

LIVES WORTHY OF MEMOIR? BILLIONS! YET NOT MANY 'MAKE IT' INTO PRINT

By Ron Kenner

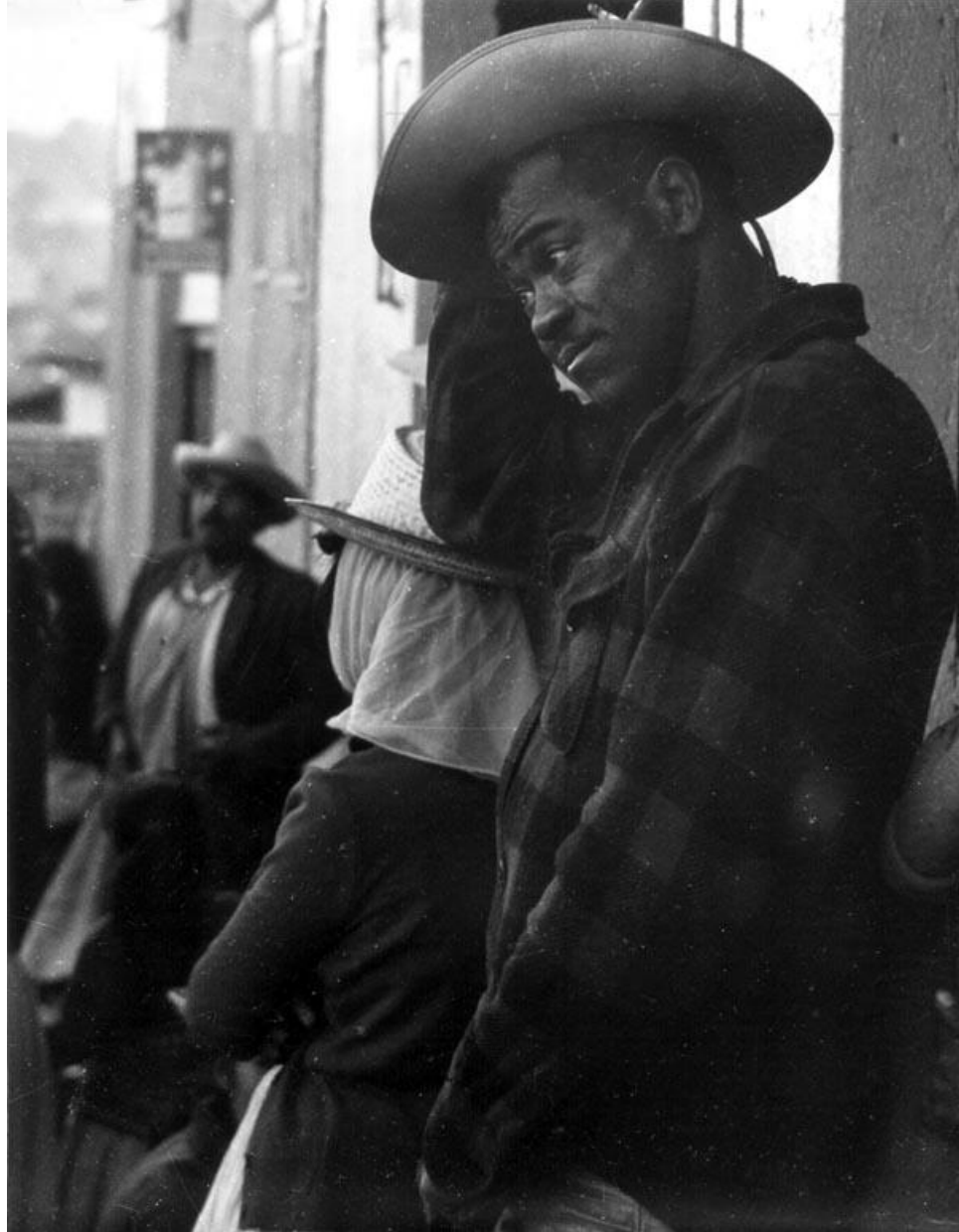


Photo by Ron Kenner of a curious U.S. citizen in Mexico

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—We all have a life.—

In one important sense, unfortunately, we *don't* all have a life. Not really! And I'm not merely talking about many of our lives in the developed world such as those (in Bush administration times) currently being diminished educationally, morally, nutritionally or in health or happiness; nor, for that matter, should we overlook future lives being sold out economically, culturally, environmentally and more.

For billions more people in the developing world, lives are either barely on a subsistence level —not much of a life— or are all too frequently cut short, often needlessly, as in Darfur. Reportedly some three thousand children a

day die from malaria, many of these deaths needless and any one of which might warrant a good biography.

Admittedly many of us, in the U.S, have a good deal more of a life than others; more livable, say, and extending literally decades longer than tens of millions or hundreds of millions (billions?) who die needlessly early on; often because they don't even have relatively inexpensive clean drinking water or sometimes even because of the lack of relative pennies for inoculations. Not much of a life there.

Of course, although it gets small mention, many of us are well aware of some of these limitations on life, as indicated, for example, by the astute quote by the late president Franklin Delano Roosevelt (and posted regularly, thoughtfully, by Margaret*): "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much: it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little."

Author and educator Jacques Barzun once wrote that the test of one's education is whether he or she takes pleasure in the use of one's mind; and in this sense, too, one might argue that many of us, even among the wealthy—some might say even in the White House—live seriously limited lives.

Along such economic and cultural lines some of us, at least—hardly in times under the Bush administration and for all its talk of democracy, righteousness, religiosity, piousness—realize that a highly important question for us on this planet is not merely is there "life after death." The larger question may be whether there is life before death. Thus from one perspectives, at least, it's not much of a life when it comes to the many millions who live in abject misery in the U.S. and worldwide. If only in the sense that every life has value, I'd guess that any one of these miserable souls probably has a life worth writing about, whether as biography, autobiography, or memoir.

