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Applestein-Sweren Book Collecting Prize

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The Value of a True Story: Memoir as a Writer's Primary Source

After high school, my love of reading was rekindled through memoirs. I had entered a very transitional period in my life, where I was commuting to community college and struggling to dig my heels into an area of study that interested me. After attending a small Christian high school that effectively squashed the aptitude for creativity and critical thinking I'd had in both elementary and middle school—replacing it with stark memorization and uniformity—I was learning to love learning again, and much of this is attributed to a combination of extraordinary teachers and the growing stack of books beside my bed.

My draw to memoirs probably stemmed out of my love for coming-of-age stories. Much of these books also deal with foster care and the system, which have been interests of mine since I was a child myself. I find childhood development and psychology fascinating, and am always curious about how events and trauma in early childhood impact the child's transition into adulthood, especially now that I work with children. I'm inexplicably drawn to the significance of the memories individuals retain from their early years. My proudest achievement in community college was a research paper I wrote that studied how the most popular narratives that emerged from the Holocaust were written from the perspective of children. I wrote: "The common understanding and relatability of being so young allows any audience to place themselves into the shoes of a child and see the world through their eyes... *The Diary of Anne Frank*, one of the most famous Holocaust memoirs, is taught in primary schools as a cautionary

tale for future generations. Children's narratives, specifically, make it near-impossible to justify any of the suffering caused by World War II." The same can be applied to the appeal of a child's perspective in all memoir.

I find I am attracted to memoirs over books of fiction that are considered "literary." This defies almost everything I'm taught as a student of English Lit, but the creative writer in me clings desperately to these stories. Writing, in my opinion, is one of the most effective ways for someone to unpack the scattered memories from their past, and it nearly always results into an intimate window into someone's psyche—even if the end result isn't something that would be upheld as a work of literary art. There is truly no other form that allows someone to collect their past as intimately as memoir does. For me, the draw is also in the fact that there's no "lesson" or forced moral objective in most memoirs. Nothing feels forced, melodramatic, or disingenuous. The author hands you their story, and asks you to decide for yourself what it means—whether it be about them as an individual, or about humanity in general. I, myself, have faced lapses in my memory from points in my life that I find particularly traumatic, and a few years ago I discovered that writing is one of the only ways I can recover some of those details that I thought I'd forgotten—no matter how minute—out of the murkiness of my memory.

I've always placed my role as a storyteller over my role as a writer. I can bear to read a poorly written narrative as long as I'm connected to the story, but I can never force myself to read an articulate, "well-written" piece of work if I find the characters to feel unrealistic and cartoonish. I'm not a big fantasy or science-fiction fan, but the standouts in that genre always seem to ground themselves in the fact that their characters' reactions and emotions feel real, even if the environment they're placed in is not. I've read a number of memoirs by authors who have self-published, just for the sake of having their story out there. Some of these are difficult to

read, and far from writing that would be considered “publishable,” but I value them just the same, for the authenticity of a true story. It’s also the same reason I’m drawn to webpages such as Humans of New York—I crave the real, the true, the personal, and am astonished by the common threads weaved throughout stories that seem to singular on the surface.

It’s almost as if I use these books as primary source material for my own writing. I want to write a story so real that it reads like memoir. I keep a small notebook beside my bed, full of the most random of character details—bullet points such as “uses toaster to light cigarettes,” or “waters down milk to save money.” I write a lot of historical fiction, and my research includes delving into historical archives and old journals of men and women living in the time period I’m focused on. Some stories are so unbelievable but so specific in detail that it is impossible for them to be anything other than true.

Memoirs offer an intimate perspective on life and social issues that is impossible to find through traditional modes of research. It is one thing to read about addiction and alcoholism in a medical journal, but it is another, more visceral experience to experience it through the eyes of a child with an addict parent. It is one thing to read statistics on poverty, but it is a completely different experience to read through the suffering of a child who endured it themselves. It is one thing to study autism in a college class, but it is another to enter the mind of an autistic child through their own words. I’d never felt so dumb and ignorant after reading Donna Williams’ *Nobody Nowhere: The Extraordinary Autobiography of an Autistic Girl*, where she writes about how she would swallow things like coins and shiny rocks as a toddler, because she found them so beautiful and shiny that she simply wanted them to be a part of her. Attaching emotions and specific experiences opens the door to the more personal side of big picture issues, which is exactly the kind of arsenal one wants to build as a writer, and is why reading and collecting these

books has shaped every step of my personal growth—as a writer, but also simply as a human being.

