

THE CAMBRIDGE
HISTORY OF
GAY AND LESBIAN LITERATURE

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Autobiography

DAVID BERGMAN

Beginnings

The first explicitly same-sex autobiographies published in English appeared as case studies in Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion* (1897), a groundbreaking medical book. Often Ellis would summarize these case studies, but it is significant how he would also let these men and women speak for themselves, reprinting their communications in full. If autobiography in general began as religious confession, queer autobiography began as medical evidence. Even in French, among the earliest examples, Herculine Barbin's memoir was published as part of *Question médico-légale de l'identité* (1872). On the one hand, these works are written for outsiders to arouse sympathy and understanding from heterosexuals; on the other hand, they are written for insiders to lift the spirits of fellow "sufferers." Consequently, queer autobiography often changes rhetorical stances to accommodate these two different audiences. I want to distinguish these queer autobiographies from a work such as Gertrude Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933). Stein neither addresses her sexuality nor allows the reader to become an insider to the text. Like Ellis's gallery of portraits, Stein allows no formula to stereotype her subjects. The very nature of chapters such as this one tends to flatten differences and force similarities. I hope by the number of titles mentioned and the various subgenres represented to minimize the flattening.

One can see the rhetorical tensions of straight and gay audiences played out in the earliest American same-sex autobiographies. The title page of Claude Hartland's *The Story of a Life* (1901) announces that it is "[f]or the consideration of the Medical Fraternity," but the preface indicates that it was "a means by which similar sufferers may be reached and relieved" (n.pag.). Hartland is careful to present himself as a comforting figure, both victim of psychic and social forces beyond his control and survivor, who has retained his moral and emotional bearings. Mary Casal's *The Stone Wall* (1930), perhaps the earliest

lesbian autobiography in America, was also intended for both heterosexual and lesbian readers. Unlike Hartland, Casal does not ask for help from the medical profession (or from anyone) to cure her homosexuality, rather she believes that the relation between women “is the highest and most complete union of two human beings” (165). The lesson she wishes to teach (and she was a schoolmistress) is the need to understand troubled youngsters who suffer from sexual repression. Children must not be frightened about sex; their desires must be treated with gentleness.

Journals and Diaries

Because early gay and lesbian memoir (and I shall use the terms *autobiography* and *memoir* interchangeably) is shaped by the need to justify and defend homosexuals, they are less useful in giving a picture of the lives of gay men and lesbians than their journals. To be sure, journals often obscure or transform events to suit their authors, but because they are written over long periods, they are less likely to be shaped by overarching concerns. Among the most astonishing documents is Anne Lister’s journal, which runs four million words. Lister (1791–1840) was born into a wealthy, Yorkshire landowning family. Unlike Jane Austen, with whom she is roughly contemporary, she inherited the family estate, Shibden Hall, which left her time to seduce, with surprising luck, various women of the neighborhood and pen her diary, whose erotic portion she rendered in a code of her own devising.

Yet another remarkable document is the diary published as *Jeb and Dash*. Ina Russell, the editor, went to great lengths to disguise the names of her uncle Carter Newman Bealer (Jeb) and his longtime friend Isham W. Perkins (Dash), even though they were dead for nearly thirty years. What makes this diary particularly interesting is that, unlike most of the journals that have survived, *Jeb and Dash* is not by a famous person or literary figure. Bealer was a low-level clerk in a government office who for long stretches lived in the YMCA. He presents the life of the average gay Washingtonian.

The same cannot be said of Christopher Isherwood (1904–86), whose diaries start in 1939, and so far run to four long volumes and host a panoply of Hollywood celebrities and cultural figures. They cover much of the same territory as his novels and memoirs, combining an exuberant sex life with artistic striving and spiritual commitment. An even earlier and more detailed journal is by Claude Fredericks (1923–2012), who counted Anais Nin, May Sarton, and James Merrill among his friends. His journal begins in 1932 and takes forty-three hundred pages to get only as far as 1943. Fredericks continues writing

