
Memoirs: How and Why

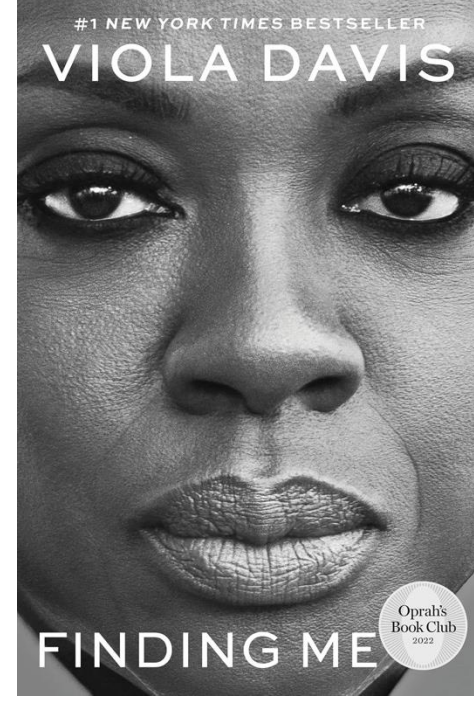
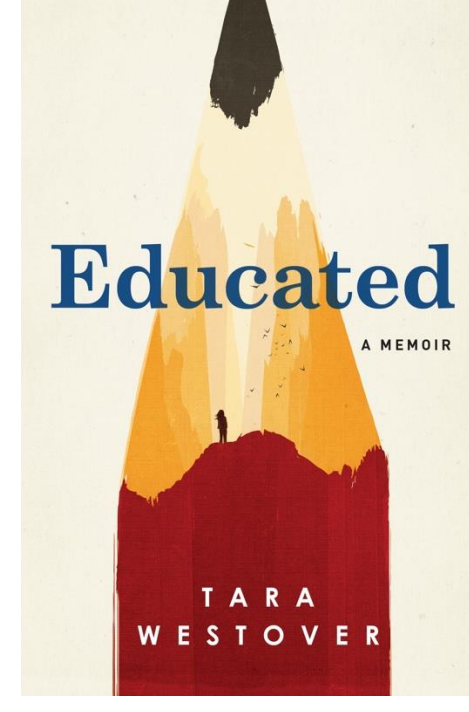
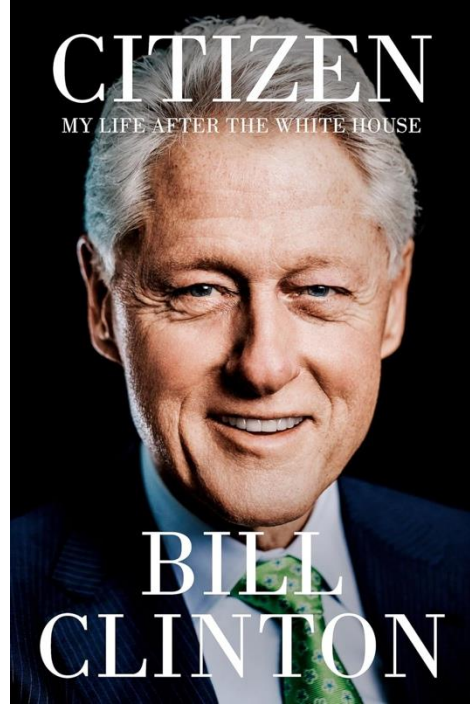
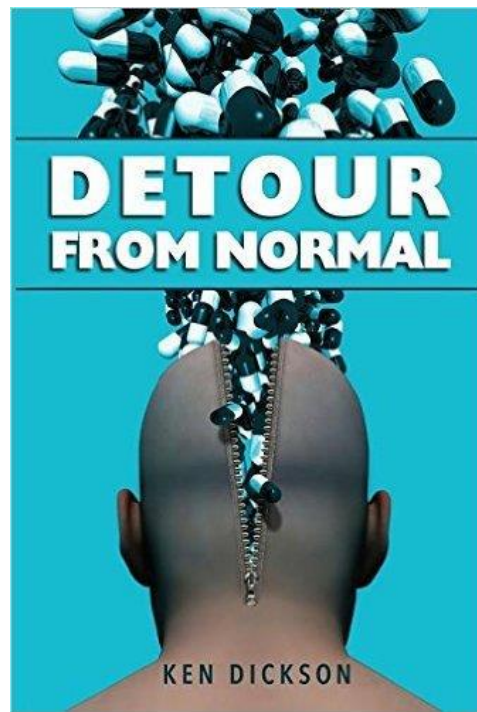
