

*Contemporary  
Authors*

**Autobiography Series**

*volume* **15**

# Contemporary Authors

**Autobiography Series**

**Joyce Nakamura**  
Editor



volume **15**



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Copyright © 1992  
Gale Research Inc.  
835 Penobscot Bldg.  
Detroit, MI 48226-4094

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 84-647879  
ISBN 0-8103-5348-2  
ISSN-0748-0636

Printed in the United States of America

Published simultaneously in the United Kingdom  
by Gale Research International Limited  
(An affiliated company of Gale Research Inc.)

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*Contemporary Authors*  
**Autobiography Series**

## Preface

Each volume in the *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series* (CAAS) presents an original collection of autobiographical essays written especially for the series by noted writers. CAAS has grown out of Gale's long-standing interest in author biography, bibliography, and criticism, as well as its successful publications in those areas, like the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, *Something about the Author*, and particularly the bio-bibliographical series *Contemporary Authors* (CA), to which this Autobiography Series is a companion.

As a result of their ongoing communication with authors in compiling CA and other books, Gale editors recognized that these writers frequently had more to say than the format of existing Gale publications could accommodate. Inviting authors to write about themselves at essay-length was an inevitable next step. Added to that was the fact that the collected autobiographies of current writers were virtually nonexistent. CAAS serves to fill this significant information gap.

### Purpose

*CA Autobiography Series* is designed to be a meeting place for writers and readers--a place where writers can present themselves, on their own terms, to their audience; and a place where general readers, students of contemporary literature, teachers and librarians, even aspiring writers can become better acquainted with familiar authors and make the first acquaintance of others. Here is an opportunity for writers who may never write a full-length autobiography to let their readers know how they see themselves and their work, what carefully laid plans or turns of luck brought them to this time and place. Even for those authors who have already published full-length autobiographies there is the opportunity in CAAS to bring their readers "up to date" or perhaps to take a different approach in the essay format. Singly, the essays in this series can illuminate the reader's understanding of a writer's work; collectively, they are lessons in the creative process and in the discovery of its roots.

CAAS makes no attempt to give a comprehensive overview of authors and their works. That outlook is already well represented in biographies, reviews, and critiques published in a wide variety of sources. Instead, CAAS complements that perspective and presents what no other ongoing reference source does: the view of contemporary writers that is shaped by their own choice of materials and their own manner of storytelling.

### Scope

Like its parent series, *Contemporary Authors*, the *CA Autobiography Series* sets out to meet the needs and interests of a wide range of readers. Each volume provides about twenty essays by writers in all genres whose work is being read today. We consider it extraordinary that twenty busy authors from throughout the world are able to interrupt their existing writing, teaching, speaking, traveling, and other schedules to converge on a given deadline for any one volume. So it is not always possible that all genres can be

equally and uniformly represented from volume to volume, although we strive to include writers working in a variety of categories, including fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. As only a few writers specialize in a single area, the breadth of writings by authors in this volume also encompasses drama, translation, and criticism as well as work for movies, television, radio, newspapers, and journals.

### Format

Authors who contribute to CAAS are invited to write a “mini-autobiography” of approximately 10,000 words. In order to give the writer’s imagination free rein, we suggest no guidelines or pattern for the essay. We only ask that each writer tell his or her story in the manner and to the extent that feels most natural and appropriate. In addition, writers are asked to supply a selection of personal photographs showing themselves at various ages, as well as important people and special moments in their lives. Barring unfortunate circumstances like the loss or destruction of early photographs, our contributors have responded generously, sharing with us some of their most treasured mementoes. The result is a special blend of text and photographs that will intrigue even browsers.

A bibliography appears at the end of each essay, listing the author’s book-length works in chronological order of publication. Each entry in the bibliography includes the publication information for the book’s first printing in the United States, and if an earlier printing has occurred elsewhere, that information is provided as well. The bibliographies in this volume were compiled by members of the CAAS editorial staff from their research and the lists of writings that were provided by many of the authors. Each of the bibliographies was submitted to the author for review.

