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Recommended reading for memoirists

This list keeps growing as I make new discoveries and remember books I somehow forgot. My focus is favorite memoirs, but you'll also find personal essays, books about writing and a couple of useful links.

Some memoirs I love

Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal? by Jeanette Winterson. Adopted by a fanatically religious mother who tried to annihilate her spirit, Winterson mines harrowing material with courage, compassion and laugh-out-loud humour. Love of literature pulled her through and illuminates every page of this unforgettable memoir. If I could open a bottle of wine with one writer, I'd pick Winterson.

Just Kids by Patti Smith. The rocker and poet roots her story in a life-changing but ultimately tragic love affair with doomed photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, her muse and partner in creative crimes. If you've ever wondered how it feels to live the starving-artist story that was prettified for *Rent*, Smith will be your guide. I loved her evocation of New York in the ragged glory days of the Chelsea Hotel.

The Gastronomical Me by M.F.K. Fisher. The path-finding food writer proves that eating is the perfect metaphor for life itself. First published in an age of restraint (1943), the book skirts the boundaries of the tumultuous affair that ended Fisher's marriage and ultimately broke her heart when her lover fell victim to a catastrophic illness. The lesson: you don't have to tell all the details to tell the truth.

Drinking: a Love Story by Caroline Knapp. Another fine, haunting example of the life story anchored by metaphor (alcohol as dangerous lover). I never understood why so many addicts can't quit until this book pulled me into the emotional world of addiction.

Life Itself by Roger Ebert. Reading this genial, graceful book is like hanging out in a bar with the beloved film critic as he takes you to the colorfully grimy newsrooms of his youth, the hidden byways of London that comprise his perfect walk and the film sets of a classic movie or two. Unlike many of my favourite memoirs, this one lacks a strong narrative arc. It's a ramble full of twists and turns like...well, life itself. Repeated cancer surgeries left Ebert unable to speak in his

final years, but his writing voice positively sings with affection for the people and places that formed him.

Little Comrades by Laurie Lewis. An 80-year-old Canadian looks back on her colourfully unconventional life (alcoholic Communist father, free-spirited mother who was more like a sister than a parent) with dry wit and relentless honesty. Proof that it's never too late for memoir, this first book crackles with energy. Lewis shines at writing from a child's point of view: you're right beside her as she struggles to make sense of her world.

The Glass Castle by Jeannette Walls. I may be the hundred-and-twenty-ninth person to tell you, "Don't miss this book." At least 128 book lovers must have urged me to read it before I finally took their advice. Lots of memoirists have screwed-up families, and Walls' family just might top the hit parade of dysfunction. What stands out is for me is the humour and love that illuminate a tale so twisted, a novelist would be hard pressed to make it up. Walls will make you care for this dangerously wacky bunch and laugh with them—not at them. Few writers have that ability.

Out of the Blue: a Memoir of Workplace Depression, Recovery, Redemption and, Yes, Happiness by Jan Wong. To write about your past with conviction, you must summon the courage to relive it. Wong rises to the challenge in this meticulous and gripping account of her descent into paralyzing depression. Warned that writing about it would impede her recovery, Wong understood that the opposite was true. Reviewers (I'm one) have focused on this memoir's importance to the public conversation about depression. It's equally relevant to writerly conversations about the roots of memoir.

Testament of Youth by Vera Brittain. An eye-opening, exquisitely painful account of the first World War's impact on an entire generation, told by a gutsy feminist who overcame formidable obstacles to become a leading journalist and author. You won't always like Brittain, but you'll admire her and ache for her. She should have cut the last 100 pages or so, an object lesson in how not to write.

About Alice by Calvin Trillin. You can read this slim, spare, heartbreaking book in a couple of hours. You'll never forget the author's late wife and muse, Alice. Each precisely chosen detail adds a layer to her portrait.

Too Close to the Falls by Catherine Gildiner. Coming-of-age stories by a Toronto writer with a well-deserved international following. Ever wondered how to write with conviction from a child's perspective? Watch Gildiner pull it off.

