



Take the Cannoli

Sarah Vowell

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Take the Cannoli is a moving and wickedly funny collection of personal stories stretching across the immense landscape of the American scene. Vowell tackles subjects such as identity, politics, religion, art, and history with a biting humor. She searches the streets of Hoboken for traces of the town's favorite son, Frank Sinatra. She goes under cover of heavy makeup in an investigation of goth culture, blasts cannonballs into a hillside on a father-daughter outing, and maps her family's haunted history on a road trip down the Trail of Tears. Vowell has an irresistible voice—caustic and sympathetic, insightful and double-edged—that has attracted a loyal following for her magazine writing and radio monologues on *This American Life*.

Take the Cannoli Details

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lp says

I have heard wonderful things about Sarah Vowell, and I thought she would be great because she was funny on Gigantic, that documentary about They Might Be Giants. I've never heard her on This American Life, but Ira Glass and This American Life are great, so I bet she is, too. But I didn't like her book. I must admit, toward the end I left huge chunks unread. I'd, like, get to a boring chapter and think "aw, hell no. Next!" and I'd start reading the next one and pretty much be equally disappointed.

I was excited for about ten seconds when I saw the chapter that started "I am standing on Disney World's Main Street, U.S.A..." but ended up just getting pissed. Of course, she must explain how it's a TOTAL ACCIDENT that she ended up there (because she is actually above Disney World), makes fun of pretty much everything (like, the fact that the waiters dressed in Revolutionary War-Era clothes have to wear black sneakers? Who gives a shit?) Honestly, I have witnessed it all. There is plenty to make fun of in Disney World, but Vowell instead seemed appalled by the least controversial things. She also claims that on Tom Sawyer's Island someone scrawled "Fuck Off Nazis" on one of the walls and I feel like flying there right now to prove her wrong. They unleash an army of janitors the moment the park closes every night to unstick discarded gum, and scrub and pick up trash from every square inch of the park. There is absolutely no way there is graffiti of any kind. I have never seen it. She ends by taking a trip to Celebration, Florida and making fun of that. Too easy. Who goes to Celebration for fun, anyway? (Despite its name, it is not a party town and everyone who is there knows it's not trying to be entertaining. It's basically a retirement community.)

All I could think of is "thank God I don't have to go to Disney world with you, or anywhere for that matter." In fact, Vowell came off as pretty pretentious and un-fun throughout the entire book. She is predictably nerdy – it is almost painful how stereotypical it all is. I read a lot of reviews that praised the book after I gave up reading it, so I picked it up and said "okay, Lauren, let's try again!" But honestly, it was too excruciating and I thought why am I doing this and I started reading a new book, that I am really actually enjoying.

Maybe I should have tried harder, and maybe, as a Disney nerd, I was farrrrrr too offended about the unjustifiable Disney stabs. That might have ruined the entire book for me. So please, someone who has read it that is NOT a Disney nerd: is she right, is this book okay? Did the Disney stuff (and all the other stuff) entertain you?

Romany Arrowsmith says

Yawn. This was written by a person who is very obviously used to the format of radio presentations and has failed to adapt her style to that of written non-fiction. Don't get me wrong - I've always liked Sarah Vowell's contributions to NPR (to *This American Life* in particular), and definitely love NPR itself. NPR is love. NPR is life. Unfortunately, like a tattoo that looks pretty on paper but comes out all mushily deformed on skin, what is offbeat and wry and witty over the radio can come across as lifeless in a book, especially when the book reads as yet another fragmented *bildungsroman-cum-memoir* of a white American woman's dull middle class epiphanies over her short and unremarkable lifetime.

The best parts of this collection were almost always the quoted words of others*, which is about the most

damning praise I can give it, yet also indicative of Vowell's great journalistic instincts that are nonetheless smothered in this attempt at self-reflection through essays.

*I'm thinking in particular of the following:

"Personally, I am too vindictively American, too full of hate for the hateful aspects of this country, and too possessed by the things I love here to be too long away." (Ralph Ellison)

and

"You think this is a mess? New York is a mess! Why should it matter if I spill anything inside? The whole city is a dump! I'm not pretending the inside is any different from the outside anymore!" (unnamed guest staying at New York's Chelsea hotel).

