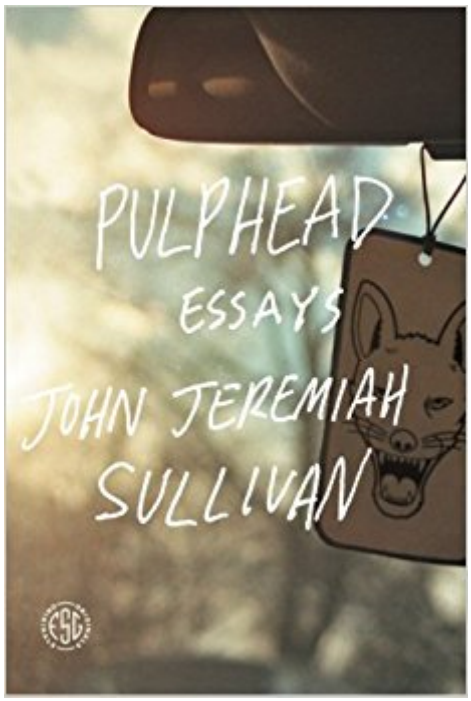
# Pulphead: Essays



## Synopsis

Named A Best Book of 2011 by the New York Times, Time Magazine, the Boston Globe and Entertainment WeeklyA sharp-eyed, uniquely humane tour of America's cultural landscapeÃ¢â ¬â ¢from high to low to lower than lowÃ¢â ¬â ¢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 usÃ¢â ¬â ¢with a laidback, erudite Southern charm that's all his ownÃ¢â ¬â ¢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 straggling refugees 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 KatrinaÃ¢â ¬â ¢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 reflectionÃ¢â ¬â ¢it's our inevitable sob-guffaws that attest to the power of Sullivan's work.

## Book Information

Paperback: 369 pages

Publisher: FSG Originals; 1 edition (October 25, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0374532907

ISBN-13: 978-0374532901

Product Dimensions: 5.1 x 7.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 6.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 95 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #19,842 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #5 inÃ Â Books > Reference > Quotations #30 inÃ Â Books > Literature & Fiction > United States > Anthologies #107 inÃ Â Books > Literature & Fiction > Essays & Correspondence > Essays

## Customer Reviews

Best Books of theÃ Â Ã Â 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 ThompsonExclusive .com Interview:Though his stories have appeared for a decade in Harper's, GQ, and other magazines, John Jeremiah Sullivan wasnÃ¢â ¬â„¢t a recognizable name until Pulphead started landing on year-end best-books lists, including Time, the New York Times, and 's Best Books of 2011. The New YorkerÃ¢â ¬â„¢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. SullivanÃ¢â ¬â„¢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,Ã¢â ¬Â• he said. Ã¢â ¬Å"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 Ã¢â ¬Å"lost periodÃ¢â ¬Â• 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 brotherÃ¢â ¬â„¢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." Pulphead is filled with hunks of other peopleÃ¢â ¬â„¢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 thatÃ¢â ¬â„¢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? "ItÃ¢â ¬â„¢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." YouÃ¢â ¬â„¢re a fan of bourbon Ã¢â ¬â œ 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 Ã¢â ¬Â¦ (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 Ã¢â ¬Â¦ 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 Ã¢â ¬Â¦ Mainly IÃ¢â ¬â„¢m interested in the psycho-geography of regionalism, and how it gives shape to people's personalities.Ã¢â ¬Â•

