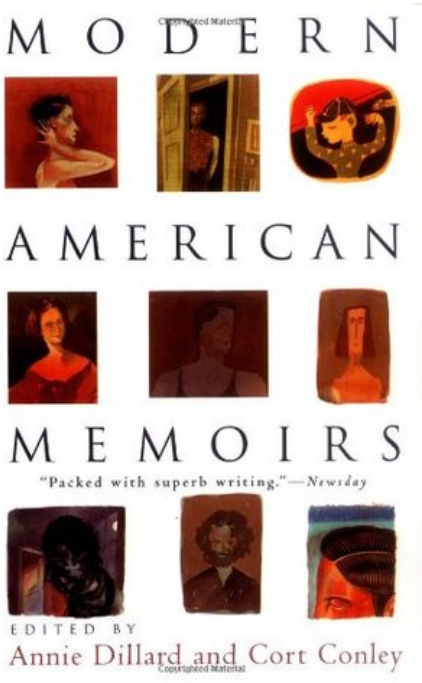

Modern American Memoirs

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In *Modern American Memoirs,* two very discerning writers and readers have selected samples from 35 of the finest memoirs written in this century, including contributions by such diverse writers as Margaret Mead, Malcolm X, Maxine Hong Kingston, Loren Eisely, and Zora Neale Hurston. Chosen for their value as excellent examples of the art of biography as well as for their superb writing, the excerpts present a broad range of American life, and offer vivid insight into the real-life events that shaped their authors. Here, readers can learn about the time when Harry Crews, playing as a boy, fell into a vat of boiling water with a dead hog; Chris Offutt joined the circus and watched a tattooed woman swallow a fluorescent light; and Frank Conroy practiced yo-yo tricks.

Modern American Memoirs Details

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From Reader Review Modern American Memoirs for online ebook

Laura says

Each chapter of this book is from a different memoir by American writers, curated by Annie Dillard and Curt Conley. I read to help me choose a couple of memoirs to put on my reading list and because I was so pleased to have the recommendations of Annie Dillard, an outstanding memoir writer herself. Almost every chapter was vividly written and drew me into the writer's experience despite the fact that each was only a short portion of a longer work. I'm putting Zora Neale Hurston and Margaret Mead onto my reading list, as I found their chapters particularly compelling.

Kristin says

I was about halfway through the book, essays not thrilling me very much anyway, and then I realized the authors seem a bit too light on women for my tastes, thereafter losing any of the remaining interest I had.

Ann Sosnowski says

I enjoyed about half of these memoir excerpts. Some were older and written in styles I haven't cared for, across fiction and nonfiction. Some topics were boring. Overall, a great book for reading when you wake up in the middle of the night and can't sleep.

Jen Hirt says

Since creative nonfiction is what I write and teach, I find myself trying to study, more and more, the origins of the genre. In particular, I'm looking for the crossovers between memoirs and essays. I have plenty of collections of essays, and so I read this 1995 anthology of memoir excerpts edited by none other than one of my early influences, Annie Dillard.

First, the cons: I was surprised by and can't really explain why, out of 35 contributors, only 9 are women. Another bias is that Dillard and her co-editor Cort Conley seemed to favor memoirs set in the east. (Dillard is from the mid-Atlantic and east coast, but Conley is from Idaho). There are of course a few excerpts that take the south as their setting (and racism as their topics), as well as the west (fathers, farming, failure, fortitude...some lovely writing over well-trod ground) and the midwest is, for some reason, handed over to the writer born in the nineteenth century, Hamlin Garland, who I've studied and who is great in his own way; my problem is that his essay about living in the midwest is from 1917, which is technically "modern," yes, but I'm pretty sure that in the 80 years between Garland and the publication of this collection, there were other memoirs about the midwest. And yes yes, there are other excerpts set in the midwest, but the only one that really handles the midwest as the midwest is Garland, and, sorry to break it to the world, the midwest has changed since 1917. I could have told you that in 1995.

