

Mythbusting Publishing: Questioning the 'Runaway Popularity' of Published Biography and Other Life Writing

Introduction: Our current obsession with the lives of others

"Biography—that is to say, our creative and non-fictional output devoted to recording and interpreting real lives—has enjoyed an extraordinary renaissance in recent years," writes Nigel Hamilton in *Biography: A Brief History* (1). Ian Donaldson agrees that biography is back in fashion: "Once neglected within the academy and relegated to the dustier recesses of public bookstores, biography has made a notable return over recent years, emerging, somewhat surprisingly, as a new cultural phenomenon, and a new academic adventure" (23). For over a decade now, commentators have been making similar observations about our obsession with the intimacies of individual people's lives. In a lecture in 1994, Justin Kaplan asserted the West was "a culture of biography" (qtd. in Salwak 1) and more recent research findings by John Feather and Hazel Woodbridge affirm that "the undiminished human curiosity about other people's lives is clearly reflected in the popularity of autobiographies and biographies" (218).

At least in relation to television, this assertion seems valid. In Australia, as in the USA and the UK, reality and other biographically based television shows have taken over from drama in both the numbers of shows produced and the viewers these shows attract, and these forms are also popular in Canada (see, for instance, Morreale on *The Osbournes*). In 2007, the program *Biography* celebrated its twentieth anniversary season to become one of the longest running documentary series on American television; so successful that in 1999 it was spun off into its own eponymous channel (Rak; Dempsey). Premiered in May 1996, *Australian Story*—which aims to utilise a "personal approach" to biographical storytelling—has won a significant viewership, critical acclaim and professional recognition (ABC). It can also be posited that the real home movies viewers submit to such programs as *Australia's Favourite Home Videos*, and "chat" or "confessional" television are further reflections of a general mania for biographical detail (see Douglas), no matter how fragmented, sensationalized, or even inane and cruel. A recent example of the latter, the USA-produced *The Moment of Truth*, has contestants answering personal questions under polygraph examination and then again in front of an audience including close relatives and friends—the more "truthful" their answers (and often, the more humiliated and/or distressed contestants are willing to be), the more money they can win.

Away from television, but offering further evidence of this interest are the growing readerships for personally oriented weblogs and networking sites such as *MySpace* and *Facebook* (Grossman), individual profiles and interviews in periodical publications, and the recently widely revived newspaper obituary column (Starck). Adult and community education organisations run short courses on researching and writing auto/biographical forms and, across Western countries, the family history/genealogy sections of many local, state, and national libraries have been upgraded to meet the increasing demand for these services. Academically, journals and e-mail discussion lists have been established on the topics of biography and autobiography, and North American,

British, and Australian universities offer undergraduate and postgraduate courses in life writing.

The commonly aired wisdom is that published life writing in its many text-based forms (biography, autobiography, memoir, diaries, and collections of personal letters) is enjoying unprecedented popularity. It is our purpose to examine this proposition.

Methodological problems

There are a number of problems involved in investigating genre popularity, growth, and decline in publishing. Firstly, it is not easy to gain access to detailed statistics, which are usually only available within the industry. Secondly, it is difficult to ascertain how publishing statistics are gathered and what they report (Eliot). There is the question of whether bestselling booklists reflect actual book sales or are manipulated marketing tools (Miller), although the move from surveys of booksellers to electronic reporting at point of sale in new publishing lists such as *BookScan* will hopefully obviate this problem. Thirdly, some publishing lists categorise by subject and form, some by subject only, and some do not categorise at all. This means that in any analysis of these statistics, a decision has to be made whether to use the publishing list's system or impose a different mode. If the publishing list is taken at face value, the question arises of whether to use categorisation by form or by subject.

Fourthly, there is the bedeviling issue of terminology. Traditionally, there reigned a simple dualism in the terminology applied to forms of telling the true story of an actual life: biography and autobiography. Publishing lists that categorise their books, such as *BookScan*, have retained it. But with postmodern recognition of the presence of the biographer in a biography and of the presence of other subjects in an autobiography, the dichotomy proves false. There is the further problem of how to categorise memoirs, diaries, and letters. In the academic arena, the term "life writing" has emerged to describe the field as a whole. Within the genre of life writing, there are, however, still recognised sub-genres. Academic definitions vary, but generally a biography is understood to be a scholarly study of a subject who is not the writer; an autobiography is the story of a entire life written by its subject; while a memoir is a segment or particular focus of that life told, again, by its own subject. These terms are, however, often used interchangeably even by significant institutions such the USA Library of Congress, which utilises the term "biography" for all.

