

Deciderization 2007—a Special Report

I think it's unlikely that anyone is reading this as an introduction. Most of the people I know treat Best American anthologies like Whitman Samplers. They skip around, pick and choose. There isn't the same kind of linear commitment as in a regular book. Which means that the reader has more freedom of choice, which of course is part of what this country's all about. If you're like most of us, you'll first check the table of contents for names of writers you like, and their pieces are what you'll read first. Then you'll go by title, or apparent subject, or sometimes even first line. There's a kind of triage. The guest editor's intro is last, if at all.

This sense of being last or least likely confers its own freedoms.

I feel free to state an emergent truth that I maybe wouldn't if I thought that the book's sales could really be hurt or its essays' audience scared away. This truth is that just about every important word on *The Best American Essays 2007's* front cover turns out to be vague, debatable, slippery, disingenuous, or else 'true' only in certain contexts that are themselves slippery and hard to sort out or make sense of—and that in general the whole project of an anthology like this requires a degree of credulity and submission on the part of the reader that might appear, at first, to be almost un-American.

... Whereupon, after that graceless burst of bad news, I'm betting that most of whichever readers thought that maybe this year they'd try starting out linearly with the editor's intro have now decided to stop or just flip ahead to Jo Ann Beard's 'Werner,' the collection's first essay. This is actually fine for them to do, because Beard's is an unambiguously great piece—exquisitely written and suffused with a sort of merciless compassion. It's a narrative

essay, I think the subgenre's called, although the truth is that I don't believe I would have loved the piece any less or differently if it had been classed as a short story, which is to say not an essay at all but fiction.

Thus one constituent of the truth about the front cover is that your guest editor isn't sure what an essay even is. Not that this is unusual. Most literary readers take a position on the meaning of 'essay' rather like the famous one that U.S.S.C. Justice Potter Stewart took on 'obscene': we feel that we pretty much know an essay when we see one, and that that's enough, regardless of all the noodling and complication involved in actually trying to define the term 'essay.' I don't know whether gut certainty is really enough here or not, though. I think I personally prefer the term 'literary nonfiction.' Pieces like 'Werner' and Daniel Orozco's 'Shakers' seem so remote from the sort of thing that Montaigne and Chesterton were doing when the essay was being codified that to call these pieces essays seems to make the term too broad to really signify. And yet Beard's and Orozco's pieces are so arresting and alive and good that they end up being salient even if one is working as a guest essay editor and sitting there reading a dozen Xeroxed pieces in a row before them and then another dozen in a row after them—essays on everything from memory and surfing and Esperanto to childhood and mortality and Wikipedia, on depression and translation and emptiness and James Brown, Mozart, prison, poker, trees, anorgasmia, color, homelessness, stalking, fellatio, ferns, fathers, grandmothers, falconry, grief, film comedy—a rate of consumption which tends to level everything out into an undifferentiated mass of high-quality description and trenchant reflection that becomes both numbing and euphoric, a kind of Total Noise that's also the sound of our U.S. culture right now, a culture and volume of info

and spin and rhetoric and context that I know I'm not alone in finding too much to even absorb, much less to try to make sense of or organize into any kind of triage of saliency or value. Such basic absorption, organization, and triage used to be what was required of an educated adult, a.k.a. an informed citizen—at least that's what I got taught. Suffice it here to say that the requirements now seem different.

A corollary to the above bad news is that I'm not really even all that confident or concerned about the differences between nonfiction and fiction, with 'differences' here meaning formal or definitive, and 'I' referring to me as a reader.¹ There are, as it happens, intergenre differences that I know and care about as a writer, though these differences are hard to talk about in a way that someone who doesn't try to write both fiction and nonfiction will understand. I'm worried that they'll sound cheesy and melodramatic. Although maybe they won't. Maybe, given the ambient volume of your own life's noise, the main difference will make sense to you. Writing-wise, fiction is scarier, but nonfiction is harder—because nonfiction's based in reality, and today's felt reality is overwhelmingly, circuit-blowingly huge and complex. Whereas fiction comes out of nothing. Actually, so wait: the truth is that both genres are scary; both feel like they're

