

Four Lives: Contemporary Literary Memoirs

by STEVEN NESTER

MEMOIRS SURE AREN'T WHAT THEY USED TO BE. Once the stuff of the great, memoirs were written by members of a certain echelon of society—generals and statesmen, the empowered and the adventurous—whose material was evidence of the sway they held. The Caesars and Grants and Churchills, men who made the ground tremble when they walked, were the ones who could record their lives with no exaggeration or pretense. If their words were not always received with veneration, they were greeted at least with some amount of respect. To write a memoir, you had to matter.

In this day and age, memoirs have taken on quite a different description. Not inclusive of an entire life, they tend to be compact, with the breadth of a short story instead of a novel. Writer and memoirist Nicholas Dawidoff gives a succinct definition of the new standard, stating that “a memoir now usually implies a book of personal history by an individual most people will not recognize. They’re often more artistic, relying on what V.S. Pritchett called ‘the imaginative retrieval of memory.’ Memoirs are typically episodic, likely to describe only a fragment of a life or an aspect of it—aspects that tend to emphasize emotional subject matter.”

This describes much of the current glut of memoirs, books written by everyday people describing any number of subjects—their moments of destiny, how they found enlightenment at a

hotdog stand, or how the girl met under the Biltmore clock became a wife. The subject matter is small, but the books have real heft; these additions are more like personal essays that the writer just couldn’t leave alone. The other message here is that many of these books cannot be counted on for veracity.

Taking things a little deeper, critic Michiko Kakutani identifies the most popular subgenre as the “memoir of crisis,” a “genre that has produced a handful of genuinely moving accounts of people struggling with illness and personal disaster but many more ridiculously exhibitionistic monologues that like to use the word ‘survivor’ (a word once reserved for individuals who had lived through wars or famines or the Holocaust) to describe people coping with weight problems or bad credit.”

Readers know which books these are. Bookstore shelves are filled with them, and they bear no discussion here. What the reader does have to do is choose. Memoirs have never been so popular, and the numbers prove it. The information at hand, provided by the *Publishers Weekly* “Deals” page, shows that the total number of memoirs sold to publishing houses rose from 144 in 2004 to 325 in 2008. That’s almost a book a day, the kind of reading schedule that would give even the most scholarly a run for their money.

Among the dross and lackluster titles for sale there are gems to be read, but curious readers are likely to look over their shoulders to see what came earlier.

Forget about the rich and famous, and zero in on the individual point of view. The books with the staying power to remain fresh and alive and in print are the ones that avoid tabloid sensibility and trend, but have plenty of depth and heart. When a writer can summon a memory and connect it to the reader in such a way that it illuminates the reader's life, it's a book that's going to be around for a while. Here are several of them.

OF THE MANY SUBGENRES OF THE MEMOIR none seems more popular than the "hard luck" variety. Geoffrey Wolff began the modern fixation with hard luck tales with *The Duke of Deception* (Random House, 1979) and, in my opinion, it's the best of its kind. Erudite and wise, it's a tawdry story told well.

The author's father, Duke Wolff, is a man who instilled the value of truth in his son but was unable to live honestly himself. A liar, a piker and an alcoholic, Duke lived large from the 1930s to the 1960s, leaving a trail of debt and deceit as he dragged his young family around the country as one job and life after another collapsed under him. A victim of his past—or his lack of one—Duke's inability to pay his dues and his bills are his fatal flaws.

The son of a Hartford, Connecticut physician, Duke is a gin-swilling swell in a raccoon coat in the 1920s and 1930s. He refuses to grow up, spending his youth getting kicked out of expensive prep schools and borrowing money. Soon married with a family to support (his other son is author Tobias Wolff), Duke cuts to the front of the line every time. Extremely intelligent but lacking the scruples gene, he hides his Jewish heritage and never bothers with college. One thing he isn't shy of is talking the talk.

