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Written by Herself



Autobiographies of American Women: An Anthology

Anna Howard Shaw

Zora Neale Hurston

Cecilia Payne Gaposchkin Hortense Powdermaker Gloria Steinem Janet Scudder

Margaret Floy Washburn Jane Addams Anne Walter Fearn Margaret Bourke-White

Anna Louise Strong Maxine Hong Kingston Harriet Ann Jacobs Marian Anderson

Dorothy Reed Mendenhall Vida Dutton Scudder Maya Angelou Louise Bogan

Mildred Ella (Babe) Didrikson Zaharias S. Josephine Baker Margaret Morse Nice

Margaret Sanger Lucy Larcom Margaret Mead Ellen Anderson Gholson Glasgow

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AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF AMERICAN WOMEN: AN ANTHOLOGY

Edited and with an Introduction by

Jill Ker Conway

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INTRODUCTION

Autobiography is a form of writing which fascinates modern readers. Because so much of modern cultural criticism teaches us about the fragility of identity and the difficulty of achieving a strong sense of self, we are interested in hearing many distinct “voices” explain their experience. Autobiographical narratives are fictions, in the sense that the narrator imposes her or his order on the ebb and flow of experience and gives us a false sense of certainty and finality about causation in life. Yet they are not fictions but accounts of real lives, lived in a specific time and place, windows on the past, chances to enter and inhabit the real world of another person, chances to try on another identity and so broaden our own.

Autobiographies by women excite particular interest today, because three important trends in late-twentieth-century culture intersect to heighten the resonance of this form of narrative. The rise of democracy has enlarged the focus of interest in the lives of other people—from monarch, great general, and political leader to the ordinary person—someone like ourselves. And, as feminists have insisted that battles for power, authenticity, moral stature, and survival occur as fiercely within the domestic as in the public arena of life, what was once seen as placidly domestic now offers the reader a world charged with great issues.

Moreover, once Freud’s condescending notion that a woman does not develop beyond the age of thirty, remaining permanently childish into old age, was displaced by the work of feminist psychologists presenting their own compelling version of the female Oedipal story, we came to see the development of women as filled with drama and challenge, as much concerned with work as with love and as potentially instructive as any male life.

Postmodern thought, influenced by the notion of contingency in nature and the uncertainty of natural events, has made us obsessed with causal narrative and has heightened our curiosity about agency in life. While we know that no life flows along clear, logical lines of causation, we still crave such coherence, so that the well-written autobiographical narrative seems to free us momentarily

from ambiguity. Since, in Western culture, women have been seen as persons without agency, the female narrative with its conception of agency has a powerful appeal, the more so as our view of nature, with which in Western culture women have been identified, becomes chaotic and random.

There are distinct differences between the traditions of male and female autobiography in the West. The male form derives from classical models. The plot, borrowed from the *Odyssey*, shows us the narrator being tested in an heroic journey, emerging victorious from his trials, ready to claim his rightful place and his faithful Penelope. As readers we can thrill to the trials of Odysseus, secure in the certainty that he will triumph and return to claim his birthright. We don't have the same comfort about the testing of women, for we are used to the archetypal romantic plot dealing with female lives, in which the heroine must die tragically.

Whether religious (St. Augustine's *Confessions*) or secular (Rousseau's *Confessions*), the standard forms of the male narrative give the reader the sense that the narrator's actions are decisive and that his life has metaphysical significance. Thus we see the fate of Christianity in the West in balance in the famous moment of Augustine's theft of the pears. And the form of Rousseau's narrative converts an essentially sleazy set of erotic encounters into a mythic quest for democratic spontaneity.¹

Women's narratives are rare until the nineteenth century, and their plots concern inner spiritual journeys, accounts of a relationship with God. The Protestant Reformation was a spur to more frequent female narratives because of the convention which encouraged accounts of religious conversion. Thus we have Anne Bradstreet's poem "To My Dear Children" and the life story of Elizabeth Ashbridge, a Quaker woman missionary whose account of her conversion and call to preach is compelling.²

This plot form was expanded in the mid-nineteenth-century

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1. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, translated with an introduction and notes by Henry Chadwick, Oxford University Press, New York, 1991; Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, translated with an introduction, Gibbings, London, 1907.
 2. Anne Bradstreet, *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, ed. Jeannine Hensley (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967); Elizabeth Ashbridge, *Some Account of the Early Part of the Life of Elizabeth Ashbridge, Who Died in the Service of the Truth, at the House of Robert Lecky, in the County of Carlow, Ireland, 1755, Written by Herself* (Providence, R.I. / H. H. Brown, 1831).

