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# Memoir.

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**Abstract:** A memoir is a personal account of one's past experiences. Although memoir overlaps with autobiography, the main focus of a memoir may be on the writer's experiences with noteworthy people, events, or places rather than on his or her own life. The word "memoir" derives from the French word *mémoire* and the Latin term *memoria*, meaning "memory."

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## Memoir

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[autobiography](#), the main focus of a memoir may be on the writer's experiences with noteworthy people, events, or places rather than on his or her own life. The word "memoir" derives from the French word *mémoire* and the Latin term *memoria*, meaning "memory."

As a genre, memoir has a long history. Humans have been traveling from place to place to tell stories since the introduction of language. Writing about one's personal experience is a method of understanding the meaning of life and a way to communicate one's experiences, emotions, and personal beliefs. The ancient Greeks and Romans wrote about their experiences in order to convey their opinions about life, make a record of history as lived in their era, and transmit political, religious, and educational philosophies. Memoirs have remained popular through the ages, and various categories of memoirs can be found in libraries and bookstores. The contemporary fascination with genealogy and family research illustrates the prominence of memoir as a method of understanding the self.

## **Background**

Memoirs are valuable tools for learning about historical and cultural issues and personal and public stories that would otherwise be forgotten. Reading a memoir about an unknown person or way of life can be an excellent starting point from which to pursue further research. Writers often use the medium of memoir to impart morals, truths, beliefs, and philosophies. Young adult (YA) memoirs are a popular form of literature in many languages, particularly those written by young patients with serious illnesses or children who have survived tragedies.

In order for a piece of writing to be classified as memoir, it must be written or told in the first-person point of view, directly narrated by the author. Otherwise, there are no restrictions as to the focus or length of the narrative. Memoirs may employ literary devices, such as character, plot, theme, and setting, and they may be written by the author or passed down as oral history. Memoirists with physical or language-related difficulties may have their stories recorded by another person. Other forms of memoir include video memoirs, taped recordings, and memoirs expressed as music, poetry, or art. Some traveling memoirists attend festivals and other gatherings to tell their stories to audiences who may not otherwise have the opportunity to read, such as people in prisons, hospitals, nursing homes, or homeless shelters. The Internet has given writers the freedom to self-publish their memoirs and reach a global reading audience.

## **Overview**

There are several overlapping subgenres of memoir, including religious memoirs, historical memoirs,

slave narratives, survival epics, and émigré accounts.

**Religious memoirs.** Some of the earliest recorded memoirs can be found in the prophetic narratives of the Old Testament. In 500 BCE the prophet [Nehemiah](#) wrote about his experience rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. In 62 CE [Luke the Evangelist](#) narrated the events leading to the establishment of Christianity in the New Testament book Acts of the Apostles. Saint Augustine wrote his [Confessions](#) (*Confessiones*, 397–401; English translation, 1620) about his rejection of a sinful life and conversion to Christianity. Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani student and activist, wrote about being attacked by Islamic fundamentalists at the age of fifteen in *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* (2013).

**Historical memoirs.** Whether written by famous historical figures or those close to them, historical memoirs reveal an intimate, first-person perspective of historical events not often found in conventional historical texts. [Julius Caesar](#) (100–44 BCE), dictator of ancient Rome, recorded his memoirs of his earlier conquest of Gaul, *The Gallic Wars* (*Comentarii de bello Gallico*, 52–51 BCE). [Bābur](#) (1483–1530), the founder of the Mughal dynasty in Central Asia, wrote about his conquests in the *Bāburnāma*, which he began in 1494. Sofia Tolstaya (1844–1919), wife of Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, wrote her story, *My Life*, over the course of fifteen years, starting in 1904; the complete manuscript was not published until 2010, having previously been either ignored or suppressed because it was deemed detrimental to her husband’s image. [Ulysses S. Grant](#) (1822–85), eighteenth president of the United States, spent the last year of his life writing the *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*, which focused on his involvement in the Mexican-American War and the Civil War and was published posthumously by Mark Twain. Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (b. 1938) wrote *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir* (2010), chronicling his life under British colonial rule during World War II.

**Slave narratives.** Slave narratives tell a story of enslavement from the point of view of the enslaved; as such, they are vital for those interested in gaining an accurate historical account of slavery. According to the Library of Congress, in the 1930s the [Federal Writers’ Project](#) of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) collected more than 2,300 first-person accounts and photographs from previously enslaved African Americans. A number of the memoirs were written by the former slaves themselves, while others were told to a writer who in turn recorded them in printed form. The collection was published in 1941 as *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*. Other examples of the genre include *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845); *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave* (1850); and [Harriet Jacobs](#)’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (1861).

**Survival epics.** Another category of memoir is the survival epic. Halima Bashir, author of *Tears of the Desert: A Memoir of Survival in Darfur* (2008), accounts her experience of when the [Janjaweed](#) militia attacked her village. Bashir became a physician and wrote about her life with the purpose of telling the world about conditions in her home country. Nobel Prize–winning author [Elie Wiesel](#)'s memoir, *Un di Velt hot geshvign* (1956; *Night*, 1960), describes his imprisonment in the [Auschwitz](#) and [Buchenwald](#) concentration camps during World War II and the subsequent liberation of the camps.

**Émigré accounts.** People who leave their home countries due to political repression often write their memoirs as a form of therapy for the suffering they lived through. Such memoirs can reveal otherwise unseen conditions within repressive regimes and provide valuable counterpoints to official government accounts. The memoir of Loung Ung, *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* (2000), describes her life in Cambodia in 1976–78, when she was kidnapped by [Pol Pot](#)'s (1925–98) [Khmer Rouge](#) and forced to work as a child soldier in a labor camp.

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