Adult Memoirs for Teens

Alicia was only nine years old when World War II began, and although she managed to elude death at the hands of Communists and Nazis, she lost her entire family. With incredible courage and nerve, she not only survived but ran a Jewish orphanage and led secret transports to Palestine.

Recalling her childhood as the daughter of a Peruvian father and an American mother, Arana tells how these competing cultures complicated and enriched her life. In Peru, she was taught to be a lady; on the Wyoming ranch of her mother's family, she learned how to shoot a gun and ride a horse.

Cancer and the Tour de France, deathly illness and incredible strength define Armstrong's life journey. Diagnosed with testicular cancer at age twenty-five and given only a fifty-fifty chance of survival, he went on to win international championships and become a father. Armstrong's plain spoken story is filled with the emotional highs and lows of a very full life.

Beah was a carefree pre-teen in his small Sierra Leone village, memorizing rap songs from American cassettes, when rebel attacks robbed him of home, friends, and family. At age 12 he was recruited into the civil war as a child soldier and trained to kill.

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. With the skills of a fine novelist, Boylan makes the pain and joy of his journey vivid and compelling.

From childhood, Lynne loved swimming long distances—at age 14 she swam across the 26 mile Catalina Channel and then the English Channel, setting a new record. Other remarkable swims followed, as she endured physical difficulties, harsh conditions, and encounters with sharks, always seeking greater challenges.

Cunxin, Li. *Mao's Last Dancer*
Li was one of 6 brothers in a desperately poor rural Chinese family. At age eleven, he was picked for Madame Mao's ballet academy in Beijing. His steely determination to excel led to a cultural exchange program with the Houston Ballet. The story of how he fell in love with America and subsequently defected reads like adventure fiction.

Novelist and Newbery Award winning author Fox had an astonishingly awful childhood—as an infant, her uncaring, self-absorbed parents abandoned her at an orphanage. She was raised by a compassionate minister in upstate New York, but periodically her parents would appear, whisk her away and deposit her with strangers. This is a Dickensian tale, recounted without self-pity and with a writer's eye for the telling detail.

At age 9, Grealy had surgery to remove a cancerous growth in her jaw; her disfigured face made her a target for taunts and stares at school and in the street. Radiation, chemotherapy and multiple surgeries forced her to cope with the isolation and shame of looking different and confront the value society places on physical beauty.


Rawicz was arrested by the Russians as a spy in 1939, tortured, and sent to a labor camp in Siberia. He organized an escape with 6 other prisoners; they trekked south, from Siberia to India, across the Gobi Desert and the Himalayas. The story of how they cooperated to survive under impossible conditions is simply riveting.


Santiago grew up in a tin shack in a rural Puerto Rican barrio, the oldest of 7 children with a mostly absent father. She describes a difficult but vibrant world, full of friends and relatives joyously celebrating life. Her move to Brooklyn as a young teenager thrust her into a drab, cold world, but fired her with ambition to use education as a way out.


Scheeres grew up with two adopted black brothers in 1970s rural Indiana with parents whose fundamentalist religious beliefs papered over abuse and neglect. When her beloved brother David was sent to a Christian reform school in the Dominican Republic, she chose to join him. The racism, beatings, attempted rape, and hypocrisy they endured are recounted by Scheeres with frankness and sad longing for what could have been.


For a reluctant reader, this graphic memoir uses very few words but has a powerful impact. Small grew up mentally abused by angry, unhappy parents. Told that he needed a simple operation on his neck, he woke up mute, a victim of his father’s experiments with radiation. Small, a well-known children’s illustrator, turns his talents on his own unhappy childhood with remarkable results.


Wolff spent his teenage years locked in a battle of wills with an abusive stepfather, desperately creating a self that could escape and survive intact. His insight into his teenage years and the bizarre behavior of the adults around him makes this a tour de force of the genre, by turns chilling and very funny.

Additional titles:
Hickam, Homer. *Rocket Boys*. Delacorte, 1998 (also released as *October Sky*).