Mandy Szewczuk says

Not my favorite of one of my favorite authors' books. Perhaps it's that some of the essays are older and don't feel as relevant, or maybe because the subjects just didn't really grab me. I didn't find myself as engaged as I have been in other essays. Which isn't to say I didn't get some chuckles out of this book, but I felt like the chuckles were more spaced out and mellow.

Ciara says

i wanted to like this book better than i liked it. at the end of the day, i like sarah vowell's writing: it's funny & engaging, it's smart & self-deprecating & informative. but there's so much strangely blind patriotism in here. yeah, it comes from a liberal perspective, what with vowell being all over NPR & being really critical of the bush administration & everything, but there's so much of, "if we could just fix these huge glaring problems with the government, this country would be awesome!" & i think that's really naive & short-sighted. probably the piece in here that bothered me the most was the one about andrew jackson & the trail of tears. vowell is all, "i am part native american, so i wanted to travel the trail of tears like my ancestors did." i mean, right off the bat, the whole concept was grating on me in a way i just can't quite explain. she gets into the whole history of the cherokee nation being pretty inspired by the new u.s. government & copying a lot of their ideas & starting a newspaper & a written language & all this shit that other indian tribes hadn't really thought about doing before, & how the cherokee people were supposed to be considered a sovereign nation within the boundaries of the u.s., but a lot of white settlers wanted them to move off their land so the white people could claim it for farms & such forth, & a few tribe members who felt their eviction was inevitable anyway went ahead & signed a treaty with jackson & agreed that everyone would clear out. when the tribe failed to meet the deadline set down in the treaty (because the overwhelming majority of the tribe was totally opposed to the treaty), they were forced into stockades & set out on the six-month march along the trail of tears, which vowell drove with her sister, stopping at indian- & jackson-themed landmarks along the way. the whole thing...it seemed a little bit histrionic. not that the trail of tears wasn't a barbaric thing, but i couldn't help but feel that some of vowell's rage was a little bit appropriative. it just struck a sour note with me, as does much of her "rah rah america" crap. i'm into the whole concept of exploring the seedy underbelly of american history, peeling up the carpet & seeing where the roaches run, etc, but there was something just a touch insincere about this book. i'm still working it out in my head.

Chrissy says

Sarah Vowell takes you with her on a series of adventures, challenges and bizarre dares. She is a modern day Huck Finn with a glass of scotch in her right hand and a biography of Andrew Jackson in the left. From shooting off cannons, learning to make a non sentimental mix tapes, to the bizarre not so wonderful world of Disney, learning to drive with Ira Glass, to going Goth for a night, to her obsession with The Godfather, she doesn't hold back and I love her for it.

The chapter "What I See When I Look at the Face on the 20 Dollar Bill" was one of my favorites, in which she follows the Trail of Tears of the Cherokee Nation. A story of American genocide and unrequited bravery, it is truly suspenseful and heartbreaking. When Sarah visits the Nashville home of Andrew Jackson who went against his word and caused so many to die so long ago, Sarah cannot forgive him. She reads a quote by President Jackson aloud to the guide who gives her the tour of his grave and tries to find understanding and peace. I love that Vowell, while laying hard into the evils and arrogance of a country that took away the land of the Cherokees, acknowledges her part in the America that caused so many to die.

Vowell never lets you forget for a moment that she loves/hates America and explains why every step of the way. She is so frighteningly smart and self-deprecatingly hilarious, it is no wonder she can count David Sedaris and Nick Hornby among her list of friends.

To me this book is like a late night conversation with a good friend after too much red wine and too little sleep. It is a delicious mix of booze and coffee and Elvis and wisdom and pain and acceptance, Italy, and understanding, insomnia, religion, Sinatra, confusion, band uniforms, death, Burger King, and love. She takes the Cannoli.

Gordon says

Sarah Vowell is both smart and smart ass -- if you've seen Jon Stewart interview her on The Daily Show, you know she does more than hold her own. She's a curious amalgam: she writes for NPR and yet revels in her "white trash" background.

All in all, Take the Cannoli is a very uneven collection of stories, which comes with the territory with a writer like Vowell. To grossly oversimplify, her style is to take whatever happens to be going on in her life or her mind at the moment and then whip it into a story. It's not quite stream of consciousness so much as stream of life. Sometimes that's interesting, sometimes not.