Ã¢â ¬Å“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 paragraphÃ¢â ¬Â¦Pulphead is the best, and most important, collection of magazine writing since Wallace's A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do AgainÃ¢â ¬Â¦Sullivan's writing is a bizarrely coherent, novel, and generous pastiche of the biblical, the demotic, the regionally gusty and the erudite.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢New York Times Book ReviewÃ¢â ¬Å“[Pulphead 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 Pulphead 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 Ã¢â ¬ËœLet Him Go.' That is, I felt Ã¢â ¬Ëœlike 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. Ã¢â ¬ËœWhenever 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.'Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢New York Times"[Sullivan] seems to have in abundance the storytellerÃ¢â ¬â„¢s gifts: he is a fierce noticer, is undauntedly curious, is porous to gossip, and has a memory of childlike tenacity . . . Unlike Tom Wolfe or Joan Didion, who bring their famous styles along with them like well-set, just-done hair, Sullivan lets his subjects muss and alter his prose; he works like a novelist." Ã¢â ¬â ¢James Wood, New YorkerÃ¢â ¬Å“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.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢TimeÃ¢â ¬Å“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.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢BookforumÃ¢â ¬Å“One ascendant talent who deserves to be widely read and encouraged is John Jeremiah Sullivan . . . Pulpheadis one of the most involving collections of essays to appear in many a year.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Larry McMurtry, Harper's MagazineÃ¢â ¬Å“[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.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢NPRÃ¢â ¬Å“Each beautifully crafted essay in John Jeremiah Sullivan's collection Pulphead is a self-contained worldÃ¢â ¬Â¦Sullivan's masterful essays invite an honest confrontation with reality, especially when considered in light of one anotherÃ¢â ¬Â¦.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.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢BookPageÃ¢â ¬Å“The age-old strangeness of American pop culture gets dissected with hilarious and revelatory precisionÃ¢â ¬Â¦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.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Publishers Weekly (starred review)

In "Unknown Bards", Sullivan's essay about American Blues music, we get this quote from Dean Blackwood of Revenant Records, "...I have always felt like there wasn't enough of a case being made for [blues musicians'] greatness. You've got to have their stuff together to understand the potency of their work." The same can be said about John Jeremiah Sullivan.Until now, Sullivan's essays have entered the public sphere only piecemeal through periodicals like GQ, Harper's Magazine, and The Paris Review. With "Pulphead", we get the first compilation of Sullivan's essays, and only the second book of his ever published. What emerges from this collection, more so than if one were to read these essays on their own, is a uniquely talented American writer and voice.Sullivan's prose is humble and emotional, while never self-centered or overbearing.His prose is opposite that of a political pundit's, a sophist sportscaster, or "expert" social media consultant. Our society is quick to confuse wisdom with declarative opinions. From Sullivan, don't look for grandiose reformations of opinions into facts. Words like guarantee, definitely, undoubtedly are as foreign to Sullivan as pretentious qualifiers like, "My twenty years of successful leadership on the Hill..." Or, "I have been saying all along, and I will say it again, John Doe is the best athlete since..."Sullivan deals in grey. In his essays, he even takes self-deprecating swipes at his own credibility as a writer: "I don't know. I had no pseudo-anthropological moxie left." Or, "Ordinarily, one is tense about interrogating strangers, worried about freezing or forgetting to ask what'll turn out to be the only important question." Or about Axl Rose, who the entire essay "The Final Comeback of Axl Rose" was supposed to be about, "I don't know him at all."Such self-deprecation is uncommon from writers, and requires immense self-confidence. These swipes, in their humanity, though, have a way of increasing Sullivan's credibility. Such subtleties are the touch of a confident Velazquez at the height of his technical mastery.Sullivan's technical mastery of his craft, his tantalizing, crackling prose, is what allows the reader to learn not only more about the subject of the Sullivan's eye, but also about Sullivan himself.Whether John Jeremiah Sullivan is writing about pop culture, youth movements, religion, music, or geology, there is always reverberating just beneath the surface of the lead story the narrative of Sullivan's own life.The story of Sullivan's life has a way of turning the reader inward. The reader becomes a reader of his or her own story.In "Upon This Rock", Sullivan journeys to the Creation Christian Rock Festival. We learn that Sullivan began this journey with the mindset that his trip to Creation would be "a lark". Instead, Sullivan provides a vivid account of a humbling, human journey of self-exploration, "I went back to the trailer and had, as the ladies say where I'm from, a colossal go-to-pieces. I started to cry and then stopped myself for some reason. I felt nonsensically raw and lonely. What a d%ickhead I'd been, thinking that this trip would be a