in his journal until his death, and it gives the most detailed account of a gay man's life that we have. Through its pages, we discover a gay underground in Springfield, Missouri in the late 1930s, and the rather open romancing of Harvard undergraduates in the early forties. British painter Keith Vaughn died with his pen in his hand in the midst of writing an entry. Donald Vining (1917–98) published five volumes of *A Gay Diary* (1979–93), which starts in the mid-thirties and presents the lives of gay men at the fringe of Broadway. Perhaps the most renowned diarist is composer Ned Rorem (1923–). Tart, unsparing, and explicit, Rorem's diaries – collected in many volumes – were shocking to readers in 1966 when they began to be published. Adding to the shock was that he wrote about events only ten years in the past and about people still alive. One of Rorem's lovers was bisexual novelist, poet, playwright, and essayist Paul Goodman (1911–72), whose own journal *Five Years* (1966) remains a fascinating work. Fredericks, Vaughn, Vining, Rorem, and Goodman all saw their journals into print. Their diaries were never meant to be secret.

Death sometimes ends the hide-and-seek element in people's lives. Susan Sontag (1933–2004), for instance, refused to acknowledge her lesbianism during her life although the truth was widely known. Only after her death did her son, David Reiff, publish *Reborn* (2008), her journals and notebooks from the years 1947–63, which show that the most sophisticated intellectuals can produce emotional lives as messy as anyone's. Among the finest journals are those of May Sarton (1912–95), and they may be of more lasting significance than her novels and poetry. Her first *Journal of a Solitude* (1973), written when she was already sixty, reduces the beloved's name to a letter – Sarton is not completely open about being a lesbian – but the context makes it clear that the beloved is a woman. *Journal of a Solitude* was followed by five more volumes that are quietly unflinching in their observation and self-assessment. Doris Grumbach's diaries also should be mentioned for their warmth and wisdom though they, too, are less than explicit.

Gay Liberation

From the late sixties through the 1970s, a number of autobiographies appeared that either advanced or were made possible by the gay liberation movement. Perhaps the finest gay autobiography written is J.R. Ackerley's *My Father and Myself* (1968), which juxtaposes Ackerley's life as a gay man with the no-less-unconventional life of his father, who kept a secret second family as well as, perhaps, a history of having been a male prostitute. Tennessee Williams's *Memoirs* (1975) was met with harsh critical reactions because of its explicitness.

One critic wrote, “if he has not exactly opened his heart, he has opened his fly” (qtd. in Hale 253). Williams saw himself within the gay liberation movement, which he calls a “serious crusade to assert . . . a free position in society” (50). The most famous of these gay liberation period autobiographies was Quentin Crisp’s *The Naked Civil Servant* (1968). Crisp (1908–99) decided early in life to appear unabashedly as he was – a homosexual. He was a one-man liberation army *avant la lettre*.

A number of men directly involved in the gay liberation movement wrote memoirs. *I Have More Fun with You than Anyone* (1972) and *Roommates Can’t Always Be Lovers* (1974) by Lige Clark (1942–75) and Jack Nichols (1938–2005) articulate the early gay liberationist belief that meaningful relations cannot be drawn from the marriage model. Clark was murdered in Mexico while in his thirties; Nichols had a distinguished career as a journalist. Arthur Bell (1939–84) wrote a lively early account of the Gay Activist Alliance (GAA) in *Dancing the Gay Lib Blues* (1971). Arnie Kantrowitz (1940–) describes how his closeted life was changed by the GAA in *Under the Rainbow* (1977). Perhaps the most popular autobiography of the period, a book that has been in print ever since, is *The Best Little Boy in the World* (1973) by Andrew Tobias (1947–) under the name of John Reid. The book, written in “the breezy but informed approach that has become his trademark” (v), is about a highly neurotic and lustful student who is both hampered and energized by the need to compensate for being gay by achieving everything else his parents wanted of him. Two autobiographies from religious figures were also of significance. In *The Lord Is My Shepherd & He Knows I’m Gay*, Reverend Troy D. Perry, the founder of the Metropolitan Community Church, articulates how Christianity – even evangelical Christianity – can be joined with homosexuality. Malcolm Boyd (1923–), who had become famous for his work in civil rights, published *Take off the Masks* (1978).