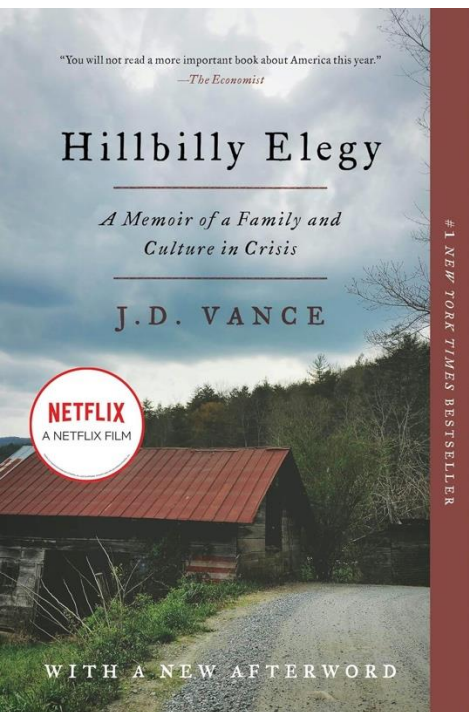
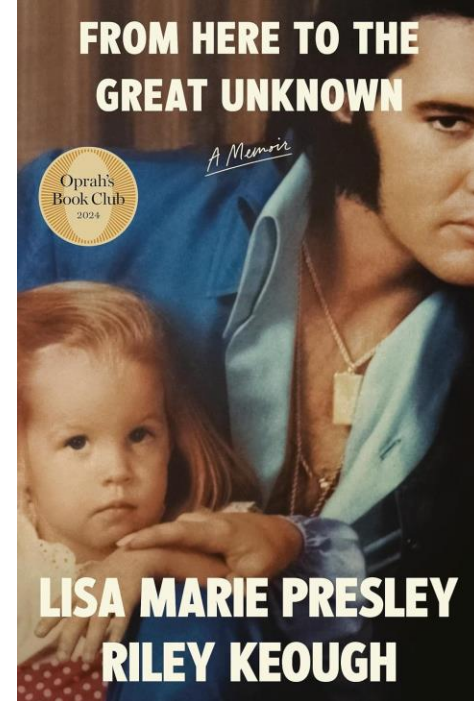
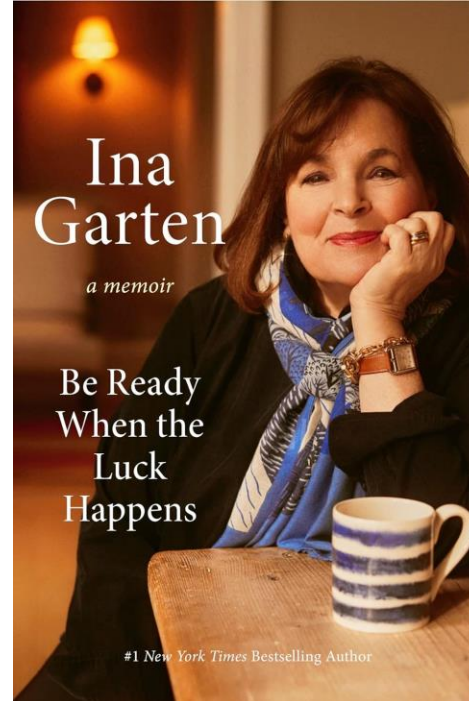
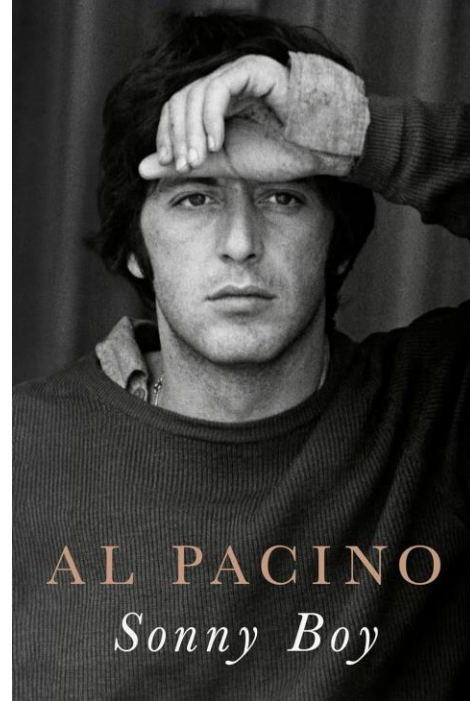
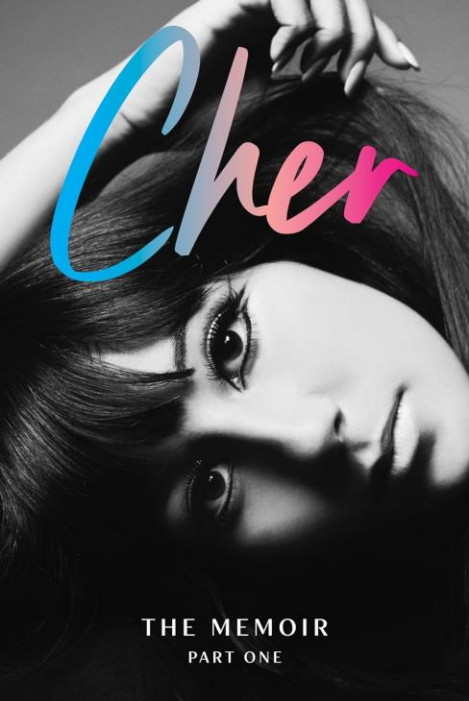
Kevin O'Connor

