

# Occasional Papers on the Essay: Practice & Form

THE ESSAYIST'S DILEMMA

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Lucy Ferriss  
Kim Dana Kupperman  
E. J. Levy**

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Welcome Table Press  
Pamphlet Series



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This volume of the Welcome Table Press *Occasional Paper Series on Practice & Form* derives from talks delivered at the annual conference of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP), held in Denver, CO, April 2010.

Welcome Table Press is a nonprofit, independent press dedicated to publishing and celebrating the essay, in all its forms.

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## Introduction

### Marcia Aldrich

The Essayist's Dilemma: How to Assemble a Collection was a panel presentation at the annual conference of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) in 2010. The description of the event in the conference program was as follows:

This panel examines the expectations that publishers have for essay collections, including aesthetic and marketing issues. What are the various connecting apparatuses used to assemble essay collections that do not cohere around a theme, a single grand narrative, or other linking device? How might essayists protect the stand-alone essay from being subsumed into an artificial memoir? And finally, how can essayists reestablish the importance of this literary form?

To the panelists' delight, the room was filled with listeners who spilled into the aisles and halls. The overflow attendance and lively discussion afterward were signs that the panel's probe of the subject had hit a nerve.

Just a week before the AWP conference, I heard Cheryl Strayed read from her recently completed memoir, *Wild*. We mingled and chatted afterward in small groups, and a member of the audience asked me what *my* next book was. As an essayist, I began to talk about the problems of getting into print a collection of my writings. And then Cheryl leaned over from the next group and said, "Oh, essays, they're the kiss of death in publishing."

It's a sentiment I have often heard expressed. In an interview for *Fourth Genre* in 2008, I asked Brenda Miller if it was harder to find a publisher for a collection of essays than a single-subject nonfiction book. Her emphatic reply was, "No one wants essays; you can't say the word *essays*. They have to be memoirs or meditations or chronicles, anything but the word *essays*. Not having a solid center where a publisher could say in ten words or less what the book is about makes it very difficult to place."<sup>1</sup>

It might surprise those outside the world of publishing to learn that essayists struggle to find presses interested in their work. After all, many essayists are award-winning writers; surely they would have no trouble finding an audience for their collections. But gather a group of essayists together and they will tell stories of agents and publishers who want memoirs, not collections, because they can market and sell them. And it isn't just trade publishers, but small presses and university presses also that are afflicted with the stay-away-from-essays syndrome.

If you aren't writing a novel, a memoir, or a book focused on a central subject—say, the sex life of whales or the shenanigans in the last presidential election—then you are writing a collection, a miscellany. Collections of essays lack the memoirist's dramatic arc, single theme, or “hook,” a term often used by those who think first about sales figures. The reading public might be surprised at how often essayists have been urged to reshape their material as memoir. Many books marketed as memoir started off as collections. I often hear stories of how the author of a collection of fine essays was asked to write new material to supply missing linkages, to fill holes. A writer might be asked to break apart the essays and reform them into a more continuous and coherent narrative—in other words, to revise toward the form of memoir. These stories are often accompanied by writerly sighs.

In a review titled “Not a Memoir” of Emily Fox Gordon's recent collection of personal essays, Gordon voices her misgivings about the dominance of the memoir: “I regret having written *Mockingbird Years*—the memoir, that is, not the essay.”<sup>2</sup> The publishers insisted she create a narrative arc to bolster her original personal essay and to create what became the memoir. Her account shows the negotiations that many writers undergo with agents and editors—and what to some writers feels like capitulation. While an author is free to refuse such pressures, that refusal may well mean her work will not be published in book form.

The essay collection by long tradition resists overt forms of coherence, favoring the incidental, the reader's pleasure in circulating without reaching a single take-home message. Arthur Saltzman, in the introduction to his essay collection *Objects & Empathy*, says, “Although readers will likely discover thematic and tonal consistencies among the essays in this volume, as well as detect repeat appearances by some characters in varying degrees of disguise, that is probably the closest I can come to a unifying principle for the volume.” For many of its practitioners, this poor fit within the pigeonhole is one of the great

attractions of the essay form, not a characteristic to be dismantled. I circle back to Brenda Miller, who loves the word *miscellaneous*. “We tend to see it as a diminutive word when actually it’s quite wonderful. It’s all the things that don’t fit into one category coming together and finding commonality...But,” she adds, “I think it’s very difficult for a publisher to market that kind of work.”

Calling a book a collection implies that the reader can open it at any point and start reading. It suggests that each piece can stand alone and is independent of what comes before it, although it may be enriched by its place in a sequence. Contemporary essays are often dramatic explorations of the possibilities of the form itself. That formal exploration may be destroyed when an essay is ripped open for its narrative content and reassembled as a part of another whole.

