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# An Elemental Thing (New Directions Paperbook)



## Synopsis

Internationally acclaimed as one of the most innovative writers today, Eliot Weinberger has taken the essay into unexplored territories on the borders of poetry and narrative where the only rule, according to the author, is that all the information must be verifiable. With *An Elemental Thing*, Weinberger turns from his celebrated political chronicles to the timelessness of the subjects of his literary essays. With the wisdom of a literary archaeologist-astronomer-anthropologist-zookeeper, he leads us through histories, fables, and meditations about the ten thousand things in the universe: the wind and the rhinoceros, Catholic saints and people named Chang, the Mandeans on the Iran-Iraq border and the Kaluli in the mountains of New Guinea. Among the thirty-five essays included are a poetic biography of the prophet Muhammad, which was praised by the *London Times* for its "great beauty and grace," and "The Stars," a reverie on what's up there that has already been translated into Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, and Maori.

## Book Information

Series: New Directions Paperbook

Paperback: 194 pages

Publisher: New Directions; 1st Edition edition (May 17, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0811216942

ISBN-13: 978-0811216944

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 0.7 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars 10 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #211,965 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #202 in *Books > Reference > Encyclopedias & Subject Guides > Antiques & Collectibles* #1020 in *Books > Literature & Fiction > Essays & Correspondence > Essays* #1718 in *Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Criticism & Theory*

## Customer Reviews

His remarkable use of simultaneity and collage is something that didn't quite exist before. -- *Times Literary Supplement*  
Weinberger is a master of distilling massive amounts of information into a compelling takedown. -- *Time Out*

Eliot Weinberger is an essayist, editor, and translator. He lives in New York City.

I find this book very interesting and very different from everything I had read before. I feel that I will be returning to it many times and find always new issues. These special essays are fascinating new experiences

An essential book if you're curious about the limitless possibilities of non-fiction.

Weinberger charts unexplored territory, reaching further than most any essay writer today. He said in the 80s, only two people are doing anything of interest with the essay form: Susan Howe and Guy Davenport. I think we can add Eliot Weinberger to that list. This book is likely to make you think a lot about what an essay is and what it could be. He takes a universe of knowledge and compresses into lines and paragraphs that breathe out erudition and poetic vision. His topics span the globe, but are linked by common undercurrents. In some ways, I'd like to call this a status check on the spiritual life of the universe or a status check of the historical fringes of spiritual tradition. It's hard to say what it is-- moving from a history of people named Chang to a discussion of the concept of a Vortex in the mind of Pound and the mind of Blake and Descartes and so many others to a discussion of the Nazca lines to Aztec spiritual traditions to Christian saints who flew to wrens. I feel like I'm on the cusp of something big reading this book, a new discovery about how far literature can reach. I have to echo the earlier comment that reading this book is liking drinking cool, clear water, but I also think it's like unwittingly entering a vortex. This book is the perfect storm; I suggest you ride right into it.

This book's sequence of short essays covers an astonishing range of subjects, from wind to rhinoceros to lizards, from Aztecs to Romans to Mandeans. Empedocles and "the ox-herding boy" are presiding spirits of sorts, drifting in and out of multiple essays. Parallel essays elaborating the seasonal activities of a T'ang Dynasty Chinese court give structure to the book as a whole. What makes the essays so remarkable, besides their astounding learnedness (James Laughlin, the editor of *New Directions*, once said that Weinberger was the most erudite person he'd met since Ezra Pound), is their formal innovation. Each essay is utterly distinct. Everything Weinberger has learned from a lifetime's obsession with poetry he brings to bear on the essay. Laughlin's comparison comes to mind in part because Weinberger has cracked open the essay form in as dramatic a way as Ezra Pound cracked open the poem in the early 20th century. Precipitous juxtapositions, heuristic leaps, lists, anaphoric incantation, cultural rhymes, onomatopoeia, parallel structures, strong syntactical shifts, refusals of closure, kennings, textual patterning on the page, and merciless