Different commentators also use differing definitions. Hamilton uses the term "biography" to include all forms of life writing. Donaldson discusses how the term has been co-opted to include biographies of place such as Peter Ackroyd's *London: The Biography* (2000) and of things such as Lizzie Collingham's *Curry: A Biography* (2005). This reflects, of course, a writing/publishing world in which non-fiction stories of places, creatures, and even foodstuffs are called biographies, presumably in the belief that this will make them more saleable. The situation is further complicated by the emergence of hybrid publishing forms such as, for instance, the "memoir-with-recipes" or "food memoir" (Brien, Rutherford and Williamson). Are such books to be classified as autobiography or

put in the “cookery/food & drink” category? We mention in passing the further confusion caused by novels with a subtitle of *The Biography* such as Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*.

The fifth methodological problem that needs to be mentioned is the increasing globalisation of the publishing industry, which raises questions about the validity of the majority of studies available (including those cited herein) which are nationally based. Whether book sales reflect what is actually read (and by whom), raises of course another set of questions altogether.

Methodology

In our exploration, we were fundamentally concerned with two questions. Is life writing as popular as claimed? And, if it is, is this a new phenomenon? To answer these questions, we examined a range of available sources.

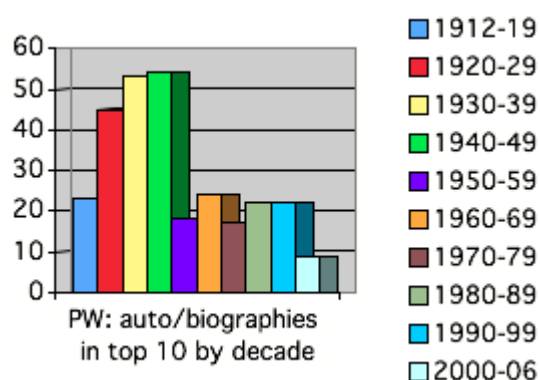
We began with the non-fiction bestseller lists in *Publishers Weekly* (a respected American trade magazine aimed at publishers, librarians, booksellers, and literary agents that claims to be international in scope) from their inception in 1912 to the present time. We hoped that this data could provide a longitudinal perspective. The term bestseller was coined by *Publishers Weekly* when it began publishing its lists in 1912; although the first list of popular American books actually appeared in *The Bookman* (New York) in 1895, based itself on lists appearing in London’s *The Bookman* since 1891 (Bassett and Walter 206). The *Publishers Weekly* lists are the best source of longitudinal information as the currently widely cited *New York Times* listings did not appear till 1942, with the *Wall Street Journal* a late entry into the field in 1994.

We then examined a number of sources of more recent statistics. We looked at the bestseller lists from the USA-based *Amazon.com* online bookseller; recent research on bestsellers in Britain; and lists from *Nielsen BookScan Australia*, which claims to tally some 85% or more of books sold in Australia, wherever they are published. In addition to the reservations expressed above, caveats must be aired in relation to these sources. While *Publishers Weekly* claims to be an international publication, it largely reflects the North American publishing scene and especially that of the USA. Although available internationally, *Amazon.com* also has its own national sites—such as *Amazon.co.uk*—not considered here. It also caters to a “specific computer-literate, credit-able clientele” (Gutjahr: 219) and has an unashamedly commercial focus, within which all the information generated must be considered.

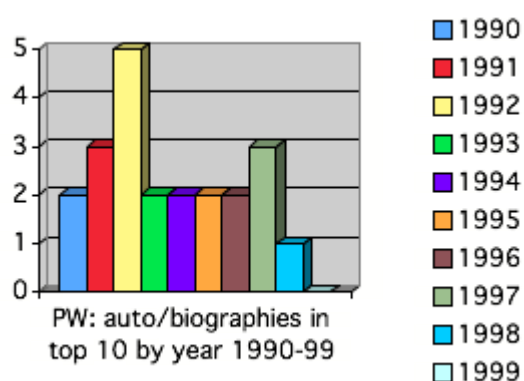
In our analysis of the material studied, we will use “life writing” as a genre term. When it comes to analysis of the lists, we have broken down the genre of life writing into biography and autobiography, incorporating memoir, letters, and diaries under autobiography. This is consistent with the use of the terminology in *BookScan*. Although we have broken down the genre in this way, it is the overall picture with regard to life writing that is our concern. It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a detailed analysis of whether, within life writing, further distinctions should be drawn.