My own inclination is to write an essay as if it were a poem. Often I don’t have a grand plan for how the essay will fit into a larger structure called a book. My method is closer to a portrait gallery. I’m drawn to the comparison with a photographic sitting. Milton Greene, for example, did a legendary series of sittings with Marilyn Monroe. Each set of photographs focused on certain incidental elements, such as Marilyn in a ballerina dress. These other modes of artistic form, which aren’t based on a narrative line that unifies the totality, show the potential strengths of the essay collection.

At times I think the idea of the unified whole is a fat myth, a delusion that we’ve created and a tin god we worship. It should be called out and investigated. Why don’t essayists have more success in doing so?

Though I have struggled with the movement of the essay into book form, at least I’m not alone. The three writers whose comments follow, award-winning essayists all, are occupied with the problem as well. Let’s find out what they have to say on the subject of the essayist’s dilemma.

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<sup>1</sup> *Fourth Genre*, 11.2 (Fall 2009)

<sup>2</sup> Alex Kuczynski, “Not A Memoir,” the *New York Times*, August 23, 2010.

## The Parts and the Whole

Lucy Ferriss

Although I have certainly published more than enough essays to fill a book, I have never collected them. I'm not sure, right now, that I could. The one book-length piece of personal writing that I did publish, *Unveiling the Prophet*, was labeled a memoir; the subtitle that was imposed by the publisher, *The Misadventures of a Reluctant Debutante*, was meant to signal that genre to the reader. I thought of the work more as cultural reportage that centered on a specific public action on a specific date—December 22, 1972—and came at the complexities of that action from a number of different vantage points and via two different time lines. I mention this work only to say that my inclination in nonfiction is to resist linearity, but not necessarily to resist coherence. Were I to publish a collection of essays, I would seek the thread that travels through some of the essays that I have written—not necessarily a thread of which I was conscious at the time (and I am not, as I write, conscious of such a thread), but one that would affect both the choice and the arrangement of essays in the collection. I believe that readers come to essay collections, if they come at all, for one of two reasons: because they are passionate about the author and want to read everything he or she has written, or because they hope to come away from the collection with a sense of something they hadn't quite thought of that way before.

Just before we gathered for this panel, for instance, I looked at essay collections that were just published or forthcoming. Zadie Smith was able to publish a collection bravely titled *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*, and almost all of the seventeen people commenting on the book on Amazon (as opposed to the 370 people commenting on her novel *White Teeth*) expressed their desire to read nonfiction authored by Zadie Smith. Wendell Berry has recently come out with another miscellany and has two more forthcoming, all of which readers will love if they love Wendell Berry's particular voice and view of the world. Ditto miscellanies by Simon Schama, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Nadine Gordimer. Collections by less well-known single authors, by contrast, frequently resorted to subtitles that claimed either physical or emotional territory (*Nine Stories of Love and Serendipity on the Streets*

of New York; *Excursions into the Shenandoah Valley; A Personal Quest for Wilderness; Essays on Memory and Identity; The Amazing Adventures of an Ordinary Woman*) or set forth subject matter in the title itself (*Life Would Be Perfect if I Lived in That House; Quotidiana*). In other words, if you are sufficiently well known, someone will come to you wanting your essays, and if nothing else joins them, chronology will do. If you are less well known, you would do better to find a fulcrum.

My own experience with collecting works comes from assembling my short story collection, *Leaving the Neighborhood* (Mid-List, 2001). I had initially taken a variety approach—a story narrated by a woman followed by a story narrated by a man; a story set on the East Coast followed by one on the West Coast; a snappy bit of fiction in present tense followed by something more ruminative in past tense. My editors had a very different idea. Here's an excerpt from the letter they sent:

What we find with collections is that writers see pieces individually. We see the work as a whole, and we keep in mind that readers will also see it that way. Unlike an anthology, in which readers cherry-pick their way through, a collection provides a different sense of movement. Anthologies take advantage of the short narratives' strength in beginning and ending quickly, and they allow readers to move between very different pieces without considering the whole. In a collection, the ending of one piece provides the beginning for another. Thematic underpinnings and stylistic consistencies subtly lead the reader from place to place, from character to character.

I had seen none of this connective tissue when I wrote the stories or when I assembled them. To my surprise, my editors did: "This is fiction," they wrote, "about the things that count in relationships, the very things most unresolvable . . . The stories together make a case for permanence."