Only a dozen years separate the Stonewall riots in 1969, the symbolic beginning of the gay revolution, and the first announcements of what would become AIDS, but there have been a number of chroniclers of that generation. Felice Picano (1946–) is one of the most assiduous, producing a tetralogy of memoirs, starting with *Ambidextrous* (1985) that begins with him at eleven and concluding with *Art & Sex in Greenwich Village* (2007), when he is a successful writer and publisher. Michael Rumaker (1932–), who was educated at Black Mountain, wrote a controversial book in its time, *A Day and a Night at the Baths* (1979), celebrating the exercise of sexual freedom. Here we may place the work of Edmund White (1940–), the most famous author of this generation of gay writers. Much of his fiction is autobiographical, but his two memoirs

are particularly fine. *City Boy* (2009) is a chronological account of gay life in New York during the sixties and seventies. *My Lives* (2005) covers his childhood through his sixties in such chapters as “My Blonds” and “My Hustlers.”

AIDS Memoirs

The AIDS epidemic has produced some of the finest writing by both men and women. Rebecca Brown wrote *The Gift of the Body*, an extraordinary fictional memoir of her experiences as an AIDS healthcare worker, told with a tenderness increased by its linguistic restraint. Mark Doty (1953–) has written lyrically and with great psychological precision a remarkable account of the death of his partner Wally Roberts, *Heaven’s Coast* (1996). Both Brown and Doty write of AIDS from the point of view of those who had not contracted the disease. Those stricken with AIDS wrote with an understandable urgency and anger. One of the finest works of this period is *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (1991) by David Wojnarowicz (1954–92), who was also a painter, photographer, and performance artist. Wojnarowicz’s father terrorized his family, throwing them down until blood flowed from their ears (152). At sixteen, he escaped to hustle on the street. But it was AIDS that alerted him to the political dimensions of suffering. *Before Night Falls* (1993) by Reinaldo Arenas (1943–90) tells how an escape from Castro’s Cuba ends in tragedy in New York. Perhaps the best-known work on AIDS is Paul Monette’s *Borrowed Time* (1988). At first Monette (1945–95), a successful writer, shares a privileged, glamorous life in Los Angeles with his partner, Roger Horwitz (1941–86), a highly successful Hollywood lawyer. But soon Horwitz gets ill, and Monette discovers that he also is infected with HIV. The disease tests their love for one another. Hervé Guibert created a furor in France with his memoir *To The Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* (1990) with its indictment of Michel Foucault. By far the angriest (and the funniest) memoirs of AIDS are by David B. Feinberg (1956–94). Feinberg was a dedicated member of the direct action group ACT UP, and he gives witness to the terrible changes in the lives of the gay community. Since the advances in AIDS treatment, there have been fewer AIDS memoirs, but two deserve note. Douglas Wright (1956–), a New Zealand dancer and choreographer, has written *Ghost Dance* (2004) and *Terra Incognita* (2006) that record a life in extended time.

African American men are disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS, but they have left relatively few accounts. Archbishop Carl Bean (1944–) devotes a good portion of his memoir *I Was Born This Way* (2010) to founding the Minority AIDS Project (MAP) that cares especially for people of color. Another

noteworthy example is Gary Fisher, whose diary, filled with sadomasochistic encounters, registers the anger, frustration, and despair of an educated black man stricken with a terminal disease. Glenn Burke's autobiography *Out at Home* (1995) is more about his promising career in the major leagues where he played for the LA Dodgers under famed coach Tommy Lasorda. But when Burke (1952–95) started palling around with Spunky Lasorda, Tommy's rather flamboyantly gay son, he was abruptly traded. His career ruined, Burke drinks heavily, takes drugs, contracts AIDS, and finds himself for short periods living on the street. Burke's faith, however, remains. "I'll soon be in Heaven with the Lord," he writes, "And I'll be rejoining so many of my friends" (117).

Military Memoirs

Lesbian and gay autobiographies are written from or about social institutions to which queers have been placed or denied admission. The subgenres of gay and lesbian memoir are often defined by these social institutions and cultural practices. For example, queers have often been assigned to medical institutions and prisons; their memoirs are often about freeing themselves from such places. Other memoirs about professional athletics or the military are about returning to places from which they have been rejected or reconciling themselves to their exclusion.

