

Memoirs for Reading Groups I

Boylan, Jennifer Finney. ***She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders***. Broadway Books, 2003. From early childhood, Boylan knew he was a girl trapped in a boy's body; in his early forties, a tenured professor, already married with children, he finally became Jennifer, risking everything he knew and loved to be the person he was always meant to be.

Braestrup, Kate. ***Here if You Need Me: A True Story***. Little, Brown, 2007.

After her husband's accidental death, Braestrup became a chaplain in the Maine Warden Service, providing comfort and spiritual guidance to families and wardens alike on search-and-rescue missions. On the way she muses about religion's answers to life's important questions, and makes her own journey from grief to faith.

Caputo, Philip. ***A Rumor of War***. Holt, Rinehart and Winson, 1977.

Caputo arrived in Vietnam with the first Marine troops in 1965 and his experiences were emblematic of all that followed: the frustrations of fighting a rarely-seen enemy in hostile jungle terrain and the difficulty of differentiating civilians from Viet Cong. His descriptions of the moral ambiguity of the War, the way nineteen-year olds were turned into angry killers, and the "nameless numbered hills and joyless, raining dawns" have made this a wartime classic.

Dubner, Steven. ***Turbulent Souls: A Catholic Son's Return to His Jewish Family***. Wm. Morrow, 1998.

Dubner's parents, raised in observant Jewish families, found their separate ways to Catholicism, then found each other. Disowned by most of their relatives, they raised eight children and remained devout Catholics. Dubner, curious about the religion his parents rejected, embarked on a literal and spiritual journey to understand his parents' choices and find his own path.

Garis, Leslie. ***House of Happy Endings***. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

Garis's grandparents wrote for the Stratemeyer syndicate, penning series books like *The Bobbsey Twins* and the Uncle Wiggly stories, staples of childhood reading in the early twentieth century. They all lived together in a beautiful old house where happiness should have prevailed. But mental illness ravaged the family and Garis's childhood was spent shoring up her emotionally shattered father, while mother, brothers, and grandmother spun off into their own worlds of pain.

Gornick, Vivian. ***Fierce Attachments: A Memoir***. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987.

The author's close but difficult relationship with her mother underlies this intense memoir of growing up in a socialist apartment complex in the Bronx in the 1940s and 1950s. Gornick's mother and neighbors offered some unusual life lessons in love, sex, and politics,

counterpoints to Gornick's own efforts to establish her identity. Long a classic in the feminist community, it is still a fresh coming of age story.

Hall, Sara. ***Drawn to the Rhythm: A Passionate Life Reclaimed***. W.W. Norton & Co., 2002. Readers will cheer through their tears as Hall reclaims her life from her psychologically abusive husband. One day driving near the water with her children, Hall was struck by the grace of a solitary rower and began an early morning training regimen in a borrowed scull, going on to become a champion racer. The strength she gained was physical and mental, allowing her to "row my way to freedom."

Hockenberry, John. ***Moving Violations: War Zones, Wheelchairs, and Declarations of Independence***. Hyperion, 1995.

Millions have heard Hockenberry's radio reportage from around the world without knowing that he is a paraplegic, confined to a wheelchair due to a car accident in his late teens. Fiercely independent, he tells how he set about reconstructing a full and accomplished life without the use of his legs. His candor, wit, and anger, make this an inspirational, unforgettable story.

Skloot, Floyd. ***In the Shadow of Memory***. University of Nebraska Press, 2003.

"I am sometimes a stranger to myself" says Skloot, who was an athlete, poet, novelist, and financial manager when a virus struck his brain and derailed his life in his early forties. Challenged by the simplest mental and physical tasks, he was compelled to re-examine who he had become and remake his life. Skloot writes about the relationship between brain and mind, the role of memory in making us who we are, and how our childhoods shape our adult lives.

Swiller, Josh. ***The Unheard: A Memoir of Deafness and Africa***. Henry Holt & Co., 2007.

Mostly deaf from birth, Josh Swiller's hearing aids and lip-reading helped, but he always felt like an outsider. When he joined the Peace Corps, he hoped that he could find "a place past deafness and hearing." In his Zambian village he set about trying to make a difference, but came up against a culture of violence with profound consequences for the villagers, his friends, and his own future.

Umrigar, Thrity. ***First Darling of the Morning: Selected Memories of an Indian Childhood***. HarperCollins, 2004.

Umrigar grew up in a middle-class Parsi family in Bombay, surrounded by her father's extended family, well-loved but caught in the undercurrents of family quarrels and jealousies. She tells how she navigated these difficult waters, but the joy of the memoir is in her exceptional ability to show us her intellectual development--how she became politically aware and discovered the wonders of literature, art, and music. Umrigar's portrait of coming of age in Bombay will resonate for readers everywhere.