Peter Craven’s is the name in Australia that is most associated with the essay. He has been both champion and gatekeeper of the essay genre, as well as a respected exponent, in the form of literary criticism, for some years.

He was the founding editor of the *Best Australian Essays* and the *Quarterly Essay*, both of which he continued to edit until a recent falling out with the publisher Morry Schwartz. His work for Black Inc included founding and editing the anthologies *Best Australian Stories* and *Best Australian Poetry*.

Craven wrote a column about literature in the *Australian* for most of the 1990s, was a co-founder of the literary magazine *Scripsi* with Michael Heyward and has been a contributor to the *Oxford Guide to Contemporary Writing*, the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *London Review of Books*.

*******

It is sometimes a bit of a mystery to me how I became associated with this whole essay caper. When I was a student essays were things people stood over you to write. When I became a literary editor, they became things I stood over people to write, though I suspect both parties, both the poor writer and the stand-over merchant editor, would have been more comfortable with the term ‘article’. Of course, there had always been rather grand things called essays. Montaigne wrote them about the end of his nose, and Chesterton polished them off to delicious effect. Among grand contemporary figures, perhaps we think of Gore Vidal or Susan Sontag as writers of essays, the kind of people SideShow Bob in *The Simpsons* admires the caricatures of in the *Springfield Review of Books*. We certainly think of Orwell and Camus as writing essays and have for quite a long time. It helps that they both died mid-career. It may be that the essay is merely a mutation - that journalism or academic journeywork suffers when it takes on the pretensions of immortality. Essays are, after all, pieces designed to be read in throwaway publications, that can nonetheless end up - perhaps they are ideally destined to end up - in a book.

Now there’s a bit to unpack in all of that, but forgive me if I take a few steps back and talk about this rather odd form of writing and talk a bit more about my experience of it as an editor. A few years ago a fellow called Morry Schwartz, of unhappy memory, approached me about the idea of doing a best essays anthology, somewhat in the manner of the famous American annual. It was obvious to me, though not perhaps to him, that “somewhat” would have to be the order of the day. You may have noticed in the blurb that this session talks about why the form of the essay has flourished in America but not in Australia. Well there’s a pretty obvious reason for this fact, and that’s that we do not have the kind of publications, let’s by way of shorthand say *New Yorker*-style publications, that encourage classic essay writing and which pay people to lavish their souls and their talents on the extended short forms of non fiction. I’m tempted to say we don’t have them and that if we did we wouldn’t notice them, but let’s break things down a bit.

It’s significantly harder for someone to publish the Montaigne or Chesterton style of essay - the essay that follows the essentially lyric logic of expressing the writer’s sensibility as an end almost in itself - in
a way that’s analogous to the lyric poem … you know, EB White used to do this sometimes in the New Yorker. Garrison Keillor is someone I suppose who still does it. This kind of writing is not unheard of in Australia but it tends to be found in humble places or in humble formats. I’ve said often enough in recent years that Charmian Clift’s newspaper columns were like this, and that they’ll bear comparison with Thurber’s, say. They’re miniature; they’re gutsy; they’re built to last. Helen Garner’s fugitive columns in newspapers - she writes them for a while and then she stops - are probably the closest equivalent. I have examples of them in each of the Best Essays books which I edited. So this kind of thing, although comparatively rarer in this country, does exist, though it’s always liable to be camouflaged by its place of publication.

The pure signature writing essayists, for whom the minutiae of everyday experience become the raw data for something like a self-expressive art, don’t get too much of an innings in Australia, though Inga Clendinnen, Cathy Ford, Drusilla Modjeska, Robert Dessaix and Amanda Lohrey have all done this thing superbly. Of course, this kind of essay, this Chesterton/Charmine Clift variety, can easily look like any old newspaper column or like an old-fashioned feature story. It can also blend or transit towards that somewhat different thing – the essay with a heavyweight subject matter, an empirical reference point out there, which is nevertheless read for the grain of the voice of the teller. Janet Malcolm (the nearest equivalent elsewhere to Helen Garner when she is writing full-scale [as in] The First Stone or Joe Cinque’s Consolation) and Helen Garner - they’re essayists who write like this. So, somewhat in a different way, does Gore Vidal in his political essays. And so did the late Alastair Cook in his radio broadcasts. But there is in fact a whole area of superior non-fiction writing - can we call it journalism? or would that be too much of a provocation? - to be found across every level of the little magazine, broadsheet, tabloid, and colour and celebrity magazine press in this country. It’s just so unobtrusively inserted into our culture that we hardly know it’s there.

