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**Dick Schaap, ed.** *The Best American Sportswriting, 2000.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000. Xxvi + 320 pp. Notes. $13.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-618-01209-1.

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**Best of the Best**

Best of the Best

Let's face it. The "Best American" series, which encompasses genres from mysteries to sports to essays, and just about everything in between, is just a little bit arrogant about its mission. Series editors choose yearly guest editors to cull through hundreds, sometimes thousands of pieces, and from these they choose "the best" for inclusion in their volume. In recent years the series seems to have grown ubiquitous. Although around for more than a decade, the series' output remains high. It seems one cannot turn around in a bookstore without bumping into one of its varied volumes. Indeed, even as I write this review of *The Best American Sports Writing, 2000*, I see that the 2001 editions have already been released. Still, the 2000 collection of essays and sports features appears just about to live up to its grand claims.

Of course "The Best" is one of those terms that begs to inspire debate. In the year 2000, I have read a fair amount of columns, articles, features, notes, diatribes, essays and reviews on and about sports. Many of this literature has been drivel. But other material was thoughtful, readable, insightful, and even transcendent. Most did not gain inclusion in this book. Why does one piece merit inclusion and another not? In this case the answer is that of the thousands of eligible examples of the Sports Writing, Stout narrows them down to a manageable total. Then he chooses a Guest Editor to choose from among these. This year he chose Dick Schaap. Schaap is well-equipped for the task.

The book commences with a brief essay by Stout, on the hows and whatfors of the series. Stout explains the editorial process, and in this edition pontificates on some of the changes in the series since its inception a decade ago. He includes some numbers–the series had published 240 stories by 177 writers up to and including the 2000 edition–and then explains the selection criteria.

Stout's opening essay is interesting from a methodological vantage point, but the book begins in earnest with Dick Schaap's introductory essay. Not surprisingly, Schaap, a veteran sportswriter and commentator and one of the most respected individuals in the business, is up for the task. Indeed, his essay is without a doubt one of the best examples of sports writing from 2000, a remarkable feat for one essentially commissioned to write about great writing. After several fascinating (and self-deprecating) pages by way of autobiography, Schaap further refines his own criteria for inclusion. These criteria, not surprisingly, essentially came down to what struck him as great writing about sports. For reasons that he explains in his piece, most of these pieces were not about the major team sports, but rather about a whole array of topics that loosely fit under the heading of writing about sports.

For reasons having to do with space and fairness, I will not outline the particular essays in the collection. Suffice it to say that if these are not the absolute, rock-solid, etched-in-stone BEST twenty-three pieces on sports from the calendar-year 1999, they certainly are representative of some of the best things that writers on sports were up to in that year. A number of the pieces come from relatively unexpected sources. Five come from *Esquire* magazine. *Vanity Fair*, *Harper's*, *GQ*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New Yorker*, *Sports Afield*, *Outside*, and *Saturday Night* are also all represented. So too are perhaps more expected sources such as: the *Chicago-Sun Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Sports Illustrated* (although perhaps surprisingly, *SI* gets only one piece), and *Women's Sports and Fitness*. For the first time, the internet is also represented, with a piece from the first-rate website *Sportsjones*. Some of the contributors are well known for their work on sports, such as Rick Telander and the enviably versatile David Halberstam. Others have attained fame in other realms of writing, such as Garrison Keillor. But the vast majority of the contributors are relatively unknown on a national level,

which probably goes to show as much as anything just how much good writing there is out there in so many disparate places.

The themes of these essays run a wide gamut, from a yacht race gone tragic to cockfighting, Robbie Knievel to Joe DiMaggio, competitive curling to world class poker, these stories are often gripping, sometimes funny, occasionally maddening, but always entertaining. The book has biographical sketches of the contributors and an appendix listing "notable sports writing of 1999," most of which are probably more than worth one's while to track down and read. *The Best American Sports Writing 2000* makes grand claims. By and large it lives up to them. I look forward to reading the 2001 edition.

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