Annotated Bibliography

Brown, Cupcake. *Piece of Cake*. Paw Prints, 2008.

I find that this book exemplifies the impact education can have on someone's life, but it also delves much further. I read it during my first year at community college and was left in awe. Cupcake Brown details her scattered upbringing, dealing with the foster care system and abuse in her early life, and how she found her way to law school despite those odds. While difficult to read, the book is astonishingly open and honest, and Brown's vivid memory leaves no stone in her past unturned. Out of all the authors in this collection, Brown, specifically, creates such a unique voice for herself through this work.

Burch, Jennings Michael. *They Cage the Animals at Night: The True Story of an Abandoned Child's Struggle for Emotional Survival*. New American Library, 2017.

At first, this story was almost unbelievable. It reads so much like fiction that I kept having to remind myself that I was reading a memoir. Jennings narrates his time spent in an orphanage as a child, writing with a voice so strong that it taps right back into the psyche of an abandoned child. Many of the books in this collection deal with the foster care system and its subsequent institutions, and this one stands out because of the innocence and perspective of the young male narrator.

Busby, Cylin, and John Busby. *The Year We Disappeared*. Bloomsbury, 2018.

I'm usually not a fan of "true crime" type memoirs, but this one remains stuck in my brain. Again, it is the child's perspective that captured my attention. Cylin Busby's father—a police officer—is shot and nearly killed by an unknown assailant, forcing Cylin and her family to go into hiding in their own home, isolated behind an armed house and guards while her father recovers and his attacker is located. Cylin details a unique type of social and emotional

isolation during the ordeal, and the narrative switches between Cylin and her father's points of view, showing all sides of the tragedy. It is easy to see why the Busby's experience lent itself to a memoir.

Byron, Tanya. *Skeleton Cupboard: The Making of a Clinical Psychologist*. Flatiron Books, 2016.

While this book is an amalgam of real-life characters and stories (for confidentiality's sake), I still consider Byron's novel to be a memoir. Byron recounts her experience entering into the field of clinical psychology, and organizes the book into six sections, each dedicated to a specific case she's worked on. The one that stuck out to me the most was the story of a young girl, Imogen, who drowned her baby sister in an attempt to protect her from her father's sexual abuse. Byron pays attention to the stories of the patients while also looking introspectively, detailing her fear and emotions as a young woman, herself, expected to act appropriately and professionally at all times, treading the line of her own emotional investment in her patients.

Calcaterra, Regina. *Etched in Sand: A True Story of Five Siblings Who Survived an Unspeakable Childhood*. William Morrow & Co, 2017.

This is one of the first memoirs I read, and one of the many that jumpstarted my interest in the foster care system from the perspective of the child navigating and other memoirs dealing with the same subject. The author, herself, grew up to be a lawyer and advocate for foster youth, which greatly impacts the way she chooses to tell her story—combining her experience as a child with the knowledge of the system she gained in hindsight.

Dugard, Jaycee Lee. *A Stolen Life*. Simon & Schuster, 2011.

For someone who has only ever been written *about*, allowing Jaycee Dugard to recount her story in her own words is extremely important. Something I took away from this memoir was

that Dugard's story didn't stop once she was rescued from captivity—an impression that one might draw from the media frenzy around her case that penned rescue as her ultimate goal. The book goes further, detailing into her rehabilitation after she was “found,” and even including journal entries she wrote during the time she was captive.

Frank, Anne. *The Diary of a Young Girl*. General Press, 2018.

Rightfully one of the most widely-known memoirs. I first read this when I was only a year older than Anne had been at the time, purchasing it because I felt obliged to—it had always seemed like one of those “right-of-passage” books for young adults, and I'd never been given the chance to read it in school. As a writer I'm still in awe at how articulate and honest Anne's voice is, and how the common thread of teenage girlhood continues to resonate with young readers—no matter the difference in years or situations. This is a book I plan on gifting to my future daughter when she reaches adolescence.

