Revitalization: *The Best American Essays 2025*

James McDonald
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The Best American Essays 2025 (Mariner) is an anthology of 21 nonfiction prose pieces written by North American writers in 2024 and selected in 2025. In a word, this selection is encouraging, in part due to the more historically minded sensibilities of series editor Kim Dana Kupperman and guest editor Jia Tolentino. The true source of the elevated quality of this edition of *BAE*, however, is to be found in the pressing objective conditions and the degree to which various writers genuinely reflect on those conditions in an illuminating manner.

That things are changing in American writing, and they *are* changing, is also due to the movement of masses of people in the US and around the globe. One of the immediate catalysts has been the genocide in Gaza. Despite official complicity and repression, great numbers of workers and youth the world over have made clear their outrage at the destruction of a people. Enormous marches through cities, Palestinian flags unfurled at sporting events and concerts, campus encampments, hunger strikes, all have been expressions of the global horror. The pressure of this popular anger has also made itself felt in the publishing world.

The first essay in *BAE 2025* is "The Work of Witness" by Palestinian American Sarah Azizza. It is an anguished meditation upon Aziza's experience of witnessing the Gaza genocide from afar, testing various meanings of the word "witness." Although a fine essay, "The Work of Witness" tends in places to conflate Aziza's Western readers with their governments, which bankroll and otherwise enable the slaughter. Two other Palestinian American writers, Mosab Abu Towa and Khalil Abu Sharekh, are also featured in the anthology.

The second essay in the collection, "Sharing the Darkness" by poet and Georgetown professor Carolyn Forche, also registers a protest of the Gaza genocide, as well as of the war in Ukraine. However, Forche finds all the "despotic aggression" to be on Russia's side and uncritically accepts the pro-imperialist, pro-US/NATO perspective. She goes so far as to refer to "occupied Crimea," though Crimea voted by 97 percent to integrate with the Russian Federation in 2014.

An increasing proportion of the US population, along with feeling revulsion at Israel's barbarism in Gaza, recognize in Donald Trump and his administration a gang of bandits who threaten, not only the country's most basic social programs, but its constitutional underpinnings. Writing in 2025, Kupperman in her Foreword warns of "an America whose democratic foundations are crumbling."

Also writing her Introduction in 2025, Tolentino goes further:

> Elected officials did not take up their constituents' cries for a ceasefire. The year 2024 did something to break my faith in representative democracy, and certainly in the party I've always voted for, which in the presidential election made it clear they would continue to support the genocide but differentiate themselves from the Republicans by performing sadness about it.

This is a formulation one is beginning to hear more often, the healthy recognition of and disgust with the Democratic Party's collaboration in the Gaza genocide and imperialism's crimes more generally. "Democracy" is not the problem, of course, but the lack of any constituency for democracy within the American ruling class. The fight for democracy today falls to the working class and leads beyond the bounds of capitalism.

Tolentino's Introduction and her selection of essays are to an extent dominated by her question, "How can we conceive of our entanglement with systems that consign people to misery, even if they benefit us, and how do we dissent from and sabotage those systems?"

While this is a far cry from the refuge-in-art pablum we are used to seeing as a response to the official rightward lurch of this past decade, including in the *Best American* series, it is still somewhat muddle-headed. If she means that she receives income and privileges from the existing system, so what? Has she not noticed that the best elements of the intelligentsia *for several centuries* (think of Tom Paine, think of the Abolitionists, think of Daniel De Leon, John Reed and countless others) have sacrificed their personal interests for the betterment of humanity as a whole? It is high time artists and intellectuals in America once again started looking beyond their noses.

Thoughtful literary art necessarily lags behind events and their public reactions. Nevertheless, the essays in *BAE* at times register an urgency and a recognition of big changes taking place that prompt writers out of the cocoon of personal feelings and identity.

The American essay

The United States made contributions to world literature in the 19th and 20th centuries. Edgar Allan Poe, while not the first short story writer, elevated the tale to a new artistic level that, along with his poetry, deeply influenced European writers in the latter half of the 19th century. Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Mark Twain—all left lasting impressions on world fiction. Walt Whitman's free verse and democratic impulses had a revolutionary impact on poetry, as did Emily Dickinson's poetry once it was restored and discovered.

But if there is a genre that most closely represents the young nation, at least before the advent of film, it is the essay. From the letters of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson to Paine's series *The American Crisis* ("These are the times that try men's souls") and the polemical tracts of scores of colonists, the revolutionary colonies and young republic were abuzz with prose. Throughout the 19th century, when with the exception of the Southern states the US was arguably the most literate nation in the world, the essay was the medium through which a robust and protean society conducted its political and intellectual business.

Like scientific, political and philosophical argumentation, the meditation—or what came to be called the personal essay—can be traced back millennia. Seneca's essays, for example, such as the small "On Noise" and the grand "On the Shortness of Life," are delightful. The name most closely associated with the modern essay form is the 16th

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century's Michel de Montaigne, who blended the philosophical with the autobiographical and revived the Western tradition of short prose pieces conveying a central insight, usually one that is counterintuitive, and that is generally answerable to reason, which dominates the genre today. Montaigne's "On Cannibals" is a blueprint for centuries of essays that followed.

American essayists, then, were joining a well-developed tradition. Still, the energy of the American 19th century made its mark on world literature and thought. The published oratory of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln, the philosophically idealist and aphoristic essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the equally aphoristic if less idealist writing of Emerson's friend Henry David Thoreau, the powerful polemics of another friend of Emerson's, Margaret Fuller, these led a parade of American personal and political essayists. Abolitionists, feminists, social reformers, education theorists and, later, muckraking journalists, all drove a vibrant national conversation in prose of distinctive moods and voices.