*Well!* I thought when I first read such comments. Is that what I was intending? Later I thought that perhaps it was. As a result of my editors' advice, I dropped one story entirely, added another, rearranged everything, and came up with a different title. Why had I not proposed this arrangement in the first place? Because—I now believe—I was still thinking of the stories individually, rather than as part of a whole. And I believe my editors were correct: readers come to a collection wanting something that is of a piece, whether because they think they know the voice and world view of the author, or because some underlying theme, however subtle and unexpected, joins the pieces of the work together.



And they look, whether we want them to or not, for movement and continuity amid the eclecticism.

I don't know that this pressure, whether from publishers or readers, is a bad thing. After all, in the digital age, most published essays are easily searchable online. Our carefully crafted pieces of nonfiction are no longer "lost" if they are not gathered into a hardbound volume. More important for us as writers may be uncovering what *has* preoccupied us, whether we knew it or not, when we penned one essay about New Jersey and another about our dog's cancer and another about the politics of body hair. There's a new challenge here, a new journey of self-discovery, from which it's not always best to turn away. That mysterious thing, the whole that is greater than its parts, may emerge only as we think about the whole, and may be the greatest gift we can offer our readers.

## An Essayist's Dilemma

**Kim Dana Kupperman**

I am not so sure that organizing a collection of unlinked essays is a dilemma; rather it seems more like a puzzle. The arrangement of my own book came about in stages, beginning with that monster called *The Creative Thesis*, completed after two plus years in an MFA program. Of course when you're a grad student, especially one who writes essays as opposed to memoir, you don't have to worry about linkages and connective tissue, you simply have to put your essays together the way a poet or a short story writer might, setting side by side those pieces that share preoccupations or tone or stance or theme, letting a nuanced call and response evolve, braiding together, as it were, strands.

After I graduated, I thought that all I'd need to do was write a few more essays to fill out the collection I had so diligently assembled. And then a friend read one of my autobiographical essays, the one about scattering the ashes of my mother and oldest brother, and said, "This is very interesting, but what happened before the time you wrote about?" That question prompted me to take apart this particular essay and write it into a memoir. Which meant, for practical purposes, removing a piece of writing from an already slim collection. But, I reasoned, I'd have a memoir too by the time I was done, and it would be much easier to place the memoir with a publisher than it would be a collection of discrete essays by a virtually unknown writer.

Can you hear the literary gods laughing? I did not. I really believed in my plan. And so I spent almost two years writing a memoir. Though I published chapters from it as discrete essays, it did not sell. (That's another story.) I entered it, along with the slimmed-down essay collection, into the four book-length nonfiction contests currently offered by American literary presses. Nothing happened. And then, after a publisher asked to see the memoir, read it, but turned it down, I decided to take a new course of action. I dismantled the memoir, breaking it into discrete autobiographical essays and restoring the essay from which it germinated. I merged these pieces with the essay collection. It occurred to me that if I wanted to publish this book, I'd need to solve the puzzle of how to organize these somewhat-linked-but-mostly-not pieces.

Though a book of discrete essays may be opened and delved into at any given point, most readers, perhaps because we are trained by the beginning-middle-end schema, desire an organizing principle, a structure that imposes meaning—even if it is quite nuanced—that relates the parts comprising a whole. Using sections to group the essays would help, I thought. And, the book’s title would derive from one of the essays, and I knew that the title would, eventually, lead me to develop a suitable configuration, but which title to pick, which essay to emphasize? I identified some of the shared preoccupations among the essays—air, wind, flight—as well as some of the overarching themes—departures and disappearances (read “death”), but how to wrap it up in a neat package for the dear readers I imagined on the other side of the page?

When I decided on the title, *I Just Lately Started Buying Wings* I realized I’d need a subtitle to be the agent of cohesion. I jotted down other title/subtitle combinations that operated similarly: Ander Monson’s *Neck Deep and Other Predicaments*; Dustin Beall Smith’s *Only Endless Consequence: A Memoir in Essays* (which Houghton Mifflin reworked as *Key Grip: A Memoir of Endless Consequences*); Susan Griffin’s *A Chorus of Stones: The Private Life of War*; Leah Cohen’s *Glass, Paper, Beans: Reflections on the Nature and Value of Ordinary Things*; Eduardo Galeano’s *Upside Down: A Primer for the Looking-glass World*. Barbara Hurd’s *Entering the Stone: On Caves and Feeling through the Dark*. Perhaps, I thought, I could use the leitmotif of correspondence, using different kinds of letters as subheadings for individual sections. I noted words and phrases that evoked the epistolary: *Letters home. Missives, dispatches, correspondence, billets-doux, epistles. Return to sender. Air mail. Parcel post. Sealed with a kiss.* Etcetera. I played with the organization possible within these different rubrics. “I like the word *missive* for the subtitle,” I said to my husband during a moment of procrastination induced by coming to a dead halt. “But missives from *where*?” I wondered. “How about ‘from the interior?’” he suggested. And so I had a title: *I Just Lately Started Buying Wings: Missives from the Interior*. All that was left was to figure out how to group the essays.