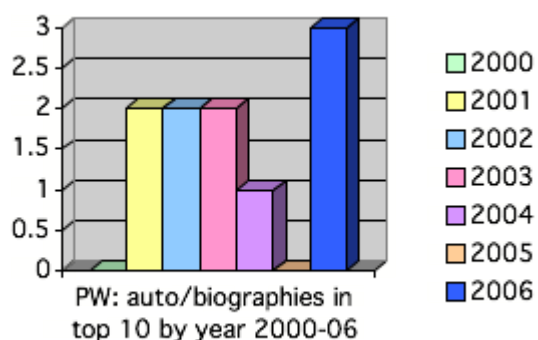
Publishers Weekly: 1912 to 2006

1912 saw the first list of the 10 bestselling non-fiction titles in *Publishers Weekly*. It featured two life writing texts, being headed by an autobiography, *The Promised Land* by Russian Jewish immigrant Mary Antin, and concluding with Albert Bigelow Paine's six-volume biography, *Mark Twain*. The *Publishers Weekly* lists do not categorise non-fiction titles by either form or subject, so the classifications below are our own with memoir classified as autobiography. In a decade-by-decade tally of these listings, there were 3 biographies and 20 autobiographies in the lists between 1912 and 1919; 24 biographies and 21 autobiographies in the 1920s; 13 biographies and 40 autobiographies in the 1930s; 8 biographies and 46 biographies in the 1940s; 4 biographies and 14 autobiographies in the 1950s; 11 biographies and 13 autobiographies in the 1960s; 6 biographies and 11 autobiographies in the 1970s; 3 biographies and 19 autobiographies in the 1980s; 5 biographies and 17 autobiographies in the 1990s; and 2 biographies and 7 autobiographies from 2000 up until the end of 2006. See Appendix 1 for the relevant titles and authors.



Breaking down the most recent figures for 1990–2006, we find a not radically different range of figures and trends across years in the contemporary environment.





The validity of looking only at the top ten books sold in any year is, of course, questionable, as are all the issues regarding sources discussed above. But one thing is certain in terms of our inquiry. There is no upwards curve obvious here. If anything, the decade break-down suggests that sales are trending downwards.

This is in keeping with the findings of Michael Korda, in his history of twentieth-century bestsellers. He suggests a consistent longitudinal picture across all genres:

In every decade, from 1900 to the end of the twentieth century, people have been reliably attracted to the same kind of books [...] Certain kinds of popular fiction always do well, as do diet books [...] self-help books, celebrity memoirs, sensationalist scientific or religious speculation, stories about pets, medical advice (particularly on the subjects of sex, longevity, and child rearing), folksy wisdom and/or humour, and the American Civil War (xvii).

Amazon.com since 2000

The USA-based *Amazon.com* online bookselling site provides listings of its own top 50 bestsellers since 2000, although only the top 14 bestsellers are recorded for 2001. As fiction and non-fiction are not separated out on these lists and no genre categories are specified, we have again made our own decisions about what books fall into the category of life writing. Generally, we erred on the side of inclusion. (See Appendix 2.) However, when it came to books dealing with political events, we excluded books dealing with specific aspects of political practice/policy. This meant excluding books on, for instance, George Bush's so-called 'war on terror,' of which there were a number of bestsellers listed.

In summary, these listings reveal that of the top 364 books sold by Amazon from 2000 to 2007, 46 (or some 12.6%) were, according to our judgment, either biographical or autobiographical texts. This is not far from the 10% of the 1912 *Publishers Weekly* listing, although, as above, the proportion of bestsellers that can be classified as life writing varied dramatically from year to year, with no discernible pattern of peaks and troughs. This proportion tallied to 4% auto/biographies in 2000, 14% in 2001, 10% in 2002, 18% in 2003 and 2004, 4% in 2005, 14% in 2006 and 20% in 2007. This could suggest a rising trend, although it does not offer any consistent trend data to suggest sales figures may either continue to grow, or fall again, in 2008 or afterwards.



Looking at the particular texts in these lists (see Appendix 2) also suggests that there is no general trend in the popularity of life writing in relation to other genres. For instance, in these listings in *Amazon.com*, life writing texts only rarely figure in the top 10 books sold in any year. So rarely indeed, that from 2001 there were only five in this category. In 2001, *John Adams* by David McCullough was the best selling book of the year; in 2003, Hillary Clinton's autobiographical *Living History* was 7th; in 2004, *My Life* by Bill Clinton reached number 1; in 2006, Nora Ephron's *I Feel Bad About My Neck: and Other Thoughts on Being a Woman* was 9th; and in 2007, Ishmael Beah's discredited *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* came in at 8th. Apart from McCulloch's biography of Adams, all the above are autobiographical texts, while the focus on leading political figures is notable.