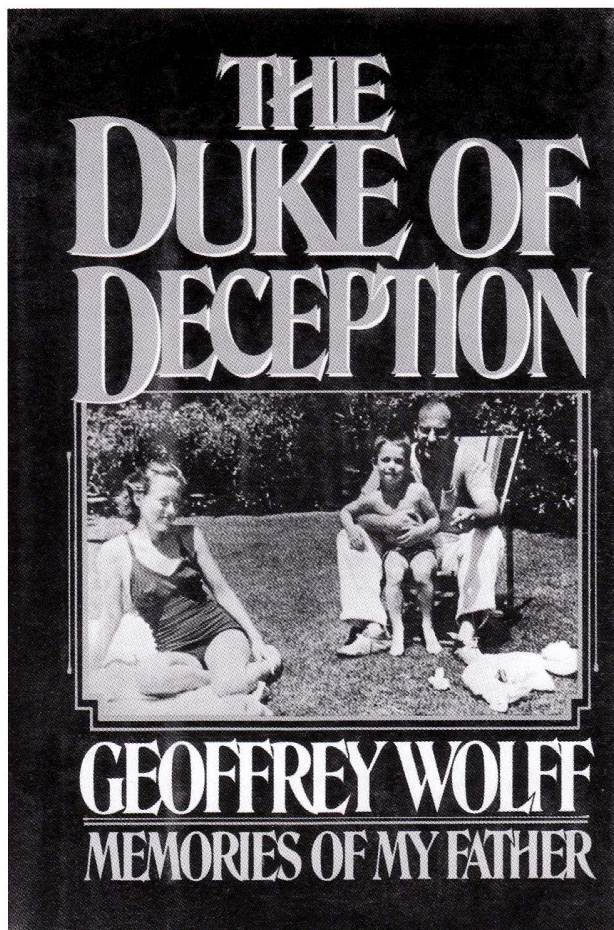
Armed with an outrageous *curriculum vitae* that lists the Sorbonne, Yale, jobs at M.I.T. and designing steel mills and highly-ranked CIA officials as references, (lies, all of it), he talks his way into high-tech and high-security jobs in the aeronautics business during World War Two. He's an overwhelming success as an "engineer" and manager, and his security clearance with some employers is at the atomic level. Duke is well-liked and has no equal as a motivator and troubleshooter, but he's doomed by a past that never existed.

When the eventual background checks bring to the surface lie after lie, it's only a matter of time before a liquor store owner or grocer or the landlord comes to Duke's place of employment looking to garnish Duke's wages. His long and ugly slide to the bottom begins in Seattle, at Boeing, where he's working on a new plane that will carry the atomic bomb. The F.B.I. comes calling with plenty of questions to which Duke has no answers. Unable to fast-talk the Feds, he's finally washed up. Say what you will about Duke Wolff, but he was never fired for technical or managerial incompetence—his only failings were as a human being.

When their parents' marriage falls apart, Geoff leaves with his father while Toby stays with his mother. (The brothers didn't see each other for the next 10 years.) Incredibly enough, Geoff gets

himself admitted to Princeton, financed by the silver service Duke bequeaths himself as a parting gift from his last wife, Tootie.

That Geoff Wolff survived his father's "Do what I say, not what I do" pedagogy and learned and upheld the concepts of honor and honesty is a miracle. Also miraculous is that while Duke betrayed Geoff virtually every day with the



egregious examples he set, it was by Duke's own efforts that he raised a boy into an honorable and productive man. And, by rising above his flaws, he engendered his son's love, however conditional and complicated. *The Duke of Deception* is a fascinating story of a man who's helpless to live honestly but is able to raise a son who can transcend circumstances and succeed in the world.

B*urning the Days* (Random House, 1997) is a book that you feel with the premonition of a poem. Much lies beneath the surface as you read meaning into it, and when you truly grasp the import of the words, you understand that the most casual aspects of life hold great significance and wisdom. James Salter is a novelist and screenwriter, first generation jet fighter pilot and lover of women and life, and his memoir, like MacLeish's poem on poetry, doesn't necessarily have to mean, but must possess and exude a sense of being.

