Memoir Types: Classifying by Style
Thomas Larson

Below I’ve made seven groups of memoirs based on style: narrative, descriptive, expository, thematic, hybrid (and experimental), memoir/reportage, and the linked essay form. I’ve also added an oddities category for the recalcitrant memoir.

The point is to help you the memoirist understand your choice of style as it relates to your subject. Your subject should tell you a lot about what style to choose if it hasn’t guided you there already.

Some memoirs mix styles quite well. *Fierce Attachments* by Vivian Gornick is a relational mother-daughter memoir that parallels their chronological history and bursts with as much anecdote as it does description.

But the sophisticated mixed-up sorts are far fewer than the memoir that is predominantly *one* style. Mark that word: predominant or, its ruddy-faced cousin, emphatic.

What memoirists do is to take their subject and match it, based on an understanding of and an experience with, all the memoir forms, and then write or revise the book to follow that singular style. The idea is to find a style that releases the writer’s particular story or telling.

Consider two books about growing up. *This Boy’s Life* is stylistically nothing like *The Road from Coorain*: Wolff’s is a nearly pure narrative memoir, emphasizing the story of his mother’s escape from a bad marriage and the subsequent showdowns with a stepfather; Ker Conway’s is a nearly pure descriptive memoir, emphasizing sensory experience based on habitual actions: for example, weeks spent sheep herding. And yet both books cover a similar time period and focus: an adolescent coming-of-age against great odds.
Below I list styles, say a bit about their predominant elements, and name titles and authors. It’s up to you, the aspiring memoirist and personal essayist, to read these books and discover how the writer has merged subject matter and style to make a memoir as unique as her experience.

***

**Narrative** memoirs are time-oriented (a few months, a year, a few years) and chronological. Writers use specific narrative action, dialogue, and strong verbs as the dominant style. They employ time markers to make incidents and anecdotes move toward a goal. They push toward consequential action with drama, often intense and confrontational, especially between characters more often than within the narrator.

*This Boy’s Life* Tobias Wolff  
*The Glass Castle* Jeannette Walls  
*Wild* Cheryl Strayed  
*Angela’s Ashes* Frank McCourt  
*Black Boy* Richard Wright  
*Stop-Time* Frank Conroy  
*All Over But the Shoutin’* Rick Bragg  
*Making Toast* Roger Rosenblatt  
*Half a Life* Jill Ciment  
*Hurry Down Sunshine: A Father’s Story of Love and Madness* Michael Greenberg

***

Memoirs focused on **description** link the narrator often to another person or place or era, using a seed-like motif: here is the place or community or family or person from which or with which I grew. How deeply the person or place or period has imprinted me. How I have had to separate myself from it or them in order to be free. Included are travel memoirs, remembrances and reminiscences, and books about treasured objects, noted artworks, literary characters. Recalling the past is often stronger than self-discovery, though both can occur.
In an **expository** memoir, the author tells us as much as she shows us. The possibilities seem endless: a large statement, a quotation, historical background, or an idea launches us on a journey that may be as much personal as it is social, political, psychological, or spiritual. For example, the book might begin: “This is the story of how I lost—and regained—my faith.” Often diaries, confessions, reflections, and the aphoristic litany are in this category.
Thematic memoirs are organized by topic and tend to jump around in time. Chronology is not key, though a life story may be culled in the reader’s mind as the piece progresses. (See Gordon’s organization: her mother and her bosses, and her sisters, and her husbands, and her priests, etc.) What is key is creating a whole out of its separable dimensions, which may also have rising and falling narrative action.

*Circling My Mother* Mary Gordon  
*An American Childhood* Annie Dillard  
*Five Men Who Broke My Heart* Susan Shapiro  
*The Guardians: An Elegy* Sarah Manguso

Hybrid memoir purposefully mixes styles but follows a consistent logic of juxtaposition or shifts of the those styles. Such books may structure a tone of voice or arc-like unfolding that is unique to the subject matter. Disorientation can orient us toward discovery and new ways of seeing the familiar.

*The Saddest Music Ever Written: The Story of Samuel Barber’s “Adagio for Strings”* Thomas Larson  
*For the Time Being* Annie Dillard  
*Bluets* Maggie Nelson  
*The Prince of Frogtown* Rick Bragg  
*Girl, Interrupted* Susana Kaysen  
*The Untouched Minutes* Donald Morrill  
*The Pharmacist’s Mate* Amy Fusselman
The way to make journalism personal is to combine **memoir and reportage**. This book begins with a witness-writer who sets out to tell another’s tale and stay in the background but becomes personally involved and shifts into a participant or co-producer of the piece. Two things are key: access to the subject (most often a subject way out of the author’s ken: a murder, a prison, a historical search, a court case) and access to the self who is transformed by the subject.

*Plain Secrets: An Outsider among the Amish* Joe Mackall

*Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Appalachia* Dennis Covington

*Finding George Orwell in Burma* Emma Larkin

*An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness* Kay Redfield Jamison

*The Journalist and the Murderer, Reading Chekhov* Janet Malcolm

*The Colorful Apocalypse* Greg Bottoms

*As If: A Crime, A Trial, A Question of Childhood* Blake Morrison

*Girls of Tender Age* Mary Ann Thorne Smith

*Green Fields: Crime, Punishment, and a Boyhood Between* Bob Cowser

*True Notebooks* Mark Salzman

*Into Thin Air* Jon Krakauer

***

**Linked essays** tie companionable threads together whether of time period, literary style, or engaged interest. They tend to group around a common theme (say childhood or fishing) or a sensibility (say a grief’s surprising turns or a passion explored and redefined). Linked essays aren’t just thrown together; there is (or should be) an interrelatedness or a conscience guiding the proximity. It’s a difficult form to work in because often the essays are written separately and a link may have to be forged, one not always convincingly done. Collections of lyric essays also fall into this group.

*One Writer’s Beginnings* Eudora Welty

*Bound for Shady Grove* Steve Harvey
Resisting Elegy Joel Peckham
Portrait Inside My Head Phillip Lopate
Ruined By Reading Lynn Sharon Schwartz
A Field Guide to Getting Lost Rebecca Solnit
Raising the Dead: A Doctor’s Encounter with His Own Mortality Richard Selzer
I Just Lately Started Buying Winds Kim Dana Kupperman

***

Oddities are memoirs that resist classification because they exploit a book-length stylistic trait such as a confessional voice, a diary or journal tack, a list of aphorisms, graphic and video forms, etc.

I Remember Joe Brainard
Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic Alison Bechdel
Maus I & II Art Spiegelman

***

(Note: I have tried to include more books from the 1980s, 1990s, and the 2000s in hopes that these are more widely available and very cheap on Amazon.)