



with Guest Book Reviewer Jim Davis

Memoir: Reading Life

This column will explore several aspects of memoir, particularly coming-of-age memoirs of interest to young adults and their teachers, as well as memoirs written by young adult authors. We will also review some memoirs and look at a pedagogical book about teaching memoir in the secondary English classroom.

An aspect of being a column editor for *The ALAN Review* that I have most enjoyed is the guilty pleasure of receiving dozens and dozens of free review copies from publishers who hope I will review the books in my columns. It is a guilty pleasure because the books are free and because I can only review a few of them. The best thing is that I get to look at, handle, and sometimes read many kinds of books that I would never choose in a bookstore or check out of a library. One such book—a great, five-pound hardback—arrived a couple of years ago and sat on my office bookshelf unnoticed until I began thinking about a column on reading memoirs. Once I took up *Remembered Childhoods: A Guide to Autobiography and Memoirs of Childhood and Youth* by Jeffrey E. Long (Libraries Unlimited, 2007),

I was profoundly amazed. In his brief and succinct introduction, Long defines and describes memoirs of youth in a way that reminds us why we love them so much.

Coming-of-age memoirs and autobiographies open up and guide us through worlds of human experience in a visceral and immediate way that we could not know any way else. Like a time machine, memoirs take us back to the trappings of another era, a place that is best encountered, explored, and analyzed in its own terms, rather than in the terms familiar to us in the 21st century.

An effectively composed coming-of-age memoir[’s] . . . rewards to the reader are great, presenting the opportunity for us to consider which factors and rites of passages (as of family or school life) most critically aided, or hindered the development of the mind and character of a fellow human being. (xxiii)

Long’s 500-page reference book offers briefly annotated bibliographies of 2800 books that “cover some part of the first twenty-one years of the author’s lives” (xvi). The book is divided into sections with chapter headings we might expect, such as “Connections with Nature: On the Job, in the Field, at Home,” and “The Play’s the Thing: Sports,

Recreation, and Athletes,” along with some more contemporary and unique sections such as “Multicultural Heritages: Lives and Cultures in Transition,” and “Inside and Outside the Law: Lawyers, Judges, Police, Criminals.” For teachers who are interested in building library or classroom collections of coming-of-age memoirs, this book is a great guide. And, of course, there is a chapter on memoirs by writers for children and young adults, guiding readers to the early lives of Beverly Cleary, Roald Dahl, M. E. Kerr, Gary Paulsen, Jerry Spinelli, and Paul Zindel, among others.

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Of course, no bibliographer can know all of the great books in any category. A book Long missed is one of the best coming-of-age memoirs I have read in a long time, Chris Crutcher’s *King of the Mild Frontier: An Ill-Advised Autobiography* (Greenwillow Books, 2003). It is not that anything so bad happened to Crutcher in his young life growing up in the ’50s and ’60s in Cascade, Idaho—it was a “mild frontier.” It is just that he experienced very few triumphs and

victories. If he did, he did not write about them. Crutcher paints himself as a below-average kid, struggling along like most of us struggled—trying to become himself, to matter in some special way to those who know him, and to understand how his family and community are shaping him. He is given to attacks of rage and bouts of tears into his early teens. He loves his benignly alcoholic mother and his hard-working, WWII bomber-pilot father. Chris admires his older brother who excels in everything. Last string on the basketball team and a failure with the girls, he tries to impress. Chris survives his high school classes by copying all of his homework from his brother's scholarly archives.

My brother, John, was nearly three years older than I but preceded me in school by only two years, due to our birth months. John took his studies seriously and graduated as valedictorian of his class From me, [my parents] could expect Cs. I came to imagine myself the perfect C student, to which there was a certain poetic balance, all of my initials being C. . . . I could earn Cs with a minimum of time and effort directed at schoolwork, but what I really wanted was to earn them with no effort

[At this opportune moment, searching for a favorite baseball card lost in a fraudulent trade, Chris sneaks into John's private closet.] The closet is a huge walk-in with unfinished walls and a single blub dangling on a frayed cord from the ceiling just above the entrance. The switch is broken, so you simply screw the bulb tight. I open the door, reach up and twist the bulb, and immediately hear celestial music . . . because in the back of my brother's closet is every assignment he has ever done. They are separated by year and by class I instantly become what I now believe is one of the first recorded academic ecologists, because the rest

of my high-school career I will recycle every bit of that at which I now stare in awed and thankful reverence.

