

David foster wallace's  
selections of best  
american essays  
2007



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Judging from David Foster Wallace's selections for inclusion in the 2007 version of *The Best American Essays*, he is iconoclastic. According to *The American Heritage College Dictionary* 4th ed. , an iconoclast is defined as "one who attacks and seeks to overthrow traditional or popular ideas or institutions" (687). The essays challenge traditional ways of thinking. In the introduction to the collection, Wallace gives several criteria by which he judged essays, one of the most important being what he views as an absence of dogma.

This is important because " 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" (xxiii). In one essay a man whose building is burning down makes the heroic (in light of the inertia that overtakes so many of us in intense situations) decision to leap across from his window through the neighboring tenement window, which was closed at the time (Beard). What is unique about this story is the tone it takes.

Rather than hailing this man for his daring act, we are taken through the story in a manner which makes clear that the heroic people we read about in newspapers are just as scared and unsure of their actions as the rest of us are. This flies in the face of what we are taught growing up - to idolize individuals, place our heroes on pedestals, and hold certain people apart from the rest of the human race - by telling an exceedingly honest story about a regular person who was able to do something superhuman in the face of danger.

In another essay, Marilynne Robinson gives a stirringly beautiful account of how her Christianity compels her liberalism. Through a wide-ranging theological dialogue, she severs Christianity from its current place as the religion of free-market conservatives. Robinson makes a compelling case for kindness and munificence in place of miserliness and avarice. In describing her own Christianity, which stems in large part from Calvinist ideology, she asserts that “ There is no doctrine here, no setting of conditions, no drawing of lines.

On the contrary, what he describes is a posture of grace, generosity, liberality” (220). This allows for a Christianity closer to what Jesus Christ taught and lived. It also allows liberals to loosen the stranglehold on religion (and morality) that conservatives have held for the past few decades (Robinson). The essay changes essential terms of a large debate, challenging conventional thinking on the subject. In “ Loaded”, Garret Keizer discusses gun rights, and the meaning of guns in America.

His essay transcends the Second Amendment debate by creating a space to talk about guns as a means of defense against an overreach of government power. Keizer presents all sides of the argument in an empathetic and evenhanded manner, before arguing for a less bombastic support of gun rights. Still, he has “ always believed in the superiority of nonviolent noncooperation: (143). Making clear and understandable the feelings of both sides, he instead chooses a third path. It is this untried third path that seems to appeal to Wallace. Wallace’s interest in the unique and iconoclastic continues throughout the collection.

In In other essays ranging from a report of a seemingly innocuous cell phone ring only teenagers can hear (Menand) to an essay discussing the sexuality and sexualization of children where the author digs deep into the American psyche, rather than playing the blame game (Greif). These authors have created new lenses through which to view long-standing issues. They would rather change the terms of the debate entirely than take a side. It is clear from these essays that David Foster Wallace prefers challenging over complacent writing, even when those new visions tread on sacred ground. This is the definition of an iconoclast.