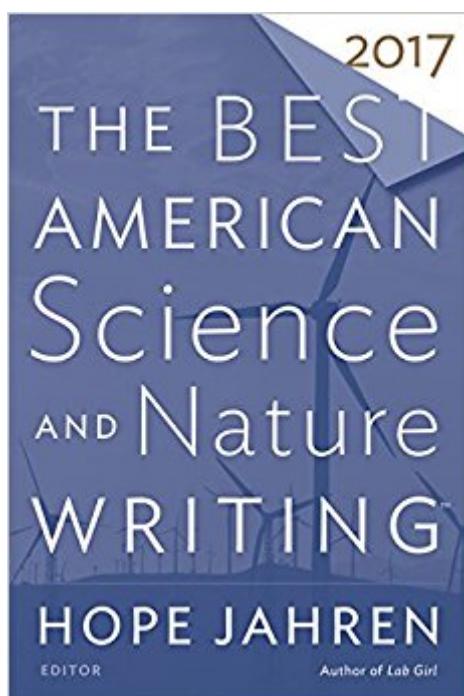


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# The Best American Science And Nature Writing 2017 (The Best American Series ®)



## Synopsis

“Undeniably exquisite . . . Reveal[s] not only how science actually happens but also who or what propels its immutable humanity.” • Maria Popova “An excellent introduction to the key issues in science today.” • P. D. Smith, *Guardian* “[A] stellar compendium . . . Delightful to read.” • Publishers Weekly, starred review A renowned scientist and the best-selling author of *Lab Girl*, Hope Jahren selects the year’s top science and nature writing from writers who balance research with humanity and in the process uncover riveting stories of discovery across disciplines.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

HOPE JAHREN, guest editor, is an award-winning scientist and the best-selling author of *Lab Girl*. She lives in Oslo, Norway. TIM FOLGER is a contributing editor at *Discover* and writes about science for several magazines.

For seventeen years the Best American Science and Nature writing series has enthralled readers like me with an annual anthology of articles chosen from magazines the *New Yorker*, *New York Times Magazine*, *Scientific American*, and *National Geographic*, with an occasional article that would be accessible to a general reader from more technical publications like *Science*. This year’s volume has a significant representation of less well-known publications also, such as *Curbed*, *Hazlitt*, and *Mosaic*. Series editor Tim Folger provides continuity and does the

initial canvassing to find possible candidates, but each year a prominent scientist or science writer serves as guest editor to make the final selections. This year’s guest editor is biogeochemist Hope Jahren, whose memoir *Lab Girl* is a perfect combination of science and the life of a scientist and made me eager to see what she would select. There are some wonderful reads in the book. Which are your favorites will depend on your own interests, but all were well-written. The first section, *Emergent Fields*, has some cool articles about subjects like neurogastronomy and gravity waves. In Sarah Everts’ article *The Art of Saving Relics* we learn that plastics can deteriorate much faster than most people believe, creating a problem for preservation of items from acrylic-based modern art to the spacesuits worn by the first men on the moon. The second section is on *Changing Land and Resources*. Elizabeth Kolbert’s article *A Song of Ice* about Greenland made me want to hop on the next plane to see it for myself. I was impressed by how Assateague Island National Park in my own backyard is dealing with climate change and increasing storms. In Part III, *The Real Life of Scientists*, I especially liked David Epstein’s article *The DIY Scientist*, the Olympian, and the *Mutated Gene* about a muscular dystrophy patient whose drive to understand her condition led scientists to discoveries about some genetic mutations. There were Wow! moments throughout. I was introduced to Willi Dansgaard, a climate scientist who can determine the temperature at which a sample of rainwater was formed based on its isotopic composition. And I learned that prairie dogs, not rats, are the main carrier of bubonic plague in North America. However, the book began and ended for me on the wrong note. Tim Folger’s Foreword opens with a trite comparison of today’s climate for scientific research with Nazi Germany. Part III, *The Real Life of Scientists*, includes pieces on topics like gender bias and sexual harassment (a very moving piece) that have no science content. As someone who spent a career in technical fields and loves science both for the sheer wonder of it and the contribution it can make to society, I care deeply about current threats to support for scientific research. As a woman who is old enough to have more than once been

“the first woman \_\_\_\_\_ we have had,” I decry the sexual harassment and the gender bias that today’s women still experience. But those topics are not “science and nature writing,” and those articles should appear in mainstream media, not here. Despite my disappointment at what I consider some inappropriate selections, there is a LOT to enjoy in this year’s edition. And if you find your appetite whetted rather than sated, Tim Folger provides his own list of *Other Notable Science and Nature Writing of 2016* at the end. You can follow up his list and read about

Einstein's Symphony or How Science is Putting a New Face on Crime Solving or have A Conversation with Whales to tide you over until next year.

I have to tell you to get this book and read David Epstein's astounding article, The DIY Scientist, the Olympian, and the Mutated Gene. It is so riveting, so unbelievable, that I got goose bumps while reading it and even just thinking about it after I put the book down. An ordinary (NOT!) woman with a rare disease maximizes the internet, makes scientific history, saves the life of an Olympic athlete, and changes the course of scientific research into a genetic mutation. It's an amazing achievement. If we had a thousand women like Jill Viles, medicine would advance exponentially. Okay, end of rave. This compilation, as others in the series, is divided into topics. The topics vary each year. This year focuses on Emergent Fields, Changing Land and Resources, and The Real Life of Scientists. It includes essays by two dozen writers. If you enjoy reading anything relating to science and nature, you will have encountered some of them in National Geographic, Scientific American, Buzzfeed, the New York Times, the New Yorker...a mix of paper and digital media. Some of the articles are a bit controversial, but all are fascinating.

The best sort of non-fiction writing happens when an author becomes fascinated with some subject and can't wait to share this new knowledge. The best writers will present the information in an interesting way that will make the reader want to read, even if it's a subject they don't care much about. The writer will almost disappear from the narrative, leaving on the story to tell itself. The model for all would-be nonfiction writers is, or should be, John McPhee, of whose book, *Oranges*, one reader noted, "I can't believe that I've just read two hundred and thirty five pages about oranges." Many of the pieces in this collection follow McPhee's example, letting the facts and the actors tell the story for them. The best bring to mind the clear writing of McPhee- Nicola Twilley's piece on the LIGO project to detect gravity waves struck me as very much in the style of McPhee, possibly because Twilley, like McPhee, is a New Yorker writer. Most of the writing is in the form of the first-person narrative which can be effective if not abused. Tom Philpott's piece on the role of antibiotics in commercial chicken production, from Mother Jones, is an excellent piece of reportage even though it reads like autobiography. Some of the writers represented fall into cliches, or commit the unpardonable sin of telling you that something is interesting rather than showing you that it is. And some of it is dreadful, over the top polemic, like the author who compares climate

skepticism with Nazi book burning. But for the most part the pieces in this collection are interesting, informative, and well written.

I had never read a Best American Science collection before, but as expected it's a solid gathering of interesting stories, journalism and essays. No question that some of the entries do require some hard science knowledge to truly enjoy, but there are plenty that will be interesting to any general audience. Some of my favorites included "The Billion Year Wave," which is way over my head but still intriguing about gravity waves spinning across the universe, "Something Uneasy in the LA Air," an interesting reflection about the famous Santa Ana winds, and "The Battle of Virunga," which was depressing but maybe hopeful about national parks in Zaire. There are a couple pieces that deal with global warming and a few that offer accounts of sexual harassment in the fields - both in science classrooms, and also in the field. Those weren't pleasant to read, but were important to present. It's a solid collection, as these "Best American" volumes always are.

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