

# Biographies /Autobiographies



## Why Am I Reading This?

Biographies and autobiographies, perpetually popular forms of writing, allow us to observe a writer confronting himself or herself or confronting the life of another, exploring the limits of memory and the connections between past and present. Moments of spiritual insight, the loss of a loved one, childhood traumas—these sharply recalled kernels become the core, reverberating throughout the entire work. To read a biography or an autobiography is to read another human's struggle to understand himself or herself; therefore, we are likely to contemplate our own lives as well.

Autobiographies may be more common in America than elsewhere. This popularity results from our cultural emphasis on individualism and self-expression, from our long tradition of spiritual quest and self-examination, and from our historical preferences for plainly written, factual documents. In addition, the autobiography has been a major form of expression for minorities.

## Book List

1. *A Bride Goes West*, by N. T. Alderson
2. *A Mormon Mother: An Autobiography*, by Annie Clark Tanner
3. *Balsamroot: A Memoir*, by Mary Clearman Blew
4. *Billy the Kid: A Short and Violent Life*, by Robert M. Utley
5. *Black Elk Speaks*, by John Neihardt
6. *Bloodlines: Odyssey of a Native Daughter*, by Janet Campbell Hale
7. *Growing Up*, by Russell Baker
8. *Hole in the Sky: A Memoir*, by William Kittredge
9. *In the Wilderness*, by Kim Barnes
10. *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions*, by John Lame Deer
11. *Letters of a Woman Homesteader*, by Elinor Stewart
12. *My Grandmother Smoked Cigars*, by Sabine R. Ulibarri
13. *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, by Terry Tempest Williams
14. *Waiting For Snow in Havana*, by Carlos M. N. Eire
15. *The Enders Hotel*, by Brandon R. Schrand
16. *This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind*, by Ivan Doig

# Theme Essay

An astute reader, absorbed in an autobiography, begins to hear a conversation between the writer and his or her memory. Listening to the conversation invites participation on the part of the reader—participation by personal comparison. It is exactly this dialogue that makes autobiography compelling reading. We all grew up, had parents, had positive and negative influences, went to school, fell in love, started jobs, moved, had conflicts, health problems, some experience with religion, and saw ourselves as pioneers of sorts. We all both want and fear the truth. Autobiography explores and reflects these universals.

All humans share certain experiences, yet only some have the urge to record these experiences. Scholars have speculated a great deal about the motives for autobiography. Often the writer is explicit about that motive in the first few pages of an autobiography. The motives are as varied as the authors: to instruct future generations; to impose order on the events of one's life; to document change in oneself or society; to justify one's actions; to discover one's identity; to purge oneself of fear, frustration, or haunting memories; to arouse one's readers to right wrongs.

"I write for myself and strangers," quipped Gertrude Stein. Why one writes an autobiography will be reflected in the format of one's work. Over the centuries, autobiographies have taken various forms. Many of the earliest examples of the genre were spiritual in nature, recounting conversions or other religious experiences. St. Augustine's fifth century *Confessions* is generally believed to be the first autobiography, yet many early spiritual accounts were written by women, too. There are two uniquely American forms of autobiography: captivity narratives—written by white men and women about their experiences as prisoners of American Indians in the 1700s—and slave narratives, often dictated by illiterate slaves to white abolitionists. Other common nineteenth-century formats include the travel journal, diaries and autobiographies relating to the Civil War, pioneer journals, and journals kept by women who disguised themselves as soldiers.

Letters, too, are considered to be autobiographical, yet differ in two important ways from the more traditional retrospective autobiography. Like journals, letters are written in staggered fashion over a period of time, and hence are fragmented. In addition, letters are usually written for a specific audience, which gives a sense of immediacy and perhaps influences the voice of the author. Yet another large category is that of autobiographies by social reformers, rebels, and political figures.

But whatever the motivation, whatever the structure, autobiographies yield insights that result from "the journey inward." In accompanying a writer on that journey, the reader remembers, reflects, and reveals truths within him or herself.

# For Further Reading

*An Orphan in History*, by Paul Cowan (Doubleday, 1982)

*Dear Theo: The Autobiography of Vincent Van Gogh*, ed. By Irving Stone (Houghton Mifflin, 1937)

*Journal of a Solitude*, by May Sarton (Norton, 1973)

*The Way to Rainy Mountain*, by N. Scott Momaday (University of New Mexico Press, 1967)

*A Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*