



## Americana: Dispatches from the New Frontier

*Hampton Sides*

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## **Americana: Dispatches from the New Frontier** Hampton Sides

Harley-Davidson bikers . . . Grand Canyon river rats. . .Mormon archaeologists. . . Spelling bee prodigies...

For more than fifteen years, best-selling author and historian Hampton Sides has traveled widely across the continent exploring the America that lurks just behind the scrim of our mainstream culture. Reporting for *Outside*, *The New Yorker*, and NPR, among other national media, the award-winning journalist has established a reputation not only as a wry observer of the contemporary American scene but also as one of our more inventive and versatile practitioners of narrative non-fiction.

In these two dozen pieces, collected here for the first time, Sides gives us a fresh, alluring, and at times startling America brimming with fascinating subcultures and bizarre characters who could live nowhere else. Following Sides, we crash the redwood retreat of an apparent cabal of fabulously powerful military-industrialists, drop in on the Indy 500 of bass fishing, and join a giant techno-rave at the lip of the Grand Canyon. We meet a diverse gallery of American visionaries— from the impossibly perky founder of Tupperware to Indian radical Russell Means to skateboarding legend Tony Hawk. We retrace the route of the historic Bataan Death March with veterans from Sides' acclaimed WWII epic, **Ghost Soldiers**. Sides also examines the nation that has emerged from the ashes of September 11, recounting the harrowing journeys of three World Trade Center survivors and deciding at the last possible minute not to "embed" on the Iraqi front-lines with the U.S. Marines. **Americana** gives us a sparkling mosaic of our country today, in all its wild and poignant charm.

Experience the many faces of America with Hampton Sides as he:

### AMERICAN ORIGINALS

. . . drops in on the charmed life of skateboarding icon Tony Hawk; studies counter-terrorism at the G. Gordon Liddy spy school; goes Hollywood with American Indian Movement radical-turned-movie-star Russell Means; steps out of the closet with Mel White, religious right ghostwriter-turned-gay activist; mushes the Iditarod Trail with Alaska legend Joe Redington.

### AMERICAN EDENS

. . . runs the rapids during a man-made flood in the Grand Canyon; crashes the redwood retreat of California's elite Bohemian Club; debriefs the "bio-nauts" as they emerge from captivity in the Biosphere; dives into America's greatest swimming hole; gets ecstatic with the Zippies at their secret all-night techno-rave.

### AMERICAN RIDES

. . . ponders silver bubbles at the annual Airstream RV convention; revs it up at the Harley-Davidson rally in Sturgis, South Dakota; sails the Chesapeake with snooty owners of a rare antique sailboat known as the log canoe; roams the streets with D.C.'s hard-core band of bike couriers.

### AMERICAN BY BIRTH, SOUTHERN BY THE GRACE OF . . .

. . . speaks in tongues with black Pentecostals of the Memphis-based Church of God in Christ; fishes for lunkers at the Bassmasters Classic; goes underground with the world's greatest cave rescuer; unravels the mystery of a notorious teen murder in rural Mississippi.

## AMERICANS ABROAD

. . . crosses the Sahara Desert with American endurance runners at the infernal Marathon des Sables; bushwhacks through MesoAmerica with Mormon archaeologists in search of lost tribes of Israel; visits a high school friend who's become an Uzi-toting Zionist pioneer in the West Bank; walks the route of the Bataan Death March with characters from **Ghost Soldiers**.

## AMERICAN OBSESSIONS

. . . cranks it up with high-end stereophiles at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas; gets bowled over by 5,000 squealing salesladies at the annual Tupperware convention; plumbs the mysteries of the "schwa" at the National Spelling Bee; scrapes at the stucco of the neurotic architectural tradition known as Santa Fe Style.

## AMERICA, POST 9/11

. . . traces the harrowing stories of three World Trade Center survivors; goes off-roading in the Imperial Sand Dunes; almost embeds on the Iraqi frontlines with the U.S. Marines; remembers Shane Childers, the decorated Marine who became the first American combat death in Iraq.

