

Pulphead: Essays

By John Jeremiah Sullivan

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A *New York Times* Notable Book for 2011

One of *Entertainment Weekly's* Top 10 Nonfiction Books of the Year 2011

A *Time Magazine* Top 10 Nonfiction book of 2011

A *Boston Globe* Best Nonfiction Book of 2011

One of *Library Journal's* Best Books of 2011

A sharp-eyed, uniquely humane tour of America's cultural landscape?from high to low to lower than low?by the award-winning young star of the literary nonfiction world.

In *Pulphead*, John Jeremiah Sullivan takes us on an exhilarating tour of our popular, unpopular, and at times completely forgotten culture. Simultaneously channeling the gonzo energy of Hunter S. Thompson and the wit and insight of Joan Didion, Sullivan shows us?with a laidback, erudite Southern charm that's all his own?how we really (no, really) live now.

In his native Kentucky, Sullivan introduces us to Constantine Rafinesque, a nineteenth-century polymath genius who concocted a dense, fantastical prehistory of the New World. Back in modern times, Sullivan takes us to the Ozarks for a Christian rock festival; to Florida to meet the alumni and stragglers of MTV's *Real World*, who've generated their own self-perpetuating economy of minor celebrity; and all across the South on the trail of the blues. He takes us to Indiana to investigate the formative years of Michael Jackson and Axl Rose and then to the Gulf Coast in the wake of Katrina?and back again as its residents confront the BP oil spill.

Gradually, a unifying narrative emerges, a story about this country that we've never heard told this way. It's like a fun-house hall-of-mirrors tour: Sullivan shows us who we are in ways we've never imagined to be true. Of course we don't know whether to laugh or cry when faced with this reflection?it's our inevitable sob-guffaws that attest to the power of Sullivan's work.

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Pulphhead: Essays By John Jeremiah Sullivan Bibliography

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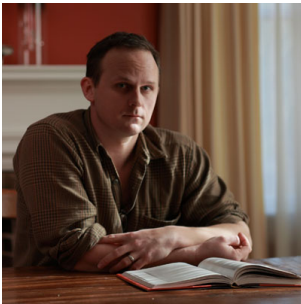
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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Amazon Best Books of the Month, November 2011: What a fresh and daring voice. John Jeremiah Sullivan is a dynamic and gutsy writer, a cross between Flannery O'Connor and a decaffeinated Tom Wolfe, with just the right dash of Hunter S. Thompson. In fourteen essays ranging from an Axl Rose profile to an RV trek to a Christian rock festival to the touching story of his brother's near-death electrocution, Sullivan writes funny, beautiful, and very real sentences. The sum of these stories portrays a real America, including the vast land between the coasts. Staying just this side of cynical, Sullivan displays respect for his subjects, no matter how freakish they may seem (see Axl Rose). Put another way: if Tom Waits wrote essays, they might sound like *Pulphead*. --Neal Thompson

Exclusive Amazon.com Interview:



Though his stories have appeared for a decade in *Harper's*, *GQ*, and other magazines, John Jeremiah Sullivan wasn't a recognizable name until *Pulphead* started landing on year-end best-books lists, including *Time*, the *New York Times*, and Amazon's Best Books of 2011. The *New Yorker's* James Wood compares him to Raymond Carver - "with hints of Emerson and Thoreau." Elsewhere, Sullivan has been called the new Tom Wolfe, David Foster Wallace, or Hunter S. Thompson, or some combination of all three.

I prefer to think of him more as the Tom Waits of long-form journalism.

✖ Sullivan's sportswriter father was an early and lasting influence. "The stuff he wrote was so weird, when I go back and look at it. It would almost have to be classified as creative non-fiction," Sullivan told me.

I asked Sullivan if his father encouraged him to become a writer.

"He did the smartest and best thing he could have done for me, which was to take a very coolly distant but encouraging attitude," he said. "I think he could tell early on that it's what I was going to do, that I wasn't really suited for much else.

After college and a brief "lost period" in Ireland, Sullivan got an internship at *The Oxford American* magazine and spent a month in Mississippi, living in a brown-carpeted room at the Ole Miss hotel, with hookers conducting their business nearby.

One night, Sullivan told his editor, Marc Smirnoff, about his musician brother's near-death electrocution from a microphone. Smirnoff suggested he write a story about it, giving Sullivan his first professional byline.

"It was just one of those things where somebody opens the door and steps aside and says, 'Don't f**k it up'," Sullivan said. "And that piece made a lot of cool things happen for me."

Cool things like bylines in *Harper's*, *The Paris Review*, and *The New York Times Magazine*.

Over the next decade he honed his reporting skills, his unique voice (personal not cynical, thoughtful not intellectual), and a particular interest in outliers. I asked: do you look for oddballs, or do they find you? "It

probably betrays a weakness for grotesques," he said. "And grotesques give you little angles of insight into human nature. There are things they can't help exposing.

"Sometimes I take pleasure in writing about people who make it hard for you to see their basic humanity. It gives me a very clear task as a writer to insist on it."

Pulphed is filled with hunks of other people's sometimes misshapen humanity.

"The things that can happen to people... it just blows your mind."