I'll have to do a *little* work, because I don't want to be stuck with As and the expectations that go with them, so I'll misspell some words, come to some wrong conclusions, miss some math answers by a decimal point or a few digits, [and] hand those babies in. (211–213)

Crutcher's memoir has much humor, and more pathos. When he recounted the scene of his unlikely first emergence as a creative writer, I was hearing celestial music and grinning from ear to ear. There is true joy and wonderment in Crutcher's statement, "Sometimes I stand before an auditorium filled with students or a banquet room filled with librarians and/or teachers, and I shake my head at the fact that I am living proof the universe will allow almost anything" (209).

Crutcher fans will love this book.

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Having been an English teacher for almost 40 years, sometimes I think I should write a teaching memoir. If I do, I know of no better model and inspiration for such an endeavor than reading *Educating Esmé* by Esmé Raji Codell (Algonquin Books, 1999—an ALA Alex Award-winner in 2000). The book makes me cry and then laugh aloud. With humor and heartbreak, Esmé's diary of her first year of teaching fifth grade addresses many of the issues

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and experiences all young teachers face—balancing personal and professional life, avoiding exploitation by unethical school administrators, learning from older colleagues, dealing with parents, handling crises in students' personal lives that force their way into the classroom. Even though Madame Esmé (as she invites her students to call her) is writing about helping open a brand new school in a tough Chicago neighborhood in the late 1990s, almost every diary entry resonates with something I experienced in my first years of teaching in rural Iowa 37 years ago—the exploitive principal, the desperate parent, the student who needs more than we have to give.

After teaching fifth grade for a few years, Esmé became a school librarian and successful children's author. Her books include the award-winning companion novels *Sahara Special* (Hyperion Books for Children, 2003) and *Vive La Paris* (Hyperion Books for Children, 2006). For more information about and interaction with Madame Esmé, I invite readers to visit Esmé's website: <http://www.planetesme.com/>. That is where I contacted her and asked her what comments about memoir writing and reading she wanted to share with *TAR* readers. Here is some of her email response:

I was lucky that I wrote *Educating Esmé* without the thought of an audience, as a real diary, even though I sometimes don't come off so well. I've taught for several years since that diary, and if I had "do-overs," I'm sure I would have written more about other teachers and what they were accomplishing and been more self-conscious about language, but now I can read it myself and look back and see the true

frustration and isolation that was part of that first year. If I had some advice to give, I would recommend teachers journal truly for themselves before trying to write a memoir for the world. That's how they will find their voice, not only as an educator but as a writer. And that voice may surprise them . . . Explorers keep logs, and scientists meticulously chronicle their data, so why shouldn't teachers journal? In these times of so much attention to accountability, it's such a meaningful tool for educators to authentically track their own professional growth, frustrations and successes, as well as those of the children in their charge. It's not always pretty, but it's always useful to determine what works and what doesn't. I didn't publish my real diary to talk about myself; I published as a battle-cry for other teachers to tell their stories, and to value their anecdotes as documentation, whether first-year teachers or golden apple veterans. There's a lot of room on the shelf!

Here's an informal and multicultural bibliography of some other memoirs that I like, and that I like to share with children:

- The Abracadabra Kid: A Writer's Life* by Sid Fleischman (Greenwillow, 1996)
- Knots in My Yo-Yo String: The Autobiography of a Kid* by Jerry Spinelli (Knopf, 1998)
- 26 Fairmount Avenue* by Tomie DePaola (Putnam, 1999)
- How Angel Peterson Got His Name: And Other Outrageous Tales about Extreme Sports* by Gary Paulsen (Wendy Lamb Books, 2003)
- Looking Back: A Book of Memories* by Lois Lowry (Delcorte, 2002)
- Bill Peet: An Autobiography* by Bill Peet (Houghton Mifflin, 1989)
- A Day of Pleasure: Stories of a Boy Growing Up in Warsaw* by Issac Bashevis Singer (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986)
- Chewing the Cud: An Extraordinary Life Remembered by the Author of Babe, the Gallant Pig* by Dick King-Smith (Knopf, 2002)

