

It's scientific: Accessible writing key to enjoyment

THE BEST AMERICAN SCIENCE AND NATURE WRITING

Natalie Angier, Editor; Tim Folger, Series Editor

Houghton Mifflin, \$13 paperback

BY ALICE RHEIN
CORRESPONDENT

One of the unexpected pleasures of switching doctors during my first pregnancy in 1998 was going from a waiting room full of parenting magazines to one that carried current issues of *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Discover*.

I wasn't so confident to think that I didn't need parenting advice, but something deeper in me said "fuel your intellect now, they'll be plenty of time to learn '10 Steps to Painless Potty-Training'."

When I was making regular office visits again in 2001, I hoped that the nurse wouldn't call my name before I finished Eric Schlosser's *Why McDonald's Fries Taste So Good* in the January issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*.

When she did, I had no choice but to sneak it into the examining room with me, finishing it just before she produced the blue gown.

It was no surprise to me then, that Natalie Angier, the Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist and best-selling author, included Schlosser's article in *The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2002*, which she edited for Houghton Mifflin along with series editor Tim Folger.

Schlosser's article, which was gleaned from his wildly popular book *Fast Food Nation*, is both a funny and disturbing tale of what goes into making America's most popular food. His story of the secretive group of scientists, or flavorists, who manufacture the flavors and smells of fries as well as perfumes, floor wax and TV dinners is riveting, and will forever change how you think about that burger, fries and shake.

In fact, the contributor's notes mention that after Schlosser's article was published, riots broke out in India and class action lawsuits were filed against McDonald's after the company admitted that the fries contained beef.

Schlosser's story is just one of 27 non-fictional articles included in this 300-page book. And Angier will be at Shuman Drum bookstore in Ann Arbor on Tuesday, Nov. 19 at 8 p.m. to discuss her role as guest editor.

In her introduction, Angier, who attended the University of Michigan for two years before transferring to Barnard College in New York, wrote that the element common to all the stories she chose was clarity. Clarity is important to every

ON TOUR

Natalie Angier, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and the author of the national bestseller *Woman: An Intimate Geography* will be promoting the collection of works included in *The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2002* at Shuman Drum, 313 South State Street, Ann Arbor at 8 p.m. on Tuesday, Nov. 19. For more information, contact the bookstore at (734) 662-7407 or (800) 490-7023.

story, but perhaps more so in science writing.

Few scientists can actually write an article that can capture and maintain a lay reader's attention. And when journalists take on the task, they have to be able to comprehend the subject matter well enough to explain it back to the reader in concrete terms rich with anecdotes.

That's no easy task when the subject is, say, an artificial intelligence machine that could someday learn through normal conversation. Clive Thompson's *The Know-It-All Machine* written for *Lingua Franca* is about just that, a software called Cyc that will enable its computer to speak, reason, and learn.

Not all the subjects are heady. Joy Williams writes about the acre of land she purchased in Florida and vowed to keep in its natural state even as land subdivided around her. *One Acre*, first featured in *Harper's Magazine* is a loving tale of nature's beauty that offers a thoughtful, Thoreau-like image of lagoon life.

Barbara Ehrenreich, who wrote the compelling *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* offers her less-than-rosy take on the marketing of breast cancer in *Welcome to Cancerland* from *Harper's Magazine*.

Having been diagnosed with breast cancer, she writes about the oddities that she has encountered, like the tote bag distributed to breast cancer patients that contains — along with perfume and costume jewelry — a small box of crayons and a pink-striped journal.

"Possibly the idea is that regression to a state of child-like dependency puts one in the best frame of mind with which to endure the prolonged and toxic treatments," she ponders, adding later that, "Certainly men diagnosed with prostate cancer do not receive gifts of Matchbox cars."

Garret Keizer also muses in the first-person about his disdain of noise in *Sound and Fury* from *Harper's Magazine*. And in *The Sting of the Assassin*, written for *Outside*, Peter Stark fictionalizes a bit by introducing a honeymooning couple to explain the dramatic impact that the venom of a box jellyfish has on the human body.

Sarah Blaffer Hrdy's *Mothers and Others* from *Natural History* presents the evolutionary aspects akin to "It takes a village." And Steve Mirsky's column *Dumb, Dumb, Duh Dumb*, which first appeared in *Scientific American* rings with humor.

Strangely absent from this book are stories about 9/11, perhaps because Angier herself wrote one of the best pieces for the *New York Times* on Sept. 18 entitled *Altruism, Heroism and Nature's Gifts in the Face of Terror*, which is listed in the appendix along with other notable writings of 2001.

But the World Trade Center is very much a part of this book. In *Wall Street Losses, Wall Street Gains* by Anne Matthews for *Orion*, the gleaming twin towers are what beckon migratory songbirds to Manhattan, where they are so mesmerized by the light that they can circle the building until exhaustion sets in.

Birds plummeting to the ground hardly seem important now, having seen the horrors of our own species crash, but Matthews' story is hauntingly bittersweet in retrospect. Before 9/11, it was a story about songbirds and the people who take an interest in them. After 9/11 it's a warm eulogy to a place that once teemed with life.

The Best American Science and Nature Writing is a fascinating and surprisingly uncomplicated read, which, of course, is the sign of excellent writing.

"For all their passion and productivity," Angier writes in her introduction, "scientists labor in profound anonymity."

These essays certainly highlight many of the men and women who possess that passion for knowledge, and in doing so, their stories inspire us all to unlock the mysteries of science.



A star filter added that special touch to Monte Nagler's photograph of late afternoon sun sparkle in the lake.

Put some sparkle in your photos with a star filter

Perhaps it's time to become a photographer of the stars. Not movie stars or constellations, but stars, added to your photographs by means of a star filter.

A star filter is an inexpensive addition to your photo equipment that can add a burst of excitement to your shots, whether color or black-and-white. A close inspection of a star filter will reveal a miniature window screen imbedded in the glass. This screen acts on any light high-

light to produce a starburst effect in the finished picture. And because you always see directly through the lens on your single-lens-reflex camera, you'll be able to preview and adjust the star effect before you snap the shutter.

Star filters come in four-, six- and eight-point designs, depending on how much of a burst you want. I prefer the simplicity of the four-point star, which easily adjusts to any angle.

Here are some subject ideas that work well with star filters: Sparkles in the lake or ocean caused by a descending sun will produce dazzling photos with a star filter, especially if you place a silhouetted subject in the foreground such as a seagull perched on a piling or tree branches framing the seascape.

Reflections in shiny objects such as chrome will give that

added flair to your pictures. Street lamps at night combined with a star filter produce effects not attainable in any other way. And, of course, the sun itself photographed through a star filter will result in a breathtaking shot.

A star filter can be used in combination with other filters if, for example, you want to darken a blue sky with a polarizer or use any of the filters designed for black-and-white film.

Just attach the star filter directly over the other filter being used and you'll be pleasantly surprised with the results.

Always reach for the stars in your photography. And to help along the way, use a star filter.

Monte Nagler is a fine art photographer based in Farmington Hills. You can leave him a message by dialing (734)953-2047 on a touch tone phone.



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