

## JOHN D'AGATA

John D'Agata is the author of a trilogy of anthologies which trace the history of contemporary essaying: *The Next American Essay*, *The Lost Origins of the Essay*, and a forthcoming third. Once called "one of the most significant US writers" by the late David Foster Wallace, D'Agata continues to hash out a place for the kind of writing Wallace did. His second creative work, *About A Mountain*, is to be released in February. He and nonfiction editor Sandra Allen spoke on a café patio in downtown Iowa City, IA, where he teaches at the University of Iowa's poorly-named Nonfiction Writing Program.

**Sandra Allen, Wag's Revue: *It strikes me that the role you're credited as having on the covers of both The American Essay and The Lost Origins of the Essay—"Edited and Introduced by John D'Agata"—is somehow disingenuous. Really, both of these anthologies seem to be large essays that you're composing, using other works as evidence. Nearly five-hundred pages into The Lost Origins of the Essay, you give what may be called a thesis statement for the entire project: "My point is that the essay exists. And it seems, in fact, to have always existed. But even now, five thousand years since the earliest essay appeared...essayists who are trying to offer more than information are still not being recognized as practitioners of the form."***

**John D'Agata: That's not much of a thesis, is it?**

**SA: Is my reading fair?**

**JD: Sure. I guess I would say that that's one purpose of the anthology, and of all three projected volumes in the project. It's trying to do two things. The first is to not necessarily to usurp work that has been traditionally read as poetry or**

fiction by claiming ‘no, no, this is actually an essay,’ but rather to encourage a broader reading of what we normally call ‘essay.’ Some people are apparently upset that William Blake is in this anthology, and that he’s being called an essayist, and ditto for the inclusion of Rimbaud and Borges and a number of other writers. But what their inclusion is meant to do is ask what happens if we take these texts and we frame them as essays. Does something happen to them, conceptually speaking? Does something change? Do we read them differently? Does the implied mechanism of ‘essaying’ not only alter how we approach these texts but also perhaps even the texts themselves? And, perhaps most importantly, does our perception of what an essay is change? I think these anthologies are trying to say that the essay, the idea of essaying, has been around for, for... whatever I say in there, for a really long time.

And then they’re also trying re-stake a claim for essay form as art, which you would think one wouldn’t have to do. But there is evidence all around us that in most readers’ minds the essay is not an art-form. It’s in fact quite the opposite: you turn to it for information or for criticism, a discussion of literature in other genres and media. But it is not itself art.

*SA: When and how did this project become central to your career?*

*JD: I started that book, *The Lost Origins*, when I was a graduate student. I was in both a poetry and a nonfiction program at the University of Iowa. And the dirty little secret about creative writing at the University of Iowa is that the genres are segregated, and I didn’t understand that at the time. Actually, to be honest, now that I’m back as a faculty member I still don’t understand it, although I understand the politics that are involved in the segregation a little better. Anyway,*

I started an anthology while I was a student merely as a conceptual exercise to try to find the kinds of writers with whom I felt I had something in common, or whose work I appreciated for what it was trying to do. I don't know how to explain this without it sounding incredibly hokey, but I felt a little displaced while in both of those writing programs simultaneously, and so what I think I was really trying to do was build a little family for myself. I didn't really feel a part of poetry or nonfiction. And I guess it would be honest to say that at the time I especially didn't feel comfortable in nonfiction—not just in the program I was attending but in the genre as a whole. At the time, the nonfiction being produced was primarily personal essay, and by extension of that, memoir. And that was pretty much it. Yet I knew from the start that what interested me about this genre was inquiry, the act of trying to figure something out, and necessarily with the promise that you will be able to figure out what you're pursuing, but nevertheless trying. Attempting. What I was interested in was essaying.

*SA: Has it worked? Have you seen things begin to change because of your work, or because of the work of others who are like-minded? Do you think that something is happening?*

**JD:** Yes, absolutely. But I don't think it has anything to do with me. I think that it's the result of more students going through graduate programs specifically in nonfiction and more graduate programs loosening up. Not Iowa, because things aren't loose here at all. But those programs that encourage students to explore a multitude of genres with the belief that all of it is fodder—all of it can be inspiring, either technically or aesthetically or however. Plus more literary journals began appearing that were dedicated to the essay or at least committed to publishing essays (as art), and even more

interested in publishing hybrid work. Where this loosening comes from, I don't know.