lark."In this raw emotion, and through empathy for the people he is writing about, Sullivan achieves at Creation some clarity about his own life, and his own relationship with spirituality.Sullivan's prose in "Upon This Rock" stands up to today's frenetic, digital, fragmented, and hyperlinked world. His prose is like a glorious mixed-media work of art: a orange yarn glued on top of a black and white photo, underneath and oil painting of an purple-pink evening sky.Some critics are quick to draw parallels between Sullivan's style and that of David Foster Wallace: the patched together, disjointed brilliance. A more apt description of Sullivan is that he is a self-assured, humble, updated, and less egotistical Hunter S. Thompson.In his journey to Kingston to meet the "Last Wailer," the influence of fellow Kentuckian Hunter S. Thompson is most apparent: "There was a big open-air bar. `Mind if we smoke?' Llewis asked...We rolled a two-sheeter under a giant sign that said NO GANJA SMOKING." Llewis is not the "Last Wailer". He is just a tour guide, helping Sullivan with the essay. The essay is about neither Llewis, nor Sullivan, but in a way it does become about them, and about something bigger than just Bunny Wailer.Like with Thompson's writings, in Sullivan's essays, we are always presented the author's story. But Sullivan's first person narrative is far less "Gonzo" than Thompson's.Sullivan strikes a tone that is more gently, lovingly irreverent than that of "The Decadent and The Depraved" (Thompson's brilliant essay about the Kentucky Derby). Sullivan replaces Thompson's vitriolic I'm-not-a-member-of-the-Country-Club-so everyone-who-is-is-a-small-minded-sycophant bitterness, with an even-though-a-Country-Club-can-be-a-culturally-empty-place-there-are-individuals-inside-of-it-that-I-am-sure-have-some-vulnerability-some-humanity-that-I-can-write-about empathy.Sullivan opens his heart to his subjects. While his methods- for interviewing and writing alike- may not be ganja-free, and are unconventional- they are far from bitter, angry, or temperamental. A warm self-confidence, respect for mankind, self-deprecation, and desire to know pulsates through Sullivan's writing like a bubbling brook.In "Peyton's Place" Sullivan has crafted a shrewd commentary on pop culture, parenthood, and of the way media in its many forms is blurring the lines between what is real and unreal, public and private. With a keen sense of humor, and a big heart, Sullivan has an adroit and playful way of mending his language to match his subject, "The brunet's question had given me a small, surprising tilt of nostalgia. Did we know that we used to be on a show? Did we know that?" One can almost hear the unwritten "OMG!!" at the end of that sentence.Sullivan doesn't play with language in this way to be demeaning; rather, he uses it as a way to show empathy, and to self-reflect. "Brunet" is a carefully, brilliantly chosen word. This superficial identification is similar to the kinds of superficiality that occurs within the very sitcom being filmed in Sullivan's home- a show that Sullivan is neither admonishing nor praising, because he is both removed from the show, but

also has an indirect hand in fostering its production.Sullivan doesn’t deal in absolutes. He is constantly exploring through his pen. He is trying to determine what is really real, who he really is, how he relates to another person, what it all means. His language will disarm you with humor, with a familiarity and modernity that carries his words- with a Trojan horse-like slippage- into your psyche for a long, long while. "Pulphead" is a collection of essays that proves Sullivan is a young and lively Southern writer not to be overlooked.