Four more questions for Sullivan:

- *Where do you work?* "I used to be one of those people who could write anywhere but for the first time I've become real attached to this corner office in our house that's become sort of a cocoon. I keep it real disgusting so nobody will ever want to come in here. My daughter will show it to friends, almost like you'd show somebody the dungeon."
- *Who are you reading?* "It's more about staying in constant contact with writing, always being into *some* writer. That keeps me inspired and it keeps me feeling like, when I sit down to write, it's part of a preexisting and ongoing conversation. It's not the scary void that people talk about of the white page. I do everything I can to cancel out that feeling."
- *You're a fan of bourbon – can you write drunk?* - "Drinking and smoking for me are useful for getting over humps. For cracking things open. But if I try to do it in a sustained way, it gets kind of sloppy and pudding-headed. So I have to introduce it into the process at the right moments ... (Bourbon) gives you a little bit of that what-the-f**k feeling."
- *Do you think of yourself as a southern writer?* "I'm not an authentic southerner by anyone's definition, and I don't self-identify as a southern writer ... I'm interested in regionalism. The fact that I sort of grew up back and forth between the Midwest and the South, it sensitized me to the differences early on ... Mainly I'm interested in the psycho-geography of regionalism, and how it gives shape to people's personalities."

Review

"Sullivan seems able to do almost anything, to work in any register, and not just within a single piece but often in the span of a single paragraph...*Pulphed* is the best, and most important, collection of magazine writing since Wallace's *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*...Sullivan's writing is a bizarrely coherent, novel, and generous pastiche of the biblical, the demotic, the regionally gusty and the erudite."
The New York Times Book Review

"[*Pulphed* is] a big and sustaining pile of--as I've heard it put about certain people's fried chicken--crunchy goodness . . . What's impressive about *Pulphed* is the way these disparate essays cohere into a memoirlike whole. The putty that binds them together is Mr. Sullivan's steady and unhurried voice. Reading him, I felt the way Mr. Sullivan does while listening to a Bunny Wailer song called 'Let Him Go.' That is, I felt 'like a puck on an air-hockey table that's been switched on.' Like well-made songs, his essays don't just have strong verses and choruses but bridges, too, unexpected bits that make subtle harmonic connections . . . The book has its grotesques, for sure. But they are genuine and appear here in a way that put me in mind of one of Flannery O'Connor's indelible utterances. 'Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks,' O'Connor said, 'I say it is because we are still able to recognize one.'"
The New York Times

"Sullivan's essays have won two National Magazine Awards, and here his omnivorous intellect analyzes

Michael Jackson, Christian rock, post-Katrina New Orleans, Axl Rose and the obscure 19th century naturalist Constantine Rafinesque. His compulsive honesty and wildly intelligent prose recall the work of American masters of New Journalism like Hunter S. Thompson and Tom Wolfe.” ?*Time*

“Sullivan's essays stay with you, like good short stories--and like accomplished short fiction, they often will, over time, reveal a fuller meaning . . . Whether he ponders the legacy of a long-dead French scientist or the unlikely cultural trajectory of Christian rock, Sullivan imbues his narrative subjects with a broader urgency reminiscent of other great practitioners of the essay-profile, such as *New Yorker* writers Joseph Mitchell and A. J. Liebling or Gay Talese during his '60s *Esquire* heyday . . . [*Pulphead*] reinforces [Sullivan's] standing as among the best of his generation's essayists.” ?*Bookforum*

“[The essays in *Pulphead* are] among the liveliest magazine features written by anyone in the past 10 years . . . What they have in common, though, whether low or high of brow, is their author's essential curiosity about the world, his eye for the perfect detail, and his great good humor in revealing both his subjects' and his own foibles . . . a collection that shows why Sullivan might be the best magazine writer around.” ?*NPR*

“One ascendant talent who deserves to be widely read and encouraged is John Jeremiah Sullivan . . . *Pulphead* is one of the most involving collections of essays to appear in many a year.” ?*Larry McMurtry, Harper's Magazine*

“Each beautifully crafted essay in John Jeremiah Sullivan's collection *Pulphead* is a self-contained world. . . Sullivan's masterful essays invite an honest confrontation with reality, especially when considered in light of one another. . . *Pulphead* compels its readers to consider each as an equal sum in the bizarre arithmetic of American identity . . . [Sullivan is] as red-hot a writer as they come.” ?*BookPage*

“The age-old strangeness of American pop culture gets dissected with hilarious and revelatory precision. . . Sullivan writes an extraordinary prose that's stuffed with off-beat insight gleaned from rapt, appalled observations and suffused with a hang-dog charm. The result is an arresting take on the American imagination.” ?*Publishers Weekly (starred review)*

About the Author

John Jeremiah Sullivan is a contributing writer for *The New York Times Magazine* and the southern editor of *The Paris Review*. He writes for *GQ*, *Harper's Magazine*, and *Oxford American*, and is the author of *Blood Horses*. Sullivan lives in Wilmington, North Carolina.

Users Review

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Diana Elliott:

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Playing with family in the park, coming to see the ocean world or hanging out with buddies is thing that usually you might have done when you have spare time, in that case why you don't try factor that really opposite from that. 1 activity that make you not feeling tired but still relaxing, trilling like on roller coaster you have been ride on and with addition details. Even you love Pulphead: Essays, you may enjoy both. It is great combination right, you still need to miss it? What kind of hangout type is it? Oh come on its mind hangout men. What? Still don't obtain it, oh come on its identified as reading friends.

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