**SA:** *And what would you like to continue to see? What's the ideal outcome of this project?*

**JD:** I just want the essay recognized as what those of us who practice it know it is. So I guess ultimately I hope that all three anthologies are pulled from library shelves because they're completely unnecessary. That the few exasperated voices that are out in the world right now encouraging folks to remember the other role that the essay serves will seem silly in retrospect. That's my goal: to seem silly 50 years from now.

**“That’s my goal:  
to seem silly  
in 50 years.”**

**SA:** *Your project, in The Lost Origins of the Essay, in particular, is looking back to the origins to writing and seeking a through-line with this concept called “the essay.” I guess that struck me as very unusual in comparison to how we view “the essay” in a contemporary genre sense. With contemporary genre there’s a sense that: this writer read this writer read this writer, and there was a school and there was an –ism. What you’re doing instead is you’re pointing out that texts and writers that might not have had any knowledge of one another’s existence had some sort of commonality. I guess in my mind then, the essay becomes more like ‘song’ or ‘dance’—something that continues to emerge regardless of culture or time. Do you believe that the essay is a common, artistic recurrence, and that’s what everyone’s missing?*

**JD:** Yes, because it is as fundamental to the human spirit as song or as storytelling. But I would also add that I think it's

probably even more fundamental, because most of us are essaying every day. It's how we live our lives. Not all of the essaying that we do is particularly sexy; we might just be trying to figure out where our car keys are. But the same activity that's functioning in an essay by Joan Didion or Virginia Woolf or Thomas Browne or Michel de Montaigne is the same that's been at work in our species since our species became the so-called "thinking apes." To essay—to explore and to be curious and to strive for clarity and answers—is frankly what makes us human.

**SA:** *As you mentioned, some people were upset at your inclusion of "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" in The Lost Origins of the Essay—*

**JD:** Really upset. And some very surprising people. When I was an undergrad one of the books that came out that really encouraged me was Philip Lopate's *The Art of the Personal Essay*. It was inspiring for me, because as an undergrad we had a great little creative writing program but I was the only student doing nonfiction. And I actually think that that's not uncommon, because nonfiction is still perceived to be the far less sexy among undergrads than fiction and poetry. So when this massive volume by Lopate came out it felt like an incredible testament to the genre and its heritage. While I might disagree aesthetically with Lopate today and with some of the writers and essays that are included in his anthology, I think that with that anthology he did more politically for the essay than anyone else. But, I also hear that Philip is sort of upset with the inclusion of Baudelaire and Rimbaud and Mallarmé and Blake in my anthology. So yeah, some people are upset. And I don't dislike criticism—I think sometime's it's quite healthy, although usually not when it's after the fact. But anyway, I just wish we could all be on the same team about

some of this stuff. It's a good sign, though. It's a healthy sign that we feel strong enough as a community to start splitting off into camps. I guess.

*SA: So in your estimation, the term 'essay,' needn't imply 'prose,' or 'nonfiction' necessarily.*

JD: No.

*SA: If you could get rid of the term 'creative nonfiction' tomorrow, forever, would you?*

JD: Fuck yes.

*SA: In the essay introducing Blake in Lost Origins, you wonder if the reason that poets have claimed the text for themselves (despite the fact that only a scant percentage of it is written in verse), is because "it's good," and likewise you wonder if your desire to call it 'essay' as opposed to 'poetry' is because "it's good." I wonder if you're aligning 'essay' as a term that just means 'art'?*

JD: No more so than we tend to assign the term "poetic" to literature that we consider especially good. But I think as long as we have these genre distinctions, I would prefer the term 'essay.' I prefer to be defined by that term, and what I tend to enjoy about the genre seems to fit more under 'essay' than 'creative nonfiction,' if only because it tells us more about the genre.

*SA: In your estimation as both a poet and nonfiction writer, why do we not struggle to define fictional versus nonfictional elements in prose, and yet poetry got away with never having this debate?*

JD: In the seventies there were a lot of poets who called themselves 'documentary poets.' But that's a stupid term, so it went away. That is a great question, though. In some ways it's poets themselves that perpetuate this image as their genre being the pinnacle of the literary arts. We have the magazine *Poets. . . & Writers*, for example, as if the rest of us are after thoughts, or trying desperately to catch up with the poets and reach their glorious heights or enlightenment. And yet it's also

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the poets who are often bemoaning the state of the genre and how no one is reading it and how it's always on the edge of collapse, despite the fact that we'd probably have to hunt around to find

an English Department in this country that actually taught essays. Poetry, on the other hand, is a part of every English major's basic curriculum. So poetry isn't going anywhere. But certainly the sales of poetry books are quite a bit lower than prose. While on the other hand there is obviously a much stronger literary marketplace for prose, and because of that prose writers have to concern themselves with some very unsophisticated and spiritually un-enlightening issues, like veracity. If someone uses a persona in a poem, it's unlikely to cause much drama in the publishing world. But if a James Frey does it then we're obviously dealing with a different bowl of fruit, because there's a ton of money involved with a book like that, and unfortunately because there's a lot of money involved the stakes are higher. So these days books that have

no chance of selling even a fraction of what Frey's memoir sold are affected by this paranoia about veracity because publishers are afraid that Oprah's gonna call them out.

