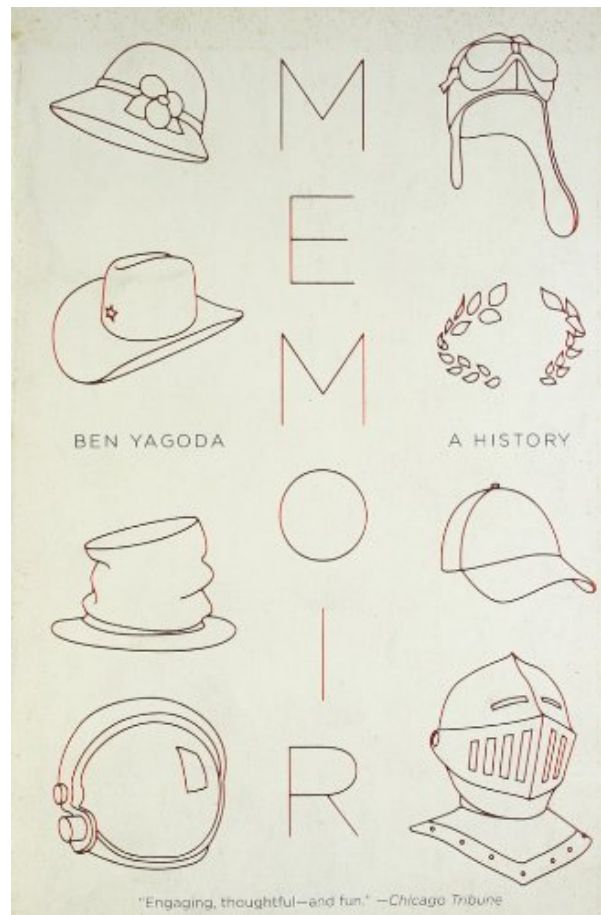
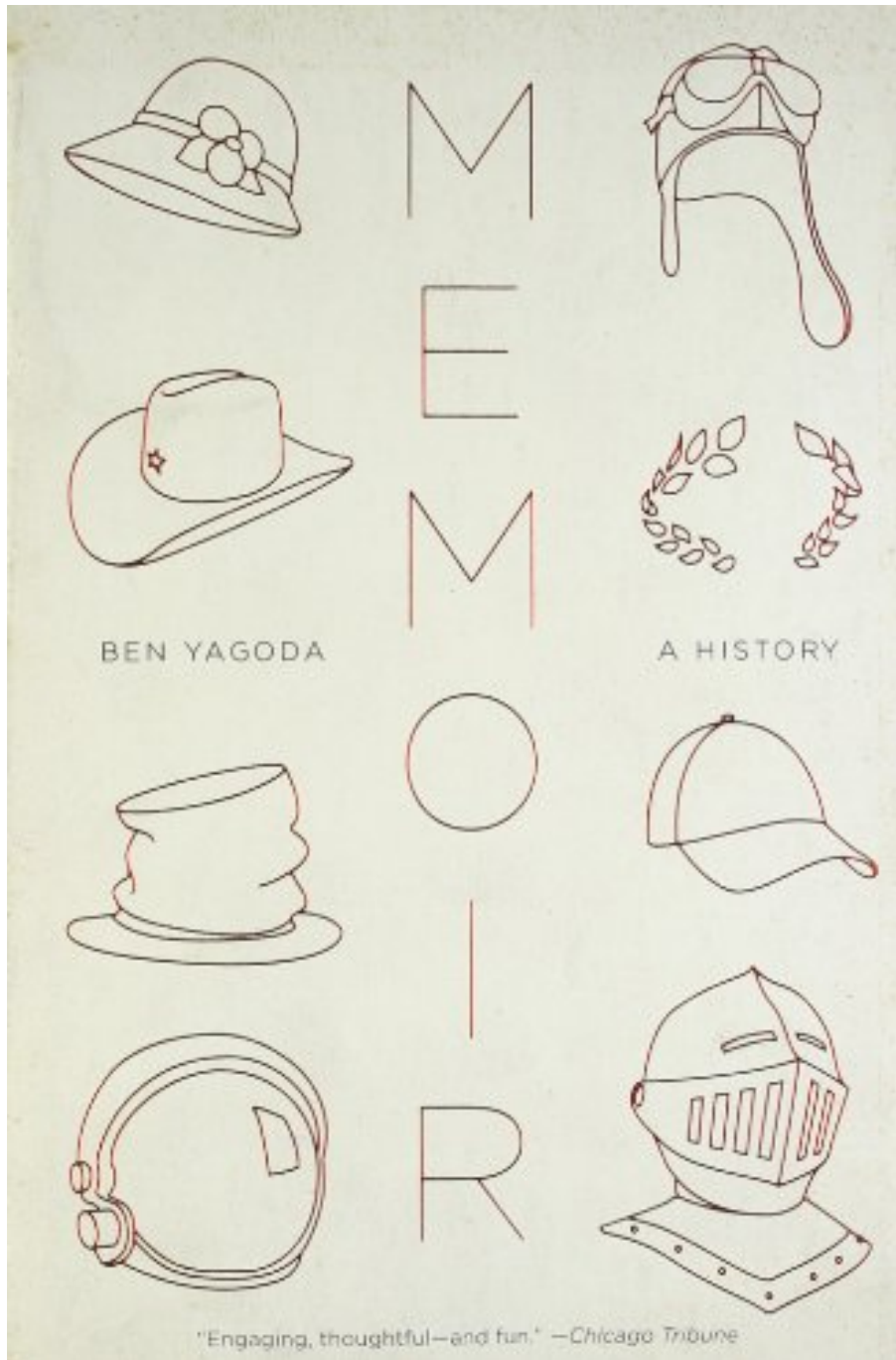