A cumulative index appears in each volume and cites all the essayists in the series as well as the subjects presented in the essays: personal names, titles of works, geographical names, schools of writing, etc. The index format is designed to make these cumulating references as helpful and easy to use as possible. For every reference that appears *in more than one essay*, the name of the essayist is given before the volume and page number(s). For example, W. H. Auden is mentioned by a number of essayists in the series. The entry in the index allows the user to identify the essay writers by name:

Auden, W.H.  
Allen 6:18, 24  
Ashby 6:36, 39  
Bowles 1:86  
Burroway 6:90  
Fuller 10:120, 123  
Hall 7:58, 61  
Hazo 11:148, 150  
Howes 3:143  
Jennings 5:110  
etc.

For references that appear *in only one essay*, the volume and page number(s) are given but the name of the essayist is omitted. For example:

Stieglitz, Alfred 1:104, 109, 110



CAAS is something more than the sum of its individual essays. At many points the essays touch common ground, and from these intersections emerge new patterns of information and impressions. The index, despite its pedestrian appearance, is an important guide to these interconnections.

### Looking Ahead

Each essay in the series has a special character and point of view that sets it apart from its companions. A small sampler of anecdotes and musings from the essays in this volume hint at the unique perspective of these life stories.

**Claribel Alegría**, explaining her precocious reaction to reading Dostoyevski: “I should also say that I was—am I still?—a scandalous liar and mythmaker. When I was twelve, I got hold of one of Dostoyevski’s short novels, *Nietoshka Niezvanova*, which my mother did not want me to read at so early an age. I read it clandestinely, and it impressed me so that I came down with fever. I was *Nietoshka*, naturally, and with tears in my eyes, I recounted to my classmates how my father got drunk every night and beat my mother. ‘How can that be?’ they exclaimed. ‘Everyone says that Dr. Alegría is such a good man.’ ‘That’s what you think,’ I replied. ‘At night he becomes a different person.’ ‘How awful!’ they exclaimed, and their eyes filled with tears. I was happy whenever that happened. As a result, my father began losing clients and couldn’t understand why until I finally confessed what I’d done and had to go around apologizing to all my classmates. I had only wanted to prove to myself that I was capable of making them feel what I had felt when I read the novel.”

**Willis Barnstone**, stimulated by the imagery of the waters off Greece: “At first daybreak I woke as we were rounding a turbulent Peloponnesos. That turbulence I could see through our water level porthole. I climbed in the half-light to a place on the portside deck, and looked with amazement at the water a few feet below. The color and texture were like no water or liquid I had seen. Its uniqueness made me struggle to find a comparison as a way of identifying it. Only through metaphor, by likeness, by indexing, does the mind leap to the next meaningful perception. Finally, the image made sense. The water was like the inside of a purple grape. It had the pulpy thickness, the soft glow, the sweetness. Its brine must have been only an illusory surface attribute, for under it all the water was grape. Then I realized that others were forced into the same simile. There was the first writer we record in the West, Homer, and he anciently called it the ‘wineblue sea.’”

**Abelardo B. Delgado**, reaffirming his manhood: “Most of what I recall from those twelve years in Mexico is often reinforced by what my mother tells me. Other memories are a bit obscure. I may change them at times to suit me. My mom wanted to have a little girl but had to settle for me. She actually would dress me up as a little girl. This made me very angry. It must have been then when I developed my mean look. My grandmother used to tell me of a time she took me to the molino to grind some corn. Some of the women there began to comment about what a nice-looking little girl I was. She tells me that in anger I raised my skirt and showed all of them my tiny manhood proof. I was a boy regardless of how my mother decided to dress me.”

**Harrison E. Salisbury**, sharing a wistful memory of his father's: "My father told me of going to the Dakotas when he was a boy with his father. In those days the buffalo hunters rode the ranges. The buffalo hides were stacked at the prairie stations of the Great Northern and the Burlington lines like cordwood. Thousands and thousands of them. My father had seen the buffalo on the prairie. There was no sight like it in the world. The great herds stretched to the horizon. They moved slowly over the rich prairie, grazing as they went. And there was no cloud of dust as they passed because the prairie was so rich, so thick, the turf so heavy that the buffalo passed by and did not tear it. Now they were gone. My father was saddened and puzzled by this. 'I don't know how it happened,' he said. But the great herds were gone."

