The Best Business Writing 2012
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The title and the introduction claim this book to be “the first in an annual series that will collect the best English-language writing on business, finance, and economics” (p. xi). The editors are part of the Columbia Journalism Review staff that focuses on business, so their credentials are solid.

Best Business Writing 2012 is a bit misleading because actually all the articles it contains were published in 2010 and 2011. So it is not the best business writing from 2012. And who can really says this is the “best” in class? By what criteria? What it actually is is “really interesting” business writing from 2010 and 2011. And in an era of declining literacy, dumbing down, and the replacement of thinking with sound bytes and tweets, The Best Business Writing 2012 is a welcome and praiseworthy contribution, title notwithstanding.

The anthology is organized topically in six sections. “Bad Business” includes exposes of a loathsome coal executive and the Murdoch team’s phone hacking scandals. “The Financial System and Its Discontents” gets down and dirty with the sins of Merrill Lynch, Countrywide, BankAmerica, and the SEC, followed by Gretchen Morgensen’s indictment of our system for not prosecuting the top culprits. “Over There” has two good articles on Germany and Norway. “Politics and Money” goes after Greenspan, the tax system, corporate lobbyists and Washington ineptitude and corruption. “The Big Picture” looks at globalization, patent laws, world hunger, and the weaknesses of the field of psychiatry (how did that get in here?). Finally, “Corporate Stories” looks at Steve Jobs and Apple, at Ford’s recovery, Pfizer’s troubles, Google’s DNA, Netflix’s missteps, IKEA’s eccentric success, and H-P’s bizarre CEO story.

The topics are all interesting here. The authors are usually well-known and either highly skilled or highly interesting or both: among them, Warren Buffet, Marcia Angell, Gretchen Morgenson, David Cay Johnston, Paul Krugman, Martin Wolf, James Stewart, and even actor Hugh Grant! (hacked by Murdoch’s goons). So for what it’s worth The Best Business Writing 2012 is a page-turner and a good way to spend ten or twenty hours reading on your next business trip.

The final section looking at several specific companies and their leaders was almost the only place in the book that broke (in part) with the focus on the negative, scandalous, and infuriating. Mind you, I think we need courageous, bold, even muck-raking journalists to go after the charlatans, crooks, and oligarchs in our midst. But we will never get beyond the appalling state of current affairs unless we can light a few candles and not just curse the darkness. We need more stories of how they did it right – and succeeded. More about Southwest Airlines, Costco, In-N-Out Burger, and Pacific Crest Windows (no, I didn’t think you would know, but you should) and their ilk.

There actually were hundreds of great business articles in not just the traditional business press but in the academic business journals and in unconventional sources. Maybe the CJR should create a web site where they would invite article nominations, post abstracts and links, and organize by topic. Despite the fact that I am already buried in info, I might even bookmark the site or subscribe to a monthly newsfeed from such a site!