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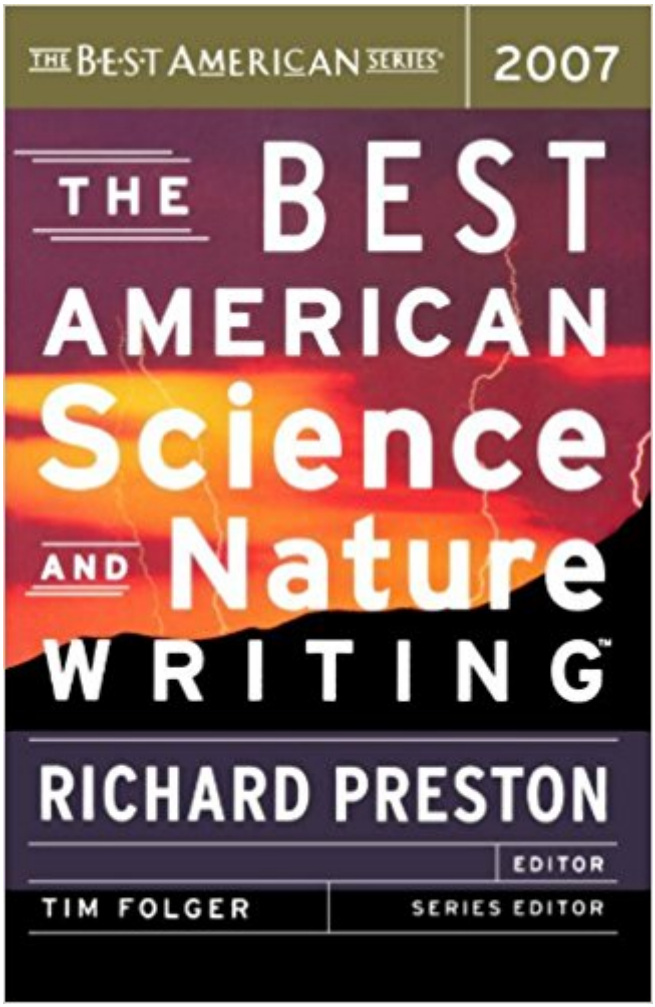
The Best American Science And Nature Writing 2007



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Synopsis

"Science is about not knowing and wanting badly to know. Science is about flawed and complicated human beings trying to use whatever tools they've got, along with their minds, to see something strange and new. In that sense, writing about science is just another way of writing about the human condition." -- from the introduction by Richard PrestonThe twenty-eight pieces in The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2007 span a wide range of topics, from the farthest reaches of space to the everyday world around us to the secrets hiddin in our own bodies. Michael Lemonick travels to an extinct volcano in Hawaii, where telescopes at the summit are providing researchers with a glimpse of the most distant galaxy ever seen -- and profound new insights into the creation of the universe. Neil deGrasse Tyson takes a sharp, witty look at Americans' delirium over space travel. And with surgical precision Michael Perry describes how a medical autopsy is performed. Dead men can tell tales.Here we also see examinations of the sometimes harmful impact of science on the natural world. Susan Casey gives an alarming portrait of plastic waste pollution in the world's oceans, including a dead zone in the mid-Pacific that's twice the size of Texas. Michael Shnayerson heads to West Virginia, where the Appalachians are being blasted at the rate of several ridgetops a week, all in the pursuit of ever-elusive coal. And Paul Bennett goes deep beneath Rome's streets, where cutting-edge excavation techniques are revealing newfound treasures in one of the world's oldest cities.A profile of a late, distinguished British ornithologist by John Seabrook reveals that the man's personal collection of bird skins, now in the British Natural History Museum, was largely stolen or bought and intentionally mislabeled. Richard Conniff visits a former Brooklyn social worker turned primatologist who has become a fierce advocate of the lemur. And Patricia Gadsby takes us into the kitchens of Europe's finest chefs to explain how the new field of molecular gastronomy is revolutionizing fine cuisine.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Our guest editor this year, Richard Preston, thinks the best essays are written by authors who have a personal obsession with the subject matter. It shows in this collection - there is not a single article that does not resonate from an author’s passion. There are 28 essays from 20 different periodicals. "Smithsonian" is best represented with four articles. The articles are generally light on hard science, heavy on nature and ecology, and heavy on memoirs. I go out of my way to get this excellent yearly and am never disappointed in it, or in its competitor of a similar name, "Best of American Science Writing." I have asterisked my personal favorites among these brief summaries:Paul Bennett - Rome is a paradise for archeology, where an archeologist is present anytime a construction project involves excavation. Backhoe operators must stop immediately if something of interest is unearthed, making for constant work slowdowns. Recently a two foot marble head of Constantine was found blocking a sewer drain under the Roman Forum.Susan Casey - In the northern Pacific, air and water currents create doldrum areas twice the size of Texas where plastic accumulates. This area contains six times as much plastic as it does plankton and there are four more ocean sites like it around the world. Every bit of plastic ever made still exists, and each year we churn out another 60 billion tons of it.Richard Conniff - A memoir about Patricia Wright, the Jane Goodall of lemurs. An extinct lemur the size of a gorilla roamed Madagascar 350 years ago and the island still has 50 species left. Wright is responsible for preventing much deforestation in Madagascar and the creation of thousands of acres of national parks.