3 December 2024





- Why read a memoir?
- Why write a memoir?
- What is *story*?
- What are the elements of a memoir?
- How to get started



Why READ a memoir?

Why READ a memoir?

- Vicarious experience—what would I do in a similar circumstance
- Personal connection to history, a specific moment
- Understanding an important figure and their times
- Self-transformation
- Coming of Age / Coming to Terms
- Life lessons

“By the imagination, we place ourselves in his situation...”

Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 4.

Why Write a Memoir?

“Crafting a memoir about our personal narratives can lead to self-realization and a sense of empowerment.”

Diana Raab, PhD

Why Write a Memoir?

- Unique POV
- Self-knowledge
- Documenting a historical moment
- Passing on culture/stories/anecdotes
- Overcoming obstacles
- Family stories

**“These things were so deeply felt,
they should never be forgotten...”**

Murasaki, *Tale of Genji*

The New York Times

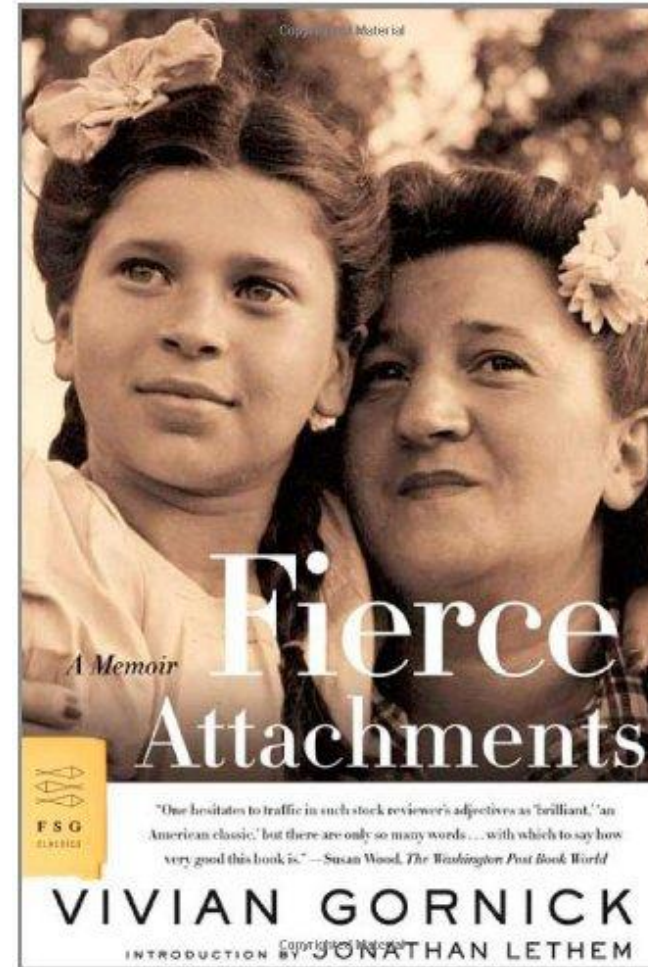
The 50 Best Memoirs of the Past 50 Years