**Thomas Savage**, characterizing life in a small town: "The Boone name could not overshadow the fact that she'd been born a Johnson, and of this she was reminded over and over when she met her brother on the street. He walked a good deal on the street. She wished he would not so much. She often crossed to the other side, wondering if this maneuver had been noticed, if someone must think her heartless, a woman who would cross over to the other side to avoid a brother. Or she turned her face away to look into the window of the City Drug Company at rubber goods displayed there, articles to correct or alleviate some common physical difficulty. But surely Sid, that was his name, as he passed would have recognized her by her shape, so familiar he was with that, so his not pausing to speak to her as she looked in at the rubber goods meant that he knew she did not wish to acknowledge his presence on the street, and he'd have to take that thought home to his little house with the one bedroom built long ago by one who like Sid despaired of having children or even a guest. A little house close by that of Miss Pegram in a lost part of town where nothing much ever turned out right."

**Lloyd Van Brunt**, on the bitter lessons learned during childhood days spent in an orphanage: "Speaking of the middle class, its children quickly learn that compliments and flattery grease the wagon wheels of daily life. Working-class children learn insults, the kind that hurt, about one's mother and father, uncles and cousins, or lack of them. At the children's home we clawed at one another's self-esteem until the only way of not feeling bad was to make someone else feel worse, reduce him to bawling. The best candidates were the new and usually younger boys who had not yet formed a skein of hate and contempt to protect their emotional wounds—a newly dead mother, a convict father who never wrote, blood kin that never visited on the last Sunday of the month, 'visiting day.' A normal initiation was for an eight-year-old to be pushed and prodded across the playground by a dozen or so older boys, who would chant insanely over and over, 'Your mother's dead / Your father's a Red / You wet the bed / You little shithead.' Wretched rhyme. Welcome to our world, kid, welcome to our world."

These brief examples only suggest what lies ahead in this volume. The essays will speak differently to different readers; but they are certain to speak best, and most eloquently, for themselves.



## Authors Forthcoming in CAAS

**Bella Akhmadulina**

Russian poet, translator, and  
short-story writer

**Mulk Raj Anand**

Indian novelist, nonfiction  
writer, and critic

**Ed Bullins**

American playwright

**Rick De Marinis**

American novelist and short-  
story writer

**Paul Engle**

American poet and educator

**Philip José Farmer**

American science-fiction writer

**Calvin Forbes**

American poet

**Charles Gordone**

American playwright, actor, and  
director

**Daniel Halpern**

American poet and editor

**Michael S. Harper**

American poet

**Wilson Harris**

Guyanese novelist, poet, and  
nonfiction writer

**Rolando Hinojosa**

Mexican American novelist

**John Hollander**

American poet

**James D. Houston**

American fiction and nonfiction  
writer

**Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston**

Japanese-American fiction and  
nonfiction writer

**Hugh Kenner**

Canadian literary critic of major  
modern authors

**Joanne Kyger**

American poet

**Walter Laqueur**

German-born historian,  
journalist, and novelist

**Seymour Mayne**

Canadian poet

**Leonard Michaels**

American short-story writer,  
editor, and novelist

**Bharati Mukherjee**

Canadian novelist and short-story  
writer

**Harry Mark Petrakis**

American novelist and  
screenwriter

**Alastair Reid**

Scottish poet, essayist, and  
translator

**Ernesto Sábato**

Argentinean novelist and essayist

**Antonis Samarakis**

Greek novelist and short-story  
writer

**James Still**

American poet, novelist, and  
short-story writer

**Anne Waldman**

American poet

# Acknowledgments

We wish to acknowledge our special gratitude to each of the authors in this volume. They all have been most kind and cooperative in contributing not only their talents but their enthusiasm and encouragement to this project.

Grateful acknowledgment is also made to those publishers, photographers, and artists whose works appear with these authors' essays.

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*Contemporary Authors*  
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# Claribel Alegría

1924-

(Translated from the Spanish by Darwin J. Flakoll)



*Claribel Alegría, age seven years old,  
and her pony, 1931*

I was five years old in 1929 when my father, mother, younger brother, and I boarded a ship in La Libertad, El Salvador, and sailed to Puerto Corinto, Nicaragua. My father was Nicaraguan, and we were travelling to visit his mother, whom we hadn't seen since we had to leave hurriedly for El Salvador in 1925.

