

# ***Selected Autobiographies for Fiction Readers***

## **Beah, Ishmael.**

*A Long Way Gone: memoirs of a boy soldier.* Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

At the tender age of 12, Beah was caught up in Sierra Leone's civil war, experiencing horrors far beyond his years. This lacerating story takes the reader through his 3-year experience as a child soldier, embedded in a life of slaughter, drugs, and casual atrocities.

## **Bechdel, Alison.**

*Fun Home: a Family Tragicomic.* Houghton Mifflin, 2006.

In graphic novel format, Bechdel, author of the long-running comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, recounts a childhood filled with eccentricities and worse from a father whose closeted gay identity made a mockery of family life.

## **Brown, James**

*Los Angeles Diaries: A Memoir.* Morrow, 2003.

Twelve interconnected chapters veering from childhood to adulthood recount a dark and often harrowing childhood. As a child, Brown waits in the car for his arsonist mother as she set a building ablaze. As an adult, his drug and alcohol abuse makes a mess of his family and professional life. A memoir that reads like a very noirish crime novel.

## **Burroughs, Augusten**

*Running With Scissors.* St. Martin's Press, 2002.

At the age of 12, Burroughs' mother sends him to live with her psychiatrist; he spends his teen years in this completely dysfunctional household where the children skip school, trash the house, play with an old electroshock machine, and have access to drugs. At 14, he begins an affair with Neil, a former patient adopted by the doctor.

## **Conroy, Pat**

*My Losing Season.* Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2002.

Conroy's account of his senior year playing basketball at The Citadel and how the game helped him find his way out of a childhood of abuse and violence.

## **Conway, Jill Ker**

*The Road From Coorain.* Knopf, 1989.

Conway spent her early years on a huge sheep farm in the Australian wilderness, home-schooled and rarely seeing another child. When her father died, she was wrenched from that life and sent to school in Sydney, where the "bush girl" worked hard to make up for lost time. As her mother slipped into mental illness, Conway felt compelled to set her own course, which led her ultimately to the U.S.

## **Didion, Joan.**

*The year of magical thinking.* Knopf, 2005.

A unique memoir of loss and bereavement from one of our great prose stylists. Didion's husband, writer John Gregory Dunne, died of a heart attack while their only daughter remained unconscious in a hospital from septic shock.

## **Dubner, Stephen**

*Turbulent Souls: A Catholic Son's Return to His Jewish Family.* Morrow, 1998.

Dubner's parents, raised in observant Jewish families, found their separate ways to Catholicism, then found each other. Disowned by most of their relatives, they raised eight children and remained devout Catholics. Steven, curious about the religion his parents rejected and the relatives he never knew, discovered his own spiritual path.

## **Dumas, Firoozeh**

*Funny in Farsi.* Villard, 2003.

Funny and perceptive vignettes about how one Iranian family adapted to life in the U.S.

**Eggers, Dave**

*A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius.* Simon & Schuster, 2000.

When Dave's parents die within months of each other, he becomes responsible for his 8-year old brother just when he is trying to strike out on his own. A very post-modern, hip look at parenting in the 90s.

**Ellroy, James**

*My Dark Places: An L.A. Crime Memoir.* Knopf, 1996.

Ellroy's account of his mother's sordid death and the effect it had on his life reads like a noirish crime novel, unemotional on the surface and filled with crime sheet facts. The murder left the young Ellroy with an obsessive interest in murdered women and brought him back to the scene of the crime years later to try to learn the truth.

**Facey, A.B.**

*A Fortunate Life.* Penguin Books, 1981.

By the time Facey was three years old, his father had died and his mother had abandoned him. He was self-taught and self-made, unafraid of hard work of any kind, and counted himself lucky to be alive. A very vivid, and often riveting story of life in early twentieth century Australia.

**Fuller, Alexandra**

*Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight.* Random House, 2001.

Alexandra grew up in various south African countries at the end of the colonial era. Each time revolution ousted the British from power, they moved. Despite poverty, death of siblings, a manic-depressive mother, and terrorist attacks, she loved Africa with a passion that was never quenched.

**Gilbert, Elizabeth**

*Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia.* Viking, 2006.

Gilbert embarked on a year of travel for self-discovery and renewal. She chose three very different places: Italy for its sensual pleasures; an Indian ashram for spiritual succor; and Bali for "balancing." Chatty and exuberant, this is a delightful journey.

**Goodwin, Doris Kearns**

*Wait Till Next Year.* Simon & Schuster, 1997.

Goodwin's childhood on a suburban street, where baseball mattered to everyone. An evocative and wise account of growing up in the 50s.

**Gornick, Vivian**

*Fierce Attachments: A Memoir.* Reprint. Beacon Press, 1997.

The author's close but often difficult relationship with her mother underlies this vivid memoir of growing up in a socialist apartment complex in the Bronx in the 1940s and 1950s. Gornick's mother and neighbors provided some unusual life lessons in love, sex, and politics that served as a counterpoint to Gornick's own efforts to find her way.

**Hahn-Beer, Edith and Susan Dworkin**

*The Nazi Officer's Wife: How One Jewish Woman Survived the Holocaust.* Rob Weisbach/Wm. Morrow, 1999.

After deportation to the Viennese ghetto and several stints in labor camps, Edith Hahn becomes a "U-boat," passing as a non-Jew in wartime Germany, until she marries a willing but volatile Nazi officer.

**Harrer, Heinrich**

*Seven Years in Tibet.* J.P. Tarcher, 1982.

The young Austrian Heinrich Harrer was in India in 1939 when war broke out and interned as a German national; he and a friend escaped and traveled through the Himalayas to Tibet at a time when it was closed to foreigners. Harrer was able to remain and grew to love the culture and people, eventually meeting and tutoring the Dalai Lama.