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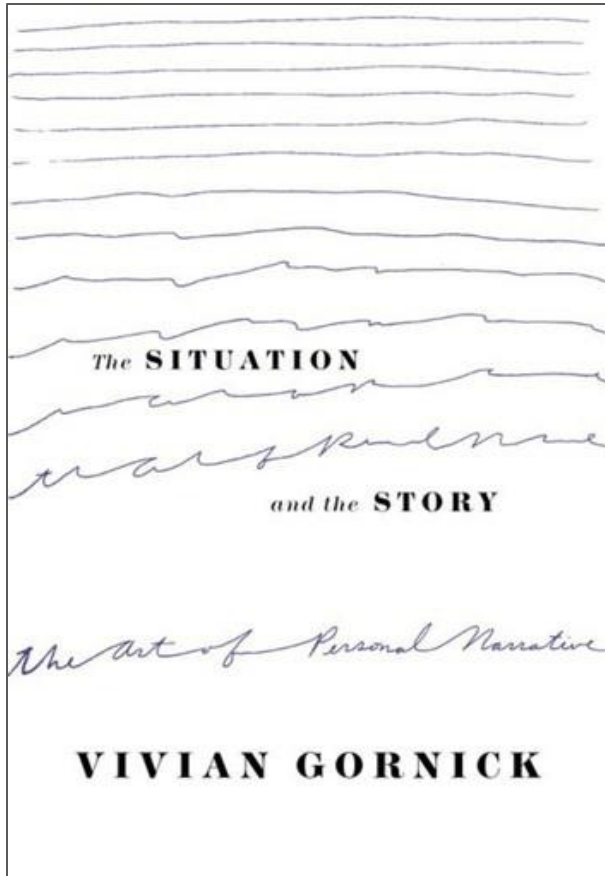
Fierce Attachments

Vivian Gornick

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1987



Story versus Situation



“Every work of literature has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say.”

--Vivan Gornick, *The Situation and the Story*

Another Way

Given the circumstances of your life,
how did you respond and transform?

Four elements

- Intrigue: the Hook

Four elements

- Intrigue: the Hook
- Decisions

Four elements

- Intrigue: the Hook
- Decisions
- Details

Four elements

- Intrigue: the Hook
- Decisions
- Details
- Impact

An Exercise

A Big Decision

- Job
- School
- Move
- Relationship
- Pet

Questions:

- How did you come to make that decision?
- How has it effected you / your life?

Details

- Songs
- Music
- People
- Clothes
- Time of year
- Things
- Feelings

Old Guard Challenge

- Write for 5 minutes a day for 1 week
- Intrigue,, decisions, details, impact
- Read a memoir
 - What makes it work?
 - What makes it moving?
 - What's boring/frustrating?



Suggested Reading

- Vivian Gornick – *The Situation and the Story*
- Paula Balzer – *Writing & Selling Your Memoir: How to Craft Your Life Story So That Somebody Else Will Actually Want to Read It*
- Frank McCourt – *Angela's Ashes*

“It is strange that there should be so little reading in the world, and so much writing. People in general do not willingly read, if they can have any thing else to amuse them.”

— Samuel Johnson, Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson*

Appendix



Adam Smith *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*

As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation.

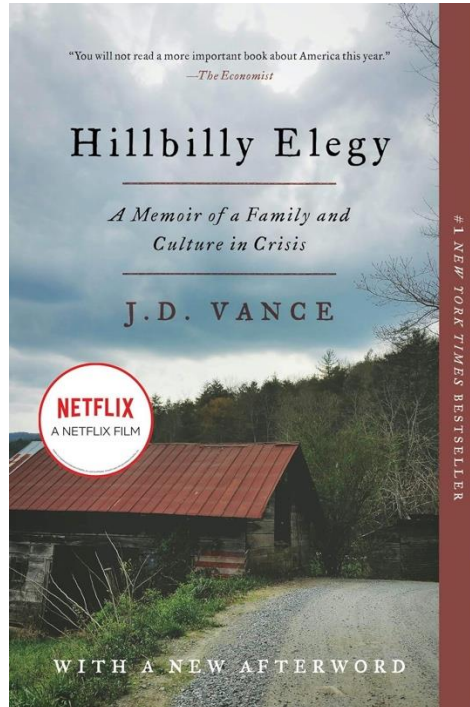
Though our brother is on the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is **by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations.**

Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case.