I remember the voyage clearly. We made friends with the sailors, who took us below decks to the

engine room, where the glare of the boilers and the clanking machinery fascinated and terrified us. One day my brother and I remained in the cabin while our parents ate lunch. We climbed to the top bunk to watch the sea through the porthole.

"Look," I told him. "The mermaids live down there, and if we can get this window open, you can dive in, and a mermaid will invite you to her palace, and then you can come back for me."

He gazed at me thoughtfully.

"Come on, help me," I urged him. I was still struggling to unscrew the brass wingnut securing the porthole when my parents walked in. My brother informed them of our prospective adventure, and that was the last time they left us locked in the stateroom.

My grandmother was terribly old. She dressed in blouses and long skirts, and she wore dark glasses because one of her eyes was missing. Every evening she would recite passages from the Bible to us. She knew the Gospels by heart and many passages from the Old Testament. It was she who taught me to love the Bible.

There was a globe-trotting uncle who told us ghost stories after dinner, and another with large green eyes who knew how to talk through the earth with a distant friend. One afternoon he demonstrated his gift for us on the patio. When he knelt and knocked on the earth with his knuckles, his friend would sense the vibrations and put his ear to a certain tree. My uncle lay down, put his lips to the ground and delivered his message. Then he jumped up, put his ear to the huge araucaria pine and listened to his friend's reply.

My favorite cousin in Estelí was René, who was a year older than I. He was blonde with dark black eyes, a natural storyteller, and I fell in love with him instantly. I relate René's brief history in *Luisa in Realityland*.

I was born of a Salvadoran mother in Estelí, Nicaragua, under the sign of Taurus and, in the Chinese lunar horoscope, the sign of the rat. The U.S. Marines were occupying Nicaragua during those



years, and my father—a staunch Liberal from Las Segovias—who had fought along with Benjamín Zeledón against the first wave of yanqui invaders as a boy, detested them. The sentiment was reciprocal, and it was not long after the newlywed couple arrived when the Marine contingent occupying Estelí commenced deliberately baiting and provoking him. My mother often told me in later years how, when I was eight months old and she was carrying me in her arms in front of our house, a bullet whistled over her head and lodged in the adobe wall. A group of Marines in the central plaza across the street guffawed and jeered at her. Their objective was to terrify her, and it worked. A few days later my parents returned to El Salvador, where I lived until I was eighteen.

When we returned to El Salvador from that second voyage in 1929, I entered school. There were two possibilities: I could attend either the Asunción nun's school where my mother and my aunts had been educated (it was my great-grandfather who brought the Belgian nuns to Santa Ana) or my uncle Ricardo's school, which had just opened. I unhesitatingly chose my uncle's school, even though all my friends attended Asunción, and my parents accepted my decision.

My mother was an avid reader, and we had a well-stocked library, principally in French. My maternal grandfather had studied medicine in Paris, and my mother at Asunción, where she learned to write in French better than in Spanish. Leading Salvadoran intellectuals frequented the house: Salarrué, Alberto Guerra Trigueros, Serafín Quiteño, Claudia Lars, and occasional foreigners. That was how I met José Vasconcelos.

"You're going to meet a giant," my father announced proudly. I was six years old at the time, and I was already dictating poems to my mother: puerile verses about the stars or dedicated to my dolls. When Vasconcelos arrived at the house, I couldn't conceal my disappointment; he was shorter than my father.

"They told me you were a giant," I reproached him as he bent down to kiss me on the forehead. He laughed, and from that moment on we were friends: a friendship that endured until his death in 1958. It was he who prologued my first book of poems, *Anillo de Silencio*.

Sometime later, that enigmatic personage, Wilf, arrived in Santa Ana. He made such a deep impression on me that I also write about him in *Luisa in Realityland*.

Ricardo's school was named José Ingenieros in honor of the renowned Argentine philosopher. It was very progressive for its time.



*On her father's shoulder, 1925*

"Don't send your daughter there," my mother's friends warned her. "All of Ricardo's teachers are Communists."