United States by slave narratives, accounts by women of their sexual exploitation in slavery and their dramatic and heroic breaks for freedom. These narratives escape the bourgeois convention that a woman's story ends in marriage, because slavery allowed a woman no family and respected neither kinship nor bonds of affection. Slave narratives are heroic stories of survival, accounts of endurance and of inextinguishable identity which transcend the usual Western quest or romance. This gives them their formidable power and explains their dynamizing impact on white women abolitionists.

By midcentury white American women with access to education saw their experience as exemplary, something to be made available to others, to encourage fellow seekers after knowledge and to instruct skeptics who doubted the value of female learning. After the Civil War, the generation of white women who entered higher education followed three paths into adulthood. The first was toward the creative life of the artist, a trailblazing path for the pioneer sculptors, photographers, and scholars who pushed their way into the training needed to acquire the techniques of their trade, and a more conventional path for the writers who set out alone to learn their calling.

The second route was toward the life of the literal pioneer in new professions and occupations for women. These trailblazers created new styles of life and explored and challenged accepted social norms and values. There were no male enclaves in studios, workshops, or ivied colleges which contained the knowledge these women sought, so their lives and callings were more or less invented as they went along.

A third, much smaller group of educated white women elected the vocation of scientist, seeking to work at the most abstract core of the emerging science and technology which would shape the twentieth-century West. They too had to push their way into the training they sought and to deal with male bias against women at its most intense level, in elite professional schools for men.

For all three groups there was no literary plot convention, no archetypal pattern in the culture, which told what their lives were about. They could never appropriate the *Odyssey*, for their trials were too severe, the absence of an attendant male version of Penelope too obvious, and the chances of triumphant recognition too remote. The bourgeois romance, the great myth of nineteenth-century capitalism, was ill suited to a group of women who seriously resisted becoming male property and who found adventure, work,

politics, art, letters all more fulfilling than the glowing hearth and patter of little feet assigned women in the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity. Nor did the inner religious quest of earlier women autobiographers fit the lives of such typical American activists, many of whom rejected traditional Christianity.

The stories they told about their lives therefore show us a culture under stress. The plots, the notions of causation, the self-presentation in their narratives literally show us individuals grappling with the problems of describing a life which can't be crammed into conventional cultural categories.

In general, the artists and scientists, along with black women, dealt most easily with their narrative problems. They knew that their lives didn't fit easily into conventional patterns, but, nonetheless, their vocations have long histories in Western culture. A woman artist may not have fit her generation's definitions of femininity yet may have seen herself a lineal descendant of Leonardo. A woman scientist could have looked back with comfort to Galileo and Newton, even as her contemporary male colleagues were harassing her. A black woman may have looked back to the history of slavery in the Old Testament and seen her journey to freedom as a reenactment of that sacred history. The life plot for such people exists supposedly independent of gender. One's life is a quest—to realize one's vision of beauty, to see more deeply into nature, to escape from Egypt into the Promised Land. As we will see from the narratives in this anthology, the role of artist or scientist or escaped slave is not independent of gender, but such lives are lived consciously outside the standard patterns of bourgeois culture.

By contrast, the problems of personal narrative were intense for white women writers, social reformers, political leaders, athletes, and foreign adventurers. There were no conventions setting them outside bourgeois norms. Most, needing an appreciative audience for their causes to prosper, had to present themselves as the embodiments of romantic femininity, women to whom things happened rather than people who shaped events. A close reading of their narratives will show them moving to the passive voice whenever they are really acting decisively (Jane Addams), or taking refuge in the convention of being drawn to act by forces of destiny outside their control (Margaret Sanger). The hard-driving athlete Babe Didrikson—who once won a national track meet serving as a one-woman team competing successfully in every event and who, when she took up golf, practiced her drive till her hands bled—let the

reader think she was always led to a new sport or a new dream of excelling by a generous mentor, not by her own restless search for new challenges.

