

Autobiography/Memoir Independent Reading List

Humanities 6

* indicates book is available in the PJA library

Descriptions are a compilation of information taken from Amazon.com and personal recommendations.

ADVENTURE

**Caught by the Sea, My Life on Boats* by Gary Paulsen

Celebrated outdoorsman-turned-author Gary Paulsen relates his lifelong romance with open water to young readers with this short memoir. He grabs our attention within the first few pages with a shocking childhood memory of watching as sharks attacked plane-wreck victims. Strangely, this doesn't scare Paulsen off as much as it challenges him to conquer the ocean's power.

**My Life with the Chimpanzees* by Jane Goodall

Jane Goodall's adventures into the forests of Africa to observe chimpanzees in the wild are captured in this easy-to-read autobiography written especially for middle school students. The relationship she develops with the animals makes this a moving story.

My Family and Other Animals by Gerald Durrell

This autobiographical work by naturalist Durrell tells of the part of his childhood he spent on the Greek island of Corfu between 1935 and 1939. He humorously describes the life of the Durrell Family on the island and also richly discusses the wildlife he encounters.

AUTHORS

**A Girl from Yamhill* by Beverly Cleary

Lovers of Cleary's many children's books will enjoy her memories of growing up in Oregon during the Great Depression.

**My Own Two Feet: A Memoir* by Beverly Cleary

The sequel to *A Girl from Yamhill* chronicling Cleary's time from college to acceptance of her first book, *Henry Huggins*.

**Boy: Tales of Childhood* by Roald Dahl

The first autobiographical book by British writer Roald Dahl (*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, etc.) describes with humor his life from birth until leaving school, including those incidents that influenced him to become a writer.

**Going Solo* by Roald Dahl

Going Solo, the sequel to *Boy: Tales of Childhood* is the action-packed tale of Roald Dahl's exploits as a World War II pilot.

**Bill Peet: An Autobiography* by Bill Peet

An easy-to read autobiography written by children's book author Bill Peet (*The Wump World*), beginning with a traditional Midwestern town and country boyhood, and then following Peet through high school, into art school, on to local prizes for his paintings, and eventually to an invitation to "audition" for the Disney studios where he eventually worked on *Snow White*, *Dumbo*, and many more films.

**Knots in My Yo Yo String* by Jerry Spinelli

Although the first five pages are a bit slow moving, the rest of the book takes off as Spinelli (*Maniac Magee*) takes small, seemingly insignificant snippets of the ten years he lived on George Street on the West End of Norristown, PA, and explains with humor how they were stepping-stones to his success as a popular children's book author.

The Abracadabra Kid: A Writer's Life by Sid Fleischman

A prolific author and the winner of the Newbery Medal in 1987 for *The Whipping Boy*, Fleischman tells in an engaging brisk style how he worked his way from boy magician to Hollywood scriptwriter to award-winning writer.

Looking Back: A Book of Memories by Lois Lowry

Lowry (*The Giver*, *Number the Stars*) deftly dances between humorous and heartbreaking with this ingenious memoir. Unlike most autobiographies, this one uses an inventive thematic organization. Lowry introduces each section with an excerpt from one of her novels, followed by one or more anecdotes, each inspired by a photograph of herself or her family.

Living up the Street by Gary Soto

A collection of stories by poet and young adult novelist Soto (*Taking Sides*) exploring the challenges he and his family faced as Mexican-Americans working in the fields and factories of Fresno, California. Filled with warmth and poetic prose.

Small Steps: The Year I Got Polio by Peg Kehret

In a riveting story of courage and hope, Peg Kehret, a prolific author of middle school thrillers (*Abduction*, *I'm Not Who You Think I Am*) writes about months spent in a hospital when she was twelve, first struggling to survive a severe case of polio, then slowly learning to walk again.

CULTURE & HISTORY

**Red Scarf Girl: A Memoir of the Cultural Revolution* by Ji Li Jiang

This autobiography details the author's experiences as a teenager during the Chinese Cultural Revolution which began in 1966. Though wanting to be devoted followers of Chairman Mao, Jiang and her family are subjected to many indignities because her grandfather was once a landlord. A straightforward, easy to read account of a fascinating and terrifying period in World History.

**Homesick: My Own Story* by Jean Fritz

Fritz's Newbery Honor-winning memoir written especially for young people tells of growing up during a turbulent time in the 1920's in China. While Fritz claims the book is fiction because the episodes she describes come exclusively from her own memory, it is really a captivating blend of truth and storytelling which is, ultimately, what all memoirs are.

