

Memoir: Growing Up & Getting Through

What is it?

- Reader's Advisor Online defines memoirs as "narratives composed from personal experience."
- Memoir differs from autobiography in that it generally deals with a slice of the author's life, not the whole pie. Also, autobiographies tend to be more about dates and facts, while memoirs tend to be more reflective.
- The line between memoir and essay can be a fine one. As the market for stand-alone essays shrinks, more authors are publishing book-length essay collections which are marketed as memoirs.
- Since the controversy over James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, the discussion concerning "creative nonfiction" continues.
- A STrib article by Laurie Hertzell ("The Lovely and the Mundane," June 6, 2010) asserted that the recent trend is toward lighter memoirs with less angst and more focus on aspects of everyday life.

Why do people read it? (a.k.a. the appeal factors)

- Vicarious experience of situations and settings
- Immediacy of the first-person voice; the ancient tug of storytelling
- Reassurance that others experience and feel what they do
- Fast-pace of many memoirs
- Interesting, varied topics
- Popular buzz around some memoirs, driven by media and word-of-mouth
- Character, story, language, and setting all apply to memoir as well as fiction
- Memoirists often say what we wish we could say more eloquently than we are able

Who reads it?

- Fiction readers who like first-person and character-driven stories
- Fans of biographies
- Book groups looking for companion reads on certain themes
- Other nonfiction readers who enjoy journalism, travel, or family themes

Genre & Sub-Genre Overview

There is no agreement on standard divisions, but here are a few suggestions, including some by Neal Wyatt:

Clash of Cultures/ Immigrant Experience:

- *Forbidden Bread* by Erica Johnson Debeljak
- *In Cod We Trust: Living the Norwegian Dream* by Eric Dregni
- *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* by James McBride

- *Marcus of Umbria: What an Italian Dog Taught an American Girl about Love* by Justine van der Leun

Coming-of-Age:

- *Wait 'Till Next Year* by Doris Kearns Goodwin
- *A Girl Named Zippy: Growing Up Small in Mooreland, Indiana* by Haven Kimmel
- *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood* by Alexandra Fuller

Overcoming Adversity:

- *Waking: A Memoir of Trauma and Transcendence* by Matthew Sanford
- *Here if You Need Me: A True Story* by Kate Braestrup
- *Lucky* by Alice Sebold
- *Love in the Driest Season: A Family Memoir* by Neely Tucker

Women's Interest:

- *Teta, Mother, and Me: Three Generations of Arab Women* by Jean Said Makdisi
- *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress: A Memoir of Going Home* by Rhoda Janzen
- *Love in a Time of Homeschooling* by Laura Brodie
- *The Butcher and the Vegetarian: One Woman's Romp Through a World of Men, Meat, and Moral Crisis* by Tara Austen Weaver

Working Life:

- *Confessions of a Tax Collector: One Man's Tour of Duty inside the IRS* by Richard Yancey
- *Blue Blood* by Edward Conlon
- *Born Standing Up: A Comic's Life* by Steve Martin
- *Beware of Cat: And Other Encounters of a Letter Carrier* by Vince Wyckoff

Minnesota Authors:

- *Half Baked: The Story of My Nerves, My Newborn, and How We Both Learned to Breathe* by Alexa Stevenson
- *The Florist's Daughter* by Patricia Hampl
- *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* by Kao Kalia Yang
- *Roads Less Traveled: Dispatches from the Ends of the Earth* by Catherine Watson

Other themes/categories [from NovelList]: Classics, Foodie, Celebrity, Death & Grieving

Some other authors you should know

•Maya Angelou •Augusten Burroughs •Mary Karr • Ruth Reichl •Jeannette Walls

Awards:

Few awards are given specifically for memoir, but it helps to watch the winners of the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize for Biography & Autobiography, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Memoirs frequently are found on lists such as The NY Public Library's Books to Remember, ALA's Notable Books, and IndieBound.org's Next Lists.

Another Resource:

Read On...Life Stories: Reading Lists for Every Taste by Rosalind Reisner