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Fierce Attachments

Vivian Gornick

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1987

“I remember only the women,” Vivian Gornick writes near the start of her memoir of growing up in the Bronx tenements in the 1940s, surrounded by the blunt, brawling, yearning women of the neighborhood, chief among them her indomitable mother. “I absorbed them as I would chloroform on a cloth laid against my face. It has taken me 30 years to understand how much of them I understood.”

When Gornick’s father died suddenly, she looked in the coffin for so long that she had to be pulled away. That fearlessness suffuses this book; she stares unflinchingly at all that is hidden, difficult, strange, unresolvable in herself and others — at loneliness, sexual malice and the devouring, claustrophobic closeness of mothers and daughters. The book is propelled by Gornick’s attempts to extricate herself from the stifling sorrow of her home — first through sex and marriage, but later, and more reliably, through the life of the mind, the “glamorous company” of ideas. It’s a portrait of the artist as she finds a language — original, allergic to euphemism and therapeutic banalities — worthy of the women that raised her. — *Parul Sehgal*

I love this book — even during those moments when I want to scream at Gornick, which are the times when she becomes the hypercritical, constantly disappointed woman that her mother, through her words and example, taught the author to be. There’s a clarity to this memoir that’s so brilliant it’s unsettling; Gornick finds a measure of freedom in her writing and her feminist activism, but even then, she and her mother can never let each other go. — *Jennifer Szalai*

Gornick’s language is so fresh and so blunt; it’s a

quintessentially American voice, and a beautiful one. The confidence of her tone in “Fierce Attachments” reminds me of the Saul Bellow who wrote, in the opening lines of “The Adventures of Augie March,” “I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way.” — *Dwight Garner*

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The Woman Warrior

Maxine Hong Kingston

Alfred A. Knopf, 1976

This book is more than four decades old, but I can't think of another memoir quite like it that has been published since. True stories, ghost stories, “talk stories” — Maxine Hong Kingston whirs them all together to produce something wild and astonishing that still asserts itself with a ruthless precision.

The American-born daughter of Chinese immigrants, Kingston

navigates a bewildering journey between worlds, each one stifling yet perforated by inconsistencies. There's the Chinese village of Kingston's ancestors, where girls learn the song of the warrior woman while being told they are destined to become a wife and a slave. There's the postwar California of her childhood, where she has to unlearn the "strong and bossy" voices of the Chinese women in her family in favor of an "American-feminine" whisper. There's Mao's revolution, which is supposed to upend the old feudal system that kept her female ancestors trapped in servitude (if they weren't victims of infanticides as unwanted baby girls) but also imposes its own deadly cruelty, preventing her parents from returning home.

The narrative undulates, shifting between ghost world, real world and family lore. It can be deadpan and funny, too. The young Kingston resolves to become a lumberjack and a newspaper reporter. Both worthy ambitions, but I'm thankful she wrote this indelible memoir instead. — *Jennifer Szalai*

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Fun Home

Alison Bechdel

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006

Alison Bechdel's beloved graphic novel is an elaborately layered account of life and artifice, family silence and revelation, springing from her father's suicide. He was a distant man who devoted himself to the refurbishment of his sprawling Victorian home — and to a hidden erotic life involving young men. The title comes from the abbreviation of the family business — a funeral home — but it also refers to the dual funhouse portrait of father and daughter, of the author's own queerness.

It's a sexual and intellectual coming-of-age story that swims along literary lines, honoring the books that nourished Bechdel and her parents and seemed to speak for them: Kate Millet, Proust, Oscar Wilde, theory, poetry and literature. "Fun Home" joins that lineage, an original, mournful, intricate work of art.
— *Parul Sehgal*

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The Liars' Club

Mary Karr

Viking, 1995

This incendiary memoir, about the author's childhood in the 1960s in a small industrial town in Southeast Texas, was published in 1995 and helped start the modern memoir boom. The book deserves its reputation. You can almost say about Mary Karr's agile prose what she says about herself at the age of 7: "I was small-boned and skinny, but more than able to make up for that with sheer meanness."

As a girl, Karr was a serious settler of scores, willing to bite anyone who had wronged her or to climb a tree with a BB gun to take aim at an entire family. Her mother, who "fancied herself a kind of bohemian Scarlett O'Hara," had a wild streak. She was married seven times, and was subject to psychotic episodes. Her father was an oil refinery worker, a brawling yet taciturn man who came most fully alive when telling tall stories, often in the back room of a bait shop, with a group of men called "The Liars' Club."

This is one of the best books ever written about growing up in America. Karr evokes the contours of her preadolescent mind — the fears, fights and petty jealousies — with extraordinary and often comic vividness. This memoir, packed with eccentrics, is beautifully eccentric in its own right. — *Dwight Garner*

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For generations my ancestors had been strapping skillets onto their oxen and walking west. It turned out to be impossible for me to “run away” in the sense other American teenagers did. Any movement at all was taken for progress in my family.

—Mary Karr, “The Liar’s Club”

Hitch-22

Christopher Hitchens

Twelve, 2010

This high-spirited memoir traces the life and times of this inimitable public intellectual, who is much missed, from his childhood in Portsmouth, England, where his father was a navy man, through boarding school, his studies at Oxford and his subsequent career as a writer both in England and the United States.

Christopher Hitchens was a man of the left but unpredictable (and sometimes inscrutable) politically. “Hitch-22” demonstrates how seriously he took the things that really matter: social justice, learning, direct language, the free play of the mind, loyalty and holding public figures to high standards.

This is a vibrant book about friendships, and it will make you want to take your own more seriously. Hitchens recounts moments with friends that include Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie and the poet James Fenton. There is a lot of wit here, and bawdy wordplay, and accounts of long nights spent drinking and smoking. Hitchens decided to become a student of history and politics, he writes, after the Cuban missile crisis. “If politics could force its way into my life in such a vicious and chilling

manner, I felt, then I had better find out a bit more about it.” He was a force to contend with from the time he was in short pants. “I was probably insufferable,” he concedes. — *Dwight Garner*

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Men We Reaped

Jesmyn Ward

Bloomsbury, 2013

“Men’s bodies litter my family history,” the novelist Jesmyn Ward writes in this torrential, sorrowing tribute to five young

black men she knew, including her brother, who died in the span of four years, lost to suicide, drugs or accidents. These men were devoured by her hometown, DeLisle, Miss. — called Wolf Town by its first settlers — “pinioned beneath poverty and history and racism.”