## **Americana: Dispatches from the New Frontier Details**

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## **From Reader Review Americana: Dispatches from the New Frontier for online ebook**

### **Pam says**

I listened to the audio book, which was very well narrated. The stories were often on unusual topics and many were dated in the 1990s-early 2000s but most of not all were interesting.

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### **Fred Forbes says**

I must have been in the mood for essays after Bryson's book about the summer of '27 in America so this one was a nice continuation. A lot of different, interesting topics from "Airstreaming" retirees, to cavers to bass fishing. But probably the most powerful writing is on the experience of the those at the World Trade Center on 9/11. Pretty tough to come away from those stories with dry eyes.

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### **Lee says**

The introduction to this book is epic, eagle spreading his wings, firecrackers exploding over Fort McHenry. This introduction made me proud to be an American.

And then you descend into the first essay, a sort of biography of Tony Hawk, American skateboarder. And frankly, it is just not that interesting. Maybe the other essays match the soaring rhetoric of the introduction, but, after slogging through much of the Tony Hawk essay, I was just not willing to find it.

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### **Brian Beatty says**

Magazine journalism is a dying art, in this era of listicles and clickbait links. Mr. Sides knows how to tell one hell of a story.

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### **Walter says**

Americana by Hampton Sides is easy to read and interesting. The volume is composed of 30 short, non-fiction, people pieces. Each article offers a snippet of the kaleidoscope of the American character. Sides has a talent at choosing intriguing topics. Some of the topics are satirical, but, not with malice. Sides seems to attempt to bring understanding to each of the pieces by including lots of interesting facts. One piece, for example, on spelling bees and modern spelling contests includes a whole host of information on why the English language presents such spelling difficulties, and why English English and American English have evolved differently.

Some of the topics are of a more realistic bent. One, on the first American death in the second Iraq war and

another portraying the impact of the 9/11 - Twin Towers collapse on several individuals are some of the best prose pieces I have read. For just plain writing fun and humor, two of my favorite pieces characterize the annual "Hog" motorcycle conflagration at Sturgis, South Dakota; and Biosphere 2 in Arizona, at the two-year exit. Taken in aggregate these diverse glimpses of America portray the individualism of America. Sides chooses two words to integrate these individual stories of American character: confidence and openness.

Read this book. I think you will enjoy it.

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### **Autumn says**

The intro was spectacular. The essays were fair, at best. I still do not see what any of them has to do with how people from other countries see Americans. I just do not get the connection.

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### **Heather says**

This non fiction work did not hold my interest like his Ghost Soldiers did. Written dryly like newspaper articles for human interest stories ("dispatches" is a good subtitle and should have been a warning to me). A fantastic range of subjects though. I wish I could have been pulled into more of the stories he covered.

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### **Angela Oneal says**

The author starts this book with an anecdote where he asks a Moroccan friend how he could spot an American. The friend responds, "Confident like you own the world. But open." The book is a series of stories that document American stories- from skate board culture to fundamentalist Christians. Overall, a good read.

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### **Booth Babcock says**

Have you ever picked up a book from your shelf and struggled to remember if you had already read it? Have you ever wondered that after you finished the book? That's the case with this collection of medium- and long-form essays from Hampton Sides...I like the long form article, so this is a book of various ones written mostly in the 90s covering a variety of American characters and subcultures. Somewhere between something you'd read in the New Yorker and in an in-flight magazine. Not bad, but unmemorable and also fairly dated now.

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### **Patrick Gibson says**

It is precisely because Hampton Sides writes with articulate verbosity that I like him. Knowing clever words and using them wisely is craftsmanship not showoffyness. And he doesn't need me to defend him—but there are critics among you who find him elitist and wordy. Can you imagine such a thing? He also has a macho

bravura that takes him places other chroniclers of the human condition shy away from. The annual Harley hog-fest in Sturgis, South Dakota for example. Or tracking the Bassmasters in Richmond (come on, fishing can be dangerous, or at least adventurous).