Addams needed public support for her efforts as an urban reformer and teacher of the American social conscience. Sanger, in reality a total rebel against bourgeois sexual norms for women, had to win popular support for her campaign for legal access to birth control information. And Didrikson, the pioneer of women's professional sports in the United States, had to be able to draw a crowd. The narratives they wrote cultivate the image of the romantic female, nurturant, peace loving, and swayed only by positive emotion, rather than the driven, creative, high achievers we see when we really study their behavior. By presenting themselves in terms consistent with romantic imagery they created their own myth about female achievement in America. In their stories achievement comes from the intersection of emotionally prepared women with events and causes, to which they respond but which they do not shape. Their stories are about conversion experiences, about being swept along by events as the romantic heroine is swept off her feet by her lover, about being carried by events toward moments of intuitive insight and emotional truth.

It is only when we read the memoirs of public women influenced by the feminist movement of the 1960s and '70s that we encounter a nonromantic view of the female life. For Maya Angelou, sex is purely instrumental, the noblest relationships are with other women, and rage at life's injustices inspires some of her most powerful rhetoric. Maxine Hong Kingston alternates bitter realism about an Asian American woman's life situation with her own lyrical myth adapted from the Chinese folk story of the Woman Warrior. And Gloria Steinem infuses her account of her mother's unhappy life with her own anger and grief at the society and the attitudes which turned her competent mother into a helpless woman, terrified of life to the point of insanity. In these stories we hear a new tone of voice, politically aware, energized by rage, alternating gritty realism with powerfully lyrical imagery of a better world. These women also aim to persuade their readers, but by employing polemics, not by accepting and manipulating cultural patterns they cannot confront.

The selections in this anthology are organized in four sections, chosen to exemplify the range of activities, occupations, and social

situations which have prompted the autobiographical muse for American women. Because the black female voice is so powerful in American letters, the first section deals with black women, though each memoir could well appear in one of the other three sections, concerned with the writing of women scientists and physicians, women artists and scholars, and women pioneers and reformers. Each section is arranged chronologically so that the reader can trace the history of American women through the narratives presented, describing American women's lives from the 1840s to the 1960s and '70s. The only principle of selection has been the literary quality of the memoirs. A more representative approach would produce quite another type of anthology. The aim of this one has been to present the most powerful female voices commenting on the American experience over the century and a half since women began writing memoirs in significant numbers.

Each section is introduced by a brief essay commenting on the historical context surrounding the lives of the authors as a group, emphasizing both what is unique about them and the themes linking their collective experience. A brief biographical sketch introduces each work, the selections from which are presented as connected narrative, with as little editorial clanking of gears as possible. All but two are parts of full dress autobiographies. The excerpts of Louise Bogan's memoirs are drawn from a posthumous memoir edited by Ruth Limmer, who has interwoven passages from Bogan's diaries and letters with passages from Bogan's astonishingly powerful autobiographical essay, "A Journey Around My Room," originally written for *The New Yorker*. Gloria Steinem's essay about her mother, "Ruth's Song (Because She Could Not Sing It)," comes from a collection of Steinem's essays, only a few of which are autobiographical. The selections drawn from works out of print or available only in manuscript are deliberately longer than those taken from current autobiographies, readily available to the interested reader. The aim of the whole is to give the reader a feel for the texture and imagery of women's writing and a sense of the kinds of narrative problems which a woman autobiographer must resolve.

Naturally, the selections vary in quality, but all claim our attention because of the powerful motivations which led these writers to cast aside the convention of female "modesty" and set them to telling the world about their lives. When we finish, and imagine this cast of characters, now become our friends, instructing us about our lives, we know that they will continue to instruct while they

are parts of our memory, and that they will make us both more reflective and more decisive about working on the inner script with which we construct the meaning of our own lives. For this, after all, is what links us to the authors, who have set down on paper what we all do, with more or less conscious artistry. It is valuable to examine our own inner texts with these powerful models in mind, for they can both instruct and call forth a more confident inner voice of our own.