Down a Sunny Dirt Road: An Autobiography by Stan and Jan Berenstain (Random House, 2002)

Five Pages a Day: A Writer's Journey by Peg Kehret (Albert Whitman, 2002)

A Girl from Yamhill: A Memoir by Beverly Cleary (Morrow, 1998)

Homesick: My Own Story by Jean Fritz (Putnam, 1982)

Childtimes: A Three-generation Memoir by Eloise Greenfield and Lessie Jones Little (Harper Trophy, 1993)

Knucklehead: Tall Tales and Mostly True Stories of Growing Up Scieszka by Jon Scieszka (Viking Children's Books, 2008)

I hope this is of some help.
Best,
Esme

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So, you and your students read a lot of memoirs and you start to think that memoir is the perfect platform for integrated reading and writing instruction. You might get so wild as to think of restructuring your whole ninth-grade language arts semester around memoir. When that happens, Dawn and Dan Kirby, authors of *New Directions in Teaching Memoir: A Studio Workshop Approach* (Heinemann 2007) have written the book for you.

We like memoir because we can use it to develop a large, inclusive framework that gives us the opportunity to work with our students as readers and as writers. Memoir offers possibilities for in-depth literary study and analysis and for connecting literature to personal experience through writing. (Kirby and Kirby 8)

In my opinion, before most English teachers get to page 25, they will be saying, "I have to try this. Let's see, what can I jettison to make room for memoir?" One of the best things about this 196-page, 12-chapter book is that it is more of a *why-to*

One of the best things about this 196-page, 12-chapter book is that it is more of a *why-to* than a *how-to* discussion.

than a *how-to* discussion. Especially in early chapters, such as "Memoir as Genre" and "Studio-style Teaching," readers are treated to a very accessible discussion of writing and literature pedagogy, lightly but purposefully salted with foundational citations. And I love the arguments Kirby and Kirby use to promote memoir as a vehicle for student literature study:

Contemporary Memoir is also an ideal genre for study as literature because its rules have not been set in concrete. Mercifully, there are not "five elements" to the memoir, as traditionalists will claim about the short story. Rather, CM (contemporary memoir) as a form continues to surprise and confound its readers. Its conventions and constraints are seemingly challenged by the publication of each new memoir book . . . Readers, who are teachers and students alike, are witness to an emerging genre that has not been overly dissected by critics or flattened by instruction. Here is an authentic opportunity for students to share in the process of literary criticism and in the analysis of an emerging genre. (Kirby & Kirby 7)

Kirby and Kirby convince me that as text to read and to compose, memoir is clearly about constructing meaning. Here is how they explain that Contemporary Memoir is something different from autobiographical writing by famous people:

No longer merely heroic epics of lives

well lived, CMs explore both what writers can remember and understand from their lives and also take readers with them on journeys into unknown territory where writers use the form to try to understand and make sense of unexplained experiences they have yet to fully comprehend. CM has become the genre in which any reasonably reflective individual can construct a version of his or her own life. (2)

Sounds like Kirby and Kirby are talking about *King of the Mild Frontier*.

I want to say another word about some of the most important and, in my mind, *fresh* concepts for teaching and learning that Kirby and Kirby offer.

Memoir writing requires that students write about their lived experiences, which they know far better than we. We can neither tell these students exactly how these stories should go nor what meanings they should ultimately make of them. That's because the knowledge of their experiences resides within our students, not within us as omniscient teachers. (12)

Finally, a review of this book needs to mention the very cool and extensive bibliography of contemporary memoirs provided on the twenty-two pages of Chapter 12. The only problem *TAR* readers will have with reading those lists is the height to which the pile of memoir books will grow on their bedside tables.

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Now my friend and colleague Jim Davis will further help fill your bedside reading stand by reviewing two recent memoirs (one that continues this column's crusade for books about WWII) and four books about writing memoir.

Two Worthy Memoirs

Peck, Robert Newton. *Weeds in Bloom: Autobiography of an Ordinary Man*. Random House 2005.

