

Recommended reading list

This is a list of books I've read that stick with me. I believe—if you are into memoir and/or true stories—you'll like these.

Memoir is probably my favorite genre because when it's done well, it's the closest thing literature has to a controlled demolition. A great memoir writer isn't protecting themselves. They're telling the truth as honestly as they can bear to tell it—and sometimes more honestly than that.

The books below cracked something open in me. Some are hilarious. Some are brutal. Some made me feel less alone in the world. A few made me gasp at the sheer audacity of the writing itself.

This list is not exhaustive. There are too many brilliant memoirs for that. But if you love literary nonfiction, complicated families, addiction narratives, survival stories, dark humor, female rage, reinvention, or writers willing to expose the messiest parts of themselves on the page—you'll find something here.

The Liars' Club — Mary Karr

This is the book that changed memoir forever.

Mary Karr kicked the door open for an entire generation of writers by proving memoir could be literary, ferocious, funny, vulgar, heartbreaking, and structurally sophisticated all at once. Her East Texas childhood is rendered with such vividness, you can practically smell the gasoline and cigarettes.

Karr writes about chaos with terrifying clarity, but she also understands humor as survival. I've reread this book more than once and continue to marvel at it.

Cherry — Mary Karr

This book feels like watching someone walk directly into the fire of their own young adulthood.

Karr writes about sex, ambition, motherhood, addiction, and self-destruction with the kind of honesty that still makes many memoirists flinch. What I love most is that she never writes herself as a heroine. She writes herself as a human.

Messy, brilliant, searching human.

Lit — Mary Karr

Recovery memoirs can become repetitive or self-righteous very quickly. Lit does neither.

Karr somehow manages to write about addiction, faith, sobriety, and spiritual longing while remaining profane, hilarious, skeptical, and deeply intelligent. This book understands how difficult transformation actually is.

And sentence by sentence, she's just operating on another level.

The Cracker Queen — Laretta Hannon

This memoir has so much heart.

Laretta Hannon writes about Southern working-class life with warmth and humor and tremendous affection for the oddballs and survivors who populated her world. There's grit here, but there's also joy and resilience and wit.

I laughed a lot reading this book.

Wishful Drinking — Carrie Fisher

Carrie Fisher had one of the sharpest comic minds of anybody, anywhere.

This memoir is funny right up until it punches you in the chest emotionally. Fisher writes about addiction, mental illness, fame, family dysfunction, and Hollywood absurdity with astonishing candor and self-awareness.

She never asks for pity. That's part of what makes the book so powerful.

Postcards from the Edge — Carrie Fisher

Technically a novel, but so autobiographical it practically winks at you from the page.

Fisher's voice is what makes this unforgettable — darkly funny, whip-smart, self-lacerating, and emotionally naked underneath all the wit. Addiction memoirs often become very solemn. Fisher understood that humor and despair frequently occupy the exact same room.

Running with Scissors — Augusten Burroughs

Absolutely insane. I mean that as a compliment.

This memoir reads like someone survived a fever dream and somehow managed to write it all down with comic precision. Burroughs' childhood inside his psychiatrist's wildly dysfunctional household is horrifying and hilarious in equal measure.

The tonal balancing act here is remarkable.

This Boy's Life — Tobias Wolff

One of the most beautifully written coming-of-age memoirs ever published.

Wolff captures boyhood, longing, masculinity, reinvention, and shame with incredible emotional restraint—which somehow makes the book hit even harder. His stepfather is one of the great terrifying memoir villains because he feels so painfully real.

The prose is flawless without ever showing off.

Borrowed Finery — Paula Fox

Paula Fox writes with such elegance and emotional precision it almost hurts.

This memoir explores abandonment, instability, and emotional neglect without melodrama or self-pity. The restraint of the writing makes the pain land even more forcefully.

Fox understood that children absorb everything.

Angela's Ashes — Frank McCourt

This book somehow turns crushing poverty into literature that feels alive, funny, heartbreaking, and deeply humane.

McCourt's voice is the miracle here. He writes about deprivation with humor so sharp and specific that the darkness never overwhelms the story completely. You fall in love with his way of seeing the world even while that world is devastating.

A masterpiece of narrative voice.

Stop-Time — Frank Conroy

Frank Conroy writes with such calm authority that you almost don't notice how emotionally wrecked you've become until several pages later.

This memoir chronicles Conroy's chaotic childhood—drifting through instability, eccentric adults, poverty, and emotional neglect—but what makes the book extraordinary is the precision of the observation. He remembers the physical texture of adolescence so vividly that the entire memoir feels inhabited rather than merely recalled.

There's no melodrama here. No performance. Just astonishingly disciplined prose doing the quiet work of telling the truth.