It is the impressions of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy. **By the imagination, we place ourselves in his situation...**

Questions to Ask

- What can we tell about the writer?
 - Age
 - Sex
- What do you think the book is about?
- What works?
- Do you want to read more? Why or Why Not?



To understand me, you must understand that I am a Scots-Irish hillbilly at heart. I may be white, but I do not identify with the WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) of the Northeast. Instead, I identify with the millions of working-class white Americans of Scots-Irish descent who have no college degree. To these folks, poverty is the family tradition...Americans call them hillbillies, rednecks, or white trash. I call them neighbors, friends and family.

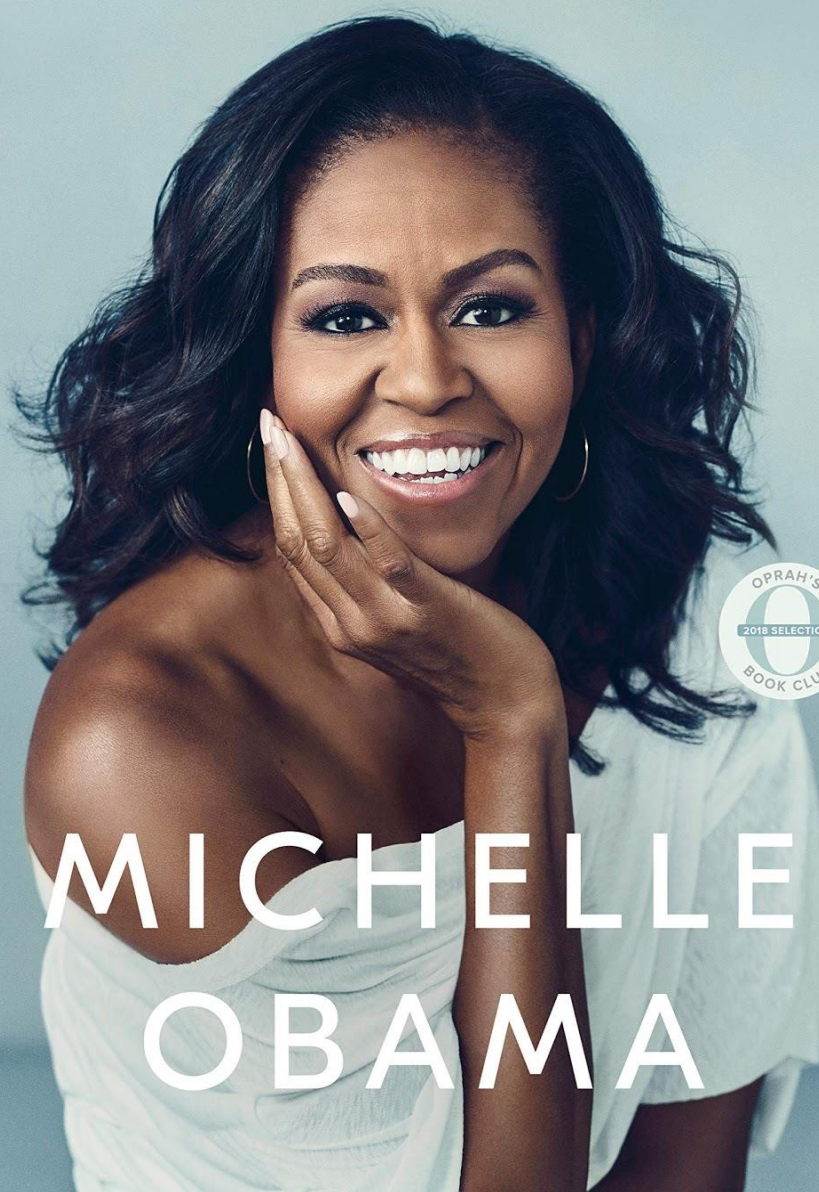
When I was a kid, my aspirations were simple. I wanted a dog. I wanted a house that had stairs in it —two floors for one family. I wanted, for some reason, a four-door station wagon instead of the two-door Buick that was my father's pride and joy. I used to tell people that when I grew up, I was going to be a pediatrician. Why? Because I loved being around little kids and I quickly learned that it was a pleasing answer for adults to hear. *Oh, a doctor! What a good choice!* In those days, I wore pigtails and bossed my older brother around and managed, always and no matter what, to get As at school. I was ambitious, though I didn't know exactly what I was shooting for. Now I think it's one of the most useless questions an adult can ask a child—*What do you want to be when you grow up?* As if growing up is finite. As if at some point you become something and that's the end.