A little reminiscent of Bill Bryson but with longer chapters and less sarcasm, Sides chooses his subject matter from broad cloth. Jerry Falwells gay speech writer, Tom Ferguson and the New World Archaeological Foundation (which is attempting to pinpoint the Mormon Nephite-Lamanite battle) to Wes Phillips, an obsessive audiophile (that's 'audio' not 'peda')—each focus subject is treated honestly and fairly. Almost always, interesting.

Even with dubious subject matter (and there is very little I'd call hesitant), the author's razor sharp observations are expounded by his obvious love of language.

The collection is so diverse, in a way, it takes your breath away. You can see some of the beginnings of his two (so far) great books 'Ghost Soldiers' and 'Blood and Thunder.' Each mini-treatise flows effortlessly from one to another, no matter the subject. You never get the sense he labors over anything, it just pours out effortlessly. Going from a Saint-of-the-latter-day-hippie rave in the Kaibob National Forest (called 'Smells Like Zippy Spirit') to walking the Bataan Death March with a few ageless survivors (yah, he leaves America for some of his stories), it is great to be able to shake your head with dismayed laughter and a few pages later shake away tears. He's that good of a writer. After reading 'Blood and Thunder' I have pretty much decided Hampton can do no wrong.

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### **Scott says**

Anthologies aren't the type of books that I knowingly choose to read. i didn't realize this book was an anthology when i bought it; i might not have bought it had i known it. anyway, when i discovered this was a book of short stories, i wasn't thrilled. well, the book was good. it was in the travel section at half price books, but it shouldn't have been. Maybe the sociology section would have been more appropriate for it.

This author wrote interesting non-fiction stories about interesting topics, ranging from the big Harley rally in Sturgis to a story about a cave rescue specialist. The topics were interesting, and the stories were written in a style that kept me entertained. This was a good book that i would recommend to most people.

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### **Martha says**

He is my favorite writer of nonfiction. These essays cover a lot of ground and a lot of the world. He writes about fascinating people and places.

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### **Karen Germain says**

My Friend Nicole passed this book my way and it was absolutely fantastic. Hampton Side's "Americana: Dispatches from the New Frontier" is comprised of thirty chapters, each reflecting on a different American subculture or perspective. The stories each vary drastically in tone, some taking more of a travel writer feel

and some hardcore journalism.

As with all collections, some pieces are bound to be more interesting than others, but I really don't think that there was a low point in this book. The book has several highlights. In particular, I enjoyed "Waiting for Liddy", "Sisters of the Bowl" and "This is Not the Place." A majority of the chapters really made me envious of Sides and it made me want to sell everything, buy an airstream trailer and hit the road. America is fascinating!

The best piece was "Points of Impact" which was the perspective of three World Trade Center survivors. It was completely affecting and absorbing. I can't imagine that anyone would be able to read that chapter with a dry eye and without feeling completely lucky.

I can't praise this book enough and look forward to reading more of Hampton Sides.

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### **John says**

Though I rarely read an anthology, I found this one superb. It's a collection of 30 of author's magazine articles, mostly from the 1980s and 90s. For example, author travels with Mormons in Central America jungles in effort to prove the viability of the Book of Mormon. Results: zero. He embeds with Marines in Kuwait prior to the invasion of Iraq, but then, remembering his wife and three young sons back in the U.S., backs out at the last minute. He skateboards with the legendary Tony Hawk. He attends a Tupperware convention. His continued use of "gauntlet" for running through something rubs me the wrong way. Since a gauntlet is a glove, I cheer whenever I see an author use the more correct "gantlet."

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### **Kate says**

I thought this book was incredibly interesting. The anthology style means you get a brief glimpse at all kinds of different people and events, tons of which I wouldn't have read about otherwise.

I would love to read a biography of Hampton Sides. He has definitely lived an interesting life.

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