**Farewell to Manzanar* by Jeanne Wakatsuki and James D. Houston

The book describes the experiences of Jeanne Wakatsuki and her family before, during, and following imprisonment at the Manzanar concentration camp, which was due to the United States government's internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Wakatsuki's memoir is simple and compelling and has been required reading at many schools since its publication in 1973.

**Zlata's Diary* by Zlata Filipovic

From September 1991 through October 1993, young Zlata Filipovic kept a diary. When she began it, she was 11 years old, concerned mostly with friends, school, piano lessons, MTV, and Madonna. As the diary ends, she has become used to constant bombing and snipers; severe shortages of food, water, and gas; and the end of a privileged adolescence in her native Sarajevo. The narrative provides a vivid description of the ravages of war and its effect upon one young woman.

**Chinese Cinderella: True Story of an Unwanted Daughter* by Adeline Yen Mah

As the youngest of her five siblings, Wu Mei suffers the worst at the hands of her stepmother Niang. In her loneliness, Wu Mei turns to books for company. A complete glossary, historical notes on the state of Chinese society and politics during Yen Mah's childhood, and the legend of the original Chinese Cinderella round out this stirring testimony of the author's strength of character.

**The Circuit* by Francisco Jimenez

In this short, easy-to-read and very moving book suitable for all ages, Jimenez recalls his life with his family as they leave Mexico and move from one location to another to harvest crops in the United States.

**Breaking Through* by Francisco Jimenez

The sequel to Jimenez's book *The Circuit* in which he recalls the struggles and triumphs of growing up in a family of migrant farm workers.

Rosa Parks: My Story by Rosa Parks

This well-known story is refreshed by Parks's personal narrative. In simple, gracious, compelling language she describes her childhood, family life, and elusive educational opportunities. A warm and easy-to-read autobiography.

Warriors Don't Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High by Melba Beals

Beals, one of the nine black students who integrated Central High School in Little Rock, AR, in 1957, tells an incredible story of faith, family love, friendships, and strong personal commitment. Drawing from the diaries she kept, the author easily puts readers in her shoes as she struggles against those people in both the white and black communities who would have segregation continue.

Leon's Story by Leon Walter Tillage

Tillage, a black custodian in a Baltimore private school, reminisces about his childhood as a sharecropper's son in the South and his youth as a civil-rights protester. The afterword and note about the genesis of the book contain important supplementary information for understanding this period of history.

Defending Baltimore Against Enemy Attack--A Boyhood Year During WW II by Charles Osgood

For a nine-year-old boy living in Baltimore, 1942 was as memorable for the childhood mischief of making stink bombs as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Radio and television broadcaster Osgood renders sharp details of a life he insists was actually simpler and sweeter, even with the threat of war. A warm, humorous look at the past.

Facing the Lion: Growing up Maasai on the African Savanna by Joseph Lemasolai Lekuton

This short, simple and readable memoir is the extraordinary story of a poor nomadic boy in Kenya who literally travels across the world but never abandons home. Lekuton grew up in Kenya's poorest tribe, herding cows and playing in hyena holes before he entered boarding school and went to college in the U.S. Now he teaches in Virginia, but he has never lost his Maasai roots, and he returns home to help his people several months a year.

In My Hands: Memories of a Holocaust Rescuer by Irene Opdyke

When World War II began, Irene Gutowna was a 17-year-old Polish nursing student. Six years later, she writes in this inspiring memoir, "I felt a million years old." In the intervening time, she was separated from her family and forced to work in a hotel serving German officers. Sickened by the suffering inflicted on the local Jews, Irene began leaving food under the walls of the ghetto. Soon she was scheming to protect the Jewish workers she supervised at the hotel and then hiding them in the lavish villa where she served as housekeeper to a German major. A moving tale appropriate for young adults and older.

No Pretty Pictures by Anita Lobel

Given Lobel's status as a Caldecott-winning illustrator of such delightful picture books as *On Market Street*, it is difficult to believe she endured the horrific childhood she did. Her girlhood voice tells it like it is; from age five to age ten, Lobel spent what are supposed to be carefree years hiding from the Nazis, protecting her younger brother, being captured and marched from camp to camp, and surviving completely dehumanizing conditions.

Barefoot Heart: Stories of a Migrant Child by Elva Trevino Hart

Hart's memoir concerns her childhood as the daughter of Mexican immigrants who worked as migrant workers to feed their six children. She eloquently reveals the harsh toll that poverty and discrimination took on her family.

The Division Street Princess: A Memoir by Elaine Soloway

Soloway, the daughter of European Jewish immigrants, grew up in a quintessential Chicago neighborhood during and after World War II. Soloway's child's-eye view of her ill-matched yet loving parents struggling to rise above poverty and ensure that their children live easier and more fulfilling lives enlivens a classic immigrant's tale. Simply and gracefully told.