***If you recognize it, don't say it!**

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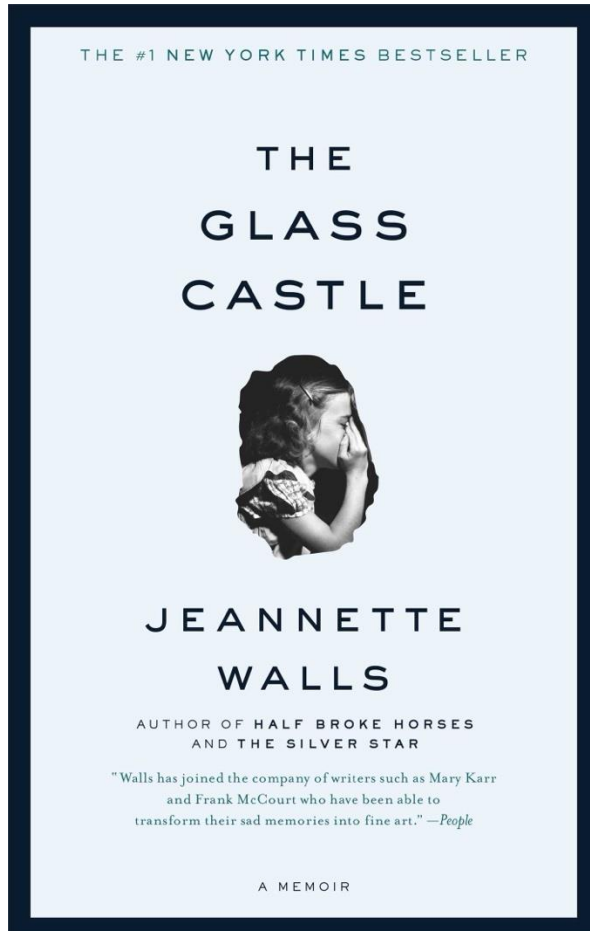
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

BECOMING



MICHELLE
OBAMA

When I was a kid, my aspirations were simple. I wanted a **dog**. I wanted a **house that had stairs** in it —two floors for one family. I wanted, for some reason, a **four-door station wagon** instead of the two-door Buick that was my father's pride and joy. I used to tell people that when I grew up, I was going to be a **pediatrician**. Why? Because I loved being around little kids and I quickly learned that it was a pleasing answer for adults to hear. *Oh, a doctor! What a good choice!* In those days, I wore **pigtails** and bossed my older brother around and managed, always and no matter what, to get As at school. I was ambitious, though I didn't know exactly what I was shooting for. Now I think it's one of the most useless questions an adult can ask a child—*What do you want to be when you grow up?* As if growing up is finite. As if at some point you become something and that's the end.



