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# , Book Musings

## April, 2013



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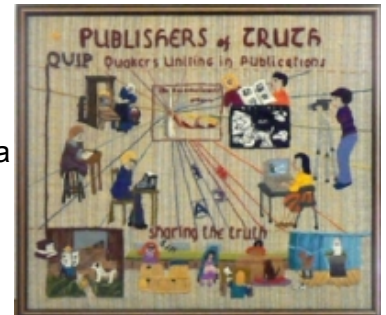
### The Memoir Conundrum

from Chel Avery

Dear Friend,

QuakerPress is swamped with manuscripts of memoirs.

I've just returned from the annual conference of QUIP ([Quakers Uniting in Publications](#)) where I led a workshop titled "The Memoir Explosion: What Do We Do with Them All?" This is a tricky question for a Quaker publisher. Memoirs hold a special place in Friends tradition—some of our most valued literature is in journal form. A number of Quaker study and retreat programs regularly offer workshops on such topics as "writing your spiritual journey." Memoirs are a very Quaker thing to do.



**Book Musings** is an occasional newsletter from staff and friends of QuakerBooks of Friends General Conference. It features books and themes that are of special interest to the author, as well as providing alerts about sales and other opportunities available to readers. If you would like to receive additional newsletters from FGC, [sign up here](#).

Every memoir is a treasure for someone. Writers of memoirs are often enriched by the process of opening up their stories and discovering the meanings that emerge. The writing itself can be a valuable exercise, regardless of whether anyone reads it. Memoirs can be a gift to living and yet-to-be-born members of one's family and a legacy to one's meeting. I hope many of the memoirs emerging out of these workshops will be preserved in archival libraries for historians of the future.

### Get the catalog



But which are the memoirs that should be mass produced as books for strangers? What makes a memoir something we will purchase, read, and talk about? One well known publisher of spiritual books wrote to a Quaker author: "we're frankly frightened of memoirs, no matter how good they are, as we've bombed with them."

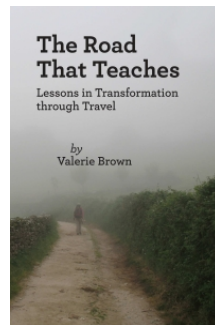
For months, I've been asking people, "What was the last memoir you read, and why did you read it? People most often tell me that they read a memoir because they already know something about the person and want to know more of his or her story. When the memoirist is not already a subject of interest, then people read memoirs because of the "buzz," because they have been told that the writing is as exquisite as Annie Dillard's or Chris Offut's, the wisdom is as profound as [John Woolman's](#) or [Mary Rose O'Reilley's](#), or the circumstances of the life itself are very compelling, as with Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*.

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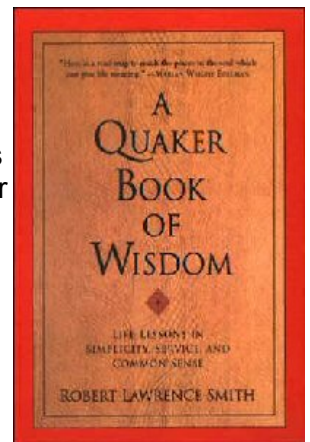
Memoirs are, in a way, compensation for only getting to live once. Reading a good memoir is like spending a period of time inside another person's life. I've noticed that what I learn from my experience there may be very different from the author's own conclusions about it.

Nonetheless, I'd argue that every publishable memoir has something going for it beyond the story of someone's inner or outer life. I've noticed that the majority of the best memoirs are as much about another subject as they are about the author.

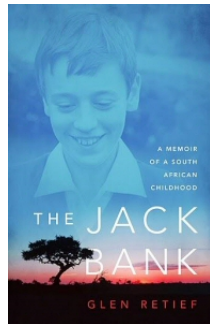
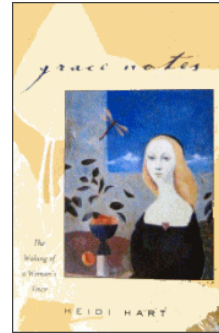
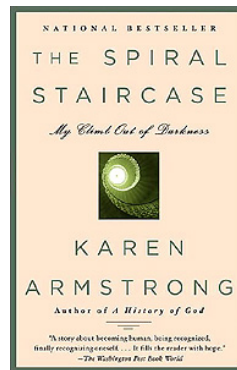


For example, Valerie Brown's new book is about pilgrimage from the perspective of a Quaker teacher of Buddhist practice. Interwoven with reflections on her own pilgrimages to such places as India, Japan, Iona, and on El Camino de Santiago, she discusses the meaning of pilgrimage itself. What is spiritual travel? How can we reach new depths by removing ourselves from home, entering sacred spaces, and placing ourselves among strangers? [\*The Road That Teaches: Lessons in Transformation through Travel\*](#) contains Brown's reflections on what she has learned in her own pilgrimages and offers counsel to readers about the practice of spiritual travel.

