

Autobiographies

American Lives in Their Own Words



BY ANDREW BENEDICT-NELSON

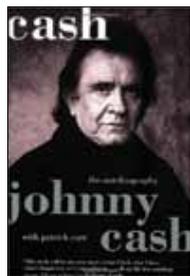
The first volume of Mark Twain's complete and unexpurgated autobiography was one of the surprise best sellers of 2010. Unlike his famous novels and essays, Twain's book was not a work he sat down and composed at his desk; instead, it is a series of stories and reminiscences he dictated to an assistant. Twain insisted that the work not be released in full until 100 years after his death, and while some parts had been published, more than half the book was "new," illuminating the thoughts and actions of one of America's great writers.

Twain's is just one of many absorbing American autobiographies that offer insight into luminaries in American history. For those looking for something to keep them busy until volume two of Twain's autobiography is published, here are some of the more interesting attempts by Americans to tell their lives in their own words.

Cash

The Autobiography

By Johnny Cash with Patrick Carr (1997)

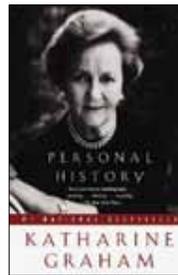


Nearly a decade before Joaquin Phoenix played the rebellious country star alongside Reese Witherspoon in *Walk the Line*, Johnny Cash (1932–2003) told many of the tales from his storied life in this autobiography. Key pieces of the Cash legend are here—the death of his brother when they were children, the concerts at Folsom and San Quentin prisons, the struggles with addiction—as well as anecdotes about everyone, from Elvis to Willie Nelson to Richard Nixon. But it's the immediacy of Cash's voice and the oddness of his life that make this much more than a celebrity memoir.

Personal History

By Katharine Graham (1997)

♦ PULITZER PRIZE

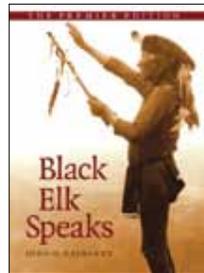


One of the great memoirs of Washington, D.C., as well as of American journalism, Graham recounts how she assumed the reins of power at the *Washington Post* after the death of her husband. In addition to an unflinching portrait of her husband's mental illness and suicide, Graham (1916–2001) provides an insider's view of the *Post's* showdowns with the government during the Pentagon Papers and Watergate scandals. She recalls her struggles as the only major female newspaper publisher of her day and explains how the role of women in journalism has changed over time. The book includes stories of her relationships with famous people like Warren Buffett and Robert McNamara, as well as with several presidents and their families.

Black Elk Speaks

Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux

By Black Elk as told to John G. Neihardt (1932)



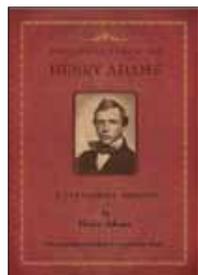
As a second cousin to Crazy Horse and a respected spiritual leader in his tribe, Black Elk (1865–1950) witnessed many of the major events of American Indian history at the end of the 19th century: the Battle of Little Big Horn, the rise of the Ghost Dance spiritual movement, and the resulting massacre at Wounded Knee. Like many of the Sioux, he was eventually relocated to a reservation, which is where he met John Neihardt in 1932. Neihardt was gather-

ing material for a series of poems but, seeing an opportunity, stopped to record Black Elk's story as translated by his son, Ben Black Elk. Recent scholars, while recognizing the value of the work, have raised issues with how Neihardt interpreted Black Elk's narrative.