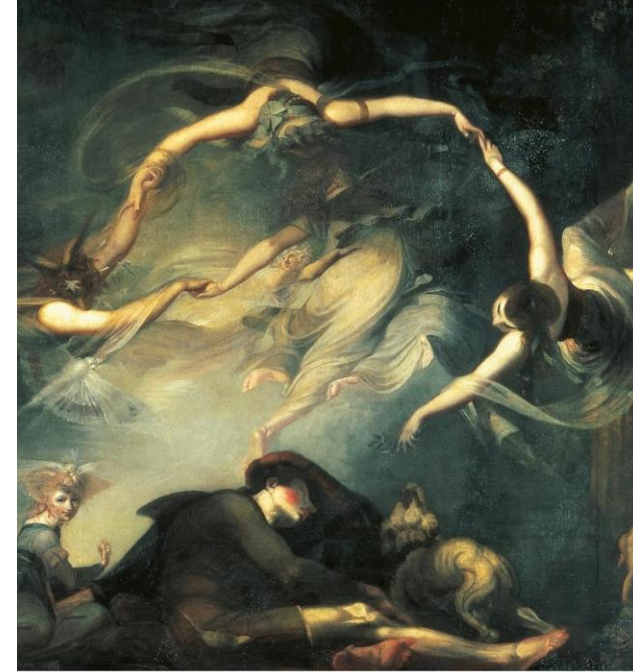
I was sitting in a taxi, wondering if I had overdressed for the evening, when I looked out the window and saw Mom rooting through a dumpster. It was just after dark. A blustery March wind whipped the steam coming out of the manholes, and people hurried along the sidewalks with their collars turned up. I was stuck in traffic two blocks from the party where I was heading.



PENGUIN CLASSICS

SAINT AUGUSTINE

CONFESSIONS

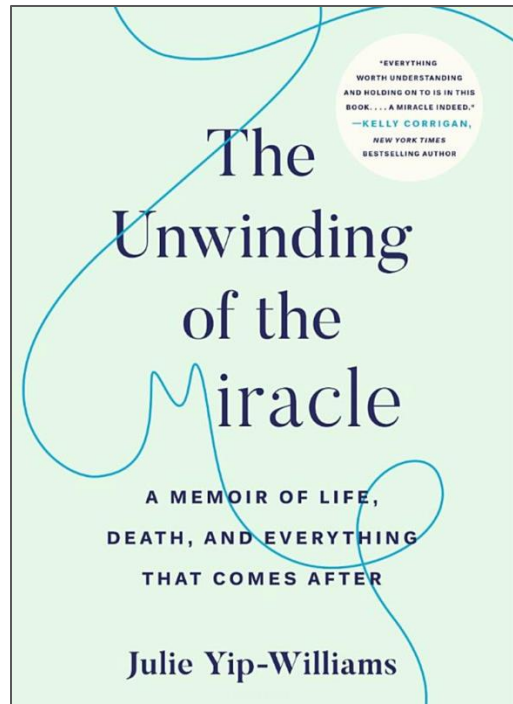


PENGUIN CLASSICS

THOMAS DE QUINCEY

*Confessions of an English Opium-Eater
and Other Writings*

“I flung myself down, how, I know not, under a certain fig-tree,” says Augustine. (Bk. VIII) Fr. Nichols notices what many of us might overlook: that the second tree is a fig tree, and it was from fig leaves that Adam and Eve fashioned themselves coverings after they sinned and felt naked

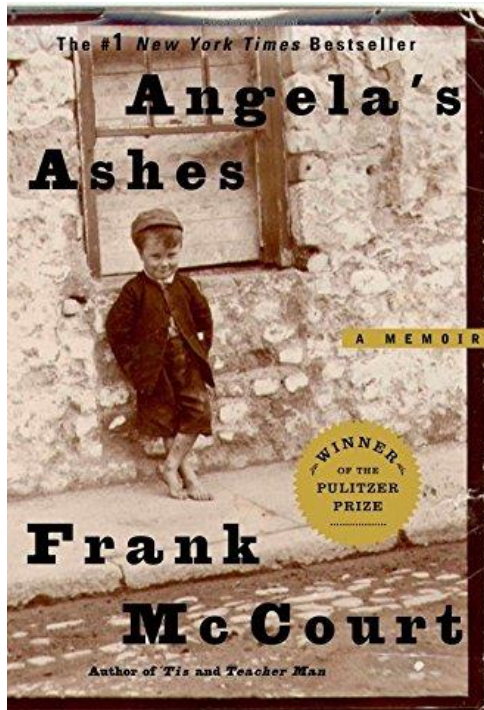


Hello, welcome. My name is Julie Yip-Williams. I am grateful and deeply honored that you are here. This story begins at the ending. Which means that if you are here, then I am not.

But it's okay.

My father and mother should have stayed in New York where they met and married and where I was born.

Instead, they returned to Ireland when I was four, my brother, Malachy, three, the twins, Oliver and Eugene, barely one, and my sister, Margaret, dead and gone.



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