Gwartney, Debra. *Live through This: A Mother's Memoir of Runaway Daughters and Reclaimed Love*. Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010.

This was the book I read most recently—not one I would have picked out on my own, but it was recommended to me by a former teacher. I've read few books from the perspective of a parent regarding their child's situation, but reading this memoir forced me to encounter a mindset much different from my own, that of a mother of two teenage girls, dealing with addition and homelessness.

Harrison, Kathy. *Another Place at the Table*. Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2004.

I'm drawn to books such as this—no matter how poorly written—simply because of my long-standing interest in foster care and the system itself. I find this book to be one of the best representations of a foster parent's dilemma that I've read thus far—Harrison doesn't stray

away from the dark stories, near-impossible decisions, and questions that seem absent of morally correct answers. She isn't hesitant to share her own doubts and shortcomings. To me, as a writer, it exemplifies the benefits that a fully rounded narrative has on a memoir—as opposed to writing that seems only self-serving or idealistic.

Hill, Jenna Miscavige., et al. *Beyond Belief: My Secret Life inside Scientology and My Harrowing Escape*. Blackstone Audio, Inc., 2014.

This is yet another book that remains burned into my brain. I've always been fascinated with the psychology behind cults and toxic religion, and intersecting this with the psychology of a child's developing brain in this community really drew me in. This book made me aware of abuse tactics used by large groups and organizations, as opposed to some of the other books on this list that deal with abuse on an individual level. The credibility of this narrative is also astounding—the author being the niece of the current leader of scientology.

Jolie, Angelina. *Notes from My Travels: Visits with Refugees in Africa, Cambodia, Pakistan, and Ecuador*. Pocket Books, 2003.

This was the first book ever purchased on my Amazon account and one of the most-loved books on my bookshelf. It accompanied me during my first semester at community college and was the catalyst for my interest in other memoirs dealing with Cambodia and the Cambodian genocide. I've always admired Angelina Jolie for her humanitarian work and her collection of her journal entries articulates her awareness of her position as an outsider in the communities she visits. She writes: "I was the American. At times during the night I was proud of that and at other times I was not." While it is not as literary as the other memoirs in this collection, I find there is so much to learn from this piece.

Karr, Mary. *The Liars' Club: A Memoir*. Penguin Books, 1995.

This is my favorite book of all time and one of the books that truly made me appreciate the art of a memoir. Karr writes a story so visceral that reading it feels more like watching a dream unfold. She rebuilds her childhood world and invites the reader to navigate it with her, through all corners of the darkness and murkiness of memory. Reading this book for the first time led me to start taking my own writing much more seriously, simply because I saw the impact that a story such as this could have on a reader, and showed me a style of writing I wanted to emulate. There is a scene in specific—where the author’s mother wakes her children up in the middle of the night and burns all of their clothing and toys—that I hold as an exemplary piece of memoir writing.

Karr, Mary. *Cherry: A Memoir*. Picador, 2002.

The follow-up memoir to Karr’s *The Liars’ Club*, that maintains the same impeccable writing, following Karr into her teenage years.

Lawson, Jenny. *Let’s Pretend This Never Happened*. Pan Books Ltd, 2013.

I tend to stray away from comedic memoirs, but this one proves to be an outlier in my collection. It’s a laugh out loud kind of funny—but not in the way that seems forced or stretched. Lawson taught me the importance of using comedy as a bridge to look into the darker corners of our lives and emerge (for the most part) unscathed.

McCourt, Frank. *Angela’s Ashes: A Memoir*. Scribner, 2003. Print.

One of the first memoirs I read, after my mother bugged me to read it for years. McCourt’s story and prose completely hung over me for the time I was reading it—he was able to make me feel the same damp darkness and hopelessness of poverty, though I was reading from the comfort of my own home. The intersection of poverty and the mindset of Catholicism (or

organized religion in general) was something I'd never considered, and remains one of the central themes in McCourt's narrative.

Person, Cea Sunrise. *North of Normal*. Harpercollins Canada, 2015.

One of the things this memoir does best, in my opinion, was create a dynamic cast of characters. Not that Person didn't already have a unique upbringing, but she revisits it with the wisdom of enough time and distance to be able to understand her family in ways she wouldn't have been able to as the young child experiencing it.