¹A subcorollary here is that it's a bit odd that Houghton Mifflin and the Best American series tend to pick professional writers to be their guest editors. There are, after all, highly expert professional readers among the industry's editors, critics, scholars, etc., and the guest editor's job here is really 95 percent readerly. Underlying the series' preference for writers appears to be one or both of the following: (a) the belief that someone's being a good writer makes her eo ipso a good reader—which is the same reasoning that undergirds most blurbs and MFA programs, and is both logically invalid and empirically false (trust me); or (b) the fact that the writers the series pick tend to have comparatively high name recognition, which the publisher figures will translate into wider attention and better sales. Premise (b) involves marketing and revenue and is thus probably backed up by hard data and thought in a way that (a) is not.

executed on tightropes, over abysses—it's the abysses that are different. Fiction's abyss is silence, nada. Whereas nonfiction's abyss is Total Noise, the seething static of every particular thing and experience, and one's total freedom of infinite choice about what to choose to attend to and represent and connect, and how, and why, etc.

There's a rather more concrete problem with the cover's word 'editor,' and it may be the real reason why these editorial introductions are the least appealing candy in the box. The Best American Essays 2007's pieces are arranged alphabetically, by author, and they're essentially reprints from magazines and journals; whatever (light) copyediting they receive is done in-house by Houghton Mifflin. So what the cover calls your editor isn't really doing any editing. My real function is best described by an epithet that may, in future years, sum up 2006 with the same grim efficiency that terms like 'Peace with Honor,' 'Iran-Contra,' 'Florida Recount,' and 'Shock and Awe' now comprise and evoke other years. What your editor really is here is: the Decider.

Being the Decider for a Best American anthology is part honor and part service, with 'service' here not as in 'public service' but rather as in 'service industry.' That is, in return for some pay and intangible assets, I am acting as an evaluative filter, winnowing a very large field of possibilities down to a manageable, absorbable Best for your delectation. Thinking about this kind of Decidering² is interesting in all kinds of different ways,³ but the general point is that professional filtering/winnowing

²(usage sic, in honor of the term's source)

³For example, from the perspective of Information Theory, the bulk of the Decider's labor actually consists of excluding nominees from the final prize collection, which puts the Decider in exactly the position of Maxwell's Demon or any other kind of entropy-reducing info processor, since the really expensive, energy-intensive part of such processing is always deleting/discarding/resetting.

is a type of service that we citizens and consumers now depend on more and more, and in ever-increasing ways, as the quantity of available information and products and art and opinions and choices and all the complications and ramifications thereof expands at roughly the rate of Moore's Law.

The immediate point, on the other hand, is obvious. Unless you are both a shut-in and independently wealthy, there is no way you can sit there and read all the contents of all the 2006 issues of all the hundreds of U.S. periodicals that publish literary nonfiction. So you subcontract this job—not to me directly, but to a publishing company whom you trust (for whatever reasons) to then subsubcontract the job to someone whom they trust (or more like believe you'll trust [for whatever reasons]) not to be insane or capricious or overtly 'biased' in his Decidering.

'Biased' is, of course, the really front-loaded term here, the one that I expect Houghton Mifflin winces at and would prefer not to see uttered in the editor's intro even in the most reassuring context, since the rhetoric of such reassurances can be self-nullifying (as in, say, running a classified ad for oneself as a babysitter and putting 'don't worry—not a pedophile!' at the bottom of the ad). I suspect that part of why 'bias' is so loaded and dicey a word just now—and why it's so much-invoked and potent in cultural disputes—is that we are starting to become more aware of just how much subcontracting and outsourcing and submitting to other Deciders we're all now forced to do, which is threatening (the inchoate awareness is) to our sense of ourselves as intelligent free agents. And yet there is no clear alternative to this outsourcing and submission. It may possibly be that acuity and taste in choosing which Deciders one submits to is now the real measure of informed adulthood. Since I was raised with more traditional, Enlightenment-era criteria, this possibility strikes me as consumerist and

scary ... to which the counterargument would be, again, that the alternatives are literally abysmal.

