

## The Journey Inward: Women's Autobiography

Browsing in a library or a mall bookstore, or reading Sunday's book reviews, you will find myriad life stories offered for your instruction and delight. Since World War II, politicians, social reformers, business executives, writers, and movie stars have felt the impulse to autobiography, and their books frequently end up on the best-seller list. Such popularity makes it difficult for us to recognize that autobiography is a recent phenomenon, as literature goes. In fact, the term itself ('autos'/individual, 'bios'/human life, 'graphia'/description) dates only from approximately 1800.

The first extant autobiography in English was dictated in the early 1400s by a woman who could neither read nor write. *The Book of Margery Kempe* opens with an account of childbirth and descent into madness. Margery Kempe goes on to recount her several religious pilgrimages, her visions, the frequent criticism she encountered, and the mundane details of her life. Her manuscript, lost for centuries and rediscovered in 1934, gives us new understanding of the tradition of women's autobiography.

Like Kempe's autobiography, many women's life stories have been "lost." In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, women wrote only a small proportion of the autobiographies produced and published. Though this has changed in the twentieth century, scholars, until recently, did not deem women's autobiography worthy of study. Women's lives were considered dull by comparison to those of famous war heroes, statesmen, philosophers, poets.

Fortunately, with the growing interest since the 1960s in women's literature and in the private, rather than public, history of oppressed groups, we have begun to recover and understand these lost lives. One of the scholars most responsible for this work, Estelle Jelinek, asserts that women's autobiography is unique in three ways. First, women autobiographers focus on their personal lives, rather than on broad historical or public issues of their times. Whether the autobiography is by Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Mountain Wolf Woman, the emphasis is on family, friends, and domestic matters. Secondly, women use irony, humor, understatement, and a straightforward style, rather than the idealized, self-confident, exaggerated, and sometimes nostalgic style used by many male autobiographers. Finally, Jelinek notes that the structure of women's autobiographies is rarely chronological. Rather than being smoothly unfolding narratives, women's autobiographies are fragmentary, disconnected, or are organized into chapters that could stand alone. Frequently, women autobiographers interrupt themselves to tell an anecdote or relate a mental association. In contrast to men, women often keep journals in which they try to discover themselves, rather than write retrospective memoirs about a self that has already been formed.

The quest for identity often involves undertaking a journey, whether literally or figuratively. The five autobiographies in this series tell of both kinds of journeys. Welty recalls her family's week-long trips in their touring car to visit relatives in West Virginia; Stewart's letters are written as a result of a move to frontier Wyoming; Hurston is literally on the move from the age of nine; Duncan, too, voyages at a young age from San Francisco to Chicago to London and then to the Continent, Africa, Greece, and Russia; Mead's famous journeys are even more far-flung. Yet all these women journey inward, too, to discover and write about the sense of self. Of course, many women live lives far more constricted than these; yet the opportunity to journey inward belongs to them as well.

The journey inward often means painful self-confrontation. As Anaïs Nin, the well-known diarist, has said: "We are all engaged in the task of peeling off false selves, the programmed selves, the selves created by our families, our culture, our religions. It is an enormous task because the history of women has been...incompletely told." This sense of a dual self, of a dichotomy between external appearances and internal reality, is a commonplace in women's literature. Frequently symbolized by the use of mirrors or by characters serving as double, this duality captures the gap between the self-women, and the private self women know to be the real person.

Perhaps women's autobiographies are fragmented, understated, and focused on the person, as Jelinek asserts, because of this gap and the tension and ambivalence it causes. "What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?" inquires poet Muriel Rukeyser. "The world would split open," she replies. Isadora Duncan concurs: "No woman has ever told the whole truth of her life. The autobiographies of famous women are a series of accounts of the outward existence, of petty details, and anecdotes which have no realisation of their real life. For the great moments of joy or agony, they remain strangely silent." Duncan's own autobiography, published in 1927, was an effort to tell the whole truth. But, 35 years later, in 1962, Lillian Smith, author of *Killers of the Dream*, repeats the accusation: "Women have not broken the million year silence about themselves. Or, they are only beginning to. They know how they look in men's eyes....But they dare not record how they look to themselves."

But what, you may ask, is the truth? How does the autobiographer recall and record it? How does the reader recognize it in the prose? Vladimir Nabokov entitled his autobiography *Speak, Memory*. When autobiographers make that command, the memory responds in an endlessly variable fashion. Memory and truth in autobiography are inextricably related. Sometimes memory lies; sometimes it offers up painful truth; sometimes it gives a writer welcome insights into his or her life and work. In writing of

an influential teacher, for example, Welty comments that the teacher is "a larger part of my work than I'd realized until now." Sometimes the writer sets the memory down on paper; sometimes the memory is suppressed or transformed. In *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, Mary McCarthy provides "inter-chapters" to comment on the veracity of the book's main narrative. "The temptation to invent has been very strong," she confesses in her introduction.