Ward tells their stories with tenderness and reverence; they live again in these pages. Their fates twine with her own — her dislocation and anguish, and later, the complicated story of her own survival, and isolation, as she is recruited to elite all-white schools. She is a writer who has metabolized the Greeks and Faulkner — their themes course through her work — and the stories of the deaths of these men join larger national narratives about rural poverty and racism. But Ward never allows her subjects to become symbolic. This work of great grief and beauty renders them individual and irreplaceable.

— *Parul Sehgal*

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Palimpsest

Gore Vidal

Random House, 1995

It's Vidal, so you know the gossip will be abundant, and top shelf. Scores will be settled (with Anaïs Nin, Charlton Heston, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, his mother), conquests enumerated (Jack Kerouac), choice quips dispensed. "At least I have a style," Truman Capote once sniped at him. "Of course you do," Vidal responded soothingly. "You stole it from Carson McCullers."

It was a rangy life — one that took him into the military, politics, Hollywood, Broadway — and he depicts it with the silky urbanity you expect. What comes as a shock is the book's directness and deep feeling — its innocence.

It's a love story, at the end of the day. Vidal had a lifelong companion but remained passionately compelled by a beautiful classmate, his first paramour, Jimmie, who died at 19, shot and bayoneted while sleeping in a foxhole on Iwo Jima. He is the phantom that has haunted Vidal's long, eventful life.

"Palimpsest" is a book full of revelations.

"By choice and luck, my life has been spent reading other people's books and making sentences for my own," Vidal writes.

Our great luck, too. — *Parul Sehgal*

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Giving Up the Ghost

Hilary Mantel

A John Macrae Book/Henry Holt & Company, 2003

As a poor Catholic girl growing up in the north of England, Hilary Mantel was an exuberant child of improbable ambition, deciding early on that she was destined to become a knight errant and would change into a boy when she turned 4.

Her mesmerizing memoir reads like an attempt to recover the girl she once was, before others began to dictate her story for her. At the age of 7, looking about the garden, she saw an apparition, perhaps the Devil. She thought it was her fault, for allowing her greedy gaze to wander. Her stepfather was bullying, judgmental, condescending; anything Mantel did

seemed to anger him. As a young woman, she started to get headaches, vision problems, pains that coursed through her body, bleeding that no longer confined itself to that time of the month. The doctors told her she was insane.

The ghost she is giving up in the title isn't her life but that of the child she might have had but never will. Years of misdiagnoses culminated in the removal of her reproductive organs, barnacled by scar tissue caused by endometriosis. Her body changed from very thin to very fat. Mantel, perhaps best known for her novels "Wolf Hall" and "Bring Up the Bodies," writes about all of this with a fine ear and a furious intelligence, as she resurrects phantoms who "shiver between the lines." — *Jennifer Szalai*

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I used to think that autobiography was a form of weakness, and perhaps I still do. But I also think that, if you're weak, it's childish to

pretend to be strong.

—Hilary Mantel, “Giving Up the Ghost”

A Childhood

Harry Crews

Harper & Row, 1978

This taut, powerful and deeply original memoir covers just the first six years of this gifted novelist’s life, but it is a nearly Dickensian anthology of physical and mental intensities.

Harry Crews grew up in southern Georgia, not far from the Okefenokee Swamp. His father, a tenant farmer, died of a heart attack before Crews was 2. His stepfather was a violent drunk. When Crews was 5, he fell into a boiler of water that was being used to scald pigs. His own skin came off, he writes, “like a wet glove.” When he recovered from this long and painful ordeal, he contracted polio so severely that his heels drew back tightly until they touched the backs of his thighs. He was told, incorrectly, that he would never walk again. “The world that circumscribed the people I come from,” he writes, “had so little margin for error, for bad luck, that when something went wrong,

it almost always brought something else down with it.”

Crews sought solace in the Sears, Roebuck catalog, the only book in his house besides the Bible. He began his career as a writer by making up stories about the people he saw there. These humans didn't have scars and blemishes like everyone he knew. “On their faces were looks of happiness, even joy, looks that I never saw much of in the faces of the people around me.”
— *Dwight Garner*

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Dreams From My Father

Barack Obama

Times Books/Random House, 1995

Barack Obama's first book was published a year before he was elected to the Illinois senate and long before his eight years in the White House under the unrelenting gaze of the public eye.

“Dreams From My Father” is a moving and frank work of self-excavation — mercifully free of the kind of virtue-signaling and cheerful moralizing that makes so many politicians’ memoirs read like notes to a stump speech.

Obama recounts an upbringing that set him apart, with a tangle of roots that didn’t give him an obvious map to who he was. His father was from Kenya; his mother from Kansas. Obama himself was born in Hawaii, lived in Indonesia for a time, and was largely raised by his mother and maternal grandparents, after his father left for Harvard when Obama was 2.

“I learned to slip back and forth between my black and white worlds,” he writes, “understanding that each possessed its own language and customs and structures of meaning, convinced that with a bit of translation on my part the two worlds would eventually cohere.” To see what held his worlds together was also to learn what kept them apart. This is a book about the uses of disenchantment; the revelations are all the more astonishing for being modest and hard-won. — *Jennifer Szalai*

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Patrimony

Philip Roth

Simon & Schuster, 1991

Philip Roth's book is a Kaddish to his father, Herman Roth, who developed a benign brain tumor at 86. Surgery was not an option, and Herman became immured in his body, which "had become a terrifying escape-proof enclosure, the holding pen in a slaughterhouse."

"Patrimony," which won the National Book Critics Circle Award, is written plainly, without any flourishes — just the unbearable facts of a father's decline, the body weakening, the vigorous mind dimming. It's the rough stuff of devotion. Roth adopts care of his increasingly difficult father and witnesses his rapid decline, admonishing himself: "You must not forget anything."

"He was always teaching me something," Roth recalls of his father. He never stopped. In this book, Roth offers a moving tribute to the man but also a portrait almost breathtaking in its

honesty and lack of sentimentalism, so truthful and exact that it is as much a portrait of living as dying, son as father. “He could be a pitiless realist,” Roth writes of Herman, proudly. “But I wasn’t his offspring for nothing.” — *Parul Sehgal*

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I had seen my father’s brain, and everything and nothing was revealed. A mystery scarcely short of divine, the brain, even in the case of a retired insurance man with an eighth-grade education from Newark’s Thirteenth Avenue School.

