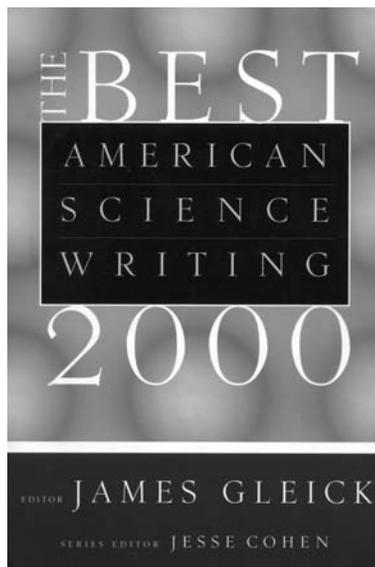
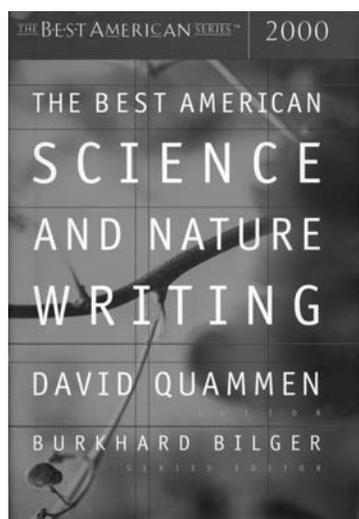


edited by Stephanie Deming



THE BEST AMERICAN SCIENCE WRITING 2000. EDITED BY JAMES GLEICK; SERIES EDITOR JESSE COHEN. NEW YORK: ECCO PRESS (HARPERCOLLINS); 2000. X + 258 PAGES. HARDCOVER \$27.50, SOFTCOVER \$14.00. ISBN 0-06-019734-X (HARDCOVER), 0-06-095736-0 (SOFTCOVER).



THE BEST AMERICAN SCIENCE AND NATURE WRITING 2000. EDITED BY DAVID QUAMMEN; SERIES EDITOR BURKHARD BILGER. BOSTON: HOUGHTON MIFFLIN; 2000. XXI + 265 PAGES. HARDCOVER \$27.50, SOFTCOVER \$13.00. ISBN 0-618-08294-8 (HARDCOVER), 0-618-08295-6 (SOFTCOVER).

Two uncannily similar annual collections of science writing debuted in late 2000. Each contains much good reading, and a look at the two volumes raises interesting issues about editing such a work.

The two books resemble each other in various ways in addition to their titles. The cover of each lists as editor a prominent science or nature writer and also lists, in smaller type, a series editor. Each book contains 19 selections, essentially all from 1999; most heavily represented are long feature articles from prestigious national magazines, such as *The New Yorker*. The two books are similar in page count and price. Even their cover designs are somewhat similar.

Each book includes pieces on aspects of biology and medicine, physical science, and more. Pieces within each book range considerably in tone, style, and difficulty. One piece—"Brilliant Light", Oliver Sacks's reminiscence of childhood visits to science-oriented relatives—appears in both collections. Authors Natalie Angier and Atul Gawande also are represented in both. Biographic notes about the various authors appear near the end of each book.

The two books, though, differ somewhat in scope. The Quammen book contains material only from print magazines, but the Gleick book also draws from the *New York Times*, a lecture, and an online magazine. However, the Quammen book includes, in addition to science writing, a fair amount of nature writing. It also includes more front matter and back matter: whereas the Gleick book contains only a fairly brief introduction by the editor, the Quammen book contains both a foreword in which the series editor discusses how pieces were chosen and a long introduction in which the editor traces the lineages of science writing and nature writing. The Quammen book ends with a list of additional noteworthy science and nature writing from 1999; among the 90-plus pieces are several appearing in the Gleick collection and several more by authors represented there.

Given the range of subjects and styles, different pieces in these collections are likely to resonate with different readers. Among those I found especially powerful were two by

authors writing from within literal or figurative prisons. In one, "The Wisdom of Toads" (in the Quammen book), Ken Lamberton, a science teacher who started writing after incarceration for a sex offense, writes masterfully about these seemingly mundane organisms and more; in the other, "Gray Area: Thinking with a Damaged Brain" (in the Gleick book), poet and writer Floyd Skloot provides a vivid first-person look at living with neurologic deficits caused by a viral infection of the brain. Other favorites of mine in the Gleick book are "When Doctors Make Mistakes", by Atul Gawande; "Lord of the Flies" (a profile of biologist Seymour Benzer), by Jonathan Weiner; and "Lab Notes" (a witty memoir of a failed attempt to pursue a scientific career), by Don Asher. Favorites in the Quammen collection are "Africa's Wild Dogs", by Richard Conniff; "http://www.when_is_enough_enough?.com" (a skeptical look at microcomputers), by Paul De Palma; and "Lulu, Queen of the Camels" (about high-technology breeding of racing camels in the United Arab Emirates), by Cullen Murphy.