Salter's prose is seamless, minimal and smooth. The stories he tells with so few words resound with such image and melancholy tone that it seems to prepare you for the inevitability that the brilliance of your days will end in darkness. Take what you can from this world, he seems to say—the instances of love and friends, good food and drink—live well as best you can. In *Burning the Days* Salter recalls all his memories and, quoting Jean Renoir, reminds readers that “the only things important in life are those you remember.”

The people and places and days Salter presents are read with the type of voyeurism that makes you wish you'd been born earlier, for the situations and those who popularized them could never exist again because the world that shaped them has disappeared. Mutability, that great subject of all

great poets, is evident and promulgated throughout this book, with the lightest of touch. You feel it instead of hearing it or seeing it.

The son of a West Point grad, Salter matriculates at the Academy. After flying in Europe during World War Two, he decides to stay in the service, where he pilots jet planes for the nascent Air Force. Stationed in Europe, he comes to know the great cities and, because of his literary aspirations, he becomes acquainted with many of the players in arts and letters on both sides of the Atlantic.

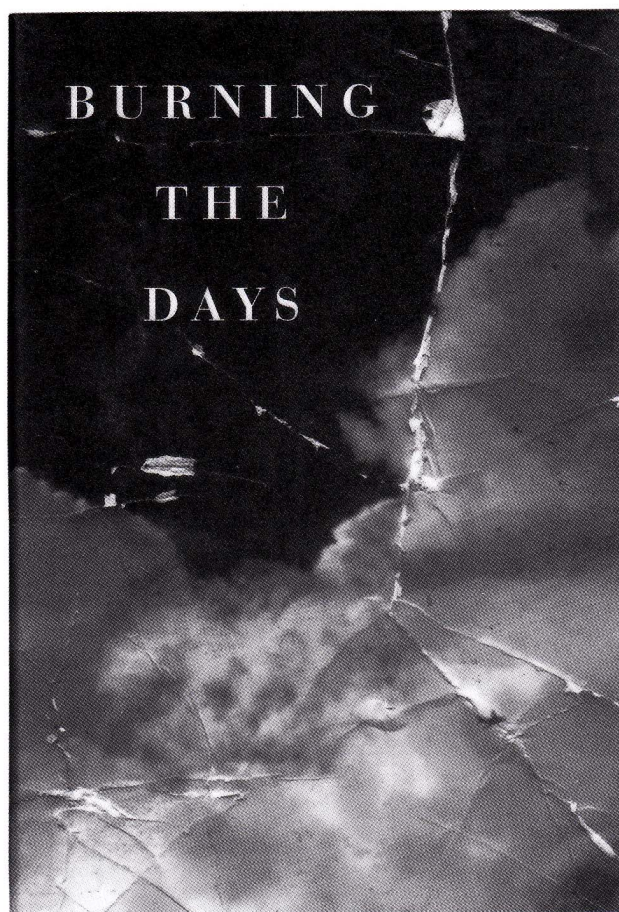
Salter spends time in South Korea, fighting MIGs piloted by Russians and Chinese. He ignores the easy

ways to describe aerial dogfights, not likening them in hackneyed terms to a dance or a ballet. In describing the action that led up to his one and only kill, Salter is precise and the poetry is in the economy of his words. Finally, in homage one supposes to the image of the dance, he refers to the kill only in memory as an image: “Here then, faintly discolored and liable to come apart if you touch it, is the corsage that I kept from the dance.”

Of conquering and making a success in the insane glamour and riches of the movie business, which attracts the brilliant, the beautiful and the driven, Salter says, “You may taste it, even reign for an hour, but that is all. You may not own the beach or the girls on it, the haze of summer afternoons, or the crashing, green sea,

and the next wave of aspirants is outside the door, their murmuring, their hunger.”

Always torn about leaving the service, Salter's regret becomes evident in a hotel while watching the liftoff of Apollo 11—the big one, the first one to the moon. He is in bed with his beautiful Italian mistress, who has “a body brown from Rome's beaches, and a narrow pale band, as if bleached, encircling her hips,



the white reserve." Salter watches as his old squadron buddy Buzz Aldrin prepares for takeoff and immortality. The scene is fraught with the imagery of death and of Salter's regret. The three astronauts "in their white suits prepared for my annihilation." They ascend the tower to the space capsule "like the top of a scaffold."