Robert Lawrence Smith's [\*Quaker Book of Wisdom: Life Lessons in Simplicity, Service, and Common Sense\*](#) introduces a Quaker perspective on life. I owe atonement to this book. When it first appeared in 1998, I wrote a critical review of it, complaining that as an introductory book on Quakerism, it was too singular in its interpretations and that the author lacked perspective on the larger Quaker movement. I have changed my mind about this book since I came to appreciate it as a memoir. I now believe this one Friend's personal reflections on growing up Quaker in a largely Quaker community to be the best kind of expression of the *spirit* of Quakerism. When I was teaching at a Friends school, I began to recommend this book to nonQuaker parents who wanted a better understanding of the people who were educating their children. In ten simply written narrative chapters about how such subjects as Truth, Simplicity, Conscience, and Service have played a role in the author's life, we learn to know both a person and the community that shaped that person. **We've marked this book down 15% through the end of April.**



Two other memoirs I have enjoyed are about the process of leaving one's religion behind in young adulthood. Karen Armstrong, once a novice nun, and Heidi Hart, once a Mormon, tell very different stories of coming to recognition that the culture of their faith is a poor fit for who they are called to become, and that a different kind of truth deep within is clamoring to have voice. Armstrong, author of [\*The Spiral Staircase: My Climb out of Darkness\*](#), has become a well known scholar of religion. Hart, author of [\*Grace Notes: The Waking of a Woman's Voice\*](#), tells a lyrical story of finding her way to Quakerism as a musician and writer.



Some memoirs offer a new insight for interpreting your own life choices. When Glen Retief leaves his childhood home on a South African game preserve for boarding school, he is confronted with brutality from the older prefects, who often discipline younger students by imposing “jacks,” or hard wallops on the backside with a cricket bat. The cruelest of the prefects introduces the concept of a “jack bank”—by volunteering to bank jacks in advance, boys can earn interest against any future penalties. Four voluntary jacks today can buy you out of six if you are caught in an infraction next week. Who would submit to such a thing? Most of the students would, including young Glen, who fears the jacks, but fears greater retaliation, humiliation, and “not fitting in” even more. [The Jack Bank](#) becomes a metaphor for self-punishing life choices the author makes as he tries to find a way to accept his gay identity and fit in to South African culture at a time of tumultuous change in politics and race relationships.

Perhaps the most likeable memoir to enter the stream of Quaker literature in the past year is Lynn Waddington’s [Staying True: Musings of an Odd-Duck Quaker Lesbian Approaching Death](#). I read this book in manuscript and would have liked for us to have published it, but the Waddington estate chose a different path. QuakerBooks hosted a reading from *Staying True* at last year’s FGC Gathering, and the room was packed beyond capacity. This book is an anomaly in being one of the very few general “story of my life” kinds of memoir that actually works very well. Why is it good? While the writing is lively and the circumstances command attention, there is not one feature that makes *Staying True* stand out. Rather, it makes good reading because it is written by an interesting person, someone who expresses interesting thoughts about her life, who makes unexpected choices, and with whom you would like to be having a conversation.



Whose story would you like to read?

Peace to you,  
Chel

Sale: Reflections from Mary Rose O'Reilley

Mary Rose O'Reilley is a Quaker, Buddhist, poetry writing, wildlife rehabilitating, shape note singing teacher. Her memoirs contain all of these things,

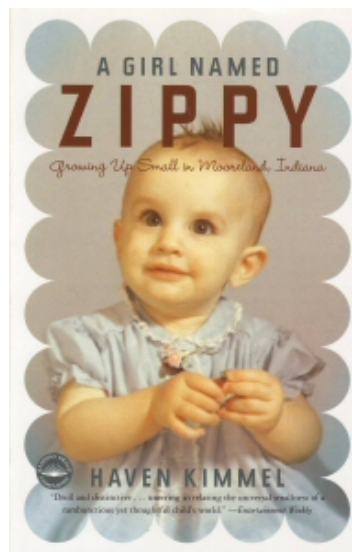
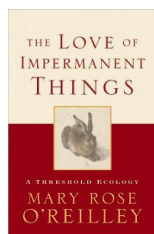
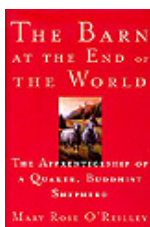
Sale: [A Girl Named](#)

[Zippy](#)

Humor is another feature people have said they really like in memoirs, especially when combined with brutal honesty. My colleague Graham describes Haven

tumbling over one another to produce delightful insights and marvelous, sometimes gritty observations. [The Barn at the End of the World: The Apprenticeship of a Quaker Buddhist Shepherd](#) and her later reflections, [The Love of Impermanent Things: A Threshold Ecology](#), are **marked down 15% through the end of April.**

Kimmel's account of her childhood memories (subtitled "*Growing Up Small in Mooreland Indiana*") as a delightfully amusing book featuring a supremely quirky family, a Friends church, and a town of 300 other characters. **Marked down 15% through the end of April.**



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