Now, the pros: Like all anthologies, it provided perfect introductions to writers I hadn't read yet, and I could

see in some of their work the origins of the 21st century essay as we know it. James McConkey was my favorite "can't-believe-I-haven't-read-this-writer!" writer, in his humbling and hilarious account of his first year of grad school in Iowa, renting a trailer on the farm of an old cuss who has problematic ideas about water usage. His copycat neighbor, a medical student, provides amusing tension too. I couldn't put down Anne Moody's amazing excerpt about her direct participation in the civil rights movement (she was one of the black teens at the whites-only lunch counter). And Maureen Howard's insightful look back at her elocution lessons was delightful and well crafted.

I had hoped the book would illuminate the mid-nineties sentiments about creative nonfiction as refracted through the memoir genre, and it definitely did that. One patterns I noticed is that most of the writers published their memoirs when they were 50 or older, and the memoirs really focus, for the most part, on early childhood. (My favorites, however, where the few excerpts that were about the teen years or early adulthood). Another pattern is the dominance of fiction techniques (narrative, dialogue) as opposed to the more lyrical essay-memoir hybrid that I see now. Even though the word "modern" in the title didn't exactly stand the test of time, I think it will be a valuable reference for my own research, teaching, and writing.

Colin says

A fairly surprising and useful book. It occupies the middle age of the memoir--the thirty or so years (although there are exceptions) between the 19th century Great Men Writing About Their Great Lives memoir and the Fucked Up Childhood memoir. Most of these deal in experiences--this is what is was like to be a kid on a farm in Iowa in 1870, a foot soldier in the Civil Rights movement in Mississippi, a worker at a circus, and so on. Very nicely done, and fills a needed gap in my education.

Brierly says

Of all the anthologies from my nonfiction class, this one was my least favorite. Yes, I gave it three stars, and I'd probably say 3.5 because of James Baldwin. All the stars to Baldwin--if you haven't read him, you should!

"Modern" is certainly a relative term as almost all of these entires included an anecdote about the Sears catalog. Some of the stories were compelling, but many felt as though they (the authors) were repeating the same tired dance. Memory-reflection-memory-reflection. I like more experimental nonfiction.

Kevin Hodgson says

Deep literary dive into the memoir genre ...

Derek says

Of all the essays in Annie Dillard's and Cort Conley's Modern American Memoirs, the one I think I learned the most from was the excerpt from Wallace Stegner's Wolf Willow. His original comparisons! "I watched the sky with suspicion," he writes. "Exposed as we were, it could jump on us like a leopard from a tree" (Stegner, 27). Or, "[The wind:] hits the Plains and comes across Alberta and Saskatchewan like the breath of a blowtorch" (Stegner, 34). Throughout the essay, Stegner compares flora and fauna and man and machine in fresh ways that help me understand his sensory and psychological situation.

He's an expert at rhythm. It might be the rolling polysyndeton in a gust of wind: "Before the shack was finished we lived in a tent, which the night wind constantly threatened to blow away, flapping the canvas and straining the ropes and pulling the pegs from the gravelly ground" (Stegner, 26). Or it might be the intentionally angular assonance and clunky consonance of a jalopy, a "high, square car, with its yellow spoke wheels and its brass bracing rods from windshield to mudguards and its four-eared brass radiator cap" (Stegner 25). Hear it? Brass and bracing. They sound the same. Or maybe they all end with "d": Rod, wind, shield, mud, guard, eared. Or the rambling two-beat cadence of windshield and mudguard contrasted with a series of triplets: "high square car," "yellow spoke wheels," and "brass bracing rod." Alternating cadences, Stegner makes me feel like I am in the car, a square on wheels, the floor vibrating from the various ruts and dents in the rough roads and green trails of Stegner's childhood. The sound of the sentence complements its meaning well.