The Education of Henry Adams

By Henry Adams (1918)

◆ PULITZER PRIZE

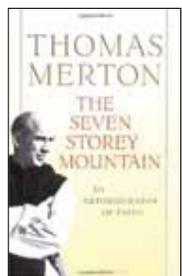


As the great-grandson of a Founding Father, the grandson of a U.S. president, and the son of a congressman and a diplomat, Henry Adams (1838–1918) had a lot to live up to. But in the end, he did so in a far different way from his famous ancestors. A journalist and historian who rubbed shoulders with nearly everyone of note in contemporary American society, he reflects on these experiences, yet he also demonstrates his profound cynicism about modern life and his detachment from it. Writing in the third person, Adams considers how much of his traditional schooling proved useless in the ever-changing world of the 20th century. Drawing upon his study of medieval history, he contrasts the Dynamo as a symbol of the unstable modern age with the Virgin Mary as a symbol of the unity of the medieval world. The book also contains hundreds of witty and memorable aphorisms concerning politics, education, and other subjects. Because Adams refers to a variety of political events modern readers will not recognize, an annotated edition may be desired.

The Seven Storey Mountain

An Autobiography of Faith

By Thomas Merton (1948)



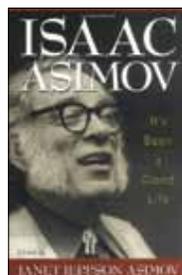
Merton (1915–1968), a brilliant but restless young man, grew up in England, France, and the United States. In his 20s he decided to turn his back on the world and join a Trappist monastery in Kentucky. *The Seven Storey Mountain* tells of his transition. It contains moments of religious transformation on both a complex, intellectual level (Merton's discovery of medieval philosophy) and a simple, personal one (in his pilgrimage to Cuba, Merton describes how the voices of children reciting the Nicene Creed moved his soul). But the book also has much to offer the secular reader, including its observations of London and New York in the 1930s as well as its reflections on authors such as William Blake. Since it was written after he became a monk, *The Seven Storey Mountain* was censored by Merton's superiors, and some facts of his life are not included (for example, he is thought to have fathered a child out of wedlock in England). Some readers who want to learn more about Merton may wish to turn to a biographical work like *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (1984) by Michael Mott, or to the famous

monk's published journals. See also *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* (2003), a "group biography" of Merton and contemporary American Catholic authors Dorothy Day, Flannery O'Connor, and Walker Percy.

Isaac Asimov

It's Been a Good Life

Edited by Janet Jeppson Asimov (2002)



Since he was famous for being peerlessly prolific and more than a tad egotistical, it should come as no surprise that science fiction author Isaac Asimov (1920–1992) wrote multiple autobiographies: *In Memory Yet Green* (1979), *In Joy Still Felt* (1980), and *I. Asimov: A Memoir* (1994). Critics tend to prefer the third, which is really a series of short essays on topics that Asimov felt were significant to his life—everything from his famous science fiction series to passions like Sherlock Holmes and Gilbert and Sullivan musicals. Following his death, Asimov's widow Janet Jeppson Asimov edited selections from the three books to form this volume, which also includes other autobiographical material, selections from their letters, and Asimov's favorite of his short stories.

And the Pulitzer Goes to ...

Every year, Columbia University presents a Pulitzer Prize for biography or autobiography. But the list of authors who wrote about themselves is relatively short. The autobiographies include the following:

THE EDUCATION OF HENRY ADAMS | HENRY ADAMS (1919)

THE AMERICANIZATION OF EDWARD BOK | EDWARD BOK (1921)

A DAUGHTER OF THE MIDDLE BORDER | HAMLIN GARLAND (1922)

FROM IMMIGRANT TO INVENTOR | MICHAEL I. PUPIN (1924)

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE | WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE (1947)

THE SPIRIT OF ST. LOUIS | CHARLES A. LINDBERGH (1954)

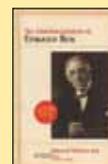
MEMOIRS | GEORGE FROST KENNAN (1968)

GROWING UP | RUSSELL BAKER (1983)

FORTUNATE SON: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF LEWIS B. PULLER JR. | LEWIS B. PULLER (1992)

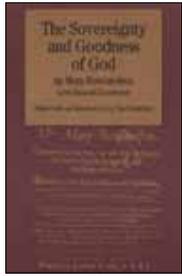
ANGELA'S ASHES: A MEMOIR | FRANK MCCOURT (1997)