Ricardo, don Chico Luarca, and the other teachers took pains from the first grade on to teach us our own regional mythology, history, and geography. That was their "unforgivable sin." We also had a school choir where I first learned that I am tone deaf. The music teacher singled me out for special attention during the first week of classes but finally shook her head and gave up. She told me to form the words with my lips like all the rest, but not to utter a sound. I underwent a similar experience with dance lessons. My mother placed me in a ballet class directed by an aging Russian ballerina. After the first month, the teacher came to her and informed her she was wasting her money.

I was not yet eight years old when the massacre of 1932 took place. Don Chico Luarca explained to us the reasons behind the peasant uprising. He pointed out the inequality of classes in El Salvador: all the wealth of the country was in the hands of a few families and, except for a minuscule middle class, the rest of the nation lived in squalor.

A few years later, don Chico was expelled from the country as a Communist. I tell of all this in the novel *Ashes of Izalco*, which I wrote in collaboration with my husband, Darwin Flakoll. As I write this, I realize that all my books reflect my own biography. They were birthed from memories, particularly those of my early years. In one way or another, all my writing is stamped with reminiscence and nostalgia.

I should also say that I was—am I still?—a scandalous liar and mythmaker. When I was twelve, I got hold of one of Dostoyevski's short novels, *Nietoshka Niezvanova*, which my mother did not want me to read at so early an age. I read it clandestinely, and it impressed me so that I came down with fever. I was *Nietoshka*, naturally, and with tears in my eyes, I recounted to my classmates how my father got drunk every night and beat my mother.

"How can that be?" they exclaimed. "Everyone says that Dr. Alegria is such a good man."

"That's what you think," I replied. "At night he becomes a different person."

"How awful!" they exclaimed, and their eyes filled with tears. I was happy whenever that happened.

As a result, my father began losing clients and couldn't understand why until I finally confessed what I'd done and had to go around apologizing to all my classmates. I had only wanted to prove to myself that I was capable of making them feel what I had felt when I read the novel.



With her mother, 1958

The Mesón Versalles was located across the street from my house, next to the National Guard fortress. A *mesón* is a Central American tenement: a hollow square of squalid single rooms built around a central patio with two outhouses, a communal wash basin, and a single tap of running water to service all the residents. Each room was occupied by an entire family, and the patio swarmed with naked children whose swollen bellies attested to malnutrition and parasite infestation. It was from seeing how those children lived that I began to understand the cruel reality in which the majority of my countrymen were immersed. That knowledge opened in me a deep psychic wound that has never healed.

There were authors and composers who played a decisive role in my adolescence: Beethoven, for example; Juan Ramón Jiménez's *Platero y Yo*; Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letter to a Young Poet*. I remember one night when I was fourteen and began reading *Letter to a Young Poet*. I couldn't put the book down until I had finished it. Afterward, I moved through the silent house like a sleepwalker, sat on the patio step, and gazed up at the stars. I had just realized that I was meant to be a poet: that this *was* my destiny, cost what it may, or I should never find happiness.

To be a poetess in El Salvador was not easy in those days. Women as well as men looked upon them as either crazed or pedantic. I begged my mother not to tell anyone I wrote. My girlfriends would mock me, and no boy would ever invite me to a dance. To gather strength, I began investigating the lives of the poetesses I most admired: Santa Teresa, Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz, Gabriela Mistral, Delmira Agustini, Alfonsina Storni, Juana de Ibarboru, and, of course, Claudia Lars, who was virtually a neighbor.

Claudia, whose true name was Carmen Brannon, was the tempestuous daughter of an Irishman and a Salvadoran mother. A classmate of my mother's, she methodically flouted middle-class prejudices. Her Irish streak ran deep, and, in both her personal life and her writing career, she always did exactly as she pleased. I owe a great debt to Claudia and to all the great poetesses who came before. Without their examples, I should never have dared become a writer.

My mother was the one who gave me the most encouragement. Others who were in on the secret were my father, my grandfather, Salarrué, Alberto Guerra Trigueros, and Serafin Quiteño. Every afternoon when my father left home to make his calls, I locked myself into his clinic and remained there, reading or writing, until dinnertime. It was the only spot in the big house where I could be alone, the only nook that I could call my own for a few hours. My single companion was a lanky skeleton who stared

down at me from empty sockets and occasionally swayed in the breeze from the open window.

