

## WOMEN'S LIVES

"This is a book to

be marooned with on a

desert island....

A nourishing

anthology...that

covers an exhilarating

range of

experience."-Elle

EDITED BY

PHYLLIS ROSE

## The Norton Book of Women's Lives

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#### To my mother Minnie P. Davidoff best critic

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#### INTRODUCTION

This anthology of excerpts from twentieth-century memoirs, journals, and autobiographies by women draws on a body of work that's exceptionally rich, perhaps the richest vein of women's literature. It aims dually to suggest that richness and the richness of female experience on which it is based. On my part, the book is the product of a lifelong and personal interest in women's autobiographical writing, an interest which had little material to feed on in my childhood but now is treated to a rich harvest.

No sooner did I realize I was likely to grow up to be a woman than I wanted to know what the possibilities were for women's lives. I turned to biographies and autobiographies of contemporary women, but in the years just after World War II the only women represented in our little local library in a white middle-class suburb of New York were Helen Keller, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the Duchess of Windsor. None of these women's paths seemed relevant to me when I was a girl. For good or ill, I had no handicaps to overcome, like Helen Keller. I say "for good or ill," because I so much admired Helen Keller's book that I sometimes wished I did have handicaps so I could overcome them as stalwartly and stylishly as Helen Keller did, in the process acquiring what I fervently wanted and feared I would never have—a life story. As for the other two, I wasn't greatly interested in women who, no matter how admirable, were known in the final analysis because of whom they had married, and the Duchess of Windsor, as my mother informed me, wasn't even all that admirable. "What did she do to deserve a biography," Mother somewhat rhetorically asked, "except to marry someone she shouldn't?"

I myself was ambitious. I wanted to be a cowgirl. I was seeking something no term then existed for—a role model. I sensed it would be hard to find biographies or autobiographies of cowgirls, but the story of almost any woman who had achieved something (besides marriage) would have served, although "woman" in the 1940s and 1950s meant "white woman" to such an extent that I doubt I could have projected myself

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into the heroism of a Harriet Tubman or Sojourner Truth. I was down on marriage, as I recall, because my mother was married. I wanted to do something different. My personal imagery for "something different" came from the westerns I loved so much: "Bobby Benson and the B-Bar-B Riders" on radio and movies starring the likes of John Wayne, Audie Murphy, and James Stewart—with a slight transposition of gender, cowgirls, and my image of independence and accomplishment for longer than I'd like to say.

Whatever my reservations, I read Eleanor Roosevelt's autobiography, *This Is My Story*, with almost sinful excitement because for me then (as now) an autobiography held out the promise of dark truths that only friends confess to one another but are the knowledge you need to live. Some of this I found in Eleanor Roosevelt's book. She, too, was shy! She, too, had weak ankles! She, too, was a physical coward! She, too, was nuts about her father! This was the knowledge I needed to live! But soon she was sent to England to school, an enlargement I needed never fear, however appropriate for an American girl of a patrician family being raised to do her duty.

I didn't want to do my duty. Nor did I want models, like Mrs. Roosevelt, of noble self-sacrifice and altruism. I wanted wild women, women who broke loose, women who lived life to the full, whatever that meant. What *did* it mean to live life to the full? How fully could a woman live? These were the questions I wanted biography and autobiography to answer.

A girl encaged in a hidden set of rooms, who has not felt sun or open air for years, may seem like a strange exemplar of the full life, but for many of us growing up in postwar America, Anne Frank was a heroine—and not just for her courage and optimism. She saw so much in those rooms behind the bookcase. She expressed so much of her own feelings, which turned out to be the feelings of many adolescents. And she accomplished so much by the very writing of her diary.

The teenaged Jewish girl, whose family's self-imposed captivity was a futile attempt to save themselves from the Nazis, began the diary out of loneliness and a frustrated desire to talk over her daily life with friends. She was thirteen when they went into hiding, fifteen when she died. She called the diary Kitty and wrote her entries in the form of letters to this friend.

Part of the tremendous impact of this book comes from dramatic irony: We know that Anne will not survive the war, but she does not. "I think Cissy van Marxveldt is a first-rate writer. I shall definitely let my children read her books." The heartrending power of that line is, in a sense, accidental, inadvertent. But little of the rest of the book is inad-

vertent, and the level of talent is so remarkable that you can almost understand some people's reluctance to believe it was written by a fifteen-year-old. There are the brilliant vignettes of her fellow inmates, like Mrs. Van Daan, pushy and vulgar, thinking herself "modest and unassuming," and the fussy dentist, Dussel, with whom Anne is forced to share a room. There are adolescent agonies dramatically presented, her preference for her father over her mother and the guilty pain that causes her, her jealousy of her sister, her sense that everyone wants her to be different from what she is.