PERSONAL HISTORY | KATHARINE GRAHAM (1998) ■



The Sovereignty & Goodness of God or A Narrative of the Captivity, Sufferings, and Removes of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson

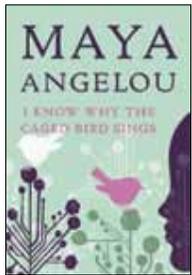
By Mary Rowlandson (1682)



A resident of Lancaster, Massachusetts in the 17th century, Rowlandson (1637–1711) was captured, along with her children, by an American Indian raiding party during the conflict known as King Philip's War. Her captivity lasted only about 11 weeks, but the notoriety she gained by publishing a book about the experience lasted for centuries. In addition to providing insight into conflict between American Indians and the first English colonists, the book is an excellent example of Puritan writing (be prepared to consult a Bible!), as well as a way of learning about the lives of women in this period of American history. Rowlandson's book is just one of a group of such "captivity narratives," several of which have been collected along with critical commentary in the Penguin anthology *Women's Indian Captivity Narratives*. For further context on King Philip's War and the development of American national identity, see Jill Lepore's *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (1998).

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

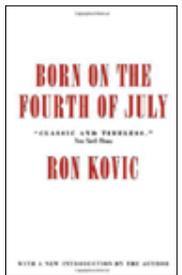
By Maya Angelou (1969)



It's remarkable to think that the joyful Maya Angelou (1928–) emerged from the harrowing experiences described in this book: as a child she was abandoned by her parents, belittled by the white people of her Arkansas town, threatened by the Ku Klux Klan, and reunited with her father only to be turned over to her mother and then raped by her boyfriend. Yet these events also provided the catalyst for Angelou to overcome the self-doubt and inferiority engendered in her by racism and oppression, as well as to allow her to embrace her identity as a poet and mother. Besides relating information about growing up in a particular time and place, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is also frequently cited as one of the best examples of autobiography as literature.

Born on the Fourth of July

By Ron Kovic (1976)

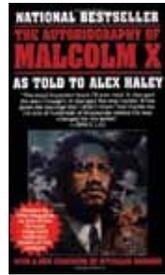


Inspired by President John F. Kennedy's inaugural address ("Ask not what your country can do for you. . . ."), Ron Kovic (1946–) joined the United States Marine Corps in 1964. He volunteered for two tours of duty in Vietnam and received several honors, including a Bronze Star. But during his second deployment, things fell apart. He accidentally shot and killed

one of his fellow servicemen and was later wounded and paralyzed from the chest down. Several years after returning to the United States, Kovic wrote this autobiography in less than two months, launching his career as one of the country's most prominent antiwar activists. But the book's descriptions of combat and life as a wounded veteran can be appreciated by people with divergent political views. The book served as the basis of the 1989 film by Oliver Stone, which Stone cowrote with Kovic.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X

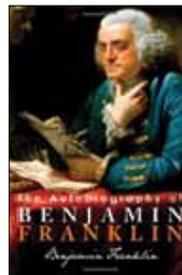
By Malcolm X as told to Alex Haley (1965)



While the country eventually embraced the ideas of equality and nonviolent struggle championed by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the lived experience of many African Americans of that generation is perhaps better reflected in the narrative of the more divisive leader, Malcolm X (1925–1965). His autobiography relates the difficulties of his early life, how he turned to crime and went to prison, and his embrace of Islam and the rejection of his birth name, Little. After 13 years as a major leader in the Nation of Islam, Malcolm eventually broke with the group, and in a pilgrimage to Mecca (movingly described in the book), he rejected racism in favor of a spirit of unity inspired by his faith. Since Malcolm worked with Alex Haley throughout the events at the end of the book and up to the point of Malcolm's assassination, the author of *Roots* (1976) had an essential role to play in its composition; today, scholars regard him as more of a collaborator than a ghostwriter.