If there has been a significant evolution in the American essay in the 21st century, it has largely been along the unhealthy lines of academic postmodernism and its pernicious offspring or sibling, identity politics. Truth, if it came into the picture at all, became a matter of subjective narrative.

Of course, these are broad strokes, and a great deal of talent has produced a great deal of good writing in the US the past 25 years. Writers on science and technology, for instance, have made for fascinating reading. But to the extent that any new conceptual ground has been broken by the popular American essay, it has been the infertile ground of personal "identities," promoting categorizations endowed with stereotypes and resting on blinkered history such that a whiff of Third Reich thought recalling "Jewish music" and "Aryan music" could be detected in the magazine section of Barnes and Noble.

The low water mark of this development was to be found in the *New York Times*'s *1619 Project*, of whose vile racialism and historical falsifications the WSWS made short work.

There are other reasons that the last decades of American history have produced a frustratingly impoverished literature. These have been decades of relentless war, foreign and domestic depredations by an unfettered finance capitalism, of stagnant wages, rising prices and deteriorating working conditions. The nation is close to $40 trillion in debt while the chasm between the rich and the working class has never been more obscene. These are conditions ripe for working class rebellion, and the American culture machine of Marvel movies, sports, celebrity and other distractions has been working at full capacity.

Writers have at times raised their voices against symptoms—poverty, wildfires, the COVID pandemic—but as struggling members of a precarious middle class, they have tended not to draw conclusions or connect dots. Nor would politics that stepped beyond the cordon guarded by the Democratic Party have been welcomed by the publishing houses or university presses.

But again, things are changing. *BAE 2025* reveals a pressure from below. There are no broadsides, no Tom Paines yet. But the anthology does suggest an American literature that is becoming more interesting, less beholden to identity politics, more alert. Here are some highlights:

Summer Hammond's "A Little Slice of the Moon" is worth the price of admission. A narrative essay that reads like a short story, Hammond's piece is an unflinching account of a particularly American desolation. It inhabits a vast expanse settled by wanderers whose lives are molded and stunted by a parasitic economy that has swept the continent like a crop fungus. It is a story where the cheap materials of a mobile home make a family sick, a family whose father hides them from society in a joy-killing, faith-healing religion, and a young girl walks the highway alone to her one source of self-worth and desire, her job at McDonald's. Hammond's essay is voiced in an arid lyricism that seeks out the vital tissue beneath the necrotic layers of American economic and cultural privation.

The majority of essays in *BAE 2025* are explicit thought pieces. Christian Lorentzen's "Literature Without Literature" examines the current state of academic literary studies. Describing a field in crisis, where the business-model university caters to the student-customers' reading preferences, "diversity and relatability" at the expense of "attention to the past," Lorentzen's essay bristles with thought-provoking observations but will strike many readers as idealist and regressive in its ultimate conception of literature.

Laura Preston addresses AI, specifically conversational AI, in "An Age of Hyperabundance." The title itself betrays the essay's myopia. This essay follows Preston through a three-day convention of software developers, entrepreneurs, and "leading thought leaders," as one of the participants has it. Preston, the conference's scheduled "contrarian speaker," constructs a well-told narrative in which she travels booth to booth encountering various applications for the technology and a numbingly relentless hucksterism.

Like Lorentzen's pessimism about literary studies, Preston's near despair over a technology "designed to violate, extract, and exploit" is unalloyed and unimaginative. That is, neither writer considers that the phenomena they are observing are being shaped by capitalism and that other possibilities exist.

Linda Kinstler's "The Olive Branch of Oblivion" is a fascinating and historically conscious meditation on the complexities of forgiving past enemies, forgetting past wars and learning the ancient principle of "oblivion," "memorializing by means of a mandate to forget."

Honorable mention for this type of essay goes to Greg Jackson's "Within the Pretense of No Pretense," one strand of which effectively contrasts the critic with the pundit; and Nuar Alsadir's classically titled "On Boredom," a psychoanalytic assessment of that condition.

In "Respect, or the Missing Relation," William Deresiewicz has written an important piece, for the questions it poses if not for its conclusions. Deresiewicz examines the ostensible political polarization of academia and American society. Promulgating identitarian dogma, "younger faculty believe their job to be indoctrination." Deresiewicz correctly asserts of this cohort, whom he calls "the left," "The left speaks constantly of 'difference,' but it cannot abide it," while "MAGA admits no dissent."

The objective for Deresiewicz, of course, is democratic pluralism, where "being a Nazi is a civil right." Ultimately, Deresiewicz is nostalgic for a world that has passed, a status quo of capitalist stability in which speech is merely speech and "to impose one's will on others" is one definition of evil. But Nazism, fascism, Zionism exist outside the discursive hothouse of the classroom, and in the 2020s the imposition of some wills result, not in hurt feelings, but in genocide. That is, while "respect" for difference is a pleasing abstract principle, actually to "be" a Nazi —or an ICE agent or IDF soldier—is decidedly not a civil or human right.

The US and the world are entering a period that will see social upheavals. For writers, nonfiction prose is one of the most expeditious forms for responding to events. *BAE 2025* offers a glimpse of the awakening of writers to the changing of the epoch, and the well-reasoned essay will undoubtedly play a role in that process.

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