An astute reader, absorbed in an autobiography, begins to hear a conversation between the writer and his or her memory. Listening to the conversation invites participation on the part of the reader – participation by personal comparison. It is exactly this dialogue that makes autobiography compelling reading. We all grew up, had parents, had positive and negative influences, went to school, fell in love, started jobs, moved, had conflicts, health problems, some experience with religion, and saw ourselves as pioneers of sorts. We all both want and fear the truth. Autobiography explores and reflects these universals.

All humans share certain experiences, yet only some have the urge to record these experiences. Scholars have speculated a great deal about the motives for autobiography. Often the writer is explicit about that motive in the first few pages of an autobiography. The motives are as varied as the authors: to instruct future generations; to impose order on the events of one's life; to document change in oneself or society; to justify one's actions; to discover one's identity; to purge oneself of fear, frustration, or haunting memories; to arouse one's readers to right wrongs.

"I write for myself and strangers," quipped Gertrude Stein. Why one writes an autobiography will be reflected in the format of one's work. Over the centuries, autobiographies have taken various forms. Many of the earliest examples of the genre were spiritual in nature, recounting conversions or other religious experiences. St. Augustine's fifth century *Confessions* is generally believed to be the first autobiography, yet many early spiritual accounts were written by women, too. There are two uniquely American forms of autobiography: captivity narratives – written by white men and women about their experiences as prisoners of American Indians in the 1700s – and slave narratives, often dictated by illiterate slaves to white abolitionists. Other common nineteenth-century formats include the travel journal, diaries and autobiographies relating to the Civil War, pioneer journals, and journals kept by women who disguised themselves as soldiers.

Letters, too, are considered to be autobiographical, yet differ in two important ways from the more traditional retrospective autobiography. Like journals, letters are written in staggered fashion over a period of time, and hence are fragmented. In addition,

letters are usually written for a specific audience, which gives a sense of immediacy and perhaps influences the voice of the author. Yet another large category is that of autobiographies by social reformers, rebels, and political figures, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Margaret Sanger, Jane Addams, Mother Jones, Ida Tarbell, and Emma Goldman. Immigrant autobiographies, literary life stories, and finally “celebrity” autobiographies, such as those by Isadora Duncan, Pearl Bailey, Mae West, and Shirley MacLaine, constitute other common formats.

But whatever the motivation, whatever the structure, autobiographies yield insights that result from “the journey inward.” In accompanying a writer on that journey, the reader remembers, reflects, and reveals truths within him or herself.

### ***One Writer’s Beginnings***

**by Eudora Welty**

“The events in our lives happen in a sequence in time, but in their significance to ourselves they find their own order, a timetable not necessarily – perhaps not possibly – chronological. The time as we know it subjectively is often the chronology that stories and novels follow: it is the continuous thread of revelation.”

This excerpt from Welty’s *One Writer’s Beginnings* describes its structure perfectly. Divided into three sections – “Listening,” “Learning to See,” and “Finding a Voice” – the book focuses simultaneously on Welty’s archetypal turn-of-the-century childhood in Mississippi and on her development as a writer. Welty’s notion of the “continuous thread of revelation” confirms Estelle Jelinek’s observation about the fragmented nature of women’s autobiography, while providing an exquisite phrase with which to describe how autobiography is written.

Drawing on the sensory experiences of childhood, Welty writes of the influence of parents, books, trips and teachers on her writing. “I learned from the age of two or three that any room in our house, at any time of day, was there to read in, or to be read to. My mother read to me.” Welty’s reverence, indeed hunger, for books becomes palpable: she describes “their smell and their weight” and “my physical awareness of the *word*.” As a young girl, she braved the dictatorial perusal of the town librarian in order to check out books: “I would do anything to read...the only fear was that of books coming to an end.”

Welty’s long career as a writer has done much to prevent books from “coming to an end.” She has published six volumes of short stories; five novels, including *Delta Wedding* (1946), *Losing Battles* (1970), and *The Optimist’s Daughter* (1972), for which she was awarded a Pulitzer Prize; a collection of essays, *The Eye of the Story* (1978); a

collection of the photographs she took during a Works Progress Authority job in the 1930s; and her autobiography. Describing herself as “locally underfoot,” she continues to live in the home in Jackson that her father built for the family in 1925.

Memory, which Welty described to an interviewer as “terribly important, a source and a force, too,” is the very stuff of autobiography. “That most wonderful interior vision which is memory,” as she defines it in *One Writer’s beginnings*, has yielded a book that recounts inward and outward journeys, their relationship to each other, and their role in the formation of this extraordinary writer.