—Philip Roth, “Patrimony”

All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw

Theodore Rosengarten

Alfred A. Knopf, 1974

This indelible book, an oral history from an illiterate black Alabama sharecropper, won the National Book Award in 1975, beating a lineup of instant classics that included “The Power Broker,” Robert Caro’s biography of Robert Moses; Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein’s “All the President’s Men”; Studs Terkel’s “Working”; and Robert M. Pirsig’s “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.” Unlike these other books, “All God’s Dangers” has largely been forgotten. It’s time for that to change.

This book’s author, Theodore Rosengarten, was a Harvard graduate student who went to Alabama in 1968 while researching a defunct labor organization. Someone suggested he speak with Shaw, whose real name was Ned Cobb. What emerged from Cobb’s mouth was dense and tangled social history, a narrative that essentially takes us from slavery to Selma from the point of view of an unprosperous but eloquent and unbroken black man.

Reading it, you will learn more about wheat, guano, farm implements, bugs, cattle killing and mule handling than you

would think possible. This is also a dense catalog of the ways that whites tricked and mistreated blacks in the first half of the 20th century. “Years ago I heard that Abraham Lincoln freed the colored people,” Cobb says, “but it didn’t amount to a hill of beans.” About his white neighbors, he declares, “Any way they could deprive a Negro was a celebration to ’em.” This book is not always easy reading, but it is the real deal, an essential American document. — *Dwight Garner*

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Lives Other Than My Own

Emmanuel Carrère. Translated from the French by Linda Coverdale.

Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt & Company, 2011

You begin this memoir thinking it will be about one thing, and it turns into something else altogether — a book at once more

ordinary and more extraordinary than any first impressions might allow.

Emmanuel Carrère starts with the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka — he was there, vacationing with his girlfriend. But that’s just the first 50 pages. Then he turns to the story of his girlfriend’s sister, a small-town judge who’s dying of cancer, and her friendship with another judge, who also has cancer. Carrère’s girlfriend chides him for thinking that such unpromising material offers him some sort of golden storytelling opportunity: “They don’t even sleep together — and at the end, she dies,” she says to him. “Have I got that straight? That’s your story?”

She does have it straight, but there’s so much more to it. Carrère weaves in his own experiences, coming up against his own limitations, his own prejudices, his own understanding of what defines a meaningful life. His sentences are clean, never showy; he writes about himself through others in a way that feels both necessarily generous and candidly — which is to say appropriately — narcissistic.

Whenever I try to describe this memoir — and I do that often, since it’s a book I don’t just recommend but implore people to read — I feel like I’m trying to parse a magic trick.

— *Jennifer Szalai*

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A Tale of Love and Darkness

Amos Oz. Translated from the Hebrew by Nicholas de Lange.

Harcourt, 2004

This memoir was born from a long silence, written 50 years after Amos Oz's mother killed herself with sleeping pills, when he was 12, three months before his bar mitzvah. The resulting book is both brutal and generous, filled with meandering reflections on a life's journey in politics and literature.

The only child of European Jews who settled in the Promised Land, Oz grew up alongside the new state of Israel, initially enamored of a fierce nationalism before becoming furiously (and in one memorable scene, rather hilariously) disillusioned. As a lonely boy, Oz felt unseen by his awkward father and confounded by his brilliant and deeply unhappy mother. She taught him that

people were a constant source of betrayal and disappointment. Books, though, would never let him down. Hearing about what happened to those Jews who stayed in Europe, the young Oz wanted to become a book, because no matter how many books were destroyed there was a decent chance that one copy could survive.

Oz says he essentially killed his father by moving to a kibbutz at 15 and changing his name. But his father lives on in this memoir, along with Oz's mother — not just in his recollections of her, but in the very existence of this book. She was the one who captivated him with stories that “amazed you, sent shivers up your spine, then disappeared back into the darkness before you had time to see what was in front of your eyes.”

— *Jennifer Szalai*

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This Boy's Life

Tobias Wolff

The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1989

“Our car boiled over again just after my mother and I crossed the Continental Divide.” So begins Tobias Wolff’s powerful and impeccably written memoir of his childhood in the 1950s, a classic of the genre that has lost none of its power.

Divorced mother and son had hit the road together, fleeing a bad man, trying to change their luck and maybe get rich as uranium prospectors. The author’s wealthy and estranged father was absent. Soon his mother linked up with a man named Dwight (never trust a man named Dwight) who beat young Wolff, stole his paper route money and forced him to shuck horse chestnuts after school for hours, until his hands were “crazed with cuts and scratches” from their sharply spined husks. Wolff became wild in high school, a delinquent and a petty thief, before escaping to a prep school in Pennsylvania. His prose lights up the experience of growing up in America during this era. He describes going to confession and trying to articulate an individual sin this way: “It was like fishing a swamp, where you feel the tug of something that at first seems promising and then resistant and finally hopeless as you realize that you’ve snagged the bottom, that you have the whole planet on the other end of your line.” — *Dwight Garner*

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A Life's Work

Rachel Cusk

Picador, 2002

Rachel Cusk writes about new motherhood with an honesty and clarity that makes this memoir feel almost illicit. Sleepless nights, yes; colic, yes; but also a raw, frantic love for her firstborn daughter that she depicts and dissects with both rigor and amazement.

As many readers as there are who love “A Life’s Work” as much as I do, I know others who have been put off by its steely register, finding it too denuded, shorn of warmth and giddiness — those very things that help make motherhood such an enormous experience, and not just a grueling one. But whenever I read Cusk’s book, I am irrevocably pulled along in its thrall, constantly startled by her observations — milk running “in untasted rivulets” down her baby’s “affronted cheek”; pregnancy literature that “bristles with threats and the promise

of reprisal” — and her willingness to see her experience cold.

Or, at least, to try to, because what becomes clear is that it’s impossible for Cusk to hold on to her old self. The childless writer who could compartmentalize with ease and take boundaries for granted has to learn an entirely new way of being. Embedded in Cusk’s chiseled sentences are her attempts to engage with a roiling vulnerability. None of the chipper, treachy stuff here; motherhood deserves more respect than that.
— *Jennifer Szalai*

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Boyhood

J.M. Coetzee

Viking, 1997

The Nobel Prize-winning J.M. Coetzee is one of those novelists who rarely give interviews, and when he does, he’s like the

Robert Mueller of the literary world — reticent, discreet and quietly insistent that his books should speak for themselves.