MEMOIR: A HISTORY BY BEN YAGODA



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From Augustine's Confessions to Augusten Burroughs's Running with Scissors, from Julius Caesar to Ulysses S. Grant, from Mark Twain to David Sedaris, the art of memoir has had a fascinating life, and deserves its own biography. "As Yagoda says: 'Memoir has become the central form of the culture: not only the way stories are told, but the way arguments are put forth, products and properties marketed, ideas floated, acts justified, reputations constructed or salvaged. How did we come to this pass? The only way to answer that question is to go back a couple of thousand years and tell the story from the beginning,'" which is just what Yagoda does in this "excellent" history (The Washington Post).

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From Publishers Weekly

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Most helpful customer reviews

21 of 23 people found the following review helpful.

"All autobiographies are lies." -- George Bernard Shaw

By R. M. Peterson

I bought this book primarily on the basis of Jonathan Yardley's review in "The Washington Post". I used to seek out memoirs and over the period of about 1975 to 1995 a goodly percentage of the books I read consisted of literate memoirs (including "Out of Step" by Jonathan Yardley). The genre was a quiet, somewhat quirky little nook of books, and I welcomed the insights into the lives and minds of interesting and intelligent people who were not really famous, or at least not famous enough to write and market autobiographies. Then something happened. Whatever it was, suddenly every issue of the "New York Times Book Review" featured, it seemed, yet another memoir - and many of them dealt with "victimhood": how the author had been physically or psychologically battered by life, by family, by drugs, by being a disfavored race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, or sex or sexual orientation. The genre had shifted from the stories of people who had done something notable or admirable to the stories of people who had had things done to them. The telling may have been therapeutic for their authors, but the books did nothing for me. And the fact that they found a market in contemporary America was/is rather alarming.

The centerpiece of Ben Yagoda's *MEMOIR: A HISTORY* is indeed the recent "memoir boom", with particular emphasis on how it has been bloated by the memoirs of victims, narcissists, and celebrity-wannabes. Yagoda reviews many of the entries that have marked this boom, and he offers some insights into why it has occurred, but he never really explains it (that probably would require a tome of cultural psychology that might well be impossible, at least while the phenomenon remains in full bloom).

The book reflects a considerable amount of background reading and/or research. By and large, it is engagingly written and presented. However, the discussion in Chapters 2 and 3 of the historical roots of autobiography and memoir (going back to Caesar and Saint Augustine) is rather boring, so much so that I came close to giving up on the book. (I seriously recommend to any casual reader that she/he simply skip

those two chapters.)

As Yagoda reviews the history of memoirs, time and again the discussion returns to inaccuracies or distortions in memoirs. These seem to be of three sorts: (i) errors of memory; (ii) embellishment for purposes of a more entertaining story (or to satisfy the ego of the author); and (iii) wholesale fabrication and outright lies. Yagoda mentions dozens of notable books that fall within the last category, including "Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Convent of Montreal, or the Secrets of Black Nunnery Revealed" from 1836 (proof that this is not just a modern phenomenon). In that exposé, the author Maria Monk told all there was to tell about the convent from which she had escaped, where nuns were forced to have sex with priests and where the babes from those couplings were tossed into a lime pit in the basement. The book became a bestseller before it was discovered to be a complete fraud (Maria Monk had never even been in a convent; she died in jail).

Yagoda's discussion of the problems of memory, while not academic in nature, is solid. He then goes on to explore the ramifications for memoirs. For example: "[T]here is an inherent and irresolvable conflict between the capabilities of memory and the demands of narrative. The latter demands specifics; the former is really bad at them. * * * So the reality is: Once you begin to write the true story of your life in a form that anyone would possibly want to read, you start to make compromises with the truth."

Yagoda's style is relatively informal, and it can be barbed. When he mentions that Maya Angelou's total of memoirs has now reached eight, he adds, "That may or may not be a record, depending on how one classifies the books Shirley MacLaine has written chronicling her past, present, and future lives." All in all the book is engaging and informative, though not quite top shelf.

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

Keen analysis, but not enough of it.

By David M. Giltinan

How many memoirists should be listed in the index for a work to qualify as a 'comprehensive' history of the memoir form? Ben Yagoda is taking no risks here - 625 is an impressive total, even allowing for the fact it contains separate entries for Tori and Candi Spelling. Unfortunately, the sheer, all-inclusive sprawl of this book is also a weakness. The effort of cramming mention of over 600 memoirists into just 270 pages of text appears to have absorbed most of the author's energy, so that the majority of the book is long on fact, with little analysis.