By late middle school, most readers know, through *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, of Robert Newton Peck's challenging childhood. They will not know the array of people who enriched that young life and his adult life as well, some of whom he encountered because he had written novels. In *Weeds in Bloom*, Peck offers "a tarnished treasury of plain people, mostly poor and uneducated, who enriched me, taught me virtues, and helped mold a mite of manhood." In short, readable vignettes of people encountered and lessons learned, Peck accomplishes the self-understanding and revelation of memoir: "You shall know me by the people I have known."

One cluster of pieces comes from Peck's Vermont boyhood. In addition to his family, young Rob learned from his "gods," the local baseball team, and from a wealthy summer resident nearby who taught him to save (i.e., the difference between income and capital). He saw the work ethic, the strength

and gentleness of the local farrier, and the generosity of an unnamed fireman on the locomotive passing through town. How he cherished his one-room schoolhouse education is clear when he writes about Miss Kelly, source of his first nudge toward writing. An early manhood cluster begins with a chance encounter, as a 17-year-old private in the Army, with "Mr. Gene Autry." Peck expresses the appreciation for an impromptu concert that he never offered in person. More of the influences on Peck as a young man were encountered at work: at the saw mill, the paper mill, and later in a Manhattan office. In a final cluster from "the Florida years," life lessons come from, among others, an old man and his dog, a senior Seminole, and a woman selling her hand-sewn quilts. All are swatches in "the crazy quilt of my life," and they confirm that "hardship is not always yoked with hardness of the heart," a major theme of the collection.

Weeds in Bloom ends with thirty-three epigrammatic conclusions, "guide-irons" with which Peck invites the reader to disagree, especially if you "forge a few of your own." They resonate with material on his website, which also can provoke as well as inspire. *Weeds in Bloom* could welcome a younger or reluctant reader to the realm of memoir, perhaps leading to Gary Paulsen's *Eastern Sun*, *Winter Moon*, Eudora Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings*, or Marian Wright Edelman's *Dream Me Home Safely: Writers on Growing Up in America*. Some rich lessons are to be harvested from among these weeds.

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Moore, Gary W. *Playing with the Enemy: A Baseball Prodigy, World War II, and the Long Journey Home*. Penguin Books 2006 (paper 2008).

Without a long-avoided father-son conversation triggered by the father's heart attack, Gene Moore's coming-of-age story would not have been written. Many veterans, from World War II and other conflicts, are reluctant to talk about their experiences. Gene Moore had the additional excuse of Top Secret classification, but his emotional pain was as great a restraint. Gene Moore's story begins as a fifteen-year-old local baseball phenomenon. In 1941, he was a hometown hero and a top prospect as a catcher and power hitter for the Brooklyn Dodgers. When the United States entered World War II after Pearl Harbor, the Dodgers arranged for Gene to play baseball for a team in the Navy, entertaining troops at training bases as well as in North Africa and Italy. In 1944, the Navy team was assigned to guard German sailors captured from a submarine carrying an Enigma decoding machine, something the German Navy did not know the Allies had. The POW base was secret; the assignment was classified.

Gene Moore's strengths as a catcher included the ability to control a game with his arm and his bat, to manage pitchers, and to direct more experienced players. He loved and understood the game. Facing the boredom of guard duty, and deterioration of skills he planned to take to the major leagues after the war, Gene persuaded his commander to let the Navy team teach the German crew to play baseball. His effort changed

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the dynamic and developed mutual respect between the teams. Their ultimate game, marking the end of the war in Europe, also ended Gene's career. Despite one last chance with the Pittsburgh Pirates, he fell into depression and alcoholism, to be saved finally by a woman who found him on a barroom floor, got him back on his feet, and married him. Gene became a successful, even inspiring businessman. Still, the pain of losing a Hall of Fame baseball career kept him from sharing his story with his son, and from enjoying his son's love of the game.

Playing with the Enemy, like many memoirs, was not written by an established author, which can be part of the appeal. Gary Moore was fifty years old when he tackled his father's story, wrote his first book, and negotiated the movie rights. The result is, at times, a slightly didactic but capably written book carried by a compelling story. It offers unique insights into little known facets of history—World War II, baseball, and even business. For many young readers, it might lead to other memoirs, like Pat Jordan's *A False Spring* or A

Nice Tuesday, perhaps Pat Conroy's *My Losing Season*. It suggests the possibility of worthy memoirs in the untold stories of those we think we know. *Playing with the Enemy* should be added to the memoir shelf in the high school classroom.