In My Father's Bakery: A Bronx Memoir by Marvin Korman

Told in a relaxed and engaging style, Korman's memoir of the Depression and war years focuses on the lives of a family of individuals, their friends, and their neighbors. Korman reveals just what it was like to grow up in a Jewish family, personally discovering the ups and downs of life and paying full tribute to the hardworking souls that persevered at their jobs day in, day out.

**Through My Eyes* by Ruby Bridges

In November 1960, all of America watched as a tiny six-year-old black girl, surrounded by federal Marshall's, walked through a mob of screaming segregationists and into her school. An icon of the civil rights movement, Ruby Bridges chronicles each dramatic step of this pivotal event in history.

MATURE/ADVANCED READING

**I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou

With a gift for language and observation, poet Maya Angelou recounts a youth filled with disappointment, frustration, tragedy, and finally hard-won independence. This book has become a beloved contemporary classic of African-American literature and is found on many high school reading lists because of (or in spite of) its mature themes.

**Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood* by Ibtisam Barakat

While the topic of this moving memoir of a Palestinian woman's childhood experiences during the Six-Day War and its aftermath remains politically charged (hence it Mature/Advanced listing), the vignettes are beautifully crafted.

**When I Was a Soldier* by Valerie Zenatti

For immigrant Valerie, 18, the required two-year Israeli army service is an exciting rite of passage. She gets to leave home, be considered equal to boys, and feel like a real citizen. The military training fascinates her, even if she misses her friends and is haunted by memories of the boyfriend who dumped her. Zenatti's fast, wry, present-tense memoir is translated from the French.

**King of the Mild Frontier: An Ill-Advised Autobiography* by Chris Crutcher

Tough and tender (and often hilarious) reminiscences focus primarily on family, social, and school conflicts, but lessons derived from Crutcher's career as a teacher, therapist, and writer are also described. He addresses issues about his use of profanity in his writing for teens which is the reason this book is listed as Mature/Advanced.

A Flight of Passage: A Memoir by Rinker Buck

In July 1966, Rinker and Kernahan Buck flew a Piper Cub from New Jersey to California, becoming at ages 15 and 18 respectively, the youngest pilots then to cross the country. Both learned how to fly from their father, Tom, whose strong personality often overshadowed his sons. This book will interest both aviation enthusiasts and readers fascinated by the complex relationships between brothers and between fathers and sons.

Jumping Fire: A Smokejumper's Memoir of Fighting Wildfire by Murry A. Taylor

The oldest smoke jumper in the 60-year history of Alaskan firefighting, Taylor gives a detailed and exciting account of his adventures parachuting into the wilderness to combat wildfires during the summer of 1991. Taylor begins by methodically introducing the reader to his Alaskan locale, the routine of his yearly training and the inevitable list of colorful supporting characters. The energy picks up as Taylor carefully shows how quiet summer days can give way to unrelenting natural disasters.

Space: A Memoir by Jesse Kercheval

Kercheval, a talented writer, takes readers back to her childhood and to her family's move to the Cape Canaveral area of Florida in 1966. The space program was in full gear and excitement was in the air. But there was a darker side to life in Florida for Kercheval, including a mother who began to fade away emotionally, an older sister who was forced to assume her mother's responsibilities and a father who couldn't face his wife's depression. Beautifully written story about a family's coming of age.

My Losing Season by Pat Conroy

This lengthy memoir by best-selling adult author Pat Conroy (*Prince of Tides*) is remarkable for its writing and its subject. In it, Conroy deals with his senior season as the starting point guard on the basketball team of The Citadel from 1966 to 1967. Conroy describes his tumultuous relationship with his coach and the team's experience with losing. Along the way, Conroy captures the essence of what it means to be a young man growing up in America, no matter the era.

When Mama Makes Up Her Mind: And Other Dangers of Southern Living by Bailey White

White is known to fans of National Public Radio's *All Things Considered* for her endearing true stories about rural South Georgia where she lives and teaches the first grade. This book contains 50 of these short pieces, rich in humor and folksy charm. Many selections deal with White's mother and other relatives and friends with similar eccentric wrinkles in their personalities. Other pieces are culled from the events of White's everyday life.

My Thirteenth Winter: A Memoir by Samantha Abeel

Abeel recounts her life, from kindergarten through college, with a learning disability. She writes frankly about her mental and emotional struggles to cope; her narrative is interjected with first-person remembrances of painful incidents that left a vivid imprint on her self-worth. After her disability was diagnosed, she turned to writing, which became her life preserver.