Truth and Beauty: a Friendship by Ann Patchett. Best known as a novelist, Patchett stretches the boundaries of memoir in this loving, anguished story of the deeply damaged friend who enthralled her, tested her and ultimately pushed her to the brink of loyalty. (Still crave more of Patchett the memoirist? See her essay collection, *This Is the Story of a Happy Marriage*. My favorite is "The Mercies," although it's a tough call.)

Angela's Ashes by Frank McCourt. Of the many things to admire about this classic tale of an Irish childhood shaped by almost unimaginable poverty, I particularly like the freewheeling wit that infuses even the most painful chapters.

The Film Club: a True Story of a Father and Son by David Gilmour. Exasperated film-critic dad strikes deal with rebellious teenage son: he can drop out of high school on condition that the two of them watch classic movies together and talk about the experience. Gilmour writes with honesty and courage about his struggle to be a good parent during the meltdown years.

Born Standing Up by Steve Martin. The wild and crazy guy reveals the no-holds-barred truth about mastering his demons and forgiving the father scapegoated him. No literary pyrotechnics here, just honest, pointed storytelling.

The Diary of a Young Girl by Anne Frank. It's a bit of a stretch to call this a memoir, but no woman has ever told her story with a more distinctive, self-aware and utterly believable voice than young Anne. Make sure you read the definitive 1995 edition, containing passages cut by Anne's father when the diary first made its way into print. Highlight: the passage in which Anne sits on the toilet contemplating her genitals with mingled curiosity and awe.

Townie by Andre Dubus III. I never thought I'd care about the kind of guy who feels compelled to punch out some other guy in a bar and leave that guy's teeth in a pool of blood. Dubus III used to be that kind of hell-bent brawler, fuelled by rage at his absent father and confusion over what it really means to be a man. More than any other book on this list, *Townie* illustrates the power of memoir to bridge the worlds of writer and reader. I've never thrown a punch in my life, yet I recognized a little of my own youthful frustration in *Townie*. I closed the book with a deeper understanding of the men in my life.

Somewhere Towards the End by Diana Athill. The great British memoirist, now in her 90s, is in fine form with this frank and refreshingly unsentimental guide to old age. It's my favourite 60th birthday gift for friends who wonder how sexy they'll be in the decade ahead. Sexy enough, to judge from this book. Athill writes of one lover, "We...shared painful feet, which was almost as important as liking sex, because when you start feeling your age it is comfortable to be with someone in the same condition."

Drunk Mom by Jowita Bydlowska. The stress of new motherhood pushed a vulnerable young woman back into the abyss of active alcoholism. Then mother love pulled her back. Harrowing and unsparing.

Wild by Cheryl Strayed. Not every section gripped me but when Strayed is on her narrative game, she takes you right inside the pounding heart of a risk-taker on a dangerous, all-consuming quest to transform her life. I'll never forget the scene in which Cheryl loses her hiking boot on a particular rough stretch of trail.

A Moveable Feast by Ernest Hemingway. Once the most celebrated writer of his era, Hemingway was a burnt-out alcoholic when he found a trunkful of evocative sketches he'd

written in Paris as a young man full of hope and swagger. The resulting memoir gets its shimmer from the young lion, and its poignancy from the regretful depressive who revisited the book and left it unfinished at the time of his suicide. There are two versions of this evocative memoir: the first one, edited by Hemingway's widow, and a relatively recent one that his grandson decided to edit for reasons I, for one, don't understand. Unless you're a Hemingway fanatic, you'll only be taking one trip to Paris in the 20s with Papa, as he was known. My advice: stick with version one. Rarely has such a slim book packed such a punch.

Drink by Ann Dowsett Johnston. A worthy successor to Caroline Knapp (*Drinking: a Love Story*), this writer gracefully melds her own story of alcoholism with a hard-hitting investigation of the factors that are driving more women down the same path.

Autobiographical essays

The Most of Nora Ephron, a big, fat collection in which Ephron's wry, pungent, big-sisterly voice lights up every page. Alongside several scripts and a novel, you'll find the classic first-person pieces that made her name.