I finished secondary school before my sixteenth birthday and pleaded with my father to send me abroad to study. The Santa Ana atmosphere had grown stifling. Dad was a good and generous man, but let's face it, like the vast majority of his generation, he was a thoroughgoing *machista*.

"Leave Santa Ana?" he replied incredulously. "Never! A girl's place is beside her mother, learning from her until it's time to get married."

Next, I told him I wanted to study medicine at the University of San Salvador. This horrified him into another flat rejection.

"I was a student there," was his only attempt at self-justification, "and I won't have you exposed to the obscene jokes medical students play on each other with anatomical scraps. No. You're going to have a piano professor, you'll perfect your French, and you'll learn to cook and crochet."

I went off to weep hysterically. I detested sewing and had no talent for the piano. But despite my sulking fits and my mother's intercession on my behalf, I had no choice but to bow to his will.

I began studying piano with a handsome professor, some twenty years my senior. Bored with finger exercises and my own musical ineptitude, I began flirting with him, knowing he was married. The classes progressed from timid hand-holding to furtive kisses. After a few months, my mother suspected something was afoot, and she being my only confidant, I confessed everything. That freed me from further piano lessons.

As for sewing, I convinced the lady who taught a group of us that the classes would be much more entertaining if she undertook my crocheting while I read romantic novels to the entire group. Every time I brought a new doily home, my father praised me fulsomely, my mother eyed me suspiciously, and I felt my cheeks go red.

It was a trying period, but I read a great deal, particularly French and Russian authors. Dad encouraged me to read Latin American writers: Rubén Darío, Romulo Gallegos, José Hernández, Pablo Neruda, Miguel Angel Asturias, and others. When I first dipped into Neruda I was swept away by his hypnotic rhythm and flow of imagery. I put the book down reluctantly and vowed not to read him again until I was much older, knowing that if I did so I would become just another of his many imitators. I was so dazzled, however, that I told my girlfriends Neruda had dedicated the seventeenth of his *Twenty Love Poems* to me (as you've already learned, I'm a dreadful liar).

"How could he?" they scoffed. "Neruda has never even been here in Santa Ana."

"Oh yes he has," I replied. "He stayed at our house, but he was travelling incognito."

Years later, at a writer's conference in Concepción, Chile, I confessed my adolescent fib to Neruda himself. He laughed and said, "All right, Claribel, I'll dedicate that one to you, but I must say you should have made a more appropriate choice."

The first lines of Poem No. 17 read:

*Me gustas cuando callas  
porque estás como ausente . . .*

*(I love you when you're quiet  
because it's as though you're absent . . .)*

I also wrote quite a bit during that time. Don Chico Luarca was living in exile in Costa Rica, and I sent him some of my poems. He had them published in *Repertorio Americano*, the best cultural supplement in Central America, edited by don Joaquín García Monge, a man of great talent and generosity who was always attentive to young writers. I was thrilled to see my poems published in a full-page spread, complete with photograph. My parents were also delighted, and there was no danger that any of my friends would find out, because *Repertorio Americano* didn't circulate in Santa Ana.

I kept on dreaming of travelling, of studying at a university. My mother was my accomplice in urging my father to let me go, but he would have none of it.

When my brother graduated from high school, Dad announced that he would attend university in the United States. I entreated him to let me go with my brother, but he was adamant. I swore I'd become a nun and then jump over the wall after I'd taken vows, that I'd marry the first man who proposed to me and then get a quickie divorce (divorce was scandalous in those days), but he refused to budge.

One afternoon, when my brother's travel arrangements were being made, Dad found me weeping and asked me why.

"I've been praying for you to die and leave me free," I told him. "I'm crying because I love you very much, and I'll be sorry when you're dead."

He didn't say a word, but five days later at lunchtime he handed me my passport and airline ticket and told me I would be travelling with my brother.

It was Vasconcelos who, through a friend, arranged my entrance into a girls' finishing school in Hammond, Louisiana, near New Orleans. Mother