Coetzee, in other words, is taciturn in the extreme. Yet he has also written three revealing volumes about his life — “Boyhood,” “Youth” and “Summertime.” The first, “Boyhood,” is most explicitly and conventionally a memoir, covering his years growing up in a provincial village outside of Cape Town. The child of Afrikaner parents who had pretensions to English gentility, he was buttoned-up and sensitive, desperate to fit into the “normal” world around him but also confounded and repulsed by it. He noticed how his indolent relatives clung to their privileged position in South Africa’s brutal racial hierarchy through cruelty and a raw assertion of power. Out in the world, he lived in constant fear of violence and humiliation; at home he was cosseted by his mother and presided like a king.

The memoir is told in the third-person present tense, which lends it a peculiar immediacy. Coetzee is free to observe the boy he once was without the interpretive intrusions that come with age; he can remain true to what he felt then, rather than what he knows now. His recollections are stark and painfully intimate: “He feels like a crab pulled out of its shell, pink and wounded and obscene.” — *Jennifer Szalai*

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Conundrum

Jan Morris

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974

“The book is already a period piece,” the legendary travel writer Jan Morris opens her memoir. “It was written in the 1970s, and is decidedly *of* the 1970s.” It might be of its time but it is also ardent, musical, poetic and full of warm humor — a chronicle of ecstasies. Best remembered as one of the first accounts of gender transition, “Conundrum” is a study of home in all its forms — of finding home in one’s body, of Morris’s native Wales, of all the cities she possesses by dint of loving them so fiercely.

We are carried from her childhood, in the lap of a family militantly opposed to conformity, to her long career as a reporter in England and Egypt. She went everywhere, met everyone: Che Guevara (“sharp as a cat in Cuba”), Guy Burgess (“swollen with drink and self-reproach in Moscow”). It’s an enviably full

life, with a long marriage, four children and Morris's determinedly sunny disposition and ability to regard every second of her life, however difficult — *especially* if difficult — as a species of grand adventure.

She chafes at the notion of “identity” (“a trendy word I have long distrusted, masking as it often does befuddled ideas and lazy thinking”). It is thrilling to watch her arrive at an understanding of a sense of self and language that is her own, bespoke. “To me gender is not physical at all, but is altogether insubstantial,” she writes. “It was a melody that I heard within myself.”

— *Parul Sehgal*

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I did not query my condition, or seek reasons for it. I knew very well that it was an irrational conviction — I was in no way psychotic, and perhaps not much more

neurotic than most of us; but there it was, I knew it to be true, and if it was impossible then the definition of possibility was inadequate.

—Jan Morris, “Conundrum”

Wave

Sonali Deraniyagala

Alfred A. Knopf, 2013

Sonali Deraniyagala was searching the internet for ways to kill herself when one click led to another and she was staring at a news article featuring pictures of her two young sons. The boys had died not long before — victims of the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka, which also killed Deraniyagala’s husband and her parents. She herself survived by clinging to a branch.

“Wave” is a meticulous account of derangement — of being so undone by grief that life becomes not just impossible but terrifying. She recalls stabbing herself with a butter knife. She

couldn't look at a flower or a blade of grass without feeling a sickening sense of panic. Reading this book is like staring into the abyss, only instead of staring back it might just swallow you whole.

This, believe it or not, is why you should read it — for Deraniyagala's unflinching account of the horror that took away her family, and for her willingness to lay bare how it made her not only more vulnerable but also, at times, more cruel. Her return to life was gradual, tentative and difficult; she learned the only way out of her unbearable anguish was to remember what had happened and to keep it close. — *Jennifer Szalai*

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Always Unreliable: Unreliable
Memoirs, Falling Towards
England and May Week Was in

June

Clive James

Picador, 2004

The Australian-born critic, poet, memoirist, novelist, travel writer and translator Clive James isn't as well known in America as he is in England, where he's lived most of his adult life. Over there, cabdrivers know who James is: the ebullient man who hosted many comic and erudite television programs over the years. We have no one quite like him over here: Think Johnny Carson combined with Edmund Wilson.

James is the author of five memoirs, to which many readers have a cultlike devotion. The first three — “Unreliable Memoirs,” “Falling Towards England” and “May Week Was in June” — have been collected into one volume, “Always Unreliable,” and they are especially incisive and comic. In a preface to the first book, James dealt a truth few memoirists will admit: “Most first novels are disguised autobiographies. This autobiography is a disguised novel.” He's an admitted exaggerator, but nonetheless he's led a big life.

He was born in 1939 and grew up with an absent father, a Japanese prisoner of war. Released, his father died in a plane crash on his way home when James was 5. The author fully relives his adolescent agonies (“you can die of envy for cratered faces weeping with yellow pus”) and his rowdy troublemaking years. Later volumes take him to London and then to Cambridge

University, where he edits *Granta*, the literary magazine, dabbles in theater (“It was my first, cruel exposure to the awkward fact that the arts attract the insane”) and gets married. He is never less than good company. — *Dwight Garner*

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Travels With Lizbeth

Lars Eighner

St. Martin's Press, 1993

Lars Eighner's memoir contains the finest first-person writing we have about the experience of being homeless in America. Yet it's not a dirge or a Bukowski-like scratching of the groin but an

offbeat and plaintive hymn to life. It's the sort of book that releases the emergency brake on your soul. Eighner spent three years on the streets (mostly in Austin, Tex.) and on the road in the late 1980s and early 1990s, after suffering from migraines and losing a series of jobs. The book he wrote is a literate and exceedingly humane document.

On the streets, he clung to a kind of dignity. He refused to beg or steal. He didn't care for drugs; he barely drank. "Being suddenly intoxicated in a public place in the early afternoon," he writes, "is not my idea of a good time." He foraged for books and magazines as much as food, but an especially fine portion of this book is his writing about dumpster-diving. There's the jarring impression that every grain of rice is a maggot. About botulism, he writes: "Often the first symptom is death." There is something strangely Emersonian, capable and self-reliant, in his scavenging. "I live from the refuse of others," he declares. "I think it a sound and honorable niche." — *Dwight Garner*

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Day after day I could aspire, within reason, to nothing more than survival. Although the planets wandered among the stars and the moon waxed and waned, the identical naked barrenness of existence was exposed to me, day in and day out.