Speaking of submission, there was a bad bit of oversimplification two paragraphs above, since your guest editor is not really even the main sub-subcontractor on this job. The real Decider, in terms of processing info and reducing entropy, is Mr. Robert Atwan, the BAE series editor. Think of it this way. My job is to choose the twenty-odd so-called Best from roughly 100 finalists the series editor sends me.⁴ Mr. Atwan, though, has distilled these finalists from a vast pool of '06 nonfiction—every issue of hundreds of periodicals, plus submissions from his network of contacts all over the U.S.—meaning that he's really the one doing the full-time reading and culling that you and I can't do; and he's been doing it since 1985. I have never met Mr. Atwan, but I—probably like most fans of BAE—envision him as by now scarcely more than a vestigial support system for an eye-brain assembly, maybe like 5'8" and 590 lbs., living full-time in

⁴It's true that I got to lobby for essays that weren't in his 100, but there ended up being only one such outside piece in the final collection. A couple of others that I'd suggested were nixed by Mr. Atwan—well, not nixed so much as counseled against, for what emerged as good reasons. In general, though, you can see who had the real power. However much I strutted around in my aviator suit and codpiece calling myself the Decider for BAE '07, I knew that it was Mr. Atwan who delimited the field of possibilities from which I was choosing ... in rather the same way that many Americans are worried that what appears to be the reality we're experiencing and making choices about is maybe actually just a small, skewed section of reality that's been pre-chosen for us by shadowy entities and forces, whether these be left-leaning media, corporate cabals, government disinformers, our own unconscious prejudices, etc. At least Mr. Atwan was explicit about the whole pre-selection thing, though, and appeared to be fair and balanced, and of course he'd had years of hard experience on the front lines of Decidering; and in general I found myself trusting him and his judgments more and more throughout the whole long process, and there were finally only maybe about 10 percent of his forwarded choices where I just had no idea what he might have been thinking when he picked them.

some kind of high-tech medical chair that automatically gimbals around at various angles to help prevent skin ulcers, nourishment and wastes ferried by tubes, surrounded by full-spectrum lamps and stacks of magazines and journals, a special emergency beeper Velcroed to his arm in case he falls out of the chair, etc.

Given the amount of quiet, behind-the-scenes power he wields over these prize collections, you're entitled to ask about Mr. Atwan's standards for inclusion and forwarding;⁵ but he's far too experienced and cagey to encourage these sorts of questions. If his foreword to this edition is like those of recent years, he'll describe what he's looking for so generally—'essays of literary achievement that show an awareness of craft and forcefulness of thought'—that his criteria look reasonable while at the same time being vague and bland enough that we aren't induced to stop and think about what they might actually mean, or to ask just what principles Mr. Atwan uses to determine 'achievement' and 'awareness' and 'forcefulness' (not to mention 'literary'). He is wise to avoid this, since such specific questions would entail specific answers that then would raise more questions, and so on; and if this process is allowed to go on long enough, a point will be reached at which any Decider is going to look either (a) arrogant and arbitrary ('It's literary because I say so') or else (b) weak and incoherent (as he thrashes around in endless little definitions and exceptions and qualifications and apparent flip-flops). It's true. Press R. Atwan or D. Wallace hard enough on any of our criteria or reasons—what they mean or where they come from—and you'll eventually get either paralyzed silence or the abysmal, Legionish babble of every last perceived fact and value. And Mr. Atwan cannot afford this; he's permanent BAE staff.

⁵I believe this is what is known in the nonfiction industry as a transition. We are now starting to poke tentatively at 'Best,' which is the most obviously fraught and bias-prone word on the cover.

I, on the other hand, have a strict term limit. After this, I go forever back to being an ordinary civilian and BAE reader (except for the introductions). I therefore feel free here to try for at least partial transparency about my Decidering criteria, some of which are obviously—let's be grownups and just admit it—subjective, and therefore in some ways biased.⁶ Plus I have no real problem, emotionally or politically, with stopping at any given point in any theoretical Q & A & Q and simply shrugging and saying that I hear the caviling voices but am, this year, for whatever reasons (possibly including divine will—who knows?), the Decider, and that this year I get to define and decide what's Best, at least within the limited purview of Mr. Atwan's 104 finalists, and that if you don't like it then basically tough titty.