Britain: Feather and Woodbridge

With regard to the British situation, we did not have actual lists and relied on recent analysis. John Feather and Hazel Woodbridge find considerably higher levels for life writing in Britain than above with, from 1998 to 2005, 28% of British published non-fiction comprising autobiography, while 8% of hardback and 5% of paperback non-fiction was biography (2007). Furthermore, although Feather and Woodbridge agree with commentators that life writing is currently popular, they do not agree that this is a growth state, finding the popularity of life writing "essentially unchanged" since their previous study, which covered 1979 to the early 1990s (Feather and Reid).

Australia: Nielsen BookScan 2006 and 2007

In the Australian publishing industry, where producing books remains an 'expensive, risky endeavour which is increasingly market driven' (Galligan 36) and 'an inherently complex activity' (Carter and Galligan 4), the most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics figures reveal that the total numbers of books sold in Australia has remained relatively static over the past decade (130.6 million in the financial year 1995–96 and 128.8 million in 2003–04) (ABS). During this time, however, sales volumes of non-fiction publications have grown markedly, with a trend towards "non-fiction, mass market and predictable" books (Corporall 41) resulting in general non-fiction sales in 2003–2004 outselling general fiction by factors as high as ten depending on the format—hard- or paperback, and trade or mass market paperback (ABS 2005). However, while non-fiction has increased in popularity in Australia, the same does not seem to hold true for life writing. Here, in utilising data for the top 5,000 selling non-fiction books in both 2006 and 2007, we are relying on *Nielsen BookScan's* categorisation of texts as either biography or autobiography.

In 2006, no works of life writing made the top 10 books sold in Australia. In looking at the top 100 books sold for 2006, in some cases the subjects of these works vary markedly from those extracted from the *Amazon.com* listings. In Australia in 2006, life writing makes its first appearance at number 14 with convicted drug smuggler Schapelle Corby's *My Story*. This is followed by another *My Story* at 25, this time by retired Australian army chief, Peter Cosgrove. *Jonestown: The Power and Myth of Alan Jones* comes in at 34 for the Australian broadcaster's biographer Chris Masters; the biography, *The Innocent Man* by John Grisham at 38 and Li Cunxin's autobiographical *Mao's Last Dancer* at 45. Australian Susan Duncan's memoir of coping with personal loss, *Salvation Creek: An Unexpected Life* makes 50; bestselling USA travel writer Bill Bryson's autobiographical memoir of his childhood *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid* 69; *Mandela: The Authorised Portrait* by Rosalind Coward, 79; and Joanne Lees's memoir of dealing with her kidnapping, the murder of her partner and the justice system in Australia's Northern Territory, *No Turning Back*, 89. These books reveal a market preference for autobiographical writing, and an almost even split between Australian and overseas subjects in 2006.

2007 similarly saw no life writing in the top 10. The books in the top 100 sales reveal a downward trend, with fewer titles making this band overall. In 2007, Terri Irwin's memoir of life with her famous husband, wildlife warrior Steve Irwin, *My Steve*, came in at number 26; musician Andrew Johns's memoir of mental illness, *The Two of Me*, at 37; Ayaan Hirsi Ali's autobiography *Infidel* at 39; John Grogan's biography/memoir, *Marley and Me: Life and Love with the World's Worst Dog*, at 42; Sally Collings's biography of the inspirational young survivor Sophie Delezio, *Sophie's Journey*, at 51; and Elizabeth Gilbert's hybrid food, self-help and travel memoir, *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything* at 82. *Mao's Last Dancer*, published the year before, remained in the top 100 in 2007 at 87.

When moving to a consideration of the top 5,000 books sold in Australia in 2006, *BookScan* reveals only 62 books categorised as life writing in the top 1,000, and only 222 in the top 5,000 (with 34 titles between 1,000 and 1,999, 45 between 2,000 and 2,999, 48 between 3,000 and 3,999, and 33 between 4,000 and

5,000). 2007 shows a similar total of 235 life writing texts in the top 5,000 bestselling books (75 titles in the first 1,000, 27 between 1,000 and 1,999, 51 between 2,000 and 2,999, 39 between 3,000 and 3,999, and 43 between 4,000 and 5,000). In both years, 2006 and 2007, life writing thus not only constituted only some 4% of the bestselling 5,000 titles in Australia, it also showed only minimal change between these years and, therefore, no significant growth.