Some of her stories: She goes to Disney World with her gay New Yorker friend. She learns to drive (with Ira Glass). She steps out of her introvert comfort zone to go through a goth makeover to check out the club scene in San Francisco. Which leads to what may be one of her best lines in this book: "By the time they're done cinching up the corset and stabilizing my bustle, I'm in so many layers of black lace scarves and fringe and fishnet stockings that I could play strip poker for three weeks without baring my belly button".

Counterbalancing stories like that are those about Frank Sinatra -- she includes TWO stories about him in this collection. Frank Sinatra???

One of the most moving of her stories is "Take the Cannoli" (from which the book also takes its title) where she talks about her guilty, compulsive watching of The Godfather in her college years, as she struggles with her loss of religious faith and seeks comfort in the moral certainties of Sicilian mafia family values. (Religion can really mess you up). The line is from the Godfather, where the gunman says to a fellow mafioso after killing someone: "Leave the gun. Take the cannoli." I think that's supposed to encapsulate a

philosophy of life.

In "The End is Near, Nearer, Nearest", she talks about growing up with religion, Oklahoma-style: fire and brimstone, Armageddon and sin. So, naturally, near the end of the 1990's, she just had to go to a Y2K seminar, the Apocalyptic message of which was all too familiar to her from her fundamentalist upbringing. The difference was that by now she was no longer a child and could actually consciously reject that nonsense and understand why she was doing so. In that story is my favorite passage of the whole book:

"Heaven such as it is, is right here on earth. Behold: my revelation: I stand at the door in the morning, and lo, there is a newspaper, in sight like unto an emerald. And holy, holy, holy is the coffee, which was, and is, and is to come. And hark, I hear the voice of an angel round about the radio, saying, "Since my baby left me I found a new place to dwell." And lo, after this I beheld a great multitude, which no man could number, of shoes. And after these things I will hasten unto a taxicab and to a theater, where a ticket will be given unto me, and lo, it will be a matinee, and a film that doeth great wonders. And when it is finished, the heavens will open, and out will cometh a rain fragrant as myrrh, and yea, I have an umbrella".

As long as you skip the Sinatra stories and anything else that doesn't grab you in the first couple of pages, you'll enjoy this book. It's kind of narcissistic, but if you like the author's point of view, that's OK.

Jenny says

Registered on Bookcrossing : <http://www.bookcrossing.com/journal/1...>

This is a fun bunch of essays, not as laugh out loud as David Sedaris, but still pretty interesting and funny. The chapter where she's learning to drive at the age of 28 is especially funny. Her boss takes her to a cemetery to practice because she can't hurt anyone there.

The author describing her room at the infamous Chelsea Hotel in New York City: "My room, marked 923 in ballpoint on a crumbling index card taped to the door, is an Edward Hopper painting waiting to happen. so Hopperesque, in fact, that upon entering I feel the need to put on a grimy old slip and slump into the dusty armchair so that I can stare wantonly at the wall."

Jonathan says

Reading Sarah Vowell for the first time was like finding a long lost friend that I never met before. There was an immediate familiarity - the sense of déjà vu: as though we shared these conversations at the cafe about the awkward teenage years, sibling rivalry, quirky family relationships and more.

I immediately recognized something of myself in her writing, as well as something inspirational. I can't gush too much: there's a few pieces in here that are dry. However, I think you have to be a little more invested in the subject matter, whether you live in a big city or love Frank Sinatra (I do neither), but her style is strong enough to keep me entertained, if not interested. This is the first Vowell book I have read and I anxiously look forward to more!

Jen says

I really enjoyed this collection of essays from Sarah Vowell's travels and experiences. Her way of writing nonfiction is very entertaining but still manages to be educational. It's a fun mix. :-)

This book was divided into four sections: Home Movies seemed to be mostly Sarah's recollections of her own American life in her growing up years through to Y2K. So...interesting, but not necessarily educational. (It *was* educational, though, if you're the type who is interested in seeing how others live through similar times.)

Post Cards gave me a line I really identified with in the essay entitled "Vindictively American." Sarah was studying abroad and in one of her orientation seminars, her group was asked, " 'What would you do if you were abroad and some foreigners came up to you and expressed anti-American sentiment?' 'Agree with them,' [Sarah] said."