Before the recent change in policy (September 2011), the military was one of the major institutions from which queer people were barred. Time will tell whether this subgenre will disappear now that homosexuals are allowed in the military. Joseph Steffan (1964–) tells in *Honor Bound* (1992) of being denied both a degree and a commission in the Navy when just before graduation as a top midshipman from the Naval Academy in Annapolis, he announced that he was homosexual. One of the most moving testimonies is Margarethe Cammermeyer's *Serving in Silence* (1994), which was made into a motion picture. With more than a quarter of a century of service, Cammermeyer (1942–) was a much honored Vietnam veteran and on her way to being Chief Nurse of the National Guard, for which she needed top secret clearance. When asked about her sexual orientation, she answered honestly, and her honesty brought the end of her military career. Don't Ask/Don't Tell and the various Middle East wars have also brought accounts by Reichen Lehmkuhl, Bronson Lemur, and Jeffrey McCowen.

There are very few gay memoirs of World War II, but one of the most extraordinary is *The Cage* (1949), an account of life in an Italian prisoner of war camp and published remarkably in the forties. Written by Dan Billany and

David Dowie, it tells of Billany's passionate attachment to Dowie. The two escaped from the prison and finished the book while hiding in a farmhouse whose owner, true to his word, sent the manuscript as promised to Billany's family after the war. Unfortunately, Billany and Dowie, after leaving the farmhouse, were never seen again. Myles Hildyard's *It Is Bliss Here* (2005) is a rare combination of letters and journals from a war hero. James Lord's *My Queer War* (2010) was published posthumously.

Prison Memoirs

With changes in the law, we forget how frequently prisons were a specter of queer memoir. In fact, the entire genre of gay autobiography may be said to have sprung from Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* (1905), his letter from Reading Gaol, where he was sent after his conviction for committing acts of "gross indecency." *De Profundis* is more a spiritual autobiography than a narrative of specific events. To get a sense of how men were treated in England after being found guilty of homosexuality, one should read Peter Wildeblood's *Against the Law* or Rupert Croft-Cook's *A Verdict of You All*, both published in 1955. In fact, Wildeblood's case spurred the creation of the Wolfenden Committee, whose report in 1957 recommended to Parliament the abolition of laws criminalizing sex between consenting adults.

The prison has been the site of two of the most brilliantly written books. The most famous is Jean Genet's *A Thief's Journal* (1964), which, like all of Genet's work, records not only his love for crime, but for "the handsomest criminals" (12). It takes place not in prison for the most part, but the penitentiary hovers above the action, casting its long shadow. Less known but extraordinarily well written is James Blake's *The Joint* (1971), a collection of letters written between 1951 and 1964. Blake was hailed as a writer by such figures as Nelson Algren, Simone de Beauvoir, and Jean Paul Sartre, who translated some of his work into French. Like *A Thief's Journal*, *The Joint* is a love story in which Blake, a pianist, meets Dan, an ostensibly heterosexual drummer, in prison. Dan protects Blake as his "boy," a role Blake assumed with other men. Blake gets Dan off of drugs; Dan pushes Blake as a musician. But out of jail, their relationship falls apart. Despite their efforts to keep free of prison, they both return, although separated, behind bars.

A third, more recent book is worth noting, J.T. Parsell's *Fish: A Memoir of a Boy in a Man's Prison* (2006). At seventeen, Tim Parsell (1960–) goes to prison, where he is immediately raped. He finds "protection" from Slip Slide, a ruthless drug dealer, but gentle and affectionate lover. *Fish* does an excellent job of

presenting the pecking order of prison. According to the prison system, Tim is neither a drag queen nor a “man.” He cannot be *gay*, because it is a category unrecognized in the prison system. He can only be a *boy*, and as such, he is required to service men sexually.