Long after she started keeping the diary, a radio program made her realize its potential importance as a historical document. The Dutch minister of education, broadcasting from London in 1944, urged that people keep diaries and letters "if our descendants are to understand fully what we as a nation have had to endure and overcome during these years." History, he said, cannot be written on the basis of documents and decisions alone. Anne looked forward to publishing her diary and thereby contributing to people's knowledge of what Jews had endured. She also had plans to use it in establishing herself as a writer.

Rescued after the war, Anne Frank's diary was published in Dutch in 1947 and in English in 1952. The book had a tremendous readership in the 1950s, especially after the stage version opened on Broadway in 1955. Anne Frank stood for all the Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust, but she also stood for adolescent girls, trying to assert their individuality in the complicated context of family life. If Holden Caulfield was the quintessential male literary adolescent of the fifties, Anne Frank was, for all the extraordinary nature of her circumstances, the representative female adolescent. And although Holden Caulfield may have resonated with young girls as much as with boys, Anne Frank had a special meaning to girls. For she was real, not a fictional creation. And she had written herself into being. Many girls picked up their pens. With the publication of her diary I would say that the golden age of women's autobiographical writing began.

From the point of view of an American growing up in the 1950s, the next landmark in the literature of women's lives was Simone de Beauvoir's *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, which came out in English in 1959, the year after its publication in French. Its very title was a revelation. One knew that Simone de Beauvoir was a brilliant and iconoclastic thinker. *The Second Sex* had burst upon the world ten years before, articulating and documenting what many women had vaguely sensed: that women throughout history had systematically gotten a raw deal.

Merely to learn that this rebellious woman had once been a "dutiful daughter," like many of the rest of us, was an inspiration. The title

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implied—and the book bore out—that it was possible to grow up in a bourgeois family (in Beauvoir's case, a very conservative Catholic family) and to escape from it. The theme of the book was female freedom, a theme picked up in the opening of Beauvoir's next volume of autobiography, *The Prime of Life*, where she describes (the excerpt in this volume) her exhilarated postgraduate life in Paris and her unconventional relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre. Her autobiography was both a sequel to and an extension of *The Second Sex* and a luminous example that the historic oppression of women need not be one's personal fate.

That Beauvoir traced in such detail a girl's coming of age was also new and exciting. In those years, if you wanted to read a narrative of a feisty, unconventional girl emerging into young womanhood, you had to turn to fiction, and hardly contemporary fiction at that: George Eliot's Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda* or perhaps Henry James's Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*. And look how they ended up! *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* had the denseness of fiction, providing a month-by-month account of Beauvoir's coming into adulthood, which she portrayed not as a dead end but as an enlargement. Continued in *The Prime of Life, Force of Circumstance*, and *All Said and Done*, her autobiography was distinguished by its sheer scale, in addition to the power of the mind that she brought to bear on her own experience.

When I was a teenager in my New York suburb in the late 1950s. reading The New Yorker was considered a mark of advanced intellect and savoir faire, and as it happened, the magazine in those years encouraged women's memoirs. From 1946 to 1957 it ran many of the pieces that later were collected to form Mary McCarthy's Memories of a Catholic Girlhood, another of my personal landmarks in the literature of women's lives. The impression of Mary McCarthy's work, both as it appeared serially and with the publication of the completed book, was stunning. Here was a woman, as someone said at the time, who wrote better than anyone else, writing better than herself—about the material of her own life. It was not lost upon those of us growing up in America that albeit she was a woman, McCarthy had both formidable intelligence and prodigious ego. She wrote about herself in a way that suggested she expected to be feared and respected. In my own radically flattened field of possible female exemplars, she seemed like the answer to Eleanor Roosevelt. Hers was not the path of cuddliness and lovability—or of altruism and self-sacrifice. In no way did she hold herself up as a moral paragon. My favorite chapter, the one included in this collection, tells how, at a Catholic girls' school, she pretended to lose her faith as a way of getting attention and making herself popular with the other girls, then to her own dismay lost her faith.

