

The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2017, Edited by Hope Jahren, Houghton Harcourt Mifflin Publishing Co., New York, 2017, 352 pages ISBN: 978-1328715517

The Best American Science and Nature Writing contains an expertly curated set of exemplary pieces from 2016, culled by biologist/science writer Hope Jahren. Jahren is well known for her memoir *Lab Girl*, which offered brutally honest insight into the pursuit of science as a woman in the past few decades.

The Best contains 24 pieces of science and nature writing from American publications. Jahren sorted the pieces into three categories: Emergent Fields, Changing Land and Resources, and The “Real Life” of Scientists. That essentially boils down to “new stuff,” “climate change”, and “profiles” (not every story fits into those narrower categories, but the pieces that stood out the most certainly did).

Writing a good, compelling long-form science story is hard, especially when you are describing an emergent field—something that is at the forefront of human understanding. As a writer, you are faced with explaining a concept to your audience that even the scientists who specialize in the subject don’t yet fully understand. That said, the four pieces in “Emergent Fields,” by Sarah Everts, Maria Konnikova, Kim Tingley, and Nicola Twilley, do a fairly good job of just that. But like any piece on emergent science—though certainly important—they leave the reader wanting more, which is decidedly unsatisfactory. But given the nature of the work, it seems inevitable. Konnikova’s “Altered Tastes,” originally published in *The New Republic*, was particularly intriguing. She explicates a brief history of food science in the context of the study of neurogastronomy—essentially the relationship between your stomach and your brain (and the rest of your body).

Part II, Changing Land and Resources, had ten pieces. Given the current political climate (and the current *climate* climate), many of these pieces resonated more than those in the previous section. We live in a world where its “most powerful man” is a vehement climate change denier, and that is quite frankly, deeply upsetting. Two of the works from this section resonated in particular—Adrian Glick Kudler’s “Something Uneasy in the Los Angeles Air” and Nathaniel Rich’s “The Invisible Catastrophe,” originally published in *Curbed* and *The New York Times Magazine*, respectively. Kudler’s piece, on the Santa Ana winds—their history, their devastation, and the fascination they inspire—seemed particularly relevant given the devastating fires that wracked the greater Los Angeles area this past winter. The Santa Ana winds have always blown—but the role of climate change in increasing the extent of their devastation is a harder causality to pinpoint. Rich’s piece (also on the greater Los Angeles area) tells a story about an old, drained J. Paul Getty oil field in Aliso Canyon that was bought by Pacific Lighting in the 1970s. Pacific Lighting used the land to store excess supplies of natural gas—methane. Fast forward to 2016—residents of a housing development on the land above this methane storage ground were reporting strange phenomena—painful headaches, dying pet parrots, even cancer. This story seems like *déjà vu*—and should, at least for anyone who saw the Academy-Award winning, based on a true story *Erin Brokovich*, almost 20 years ago—or more recently, the documentary *Gasland* or its sequel *Gasland II*. It is definitely discouraging to say the least.

Part III, The “Real Lives” of Scientists, had more memorable pieces than the other two, but that might just be the nature of the writing. Profiles have an inherently human element, and that element makes it easier to form a compelling narrative. Included in this section are Azeen Ghorayshi’s “He Fell in Love with His Grad Student—Then Fired Her for It,” from *Buzzfeed* and Kathryn Joyce’s “Out Here, No One Can Hear You Scream” from *Huffington Post Highline/The Nation Institute Investigative Fund*. Both are horrifying tales of sexual harassment towards female researchers perpetrated by their male coworkers. Given the recent outbreak of scandals in every industry, particularly entertainment, these pieces resonate—these stories need to be told, and they deserve attention.



The standout piece from the book is the longest: David Epstein's "The DIY Scientist, the Olympian, and the Mutated Gene," from *ProPublica*. Epstein, the author of *The Sports Gene*, a book that details the possible relationship between genetic predisposition and athleticism, tells a story about the aftermath of his book. Long story short, a woman who suffered from a rare form of muscular dystrophy reached out to Epstein, wanting to be put in contact with an Olympic athlete who she suspected suffered from a similar condition. You'll have to read Epstein's piece if you want to find out what ensued.

Jahren includes a list of dozens of other noteworthy pieces from 2016—which are worth hunting down and reading, if you haven't already.

Review by Jeanette S. Ferrara, MA