In awe of the brilliance and success of Truman Capote, Salter, with his as-yet-unpublished masterpiece *A Sport and a Pastime* "in my pocket, like an inheritance," drives past Manhattan's Plaza Hotel one evening in the convertible he brought home from Rome. It is the night of Truman Capote's infamous Black and White Ball, thrown by him in honor of the brilliant success of *In Cold Blood*. Men arrive in dinner jackets and women in gowns, and Salter suddenly remembers the words of a nurse who'd been at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941: The casualties, she said, had been brought to the hospitals still wearing tuxedos from the night before. The feeling here is that Capote's triumph will come with a cost. It will not be eternal, and soon Salter will have his time.

IT'S BEEN SAID that the best accounts of addiction are the fictional ones, a dictum William S. Burroughs wisely heeded but one that James Frey, author of the semi-fictional memoir *A Million Little Pieces*, took too literally. To out oneself excludes playing fast and loose with the truth, for while the author is in a stupor or going where no man in a toxic coma has gone before, there's always someone keeping score.

The long line of literary hopheads that began with Thomas DeQuincey and led to Burroughs and poet, musician and author of *The Basketball Diaries* Jim Carroll climaxes in a be-all-end-all account of heroin addiction in Jerry Stahl's *Permanent Midnight* (Warner Books, 1995). *Midnight* is as honest and revealing

as a memoir can be and, while honesty and revelation are nothing without style, there's no arm-wrestling here between the truth and Stahl's felicitous conveyance of it. Jerry Stahl possesses an ironic and

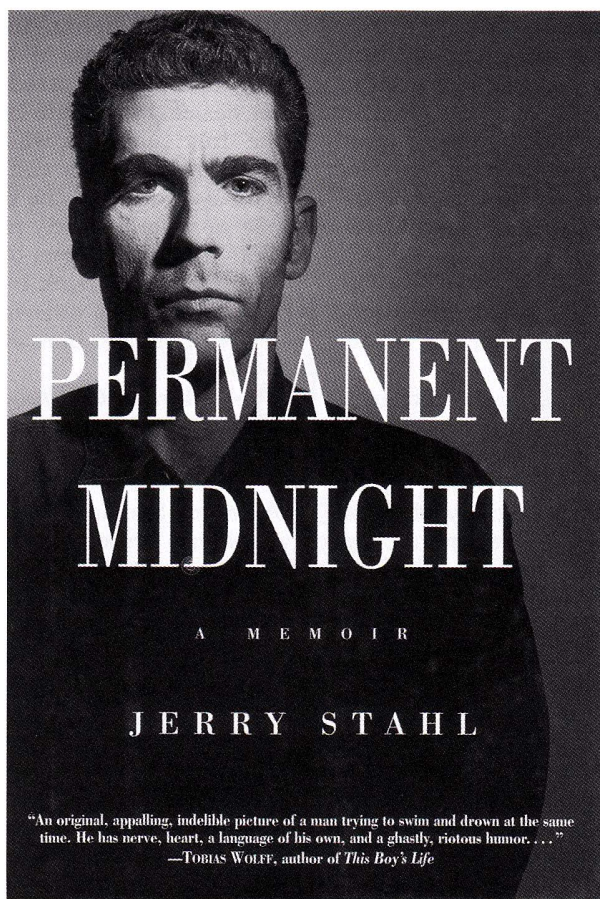
self-deprecating sense of humor that is the silver lining in the cloud that was his life, and also helps mitigate the brutality and human wreckage one encounters every day as a drug addict. If something can't destroy you, he seems to say, then at least it ought to make you laugh.

Stahl's career reached high into the worlds of television writing and "A" List slick journalism. Any one of the stops on his way to the top would have been a high point in the resume of another writer, but the guilt and self-loathing Stahl carried with him from birth were too much to bear. A hip peg in a square hole, his heroes were all junkie outsiders, guys who "wouldn't be caught dead doing an *ALF* episode." Stahl, wanted to be a hipster but considered himself a hack—

"A schmuck with an Underwood," as studio chief Jack Warner once said of the entire lot of Hollywood screenwriters. There was, it seems, nothing but pain, no matter what his station in life.

