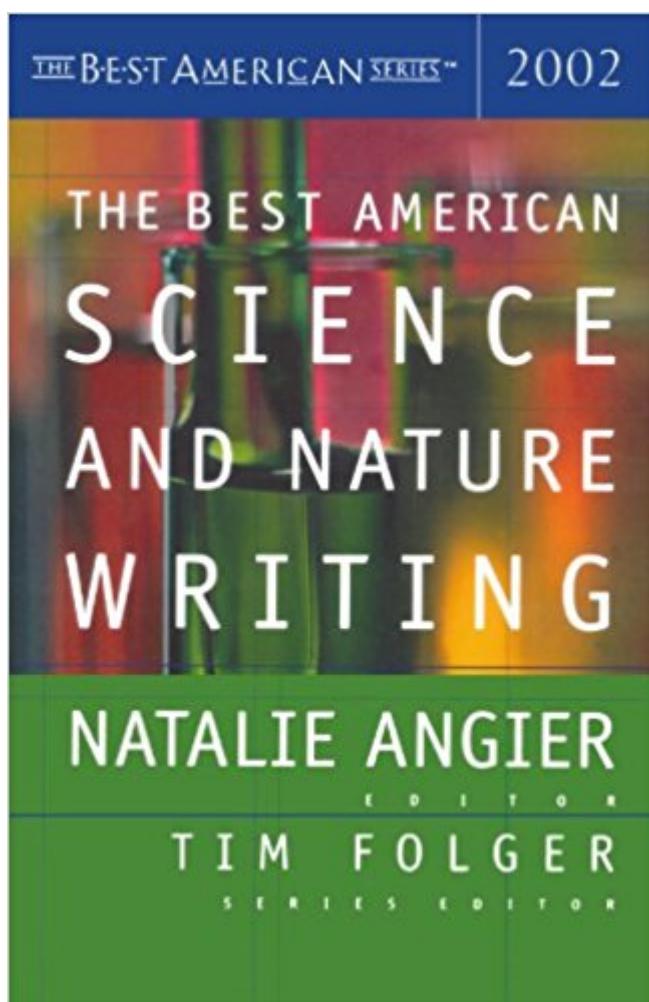


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The Best American Science And Nature Writing 2002 (The Best American Series)



Synopsis

Since its inception in 1915, the Best American series has become the premier annual showcase for the country's finest short fiction and nonfiction. For each volume, a series editor reads pieces from hundreds of periodicals, then selects between fifty and a hundred outstanding works. That selection is pared down to the twenty or so very best pieces by a guest editor who is widely recognized as a leading writer in his or her field. This unique system has helped make the Best American series the most respected -- and most popular -- of its kind. The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2002, edited by Natalie Angier, is another "eclectic, provocative collection" (Entertainment Weekly). Malcolm Gladwell, Joy Williams, Barbara Ehrenreich, Burkhard Bilger, Dennis Overbye, and many more of the best and brightest writers on science and nature explore such topics as the rise and fall of Islamic science, disappearing cancers, and the meaning of mountain lions in the back yard.

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Customer Reviews

Science writers weigh in on a number of hot-button issues in this eloquent, accessible and often illuminating anthology. Culled from periodicals like the New Yorker, Discover, Harper's, Scientific American and the Atlantic Monthly, these 27 articles tackle everything from conservation and cancer to artificial intelligence and the origins of life. "Welcome to Cancerland," Barbara Ehrenreich's blistering review of our commercial breast cancer culture-which, she argues, celebrates "survivorhood by downplaying mortality" and infantilizes the afflicted in order to promote obedience-is the boldest and most controversial of these offerings. A close second is Frederick C. Crews's "Saving Us from Darwin," a lengthy but erudite consideration of the evolution vs.

creationism debate. Several of the remaining entries offer eye-opening perspectives on humankind's impact on wildlife and the environment. In "Wall Street Losses, Wall Street Gains," Anne Matthews describes how songbirds, fixated and confused by the twinkling lights atop New York's tallest skyscrapers, circle the buildings until they fall to their death from exhaustion; H. Bruce Franklin ("The Most Important Fish in the Sea") focuses on the familiar topic of overfishing, which has led to an increased number of "dead zones" in the Atlantic; and Gordon Grice's "Is That a Mountain Lion in Your Backyard?" ponders the return of displaced mountain lions in the Western states. In her introduction to this collection, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Angier writes, "[S]cience writing has matured and is seated comfortably at the literary dining table." These fine works more than prove her point.--science writing has matured and is seated comfortably at the literary dining table." These fine works more than prove her point. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Tim Folger, series editor for this meritorious annual, notes that the only drawback to having Pulitzer Prize-winning science writer Angier, author of the vibrant and utterly trustworthy *Woman: An Intimate Geography* (1998), serve as this year's guest editor is the disqualification of her own essays. But Angier's personal and reflective introduction is every bit as lucid and arresting as the outstanding essays she's selected, evincing as it does her signature wit, glory in language, and passion for science. Clarity is the quality Angier looks for first, and she has found 27 prime examples in science and nature essays as consistent in excellence as they are wildly diverse in subject. Frederick C. Crews dissects the newest, most insidious form of creationism. H. Bruce Franklin explains the importance of the "foul" fish menhaden. Blaine Harden chronicles Congo's illegal coltan mining, and other superb writers discuss everything from french fries to urban wildlife, the Bhutan yeti, the SAT, brain death, and dark energy, and the reader's mind expands and fills with light, just as Angier intended. Donna SeamanCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