understatement characterize the essays. Also, Weinberger empathetically heaps our plate with the facts of life as they are perceived by non-Western cultures, and he does so without relying on those patronizing qualifications--"they believe," etc.--so often used to distinguish non-scientific modes of experience and explanation. Thus, in "Muhammad," we read: "He never soiled his clothes; whatever passed naturally from him was instantly received and concealed by the earth. He never smelled disagreeably, but gave off a fragrance of camphor and musk. At three months, he sat up; at nine months, he walked; at ten months, he went out with his foster-brothers to pasture the sheep...."Often elements from one essay are swirled into the configuration of another. For instance, the reader is likely to associate an essay titled "Wind and Bone" with an earlier essay, "The Wind." In "Wind and Bone," an advisor tells a Chinese emperor that the wind he feels "is a wind for your majesty alone." Any reader familiar with Pound's Cantos will recall Pound's "No wind is the king's wind" and link this allusion to Pound references in other essays. Meanwhile, Weinberger goes on to mention Chang Hua, whose name connects him to an earlier essay, "Chang," concerning (well, you have to read it) a bunch of men named Chang. The last line of "Wind and Bone"--"The metaphor for the ideal poem is a bird"--relates it to an essay called "Wrens." This cycling of themes and references typifies the movement not only of the essays, but of the writing as a whole. Perhaps the book's overriding compositional metaphor is the vortex; two of the most compelling essays, "Tree of Flowers" and "Vortex," develop that image into a cosmogony. It's curious to note how ecstasy and carnage often mingle in the final sentences of these essays, despite (or not) that a number of them are concerned with creation. Weinberger tracks cycles of human violence and dreaming as, like huge vortical whirlwinds, they stalk each other across the widening desert tracts of human history. Finally, though, it's Weinberger's attentiveness to particularity, to the particularity of our species, its dreams and literatures and landscapes, that makes the essays so rich. The brilliant net of details that Weinberger casts and recasts in his various inventive approaches to form is precisely what constitutes a superlative poetic imagination. And it's what holds the essays--and us--trembling and raging and hallucinating together.

My favorite chapter in this collection -- 33: The Sahara. It is so short that could be called either a poem or a prose, but fully embodies the essence of Pound's Imagism (in my opinion, surpasses Pound's In a Station of the Metro, but just my personal feeling). Here is the text, and It's not a spoiler -- many more await you: 33: The Sahara Camels' feet leave lotus-pad prints in the sand. (END) One must be blind not to realize how beautiful Weinberger's language is, how soul-probing his insights are, and how broad his scope covers. Maybe a recommendation comment on the inside fold of the

book speaks the truth: "In the future our children will wonder why Weinberger, one of our literature's prose masters, was best known outside his native U.S."

Mr. Weinberger has created worlds upon worlds. Every essay has the potential to be a starting point for another work. His research astonished me at every turn. I kept wondering if the stories were transcribed or the fruits of an amazing mind. I concluded, they must be both.

I imagine this collection as a watercolor painted by Borges - little surprise considering that the essays are largely dealing with Chinese themes and that the author translated Borges into English. *An Elemental Thing* is the perfect title for the book. It breaks apart the common reality into separate pieces, which contain no plot but beauty that, in a sense, surpasses any plot, because the universe doesn't have one. So don't air, sunset and love. They simply are. In our world of commercialized and predictable clones, this book is a unique creation.

This is possibly the most amazing writing I have ever read. Each essay is beautiful and brilliant on its own, but once I got to the fifth or so essay I could feel a very subtle big picture being painted, and that was the real knock-out. It would be too much to say what all of these together say or mean, but there is beautiful underlying cohesion. I can't find the exact quote, but one reviewer said something like, "Eliot Weinberger seems to have personally seen or read about every event in history." Indeed.

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