It's rural life made beautiful but not sentimental. Frederick Buechner, in an excerpt from The Sacred Journey, does much the same. By my count, this one sentence evokes at least three senses: "Then back to the big shingled summer house by the canal, where ducks quacked for breadcrumbs and bees buzzed among the honeysuckle, and all through the house there were bowls of flowers – black-eyed Susans, wild roses, cat-tails – and cold crab in the ice box, cold beer, and lemonade in crockery pitchers, a mocha torte with ground almonds in it that took two days to make" (Buechner, 82). There's sight, sound, and taste, and the specificity in the final phrase about the mocha torte keeps the other phrases rooted in originality. Detail is the enemy of cliché, and the crushed almonds in the torte steer the cold beer and the jug of lemonade away from what I was expecting next: Mama fanning herself on the front porch. Other images in the essay feel suspended in space, freed from time, composite moments, lightning flashes of memory that haunt Buechner. Though the piece is retrospective and generally past tense – "I had touched.. The curtain would rise… Not a word was spoken… She had dreamed… She would never have said…" (Buechner, 83) – some of those composites are simple present: "I remember my Grandmother… She sits… She talks… (Buechner, 81). These transitions between tense feel organic; I picked up on them because I've been focusing on tense in my writing and I'm interested in how writers shift tense within pieces. As far as I can tell, the only rule about tense is that there's no rule. The needs of a story dictate where appropriate, organic, and revelatory shifts in tense should occur.

Other favorite take-away lessons from the collection:
I love how Russell Baker alternates between general description and specific anecdote. General: "Days when there were no news sensations the newsboys lived by their wits…" Specific: "She shouted at the newsboy speeding off up the street…" General: "My transition to city life was a series of agonies…" Specific: "On my first day in Newark…" (Baker, 52, 53). I like how Richard Selzer writes about river life using subtle river language. Describing a dead body: "Who could imagine that currents of warm air had ever coursed among those fingers, streamed across those translucent webs?" (Selzer, 107). I appreciate Chris Offutt's surrealistic depiction of circus life, ascending the hierarchy of jobs from stake puller to walrus impersonator. He celebrates fringe culture – a monkey acts like a human on one page, a boy acts like a walrus on the next – in ways that remind me of Hank Stuever's Off-Ramp and Dave Hickey's Air Guitar. Finally, I love, love,

love this quote by James McConkey, from “Court of Memory”: “Memory simplifies, for its impulse is order; in playing upon a given relationship, it can erode the irrelevant and ambiguous to leave the bones of allegory” (McConkey, 349). What a perfect reminder that creative non-fiction writers get the best of both worlds: We shed irrelevant and impertinent details to work with the “bones” of an ordered story, but we also work intentionally to acknowledge and commemorate each story’s inherent complexity.

Lisa says

it's an interesting book to teach, lots to work with. bummer that everything is a selection from a larger work--it is hard to show students how to write short memoir pieces from this model, but many have said they want to get the larger works to continue the stories. many classics in the collection.

Conor says

I had previously reviewed this with "Assigned reading for a class from 10 years ago - finally finished" without explaining why it was worth going back. I am not, as a rule, a fan of memoirs as a genre. The great bulk of them (by my estimation) are insipid, full of attempts to alter history, and generally written for a pile of cash, or to fling some final barbs.

Either way, these are not whatever I find objectionable about most memoirs. In fact, some of them are gorgeous and haunting.

I might say that I should have read this book in class when it was assigned by my creepy, ancient, grammar teacher. Oddly enough, since this was her choice, sandwiched among much lower quality material that satisfied state requirements...I'd much rather say that I understand why she chose these as something worth reading; because it show exactly what how much the memoir can do as a genre; a something that I would not, or could not, understand as an 11th grade student.