Because of the fact that my Decidering function is antientropic and therefore mostly exclusionary, I first owe some account of why certain types of essays were maybe easier for me to exclude than others. I'll try to combine candor with maximum tact. Memoirs, for example. With a few big exceptions, I don't much care for abreactive or confessional memoirs. I'm not sure how to explain this. There is probably a sound, serious argument to be made about the popularity of confessional memoirs as a symptom of something especially sick and narcissistic/voyeuristic about U.S. culture right now. About certain deep connections between narcissism and voyeurism in the mediated psyche. But this isn't it. I think the real reason is that I just don't trust them. Memoirs/confessions, I mean. Not so much their

⁶May I assume that some readers are as tired as I am of this word as a kneejerk derogative? Or, rather, tired of the legerdemain of collapsing the word's neutral meaning—'preference, inclination'—into the pejorative one of 'unfairness stemming from prejudice'? It's the same thing that's happened with 'discrimination,' which started as a good and valuable word, but now no one can even hear it without seeming to lose their mind.

factual truth as their agenda. The sense I get from a lot of contemporary memoirs is that they have an unconscious and unacknowledged project, which is to make the memoirists seem as endlessly fascinating and important to the reader as they are to themselves. I find most of them sad in a way that I don't think their authors intend. There are, to be sure, some memoirish-type pieces in this year's BAE—although these tend either to be about hair-raisingly unusual circumstances or else to use the confessional stuff as part of a larger and (to me) much richer scheme or story.

Another acknowledged prejudice: no celebrity profiles. Some sort of personal quota was exceeded at around age thirty-five. I now actually want to know less than I know about most celebrities.

The only other intrinsic bias I'm aware of is one that a clinician would probably find easy to diagnose in terms of projection or displacement. As someone who has a lot of felt trouble being clear, concise, and/or cogent, I tend to be allergic to academic writing, most of which seems to me willfully opaque and pretentious. There are, again, some notable exceptions, and by 'academic writing' I mean a particular cloistered dialect and mode; I do not just mean any piece written by somebody who teaches college.⁷

⁷Example: Roger Scruton is an academic, and his 'A Carnivore's Credo' is a model of limpid and all-business compression, which is actually one reason why his argument is so valuable and prizeworthy, even though parts of that argument strike me as either odd or just plain wrong (e.g., just how much humane and bucolic 'traditional livestock farming' does Scruton believe still goes on in this country?). Out on the other end of the ethicopolitical spectrum, there's a weirdly similar example in ProfPeter Singer's 'What Should a Billionaire Give?', which is not exactly belletristic but certainly isn't written in aureate academese, and is salient and unforgettable and unexcludable not despite but in some ways because of the questions and criticisms it invites. May I assume that you've already read it? If not, please return to the main text. If you have, though, do

The other side to this bias is that I tend, as a reader, to prize and admire clarity, precision, plainness, lucidity, and the sort of magical compression that enriches instead of vitiates. Someone's ability to write this way, especially in nonfiction, fills me with envy and awe. That might help explain why a fair number of BAE '07's pieces tend to be short, terse, and informal in usage/syntax. Readers who enjoy noodling about genre might welcome the news that several of this year's Best Essays are arguably more like causeries or propos than like essays per se, although one could counterargue that these pieces tend, in their essential pithiness, to be closer to what's historically been meant by 'essay.' Personally, I find taxonomic arguments like this dull and

some of Singer's summaries and obligation-formulas seem unrealistically simple? What if a person in the top 10 percent of U.S. earners already gives 10 percent of his income to different, non-UN-type charities—does this reduce his moral obligation, for Singer? Should it? Exactly which charities and forms of giving have the most efficacy and/or moral value—and how does one find out which these are? Should a family of nine making \$132,000 a year really have the same 10 percent moral obligation as the childless bachelor making 132K a year? What about a 132K family where one family member has cancer and their health insurance has a 20 percent deductible—is this family's failure to cough up 10 percent after spending \$40,000 on medical bills really still the moral equivalent of valuing one's new shoes over the life of a drowning child? Is Singer's whole analogy of the drowning kid(s) too simple, or at least too simple in some cases? Umm, might my own case be one of the ones where the analogy and giving-formula are too simple or inflexible? Is it OK that I think it might be, or am I just trying to rationalize my way out of discomfort and obligation as so many of us (according to Singer) are wont to do? And so on ... but of course you'll notice meanwhile how hard the reader's induced to think about all these questions. Can you see why a Decider might regard Singer's essay as brilliant and valuable precisely because its prose is so mainstream and its formulas so (arguably) crude or harsh? Or is this kind of 'value' a stupid, PC-ish criterion to use in Deciding about essays' literary worth? What exactly are the connections between literary aesthetics and moral value supposed to be? Whose moral values ought to get used in determining what those connections should be? Does anyone even read Tolstoy's What Is Art anymore?

irrelevant. What does seem relevant is to assure you that none of the shorter essays in the collection were included merely because they were short. Limpidity, compactness, and an absence of verbal methane were simply part of what made these pieces valuable; and I think I tried, as the Decider, to use overall value as the prime triage- and filtering mechanism in selecting this year's top essays.