—Lars Eighner, “Travels With Lizbeth”

Hold Still

Sally Mann

Little, Brown & Company, 2015

The photographer Sally Mann’s memoir is weird, intense and uncommonly beautiful. She has real literary gifts, and she’s led a big Southern-bohemian life, rich with incident. Or maybe it only seems rich with incident because of an old maxim that still

holds: Stories happen only to people who can tell them.

Like Mary Karr, Mann as a child was a scrappy, troublemaking tomboy, one who grew into a scrappy, troublemaking, impossible-to-ignore young woman and artist. She was raised in Virginia by sophisticated, lettered parents. When she grew too wild, they sent her away to a prep school in Vermont where, she writes, “I smoked, I drank, I skipped classes, I snuck out, I took drugs, I stole quarts of ice cream for my dorm by breaking into the kitchen storerooms, I made out with my boyfriends in the library basement, I hitchhiked into town and down I-91, and when caught, I weaseled out of all of it.”

This memoir recounts some of the Southern gothic elements of her parents’ lives. This book is heavily illustrated, and traces her growth as an artist. It recounts friendships with Southern artists and writers such as Cy Twombly and Reynolds Price. Her anecdotes have snap. About his advanced old age, in a line that is hard to forget, Twombly tells the author that he is “closing down the bodega for real.” But this story is entirely her own.
— *Dwight Garner*

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Country Girl

Edna O'Brien

Little, Brown and Company, 2013

The enormously gifted Irish writer Edna O'Brien was near the red-hot center of the Swinging '60s in London. She dropped acid with her psychiatrist, R.D. Laing. Among those who came to her parties were Marianne Faithfull, Sean Connery, Princess Margaret and Jane Fonda. Richard Burton and Marlon Brando tried to get her into bed. Robert Mitchum succeeded after wooing her with this pickup line: "I bet you wish I was Robert Taylor, and I bet you never tasted white peaches."

O'Brien was born in a village in County Clare, in the west of Ireland, in 1930. This earthy and evocative book also traces her youth and her development as a writer. Her small family was religious. Her father was a farmer who drank and gambled; her mother was a former maid. She has described her village, Tuamgraney, as "enclosed, fervid and bigoted." O'Brien didn't attend college. She moved to Dublin, where she worked in a drugstore while studying at the Pharmaceutical College at night. She began to read literature, and she wondered: "Why could life not be lived at that same pitch? Why was it only in books that I could find the utter outlet for my emotions?" This memoir has perfect pitch. — *Dwight Garner*

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Persepolis

Marjane Satrapi. Translated from the French by Mattias Ripa and Blake Ferris.

Pantheon, 2003

At the age of 6, Marjane Satrapi privately declared herself the last prophet of Islam. At 14, she left Iran for a boarding school in Austria, sent away by parents terrified of their outspoken daughter's penchant for challenging her teachers (and hypocrisy wherever she sniffed it out). At 31, she published "Persepolis," in French (it was later translated into English by Mattias Ripa and Blake Ferris), a stunning graphic memoir

hailed as a wholly original achievement in the form.

There's still a startling freshness to the book. It won't age. In inky shadows and simple, expressive lines — reminiscent of Ludwig Bemelmans's "Madeline" — Satrapi evokes herself and her schoolmates coming of age in a world of protests and disappearances (and scoring punk rock cassettes on the black market).

The revolution, the rise of fundamentalism, a brutal family history of torture, imprisonment and exile are conveyed from a child's perspective and achieve a stark, shocking impact.

— *Parul Sehgal*

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Negroland

Margo Jefferson

Pantheon, 2015

The motto was simple in Margo Jefferson's childhood home: "Achievement. Invulnerability. Comportment." Her family was part of Chicago's black elite. Her father was the head pediatrician at Provident, America's oldest black hospital; her mother was a socialite. They saw themselves as a "Third Race, poised between the masses of Negroes and all classes of Caucasians." Life was navigated according to strict standards of behavior and femininity. Jefferson writes of the punishing psychic burden of growing up feeling that she was a representative for her race and, later, of nagging, terrifying suicidal impulses.

Jefferson won a Pulitzer Prize in 1995 for her book reviews in *The New York Times*. "Negroland" is an extended form of criticism that dances between a history of social class to a close reading of her mother's expressions; the information calibrated in a brow arched "three to four millimeters."

The prose is blunt and evasive, sensuous and ascetic, doubting and resolute — and above all beautifully skeptical of the genre, of the memoir's conventions, clichés and limits. "How do you adapt your singular, willful self to so much history and myth? So much glory, banality, honor and betrayal?" she asks. This shape-shifting, form-shattering book carves one path forward.

— *Parul Sehgal*

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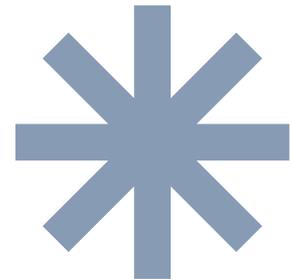
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25 More Great Memoirs

Presented in Alphabetical Order by Author



Clothes,
Clothes,
Clothes.
Music, Music,
Music. Boys,
Boys, Boys.

Viv Albertine

Thomas Dunne Books/St.
Martin's Press, 2014

Viv Albertine participated in the birth of punk in the mid-1970s. She was in a band with Sid Vicious before he joined the Sex Pistols. She dated Mick Jones while he was putting together his new band, the Clash. She could barely play guitar, yet she became the lead guitarist for the Slits. Her memoir is wiry and fearless. It contains story after story about men who told her

she couldn't do things that she did anyway. Her life up to the breakup of the Slits occupies only half of the book. There's a lot of pain in the second section: loneliness, doubt, a bad marriage, cancer, depression. Throughout, this account has an honest, lo-fi grace.

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Experience

Martin Amis

Talk Miramax Books/Hyperion,
2000

In this memoir, the acclaimed author of “London Fields,” “Money” and other novels decided, he writes, “to speak, for once, without artifice.” The entertaining, loosely structured result is movingly earnest and wickedly funny. It includes a portrait, both clear-eyed and affectionate, of the author’s father, the comic novelist and poet Kingsley Amis. In addition, “Experience” offers more

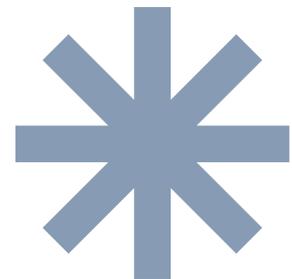
vivid and harrowing writing about dental problems than you might have thought one person capable of producing.