This is unfortunate because, when Professor Yagoda does engage in analysis, his comments are astute. His insights about the fallibility of memory and different degrees of misrepresentation in memoir are smart, interesting, and to the point. These were the most interesting sections of the book.

Other chapters read more like an extended catalog, a listing of titles and authors, with insufficient commentary to liven up the reading experience. The organization of the book is a little eccentric; chapter headings are loosely thematic, but the underlying logic is unclear at times. I still can't figure out how Ulysses S. Grant, P.T. Barnum, and Mark Twain migrated from Chapter 4 (The United States of Autobiography) to Chapter 6 (Eminent Victorian Autobiography), or why Yagoda felt it necessary to split his exploration of truth and the fallibility of memory into two separate chapters. Actually, there is a plausible explanation for this, which is that Chapter 5 ("Interlude: Truth, Memory and Autobiography") was inserted as a kind of lollipop for the reader, to break up what would otherwise have been a pretty lengthy dry stretch.

The first chapter considers memoirs published over the past 30 years, providing a comprehensive and brilliant taxonomy. Yagoda reminds us that there is nothing new under the sun - each of the subgenres that

he catalogs as part of the recent spate of memoirs has its historical antecedent. Before there was Augusten Burrowes there was Edmund Gosse; the embarrassing narrative liberties taken by Rigoberta Menchu had parallels in the fake slave narratives published in the early 19th century, works like "My Left Foot" and "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly" were foreshadowed by the story of Hellen Keller.

I would have enjoyed the book more if it had sacrificed comprehensiveness in favor of more analysis - ultimately Professor Yagoda's take on the facts was more interesting than the raw undigested facts, and his writing is clear and engaging.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

Makes for fascinating pondering

By Bookreporter

In this age of "boo-hoo" journalism, it seems anyone who has ever been the subject of abuse, illness, or loss -- or who knows someone in such conditions --- has or soon will come out with a memoir. A quick look at the new book section in my local library shows MY JOURNEY WITH FARRAH: A Story of Life, Love, and Friendship, written by Alana Stewart and published less than two months after the pop culture icon died in June 2009, and Patrick Swayze's posthumous THE TIME OF MY LIFE, released just 15 days after he passed away. Can it be long before we see something from one of Tiger Woods's consorts?

You might think that such gut-spilling is a relatively new phenomenon, but according to Ben Yagoda's MEMOIR: A History --- a fascinating, well, biography of the genre --- that's not the case by a long shot. From the days of the classic philosophers through medieval times, men (mostly) have been telling their stories of conquest, failure, redemption, doubt and/or belief with the notion that the world (much smaller in those days) was anxiously waiting to know their thoughts.

There are many subgenres that have enjoyed their "fad-dom" over the years, such as the founding fathers, war heroes and former slaves. In contemporary times, we have the "extreme misery memoir," which chronicles "dysfunction, abuse, poverty, addiction, mental illness, and/or bodily ruin."

How much detail should be told and how much should be kept between the writer and his maker? And how will that decision color the reader's perception? According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his own CONFESSIONS, he "presents himself as he wants to be seen, not at all as he is. The sincerest of people are at best truthful in what they say, but they lie by their reticence, and what they suppress changes so much what they pretend to reveal that in telling only part of the truth, they tell none of it."

Next, we must define what "truth" is exactly. And since much of that truth is based on memory, what role does that play? Two people who shared the same situation might have vastly different recollections of the same affair (as represented by the "I Remember it Well" duet from the film Gigi).

Then there's the infuriating issue of false memoirs, perhaps best illustrated by James Frey's A MILLION LITTLE PIECES, in which he totally misrepresented himself. The manuscript was originally intended as a novel, but when it garnered scant interest, he thought it would be more successful if he "personalized" it. He duped thousands of readers, thanks in part to his endorsement by Oprah Winfrey before the facts came to the surface.

Perhaps worse are those who prey on the public's sympathy by publishing ersatz Holocaust memoirs, such as FRAGMENTS: Memories of a Wartime Childhood, 1939-1948 and MISHA, both of which, it turned out, were totally fraudulent and a disservice to all those who were subjected to Nazi degradations.

While Yagoda --- a journalism professor at the University of Delaware --- chastises those who would simply lie about their circumstances, he takes a laissez-faire approach when it comes to more innocent misstatements and questions the importance of absolute accuracy: "Get a life, people. Human memory is flawed and everybody knows it. And memoir, as a genre, is universally understood to offer subjective, impressionistic testimony. It doesn't pretend to offer the truth, just the author's truth....The people who spend their time scouring these works for mistakes, and then proudly trumpet their findings, are hypocritical scandalmongers." It's a fine line between exaggerating for emphasis and being purposely disingenuous.

There are several passages trying to connect perceived memory and actual fact, all of which make for fascinating pondering. And whether Yagoda meant it or not, MEMOIR might have the ancillary effect of making readers question every such book they come across in the future.

--- Reviewed by Ron Kaplan

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From Publishers Weekly

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