Women are less likely than men to be placed in prison, and there are very few first-person accounts of their lives behind bars. An exception is *Grace after Midnight* (2007) by Felicia “Snoop” Pearson, who achieved some fame as the transgender enforcer in the television series *The Wire*. With a crack-addicted mother and no father, she is placed in a foster family as an infant. She found mentors in two men who dealt drugs. But none of these protectors could save her from rape and violence. As she writes, “Death lived on our street” (35). At thirteen she murdered a woman and was sentenced to ten years in prison.

Holocaust Narratives

Even the grimmest prison, however, cannot compete with the horror of Nazi concentration camps. The earliest of these accounts is Heinz Heger’s *The Men with the Pink Triangle* (1980). From a well-to-do Viennese family, Heger (1917–94) fell in love with “Fred,” who unfortunately was the son of a high-ranking Nazi official. Fred’s father sent Heger first to prison and then to concentration camp. A more searing account is *I, Pierre Seel, Deported Homosexual* (1994). Seel (1923–2005) was only seventeen when he was sent to the camp in Schirmech-Vorbrüch for rehabilitation. He was experimented on and starved. But the worst punishment, which caused him to wake up fifty years later “howling in the middle of the night,” was watching his lover, whom he hoped had escaped capture, being dragged into the middle of the camp, stripped naked, a tin pail placed over his head, and attacked by guard dogs who “first bit into his groin and thighs, then devoured him right in front of us” (43).

Gad Beck (1923–2012), a gay Jew, escaped the concentration camps by disappearing into Berlin. His memoir, *An Underground Life* (2000), is a remarkable account distinguished by Beck’s exuberance. Not only does Beck go underground but he takes care of others hiding in Berlin. Beck finds places for them to stay, gets them food, and brings them mail. And despite all of his work, he still has time for lots of sex. Although Beck was old when he wrote the memoir, the book sparkles with a teenager’s delight in getting away scot free right under the enemy’s nose.

What is astounding is that all these narratives end in hope. Gays were to be excluded from the military, worked to death in concentration camps, and forced to perform as sex workers in prisons. Yet these are fundamentally tales

of survival. The authors, with the exception of James Blake, are writing from outside the institutions to which they have been confined or with hopes of reentering the one from which they have been excluded. Of course, for the most part, it is the survivors who get to write autobiographies just as history is written by the victors.

Sport Memoirs

One of the most contested cultural places for queer folk is the sports arena. They generally express pride in having found a way into a world that would exclude them. Dying of AIDS, Glenn Burke (1952–95) ends *Out at Home* (1995) not with anger or self-recrimination, but with a joke. After saying he has no regrets, he admits to one: “I should have been a basketball player!” (117). Esera Tuaolo (1968–), a nose guard for the Green Bay Packers, is raped as a child, has difficulty in school, and for long periods is separated from his family. Yet his autobiography *Alone in the Trenches* (2006) ends with falling in love and adopting two children.

There are exceptions, of course. Roy Simmons’s *Out of Bounds* is a terrifying picture of self-destruction. Like Burke, Simmons (1956–2014) is African American and grew up in a fatherless home. But Simmons suffered much more trauma. He was raped repeatedly by his next-door neighbor. As a college football star, he began drinking heavily and living a double life because if “the stigma of homosexuality among young black men is three to four times greater than it is for young white men,” how much greater it must be for black football players (68). By the time he reaches the NFL, his partying is out of control. He goes to prison, spends time on the street, and contracts AIDS. “You cry out for help in all the wrong ways when the words won’t come out right,” he confesses at the end of the book and apologizes to a host of those he let down.

Other gay athletes who have written about their lives include diver Greg Louganis in *Breaking the Surface* (1995); Dave Kopay (1942–), a football player, in *The Dave Kopay Story* (1977); Billy Bean, a baseball player, in *Going the Other Way* (2003); and John Amaechi, the black English basketball player in *Man in the Middle* (2007). But among the earliest gay sports memoirs is Martina Navratilova’s *Martina* (1985). Writing at the height of her fame, Navratilova seems less disturbed by being bisexual than by her difficulties focusing on tennis. “I’m not a one-sex person, and yet I hate the term *bisexual*. It sounds creepy to me, and I don’t think I’m creepy – There are times when I feel downright romantic” (173). Twenty-five years ago these were daring words, especially from one of the world’s finest tennis players.