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Slow Days, Fast Company

Eve Babitz

Alfred A. Knopf, 1977

The Los Angeles-born glamour girl, bohemian, artist, muse, sensualist, wit and pioneering foodie Eve Babitz writes prose that reads like Nora Ephron by way of Joan Didion, albeit with more lust and drugs and tequila. “Slow Days, Fast Company” and “Eve’s Hollywood,” the book that preceded it, are officially billed as fiction, but they are mostly undisguised dispatches from her own experiences in 1970s California. Reading her is like being out on the warm open road at sundown, with what she called “4/60

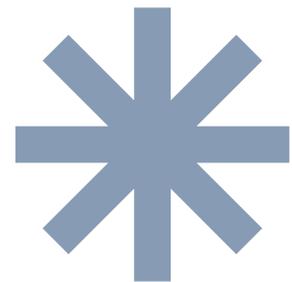
air-conditioning” — that is, going 60 miles per hour with all four windows down. You can feel the wind in your hair.

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Growing Up

Russell Baker

Congdon & Weed, 1982

Russell Baker's warm and disarmingly funny account of his life growing up in Depression-era America has garnered comparisons to the work of Mark Twain. The book quickly became a beloved best seller when it was published, and went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for biography. Baker was born into poverty in Virginia in 1925. He was 5 years old when his father, then 33, fell into a diabetic coma and died. The author's strong, affectionate mother is a major presence in the book. Baker, a longtime humorist and columnist for *The New York Times*

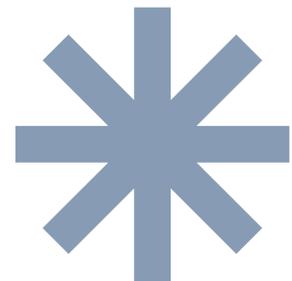
for The New York Times,
died in January at 93.

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Kafka Was the
D

Rage

Anatole Broyard

Carol Southern Books/Crown
Publishers, 1993

Anatole Broyard, a longtime book critic and essayist for The New York Times, died in 1990 of prostate cancer. What he had finished of this memoir before his death mostly concerned his time living in the West Village after World War II. “A war is like an illness,” he writes, “and when it’s over you think you’ve never felt so well.” He writes about the vogue for psychoanalysis, his experience opening a used-book store and, primarily, his formative relationship with the artist Sheri Martinelli (her pseudonym in the book is Sheri Donatti). The book was truncated, but the

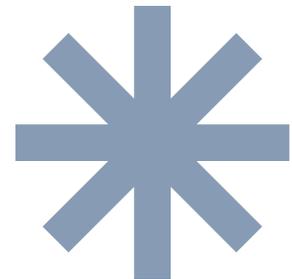
writing in it is brilliant and often epigrammatic: “I just want love to live up to its publicity.”

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Between the World and Me

Ta-Nehisi Coates

Spiegel & Grau, 2015

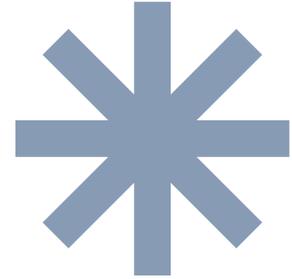
Ta-Nehisi Coates's book, in the form of a letter to his son, is a scalding examination of his own experience as a black man in America, and of how much of American history has been systemically built on exploiting and committing violence against black bodies. Inspired by a section of James Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time" that was addressed to the author's nephew, Coates's book is a powerful testimony that will continue to have a profound impact on discussions about race in America.

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The Year of
Magical
Thinking

Joan Didion

Alfred A. Knopf, 2005

Joan Didion, so long an exemplar of cool, of

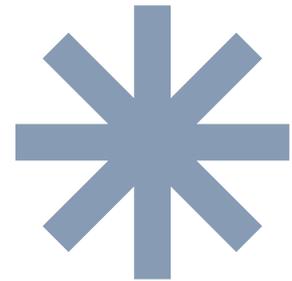
brilliant aloofness, showed us her unraveling in this memoir about the sudden death of her husband of 40 years, the writer John Gregory Dunne, and the frightening illness of her daughter, Quintana. It's a troubled, meditative book, in which Didion writes of what it feels like to have "cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad."

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Barbarian Days

William Finnegan

Penguin Press, 2015

This account of a lifelong
surfing obsession won the
Pulitzer Prize in

biography. William

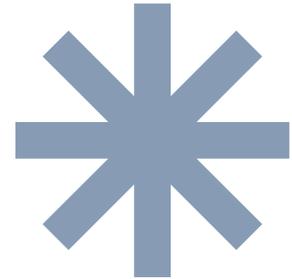
biography. William Finnegan, a longtime staff writer for The New Yorker, recalls his childhood in California and Hawaii, his many surfing buddies through the years and his taste for a kind of danger that approaches the sublime. In his 20s, he traveled through Asia and Africa and the South Pacific in search of waves, living in tents and cars and cheap apartments. One takes away from “Barbarian Days” a sense of a big, wind-chapped, well-lived life.

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Personal History

Katharine Graham

Alfred A. Knopf, 1997

Katharine Graham's brilliant but remote father, Eugene Meyer, capped his successful career as a financier and public servant by buying the struggling Washington Post in 1933 and nursing it

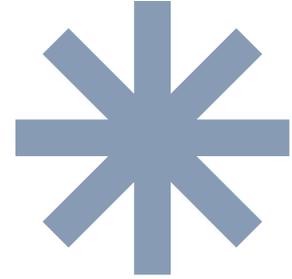
Post in 1953 and nursing it to health. Graham took command of the paper in 1963, and steered it through the Watergate scandal and the end of Richard Nixon's presidency, among other dramas. Her autobiography covers her life from childhood to her command of a towering journalistic institution in a deeply male-dominated industry. Her tone throughout is frank, self-critical, modest and justifiably proud.

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Thinking in Pictures

Temple Grandin

Doubleday, 1995

Memoirs are valued, in part, for their ability to open windows onto experiences other than our own, and few do that as dramatically as Temple Grandin's "Thinking in Pictures." Grandin, a

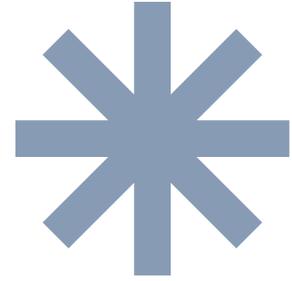
professor of animal science who is autistic, describes the “library” of visual images in her memory, which she is constantly updating. (“It’s like getting a new version of software for the computer.”) As Oliver Sacks wrote in an introduction to the book, “Grandin’s voice came from a place which had never had a voice, never been granted real existence, before.”

