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American Lives: A Reader [Preface & Introduction]

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BISON BOOKS

American Lives | Series editor: Tobias Wolff

American Lives

A Reader

EDITED BY ALICIA CHRISTENSEN

INTRODUCTION BY TOBIAS WOLFF

University of Nebraska Press | Lincoln & London

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CONTENTS

	vii	Preface
	xi	Introduction
FAN SHEN	1	"Long Live the Red Terror!"
PEGGY SHUMAKER	15	Moving Water, Tucson
LAURIE ALBERTS	19	Winter 1997
CHARLES BARBER	29	The Weight of Spoons
JOHN SKOYLES	45	Hard Luck Suit
BRENDA SEROTTE	63	Fortuna
MARVIN V. ARNETT	89	The Boys of Summer
TED KOOSER	99	Excerpt from "Winter"
DINTY W. MOORE	129	Son of Mr. Green Jeans: A Meditation on Missing Fathers
ELI HASTINGS	139	Good, Alright, Fine
DINAH LENNEY	157	Acting
NATALIA RACHEL SINGER	165	And There Fell a Great Star
AARON RAZ LINK AND HILDA RAZ	183	Not Coming Out
JANET STERNBURG	191	Excerpt from *Phantom Limb*
MARY FELSTINER	195	Alternatives, 1979
JONATHAN JOHNSON	205	Excerpt from "The Second Trimester"
FLOYD SKLOOT	229	A Measure of Acceptance
MIMI SCHWARTZ	245	The New Kitchen
LEE MARTIN	251	One I Love, Two I Love
SONYA HUBER	279	Excerpt from "The Promise of Power"
	301	Source Acknowledgments
	303	List of Contributors

ALICIA CHRISTENSEN

Preface

It was my great fortune to work as Ladette Randolph's assistant when I first joined the University of Nebraska Press. Not only was I able to learn from this talented and highly regarded editor who conceptualized and developed the press's American Lives Series, it was part of my job to read memoirs such as those excerpted here. Though I have moved on from my assistant position and Ladette has moved across the country, I still await the newest addition to the series with eager anticipation. Each volume supplies a lovely reminder of what all good books should do: influence the reader to consider the world in a new way.

Though the life stories and perspectives presented herein are remarkably varied, familiar human emotions run through them all. Fan Shen, Peggy Shumaker, Laurie Alberts, and Charles Barber must all come to grips with unexpected deaths. Shen, just a youth when Chairman Mao officially launched the Cultural Revolution, describes in "Long Live the Red Terror!" how his thrill at the pageantry and excitement of the new movement quickly turned to sickened fear as the more sinister aspects of the revolution emerged. In "Moving Water, Tucson," Shumaker relives an exhilarating and horrible flash flood from her childhood. Alberts, haunted by the death of her ex-boyfriend, attempts to understand the destructive life he lived with and without her in "Winter 1997." "The Weight of Spoons" is Barber's account of how, after his friend's suicide, he found solace in contemplating small, tangible objects, such as an eggshell, and in performing everyday actions, one of which involves the purchase of a purple shirt.

For John Skoyles's uncle, a particular piece of clothing—a "Hard Luck Suit"—imparts misfortune. After purchasing it, he loses at the track, and the offending suit is immediately incinerated. Skoyles is in awe of his street-wise uncle in much the same way Brenda Serotte is filled with wonder and admiration for her Turkish grandmother. "Fortuna" describes Nona, a cook, medicine woman, healer, and fortune-teller who makes her living reading palms, interpreting cups, and prescribing poultices for the community. Marvin Arnett's father requires no mystical powers to foresee the consequences of the actions of the "Boys of Summer," who hawk a rainbow of sweaters around the Detroit neighborhood where Arnett grew up, and though the seasons contrast, Ted Kooser peppers his lyrical ruminations on the cold months in Nebraska with episodes from his own childhood in "Winter."

Dinty Moore, Eli Hastings, Dinah Lenney, and Natalia Singer all spend considerable time contemplating father-child relationships. In "Son of Mr. Green Jeans," Moore considers the concept of fatherhood in an entirely unexpected way: he delineates and links his personal attitudes and anxieties about fatherhood with TV dads, the position of the father in pop culture, the various roles fathers play in the animal kingdom, and his relationship with his own father. Hastings, who also presents the good and the bad of fatherhood, focuses on his relationship with his dad in eight vignettes in "Good, Alright, Fine." Lenney receives earth-shattering news about her missing father in "Acting," while Singer juxtaposes the shocking *Challenger* and Chernobyl explosions with unsettling, but not unexpected, news about her dad.

