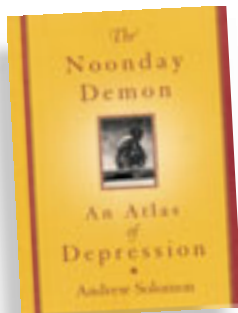


► **The Noonday Demon:
An Atlas of Depression**

ANDREW SOLOMON

Scribner, New York, 2001, 571 pp,
\$28 hardback, \$16 paperback
ISBN 0-684-85466-X



John Cassian, a monk and writer from the 5th century, referred to melancholy as one of the seven deadly sins. The sixth sin was “weariness and distress of the heart” and was

referred to in the 90th Psalm as “the noonday demon” (he called this sin *acedia*, Latin for sloth). According to Cassian, this misery “produces dislike of the place where one is, disgust, disdain, and contempt for other men, and sluggishness.” The noonday demon, according to writer and journalist Andrew Solomon, is an especially dangerous kind of sadness—an invader of sorts that attacks the soul. Most people fear the demons or invaders that come in the night—if you can’t see them, you can’t defeat them. But the noonday demon defies this logic, which makes it all the more powerful and treacherous. Solomon associates this catastrophic force with a condition that claims an increasing number of victims year after year: “Depression stands in the full glare of the sun, unchallenged by recognition. You can know all the whys and the wherefores, and suffer just as much as if you were shrouded by ignorance.”

In *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression*, Solomon confronts this glare of depression in an effort to comprehend the disease that beats down more than 19 million Americans every year, according to the National Institute of Mental Health (more than 2 million sufferers are children). This volume abounds with personal stories of depression, including his own breakdowns and his indirect attempt at suicide by engaging in unprotected sex

to contract AIDS. He credits family (especially his father), friends, and medications (especially Xanax, a benzodiazepine in the same drug family as Valium) for saving his life.

While Solomon looks at his struggle with depression with raw honesty and a literary tone, he also brings forth others who have fought this disease (some who have won and some who have lost). His examinations look at economic issues. Depression is especially common among the poor, where treatment in the form of therapy and antidepressant medication is rarely available. In 1997, an article in the *The New England Journal of Medicine* conceded a definitive link between depression and “sustained economic hardship.” In fact, Solomon points out that given that an impoverished existence is often accompanied by numerous psychosocial risks (such as a history of sexual abuse), it is surprising that more than approximately 25% of the poor in the United States are *not* depressed.

Solomon’s analysis also moves from gender (why women are twice as likely to suffer from depression) to culture (what depression is like outside the United States). For instance, in Greenland, as many as 80% of the Inuit population suffer from depression. This is partly related to the fact that the sun does not shine for three months, but Solomon explores why most Inuit suicides happen in May. He also looks at the Cambodian population, many of whom survived the bloody Khmer Rouge dictatorship, and he travels to West Africa to participate in an “ndeup”. The Lebu and Sérèr peoples of Senegal believe that this ritual, which involves being covered with blood from rams and chickens while African women dance to a drum cadence, will ward off the evil spirits that cause depression.

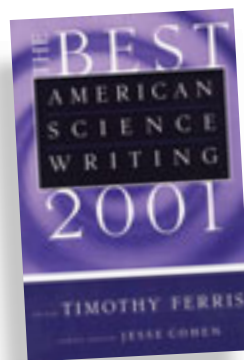
In his chapter on suicide Solomon asserts, based on a 1998 study in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, that almost

half of all suicides in the United States are committed by people in the care of a psychiatrist. He opines that rather than be considered a symptom of depression, suicide may be a problem that coexists with depression.

But one of his most powerful chapters discusses the treatments for depression, and Solomon emphasizes the healing facilitated by mental health providers and the pharmaceutical industry. He analyzes therapies from pills to shock to talk, including antidepressant medications such as selective serotonin-reuptake inhibitors (Prozac, Zoloft, Paxil, and Luvox), monoamine oxidase inhibitors, mood stabilizers (lithium), electroconvulsive therapy, and psychoanalysis. In one chapter, “Alternatives”, he delves into accounts of success and failure of treatments such as S-adenosylmethionine, St. John’s wort, acupuncture, and Qigong—a Chinese system of breathing and exercises.

One of the reasons Solomon said he wrote *The Noonday Demon* was that he thought that synthesis was missing in the vast library of depression books. Through the almost 600 pages of meticulous research and exhaustive detail, Solomon paints a more comprehensible, although no less awful, picture of this complex disease.