Hunger — Roxane Gay

This book is extraordinarily brave.

Roxane Gay writes about trauma, body image, shame, desire, visibility, and self-protection with a level of vulnerability that made me stop reading several times just to absorb what she was saying. There's no performance here. No pretending.

Just brutal honesty and intelligence on every page.

Men We Reaped — Jesmyn Ward

This memoir wrecked me.

Ward writes about grief and race and poverty and the deaths of young Black men in the American South with breathtaking lyricism and moral clarity. The cumulative emotional force of this book is enormous.

It's not just a personal memoir. It's an indictment.

Heavy — Kiese Laymon

Kiese Laymon may be one of the best living nonfiction writers.

Heavy is about weight in every sense—body, history, masculinity, race, violence, expectation, and love. Laymon writes directly to his mother, and the intimacy of that structure gives the entire memoir extraordinary emotional power.

The prose here is muscular and unforgettable.

Just Kids — Patti Smith

This book made me nostalgic for a New York I never even lived in.

Patti Smith writes about art, youth, poverty, ambition, love, and Robert Mapplethorpe with such tenderness that the memoir feels almost dreamlike at times. It's about becoming an artist before you fully understand what your life will cost you.

Beautifully written.

Fierce Attachments — Vivian Gornick

If you care about voice on the sentence level, read Vivian Gornick immediately.

This memoir explores the complicated emotional terrain between mothers and daughters with incredible intelligence and psychological insight. Almost nothing “happens” in a traditional plot sense, and yet the book is completely riveting because Gornick understands human contradiction so deeply.

A masterclass in literary nonfiction.

Priestdaddy — Patricia Lockwood

One of the funniest memoirs I've ever read.

Patricia Lockwood's mind works in gloriously strange and brilliant ways, and her language is unlike anybody else's. The memoir centers around returning to live with her Catholic priest father, who is somehow both absurd and deeply moving.

This book is weird in the best possible way.

The Chronology of Water — Lidia Yuknavitch

This memoir doesn't behave itself structurally, emotionally, or stylistically—which is exactly why it's so powerful.

Yuknavitch writes about abuse, grief, sexuality, motherhood, addiction, and the body with astonishing fearlessness. The prose feels almost feral at times.

Not everyone will love this book. The people who do will love it intensely.

Drinking: A Love Story — Caroline Knapp

One of the smartest addiction memoirs ever written.

Knapp examines alcoholism not just as a substance problem but as an emotional architecture—a way of organizing loneliness, fear, intimacy, and self-worth. Her psychological insight is extraordinary.

This book feels painfully honest in ways that linger long after you finish it.

A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius — Dave Eggers

Yes, the title is ironic. Mostly.

Dave Eggers brought a kind of postmodern energy to memoir that felt wildly new when this book appeared, but underneath all the stylistic playfulness are genuine grief and responsibility. He's writing about becoming a parent to his younger brother after losing both parents, and the emotional core is real and moving.

Ambitious, funny, chaotic, deeply alive.

The Tender Bar — J. R. Moehringer

This memoir understands yearning.

Moehringer writes beautifully about masculinity, fathers, belonging, and the strange ways bars can become surrogate families. There's such tenderness underneath the toughness of the world he describes.

One of the loveliest memoirs about searching for home I've read.

Wild Game — Adrienne Brodeur

This memoir is absolutely riveting.

Adrienne Brodeur writes about becoming emotionally entangled in her mother's affair when she was just a child, and the psychological complexity of that relationship is fascinating and painful. The book understands how family loyalties can distort reality.

Elegant and compulsively readable.

Crying in H Mart — Michelle Zauner

Michelle Zauner writes about grief with such specificity and tenderness that it feels almost intimate to read.

Food, culture, motherhood, identity, and loss all intertwine here beautifully. What moved me most is how the memoir captures the panic of realizing too late how much of another person existed beyond your understanding.

Quietly devastating.

How to Murder Your Life — Cat Marnell

Completely chaotic. Also weirdly brilliant.

Cat Marnell writes about addiction, beauty culture, media, privilege, self-destruction, and New York excess with zero interest in making herself look admirable. The voice is compulsively readable—funny, reckless, vulnerable, and exhausting.

This memoir feels like staying out too late with someone fascinating and dangerous.

Prozac Nation — Elizabeth Wurtzel

Before everybody was publicly dissecting their mental health online, Elizabeth Wurtzel was doing this on the page with startling openness.

The book captures depression, ambition, identity, and young adulthood in a way that felt revolutionary when it was published. Wurtzel's intensity won't be for everyone, but that intensity is precisely what makes the memoir unforgettable for many readers.