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Autobiography of a Face

Lucy Grealy

Houghton Mifflin, 1994

When she was 9 years old, Lucy Grealy was stricken with a rare, virulent form of bone cancer called Ewing's sarcoma. She had radical surgery to remove half of her jaw, and years of radiation and chemotherapy, and recovered. She then

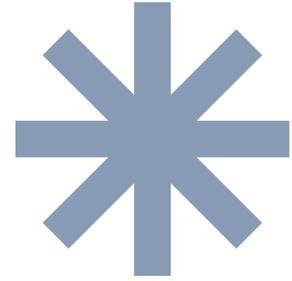
endured a sense of disfigurement and isolation from other children. She became an accomplished poet and essayist before dying at 39 in 2002. Although entitled to self-pity, Grealy was not given to it. This memoir is a moving meditation on ugliness and beauty. Grealy's life is the subject of another powerful memoir, Ann Patchett's "Truth & Beauty," which recounts the friendship between the two writers.

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Dancing With Cuba

Alma Guillermoprieto.
Translated from the
Spanish by Esther
Allen.

Pantheon, 2004

Alma Guillermoprieto was
a 20-year-old dance
student in 1969, when
Merce Cunningham
offered to recommend her

offered to recommend her for a teaching job at the National Schools of the Arts in Havana. This memoir is her account of the six months she spent there, a frustrating and fascinating time that opened her eyes to the world beyond dance. Eventually, political turmoil, piled on top of loneliness, youthful angst and assorted romantic troubles, led the author to the edge of a nervous breakdown. This remembrance is a pleasure to read, full of humanity, sly humor, curiosity and knowledge.

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Minor Characters

Joyce Johnson

Houghton Mifflin, 1983

Joyce Johnson was 21 and not long out of Barnard College when, in the winter of 1957, Allen Ginsberg set her up on a blind date with Jack

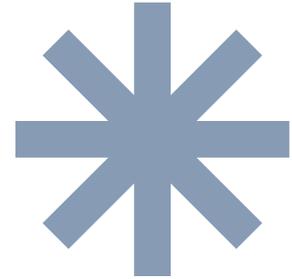
Kerouac, who was 34 and still largely unknown. Thus began an off-and-on relationship that lasted nearly two years, during which time “On the Road” was published, leading to life-altering fame — not only for Kerouac but many of his closest friends. Johnson’s book about this time is a riveting portrait of an era, and a glowing introduction to the Beats. It’s a book about a so-called minor character who, in the process of writing her life, became a major one.

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The Memory Chalet

Tony Judt

Penguin Press, 2010

The historian Tony Judt, who was known for his incisive analysis of current events and his synthesizing of European history in books like “Postwar,” wrote this book

of autobiographical fragments after he was stricken with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis and had become “effectively quadriplegic.” He would think back over his life in the middle of the night, shape those memories into stories and dictate them to an assistant the next day. “The Memory Chalet,” the resulting unlikely artifact, ranges over Judt’s boyhood in England; the lives of his lower-middle-class Jewish parents; life as a student and fellow at King’s College, Cambridge, in the 1960s and early ’70s; and his life in New York City, where he eventually settled and taught.

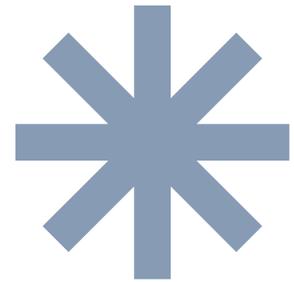
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Heavy

Kiese Laymon

Scribner, 2018

The most recently published entry on this list of 50 books, Kiese Laymon's "Heavy" details the author's childhood in

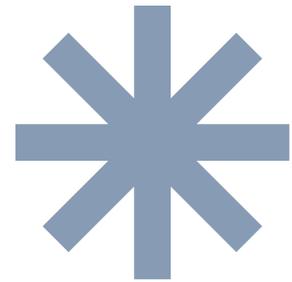
Mississippi in the 1980s and his relationship with his alternately loving and abusive mother, who raised him on her own. It's full of sharp, heart-rending thoughts about growing up black in the United States, and his fraught relationship with his body — Laymon's weight has severely fluctuated over the years, a subject he plumbs with great sensitivity. This is a gorgeous, gutting book that's fueled by candor yet freighted with ambivalence. It's full of devotion and betrayal, euphoria and anguish.

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Priestdaddy

Patricia Lockwood

Riverhead Books, 2017

Patricia Lockwood, an acclaimed poet, weaves in this memoir the story of her family — including her Roman Catholic priest

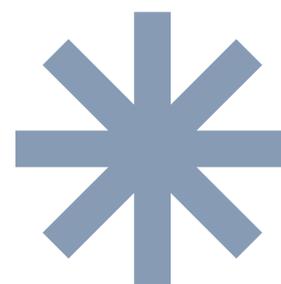
father, who received a special dispensation from the Vatican — with the crisis that led her and her husband to live temporarily under her parents' rectory roof. The book, consistently alive with feeling, is written with elastic style. And in Lockwood's father, Greg, it has one of the great characters in nonfiction: He listens to Rush Limbaugh while watching Bill O'Reilly, consumes Arby's Beef 'n Cheddar sandwiches the way other humans consume cashews and strides around in his underwear. Hilarious descriptions — of, to take one example, Greg's guitar playing — alternate with profound examinations of family, art and faith.

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H Is for Hawk

Helen Macdonald

Grove Press, 2015

When we meet Helen
Macdonald in this

beautiful and nearly feral book, she's in her 30s, with "no partner, no children, no home." When her father dies suddenly on a London street, it steals the floor from beneath her.

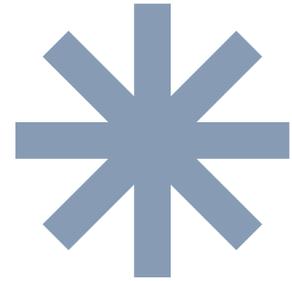
Obsessed with birds of prey since she was a girl, Macdonald was already an experienced falconer. In her grief, seeking escape into something, she began to train one of nature's most vicious predators, a goshawk. She unplugged her telephone. She told her friends to leave her alone. Nearly every paragraph she writes about the experience is strange in the best way, and injected with unexpected meaning.