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Written *by* Herself

My Story Ends with Freedom

Black women's autobiography celebrates the determination of black women to survive, to nourish and shelter those they love, and to assert their will in a hostile and often dangerous world. It records the power of faith and offers an unblinking and unabashed view of sexuality.

The tradition of black women's narratives reaches beyond slavery, back to the role of women as storytellers and religious figures in African culture. Their mesmerizing storytelling has riveted readers' attention from the time the first slave narratives were given wide publicity by the abolition movement. Black women's narratives establish their hold on the reader because of the rich rhetoric of black folk culture and the cadences of the Old Testament, so cherished by the black church. Because, from girlhood, these women faced the dual injustices of racial hostility and male exploitation, their life histories are told with no hint of romantic conventions. They describe, instead, a quest for physical and psychological survival.

The narrative voice in these stories is by turns witty, ironic, heroic, outraged, and triumphant. We hear each woman as a formidable presence, unvanquished despite terrible hazards. Whether the child of black sharecroppers or of urban industrial workers, each of these women knew fear and exploitation but possessed the psychic resources to fight them. Beside their stories the tests and tribulations of white women's lives seem lived in a minor key.

Strength and the forced wanderings of exile are both characteristics of these stories. Whereas white women might struggle to free themselves from family and polite conventions, Harriet Jacobs (1813–1897), Zora Neale Hurston (1901?–1960), and Maya Angelou (1928–) have been wanderers from childhood. Angelou and her brother were shipped as children across the United States to the safe haven of their grandmother's home in Arkansas. Hurston's wanderings began when she was fourteen, cast out of her family home after the death of her mother and a violent quarrel with her father's second wife. Jacobs was the ultimate wanderer, a fugitive slave, condemned by a corrupt public authority to hiding and disguise. The journeys of Marian Anderson (1902–) were

for artistic recognition; they were courageous travels, always as the first black performer her European audiences had seen.

Women who experience extreme sexual exploitation see sexuality, and sexual morality, in terms different from those of bourgeois society. Jacobs knew that slave women, unprotected by convention or law from white male sexual demands, could not be held accountable to conventional sexual morality. When Angelou became pregnant as a teenager, her surrogate father told her that women had been getting pregnant since Eve ate the apple, and that there was no cause for alarm. Violated as a child by one of her mother's lovers, Angelou sought her first voluntary sexual partner herself, to check out empirically the nature of her sexual preference. When the experience turned out to be unsatisfactory, she reflected wryly that *she* had had a man, in an encounter in which she had set the terms.

Physical strength, and its righteous expression in violence, are also recurring themes in these stories. Jacobs endured intense privation and solitary confinement in her quest for freedom for herself and her children. Hurston administered a physical beating to the woman who had replaced her dead mother in her father's affections and had spitefully ordered Hurston's sister out of the house. Angelou fought and was wounded by her father's mistress, after the mistress spoke disrespectfully of Angelou's mother. These are women who fight to protect honor and who expect no male protector.

Along with physical strength go moral courage and deep spirituality. The transforming figures in these stories are mothers or grandmothers. Jacobs's grandmother was respected and feared by black and white alike in Edenton. The faith of Anderson's mother inspired her daughter to great art. Angelou's Momma (her paternal grandmother) was a fierce but loving guardian angel who gave her grandchildren preternatural strength.

The men in these stories come and go, like Angelou's grandmother's third husband, who had to be watched closely on his infrequent visits lest he steal all her possessions. Only Anderson, a product of the northern black middle class, had a trustworthy father and husband, but because of her father's early death it was Anderson's mother who encouraged her genius. Brothers and sons were fiercely loved, but in three of these four lives adult males were uncertain quantities. The exception is Anderson, whose male teach-

ers, accompanists, and mentors joined with her community in recognizing and encouraging her extraordinary talents.

Angelou tells us that black women are strong because to enter adulthood they must confront and defy both racial hatred and male hostility. These stories show us women's lives completely outside the myths of romanticism. Therein lies their compelling power.