One of Navratilova's best moves was hiring Renée Richards, a male-to-female (MTF) transsexual, as her coach. Renée Richards has written two autobiographies: *Second Serve: The Renée Richards Story* (1983) and *No Way Renée* (2007). The first is penned in the heat of controversy, the second in the quiet of a life richly experienced. They are unlike any transgender autobiography because Richards fought in three spheres: as a patient, as a physician, and as a tennis player. Only someone with extreme needs would have dared to confront such obstacles. Her memoirs are unusual for other reasons: as the child of two doctors and as a doctor herself, she is able to write with a clinical distance not to be found in any other transgender autobiography, and as a septuagenarian, she speaks in *No Way Renée* from a rare perspective. *No Way Renée* ends on a much more valedictory note than *Second Serve*. In it, Richards regrets not her sex change operation or becoming a woman but "that circumstances turned me into a transsexual, whether through nature or nurture" (286).

Transgender Memoirs

Renée Richards's memoirs were not the first transgender personal accounts. That distinction goes to *Man into Woman* (1933, ed. Hoyer) constructed from the extensive notes left by Lili Elbe (1882–1931), who was born as Einar Wegener, a Danish painter. Perhaps the most famous MTF (male to female) transsexual was Christine Jorgensen (1929–89), whose sweet and simple "personal autobiography" was published in 1967. Many consider *Conundrum* (1974) to be the best written account of transgender experience. Jan Morris (1926–), the author, had made a distinguished reputation as a journalist and travel writer before changing sex. Three more recent MTF autobiographies of note are Jennifer Finney Boylan's *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders* (2003), and Joy Ladin's *Through the Door of Life: A Jewish Journey between Genders* (2012), and Kate Bornstein's *A Queer and Pleasant Danger* (2012). Richards, Boylan, Morris, Bornstein, and Ladin's stories all have similar features. Morris starts her memoir addressing her "conundrum" directly: "I was three or perhaps four years old when I realized that I had been born into the wrong body, and should really be a girl. I remember the moment well, and it is the earliest memory of my life" (1). All of the MTFs have similar early perceptions of being placed into the wrong body. They manage this problem in a variety of ways. Boylan (1958–) "was rarely depressed and reacted to [his] awful life with joy, with humor, and with light" (31). Other descended into depression. Each hoped to find a solution in marriage, and they all fathered children. It is surprising how often wives were understanding or at least tolerant of their husbands as they

made the transition to womanhood. Their children also seem to adjust (particularly when the wife makes her peace with the alteration in the relationship). Of these authors, Joy Ladin (1961–) is the most philosophical. She approaches the problem as an orthodox Jew (three of the four authors are Jewish), and she is troubled by how the spiritual sense of being a woman needs to be translated into the highly material realm of eyeliner and earrings, skirts and panty hose.

One of the more interesting MTF transgender autobiographies is Charlotte von Mahlsdorf's *I Am My Own Woman* (1995). Mahlsdorf (1928–2002) was born in Germany. Fearing for her life, she used a rolling pin to kill her father, a man so violent that he “got to be too much even for the Nazis” (20). Released from prison at the end of the war, she began what would become the Gründerzeit Museum, the museum of everyday things, which she kept open through the communist dictatorship.

Female-to-male (FTM) transsexuals follow a very different path if one can generalize from three popular books – Jamison Green's *Becoming a Visible Man* (2004), Nick Krieger's *Nina Here nor There: My Journey beyond Gender* (2011), and Chaz Bono's *Transition: The Story of How I Became a Man* (2011). None of these three had the feeling that they were boys trapped in girls' bodies although they each felt, as Chaz Bono (1969–) puts it, “like a boy” (13). Unlike MTF stories in which the men first get married, the FTM narrative includes a period of lesbianism. To be sure, MTF trans-women often have homosexual experience. Kate Bornstein (1948) haunted the male cruising areas as a boy looking to fellate whomever he encountered. Jan Morris speaks matter of factly of her homosexual relations with men. But in both cases homosexual relations were merely episodes in a predominantly heterosexual orientation. However, “the majority of the trans-men that I have known,” Chas Bono informs us, “at some point in their lives, identified as lesbians” (42). Green (1948–) puts it this way: “I . . . determined that since I had a female body and I was attracted to female-bodied people, I must be a lesbian” (17). What they discover is a deep discomfort in lesbian relationship. Having sex with another female-bodied person reminds them of having female bodies themselves. Nick Krieger stops making love with his girlfriend because “[t]here's [sic] just so many tits in the bedroom. Four of them” (105). He found it “too painful to link myself to women” (132). Jamison Green runs an FTM support group that becomes rife with dissent because trans-men “from our group decided that there were too many gay-identified guys joining up, that too many people who looked like lesbians were coming to the meetings” (77).