He was the son of a man who'd made it, an immigrant from Eastern Europe who became a well-respected federal judge and solicitor for the City of Pittsburgh. Stahl's father slaved, never relaxed, and kept everything bottled up inside while Mom inveighed and kvetched at everyone in sight. When he could no longer endure it, he killed himself when Stahl was 16 years old. A highly intelligent kid with literary aspirations and the usual alienation and rebellion heroes and poses, Stahl entered Columbia University as a fairly accomplished drug abuser.

When his career as a writer and junkie took off, he killed two birds with one stone by



discovering that dope was succor for past ills as well as a method of rebelling against the mediocrity that surrounded him. In a downward spiral of never-ceasing cause and effect, the more successful he became, the more he had to anesthetize himself to ease the guilt of making big money from writing television treacle. It all seemed to come so easy, too.

Learning to write smut in a workshop run by a Ph.D. in theology in Morningside Heights is as hilarious as it sounds, and it was Stahl's start. He then penned an underground film that became a smut classic (*Café Flesh*). It opened the door to the fabled letters department of *Hustler* magazine, which he parlayed into assignments for *Playboy*. A marriage of convenience to an Englishwoman with *joie de vivre* and a pedigree of genuine British bohemia gave him an entrée to television writing. It also began a long period of darkness and despair, though few on the outside would know of it.

Domesticity and a normal family are as foreign to Stahl as the junkie underworld is to the *Moonlighting* scribbler wearing pressed jeans and a semi-ponytail in the next cubicle. In a house they'd purchased together, during a quiet scene of domesticity after his betrothed becomes pregnant, Stahl reflects on love and family, fulfillment, security, a warm hearth—the things he'd never had—and discovers he likes them. They also scare the hell out of him. And what frightens him even more is the honesty necessary to acknowledge it to himself and to his bride.

"Perhaps," he concludes, "Under the Bill Burroughs façade, there was a Dick Van Patten dying to get out." During that perfect little moment of familial bliss Stahl attempts to express the love he feels for this woman who is carrying his child but can't. Instead, he does the next best thing; he runs to the bathroom to shoot up.

Dreaming up scripts for television would seem to be the perfect employment but, the way Stahl tells it, half the job is taking guff from mediocre talent, eating humble pie or worse and, most importantly, abandoning any semblance of pride. What makes it even more of a disconnect is the astronomical amount of money he is paid to write drivel. Scripts in Hollywood are like tribbles on the starship *Enterprise*—they're everywhere. Everyone has written one, and to Stahl, they are worthless despite the enormous amount of money he's paid to produce them. He feels it's a sinecure he doesn't deserve.

Coming to the realization of how he'll survive as a television writer after a particularly acute berating by Jack Klugman, his boss on the *Quincy, M.E.* show, Stahl says, "If you wanted to make it in television, I sensed, you'd just have to roll up your sleeves."

Shedding pretension for money is what must be done to make a go of it in Hollywood

and, while there's not one shred of pride left in Stahl, his operating system, which relies upon dark humor to keep his inner flame lit, is what keeps this book going.

There are sections of *Permanent Midnight* that are ghastly and horrifying. Stahl recalls being pulled over after buying heroin in the ghetto with his baby daughter in the car by a cop who considers him too pathetic to arrest; watching the mother who is also his dealer disintegrate before his eyes; mingling with the drug culture to whom dope and degeneracy are as normal as Mom and apple pie; and, finally, robbing drug dealers. The book is neither droll nor juvenile nor world-weary, nor are Stahl's misadventures written as cliffhangers to make the reader empathize with him. This book is simply a man being honest with himself and others, in his own mode of expression, for the first time in his life.

An *American Childhood* (Harper and Row, 1987) is a cheerful and impressionistic reminiscence of an iron-plated American way of life that no longer seems to exist. Born in Pittsburgh in 1945 to the heir of the American Standard fortune, writer Annie Dillard, née Doak, has written a memoir of her mind and how her childhood birthed it.