I felt the same when I lived in Russia once upon a time (in the mid-90s). The *last* thing I wanted to be identified as was an American. Americans were seen as loud, obnoxious, wealthy (and, sadly, the American tourists I saw in "my" town sure fit this stereotype)... I enjoy being American when I'm in America. When I was in Siberia, I wanted to be Russian and then later when I was in Prague, I wanted to be Czech (however, as this exchange happened after my time in Russia, I never really achieved "Czech-ness;" I was a pretty convincing Russian, though!). I immersed myself in the cultures of the places I found myself and most all of those things that were American about me fell by the wayside.

Anyway, moving on...

Post Cards also gave us our first truly educational history essays. I enjoyed reading and learning about the Chelsea Hotel (and its denizens) in New York in "Chelsea Girl" and "Michigan and Wacker" was a super interesting essay about the history of Chicago.

The next section, Obituaries, was rather heartbreaking because it included an essay about the Trail of Tears and Sarah's modern journey across it with her twin sister ("What I See When I Look at the Face on the \$20 Bill"). This is the essay that made me cry. "Just as our blood will never be pure, the Trail of Tears will never make sense." :("Ixnay on the My Way" followed -- a short essay about Frank Sinatra's death and songs.

Then the final section, Mix Tapes, mostly seemed to me to again be about Sarah's experiences with certain aspects of American culture (like driving and goths).

As I'm a fan of Sarah Vowell's writing, there were several lines in this book that made me laugh. They can be found in the first, second, and final sections. I'll share just one from each section (the underlined bits are my emphasis to show what made me laugh about each of the long quotes):

Home Movies

Sarah was in an antinuclear group when she was in high school: "My biggest contribution was probably representing the group in a roundtable discussion on the local public television channel; the adults said a few mundane things about a saner nuclear policy before I started screaming, 'You got to grow up! Do you know what it's like to think you're not going to grow up? Do you?' Why the station manager didn't immediately grasp my broadcasting potential then and there based on my nuanced, articulate approach and offer me my own show remains a mystery." (From page 45 in "The End is Near, Nearer, Nearest.") lol ;-)

Post Cards

In "These Little Town Blues," Sarah is in Hoboken, New Jersey, absorbing the culture to be found in Frank Sinatra's birthplace. On pages 72-73, we have these lines about New Jersey: "This is the state Paterson native Ginsberg called 'nowhere Zen New Jersey'; the place Freehold homeboy Springsteen referred to as a 'dump'; the place South Jerseyan Smith described in her song 'Piss Factory'; the place, it is said, that even Sinatra has called a 'sewer.' Or, as my guidebook puts it, the state 'has a superb interstate highway system for a reason.'" lol!!! :-)

Mix Tapes

"Drive Through, Please" is about Sarah finally learning to drive at the age of about 28: "When someone asks me why I don't drive, I usually say that my sister drives. Which sounds a little loony. But my sister, Amy, and I are twins. . . . The advantage is that twins share responsibilities. There is little or no pressure to become a whole person, which creates a very clear, very liberating division of labor. I did the indoor things, she did the outdoor ones. She learned to ride a bike before I did. I learned to read before she did. She owns at least three pairs of skis. I own at least three brands of bourbon. Driving was her jurisdiction. Criticizing her driving was mine." lol!!! :-)

In closing, I really enjoyed this book. I'm not sure I'm taking away anything from the educational bits, but it did make me reaffirm my love for Sarah Vowell's writing style and rekindled my interest in reading others of her works. :-)

Tiffany says

Thankfully, I liked *Take the Cannoli* a lot more than I liked *Radio On*. The essays in this one overall seemed funnier and/or more interesting. I love the idea of being taught how to drive by Ira Glass! And the essay about the Trail of Tears was interesting and thought-provoking.

This was a much better collection than *Radio On*, perhaps because Vowell was older when she wrote these, or because they're less self-absorbed (or are they?), or ... I don't know. Maybe because it wasn't so much about a specific time period, but about life in general. I just liked this set better than the first set I read. I might even recommend it to people, whereas I would tell people to RUN from *Radio On*.

Al Young says

Sarah Vowell has found a certain niche now and it's likely her books going forward won't stray too far (not necessarily a bad thing) but we all start out once, and so there you go.