*SA: I almost sense a high art versus vulgar art argument here. As in, right now 'essay' is the fashionable term and 'creative nonfiction' is the unfashionable one.*

**JD:** Yes, it is the more fashionable term at the moment. But I do hope it's more than that. I hope that we all recognize eventually that the term "essay" is simply better for us a community because what it does is define us as practitioners of an activity rather than a group of writers fulfilling a set of conditions that have nothing to do with art. *Do we have our facts straight?* That's basically what defines us as "nonfiction" writers—an oxymoron if I've heard one.

*SA: When you say that you want to make a legitimate artistic name for 'essay,' who do you want to notice that?*

**JD:** There are three audiences. The first audience is the audience I live with. I live in a odd town, a compact 60,000 people, 30,000 of whom are students. Yet, we're also one of three UNESCO "Cities of Literature." It's got a "literary walk of fame" in its downtown district. And it's a place where you can go to a reading maybe four or five times a week if you want. So despite its size, it's one of premier literary communities in America. But this city, my home, is one that doesn't treat the essay the same way it treats fiction and poetry. And so in some ways, that's my ideal audience. The same tension I felt as a student in this town one that I feel very strongly today.

Then there's the larger American literary community, which in some ways also considers the essay a lesser-form, which



is partly the fault of essayists. We went through about a twenty-year period when all we were producing was memoir, and frankly not very good memoir. There were occasionally phenomenal works in there, but a lot of it was literature that was less about giving the reader an experience and more about relating an experience: “I had this experience, so let me tell you about it,” as opposed to “let me replicate this experience for you.” So that’s my audience too, because I would hope that project’s like these anthologies would help remind people that this genre can do more. For instance, it can give really good experience.

And then there’s the much larger community, the one that includes my family, which doesn’t like what I write, doesn’t read what I write, wishes I wrote different things, and doesn’t understand why they can’t go into their big box local bookstore and find what I’m writing. (Even though they don’t like reading my stuff.) So I consider my family to be a good representation of the average reader, whose perception of the essay is that it’s either this thing they had to write in high school in their political science classes, or it’s a how-to manual. If we were to take a field trip to our local Barnes and Noble and we looked at their bestselling fiction and nonfiction shelves, we probably wouldn’t like most of what was on it. But I would bet that we would at least agree that what’s on the fiction shelf is at least fiction. However, if we were to look at what is shelved as nonfiction, we’d be faced with diet books, and exercise books, and how to manage your personal wealth books, or how to accumulate personal wealth books, or perhaps how to communicate with angels. Maybe there’d be a biography on there about a Revolutionary War hero. But that’s it. And so we’d be faced with a very unfortunate choice: to become a snob or to not be a snob. Because inevitably while standing in front of that nonfiction shelf we’d have

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to ask ourselves—I would *hope* we’d ask ourselves—is this literature? Are these diet books and these exercise books and these how-to books art? I made the decision a while ago to let myself be a snob in this case, and so I am very willing to say that those texts are not art. That there is a difference between a text that is ruminatively exploring some emotional or intellectual or cultural issue and a text that is promising you fucking awesome abs. And that is where the term ‘essay’ starts to help us, because if we use the term ‘nonfiction’ then we’ve got to let through the gates of the genre all the exercise books and diets books and how-to books. We have to admit it all, and embrace it all, and we can’t complain about any of it. And in some ways we in turn will become defined by those texts as well.

