

Memoirs of English Childhoods

Ackerley, J.R. ***My Father and Myself***. New York Review of Books, reprint, 1999 (1969).

The startling opening sentence of this classic memoir sets the stage for further revelations about Ackerley's eccentric and secretive father, whose authoritative and distant presence affected his childhood. Not until after his father's death, did Ackerley unearth the remarkable secrets that his father kept.

Andrews, Julie. ***Home: A Memoir of My Early Years***. Hyperion, 2008

Andrews displays the warmth, sincerity, and lack of pretension that characterize her public persona in this account of her lonely and often scary childhood. She lived with her mother and alcoholic stepfather in a series of shabby London rooms, survived the Blitz, and by age nine she was involved in the grueling round of voice classes and performances that allowed her to be the financial mainstay of the family. She ends this volume with her success in *My Fair Lady*.

Athill, Diana. ***Yesterday Morning***. Granta, 2002.

Athill's upper-class childhood on her family's country estate following World War I was often idyllic, but there were dark undercurrents: her parents' unhappy marriage, a mostly-absent father, and financial problems. A tantalizing, literate portrait of a bygone era, particularly notable for Athill's account of her relationship with her aging mother.

Blackburn, Julia. ***The Three of Us: A Family Story***. Pantheon, 2008.

Blackburn tells a disturbing story of perverted family relationships: when her drug-addicted father moved out, her mother took in lodgers who became her lovers. When one of the lodgers began an affair with daughter Julia, it shattered whatever fragile relationships remained between Julia and her parents.

Durrell, Gerald ***My Family and Other Animals***. Penguin Books, reprint 2000 (1957).

In 1933, when Durrell was 8, his family moved to the sunny, good-natured Greek island of Corfu. For Durrell, it was a kind of paradise; he roamed the beautiful island with his dog, investigating plants and wildlife. This classic of nature writing and eccentric family life is a standout.

Fiennes, William. ***The Music Room***. 2009 W.W. Norton.

Fiennes grew up in a 14th century castle surrounded by a moat, often used in films, and toured by the public several days each week. In this reflective and beautifully written memoir, Fiennes writes about the illness of his beloved and much older brother, Richard, an epileptic, whose seizures and violent personality affected all their lives.

McGahern, John. **All Will Be Well**. Alfred A. Knopf, 2006.

McGahern paints a vivid picture of life in rural Ireland in the middle decades of the 20th century. He was very close to his mother, who died when he was nine, leaving him and his six siblings at the mercy of their vain and brutal father. Despite his hellish childhood, McGahern's love of the Irish countryside infuses this sad memoir with a wonderful lyricism.

Slater, Nigel. **Toast: The Story of a Boy's Hunger**. Gotham Books, 2004.

Cookbook author Slater writes with delicious intimacy about the food of his childhood, especially the candies, crumbles, trifles, and puddings that sweetened his life. Through his vignettes of meals and holidays we come to know his awkward, asthmatic mother and difficult father.

Smith, Bob. **Hamlet's Dresser: A Memoir**. Scribner, 2002

Smith's childhood was forever changed when his sister Carolyn was born with Down syndrome and an unthinking relative blamed him. With his distant father and devastated mother, he lived in an eerie, claustrophobic world, until he found comfort and a vocation in Shakespeare's words.

Kingsland, Rosemary. **The Secret Life of a Schoolgirl**. Crown, 2003.

Kingsland's story reads like a rich meal, stuffed with passion, outrageous characters, and unsettling events. She left India as a young girl in 1948, and lived in various parts of England while her parents' marriage crashed on the rocks of adultery and alcoholism. The secret she kept for 40 years, revealed in engrossing detail here, is her affair at the age of 13, with the actor Richard Burton.

Some additional titles:

Burnside, John. **A Lie About My Father**. Graywolf Press, 2007.

Hamilton, Hugo. **The Speckled People: Memoir of a Half-Irish Childhood**. Fourth Estate, 2003.

Mitford, Jessica. **Hons and Rebels**. New York Review of Books, reprint 2004 (1960).

O'Faolain, Nuala. **Are You Somebody? The Accidental Memoir of a Dublin Woman**. Henry Holt, 1996 (2nd ed.).

Seymour, Miranda. **Thrumpton Hall: A Memoir of Life in My Father's House**. Harper, 2008