From the titles onward, reflection on this pair of books raises interesting issues about editing such anthologies. Of course, the titles of both books are misnomers of sorts: No one can say what writing is truly the best (and, indeed, if the writing in one of these books is best, that in the other cannot be so); also, despite the 2000s in the titles, the pieces in the books appeared almost exclusively in 1999. Admittedly, a title like *Some of Last Year's Science Writing That We Like* might not rack up many sales.

In a class I recently taught, one of these books engendered lively discussion of what qualifies as science writing. Similarly, editors may find it of interest to consider the appropriate scope of such a collection. The Gleick and Quammen volumes each consist largely of blockbuster pieces of writing in prestigious national media. But, one might argue, the best science writing also includes, for example, news stories that in a deft few hundred words convey the essence and context of a scientific paper. And, as judges of science-writing competitions have recognized, excellent science writing also appears

in such media as local newspapers. Granted, editors of anthologies like these cannot scour every medium. But in the longer term, such works might benefit from broader scope.

These volumes also illustrate choices that editors make in structuring collections. The Quammen book is organized alphabetically by name of author, from Natalie Angier to Gary Taubes. The Gleick book is ordered by no such immediately obvious principle, but some articles with related themes appear together.

Looking at these books made me wonder what roles the editors and series editors took in choosing and arranging the pieces. It also made me reflect on the impact of publication design. Each piece in these books appears in single-column format without any illustrations. Although it is technically difficult to achieve, books preserving more of the original design of each piece might convey more fully what made the pieces especially effective.

Perhaps because of the limitations of their time and space, the editors supply little background information about the individual pieces. A single introductory paragraph

precedes each piece in the Gleick book, and not even that in the Quammen book. Thus, readers are left largely to wonder about such items as the following: What did the editors of these volumes consider outstanding about each piece? How did the authors decide on their topics, gather information, and craft their work? What were the roles, and what are the recollections, of editors at the original publication sites? Introductory notes addressing such questions might strengthen future volumes in these series.

Whether or not such material is added, future books in these series promise to provide much good reading. They also should serve as fine resources for science-journalism classes. I look forward to the successors to these two volumes.

Barbara Gastel

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Book Notes

THE COMPLETE IDIOT'S GUIDE TO PUBLISHING MAGAZINE ARTICLES. SHEREE BYKOFSKY, JENNIFER BASYE SANDER, AND LYNNE ROMINGER. INDIANAPOLIS: ALPHA BOOKS (MACMILLAN USA); 2000. XXI + 313 PAGES. SOFTCOVER \$16.95. ISBN 0-02-863835-2.

As an editor, I cringe at the vision of hordes of people who identify as "idiots" beating down my office door. If they follow the advice in *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Publishing Magazine Articles*, they'll be dropping me notes to build rapport, taking me out for lunch to pick my brain, and persistently working to get me to like them. But at least they'll have been told that it's important to get their stories in on time and to get their facts correct!

This guide contains chapters on generating ideas, interviewing, and writing a query. Then there are descriptions of newspapers, magazines, and online outlets and a brief section on writing. The final section focuses on business aspects of freelancing: taxes, contracts, and book writing.

Unfortunately, the authors spend more time in considering the question, Do you have to know someone in publishing to break in? than the question, Do you have something to say and the skills to say it? Among the four successful freelance writers they

describe in their introductory section, two had studied writing or journalism in college and one was a professional writer in his day job. However, nowhere in the book do the authors suggest that an aspiring freelance might take some courses to improve his or her writing.

If you have been thinking about breaking into the freelance writer's market, this book might give you some pointers. Most of the information is good, but the ostentatiously low-brow tone makes it painful. For a more effective guide to the writing of magazine articles, let me suggest Peter P Jacobi's *The Magazine Article: How to Think It, Plan It, Write It* (1997, Indiana University Press). To read about science writing in particular, there's *A Field Guide for Science Writers: The Official Guide of the National Association of Science Writers*, edited by Deborah Blum and Mary Knudson (1997, Oxford University Press). And for the business aspects of being a freelance, authoritative guides are published by *Writer's Digest* and the National Writers Union.

Julie Ann Miller

JULIE ANN MILLER is the editor of *Science News* magazine, which doesn't use freelancers, and former editor of *BioScience*, which does.