

## Getting Up to Speed in Biography and Memoir

By Neal Wyatt

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### What is a Biography or Memoir?

While biography and memoir take different approaches, they have the same goal -- sharing the experience of an individual and exploring ways in which that experience can be seen as universal. Memoirs do this rather intimately: they are about the author and tend to be highly personal and evocative. Biographies employ a historical frame rather than a personal one, and while they too can be intimate, are often more objective in tone.

### What happens in a Biography or Memoir?

A person's life story, or a collection of pivotal moments, is revealed in both memoirs and biographies. The best of both forms seek to animate a life in its widest context, exploring the setting and time of the subject as well as his or her motivations and contributions. Memoirs are the recollections and feelings of the author, ordered and arranged to make narrative sense. Biographies are fact-based scholarly interpretations of a life, offered in a range of narrative levels, some have sections that are highly story-based while others seldom veer from a straight presentation of the facts.

### Why do people like Biographies and Memoirs?

People are fascinating; their life stories are intriguing and instructive. Memoirs are enjoyable to fans because they are personal and inviting and because they put our own lives into perspective. Biographies hold the same pleasures as many history titles, contextualizing a famous life and illuminating the world in which the person lived. In general, biography and memoir fans enjoy these books because of the characters, tone, and subjects. Quirky, indomitable, inspiring, and talented, these are just a few of the types of characters to be found in the pages of memoirs and biographies. Memoir tones range from the riotous to the inspirational and the subjects are endless. There are recovery memoirs, childhood memoirs, those about death and loss, as well as coming-of-age memoirs just to name a few. Biography fans seem to enjoy an insightful, more scholarly tone but are as adventurous as memoir readers when it comes to subjects and characters.

### Five key titles:

*Why be Happy When You Can Be Normal?* by Jeanette Winterson is a shining example of the best memoirs can offer -- the intimate re-telling of the author's own life through a lens that is not the least bit self-indulgent. In brisk and beautiful prose, Winterson writes bravely and intimately about her horrifying childhood, coming-of-age, coming-out, and search for a way to reconcile her life.

*Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power* by Jon Meacham is an example of a political and cultural biography. Meacham primarily explores the life of our third President in light of his political skill, intent, and philosophy. This is biography at its best, bringing Jefferson to life through lively, expansive, and engaging writing, and setting him firmly in the context of his times.

*Blue Nights* by Joan Didion is a pitch-perfect work, stellar in its execution, and deeply reflective of the author's failures and fears. Following her award-winning *The Year of Magical Thinking*, in which Didion recounts the death of her husband, she continues to explore the way grief haunts her later life, as she discusses the death of her daughter, Quintana Roo.

*Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman* by Robert K. Massie is a royal biography centered on the history, culture, and politics of Russia during the mid- to late 1700s, as Empress Catherine II came to power. Brilliantly constructed, Massie's work is notable for its story-rich approach, attention to fully formed portraits, and its intimate and engaging feel.

*Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* by Cheryl Strayed recounts Strayed's three-month long hike along the Pacific Crest Trail. Rootless after her divorce and deeply grieving the death of her mother, Strayed lost her way. This vivid and forthright portrait outlines how she eventually found her path as she followed the markers along the 2,663 mile long trail.

### Five key authors:

**Taylor Branch** is a noted social biographer who has written three iconic books on Martin Luther King Jr. As an example of the power of biography to inspire and teach, and to capture both the character and his social world, Branch's trilogy is a tour de force. Readers should start with *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63*.

**Alison Bechdel** is a great example of a new breed of memoirist, those working in the graphic format. (I want to leave this as it is to make the point that this is a newish trend to pay attention to) Her work encapsulates how authors and artists use illustration and text to convey their life stories in rich and rewarding dimensions. Readers should start with *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*.

**Augusten Burroughs** epitomizes the hyper self-aware memoirist who shares his life with readers in great -- and hilarious -- detail. While many of the events in Burroughs' life are tragic, he expresses them with a wild-eye glee that has captured readers' imaginations and launched a trend in disaster, recovery, and dysfunctional-family memoirs. Readers should start with *Running with Scissors*.

**Stacy Schiff** is a classic biographer, well-known for her rigorous scholarship and ability to get inside the characters she studies. Her works are academic but highly accessible and offer readers' true understanding of her subjects' life and times. Readers should start with *Cleopatra: A Life*.

**Ron Chernow** is an elegant biographer who specializes in creating highly readable works based on massive amounts of brilliantly synthesized research. He has written perhaps the most highly regarded biography on John D. Rockefeller as well as books that combine finance and biography. Readers should start with *Washington: A Life*.

## How do I help Biography and Memoir fans?

- Biography and memoir are two widely known and popular types of nonfiction and readers usually ask for them by name. Fans expect different things from both forms, so it is important not to interchange them. Readers of memoir usually enjoy other titles in the same general subject grouping, such as recovery or coming-of-age. They also tend to read for the same tone and literary style, so those are match points to consider as well. Biography fans are drawn primarily to subject, so you should ask if they are interested in another biography on the same subject or if they are in the mood for something different. Tone and narrative style also matter a great deal and should be considered when making biography suggestions.
- For readers new to memoirs and biography, and uncertain about what they like, briefly describe some typical topics of memoir (recovery, childhood, family dysfunction) or a few popular subjects of biography (women, American Revolutionary figures, Presidents) and see if they spark any interest. If a reader just wants to try out some memoirs, then sure bets such as *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood* by Alexandra Fuller, *The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion, *Life* by Keith Richards, and *This Boy's Life* by Tobias Wolff are good places to start. For those dipping a toe into biography, suggest *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation* by Catherine Allgor, *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* by Laura Hillenbrand, and *Sandy Koufax* by Jane Leavy.

### A few more tips:

- Like much narrative nonfiction, memoir and biography age well. Keep in mind older titles when working with readers and remember that any book a reader has not read is a new book to him or her. I left it with much because I do not want to say the majority.
- Consider other areas of nonfiction for memoir readers. There are a number of nonfiction types such as humor, essay, and highly narrative reporting that tend to read like memoirs. Examples include *Bossypants* by Tina Fey and *Me Talk Pretty One Day* by David Sedaris
- Biography fans might want to spend time in the history section or browse through titles classified as historical fiction. History titles such as *Destiny of the Republic* by Candice Millard and *Hedy's Folly* by Richard Rhodes are richly biographical. Fictional works such as *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel and *The Paris Wife* by Paula McLain also make good next reading for biography fans, even though much of the dialogue and events are imagined.
- Be careful about accidentally recommending an autobiography when asked for a memoir. They might seem interchangeable but they represent two different kinds of works. Memoirs focus on a small period of time, such as the year the author lost his daughter to a disease or the four years it took to build a boat and sail around the world. Autobiographies, on the other hand, cover the entire lifespan of the author.

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