*SA: Where did you conjure the authority to do an anthology? You could have just written a normal essay and quoted, instead. Why this form?*

*JD: When the first anthology came out, I think I was 24 or 25. And I didn’t feel like I had any authority. Who am I to come forth and declare these 30 or so contemporary essays worthy of acclaim? What I did have authority to say, however, was that these were 30 essays I really loved. So I consciously*

tried to come up with a way to blunt that omnipotence that a lot of anthologies seem to want to cast over their selections. There's a myth that a lot of editors don't do enough to dispel that the texts that end up in anthologies have been delivered to editors by some messenger of God. That the "cannon," in other words, is not artificial, but the will of some all-powerful literary deity. To me, an anthology is a deeply personal document because it's all opinion. There's always something that you're not going to be able to include in an anthology and there's always going to be stuff that you do include that people don't agree with. So I wanted to embrace that. I wanted to find a way to introduce myself as not so much an authority as an enthusiastic guide. I wanted to create an atmosphere for the essays that was casual and celebratory, and yet still informative and perhaps occasionally argumentative. In that first anthology I chose to do this through a series of introductions that were less about dates and titles and awards but rather why I find the essays interesting. I'm not Harold Bloom (or Marjorie Perloff or Helen Vendler); I can't slap my name on something and expect that everyone's going to rush out and want to eat up what I'm claiming to be a group of really great essays. And that structure that I started using in the first anthology—and will continue to use in all three—wasn't necessarily about giving myself permission to do anthology, but instead a way of justifying, as a 25-year-old, why I wanted to do one.

*SA: Do you resent or fear having become John D'Agata: Grandfather of the Lyric Essay?*

**JD: Grandfather?**

*SA: That's what people say. I've read it. Or how about hip young uncle?*

**JD:** How about cool cousin. I don't think it's biologically possible for me to grandfather anything just yet.

**SA:** *Cool cousin doesn't imply authority, though. And you are already gaining that authority, you are a figurehead of the genre. Do you resent this? Do you celebrate this? Am I breaking this news to you?*

**JD:** I try not to be aware of it. I have my suspicions, I guess. But my students do a really good job of not making me aware of any authority I may have in the larger world.

**SA:** *Your forthcoming book, About a Mountain, is due out in February. Does this project relate to the three-part Essay series, or is it something else entirely? Would you like to say something about it?*

**JD:** It's about a mountain in Nevada called Yucca Mountain where we might end up storing all of America's highest-level nuclear waste. And it's also about suicide. And it's also about trying to teach myself how to write a different kind of essay. Although that was more of a private objective; I suspect most readers will be into the nuclear stuff. And maybe the suicides. Cheery stuff.

**SA:** *Cheery indeed. In The Lost Origins of the Essay, you discuss the birth of the internet, the fact that "more information will be produced in this period than all the information produced in the previous five thousand years." Am I correct to read your hostility towards 'information' here? More importantly, what are your thoughts on the rise of the internet and your defense of the essay? Does the internet abet or hinder your quest to restore the essay to a place of artistic esteem?*

**JD:** I don't consider it a threat.

**SA:** *What about blogs, this explosion of popular nonfiction writing?*

**JD:** I'm not sure I've ever read a blog. I did see that Julia Child movie about blogging, though. And I thought that was charming. So at the moment I don't find blogging very threatening either.

**SA:** *A wag is a merry, droll joker, a wit. Who is your favorite wag, and why?*

**JD:** Hmm. I think people will expect me to say some Roman person. But I'm going to go with a Greek. We'll go with Theophrastus. He's in the anthology. He lived a pretty dry life, or at least it would seem so on the surface. He's the guy who succeeded Aristotle at the Lyceum, and he wrote, supposedly, 200 books, nearly all of which are lost. We know their titles though, and they're very exciting sounding: "On Weather," "On Rocks," "On Olive Oil," etc. Basically, in a nutshell, he was an encyclopedist. Pretty boring shit.

However, why I love him is because I think he had a gloriously nasty inner life. About two hundred years after his death, some Roman soldier found a manuscript of his that's a bunch of character sketches of societal types in Greek culture, throughout which he basically pokes fun at ugly personalities. I mean seriously grills them, and there's some suggestion in the text that these "types" are indeed actual figures in Greek society whom Theophrastus knew. Yet Theophrastus was known for being a pretty easy-going diplomat in Athens. A teacher everyone loved and trusted. He even convinced

Athenian officials to allow philosophers to begin teaching again within the city walls, something they'd stopped allowing because of Socrates. So, this was a guy who knew he needed to bite his tongue a lot of the time. And that's why when this text was discovered after his death—a snarky, biting commentary on contemporary Athenian life—most people didn't believe that Theophrastus wrote it. In fact, a lot of Greek scholars to this day don't think the text is his. But I'm in the camp that does believe that Theophrastus wrote the book because I really want to believe that he was having more fun than his other books would suggest.