**Hayslip, Le Ly with Jay Wurts**

*When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: a Vietnamese Woman's Journey From War to Peace.* Plume, 1989.

Le Ly was a young girl when the conflict in Vietnam came to her quiet village, changing everything about her life. Caught between the two sides in the conflict, she endures poverty, violence, and the loss of her family.

**Hoffman, Eva**

*Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language.* E.P. Dutton, 1989.

Hoffman's survivor parents remained in Poland after World War II, but continuing anti-Semitism made life difficult. In 1959, when she was thirteen years old, the family immigrated to Vancouver, Canada. This is the story of Hoffman's efforts to make a place for herself in America as the daughter of survivors, and as an exile from her beloved Cracow.

**hooks, bell**

*Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood.* Henry Holt, 1996.

The well-known feminist cultural critic writes of her difficult childhood as the "different" child of a poor black Southern family, learning hard lessons about race and social issues. Written with perception and warmth, in short chapters that alternate between first- and third-person narration.

**Karr, Mary**

*The Liar's Club.* Viking Press, 1995.

Karr endures the alcoholism, violence, and insanity of her parents in an East Texas refinery town in this classic story of the dysfunctional family. Her poet's voice and perceptive eye inform this account of a heartbreaking childhood.

**Kidd, Sue Monk**

*Dance of the Dissident Daughter.* HarperCollins, 1996.

Kidd's search for a truly feminine spiritual path takes her out of her comfortable Southern Baptist life to explore other paths within Christianity.

**Kimmel, Haven**

*A Girl Named Zippy: Growing Up Small in Mooreland, Indiana.* Doubleday, 2001.

The quirks and pleasures of growing up in small-town Indiana in the 1960s and 1970s are depicted with perfect and pitch in a collection of hilarious and loving vignettes about family, neighbors, animals, and friends.

**Lauck, Jennifer**

*Blackbird.* Pocket Books, 2000.

When Jennifer's beautiful, elegant mother dies of cancer, Jennifer is a heartbroken seven-year old, but when her father remarries and then dies, she and her brother are thrust into a world where no one cares about their feelings or their safety. A poignant and powerful narrative told in a child's voice. The sequel is *Still Waters*.

**Lederer, Katy**

*Poker Face: A Girlhood Among Gamblers.* Crown, 2003.

Katy grew up on the ground of an exclusive East Coast prep school where her father was an English teacher and her mother an alcoholic. Card games brought the family together, but gambling, alcohol, and drugs tore them apart. A provocative story of twisted family relationships and the destructive power of money.

**McBride, James**

*The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother.* Riverhead Books, 1996.

McBride's remarkable mother, a white woman who married two black men, had a large family and brought them up in her unique style. McBride tries to understand the complex woman who raised him.

**McCourt, Frank**

*Angela's Ashes.* Scribner, 1996.

Reversing the traditional immigrants' journey, McCourt's parents moved back to Ireland from New York but relatives refused to help them out. While his father drank up whatever small wages he earned, his mother was barely to feed and clothe the children, who learned to survive (if they did) in the streets.

**Minatoya, Lidia**

*Talking to High Monks in the Snow.* HarperCollins, 1992.

Growing up in upstate New York hearing her parents' stories about Japanese family and culture, Minatoya is caught between two cultures, never quite comfortable in either. It is only when she spends an extended time in Asia that she

begins to understand who she is and where she belongs.

**Moehringer, J.R.**

*The Tender Bar: A Memoir*. Hyperion, 2005.

As a boy, Moehringer searched for a replacement for his absent father and found it in a bar called Dickens in his hometown of Manhasset on Long Island. There he found the fathering he needed among the tavern's regulars. A most unusual upbringing, but one that seemed to have nourished his young spirit.

**Nafisi, Azar**

*Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Random, 2003.

From 1995 to 1997, the author courted danger by holding a class in her home to discuss Western literature with a group of her young university students. The books they discussed--like *Lolita*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Pride and Prejudice*--elicited discussions about their own restricted lives and remain vivid in the author's memories.

**Nuland, Sherwin**

*Lost in America*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

A well-known surgeon and author, Nuland's childhood was dominated by his father Meyer Nudelman, a bitter, ailing man with an explosive temper, whose forceful personality shadowed his son's life and caused episodes of crippling depression.

**Salzman, Mark**

*Iron and Silk* (Vintage Departures Series). Vintage Books, 1987.

Salzman's lyrical memoir of teaching two English for two years in China is filled with tender and hilarious moments; perceptions of his students and encounters with rural Chinese families are countered by his terrifying experiences with a well-known martial arts master.

**Satrapi, Marjane.**

*Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. Pantheon, 2003.

Childhood in Iran, both pleasant and perilous is the story in this graphic depiction of growing up in Tehran during the Islamic Revolution. The combination of fascinating tale and evocative drawings makes this a riveting tale. It was followed by a second volume, *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return*.

**Sebold, Alice**

*Lucky: A Memoir*. Scribner, 1999.

Sebold was raped on her college campus in a brutal attack; the police called her lucky to be alive. She recounts how the crime changed her life, leading her to drug addiction. A searing memoir of pain and recovery.

**Williams, Donna**

*Nobody Nowhere: The Extraordinary Autobiography of an Autistic*. Times Books, 1992.

Donna's struggle as an autistic, to understand and function in the world around her is all the more remarkable because she is able to express her inner life so clearly. A heartbreaking and exhilarating story of living with disability.

**Wolff, Tobias**

*This Boy's Life*. Atlantic Monthly Press, 1989.

After his parents' divorce in the 1950s, Tobias and his mother travel across country for a fresh start, but his mother's second husband turns out to be a petty tyrant who makes the boy's life miserable. A classic coming of age memoir with the ring of emotional truth.