***Letters of a Woman Homesteader***  
**by Elinore Pruitt Stewart**

The “cowboys and Indians” mythology of the West has, until recently, obscured the contribution of pioneer women. In the past 20 years, however, women’s studies scholars have brought forth, from archives and attics, the journals and letters of these women. The resulting publications – *Pioneer Women: Voices From the Kansas Frontier*, edited by Joanna Stratton, *Let Them Speak for Themselves: Women in the American West, 1849-1900*, edited by Christiane Fischer, and dozens more – have helped us understand the frontier experience from a female perspective. Elinore Pruitt Stewart’s *Letters on an Elk Hunt*, are part of this tradition.

Stewart’s letters were written over a five-year period to her former employer, Juliet Coney. According to Elizabeth Fuller Ferris, editor of *Letter on an Elk Hunt*, Stewart was born in 1876 in Fort Smith, Arkansas, and raised in Oklahoma. She taught herself to read and write, never being the beneficiary of formal schooling. An orphan at a young age, she raised eight younger siblings. Her marriage to a civil engineer brought her to Kansas; she was widowed four years later, when Jerrine, her daughter, was a month old. The two embarked on an impoverished and nomadic existence, which ultimately yielded this rich and poignant volume of letters. Stewart died in 1933, after a long and happy second marriage and a successful career as a rancher.

Any reader of these letters will quickly see that Elinore Stewart was a born writer, was *compelled* to write. Given a good education, she might have become a renowned novelist. As it is, she instead gives us, unlike the other autobiographies in the series, the life of an “ordinary” woman. While her descriptions of nature and friends and work and food are sensory and ebullient, her prose might best be termed reticent when she is discussing marriage and childbirth. This reticence is common in frontier journals of women. For example, it is a full 3 ½ years after the beginning of her correspondence with Mrs. Coney when Stewart finally confides in her that she has been married for most of that time: “I have often wished I might tell you all about my Clyde, but have not

because of two things. One is I could not even begin without telling you what a good man he is, and I didn't want you to think I could do nothing but brag. The other reason is the haste I married in. I am ashamed of that." The reader senses this reticence, a form of modesty, on Stewart's part, and it gives suspense and piquancy to the reading experience. The weaving together in Stewart's letters of ebullience and reticence, joy and sorrow, optimism and perseverance, make modern life seem bland indeed.

### ***Dust Tracks on a Road***

**by Zora Neale Hurston**

*"Zora Hurston, who went to Barnard to learn how to study what she really wanted to learn: the ways of her own people, and what ancient rituals, customs, and beliefs had made them unique.*

*Zora, of the sandy-colored hair and the daredevil eyes, a girl who escaped poverty and parental neglect by hard work and a sharp eye for the main chance.*

*Zora, who left the South only to return to look at it again. Who went to root doctors from Florida to Louisiana and said, 'Here I am. I want to learn your trade.'*

*Zora, who had collected all the black folklore I could ever use."*

With these words, Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple*, pays tribute to the woman she describes as her most important literary influence. She recognizes Zora as traveler, scholar, writer, anthropologist, black woman, survivor.

The very title of Hurston's autobiography, *Dust Tracks on the Road*, contains a journey metaphor. Addressing her readers in the concluding paragraph, Hurston exhorts, "You, who play the zig-zag lightning of power over the world with the grumbling thunder in your wake, think kindly of those who walk in the dust." Throughout her autobiography, Hurston describes herself as a "pilgrim" and her life as a journey or "pilgrimage." She recounts an early longing to "walk out to the horizon"; when travel appears to be an impossibility, she takes the alternative so many women have chosen: "So I was driven inward. I lived an exciting life unseen."

Describing the traumatic death of her mother when Hurston was only nine, she says, "That hour began my wanderings. Not so much in geography, but in time. Then not so much in time as in spirit." By that age, Hurston had already experienced a series of visions that foretold her life at various stages, "like clearcut stereopticon slides." Significantly, the first of these slide/visions is realized when she is on the road, traveling

to a new school a few days after her mother's death. Hurston's autobiography is the description of her dual journeys – internal and external.

Zora Neale Hurston is a controversial figure. Prominent scholars, including Robert Hemenway, author of *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, and Mary Helen Washington, have criticized *Dust Tracks* for what they see as “camouflage” and “subterfuge” in its voice. Hurston opposed the 1954 Supreme Court decision mandating school integration; her work was criticized as apolitical by Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright. Though she was the author of *Mules and Men*, a study of black folklore, and four novels, including the highly successful *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston died in anonymity and was buried in an unmarked grave. Only now are we rediscovering her writing after 30 years of obscurity.

