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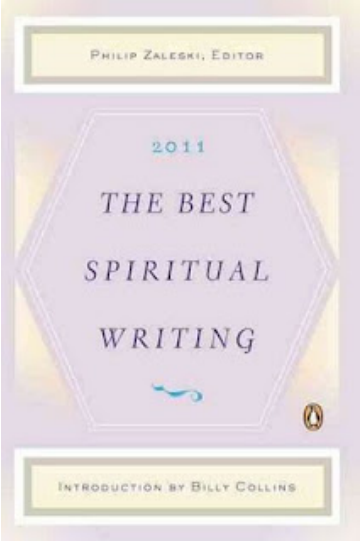
The Best Spiritual Writing, 2011



The various BEST AMERICAN series are a great way to explore topics you might not ordinarily explore and to find new interesting authors. We have many of these annuals in our library including: Best American Travel Writing [1], Best American Short Stories [2], and Best American Essays [3].

A rainy week when the world blooms anew is the perfect time to sample writing on spiritual themes. Topics in this year's collection ranged widely and included: a Jewish woman's memoir about holiday buffets she had sampled as a child; a father's nightly ritual putting his disabled son to bed; a travelogue to Buddhist Kandy in Sri Lanka; and a difficult sesshin practice in California. Sesshin means "gathering the mind." It was both fun and horrifying to read about people dedicated enough to get up at 330 a.m. to meditate, and after nodding off, getting pounded by sticks by a famous monk.

"In My Bright Abyss," Christian Wiman wrote about trying to grapple with his own mortality. Barry Lopez provided a delightful essay about lines and patterns on our planet. He described geometric padis in China, shapes on the ground as viewed from a jet, and how a line of albatrosses crossed before him on a ship near the Falkland Islands.

Two essays address Islam. One gives a dual history of Islam and Christianity, describing in what countries their paths intersected; another shows the many similarities that both faiths share. My least favorite selections were two that were overtly religious. Another one, "Sisters and Daughters," was a lovely piece penned by a Dad whose two daughters had both became nuns, a rare occurrence in the 21st century when most religious orders are having trouble recruiting.

The inclusion of poetry was a pleasant surprise. Oddly enough,there were two poems about eyeglasses, a sardonic one where Billy Collins [4]must explain his new glasses to his parents in their graves and poet Robert Cording's homage titled "Czeslaw Milosz's Glasses." The Best Spiritual Writing is fun to delve into as the mood strikes. Its contemplative topics recharge you

and enable you to do some armchair exploring of unusual ideas and delightful places.
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Posted by Dory L. on May 4, 2011

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