Rhodes-Courter, Ashley. *Three Little Words: The Heartbreaking True Story of an Abandoned Little Girl*. Ebury Press, 2014.

This is another book that deals with the foster care system, this time from the perspective of a woman who navigated through multiple homes over the course of nine years. What makes this book unique is that the first draft was completed when the author was only seventeen, giving it the added edge of a rawer narrative that stems out of a writer who hasn't yet experienced the distance from her situation, which I believe works in this instance.

Ruta, Domenica. *With or without You: A Memoir*. Spiegel & Grau, 2014.

This is another memoir that I believe nails the characterization. Ruta is given the opportunity to completely demonize so many people in her life—namely her mother—but she writes such deeply flawed and complex characters that she's somehow able to draw sympathy for even the most seemingly senseless of actions. It's one thing to give these attributes to fictional characters, but I really believe it requires another level of human insight and intuition to be able to dissect real-life people and situations in the same manner.

Scheeres, Julia. *Jesus Land: A Memoir*. Counterpoint, 2005.

Yet another book that feeds my fascination with toxic religiosity and its effect on children. Scheeres' narrative, in particular, also deals with race, as Scheeres witnesses her adopted black brother grapple with the racism of the Midwest in the 1980's. Scheeres and her brother are sent to a religious reform school in the Dominican Republic, and much of the memoir focuses on the emotional manipulation and physical abuse experienced by both siblings. Something this book does exceptionally well is carry the narrative over into Scheeres adulthood, detailing her journey back in memory and subsequent search for other children who were sent to the same "camps" as she and her brother.

Thebarger, Sarah. *The Invisible Girls: A Memoir*. Jericho Books, 2014.

I vividly remember finishing this book in one sitting. In the midst of our torn political discourse around immigrants and refugees, this book grounds itself in the undeniable reality of the real families in the eye of this storm. Thebarger's approach to memoir helped me, as a writer, look at ways of telling someone else's story without turning them into a mere plot point or caricature. On a human level, it exemplifies the ability each person has to completely change someone's world for the better. And because it is true, the audience knows it can be done in the real world, as opposed to being written off as a piece of idealistic fiction.

Ung, Loung. *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers*. Harper Collins Publishers, 2017.

I purchased this book after reading Angelina Jolie's *Notes from My Travels: Visits with Refugees in Africa, Cambodia, Pakistan, and Ecuador*. Ironically, Jolie ended up working with the author of this novel to direct a movie about the Cambodian genocide a few years later. There are so many scenes from this book that have remained viscerally implanted in my brain, and it's a book I can reread over and over again knowing I'll always discover

something different. This memoir sparked my interest in genocide memoirs from a child's point of view, mainly in the way children process and interact with trauma from a psychological perspective.

Walls, Jeannette. *The Glass Castle: A Memoir*. Scribner, 2005.

This, along with Karr's *Liars' Club*, is one of my favorite memoirs of all time. Walls seems to have perfected the art about writing with the retrospection of her own adulthood, while also paying mind to the truths of her child-self that experienced these moments. She's an expert at culminating small scenes, details, and pieces of dialogue together into something so visceral it feels less like reading and more like watching a scene play out in real time. This is a book I revisit constantly for inspiration.

Williams, Donna. *Nobody Nowhere: The Extraordinary Autobiography of an Autistic Girl*.

Perennial, 2002.

When I first read this book I found myself constantly re-reading passages and dog-earing pages to come back to later. This memoir does what I believe all memoirs should do—gives the reader a window in a world they would unlikely see otherwise. In this case, Williams illustrates not only a world, but a mind that sees the world differently than others. She explains her upbringing and autism in a way that made me feel dumb for not understanding it before.

Annotated Wish List

Brennan-Jobs, Lisa. *Small Fry*. Grove Press, 2018.

I recently discovered this book and have been dying to read it, simply because it feels like a perspective I've never heard from before. Many of the memoirs in my collection deal with children facing poverty, and I'm curious about the other side of that—how the daughter of such a rich and affluent businessman faced struggles and emotional trauma of her own.

Bui, Thi. *The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir*. Harry N. Abrams, 2018.

