
Reviewed by Madeline Walker, University of Victoria

Understanding the Essay is an anthology of nineteen critical pieces on how to read and understand the essay, bookended by co-editor Jeff Porter’s introduction and a useful compendium of terms relevant to the essay. This book is a valuable contribution to essay studies and a spirited effort to give the essay a more stable literary status and pull it into the academic center from the margins. Each author offers commentary on how to read a chosen essay (which is not included in the volume), and each commentary is an essay in its own right. However, the best critical essays in the book—and I will use this term to differentiate from the source essays—are those by writers who do not veer too sharply into the characteristic digressions of the personal essay but balance their own reading experience with critical analysis.

The editors choose not to qualify the word essay in their title with personal, as Phillip Lopate did in his 1994 anthology, The Art of the Personal Essay. They seem to do this for the sake of capaciousness and simplicity. The term essay is notoriously loose, covering everything from the five paragraph academic essay we assign in middle school English, to the journalistic essay found in the pages of the New Yorker, to the personal and literary essays of E.B. White and George Orwell. Thus, by using “essay” unadorned, Foster and Porter can include responses to a range of writing: contributors examine, for example, the half-page minimalist “On Trout” by Anne Carson; the sprawling 100-page “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again” by David Foster Wallace; the transparently political and anti-imperialist Mark Twain piece, “To the Person Sitting in Darkness,” about colonization in the Philippines; and the highly personal “Under the Influence” by Scott Russell Sanders about his alcoholic father. Similarly, the critical essays are written in a wide range of styles and forms, from the highly structured analysis of Orwell’s “A Hanging” by Carl H. Klaus, to the relaxed synaptic form of Marilyn Abildskov’s reading of Woolf’s “Street Haunting,” and to Sara Levine’s polemical, mirroring response to Joy Williams’s diatribe, “The Case Against Babies.” The simple and engaging cover of this little volume—three origami animals against a yolk-yellow background—disguises its scope and complexity.

Between these covers lie some hits and some misses. Jeff Porter’s readable introduction is the first hit. Co-editor Patricia Foster prefaces each critical essay with a short biography of the essayist under consideration; some bios hit the mark while others miss as she tries to capture the essence of each essayist. The critical essays themselves are mostly compelling. The useful “key terms”
section closing the book is another hit, with twenty-two clear definitions of terminology important to the essay, such as double vantage point and persona.

In his introduction, Porter provides a delightful history and poetics of the essay, focusing on the “father of the essay,” Michel de Montaigne, and his English counterparts (Bacon, Lamb, and Hazlitt). His main goal in this introduction, however, is to capture the “whatness” of the essay. In this genre that has spanned centuries, what is it that links Montaigne’s essays to contemporary pieces by, say, David Foster Wallace? To get at the essay’s essence, Porter then describes three salient characteristics of the form: first, the showcasing of the writerly “I” voice, a created persona that establishes intimacy with an imagined reader and is at times unruly, combative, friendly, ironic, or humorous; second, the essay’s imitation of the digressive mind—creating the effect of the “mind on the page” (xxiv); and finally, the subversiveness of the genre both in form (i.e., twisting and turning) and content (e.g., the perverse and uncanny are frequent features in essays). As such, argues Porter, the essay as individual mindscape offers a refuge to readers across the centuries as we enjoy wandering with essayists through unpredictable and often unusual terrain—a landscape providing flashes of insight around corners, recognition or re-knowings, and “vertical drops” (moments of self-disclosure, as described in “key terms”) along the way. The introduction paves the way for readers to understand the emphases of the contributions that follow, as many of them refer to those three elements.

Most of the critical essays are very strong, but my favorites are those where contributors, seasoned reader-writers, describe revelations about misreading their chosen essays. In other words, we get to experience the “vertical drop” of the critical essayist’s move to self-disclosure about his or her own failures as a reader. Porter points out in the introduction that the anthology is about the relationship between close reading and writing, and this is illustrated in many of the critical essays. Foster questions if she’s been misreading Didion’s essay as she revisits “Georgia O’Keeffe” after twenty years with a more critical eye and a matured sense of class-consciousness. Once considering Didion a feminist heroine, Foster now sees elitism behind Didion’s oversimplified portrait of the painter, an elitism that erases O’Keeffe’s life from her art. Similarly, after thirty years of teaching “A Hanging,” Carl H. Klaus describes his growing uneasiness about his simplification of this canonical Orwell essay. His growing awareness of a split point of view in the essay leads him to a reassessment of both the essay and Orwell. His closing, a warning that we should not reduce essays to a thesis nor assume the truthfulness of the narrator, is worth the price of the book, in my opinion. As a final example of misreading, Lopate admits in his critical essay that after teaching Hazlitt’s “On the Pleasure of Hating” twenty times, he realized he had missed something central to the essay: it’s not really about hating, it’s about “our inability to sustain enthusiasm” (200).
“harps” on this recognition because it took so long for him to recognize that Hazlitt had veered away from his original premise, and the implicit message is that it pays to read and re-read an essay especially closely. It’s a tricky genre.

The few misses in the volume are due, I think, to writers veering too sharply into the territory of personal essay in their critiques. Although I acknowledge that these responses are essays in their own right, I believe that we as readers still bring certain expectations to critical analyses, such as a balance of critique with personal experience, some principle of organization, and some kind of thesis. Despite a promising introduction, Robin Hemley, for example, does not manage to lift Twain’s essay about the Philippines into relevance for most readers; moreover, he doesn’t really get to the point. Similarly, Marilyn Abildskov, in her critical essay on Woolf, is as digressive as Woolf herself. Although some wandering is permitted in a critical analysis, I think readers appreciate a deliberate course. These misses, though, are infrequent and do not detract from the overall value of the volume.

My final caveat about this volume is the absence of the essays under observation. Luckily, Lopate’s own volume, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, contains six of them and several others are in the public domain; however, I hunted down the rest through the library and time-consuming interlibrary loans. I wondered about Porter’s comment that “this collection is designed to serve as a companion to your favorite anthology of essayists” (xxiii) when no such complete anthology exists, to my knowledge. The absence of the essays under review may create a problem for teachers assigning the book in the writing classroom. Although including all of the original essays may not have been economically or materially feasible, perhaps producing a volume with fewer critical essays along with the appraised essays would be more commercially viable.

Quibbles aside, I find this book compelling because the editors and authors continually show new facets of this enduring form. Even the most seasoned reader-teacher-writers contributing to the book discover and share with us something they hadn’t noticed during previous readings; these discoveries deepen, for me, the mystery and beauty of the essay. It also reminds those who teach the essay—both how to read it and how to write it—that its provisional nature is like the facets of a gem. Just keep turning it around in the light.

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**Work Cited**