... Which, yes, all right, entitles you to ask what 'value' means here and whether it's any kind of improvement, in specificity and traction, over the cover's 'Best.' I'm not sure that it's finally better or less slippery than 'Best,' but I do know it's different. 'Value' sidesteps some of the metaphysics that makes pure aesthetics such a headache, for one thing. It's also more openly, candidly subjective: since things have value only to people, the idea of some limited, subjective human doing the valuing is sort of built right into the term. That all seems tidy and uncontroversial so far—although there's still the question of just what this limited human actually means by 'value' as a criterion.

One thing I'm sure it means is that this year's BAE does not necessarily comprise the twenty-two very best-written or most beautiful essays published in 2006. Some of the book's essays are quite beautiful indeed, and most are extremely well written and/or show a masterly awareness of craft (whatever exactly that is). But others aren't, don't, especially—but they have other virtues that make them valuable. And I know that many of these virtues have to do with the ways in which the pieces handle and respond to the tsunami of available fact, context, and perspective that constitutes Total Noise. This claim might itself look slippery, because of course any published essay is a burst of information and context that is by definition part of 2007's overall roar of info and context. But it is possible for something to be both a quantum of information and a vector of meaning.

Think, for instance, of the two distinct but related senses of 'informative.' Several of this year's most valuable essays are informative in both senses; they are at once informational and instructive. That is, they serve as models and guides for how large or complex sets of facts can be sifted, culled, and arranged in meaningful ways—ways that yield and illuminate truth instead of just adding more noise to the overall roar.

That all may sound too abstract. Let's do a concrete example, which happens also to involve the term 'American' on the front cover. In your 2007 guest editor's opinion, we are in a state of three-alarm emergency—'we' basically meaning America as a polity and culture. Only part of this emergency has to do with what is currently called partisan politics, but it's a significant part. Don't worry that I'm preparing to make any kind of specific argument about the Bush administration or the disastrous harm I believe it's done in almost every area of federal law, policy, and governance. Such an argument would be just noise here—redundant for those readers who feel and believe as I do, biased crap for those who believe differently. Who's right is not the point. The point is to try to explain part of what I mean by 'valuable.' It is totally possible that, prior to 2004—when the reelection of George W. Bush rendered me, as part of the U.S. electorate, historically complicit in his administration's policies and conduct—this BAE Decider would have selected more memoirs or descriptive pieces on ferns and geese, some of which this year were quite lovely and fine. In the current emergency, though, such essays simply didn't seem as valuable to me as pieces like, say, Mark Danner's 'Iraq: The War of the Imagination' or Elaine Scarry's 'Rules of Engagement.'

Here is an overt premise. There is just no way that 2004's reelection could have taken place—not to mention extraordinary renditions, legalized torture, FISA-flouting, or the

passage of the Military Commissions Act—if we had been paying attention and handling information in a competent grown-up way. ‘We’ meaning as a polity and culture. The premise does not entail specific blame—or rather the problems here are too entangled and systemic for good old-fashioned finger-pointing. It is, for one example, simplistic and wrong to blame the for-profit media for somehow failing to make clear to us the moral and practical hazards of trashing the Geneva Conventions. The for-profit media is highly attuned to what we want and the amount of detail we’ll sit still for. And a ninety-second news piece on the question of whether and how the Geneva Conventions ought to apply in an era of asymmetrical warfare is not going to explain anything; the relevant questions are too numerous and complicated, too fraught with contexts in everything from civil law and military history to ethics and game theory. One could spend a hard month just learning the history of the Conventions’ translation into actual codes of conduct for the U.S. military ... and that’s not counting the dramatic changes in those codes since 2002, or the question of just what new practices violate (or don’t) just which Geneva provisions, and according to whom. Or let’s not even mention the amount of research, background, cross-checking, corroboration, and rhetorical parsing required to understand the cataclysm of Iraq, the collapse of congressional oversight, the ideology of neoconservatism, the legal status of presidential signing statements, the political marriage of evangelical Protestantism and corporatist laissez-faire ... There’s no way. You’d simply drown. We all would. It’s amazing to me that no one much talks about this—about the fact that whatever our founders and framers thought of as a literate, informed citizenry can no longer exist, at least not without a whole new modern degree of subcontracting and dependence packed into what we mean by ‘informed.’⁸