I'm always trying to keep up to date with the new, creative ways of telling a story, and I find the concept of a graphic memoir to be fascinating. On first look I didn't feel I would enjoy it—I wasn't much of a comic book reader growing up—but I gave the first chapter sample on Amazon a chance and was immediately emotionally invested in the story. Along with the innovative way of storytelling, the premise of the book itself seems fascinating, and fits in with the other books in my collection that deal with immigration and family.

Clark, Tena. *Southern Discomfort: A Memoir*. Atria Books, 2018.

The title of this book immediately drew me in, and within a few sentences of the book's summary I was surprised that I hadn't heard of this book sooner. It checks all the boxes of topics I'm drawn to in other memoirs—small town America, race, mid-1900's culture, sexuality, alcoholism, and coming-of-age narratives.

Cooper, Helene. *The House at Sugar Beach: In Search of a Lost African Childhood*. Simon & Schuster, 2009.

This one has been on my wish list for a while. I've taken such an interest in memoirs that detail the idea of "home" and what happens when that is taken from us. I've seen this in memoirs from the Cambodian genocide, the Holocaust, and others—but never from Liberia. I

know very little about the 1980 military coup that took place there, which is why this book is at the top of my list.

Cross, June. *Secret Daughter: A Mixed-Race Daughter and the Mother Who Gave Her Away*. Penguin Books, 2007.

Though I've heard of many, I've never read a memoir that deals with race relations between a parent and child. The book's summary is just enough to leave me with countless questions. What was the mother's intention in giving her daughter away? Was it for her daughter's protection? Out of shame? It also leaves me wondering about how the daughter—now grown—processes this formative part of her childhood.

Julien, Maude. *The Only Girl in the World: A Memoir*. Little, Brown and Company, 2017.

The premise of this book reads like something out of a horror movie. The side of me that is fascinated with child psychology yearns to read about how the author analyzes the abuse and isolation—along with psychological manipulation—she endured in her childhood, but the human side of me aches that such a story is actually true. This book fits right in with nearly every book in my collection, detailing a “unique” childhood and its impacts on the author's later life.

Lillibridge, Lara. *Girlish: Growing up in a Lesbian Home*. Skyhorse, 2018.

This memoir, too, illustrates a “unique” childhood. The summary quotes, “The story everyone wants to hear isn't the story I want to tell,” and I'm immediately drawn in by her honesty. As someone who identifies as a lesbian, this book also feels very personal, because it offers insight on the child's viewpoint of a same-sex parent relationship that I would not have otherwise.

McGrady, Vanessa. *Rock Needs River: A Memoir About a Very Open Adoption*. Little A, 2019.

I've only read a few memoirs about adoption from the adoptive parent's point of view, and this one seems to sport a pretty unique case, where the child's biological parents wind up moving in with the adoptive family as well. The idea of an open adoption has always been a point of debate for me, circling questions around the impact on both the child and the adoptive parent, and I'm hoping this book can give me a more well-rounded perspective on the concept.

Parent, Marc. *Turning Stones: My Days and Nights with Children at Risk*. Ballantine Books, 1998.

This book immediately reminded me of one already in my collection: *Skeleton Cupboard: The Making of a Clinical Psychologist*, but from the viewpoint of a different professional that deals with unique cases. I would love to work with at-risk children one day, and though I've read many books that detail these situations, I've yet to find one that is from the perspective of someone like a caseworker, which is why I think this book would really round out that part of my collection.

Vance, J.D. *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. Harper, 2016.

This book was recommended to me multiple times around the time of the 2016 election, but I'd never gotten around to reading it. I love stories such as this that trace the transgenerational issues through a family, and the themes of poverty and upward mobility in this memoir seem especially timely. While many of the memoirs I've read deal with the idea of the "American Dream" in one way or another, I have yet to read one from the perspective of a family who was born and raised in America.

Westover, Tara. *Educated: A Memoir*. Random House, 2018.

This is yet another book that has been recommended to me over and over, since its initial publication. The author's approach also catches my attention—this could easily be a memoir

about her rough upbringing, but she decides to tie it all back to the importance of education and the impact it can have on an individual's life. I've read many memoirs of children from impoverished upbringings who defy near-impossible odds to receive an education, but this one seems to take it to a new extreme. I am fascinated to learn about how the author views the first seventeen years of her life, before she was ever able to set foot in a classroom.