One element that unites FTM and MTF autobiographies is that they often culminate in a sex reassignment therapy, including hormone therapy and/

or surgery. In so doing, the transautobiography returns at least in part to the medical origins of queer autobiography. FTM autobiographies are often concerned with how much surgery to perform; whether they would feel comfortable with just a “top job” or would they also need a “bottom job.” The narratives of trans-women are rife with legal, familial, and financial obstacles to surgery; both Morris and Richards travel to Morocco to circumvent bureaucratic resistance. Perhaps because of the obstacles and the length of time reassignment takes, MTFs tend to see their surgeons as wizards who transform them with one swoop of the scalpel. In contrast, trans-men by and large view their doctors as highly trained technicians. The MTF autobiographies emphasize how surgery brings their bodies into harmony with their deepest sense of themselves; FTM autobiographies emphasize the operation as a means of presenting the trans-man as he wishes to be seen.

The fluidity of gender is the subject of several autobiographies. Justin Vivian Bond (1963–) presents the artist as the transgendered child in his *Tango: My Childhood, Backwards and in High Heels* (2011). As a boy, Bond is not so much a sissy as an Eve Arden, career woman, tough, sly, and romantically hopeful.

Sissies and Tomboys: Enduring Stereotypes

Despite the fluidity of gender, two intermediate figures appear in many autobiographies – the tomboy and the sissy. *Tomboy* is a fairly old term, stretching back to the sixteenth century; *sissy*, however, is an Americanism that goes back only as far as the end of the nineteenth century. The difference in longevity of the terms may be the reason that the tomboy is more accepted than the sissy. More likely, however, the tomboy is more accepted because it does honor to masculinity and is not viewed as a determined step toward homosexuality. In American mythology, the tomboy can be transformed into the prom queen, but the sissy is always a queer.

“I was a tomboy who liked to go hunting with my dad and play quarterback in tackle football games with my brother and his friends,” admits Chely Wright (1970–), although she is careful to point out that she also enjoyed dresses and dolls (19). The tomboy is related to independence and assertiveness, two qualities valued in America. In one of the best recent memoirs, *Mean Little Deaf Queer* (2009), Terry Galloway shakes her fists at the stars and shouts at the heavens, “Just you try!” She comments: “I had looked the bully of the intimidating universe right in the eye and stared it down. . . . If that were true, that I could be as fearlessly arrogant as my cowboy idols, as recklessly resolute and bad, then I knew those stars were as much mine as anyone’s. I had a real

shot at becoming, at the very least, the hero of my own story” (70). For lesbians, the tomboy stage may be especially helpful in developing the courage and strength to act on their sexuality.

Claude Hartland, who wrote the first gay autobiography, was a sissy. By the age of five, he was “sensitive to the extreme and shrank from horror from causing any one [*sic*] or anything pain” (7). Rigoberto González (1970–) tells us in his exquisite memoir *Butterfly Boy* (2006) about growing up in a Mexican American family in which he suffered from poverty and homophobia. “Effeminate and demure,” he is beaten by his ailing and much loved mother as a way to protect his father from having to confront his son’s budding sexuality (88). As he recounts in his memoir, *What Becomes of the Brokenhearted* (2004), E. Lynn Harris (1955–2009) was beaten by his father so many times he attempted suicide. A recurrent topic of African American gay autobiography is how the sissy boy is a provocation to black men requiring violence or sex or both. “When I was between the ages of nine and fourteen,” Carl Bean (1944–) recalls in *Was Born This Way* (2010), “more than a few older men had their way with me. . . . They saw me as a soft, chubby boy with round buttocks and full breasts. There was no hiding the fact that I was gay. This excited their aggression” (47). The sissy is especially a figure of Southern culture, where he is particularly stigmatized. In *Mississippi Sissy* (2007), Kevin Sessums (1956–) quotes Flannery O’Connor: “When I am asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it’s because we are still able to recognize one” (3).

