



The Best of Brevity

Heal McKnight

Cal Poly Humboldt

Heal.McKnight@humboldt.edu

Review of

Bossiere, Zoë, and Dinty W. Moore. *The Best of Brevity : Twenty Groundbreaking Years of Flash Nonfiction*. Brookline, MA: Rose Metal Press, 2020.

For years I've used Dinty Moore's online magazine *Brevity* in my creative nonfiction classes—turning students loose on the website, asking them to read until they find an essay they love, then paying attention to what they bring back. Folks return to class eager to share what they found: essays about floods and grief, about the silencing effects of sexual abuse, about helping a disabled brother in the shower. They return delighted by the range of subjects creative nonfiction can pick up and hold. They return eager to talk about the complexities of life and voice and the big country of small essays, and far less daunted about trying one of their own.

Brevity Magazine went live in 1997, when most of us were uncertain about our internet tendencies—did electronic publishing really count as publishing? Dinty Moore somehow shouldered past that, making us an online magazine that looks beautiful and stakes out space for short creative nonfiction pieces—over 800 of them, and counting, all 750 words or fewer. The creative work on the website is joined by a diverse range of craft essays, solidifying for students that the CNF Flash Essay is an art form with its own pedagogy, that we have ready access to the form's mentors, and that those generous mentors can teach us without resorting to pinched didactic voices.

In book form, *The Best of Brevity* collects 84 of those essays. With this gentle weight in our hands we can leave the online universe behind and settle into a papery world of concentration and margin notes. We can fold down the pages of essays we love enough, or puzzle over enough, to merit book-bending. The book features a series of indexes, sorting essays by subject and form, emphasizing the many-faceted qualities of these pieces and the qualities they model: writing compactly and deeply about the things of the world, in a distinct voice that could only belong to its writer.

The book's indexing echoes the sorting tools available in *Brevity*'s online version: under the

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“Teaching Resources” tab, a largely user-generated index system helps readers sort the essays by topic, by craft element, by essay mode. Whether you’re using the whole of *Brevity’s* website or the more manageable world of the book, these indexes are invaluable to my course planning. Trying to build a unit on the braided essay for students who wish to read about baffling baby rituals worldwide? J.D Schraffenberger’s “Dropping Babies” answers that call. Hoping for a micro-essay about the unnamable things that sometimes happen to women and girls? “Fluency,” by Jamila Osman, brings stunned silence to the page.

Further resources in the print book include a brief riff about teaching the flash form—“By definition,” say the editors, “the length requirements of a flash essay allow writers to tackle numerous brief nonfiction pieces, learning from both the failed attempts and the successes (209).” And if you’re interested in learning more, yet another index connects this collection to *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide To Writing Flash Nonfiction*. This index lists and summarizes the *Field Guide’s* chapters, like the image and detail chapter called “No Ideas But In Things,” and suggests companionable selections from *The Best of Brevity*. Looking to play with found forms? Find your way to *The Field Guide’s* chapter called “The Singular Moment,” and pair it with Randon Billings Noble’s “The Heart as a Torn Muscle” in *The Best of Brevity*. This sort of index, for me, is the best kind of course-planning assistance: a series of texts lined up and waiting patiently to cross-pollinate. The books offer me material to teach myself, and then to join my students in learning even more.

But even if a reader ignored all those indexes and potential pairings, *The Best of Brevity* stands alone gracefully. Turn to Deborah Taffa’s “My Cousin’s Backyard” for a model of the fast start necessary for flash nonfiction: “Leonard thinks he’s a bad-ass walking behind the casino, making his way over to the party. I’m the female answer to him and his Sioux style wrapped up cool in black boots” (42). Watch Brenda Miller’s “The Shape of Emptiness”—a perpetual student favorite—weave narrative, plot, and the profound empathy marking the narrator’s voice: “His mother dies three weeks before the end of the quarter. A boy, a good student: He emails me to tell me the news, asks permission to be absent...he promises to be back in class next week. And he is” (1).

Brian Doyle’s “Imagining Foxes” reminds us all how much we miss Brian Doyle, and leads us once more into the wild spaces of his youth. He recounts a day

One time, many years ago, when the world and I were young...we saw woodpeckers and an owl and lots of warblers...we saw what we thought was a possum, but which might have been a squirrel with a glandular problem...we saw holes among the roots of the white cedars, which were so clearly the dens of animals like foxes and weasels and badgers that one of us looked for mail addressed to them outside their doors. ...We saw many other amazing small things that are not small... (11 – 12).

Some of the selections here may be nuggets lifted from longer work—Amy Butcher’s “Women These Days” seems to be a seedling of her book *Mother Trucker: Finding Joy on the Loneliest Road In America*. But most of these essays are small things that remain intentionally small—but then they turn out not to be small at all.

Not small—but compact. Intriguing, the way miniatures always are. And an energetic way to inspire students to make multiple pieces each semester, using their lives, their ways of seeing, and all the writerly craft tools we hope come to feel good in their hands.

Heal McKnight teaches creative writing at Humboldt State University in Arcata, California. She and her wife Maggie McKnight are nearly over the fact that their own Brevity pieces were not chosen for this handsome anthology.