



Theme Essay

Updated in 2021 by Susan Swetnam

Have you ever found yourself watching strangers while waiting in a public place, wondering about their lives? Are you interested in hearing new friends talk about their backgrounds, or in learning about the lives of famous people? Do you wish you understood others' motives? If so, you've come to the right place; this series invites readers into real lives in an up-close-and-personal way. These nonfictional "life stories" (the broadest term) might be autobiography (writers tracing their own lives), memoir (the same, focused on a particular aspect or time period), or biography (people writing about others' lives, based on research or personal knowledge), but all are rich in intimate details as they trace how and why people respond to events both extraordinary and ordinary, and how they evolve into themselves.

Humans are just naturally curious about other people's lives, it seems. We weigh our lives against others, comparing, finding reassurance in commonalities, empathizing, and being outraged, learning. Nonfiction life stories at once help us to live vicariously through experiences that would never come our way, and show us that despite differences in culture, gender, historical period, and economic status, human beings share bone-deep commonalities in challenges, hopes, fears, aspirations, and capabilities.

Beyond learning from the literal-level content of others' life histories, another fascinating, more subtle kind of insight is available for readers who understand that composing such a narrative isn't just a matter of assembling facts. Yes, intimate, quirky, colorful facts about context are a big draw of life-story writing but plodding through all possible facts would quickly grow tedious. So, writers must impose a "story" on the collection of sequential details they recount, creating a narrative that's unified around some central impression or point. They must select details and weigh memories, choosing those that seem important and ignoring the tangential ones. They must create character, suggesting cause and effect, motive, and inner conflict. Fascinating ethical questions and controversies follow. Biographers may find, for example, that the story they believe makes the best sense contradicts the family's myth of the subject, or society's beliefs about him/her. Autobiographers are challenged by how to portray still-living "supporting characters." Will loved ones/friends be hurt? Is there a point where negative

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characterizations, though true from the writer's perspective, are too simplistic? Short of lying, cynical forced oversimplifying, or libel, these questions have no easy answers--and make wonderful fodder for readers' debates.

Some writers choose their unifying point and stick to it. The authors of spiritual autobiographies (the genre's earliest form) did, including St. Augustine in the fourth-fifth century and the American Puritan Jonathan Edwards in the eighteenth. Politicians and biographers of famous people often do, as do writers seeking to open readers' eyes to outrages or to urge laudatory behavior.

After forty-plus years of writing about others' life stories and publishing my own memoirs/autobiographies, though, I've come to believe that the most interesting texts are those where the point unfolds in the act of writing the story. Writers who explore as they go create their younger selves as flawed characters; they explore personal identity and consciously try on meanings. Yes, these works are more demanding than one-note didactic narratives. Yet in their often-mixed tones, self-deprecation and confession, complex attitudes toward others, and evolving perspective, they provide the most accurate models of what we all experience if we honestly try to make sense of our own lives.

As psychologists have long known, shaping our lives into narrative—inside our minds, by verbally recounting them to others, in writing--can pivotally influence how we feel about ourselves, and listening to others' accounts with empathy and open minds can bring us together, even in times of great division.

May your participation in this theme help you experience these wonderful powers of storytelling, offering fresh, life-affirming perspective on what it means to be human.