Eye of My Heart: 27 Writers Reveal the Hidden Pleasures and Perils of Being a Grandmother (edited by Barbara Graham). Okay, I'm biased: one of the essays in this rich, thought-provoking collection is my own. But each of the others expanded my awareness of a neglected passage in women's lives.

Carnal Acts by Nancy Mairs. My favourite of several collections by an irreverent American who hasn't let advanced MS stop her from leading a full life. Lots of people write about their struggles with illness; Mairs is one of the few who transcend the clichés.

Me Talk Pretty One Day by David Sedaris. The funniest first-person prose I've yet read. Then again, I have yet to start *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid* by Bill Bryson.

Meditations from a Movable Chair by Andre Dubus. More than a formidably good writer, Dubus was also a good man--"a mensch," as my Jewish grandmother would have said--whose prose shimmers with compassion for his fellow humans. Life tested Dubus cruelly; he lost a leg in a road accident while trying to help an injured stranger. He didn't lose his gift for celebrating the moment, best captured in "A Country Road Song." I've read this essay countless times and every time I discover something new in it.

Learning to Drive by Katha Pollitt. There's some dross in this collection by the feminist poet and essayist, but at her edgy, freewheeling best she'll crack you up while making you think. As tough on herself as she is on others, Pollitt's not afraid to be ridiculous--which she proves to hilarious effect in "Webstalker," about her obsession with a man who dropped her.

Body and Soul: Narratives of Healing from Ars Medica, edited by Allison Crawford, Rex Kay, Allan Peterkin, Robin Roger and Ronald Ruskin, with Aaron Orkin. *Ars Medica*, an innovative

literary journal by and for people in the healing professions, has published some wonderful work, as this collection proves. Look for “Palliation” by Pat Cason and “The Second Parlour” by Anne Marie Todkill. But don’t stop there. If illness—your own or someone else’s—has moved you to write, you’ll find a wealth of inspiration between these covers.

Book of Days: Personal Essays by Emily Fox Gordon. Quirky, provocative and unfailingly elegant, Gordon understands the art of irony and employs it to memorable effect. Whether she’s mining her own life or reflecting on her craft, she enlightens and surprises. I particularly liked her incisive comments on the “triumphal” tenor of a good many memoirs, including one of her own. “My reckless dismissal of so much in my life that did not fit my notion of destiny is something to regret.”

Books about writing

On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft by Stephen King. A wise, straight-talking friend to anyone who writes, King delivers both indispensable advice and a compelling story of his own apprenticeship as a writer. If you read one book on writing, make it this one.

When Memory Speaks: Exploring the Art of Autobiography by Jill Ker Conway. Who better than Conway—historian, feminist and beloved memoirist (*The Road from Coorain*)—to explore the power and the purpose of memoir through the centuries?

The Paris Review Interviews: Women Writers at Work. Maya Angelou, Anne Sexton, P.L. Travers and many other wise mentors tell why and how they write. I’ve scribbled all over my copy and return to it often.

On Writing Well: the Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction by William Zinsser. Whatever you’re writing, Zinsser is a great mentor—personable, witty and generous with examples of prose that soars or sinks. There’s a useful chapter on memoir.

The Memoir Project: a Thoroughly Non-Standardized Text for Writing and Life by Marion Roach Smith. This reassuring little book delivers lots of pointed, practical advice in little more than 100 pages.

Useful articles found online

[“Open letter from Dani Shapiro: Dear Disillusioned Reader Who Contacted Me on Facebook.”](#)

An acclaimed memoirist, Shapiro makes excellent points about the difference between autobiography (all the facts of your life) and memoir (a story with a narrative arc, which means the writer must exclude everything that’s not part of the story). You don’t have to tell the reader every job you’ve had, or every place you’ve lived. You just have to keep the reader reading.

[“Make Me Worry You’re Not O.K.”](#) by Susan Shapiro. A writing teacher and memoirist explains why she assigns all her students a “humiliation essay” in which they reveal themselves at their weakest and worst. Shapiro champions memoirs that “begin with emotional devastation and conclude with surprising metamorphosis.” I find her point of view too narrow (what about great comic memoirs like Bill Bryson’s?) but it makes a provocative read.