Christin says

The anthology provides a wide array of memoirs and is really a standard for teaching the genre. It holds a dear place in my heart because in my memoir class with Karl, I unwittingly mentioned in conference on the day we read Maureen Howard's piece from *Facts of Life* that I had performed in my high school's production of *The Music Man* as a pick-a-little lady and knew the classical attitudes from the Grecian Urn scene. Later that day in class, he proceeded to make me read that portion of the memoir and act out the appropriate attitude, culminating in "Despair" which involved a deep sigh and the flinging of my hand across my brow. That remains one of my most ridiculously embarrassing but still enjoyable experiences from Bryn Mawr and the people I took that class with still make reference to that memorable event and the inspiring stories from this collection.

Francisco says

A memoir is, unlike an autobiography, a memory of a specific event. Some authors see their whole life as a single event or as a series of events and so title their autobiography a memoir or call the story of their life: "their memoirs". But a good memoir is like a novel or better yet, a short story - it is focused and it tells a story worth reading, among other things, for the way it's told. I've always been fascinated by memoirs, especially the bad ones. Why are some memoirs bad? What makes them bad? In the bad memoirs there is, not surprisingly, a certain lack of craft that comes off as egotism. As if the only thing that mattered to the author was getting the damn thing off his or her chest and out into the world because, well, that kind of unburdening is good therapy. Even in the memoirs that describe the terrible tragedy that befell the author, there is a certain "look at how much I suffered" or "look at what I accomplished despite my hardship" that stinks of ego. In good memoirs, like the samples in this book, you get the sense that the author is more concerned about you, the reader, than he is about himself. In a good memoir, the author gives you not only language beautifully crafted but also awakens you to greater understanding, deeper consciousness. The author has found a way to transform something personal and specific into something you the reader have also felt or intimated but never found the words for it. In a good memoir, more than in any other genre, there is a potential for two souls to meet. This is a collection of memoirs selected by wonderful writers with sensitive taste. They are memoirs of people who are interesting and thoughtful and funny. These are memoirs by people who went on to write great books or do significant things and so in many cases what you have is the story of how a vocation was discovered, of the call to be and to do that was heard and answered. So be prepared, if you read this book, to feel that you too have a purpose and a path which must be maintained, if you are on it, or found if you are not.

Angie says

An interesting collection of memoirs whose stories concentrate around the time frame between the Great Depression and the civil rights movement.

With multiple takes on ideas like the intrigue of the circus, the bitterness of racism, and the hard work of conquering the west, this collection showed this time period of America from a different angle of authentic voices.

On the down side, some of the excerpts just weren't for me (in which case, I admit to just skipping forward to the next one), and several others felt like they ended too soon or didn't have enough background. And, where were the ladies? Their voice was underrepresented.

That said, the collection exposed new-to-me writers I really liked, and Annie Dillard includes a long list in the back for additional memoirs she recommends that didn't fit the time frame or American writer requirements for this collection.

I plan on reading more from these writers, whose excerpts represent my favorites of the collection:

Frank Conroy
Harry Middleton
Richard Wright
Ralph Ellison

Malcolm X
Walace Stenger
Russell Baker
Maureen Howard
Cynthia Ozick
Hamlin Garland
Chris Offutt
James McConkey
William Kittredge
Margaret Mead

All in all, definitely worth a read.

Marlene Kelly says

I read this as a book on tape for the Idaho Society for the Blind when I lived in Boise. I wonder how many people listened to me read this book to them?

Dnicebear says

Editor Annie Dillard packs this book with superb writing. I happened to read James Baldwin right on Martin Luther King Day--what a gift. Soon thereafter came John Wideman who helps us see his parents and their contexts so well. As an example about his father: "Wagons once upon a time in the streets of Pittsburgh. Delivering ice and milk and coal. Sinking in the mud, trundling over cobblestones, echoing in the sleep of a man who works all day in the mouth of a fiery furnace, who dreams of green fish gliding along the clear, stony bottom of a creek in South Carolina. In the twenty years between 1910 and 1930, the black population of Pittsburgh increased by nearly fifty thousand."