That’s when I did one of those things that seemed like a good idea at the time, but in retrospect was not, or, at least, it was something that did not meet my objective of providing a coherent structure to the collection. I came across an extraordinary poem, “Here the Birds’ Journey Ends,” by Mahmoud Darwish. I’ll read it now:

### Here the Birds' Journey Ends

Here the birds' journey ends, our journey, the journey of words,  
and after us there will be a horizon for the new birds.

We are the ones who forge the sky's copper, the sky that will carve  
roads  
after us and make amends with our names above the distant cloud  
slopes.

Soon we will descend the widow's descent in the memory fields  
and raise our tent to the final winds: blow, for the poem to live, and  
blow

on the poem's road. After us, the plants will grow and grow  
over roads only we have walked and our obstinate steps inaugurated.  
And we will etch on the final rocks, "Long live life, long live life,"  
and fall into ourselves. And after us there'll be a horizon for the  
new birds.

I used the poem as an epigraph and took pieces of lines as subheads for six different sections. I called my introduction, a very short piece about herons, "The Ones Who Forge the Sky's Copper." I grouped all the autobiographical essays culled from my memoir under the subheading "Make Amends with Our Names." Essays about memorable love affairs I organized under the subheading "Descent in the Memory Fields." The pieces about departures I arranged under "The Sky that Will Carve Roads." And so on.

When my collection won the 2009 Bakeless Prize in Nonfiction, I sent the manuscript on to Graywolf, the publisher—this was now six months after having used the poem as an organizing device—with a note that I wasn't sure about using the poem after all, and what did the editor think.

The editor is a pragmatic woman. She suggested getting rid of the poem and the subheadings, which I gladly did, reordering the book's contents in three sections demarcated by Roman numerals.

And then my editor suggested that I change the subtitle of the book to *Missives from the Other Side of Silence*, which evoked the title of one of the essays, "That Roar on the Other Side of Silence." I loved this idea.

Several months into the copyediting process, I looked at the table of contents. Those Roman numerals seemed lonely...I still saw the collection as needing some sort of organizing principle. And that's when I returned to the original idea of the epistolary. After all, I thought, in the introduction, Sue Halpern asked readers to approach these essays

“as an assortment of letters bundled together,” a phrase that led to the cover design (a bundle of letters tied with a red string).

I dug out my list of letter-related vocabulary. After looking at the three sections and moving an essay or two, I clearly saw what I needed to do. The first section I titled *Letters Home and Abroad*, because these pieces were all about my family, here in America and there, in czarist Russia. The second section I called *Return to Sender*, and in it I included a mix of essays about such diverse subjects as a lover’s suicide, working in a battered women’s shelter, and meditating on the color orange. In the third section, *Billets-doux*, I placed all the pieces about love, platonic, romantic, and of language.

There was one other exercise in which I engaged: I read the first and last lines of each essay, to myself and aloud, to make sure there was a flow between pieces.

I don’t have an opportunity to tell this story often because few people are really interested in how a writer—and in this case, me—organizes sixteen discrete essays into a cohesive whole. But look what went into the process: a question, a taking apart and reassembling, a husband’s instinct, a poem’s fever, an editorial directive, and, finally, a return to an original idea, which, very much like the bundle of letters it describes, sat in a drawer, waiting to be reread.

## In Defense of Incoherence

E. J. Levy

An editor at a good independent press recently told me that the press is “open to [collections] of essays, though they have to be,” he said, “*tight*—thematically, temporally, somethingelsally. A book of essays can’t be cobbled together, best-ofs, because the audience just is too small for such a work.”

Despite my editor friend’s advice, I want to argue in *favor* of the pleasures of the cobbled together, the incidental essay collection, those that *don’t* adhere to a particular theme or formal conceit or “somethingelseally.” Those collections that wander, like the essayist’s mind, interestingly, but not teleologically.

I love collections of essays that are, in fact, *collected*, the way flowers might be, or interesting bits of glass and metal and shells from a beach, which can become strange and extraordinary when *arrayed* together on a table or a windowsill or in a bowl; not *arranged*, but allowed to exist in curious, provocative, promising, sometimes jarring juxtaposition.