⁸Hence, by the way, the seduction of partisan

In the context of our Total Noise, a piece like Mark Danner’s ‘Iraq: ... Imagination’ exemplifies a special subgenre I’ve come to think of as the service essay, with ‘service’ here referring to both professionalism and virtue. In what is loosely framed as a group book review, Danner has processed and arranged an immense quantity of fact, opinion, confirmation, testimony, and on-site experience in order to offer an explanation of the Iraq debacle that is clear without being simplistic, comprehensive without being overwhelming, and critical without being shrill. It is a brilliant, disciplined, pricelessly informative piece.

There are several other such service essays among this year’s proffered Best. Some, like Danner’s, are literary journalism; others are more classically argumentative, or editorial, or personal. Some are quite short. All are smart and well written, but what renders them most valuable to me is a special kind of integrity in their handling of fact. An absence of dogmatic cant. Not that service essayists don’t have opinions or make arguments. But you never sense, from this year’s Best, that facts are being specially cherry-picked or arranged in order to advance a pre-set agenda. They are utterly different from the party-line pundits and propagandists who now are in such vogue, for whom writing is not thinking or service but more like the silky courtier’s manipulation of an enfeebled king.

... In which scenario we, like diminished kings or rigidly insecure presidents, are reduced to being overwhelmed by info and

dogma. You can drown in dogmatism now, too—radio, Internet, cable, commercial and scholarly print—but this kind of drowning is more like sweet release. Whether hard right or new left or whatever, the seduction and mentality are the same. You don’t have to feel confused or inundated or ignorant. You don’t even have to think, for you already Know, and whatever you choose to learn confirms what you Know. This dogmatic lockstep is not the kind of inevitable dependence I’m talking about—or rather it’s only the most extreme and frightened form of that dependence.

interpretation, or else paralyzed by cynicism and anomie, or else—worst—seduced by some particular set of dogmatic talking-points, whether these be PC or NRA, rationalist or evangelical, ‘Cut and Run’ or ‘No Blood for Oil.’ The whole thing is (once again) way too complicated to do justice to in a guest intro, but one last, unabashed bias/preference in BAE ’07 is for pieces that undercut reflexive dogma, that essay to do their own Deciding in good faith and full measure, that eschew the deletion of all parts of reality that do not fit the narrow aperture of, say for instance, those cretinous fundamentalists who insist that creationism should be taught alongside science in public schools, or those sneering materialists who insist that all serious Christians are as cretinous as the fundamentalists.

Part of our emergency is that it’s so tempting to do this sort of thing now, to retreat to narrow arrogance, pre-formed positions, rigid filters, the ‘moral clarity’ of the immature. The alternative is dealing with massive, high-entropy amounts of info and ambiguity and conflict and flux; it’s continually discovering new areas of personal ignorance and delusion. In sum, to really try to be informed and literate today is to feel stupid nearly all the time, and to need help. That’s about as clearly as I can put it. I’m aware that some of the collection’s writers could spell all this out better and in much less space. At any rate, the service part of what I mean by ‘value’ refers to all this stuff, and extends as well to essays that have nothing to do with politics or wedge issues. Many are valuable simply as exhibits of what a first-rate artistic mind can make of particular factsets—whether these involve the 17-kHz ring tones of some kids’ cell phones, the language of movement as parsed by dogs, the near-infinity of ways to experience and describe an earthquake, the existential synecdoche of stagefright, or the revelation that most of what you’ve believed and revered turns out to be self-indulgent crap.

That last one’s⁹ of especial value, I think. As exquisite verbal art, yes, but also as a model for what free, informed adulthood might look like in the context of Total Noise: not just the intelligence to discern one’s own error or stupidity, but the humility to address it, absorb it, and move on and out there from, bravely, toward the next revealed error. This is probably the sincerest, most biased account of ‘Best’ your Decider can give: these pieces are models—not templates, but models—of ways I wish I could think and live in what seems to me this world.

David Foster Wallace

Copyright © 2007 by Houghton Mifflin Company.

Introduction copyright © 2007 by David Foster Wallace.

⁹You probably know which essay I’m referring to, assuming you’re reading this guest intro last as is SOP. If you’re not, and so don’t, then you have a brutal little treat in store.