Post-Gay Autobiographies

David Sedaris (1956–) is a pivotal writer. On the one hand, he is openly and unapologetically gay. His sexuality is a given for many of his personal essays. On the other hand, the focus of his work is usually not about being gay. His most famous work, “The SantaLand Diaries,” which could never have been written by a heterosexual writer, maintains its focus on the institution of Christmas and its demeaning commercialism. Sedaris is a precursor of what might be called post-gay autobiographies in which the authors’ homosexuality is neither the central focus nor the crucial factor in their lives. These writers were born in the sixties and later.

A particularly touching example of post-gay autobiography is *Red Dust Road* (2010) by Scottish poet Jackie Kay (1961–), who was adopted by two extraordinary parents – both committed communists – who wished to bring up a mixed race baby. The bulk of the book is about her search for and relationship

with her birthmother, who was from the Highlands, and her birthfather, who was a botanist from Nigeria. One of the most gripping lesbian memoirs is Staceyann Chin's *The Other Side of Paradise* (2009). Like Kay, Chin (1971–) is of mixed race, Chinese and African, and like Kay, she grew up without her birth parents. The focus of her memoir is surviving as a mouthy, intelligent, and rambunctious youngster barely tolerated by the relatives who for a time give her shelter. A very different book is *Unbearable Lightness* (2010) by actress Portia de Rossi (1973–) who married Ellen Degeneres. Being a lesbian has been less of a problem in her life than being anorexic and bulimic. She acknowledges that sexuality and eating disorders may be connected, but the narrative she unfolds is far more about the problems of body image than anything else. One of the happier post-gay memoirs is Josh Kilmer-Purcell's *The Bucolic Plague* (2010), in which Kilmer-Purcell (1969–) and his partner, Dr. Brent Ridge, try to bring to life the abandoned Beekman Farm estate in Sharon Springs, New York. Two much darker works fall under the heading of post-gay autobiography. The first is Bill Clegg's *Portrait of an Addict as a Young Man* (2010), in which Clegg (1970–) loses his job, his friends, his money, and his lover to satisfy his addiction for crack cocaine. Clegg's is a portrait of an obsession that leaves no room for anything else, neither pleasure, nor joy, nor human connection. Clegg has followed up *Portrait* with *Ninety Days* (2012), about his slow recovery from addiction. The last work is Augusten Burroughs's best-seller *Running with Scissors* (2002), which was made into a motion picture.

Many gay books have featured mad and controlling psychotherapists. René Richards (1934–) went to famous analyst Robert C. Bok. Martin Duberman (1930–) wrote *Cures* (1991), his devastating history of psychotherapy. But no one comes close to Augusten Burroughs's Dr. Finch, who reads divine intervention into the shape and direction of his turds. But not all therapists are monsters. Alison Bechdel (1960–) has celebrated two therapists in her recent graphic-memoir, *Are You My Mother?* (2012). In its dense pages studded with quotes from Freud, D.W. Winnicott, and Melanie Klein, we return to the earliest scenes of queer autobiography, though not to explain homosexuality, but to illuminate mother-daughter relations.

We read autobiographies to learn about lives very different from our own, or to find solace in lives that are like our own, or to delight in the pleasures of the text. As same-sex relations become less stigmatized and homosexual orientations become a part of the fabric of life, LGBT autobiographies will be read increasingly for their literary rather than for their medical or sociological value. Solace will give way to curiosity and shock to delight. Yet there is a ways to go. We are just beginning to hear from such authors as Abdellah Taïa

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and Rachid O., who can provide both solace and pleasure from the postcolonial world.

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