Books On Writing Memoir

Given online searching and ordering capacity, teachers and others interested in writing and in helping students write memoirs might find the following titles helpful. (Ordered by original copyright date.)

Selling, Bernard. *Writing from Within: A Guide to Creativity and Life Story Writing*. Barnes and Noble 1988 (1998).

Strong on techniques for overcoming fear and uncovering memory, Selling offers a readable text and practical, but hardly mundane, advice. He mirrors William Stafford, for example, in his emphasis on warming up and discovering *by* writing, not before writing. He also stresses rewriting as a means to insight, and advocates building a "library of significant moments," as well as writing family histories, the stories of others. A section on "Expanding and Managing Your Creativity" is followed by life-story selections from the work of students in his classes. His "Life Writing Checklist" encapsulates key points from the book and is a handy reminder to post over a desk or in a writer's notebook.

Ledoux, Denis. *Turning Memories into Memoirs: A Handbook for Writing Life Stories*. Soliel Press 1993.

Ledoux is grounded in storytelling and considers lifelists the backbone of memoir writing, although memory jogs are acceptable companions. He emphasizes craft in interviewing and researching and writing, and considers theme the life of the story. He also stresses the importance of the writer being a reader, both as a source of perspective on one's own text and as a way to learn from the writing of others. A chapter on "little things"—active voice, point of view, appropriate vs. perfect grammar, concise and precise wording—is helpful, as is the advice to "cut 10%." Numerous lifestories are included from students in Ledoux's workshops.

Roorbach, Bill. *Writing Life Stories*. Story Press 1998.

Because the writer can't tell it all, the secret to memoir, according to Roorbach, is in "scenes." Following useful thoughts on getting started and uncovering memory, his focus on the scene as the vital heart of dramatic writing, "nearly always what's missing when a piece of creative nonfiction fails to come alive," energizes the writing student and provides foundation for further work with character and "stage presence." Roorbach includes helpful chapters on research, "Finding the Facts," and on

the relationships between metaphor and meaning in the construction of memoir. Useful exercises permeate each chapter, and a narrative thread from a particular workshop enhances the early going. Roorbach also appends a solid list of suggested reading.

Phifer, Nan. *Memoirs of the Soul: Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography*. Walking Stick Press 2002.

Recognizing that "external facts about a life can be researched generations later, but the inner life is irrevocably lost unless written during one's lifetime," Pfifer seeks to help the memoirist who probes for the essence, the activating principle and center of existence. She values memoir's ability to access the keen moments, the quickening experiences, the significant fragments that together feel whole in a life. Grounded in writing process, she emphasizes gathering material, drafting, and refining text into insight. The writing itself is a quest, and she offers reminders of much to notice along the way. Generative lists address ages and concerns, but lead to ways to change perspective and focus, to craft the emerging book, and to mine the rewards of retrospection. Pfifer includes suggestions about using her guide in community, with fellow travel-

ers, and adds a considered list for further reading.

Directed to writers, but written by writing workshop leaders, these guides are rich resources for writers and teachers alike. They, too, can strengthen the nonfiction shelf in a classroom.

James S. Davis was born and raised in the southwest Missouri Ozark Mountains and began teaching high school English in 1966. Following graduate work at the University of Arkansas and at the University of Missouri, he joined a regional agency in Cedar Rapids, Iowa in 1973 as a language arts consultant. Co-founder and director of the Iowa Writing Project since 1978, he has also served the Iowa Council of Teachers of English and NCTE in many roles. He "retired" from his consultant position in 2003 to join the faculty in the English Department at the University of Northern Iowa, where IWP simultaneously relocated under his continuing direction. **Bill Broz** is assistant professor of English Education at the University of Texas-Pan American. He has published several articles and book chapters on teaching writing and literature in high school, including "Hope and Irony: Annie on My Mind" which won the 2002 English Journal Hopkins Award. He is currently promoting the idea that literature from students' home cultures is an essential component of multicultural education.