The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin

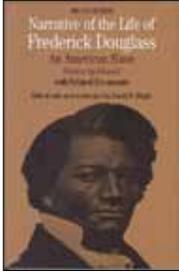
By Benjamin Franklin (1793)



Even if he had not been one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, Benjamin Franklin's (1708–1790) life would have been worth several books. His autobiography, a series of documents compiled after his death, covers his early rise through the printing business, his famous inventions and experiments with electricity, and (perhaps the book's most salient trait) his continual efforts at self-improvement. The book has a particularly tortured publication history: several early editions exist in both English and French, but the texts have been so well-studied by scholars that they likely contain no more secrets. Those interested in the American Revolution and its aftermath should be aware that Franklin does not cover this period at all. Readers who want to know more about that era might consider seeking out the Library of America edition of Franklin's writings. The autobiography appears in the second volume, *Benjamin Franklin: Autobiography, Poor Richard, and Later Writings* (2005).

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave

By Frederick Douglass (1845)

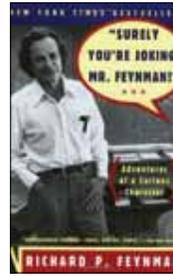


First published in 1845, this was the book that established Douglass (1818–1895) as a leading abolitionist writer and orator. It includes details of the horrors of life for blacks in the South but also the moments of joy that emerged from the slaves' efforts to cope, including a famous passage describing their singing. Douglass continually emphasizes the importance of literacy and self-education, which were essential to his escape from bondage and to his success when he reached the North. However, the book does not contain all the details of how he fled the South, because it came out before the Civil War and Douglass did not want to reveal the tactics fellow African Americans were using to obtain their freedom. He elaborates on these experiences in his two later autobiographies, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881).

“Surely You’re Joking, Mr. Feynman!”

Adventures of a Curious Character

By Richard P. Feynman as told to Ralph Leighton, edited by Edward Hutchings (1985)



Richard Feynman (1918–1988) won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1965 and was part of the team that helped create the atomic bomb. Although he remarks on Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr, the stories in this book are not so much about physics as they are about Feynman's distinct approach to life. Starting out as just a minor scientist at the Los Alamos nuclear research facility, Feynman cracked colleagues' safes out of boredom and played the bongos in the desert. Much of the book relates adventures from his later life—from traveling in South America to being commissioned to paint a naked (female) treader. Rather than a written memoir, the book is a series of taped conversations with Feynman's friend Ralph Leighton. However, Feynman was a famously entertaining public speaker, so the stories show just as much composition as many written works. See also the sequel, *What Do You Care What Other People Think?: Further Adventures of a Curious Character* (1988) as well as James Gleick's biography *Genius: The Life and Science of Richard Feynman* (1992). ■

From the Oval Office ... A Few Presidential Autobiographies

Before the presidential memoirs became serious moneymakers, several presidents focused on their own life stories:

JOHN ADAMS wrote a partial autobiography, available as part of his collected papers by Harvard Press.

THOMAS JEFFERSON left a series of autobiographical writings which are available in some of his collected writings, including a compilation called *The Autobiography of Thomas Jefferson* (1821). However, they do not have anything like the flavor of, say, Benjamin Franklin's work. Readers looking for something more from the author of the Declaration of Independence should try *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1782).

ABRAHAM LINCOLN wrote a few short autobiographical pieces in advance of his presidential campaign, which are available in some collections of his writings.

ULYSSES S. GRANT wrote, some say, the first and only truly great presidential autobiography: *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant* (1885–1886). The book focuses on General Grant's actions during the Civil War and was published by Mark Twain after the president's death. The Library of America edition also includes many of Grant's wartime letters.

THEODORE ROOSEVELT wrote not only a 1913 autobiography, but a thrilling memoir of his time with *The Rough Riders* (2004). Both are collected in a Library of America edition. Roosevelt wrote 18 books overall, and several draw upon his considerable personal experience.



President Ulysses S. Grant