2002 saw another solid edition of *BASNW*, edited by Natalie Angier, who brought a more distinctly female oriented perspective in her selections. There are a total of 27 essays, 12 of which I found outstanding, with the remainder well worth reading as well. In "Violent Pride" (Scientific American), Roy Baumeister skillfully re-examines the prevailing myth that violent offenders are that way because of low self-esteem - instead they are the exact opposite with hyper-inflated egos. Burkhard Bilger in "Braised Shank of Free-Range Possum" (Outside) takes on a familiar topic - eating odd

wild meats like possum and raccoon - but does so with a wit and style that sets it above the norm. Funny, educational. In "Welcome to Cancerland" (Harper's Magazine), Barbara Ehrenreich writes about her experiences as a breast cancer survivor, and the politics behind it. This powerful essay touches on many interesting topics: the gender politics of the breast cancer movement, the social pressures to conform to devastating chemo therapy treatments (applicable to all health care). In H. Bruce Franklin's "The Most Important Fish in the Sea" (Discover) we learn that the menhaden - a small oily fish not eaten by humans - stands close to collapse due to overfishing for animal feed protein, bringing down with it entire ecosystems like a key domino. In Malcolm Gladwell's "Examined Life" (The New Yorker) he tells the story of Stanley Kaplan, the man who beat the SAT tests by training students how to master it - and along the way reveals that IQ is partly genetic, but largely hard work, a product of study and practice. Blaine Harden's "The Dirt in the New Machine" (New York Times Magazine) is an interesting look at the Congo and its natural resource a metal called "coltan" used in electronics. Just as oil-rich countries become hotbeds of war, the electronics industry through its use of coltan is a driving engine for the wars in eastern Congo. In another article about cancer, Judith Newman profiles Steven Rosenberg in "I Have Seen Cancer Disappear" (Discover). It is an excellent look at a leading cancer researcher both his professional and private life and provides insights on how the system works. Eric Schlosser's classic essay "Why McDonald's Fries Taste So Good" (The Atlantic Monthly) caused full-out riots in India when Hindus learned McDonalds fries use beef tallow and were not vegetarian. It's also just a great essay on the evils of fast food. Daniel Smith in "Shock and Disbelief" (The Atlantic Monthly) looks at Electro Shock Therapy (ECT) for the mentally ill. Long reviled by public opinion, there is actually considerable data to show it's effective - however with risks that are not fully disclosed to patients. This essay should be required reading for anyone considering ECT for themselves or others. Clive Thompson in "The Know-It-All Machine" (Lingua Franca) gives a good if now somewhat dated history of the Cyc project, an attempt to build an AI machine by the brute force method of entering every single possible fact that exists. Reviled by academics, it is either the biggest folly, or the beginnings of AI that works. Finally in "One Acre" (Harper's Magazine), Joy Williams delightfully recounts her experience fostering nature in a 1-acre plot of land in Florida and then eventually selling it with a conservation easement. The best for last, it is my favorite essay in the book.

The Best American Science and Nature Writing series is always a great joy to pick up. This is the way to keep up with general science without spending hundreds of dollars on magazines and journals (well, not really, but it is a good series of books to read). This year Natalie Angier, the

Pulitzer Prize winning author of *Woman: An Intimate Geography* is the guest editor. None of the essays stand out as newborn classics, but they are good essays. And they cover the range of fields. Anthropology - Sarah Blaffer Hrdy's "Mothers and Others" Biology - Frederick C. Crews' "Saving Us from Darwin" originally published in The New York Review of Books (Crews attacks every form of creationism and the blending of science and religion, including Gould, but offers us no alternative idea or solution--that's what kept this essay from being an instant classic); H. Bruce Franklin's "The Most Important Fish in the Sea" (ecology/conservation science); Gordon Grice's "Is That a Mountain Lion in Your Backyard?

As a longtime science and health writer, when I saw this title, it leaped out at me. What a good way to see the articles that are considered the best-- to see what kinds of articles mainstream magazines are buying, in terms of topic, style, approach, etc. It's been a delightful surprise to discover that this book is just loaded with brilliantly written, fascinating articles covering an incredible range of topics. If you enjoy the world of science-- if you read Discover, Scientific American, New Scientist, Science News, Nature-- then you'll love this book. Actually, I could just as easily mention magazines like The New Yorker, Atlantic, Smithsonian.... because the writing is certainly good enough to make into their pages.. and has. Some of the articles are just fun to read. Some have been wonderfully helpful in filling in some ideas I've been working on. For example, the article on child rearing, which reports an anthropological approach which studied humans and other primates gave me ideas that plug in beautifully with the ideas on the prefrontal lobes, affect regulation and parent child interaction that Allan Schore writes about. It actually ties that together with Thom Hartmann's hunter farmer model of ADHD. But that's just one article. I've been amazed how, as I'd start out each article with the intent to browse, I'd shift gears to reading each and every one in depth. Turning someone on to this book will be a real gift. it's a gem.

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