I devoured this book in two days. Based on what I’d read beforehand, I was expecting a book of pop criticism, a la Klosterman. Instead, what I got was much more varied and profound. Generally speaking, the collection is a secret history of the United States; many of the essays walk a line between what can be known, and what cannot, in our American past. For example, Sullivan spends an hour, in one of the essays, trying to decipher the lyrics to a haunting, mostly-forgotten blues song. In another, he imagines an encounter between a cave painter, thousands of years ago, and a cave painting made thousands of years before that. The painting is an object of wonder and mystery to this historical would-be artist, just as his paintings will eventually be for us.A whole book of nothing but very clever essays on mainstream American pop culture can end up making the reader himself feel trapped at the carnival. By instead turning pop culture (The Real World, Axl Rose, etc) into another chapter in an ongoing American story, Sullivan elevates both his subject and his own full-length debut.

Thematic strength isn’t what you usually find in a book of journalistic essays, but apparently Sullivan is drawn to strangeness wherever it rears its head. And in this world, strangeness is de rigueur. These essays wander from a Christian rock festival to a brother of Sullivan, who exhibits all sorts of odd behavior after a near-electrocution. Then there’s a near-encounter with Guns n’ Roses’ Axl Rose, a fey old gay man, then America’s ancient cave dwellers and those who find and sell their artifacts. Perhaps the oddest two are one on Jamaica’s Rastafarians and another on a naturalist’s theory of why animals - worldwide - seem to be increasingly attacking humans. Two pieces on reality shows could very well have been left out - their oddness speaks for itself.It would be easy to treat each of these subjects as caricatures, but that isn’t Sullivan’s angle. There’s always something a bit confessional in his work; he’s very rarely cynical, and he seems to be at least a little invested in each subject he approaches. As such, his writing is both expository and personal, and there’s not a little bit of charm to each. It’s as if Sullivan wants us to admit to a lot of this strangeness in each of us. And that’s a refreshing point of view in a literary world replete with postmodernist cynicism.

This book caught my attention on the best-of-2011 lists and I bought the paperback impulsively,which is the way i usually buy my stuff. I read a lot everyday at work. When I get home, many times I do not have the patience to read a "book" what with my addictive personality wanting to know how the story ends. Instead, I read a lot of magazines. I can finish an article without a problem, and I can go to sleep having finished reading what I started.Pulphead is a collection of articles that Mr. Sullivan published in various magazines over the years. There is something about each one that resonates with me, and that allows me to get lost in its pages and forget about both the day that was, and the day that is about to arrive.This is (was) the last hard-copy book I bought before I started to accumulate e-books on my kindle. And even-though I may have 50 books in the little machine ready to be read, and a few old magazines waiting to be finished, more often than not I just pick-up Pulphead and listen to Mr. Sullivan .



Pulphead: Essays Why Tango: Essays on learning, dancing and living tango argentino (Tango Essays Book 1) Consider the Lobster and Other Essays (Selected Essays) 90% Law School Essays: Contracts * A law e-book: Contract law issues and definitions and how to argue them from 70% to 90% - Big Rests Law Study Method - produces model essays Torts Law - A Summary For Essays (e borrowing OK): [e-law book] - author of 6 Published Bar exam essays - LOOK INSIDE....! ! (e borrowing OK) 240 Writing Topics with Sample Essays: How to Write Essays (120 Writing Topics) James Baldwin : Collected Essays : Notes of a Native Son / Nobody Knows My Name / The Fire Next Time / No Name in the Street / The Devil Finds Work / Other Essays (Library of America) Heavenly Essays: 50 Narrative College Application Essays That Worked The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays Seventy-nine Short Essays on Design You Have to Pay for the Public Life: Selected Essays of Charles W. Moore (MIT Press) Causality and Mind: Essays on Early Modern Philosophy Living and Sustaining a Creative Life: Essays by 40 Working Artists Nothing If Not Critical: Selected Essays on Art and Artists The Divine Romance - Collected Talks and Essays. Volume 2 (Self-Realization Fellowship) Forty-Three Septembers: Essays Art and the Bible: Two Essays A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women: Essays on Art, Sex, and the Mind Women, Art, And Power And Other Essays (Icon Editions) Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue: Essays, A Play, Two Poems and a Prayer

Privacy

FAQ & Help