Lately I’ve been rereading David Foster Wallace’s *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*, a book that bravely announces its contents with the subtitle “Essays and Arguments.” In it, as you likely know, he writes about a lot of things—tennis, tornados, David Lynch’s film, TV, literary criticism, the horrors of a cruise ship. One could argue, I suppose, that these essays are linked by the theme of “supposedly fun things,” but it’s a very *loose* link, as I’d argue an essay collection’s should be. The essays range widely—in style and subject—refusing reduction to a cute conceit or a single formal device or that bane of English undergraduates, a theme. And I find that a great relief.

An essay collection is a distinctly different kind of pleasure from reading a memoir or a novel, and that is as it should be, as far as I’m concerned. Reading Foster Wallace’s essays, I’m not interested in Aristotelean profluence moving me forward in time, nor do I care about the satisfying teleology of memoir. What I want is to know how *that* particular mind moved through the world, and I don’t want *anything* to distort that access. Certainly not a contrived conceit intended to market books.

I love Foster Wallace's collection precisely *because* it's unrestrained by such commercial considerations—the essays are rangy, restless, inquiring, odd, irreducible as the essay form itself.

So, my remarks today are less a strategy for assembling a saleable collection than an apologia *defending the pleasures* of the essay against the *pressures* of a market accustomed to memoir and novels. In praise of the itinerant intellection of the essay.

The danger—it seems to me—even with an elegant conceit (in an essay collection) is that the linking device can overtake the essayist's vision, distorting the sensibility at work.

I'm a fan of M. F. K. Fisher's work, but by the time I'm on the fifth oyster in *Consider the Oyster*, I'm queasy. It's not that such a strategy *can't* work, but that it makes me suspect that the essayist was considering something *other* than that oyster—a check from a publisher maybe, the adorableness of her own conceit.

Obviously linking devices can be productive and fruitful—they can help writers discover connections and depths within their work—but I'd hope those links would grow *out* of the material rather than (as too often seems the case now), be imposed on it by a publisher or the market.

Reading essay collections with obvious linking devices I'm reminded of what auteur director Hal Hartley said about nudity in film. He was asked by Manhola Dargis why he didn't include nude scenes in his movies, and he said that it was because when *he* went to a movie and someone started taking off their clothes on screen, he was suddenly aware that he'd paid *money* to see it.

I often feel the same way about linking devices—when I see one, I'm aware I'm being sold something, and that perhaps concern for that sale has eclipsed the essayist's vision.

I wonder who's profiting by that, and I rarely think the essay or essay collection does.

But theory is different from practice.

When I sent to my agent a proposal for a collection of food-related essays last year, she was very enthusiastic, but she requested that I change one thing: "*Don't* call them *essays*," she said. "Call them *chapters*."

I should have realized that this was a bad a sign.

When I finished a draft late last year, another disturbing shift occurred. We started to talk about the dramatic arc. Chapters began to

drop out, to be cut, because they didn't fit that arc, which, as an essay collection, it wasn't meant to have.

I've worked as a journalist and am not squeamish about editing or being edited—I understand the pleasures of rigorous rearrangement, seeking to distill and clarify meaning by finding unity and economy of form.

But I worry that the effort to suit the essay to a market accustomed to memoir and novels, profluence and plot, often distorts rather than deepens. In my case, I feel that my book has lost some range and some texture in the effort.

But the fact is, I'm kind of *okay* with that: The essays have had a life. They've been published in good places—*Kenyon Review*, *Salmagundi*, *Best American Essays*, *The New York Times*. They've had their chance.

It's a *different project now*—a memoir built from what *were* essays. (So maybe after all I *am* talking about a strategy for structuring an essay collection—you can always let someone else turn it into a memoir...)

In the introduction to his recent anthology, *The Lost Origins of the Essay*, John D'Agata claims that five thousand years ago a Sumerian named Ziusudra made a list, which D'Agata would have us see as “the first essay in the world.” He holds Ziusudra's list up in *contrast* to the very earliest form of writing, which was, he says, designed to record commercial transactions.

Ziusudra's list is an essay, D'Agata says, precisely because it was “*not* propelled by information” or the commercial, but “by individual expression—by inquiry, by opinion, by wonder, by doubt.” In seeking out Ziusudra, D'Agata says, “I am here to track the origins of an alternative to commerce.”

The essay is an ideal place to look. Small, irresolute, experimental, often odd and idiosyncratic, the essay is an unlikely candidate in the beauty pageant of capitalism. The form doesn't lend itself to mass-market sales.

And that is precisely its charm and our pleasure in reading it. We seek it out often for just such respite from the clamor of commerce.

I hope then that in constructing our own essay collections, we will not lose sight of art, that first impulse that brought us to the essay form, which is not about the market or clever formal conceits, or even about publication, but about wonder.