Conclusions

Our investigation using various instruments that claim to reflect levels of book sales reveals that Western readers' willingness to purchase published life writing has not changed significantly over the past century. We find no evidence of either a short, or longer, term growth or boom in sales in such books. Instead, it appears that what has been widely heralded as a new golden age of life writing may well be more the result of an expanded understanding of what is included in the genre than an increased interest in it by either book readers or publishers. What recent years do appear to have seen, however, is a significantly increased interest by public commentators, critics, and academics in this genre of writing.

We have also discovered that the issue of our current obsession with the lives of others tends to be discussed in academic as well as popular fora as if what applies to one sub-genre or production form applies to another: if biography is popular, then autobiography will also be, and vice versa. If reality television programming is attracting viewers, then readers will be flocking to life writing as well. Our investigation reveals that such propositions are questionable, and that there is significant research to be completed in mapping such audiences against each other. This work has also highlighted the difficulty of separating out the categories of written texts in publishing studies, firstly in terms of determining what falls within the category of life writing as distinct from other forms of non-fiction (the hybrid problem) and, secondly, in terms of separating out the categories within life writing. Although we have continued to use the terms biography and autobiography as sub-genres, we are aware that they are less useful as descriptors than they are often assumed to be. In order to obtain a more complete and accurate picture, publishing categories may need to be agreed upon, redefined and utilised across the publishing industry and within academia. This is of particular importance in the light of the suggestions (from total sales volumes) that the audiences for books are limited, and therefore the rise of one sub-genre may be directly responsible for the fall of another. Bair argues, for example, that in the 1980s and 1990s, the popularity of what she categorises as memoir had direct repercussions on the numbers of birth-to-death biographies that were commissioned, contracted, and published as "sales and marketing staffs conclude[d] that readers don't want a full-scale life any more" (17).

Finally, although we have highlighted the difficulty of using publishing statistics when there is no common understanding as to what such data is reporting, we hope this study shows that the utilisation of such material does add a depth to such enquiries, especially in interrogating the anecdotal evidence that is often quoted as data in publishing and other studies.

Appendix 1

Publishers Weekly listings 1990–1999

1990 included two autobiographies, *Bo Knows Bo* by professional athlete Bo Jackson (with Dick Schaap) and Ronald Reagan's *An America Life: An Autobiography*. In 1991, there were further examples of life writing with unimaginative titles, *Me: Stories of My Life* by Katherine Hepburn, *Nancy Reagan: The Unauthorized Biography* by Kitty Kelley, and *Under Fire: An American Story* by Oliver North with William Novak; as indeed there were again in 1992 with *It Doesn't Take a Hero: The Autobiography* of Norman Schwarzkopf, *Sam Walton: Made in America*, the autobiography of the founder of Wal-Mart, *Diana: Her True Story* by Andrew Morton, *Every Living Thing*, yet another veterinary outpouring from James Herriot, and *Truman* by David McCullough. In 1993, radio shock-jock Howard Stern was successful with the autobiographical *Private Parts*, as was Betty Eadie with her detailed recounting of her alleged near-death experience, *Embraced by the Light*. Eadie's book remained on the list in 1994 next to *Don't Stand too Close to a Naked Man*, comedian Tim Allen's autobiography. Flag-waving titles continue in 1995 with Colin Powell's *My American Journey*, and *Miss America*, Howard Stern's follow-up to *Private Parts*. 1996 saw two autobiographical works, basketball superstar Dennis Rodman's *Bad as I Wanna Be* and figure-skater, Ekaterina Gordeeva's (with EM Swift) *My Sergei: A Love Story*. In 1997, *Diana: Her True Story* returns to the top 10, joining Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* and prolific biographer Kitty Kelly's *The Royals*, while in 1998, there is only the part-autobiography, part travel-writing *A Pirate Looks at Fifty*, by musician Jimmy Buffet.

There is no biography or autobiography included in either the 1999 or 2000 top 10 lists in *Publishers Weekly*, nor in that for 2005. In 2001, David McCullough's biography *John Adams* and Jack Welch's business memoir *Jack: Straight from the Gut* featured. In 2002, *Let's Roll!* Lisa Beamer's tribute to her husband, one of the heroes of 9/11, written with Ken Abraham, joined Rudolph Giuliani's autobiography, *Leadership*. 2003 saw Hillary Clinton's autobiography *Living History* and Paul Burrell's memoir of his time as Princess Diana's butler, *A Royal Duty*, on the list. In 2004, it was Bill Clinton's turn with *My Life*. In 2006, we find John Grisham's true crime (arguably a biography), *The Innocent Man*, at the top, Grogan's *Marley and Me* at number three, and the autobiographical *The Audacity of Hope* by Barack Obama in fourth place.

