Self, Life, and Write: The Genre of Autobiographies

By: Madeline Cassidy
What are Autobiographies?

Derived from three Greek words “self” “life” and “write”, autobiographies are narratives of the past of a person by the person concerned. Some literally critics believes this definition is too broad, and more narrowly defines the genre as “a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality.”
### Characteristics of an autobiography

- Characteristics of an autobiography uses “I” “we” “us”
- Person tells you what they remember of an event
- May include flashbacks
- Used in first person point of view
- Story of persons life told by that person
- Even the most accurate have fictional elements

- Based on truthful life experiences
- Typically discusses a person’s failures, hardships, problem situation, and personal needs
- Exceptional experiences such as mystical, physic, and death-related experiences are usually left-out
Fun Facts

- Have been written since 400 A.D
- Uses 3 main styles of writing:
  - Narrative
  - Descriptive
  - Emotional
- Focuses on FOUR major things:
  - Who you are in life
  - What life means to you
  - What major life events or critical issues have had an impact on your life
  - What your outlook on the future is
Why write an autobiography?

- To leave a message to future generations
- To pass on your heritage
- To put closure to a period or episode
- To process experiences
- To preserve family history
- To share what and who you are
Why should educators incorporate autobiographies into their classrooms?

- Autobiographies frequently serve as role models by illustrating how even prominent and successful people experience their own triumphs, failures, and hardships.

- Many autobiographies promote diversity and represent a broad span of socioeconomic levels.

- Autobiographies constrict meaning and develop an in-depth understanding of the life of a prominent person.
Classroom Autobiographies

The most effective autobiographies to keep in a classroom should focus on **three criteria:**

- Are written by authors of merit
- Detail significant people who display gifted behaviors and whose traits are well-developed by the author
- Include thought-provoking problem situations, issues, or personal needs with which students can identify
### Activities teachers can use to integrate autobiographies into lesson plans

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<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mobile or Diorama</td>
<td>Develop a mobile, museum display, or diorama revealing significant information about a person.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Life Cube</td>
<td>Design a cube depicting the six most important events or people in a person's life.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Life Newspaper</td>
<td>Create a newspaper revealing significant information about a person. Apply as many of the different sections of the paper as possible to this person's life. What would the want ads for this person contain? What is the person's sports page?</td>
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<td>3-D Time Line</td>
<td>Make a paper chain as a three-dimensional time line that sequences the important events in a person's life.</td>
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<td>People Bags</td>
<td>Create &quot;People Bags&quot; by placing in a paper sack six to ten items that represent the person or the person's life. Challenge other students to analyze the contents and figure out the identity of the significant person.</td>
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### Integration into the classroom

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<th><strong>Student Autobiographies</strong></th>
<th>After reading biographies and autobiographies, students analyze and discuss common elements and attributes of this genre. They use this insight to create their own autobiographies.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>My Life</strong></td>
<td>Students choose one of the activities discussed earlier in the article to complete for their own lives. To increase complexity, encourage them to include actual past and present events as they predict future experiences.</td>
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<td><strong>Meeting of Lives</strong></td>
<td>Students incorporate themselves into the significant person's life. Where does this &quot;meeting of lives&quot; occur and how does the student's presence affect the event?</td>
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CAUTION

- When picking autobiographies for a classroom make sure you focus on the content of the story. Since the stories are written on real-life accounts, you must review the stories and make sure they are not too tragic or upsetting for the reader.

- The book must be appropriate for the age of the reader.

- Want to make sure the book is an accurate account of the person’s life.

- Need to carefully analyze what is fiction and what is real within the story.
### Notable authors and illustrators

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<tr>
<td>Anne Frank</td>
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<td>Maya Angelou</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dave Pelzer</td>
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<td>Nelson Mandela</td>
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<td>Benjamin Franklin</td>
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<td>Elie Wiesel</td>
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<td>Alex Haley</td>
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<td>Helen Keller</td>
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The Classics

Also the 5 books I’ve read and recommend
June 12, 1942

"I hope I will be able to confide everything to you, as I have never been able to confide in anyone, and I hope you will be a great source of comfort and support. Comment added by Anne on September 28, 1942: So far you truly have been a great source of comfort to me, and so has Kitty, whom I now write to regularly. This way of keeping a diary is much nicer, and now I can hardly wait for those moments when I'm able to write in you. Oh, I'm so glad I brought you along!"
A Child Called It
By: Dave Pelzer

“This book chronicles the unforgettable account of one of the most severe child abuse cases in California history. It is the story of Dave Pelzer, who was brutally beaten and starved by his emotionally unstable, alcoholic mother: a mother who played tortuous, unpredictable games—games that left him nearly dead. He had to learn how to play his mother's games in order to survive because she no longer considered him a son, but a slave; and no longer a boy, but an "it."
“No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”
“How did Jon Scieszka get so funny, anyway? Growing up as one of six brothers was a good start, but that was just the beginning. Throw in Catholic school, lots of comic books, lazy summers at the lake with time to kill, babysitting misadventures, TV shows, jokes told at family dinner, and the result is Knucklehead. Part memoir, part scrapbook, this hilarious trip down memory lane provides a unique glimpse into the formation of a creative mind and a free spirit.”
Watch a clip from Knucklehead
The Story of My Life
By: Helen Keller

The Story of My Life, first published in 1903, is Helen Keller's autobiography detailing her early life, especially her experiences with Anne Sullivan.
More books I've read and recommend
Sources


Sources


❖ The Story of My Life. Parts I & II by Helen Keller (1880-1968); Part III from the letters and reports of Anne Mansfield Sullivan (ca.1867-1936); Edited by John Albert Macy. New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1905

❖ All short summaries came from: (The diary of a young girl, A child called it, long walk to freedom, Knucklehead, Helen Keller)