—REVIEWED BY JULIE L. McDOWELL



**The Best American
Science Writing 2001**

TIMOTHY FERRIS, EDITOR

HarperCollins Publishers,
New York, 2001, 320 pp,
\$14 paperback
ISBN 0-0609-3648-7

Science writers are misunderstood, asserts editor Timothy Ferris in his introduction to *The Best American Science Writing 2001*. “People tend to assume that we write computer software manuals or those buckram-bound engineering textbooks assigned to students in technical institutes,” writes Ferris, who has been nominated for both a

Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for his science writing. “Fellow authors dismiss us as ‘translators,’ bringing to mind Robert Frost’s quip that the ‘poetry is what gets lost in translation.’”

This second annual collection of science journalism gathers work from *Harper’s*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*, among other eminent publications, to earnestly dismiss Ferris’s feared misconceptions. Authored by some of the great contemporary writers and thinkers,

Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Tracy Kidder’s essay, “The Good Doctor”, profiles Paul Farmer, a world-renowned social medical activist and Harvard professor.

these 22 articles (and a poem by John Updike that was inspired by a *Scientific American* article) focus on controversies and issues rooted in the scientific community that cross political and social boundaries, such as stem cell research, genome sequencing, and criminal exoneration via DNA testing.

In “The Genome Warrior”, best-selling author Robert Preston tags along with J. Craig Venter, the prickly individual who was president and chief scientific officer of the Celera Genomics Group when it sequenced the human genetic code. Preston, author of *The Hot Zone* and *The Cobra Event*, chronicles the dramatic, convoluted race toward this accomplishment. At the heart of the story are the players involved (including James Watson and Francis Collins) as well as the relationships that were demolished and the mudslinging that ensued once Celera grabbed the prize.

Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Tracy Kidder’s essay, “The Good Doctor”, profiles Paul Farmer, a world-renowned social medical activist and Harvard professor, who shuns the ivy walls of Cambridge in favor of tending to AIDS patients in some of Haiti’s poorest villages. As one of the founders of the international relief agency Partners in Health, Farmer advises many world leaders on issues concerning public health and infectious diseases and spends much of the year living in a small house in Haiti without running water.

Then there’s Peter Boyer’s “DNA on Trial”, a look at the Innocence Project, a program sponsored by the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law in lower Manhattan that has had a hand in exonerating 39 people convicted of crimes since it was founded in 1992. A nonprofit clinic, the project represents clients in cases where DNA testing of evidence can yield conclusive proof of innocence. But just as the unearthing of DNA has set people free, Boyer found that DNA testing has also been used to send them back to jail in subsequent tangles with the law.

In “Let Them Eat Fat”, Greg Critser examines the “supersizing” of America by fast-food chains that help to create obese teenagers who grow into adults on the brink of medical catastrophe by their mid-20s. Critser also scrutinizes the increase in fast-food access (and the fall in access to fresh, nutritious food) in poor, urban communities that fuels this childhood obesity.

Other articles featured in this collection include Natalie Angier’s discovery of female domination in mandrill society, Malcolm Gladwell’s investigation of scientists who want to revolutionize birth control, and Michael S. Turner’s profile of those who are trying to see in the dark in “More Than Meets the Eye”. Turner writes about astronomers who want to go beyond the ordinary matter of the stars, galaxies, and planets, which is only thought to account for 5% of the universe, and, using the latest technology, probe the dark matter that purportedly makes up the rest of the universe.

Also included in this compilation is “The Recycled Generation”, an account of the political and scientific conflicts surround-

ing stem cell research by *New York Times Magazine* contributor Stephen S. Hall. While navigating through the rocky ethical and commercial landscape surrounding this political hot potato, Hall analyzes the impact stem cell technology will have in thousands of medical and social applications.

Overall, Ferris has compiled a diverse collection of science writing that satisfies on many levels and approaches a common theme—every scientific development brings controversy, eccentric personalities, and a good story.

—REVIEWED BY JULIE L. McDOWELL

► **moregoodreading**

Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness
by William Styron
Vintage Books, 1992

An Unquiet Mind
by Kay Redfield Jamison
Random House, 1997

Melancholia and Depression: From Hippocratic Times to Modern Times
by Stanley W. Jackson
Yale University Press, 1990

Unholy Ghost: Writers on Depression
by Nell Casey, Ed.
William Morrow & Co., 2001

The Future of Life
by Edward O. Wilson
Knopf, 2002

The Best American Science & Nature Writing 2001
Edward O. Wilson, Ed.
Houghton Mifflin, 2001

The Soul of a New Machine
by Tracy Kidder
Little, Brown & Co., 2000 (originally published in 1981)

The Red Limit: The Search for the Edge of the Universe
by Timothy Ferris
HarperCollins, 2002