Appendix 2

Amazon.com listings since 2000

In 2000, there were only two auto/biographies in the top Amazon 50 bestsellers with Lance Armstrong's *It's Not about the Bike: My Journey Back to Life* about his battle with cancer at 20, and Dave Eggers's self-consciously fictionalised memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* at 32. In 2001, only the top 14 bestsellers were recorded. At number 1 is *John Adams* by David McCullough and, at 11, *Jack: Straight from the Gut* by USA golfer Jack Welch. In 2002, *Leadership* by Rudolph Giuliani was at 12; *Master of the Senate: The Years of*

Lyndon Johnson by Robert Caro at 29; *Portrait of a Killer: Jack the Ripper* by Patricia Cornwell at 42; *Blinded by the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative* by David Brock at 48; and Louis Gerstner's autobiographical *Who Says Elephants Can't Dance: Inside IBM's Historic Turnaround* at 50. In 2003, *Living History* by Hillary Clinton was 7th; *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* by Walter Isaacson 14th; *Dereliction of Duty: The Eyewitness Account of How President Bill Clinton Endangered America's Long-Term National Security* by Robert Patterson 20th; *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* by Jon Krakauer 32nd; *Leap of Faith: Memoirs of an Unexpected Life* by Queen Noor of Jordan 33rd; *Kate Remembered*, Scott Berg's biography of Katharine Hepburn, 37th; *Who's your Caddy?: Looping for the Great, Near Great and Reprobates of Golf* by Rick Reilly 39th; *The Teammates: A Portrait of a Friendship* about a winning baseball team by David Halberstam 42nd; and *Every Second Counts* by Lance Armstrong 49th. In 2004, *My Life* by Bill Clinton was the best selling book of the year; *American Soldier* by General Tommy Franks was 16th; Kevin Phillips's *American Dynasty: Aristocracy, Fortune and the Politics of Deceit in the House of Bush* 18th; Timothy Russert's *Big Russ and Me: Father and Son. Lessons of Life* 20th; Tony Hendra's *Father Joe: The Man who Saved my Soul* 23rd; Ron Chernow's *Alexander Hamilton* 27th; Cokie Roberts's *Founding Mothers: The Women Who Raised our Nation* 31st; Kitty Kelley's *The Family: The Real Story of the Bush Dynasty* 42nd; and *Chronicles, Volume 1* by Bob Dylan was 43rd.

In 2005, auto/biographical texts were well down the list with only *The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion at 45 and *The Glass Castle: A Memoir* by Jeanette Walls at 49. In 2006, there was a resurgence of life writing with Nora Ephron's *I Feel Bad About My Neck: and Other Thoughts on Being a Woman* at 9; Grisham's *The Innocent Man* at 12; Bill Buford's food memoir *Heat: an Amateur's Adventures as Kitchen Slave, Line Cook, Pasta-Maker, and Apprentice to a Dante-Quoting Butcher in Tuscany* at 23; more food writing with Julia Child's *My Life in France* at 29; Immaculée Ilibagiza's *Left to Tell: Discovering God amidst the Rwandan Holocaust* at 30; CNN anchor Anderson Cooper's *Dispatches from the Edge: A Memoir of War, Disasters and Survival* at 43; and Isabella Hatkoff's *Owen & Mzee: The True Story of a Remarkable Friendship* (between a baby hippo and a giant tortoise) at 44. In 2007, Ishmael Beah's discredited *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* came in at 8; Walter Isaacson's *Einstein: His Life and Universe* 13; Ayaan Hirsi Ali's autobiography of her life in Muslim society, *Infidel*, 18; *The Reagan Diaries* 25; *Jesus of Nazareth* by Pope Benedict XVI 29; *Mother Teresa: Come be my Light* 36; *Clapton: The Autobiography* 40; Tina Brown's *The Diana Chronicles* 45; Tony Dungy's *Quiet Strength: The Principles, Practices & Priorities of a Winning Life* 47; and Daniel Tammet's *Born on a Blue Day: Inside the Extraordinary Mind of an Autistic Savant* at 49.

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