Depending on your viewpoint, the volumes in this series are either treasure houses or minefields. The jewels are essays providing new topics and information to consider. That’s also the danger. Most of these articles present the reader with a challenge - "Should I be concerned about this? Should I take some action?" It’s almost wearying to turning the pages and be confronted with the need for a decision. Yet, those prompts are not artificial.Preston, author of "The Demon in the Freezer" and "The Wild Trees" demonstrates his editorial skills with this engaging collection. Covering such diverse topics as the human threats to the seas, the nature of violence and looking for the oldest light, this series of over two dozen articles - with more than four dozen hovering in the

wings - conveys how deeply science is penetrating Nature’s mysteries. The editor’s own writing skills provide a fine standard for assessment and there is nothing either dull or arcane to make the reader stumble. Interests vary, and Preston’s choices will meet everybody’s requirements. More to the point the subjects chosen and the information provided will stir interest in new areas readers might wish to pursue further.Each reader - and reviewer - will have particular articles to favour as they wend their way through the anthology. To this reviewer, "Plastic Ocean" by Susan Casey is a foremost choice. Not only is it a fine piece of writing, but the subject - how our plastic products are being gathered into a great oceanic dump, known as the Pacific Garbage Patch - is one of universal concern. Casey interviews yachting captain Charles Moore to understand the immensity of the problem.

Great stuff on science and nature contained in twenty-eight selections, of which I liked most: Plastic Ocean, Notes on the Space We Take, Health Secrets From the Morgue, and the Introduction (by Robert Preston) and least: The Rabbit on Mars, The Final Frontier, and How to Get a Nuclear Bomb. Without necessarily agreeing with all of them, I found the following facts, statements, and/or opinions especially interesting (Pp 12, 47, 57, 96, 100-101, 120, 173, 261, 278 respectively):"...by weight, [the North Pacific subtropical gyre] contains six times as much plastic as it does plankton;" "...a 65-degree egg cooked for an hour should be quite safe.)" and soft boiling eggs at this temperature "...is becoming the rage with chefs in France;" "A twiffler...is a plate of intermediate in size between a dinner plate and a bread plate;" "...perhaps the thing that should worry you the least [should you wish to get a nuclear bomb] is the American government’s war on terror;" "Given the pervasive presence of homosexuality throughout the animal kingdom, same-sex partnering must be an adaptive trait that’s been carefully preserved by natural selection;" "A globule of yellow-streaked fat oozed through the gaping wound [of a gryllacridid]. It then curled its head down toward the leaking viscera and proceeded to consume its own entrails;" "The duck is the Trojan horse..." [of the bird flu virus], "...a car driven 10,000 miles a year with a fuel efficiency of 30 miles per gallon (mpg) emits close to 1 ton of carbon annually;" "...what you eat or smoke today could affect the health and behavior of your great-grandchildren."Great writings on a large variety of science and nature related topics.

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