It is a shock now to realize how much autobiographical work by women The New Yorker published in the fifties. Indian writer Santha Rama Rau's memoirs ran in almost yearly installments throughout the decade, Emily Hahn, Sylvia Townsend Warner, and Rumer Godden were other writers whose memoiristic work appeared regularly. It seems ungrateful to suggest that the context to some extent "emasculated" its women writers. Yet in that era when the magazine had no table of contents and little broke the suave uniformity of its graphic presentation, these women (and their male colleagues) became New Yorker writers, an ungendered group of scribblers clothed in elegant unisex wit and sophistication. To remove the women's works from their original context is like stripping the varnish off a piece of furniture to reveal the power of the wood. What seemed like charming stories, wispy pieces of nostalgia in the fifties now read differently. The bite is there, for example, in Santha Rama Rau's work—in the excerpt in this collection, about the resentment of a young Indian girl at an English school who eats the wrong food at lunch and has the wrong kind of name. Pioneer spirit, as well as a certain exoticism, permeates the life and work of Emily Hahn, who lived with Pygmies in Africa and got addicted to opium in China, as described in the selection in this book.

Memoirs didn't change, but the times did. In the late sixties the civil rights movement and the war in Vietnam politicized literature, not only making literary work about current events seem important but also attuning us to the ideological content in works we had thought of as neutral. Women's memoirs took on a new edge as people began to realize that the publication of life stories by Americans outside the mainstream constituted political statement, even when there was nothing overtly political about the books. Merely to publish the life story of someone not famous challenged the accepted order, saying, with radical democracy, "This person counts, too." Diane Johnson's biography of the wife of Victorian novelist George Meredith, Lesser Lives (1972), was a manifesto for this position, critiquing biography's usual focus on the Famous Person at the expense of all the others around him, seen as lesser characters in his life, although their consciousness was as intense as his and they did not see themselves as lesser. Memoirs and autobiographies, which previously had required celebrity to justify them, now could be justified by their reportorial value or by their art. A favorite of mine from this period is Frank Conroy's Stop-Time, which follows its author through a difficult childhood in the Northeast and Florida up to his freshman year at Swarthmore, a nothing-special child moving to a nothing-special fate. According to the old rule of thumb "If you aren't known, use it for a novel," this was not the stuff of autobiography. In the

new order, however, the spotlight of truth could rest on the lives of the obscure.

Some of the greatest works in the new literature of obscurity were written by African-Americans, and when they started appearing in the later 1960s, it seemed to many of us white children of privilege like an opening up of our experience of our own generation. Anne Moody's Coming of Age in Mississippi (1968), which describes how the author put herself through a small black college in the South and then participated in sit-ins and other civil rights protests, was a life story one would not have heard in other times. Moody was not even thirty when her book appeared; she had no claim to fame. Yet her dense account of her own life is riveting.

Rooted in the slave narratives of the nineteenth century, reinforced by a religious sense of the value of confession and by a historically determined need to find refuge in the privacy and dignity of the self, black autobiography was the glory of the literary movement that accompanied the political activism of the late sixties and early seventies. In addition to Coming of Age in Mississippi, there was Claude Brown's Manchild in the Promised Land, Eldridge Cleaver's Soul on Ice, and The Autobiography of Malcolm X, written by Alex Haley. Perhaps the greatest in this group is Maya Angelou's autobiography I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, published in 1970 and instantly recognized as a classic.

Born in 1928, Angelou went to her grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas, at the age of three and was raised by her in the Depression-era segregated Deep South. She rejoined her mother in St. Louis at the age of eight and not long thereafter was raped by her mother's boyfriend. The autobiography follows its subject to the age of sixteen, when, after a single sexual encounter, she got pregnant and had a child.

The life Angelou portrays is hard and sometimes violent, but her character is dreamy, romantic, and literary. As a girl she reads and rereads Jane Eyre. What makes Angelou's book great is her visual sense and the feel for detail deployed throughout the narrative. When writing is this good, we generally say it is novelistic. But it seems wrong to praise Angelou that way when the challenge of nonfiction is to marry art and truth. There are moments when Angelou cannot contain her rage and produces passages of fine political rhetoric, but even more effective are the pages in which the rage is subsumed into narrative, producing scenes such as the one excerpted here in which her grandmother, singing a hymn, faces down the "powhitetrash" girls out to humiliate her.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings may be the first masterpiece of American women's autobiography after the war. The date of its publication is certainly a kind of watershed, for after 1970 first-rate autobiographies and memoirs started coming at an ever-increasing pace—to name