This is her second book, and is a collection of pieces she wrote for various publishers and the like. So, topics are pretty random- The Godfather movie, Frank Sinatra, the goth scene, Walt Disney World, the Chelsea Hotel, Andrew Jackson and the Trail of Tears. Indeed, all over the place. At heart, the stories are often drawn by the dichotomies of her being outspokenly liberal and having a very Conservative father and family, and also living in Montana.

To me, this makes for a great book. I am well acquainted with Vowell's work and for me, this is a book I read quickly, enjoyed all the way through and will most likely read again. To me, I really enjoy her

observations, and sometimes this book is just plain fun, and sometimes it tries to make a point- whether it is heavy like the Trail of Tears piece or at least gets stuck in your mind like the questions of suffering for art brought by the Chelsea Hotel piece.

I suspect most people who would be interested in Vowell likely have their minds made up about her, and she wears her politics on her sleeve, so any cursory reading of her reviews will show that her rating dips among those who might disagree with her politically.

Otherwise, I certainly recommend it. Fun fact, I suspect it is because of my location, but this is yet another book I found for near nothing that is signed by the author (and has the flyer from the reading). I probably enjoy that more than I should, knowing I have the signed book, and it made its way to me.

amelia says

I love Sarah Vowell's writing, and this was no exception. It was a bizarre reading experience, though, in light of the 2016 election and her perspective on the seemingly dormant (and now-active) follies of American history. It made me crave her perspective on current events/feel icky.

Kaethe says

Take the Cannoli: Stories From the New World - Sarah Vowell I can already tell I'm going to want to read this again. Essays, I love them. Plus, in my mind, I can hear Vowell as she must have sounded on *This American Life*, which is where most of these began. There's a few bits of growing-up interspersed throughout, a lot of history, the blackest of humor. Great stuff, perhaps especially on the Trail of Tears and how many different emotions that trip spawned.

So much humor, though.

On the one hand, I think Vowell would be an awesome friend to hang with, laughing at Choo-Choo and working it into every comment because of the way it sounds ("spleen" is a personal fave) on the other, she would someday drag me along on the least appealing road trip ever. Hotspots of the Teapot Dome scandal? Tippecanoe? Some other phrase I only dimly recall from American history, but can't actually place in time or space? She's already done The Hall of Presidents, so I'd be clear of that one. Yet no matter how little the idea would appeal to me, she'd make it fascinating: full of humor and humanity. Maybe we can just get her and Kate Beaton and Bill Bryson to filter all of history for us?

Library copy

Amy says

I realized reading this that I am familiar with this author from NPR's *This American Life*

Some of the essays captured my imagination, some did not. All in all it was a diverting read from the all that is occupying my time around her otherwise.

FROM THE PUBLISHER

Take the Cannoli is a moving and wickedly funny collection of personal stories stretching across the

immense landscape of the American scene. Vowell tackles subjects such as identity, politics, religion, art, and history with a biting humor. She searches the streets of Hoboken for traces of the town's favorite son, Frank Sinatra. She goes under cover of heavy makeup in an investigation of goth culture, blasts cannonballs into a hillside on a father-daughter outing, and maps her family's haunted history on a road trip down the Trail of Tears. Vowell has an irresistible voice -- caustic and sympathetic, insightful and double-edged -- that has attracted a loyal following for her magazine writing and radio monologues on *This American Life*.

Thomas Paul says

You would think that reading and reviewing a book written ten years ago about American culture might be tricky. You would expect that so much has changed that a book like this would be more like a history lesson than a view into America. But surprisingly, in spite of all that has happened since the turn of the century, Vowell's essays are as true and as vibrant as when she wrote them. I have to admit that I am a fan of Vowell ever since I read her book *Assassination Vacation*. The best part of that book is Vowell taking us on a tour of America and making the history she finds relevant to today. This is a gift that she carries into these short essays.

Vowell takes us on a journey along the "Trail of Tears," as she travels the same path which her Cherokee ancestors were forced to travel when they were driven from their homes by Americans. She spends a few days at the Chelsea Hotel where Sid Vicious might have killed Nancy Spungen. She heads to Hoboken to discover the town where Frank Sinatra grew up. She tells us the history of a street corner in Chicago and then explains the lessons she learned from taking band in high school and from watching the movie the "Godfather."

The end result is a very enjoyable series of essays that hold up even though they are 10 years old. If you have enjoyed reading Vowell's other books then I can heartily recommend this one.