Her autobiography should be read and judged in the context of women's autobiography, and, even more specifically, black women's autobiographies: the work of Marian Anderson, Maya Angelou, Pearl Bailey, Gwendolyn Brooks, Shirley Chisholm, Lucille Clifton, Angela Davis, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Charlotte Forten, Althea Gibson, Nikki Giovanni, Lorraine Hansberry, Billie Holiday, Mahalia Jackson, Anne Moody, and Pauli Murray. Looking at how these women deal with issues of identity, education, family love, work, voice, slavery, motherhood, activism, and the double jeopardy of being black and female will help us understand *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

### ***My Life***

#### **by Isadora Duncan**

Turning from the life of Zora Neale Hurston to that of Isadora Duncan – who lived among the elite circles of white artists, writers, and actresses in Europe – may seem a startling contrast. But much ties these women together: their intense longing for education, their impoverished childhoods, their struggles to balance career and personal relationships, and their visionary experiences. Both women were on a lifelong quest for artistic fulfillment and recognition, for security and understanding.

Duncan was a dancer, and she expressed herself by physical movement throughout her life. As she embarks on the task of autobiography, she doubts her ability to express herself in words: “I confess that when it was first proposed to me, I had a terror of writing this book.” Duncan also quails before the task of telling the truth about herself. Hurston said of truth in her autobiography: “Truth is a letter from courage.” Less poetically, Duncan asks: “How can we write the truth about ourselves? Do we even know it? There is the vision our friends have of us; the vision we have of ourselves, and the vision our lovers has of us. Also, the vision our enemies have of us – and all these visions are different.”

Duncan's effort to be truthful with her reader results in a candor that is at times sweet, chilling, hilarious, and shocking. She talks of her intellectual absorption: days spent studying Greek vases in the Louvre or building a temple in Athens. She tells us in detail about her sexual encounters and her experience of labor and childbirth. She shares her unorthodox views on marriage and her temptation to commit suicide. She makes an occasional outrageous remark: "My soul was like a battlefield where Apollo, Dionysus, Christ, Nietzsche, and Richard Wagner disputed the ground," or "For those who can afford it, a trip up the Nile in a well-appointed dahabeah is the best rest cure in the world."(!) Her life was lived on the edge of convention, of financial security, of intellectual currents. The audacity, intensity, and extravagance of this life are reflected in her autobiography.

Duncan was born in San Francisco on May 27, 1878, and died in 1927, shortly after completion of *My Life*. She moved to Russia in 1921, which she describes in the concluding chapter. What she doesn't say about the last six years of her life is that she embarked, after years of opposition to the institution, upon marriage – to a young Russian poet. But the marriage was short-lived, as was the support of the Russian government for her school, and she left Russia to tour and to return to France.

As Duncan brings her autobiography to a close, she again inquires: "What is the truth of a human life, and who can find it?" Wistfully, she imagines an "inward journey" that would yield the answers: "If we could only dive down within ourselves and bring up thought as the diver brings up pearls – precious pearls from the closed oysters of silence in the depths of our subconscious!" Her underwater image – like those of Adrienne Rich in *Diving into the Wreck* and Margaret Atwood in *Surfacing* – suggests the importance to women of such an endeavor.

***Blackberry Winter***  
**by Margaret Mead**

In *The Feminine Mystique*, written in 1963, Betty Friedan sized up Margaret Mead's impact on American women: "The most powerful influence on modern women, in terms of both functionalism and the feminist protest, was Margaret Mead. Her work on culture and personality – book after book, study after study – has had a profound effect on the women in my generation, the one before it, and the generation now growing up. She was, and still is, the symbol of the woman thinker in America." Twenty-five years later, we have many "symbols of women thinkers" in America, yet Mead and her autobiography remain among the most famous.

However, Margaret Mead chose to focus her autobiography on family, not career. “This is not a book about the South Seas peoples I have studied through the years,” she says in *Blackberry Winter*. Instead, as is common in women’s autobiography, Mead discusses her personal life: as a granddaughter, daughter, student, wife, mother, and finally, grandmother. With the publication of her own daughter’s memoirs, Mary Catherine Bateson’s *With a Daughter’s Eye*, readers now have an intriguing basis for comparison: autobiography and memoir. “In my family, we never simply live, we are always reflecting on our lives, and yet, against this background, as I write about my experience, I repossess it,” says Bateson in the opening pages of her memoir.

It is just such connections – life and reflections on that life – that Mead makes throughout her autobiography. She journeys out to exotic places such as Samoa and Bali, but she domesticates that experience by analyzing it in a familial framework. Significantly, Mead names the opening chapter of Part I of *Blackberry Winter* “Home and Travel.” These are not polar opposites for Mead, but integrated experiences; “For me, moving and staying at home, traveling and arriving, are all of a piece.” Though Mead’s findings as an anthropologist have been challenged of late, her autobiography will remain cherished. Her memories of childhood, her experiences studying with Franz Boas (just shortly before Zora Neale Hurston arrived at Barnard), her discussion of how and why she married three times, her reflections on motherhood – all make compelling reading.

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