A few years ago, in the Best Essays annual, I published a piece by a man called Craig Sherborne who writes for the tabloid Melbourne Herald Sun, publishes poems and can sometimes be read in Australian Book Review writing about, I don’t know, Johnny O’Keefe or Dawn Fraser or some nest of gamblers somewhere in Sydney. Gideon Haigh, who was one of our Quarterly Essayists, is another writer I would cheerfully read writing about the most arcane aspects of business or cricket history, rather than people with an informed but uninspired interest in subjects closer to my heart.

With the Best Essays annuals, which I recently ceased to edit because Morrie Schwartz sacked me as editor of Black Inc's flagship publication Quarterly Essay, I attempted to publish every kind of non-fiction writing by Australians or about Australia which I thought had merit. I wasn’t interested in adhering with any purity to a Platonic idea of what the essay did or did not mean. This sometimes bewildered reviewers of the annuals, from Henry Reynolds to Don Anderson, because they wanted to say, ‘But this isn't an essay, this is a review. This is a newspaper report.’ I suppose I’ve had to think pretty long and hard about this question from a practical point of view, and perhaps I have cut my theorising to the jib of my practice, but I know of no definition of the essay that can come up with a useful categorical distinction between the Fairfax news report of 12 September, 2001 which we ran, and a piece by say, Virginia Spade about Turner’s painting. They’re both examples of non-fiction and we call them essays, I think, by way of honorific.
One of the funny things about this whole area of classification which tends to irritate people is that we all tend most easily to accept writing as essayistic when its technique is closest to fiction, where the rhetoric, the cadence, the human notation has the richness of the traditional storyteller. Orwell on elephants and hangings, Connolly on Eton, Helen Garner on Ormond College, Inga Clendinnen or Hilary Mantel in their memoirs. I happen to have an aversion to the modern post-Tom-Wolfe-style of feature story writing that apes the habits of fiction writing and which is forever indicating the range of the writer’s perception, how the interviewee smiled as he looked at his worn Italian shoes and ran a tobacco-stained finger through his unkempt hair, but it’s an essay collector’s dream. One of the funny things about newspapers is that as they get worse the best parts of them get better. Now, bad gonzo is execrable, but the best of it will remind you of Joan Didion or Boswell at the height of their powers. Craig Sherborne, whom I mentioned before, wrote an article called No Ordinary Neighbourhood a few years ago, which I anthologized, about child murder in Wagga. It began with the Tolstoyan sentence: “In the ghettos of the bush, the children have children.” I think there’s a bit of an echo of the book of Jeremiah there too.

The essay is an odd mongrel thing. The word essay is one we use when we want to ascribe literary quality, well, quality anyway, to something that has no automatic categorical claim to it. The essay in its quintessential Montaignian form descends from the letter in classical or Paulinian form - remember St Pauls’ epistles - and also, I suspect, represents a secularisation of the sorts of moral and reflective qualities that still characterise the Renaissance sermon, think of John Donne. Later it becomes a kind of superior diversion for a leisured class. This kind of essay writing can lead to Emerson, perhaps it can lead to Nietzsche, it can certainly lead to Sir Leslie Stephen in the Edinburgh Review. It led in this country to Archibald’s Bulletin that had all those reviews, as Sylvia Lawson discovered for us, in the midst of the Lawson and Patterson. In its most obvious and universally acknowledged manifestations, this kind of essay writing probably reaches its highest form of development in the early twentieth century where you have a fruitful tension, if that’s the word, between a democratisation, and an older educated reading public. Of course that sounds ridiculously cold and elitist and Australia understandably gets barely a look-in to that vista of the world. What I tried to do in the Best Essays annual was to present the widest range of non-fictional writing, of journalism - some of it commissioned for the volume, like John Birmingham on Pauline Hanson or Raymond Gaita on the September 11 terrorists - in such a way that what was being valorised or idealised was not the individual paradigm of the traditional essay, but the fullest range of the different kinds of non-fictional writing that could be deemed excellent. That, I suppose, is what the essay means to me. I decided the only way to edit Best Essays was like a magazine, which reproduced in range, though not in proportion, the different shapes that might be found in newspapers and magazines.

What we need to realise I think about this Australian culture of ours is that the apparent scarcity of the essay is partly an optical illusion, and partly a fairly simple matter of providing the right structures. We need to realise that the closest thing we have to the old New Yorker paradigm is something like our glossy Saturday colour magazine supplements. Hold on to that idea and then imagine one of them, The Good Weekend or the Australian’s colour magazine, devoting a whole issue and a fair bit of the whole budget to an essay by Helen Garner or Inga Clendinnen. How near and how far we are.
Anyway, it was my desire to fiddle with that conception of the higher journalism that led me to edit the *Quarterly Essay.*