Mothers and motherhood are the focus of the excerpts by Aaron Raz Link and Hilda Raz, Janet Sternburg, Mary Felstiner, and Jonathan Johnson. Link and Raz write about their discomfort and confusion with neat and precise labels for human identity.

"Not Coming Out" details the problems of our societal reliance on clear-cut definitions for complicated individuals. Sternburg's *Phantom Limb* illustrates the challenges of providing for an elderly mother. In this excerpt she muses on the number of details one must handle as a child caring for a parent and evokes the stark frustration and fear felt by a multitude of grown children who have been placed in such situations. Felstiner and her husband contemplate the consequences of expanding their family in "Alternatives, 1979" as Felstiner's rheumatoid arthritis goes into remission for a brief period, while Johnson and his wife endure an emotionally harrowing event described in an excerpt from "The Second Trimester." "A Measure of Acceptance" details the barrage of mental and physical tests that Floyd Skloot must undergo to prove to his insurance company that his illness is not faked and that he is still in need of disability payments.

In "The New Kitchen," Mimi Schwartz discovers that remodeling projects are a common undertaking among long-married couples and muses on the desire for the bright, shiny, and new. Marriage is also the center of Lee Martin's "One I Love, Two I Love." Martin intersperses the story of how he wooed his wife with the tale of his own great-grandparents' courtship. Like Lee, Sonya Huber reconstructs her family history and speculates on the difficult position in which her grandfather found himself following the German revolution of 1918. "The Promise of Power" draws a connection between Huber and her grandfather, who both make momentous decisions that ultimately disappoint their parents.

Ultimately, the excerpts presented here vary greatly in subject and style—and that is just what one would expect from a series that portrays American lives. This series has been and continues to be a gigantic umbrella for the diverse and tremendously talented American writers whose stories deserve to be told. Far

from the slew of scandalous tell-alls and ghost-written celebrity memoirs published over the past few decades, this exemplary series brings together beautiful and compelling personal stories by authors who are as meticulous and thoughtful about their craft as they are in their introspection.

TOBIAS WOLFF

Introduction

Several years ago, in his *Harper's* essay "Autobiography in the Age of Narcissism," William H. Gass came to this judgment: "He who writes his autobiography is already a monster." I admit I laughed out loud when I struck this line, partly no doubt from discomfort—I had recently finished the second (and last, I promise!) of my own memoirs—but mostly at its bald, unsparing wit. I was even willing to acknowledge a certain amount of truth in Gass's proposition, knowing that in order to write about my own life I had necessarily exposed the lives of others to public view and told their stories as well as my own, mostly without their permission. Of course I'd devised excuses for these breaches of privacy. Had I not examined my own deeds and character with at least as stern a gaze as I turned on others? Was I to be held hostage by the squeamishness of those unwilling to have their pictures taken, and put on exhibit? Finally (I knew this response was unfair even as it came to me), if they didn't like the way I wrote about them, about the way our lives intersected, why didn't they write their own damned memoirs?

But this wasn't really Gass's complaint, this question of privacy. His problem with the memoir is that, in his view, it cannot by its nature be done honestly—that in writing about ourselves we inevitably prettify our self-portraits at the expense of truth. He disparages autobiography as a bastard branch of history, pretending to history's authenticity but without its neutral, impersonal, objective view of the past.

And here he lost me, and loses me still, because his vision of

the discipline of history is either risibly naïve or deliberately ennobled for the sake of argument, which would make him even worse than the monstrous autobiographer, who at least, by Gass's account, is helpless in his misrepresentations. The historian, as much as the memoirist, is subject to preconceptions, bigotries, professional resentments and ambitions, predispositions and blindnesses of which he can be only partly aware. Objectivity is an ideal that the historian must by honor pursue, and must by nature fail to achieve. Why else would we have such different accounts of, say, the causes of World War I, given that historians are working from essentially the same archival resources? The Marxist historian sees things through the Marxist lens, already screwed deeply into his eye socket before he's read the first dispatch from Sarajevo. History is not simply a recitation of facts, it is an ordering of facts to produce a narrative; and facts, being infinite, are infinitely susceptible to manipulation. Every historian is hostage to the distortions and limitations of subjectivity—the vantage point of all human vision.