The keystones in this book are not the usual traumas and delights of growing into and through adolescence—boys, dates, slumber parties—although, of course, there is some of that. What is in plain view is the city of Pittsburgh and its environs, from museums and the castles of the robber barons to the modest backyard of the Doak house, and how the author experienced and processed them all, from local history to the natural world.

Gifted with an inquisitive and imaginative mind, Dillard was also blessed with two free-thinking parents who possessed the wherewithal to raise their children and indulge all their pursuits without a cloud of worry overhead. The book opens with Dillard's father, Frank Doak, quitting his job at the family business, selling his assets, and buying a boat to cruise solo down the Ohio River to the Mississippi and thence to New Orleans. Whim and a love of jazz and Mark Twain are the catalysts for this trip, which he undertakes but soon abandons. No lessons to learn here, just an introduction to a man who instilled a love of reading and learning into his daughter. And as far as inspiration goes, Mom wasn't too far behind.

An Alexander Calder mobile kind of gal in a crystal chandelier town, Pam Doak was a nonconformist and a character. Her sense of humor ranged from subtle to outrageous and took no prisoners. "When I visited my friends, I was well advised to rise when their parents entered the room. When my friends

visited me, they were well advised to duck." Never leaving her children out of a joke, Pam took the time to explain the more obtuse ones so as not to waste them. She was a voluble font of chatter which, if one paid attention, would entertain and edify all at once. Laughing and learning at the same time, all Annie had to do was play the straight man and listen.

Pam's acting and hamming had a purpose; for her, humor was a method for looking at the world in an unconventional way, in order to find layers of meaning beneath the obvious. The practical jokes she and Frank perpetrated bordered on the surreal. On St. Patrick's Day, they scattered seashells dyed green on the beaches of Florida to startle retirees. One Christmas morning, Annie rose to find the leg of a department store mannequin stuffed into her stocking. Humor was a tool that showed the possibilities of unconventionality and of expressing oneself in an original and creative manner.

Pam Doak's conversations with her children were filled with Scotch-Irish phrases ("grant me a boon" is asking a favor), and she explained or described the world to them in offbeat ways that stretched their minds and modes of expression. "Her speech was an endlessly interesting, swerving path of old punch lines, heartfelt *cris de couer*, puns new and old, dramatic true confessions, tag lines from Frank Sinatra songs, obsolete mountain nouns, and moral exhortations." Not so much trained to be an intellectual companion to an offbeat mother, Dillard was educated to see beyond the ordinary to what was hidden beneath. In addition to her mother's antique locutions, there was an unseen world in the hills of Pittsburgh waiting for discovery, and Dillard found it in the stories and lore of history.

The French and Indian War was a captivating and

mythical event for her, and it also found a permanent existence within her. As "part of my own private consciousness, the dreamlike interior of books," it solidified the relationship between the exterior world and the interior one of reading, learning and imagination. Much of the war took place in Dillard's own back-

yard, which imbued the neighborhoods of Pittsburgh with an ambience that no smokestack or factory could supplant in its mythical qualities of fortunes and the men who made them.

Pittsburgh was built on the site of Fort Duquesne, where three mighty rivers met, linking the Great Lakes and the port of New Orleans. For young Annie, playing war added a texture and resonance to her world that she could hear and feel and enter with her vivid imaginings. French aristocrats, English Redcoats, and exotic Iroquois in war paint roamed the forests in search of one another, and this was where, for a young and intelligent girl, books and the real world met.

"Private life, book life, took place where words met imagination without passing through world... They were imagination's playthings: toy soldiers, toy settlers,

toy Indians. They were part of my interior life; they were private; they were my own."

PUBLISHING TRENDS indicate that the number of memoirs will likely continue to increase, giving readers more material than they could ever digest. Some specious memoirs no doubt will slip past the fact checkers, but the majority will be veracious and good reading, too, despite their adherence to the truth, as amazing or banal as it may be. What always will be constant with the latter books is the art and insight their writers put into the story.