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The Color of Water

James McBride

Riverhead Books, 1996

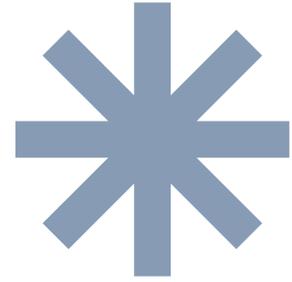
This complex and moving

story, which enjoyed a long run on best-seller lists, is about James McBride's relationship with his mother, Ruth, the daughter of a failed itinerant Orthodox Jewish rabbi. She fervently adopted Christianity and founded a black Baptist church in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn with McBride's father. The book is suffused with issues of race, religion and identity, and simultaneously transcends those issues to be a story of family love and the sheer force of a mother's will.

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Angela's Ashes

Frank McCourt

Scribner, 1996

“When I look back on my

childhood I wonder how I
survived at all,” Frank

McCourt writes near the
beginning of his Pulitzer

Prize-winning memoir. His

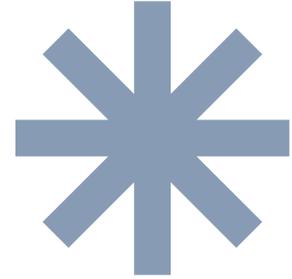
Prize-winning memoir. His parents had immigrated to New York, where McCourt was born, but soon moved back to Ireland, where they hoped relatives could help them with their four children. Having returned, they experienced crushing poverty. The book did perhaps more than any other to cement the 1990s boom in memoir writing — and reading. It features a Dickensian gallery of schoolmasters, shopkeepers and priests, in addition to McCourt's unforgettable family.

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Cockroaches

Scholastique

Mukasonga.

Translated from the

French by Jordan

Stump.

Archipelago Books, 2016

Thirty-seven of

Scholastique Mukasonga's

family members were

massacred in the

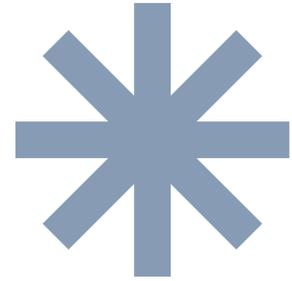
massacred in the
Rwandan genocide in the
spring of 1994, when the
Hutu majority turned on
their Tutsi neighbors,
killing more than 800,000
people in 100 days.

“Cockroaches” is
Mukasonga’s devastating
account of her childhood
and what she was able to
learn about the slaughter
of her family. (“Cockroach”
was the Hutu epithet of
choice for the Tutsis.) It is
a compendium of
unspeakable crimes and
horrifically inventive
sadism, delivered in an
even, unwavering tone.

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Life

Keith Richards

Little, Brown & Company, 2010

In “Life,” the Rolling Stones guitarist writes with uncommon candor and immediacy — with the help of the veteran journalist James Fox — about drugs and his run-

ins with the police; about the difficulties of getting and staying clean; and about the era when rock 'n' roll came of age. He spares none of his thoughts, good and bad, about Mick Jagger. He also describes the spongelike love of music that he inherited from his grandfather, and his own sense of musical history — his reverence for the blues and R&B masters he has studied his entire life.

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A Life in the Twentieth Century

Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

Houghton Mifflin Company,
2000

Arthur Schlesinger Jr., a prizewinning historian who served in John F. Kennedy's White House, here writes about the first 33 years of his life, from his birth in 1917 — the year

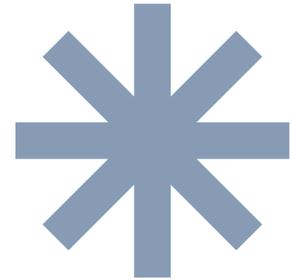
the United States entered World War I — to 1950 and

the beginnings of the Cold War. The son of an acclaimed historian, Schlesinger was born into great privilege. He went on a yearlong trip around the world between graduating from prep school and attending Harvard. This book has incisive things to say about the large themes of world history, including isolationism and interventionism, and about many other subjects besides, including the films of the 1930s.

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My Lives

Edmund White

Ecco/HarperCollins Publishers,
2006

“My Lives” is broken into chapters whose headings follow a clever formula:

“My Shrinks,” “My Mother,” “My Father,” “My Hustlers” ... But these

seemingly narrow focus

seemingly narrow-focus, time-hopping slices add up to a robust autobiography. Edmund White's portraits

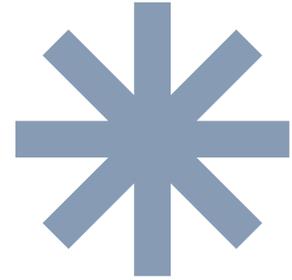
of his parents and their lives before him are novelistic; his writing about his own sexual experiences is exceedingly candid. Reviewing the book for The Guardian, the novelist Alan Hollinghurst said that “no other writer of White’s eminence has described his sexual life with such purposeful clarity.”

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Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?

Jeanette Winterson

Grove Press, 2012

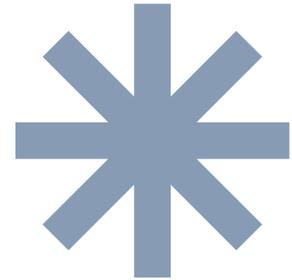
This memoir's title is the question Jeanette Winterson's adoptive mother asked after discovering her daughter was a lesbian. Winterson's

mother loomed over her life, as she looms over this book. In a quiet way she is one of the great horror mothers of English-language literature. When she was angry with her daughter, she would say, “The Devil led us to the wrong crib.” This memoir’s narrative includes Winterson’s search for her birth mother and the author’s self-invention, her intellectual development. The device of the trapped young person saved by books is a hoary one, but Winterson makes it seem new, and sulfurous.

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Close to the Knives

David Wojnarowicz

Vintage, 1991

David Wojnarowicz, who died at 37 in 1992, was a vital part of the East Village art scene of the 1980s that also produced Keith Haring. Jenny

Holzer, Jean-Michel
Basquiat and others. He
was a painter,
photographer,
performance artist, AIDS
activist and more —
including writer. This work

of hard-living
autobiography is written
in a flood of run-on
sentences, and in a tone of
almost hallucinatory
incandescence. A typical
sentence begins: “I
remember when I was 8
years old I would crawl out
the window of my
apartment seven stories
above the ground and hold
on to the ledge with 10
scrawny fingers and lower
myself out above the sea
of cars burning up Eighth
Avenue ...”

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