Indeed, it seems to me that autobiography strikes at least as fair a bargain with its reader as history, precisely because it acknowledges its subjectivity. And we allow for that—we are always aware, in reading a memoir, that we are getting just one side of a complicated story, a certainly partial, perhaps self-serving account, and possibly one that is not true at all. Of course we can sometimes be fooled by novels masquerading as memoirs, as we can be fooled by novels masquerading as histories. There is really no way to tell, in the absence of incontrovertible evidence, if a memoirist is lying to you, but part of the pleasure of reading this form is in measuring the tale against your judgment of the teller, gradually taking shape as you make your way through the narrative. Even before their serial falsities were exposed, I grew very skeptical of Lillian Hellman's autobiographies because of their relentlessly self-promoting nature and tone. She was always

the principled person in the room, the smart one, the brave one, the one who kept her head when all those around her were losing theirs. I accept that heroic people exist—I have known a few. But they have this in common: they do not see themselves as heroic. They do what they do because they think it is right, and wouldn't dream of boasting about *not* having done something that was wrong.

In short, it is as hard for us to see ourselves clearly as it is for the historian to see the past clearly. But I have to say that the memoirs I admire show little evidence of any impulse toward self-flattery. Rather the opposite. I have noticed a tendency toward diffidence and even a certain embarrassment in the self-representations of memoirists, in some cases rising (or sinking) to the level of mockery and condemnation. This too can be a form of untruth, even, paradoxically, of self-inflation: see what a good person I am, to show how bad I used to be. But in the best memoirs, which are the only ones that should concern us (we don't dismiss poetry altogether because some poems—even most poems—aren't very good), I see revealed a particular but recognizable human character, and am made to feel the way life acts on that character for good and ill. As we enter more deeply into a memoir we naturally begin to test the narrator's tone, his tale, his very self-conception, against our own experience and knowledge of life. When an entire story seems designed to paint its narrator as a walking book of virtues or Byronic, bourgeois-defying vices, we are free to disbelieve. When the memoirist tells us, on no evidence but her own word, that she wandered into the forest as an orphaned toddler in World War II and was rescued and raised by a pack of wolves, we are allowed, indeed *compelled*, to laugh at her gall, and to look elsewhere for the thrilling moment of human recognition and even complicity that this form can so richly provide.

There are many such moments in this anthology, a sampler

gleaned from the American Lives Series of the University of Nebraska Press. Here's just one example of what I'm talking about. In *Gang of One*, Fan Shen's account of growing up in China during the Cultural Revolution, we are made witness to the joys of skipping school and taking to the streets in the name of revolution, of chanting dire threats at fearful citizens, and humiliating figures of authority—the more elevated and powerful the better. One poor soul, a famous general weighted with decorations, died of a heart attack in front of his baying captors, an event whose immediate aftermath Shen recalls as follows: "The rally went on with even greater fervor for another hour, and I, along with all the Red Guards, shouted slogans at the dead body on the chair, denouncing the general's treacherous final act of escaping the revolution prematurely."

Just so. This grotesque scene, imbued with both tragedy and ghastly humor, is one we would like to view as distant from our own experience and tendencies, in social terms an exotic event, freakish as the eruption of a volcano. Yet there aren't many of us who, upon reading this and reflecting honestly upon their own youthful characters, could declare that they would have been sure to resist the temptations of anarchy and a self-righteous settling of scores with one's elders. Our narrator was neither hero nor villain, but in his individual story of ecstatic surrender to the tidal pull of the mob, we can read outward and into the nature of the mass movements that have so disfigured our history; indeed, through just such modest personal accounts those terrors of history are made intelligible. Here we find no pretense of superiority, of skepticism or even compassion—not in the moment, anyway; the compassion is all in the telling, in the very act of remembering.

You will see that quality of recognizable humanity glittering throughout the memoirs from which this book was drawn: in Floyd Skloot's classic account of trying to rebuild his life, indeed

his very self, after suffering a viral brain disorder—a wry, exquisitely detailed story of a hard journey not yet accomplished, and with no heroic feats, except for the book you hold in your hand; in John Skoyles's funny, touching hymn to the New York City of his boyhood and the raffish uncle who undertook to school him in its dark arts; in Laurie Alberts's halting attempts to understand the suicide of a friend, and to assess the degree of her own failure to prevent it, as if she had that power, which she did not; in Dinty Moore's witty, original, interestingly formed "Son of Mr. Green Jeans"; in Mary Felstiner's struggle to be at home again in a body made strange to her by crippling arthritis—not in the end the story of a pathology, but of a family, as at bottom most of these stories are.

These fine selections will, I hope, whet your appetite for the books themselves. Though necessarily personal, their gaze seems mostly to be directed outward rather than inward, however difficult and turbulent the lives they describe. While acknowledging that they occupy a particular place in the world, and must view the world from that place rather than from a godlike distance, these writers are intensely interested in what lies beyond them—how the world at large acts, and acts on them, and, finally, hesitantly, how they themselves have acted upon the world. This is, after all, history—history from the inside out.