



Magic Hours: Essays on Creators and Creation

By Tom Bissell

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In *Magic Hours*, award-winning essayist Tom Bissell explores the highs and lows of the creative process. He takes us from the set of *The Big Bang Theory* to the first novel of Ernest Hemingway to the final work of David Foster Wallace; from the films of Werner Herzog to the film of Tommy Wiseau to the editorial meeting in which Paula Fox's work was relaunched into the world. Originally published in magazines such as *The Believer*, *The New Yorker*, and *Harper's*, these essays represent ten years of Bissell's best writing on every aspect of creation—be it Iraq War documentaries or video-game character voices—and will provoke as much thought as they do laughter.

What are sitcoms for exactly? Can art be both bad and genius? Why do some books survive and others vanish? Bissell's exploration of these questions make for gripping, unforgettable reading.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Amazon Best Books of the Month, April 2012: In these ambitious and enthusiastic "Essays on Creators and Creation," journalist Tom Bissell explores the will-to-art through an expansive cast of makers working in a variety of media. From a reverent exploration of the "mirages" of filmmaker Werner Herzog to a vitriolic, almost embittered screed against the prolific historian Robert D. Kaplan, Bissell's collection--compiled from more than a decade's worth of magazine writing--offers an impressive range of emotion, an unflagging intellect, a constantly engaging style, and a menagerie of compelling subjects. Hemingway? Check. David Foster Wallace? Check. Iraq War films? A sitcom producer? The world's most prolific female video-game voice-over specialist? Check, check, check. And if the idea of a nonfiction artist's writing about other creators strikes you as charmingly self-referential, then "Writing About Writing About Writing"--Bissell's survey of other writers' how-to-write books--will leave you ensorcelled. --*Jason Kirk*

From Bookforum

Bissell is an assured and engaging first-person narrator, which is a rarer ability than many first-person writers know. While his body stands around, his line of thought is agile and ever-moving, from the observational to the philosophical, from the personal to the general. He is agreeable, even when the reader may disagree with him. — Tom Soccia

Review

"Tom Bissell is at his best in this terrific collection."—Geoff Dyer

"Every one of Bissell's pieces is like some great, transfixing documentary you stumble on while channel-surfing late at night—something you feel, in that moment, a kind of gratitude toward for redeeming your sleeplessness. Considered alongside his fiction, this new collection makes clear that Tom Bissell is one of our most interesting and ambitious writers."

—John Jeremiah Sullivan, author of *Pulphead*

"In essays spanning a decade, many previously published in *Harper's* and *the Believer*, Bissell (*Extra Lives*) peels back the layers of what it means to create and the toll creation often takes on its practitioners. While writers and writing are by no means his only subjects, Bissell is particularly astute when it comes to the arbitrary nature of literary fame. In "Unflowered Aloes" and "Grief and the Outsider," he considers the longevity of literary fame, and of works by the likes of Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and Herman Melville that originally met with withering scorn. Bissell turns to the screen—and his tiny hometown of Escanaba, Mich.—in "Escanaba's Magic Hour," narrating both the evolution of a film shoot by "Movie People" (as outsiders, a common theme in the collection) and Bissell's own relationship with the town of his birth. Documentary film is explored in "Rules of Engagement," where the act of creating a compelling story—here documentaries depicting the Iraq war—is an exercise in both truth and fiction. Never pedantic or self-congratulatory, Bissell says that he never set out to write nonfiction, and perhaps it's this backdoor approach that makes his observations on craft and the many avenues that lead to the written word all the more powerful."

—*Publisher's Weekly* (Starred Review)

"A whip-smart, occasionally pugnacious collection of essays on culture from a wide-ranging critic.

In recent years Bissell (*Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter*, 2010, etc.) has built a reputation as an expert on video games, culminating with the scattershot *Extra Lives*. Here he covers a wider swath but provides more coherence, in part because a more consistent theme emerges: the necessity of calling shenanigans on the artificiality of much of mass culture, and the difficult search for glimmers of integrity. In 'Escanaba's Magic Hour,' Bissell follows the filming of an indie movie in his hardscrabble Upper Peninsula hometown and cannily reveals subtle parrying between the townsfolk and the visiting filmmakers. In 'Writing about Writing about Writing,' he demolishes the rhetoric of how-to writing guides, slapping the genre for its disingenuously upbeat declarations. In 'Cinema Crudit  , he investigates the anti-genius of Tommy Wiseau, director of the contemporary camp classic, *The Room*. Bissell can tear into his subjects with a ferocity and brutal wit that recalls Dwight Macdonald, as when he writes about the would-be literary provocateurs of the Underground Literary Alliance or celebrated historian Robert Kaplan, whom he damns as an 'incompetent thinker and a miserable writer.' Bissell's more common tone, though, is that of the exasperated critic weary of conventional thinking, and he bookends the collection with pieces that drive that point home: "Unflowered Aloes" debunks the idea that literary greatness will always be discovered, and the closing interview with Jim Harrison is a lament for a dying working-class literary culture. Even the book's weak spots are strong: A pair of New Yorker profiles on TV and video-game professionals feel relatively voiceless—a problem with the magazine's house style that, ironically enough, Bissell calls out in an earlier essay.

Stellar cultural writing—Bissell has the knowledge and wit to earn his provocations."

—*Kirkus (Starred Review)*

"Sharply observed, lushly descriptive and often extremely funny."

—*Salon*

"Bissell writes astutely, smartly, and with acerbic candor."

—*The Boston Globe*

"A highly gratifying literary experience."

—*Los Angeles Review of Books*

"Elevating."

—*Guernica*

"Bissell's essays are brutally honest, thoughtful and entertaining to the nth degree."

—*Portland Book Review*

"Entertaining, informative and exquisitely readable."

—*Shelf Awareness*

"Full of beauty."

—*The Cleveland Plain Dealer*

"[Tom Bissell] writes these essays with a storyteller's eye for detail."

—*New York Times Book Review*

Praise for *Extra Lives*

"A master prose stylist, the erudite Bissell is frequently insightful."

— *Boston Globe*

Users Review

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Ernest Baker:

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