



Notes from No Man's Land: American Essays

By Eula Biss

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Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism

Winner of the Graywolf Press Nonfiction Prize

A frank and fascinating exploration of race and racial identity

Notes from No Man's Land: American Essays begins with a series of lynchings and ends with a series of apologies. Eula Biss explores race in America and her response to the topic is informed by the experiences chronicled in these essays -- teaching in a Harlem school on the morning of 9/11, reporting for an African American newspaper in San Diego, watching the aftermath of Katrina from a college town in Iowa, and settling in Chicago's most diverse neighborhood.

As Biss moves across the country from New York to California to the Midwest, her essays move across time from biblical Babylon to the freedman's schools of Reconstruction to a Jim Crow mining town to post-war white flight. She brings an eclectic education to the page, drawing variously on the Eagles, Laura Ingalls Wilder, James Baldwin, Alexander Graham Bell, Joan Didion, religious pamphlets, and reality television shows.

These spare, sometimes lyric essays explore the legacy of race in America, artfully revealing in intimate detail how families, schools, and neighborhoods participate in preserving racial privilege. Faced with a disturbing past and an unsettling present, Biss still remains hopeful about the possibilities of American diversity, "not the sun-shininess of it, or the quota-making politics of it, but the real complexity of it."

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Editorial Review

From School Library Journal

Adult/High School—Expository writing should always be this compelling, provocative, and intelligent. Biss explores race in America through multiple lenses, examining common issues through uncommon situations and events. She flawlessly weaves present-day experiences with historical research to create 13 essays that combine narrative appeal with fascinating facts. In "Time and Distance Overcome," the telephone pole is used to juxtapose lynching with technological intrusions and advancements. "Back to Buxton" examines the successes, sorrows, and current implications of a racially integrated mining camp in the early 1900s. The book closes with "All Apologies," which explores both the significance and opposing insignificance of national and personal statements of apology. Biss has a talent for pointing out hypocrisy without accusations. Her ability to expose seemingly subtle inequities and injustices forces readers to analyze their own actions, decisions, and relationships. Teens will find this collection both accessible and challenging, and English and social-studies teachers will find multiple ways to use these essays to enhance instruction. Whether students examine the author's craft or analyze historical and social relationships, many will take pleasure in seeing the world through a unique and refreshing perspective.—Lynn Rashid, *Marriotts Ridge High School, Marriottsville, MD*

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Review

"Two of the qualities that make Eula Biss's essays in *Notes from No Man's Land* compelling and beautiful are precision and independence?independence from orthodoxies of the right and left and the conventions of literary essays and their displays of sensibility and sensitivity. And whatever topic she takes up she dissects and analyzes with startling insight that comes from deep reading and original thinking. She's important to this moment, important to opening up what essays can be, important for setting a standard of integrity and insight, and she's also a joy to read."?Rebecca Solnit

"Biss is telling us the story of our country--one we never saw coming."?The Chicago Tribune

"Eula Biss' *Notes From No Man's Land* is the most accomplished book of essays anyone has written or published so far in the 21st century. . . . *Notes From No Man's Land* is the kind of book that rewards and even demands multiple readings. It provokes, troubles, charms, challenges, and occasionally hectors the reader, and it raises more questions than it answers. It is strident and brave in its unwillingness to offer comfort, and, unlike all but a handful of the best books I have ever read, it is unimpeachably great."?Salon

"[*Notes From No Man's Land*] is a beautiful exercise in consciousness; in bringing both intelligence and experience to bear on a subject that has implications for the way one behaves in the world."?Los Angeles Times

"Biss' pairings of ideas, like those of most original thinkers, have the knack of seeming brilliant and obvious at the same time . . . forceful, beautiful essays."?NPR

"Biss's examination of America's complicated racial heritage offers penetrating insight."?Time Out New York

"Powerful essays on the nature of identity, national and racial and personal. . . . Containing the music and force of [Biss's] singular thought."?Orion Magazine

Review

"Biss, inquisitive and buoyant, swings back and forth between the shores of nurture and nature, asking tough questions about which aspects of race and culture we inherit and which we acquire. . . . Matters of race, sense of self, and belonging involve everyone, and Biss' crossing-the-line perspective will provoke fresh analysis of our fears and expectations."

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Emma Latshaw:

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