Despite the hundreds of millions of such souls, the "uncharmed particles"—and despite all the talk about our supposed "bleeding heart" press and our supposed "bleeding heart" liberals—the quite remarkable thing is that so comparatively little has been written about *any* of these individuals. Could it be interesting to read about the lives of the poor or struggling. Read Emile Zola's poignant nineteenth century novel *Germinal!* How about a twentieth century novel that portrays the life of someone in Appalachia who lives under a strip-mined mountain and who goes to bed with his clothes on to be ready to run just in case of a slide. Even symbolically such individuals barely get a mention in our *literature* nowadays, let alone in our "media."

In the media, an example of this would be the recent anniversary of the 30th anniversary of the Vietnam War. Not only was there little-to-no mention of the causes of that war or little-to-no mention of how or why it continued somewhat meaninglessly for years—the whole Vietnam War < <http://www.kirks-graphics.com/clients/rkedit/featured-articles-vietnam.shtml#> > itself was barely mentioned coast to coast in the major opinion pages on the weekend of the War anniversary. Certainly such large scale "grand" history topics—despite the involvement of tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands or even millions of lives and billions of dollars—cannot easily compete, say, with a "memoir" of the likes of the Runaway Bride.

Admittedly the times have changed some, beginning with history 'from the top' in earlier centuries with a good many lies presented on the lives and times of Kings and Queens, then finally shifting to a more multicultural history where now we often get something more on the order of the history of shoemaking, filled in more and more, I guess, by the celebrity biography or the "reality" memoir.

Here it's helpful to draw some distinction between "memoir" and "autobiography" and "biography." Prior to this latest runaway episode by Jennifer Wilbanks it's not likely that many publishers would have shown much interest in her autobiography (her life story); not without an "angle," and short of the recent events her life would probably have been of relatively small interest for its generalities or particulars despite even the apparent considerable wealth of her family.

In a reverse context, short of some special event such as the Wilbanks' runaway, the life of an impoverished individual would be of small interest to publishers, the media, or the public; at least not until a William Kennedy brings us the novel *Ironweed* or a Meryl Streep brings life, brilliantly, to one of the *Ironweed* characters in the movie. Yet even here the value is in more than a memoir of homelessness—for here William Kennedy has given us a compelling "story."

Far removed from celebrity, or a noted name, such as Premier Ky or Diem, in the earlier Vietnam history we could well have benefited from the memoir of a peasant farmer. Not least because one of the reasons the civil war broke out in Vietnam was because of the failure —shades of the revolution under Zapata in Mexico—to have any kind of meaningful land reform. And because—despite much revolution in history over the failure to have decent land reform—over the decades few authors, publishers, publications or readers have shown curiosity about such matters. Yet undoubtedly a memoir

by just one of these farmers or peasants in Vietnam would have been well worth the readership.

Some curmudgeons sense this intuitively. They grouse about the inconsequentiality of the "celebrity" type books we tend to get. Yet few of these "celebrity" works are actually "memoirs"—where the interest is about something special about a life, or something special that happened. Obviously, as many of us realize, the interest is in the celebrity itself. It's rarely in the individual, or even in the times, or the place, the way we might get a more meaningful memoir, say, by a Pablo Neruda, an Oscar Lewis, or the likes of, say, *Plutarch's Lives*.

No doubt one reason for much interest in *celebrity* is because of the current loss of faith, in modern society, in our "respectables." Nowadays it's difficult for many to put faith in someone because of his or her role as doctor or lawyer or journalist or senator or congressman, and not hardly president where the approval ratings have sometimes dropped down to thirty percent or lower. Thus some of us tend to put our faith, instead, in *heroes*; and as we lose faith in heroes we put our faith in celebrity. Meanwhile we're left somewhat in shock when we can't even put our faith in an OJ or in a baseball homerun king or in a special athlete who maybe turns out to be a celebrity on steroids; in which case the "memoir" becomes relevant or gains interest not so much because of the celebrity or his skills but merely because of his or her fall from grace.

Perhaps this helps explain why, with the OJ Simpson case, some eighty-five million people worldwide watched for hours and hours on end on television OJ's relatively boring slow speed "bronco" car chase; the police in cool pursuit. Ironically, some eighty-five (probably more) million refugees worldwide—many chased in hot pursuit from country to country or within one's country, from nightmare to nightmare—gained essentially little or no attention (during the OJ happening) from the media or public. With such myopia we're painfully reminded now of President Bush speaking at some length (if a little late in seeking to rationalize our role in Iraq) about the U.S. role in spreading democracy while, for months ignoring the genocidal conditions in Darfur and, even, somewhat obstructing the war crimes trials.

President Bush's life, admittedly, has become important to write about as an autobiography; though mostly because of the stature of his name and because of what he's done or hasn't done, not because of who he is or what he stands for. How could we get much excited about a memoir on who he is or what he claims to stand for when publicly he talks about Democracy while quietly, in the White House, he hosts General Goss from the Sudan, one of 52 individuals then indicted for genocide related war crimes. Now Goss—I'd

like to read a Memoir on him. Or even a Bush memoir on this particular chapter, though such stories come out only painfully, like pulling teeth, even after the condition becomes known.

—But does everyone have to write about it? Does it have to be published?—

Though there are many good memoirs coming out—I like to think I've edited and worked on a few of these—in an important sense there are, despite seemingly too many empty celebrity "memoirs" or "autobiographies," too few autobiographies or memoirs that speak for those billions whose lives we're seeming barely conscious of. For example, in the 21st century we hear much talk about "Globalism" yet there are probably some four billion or more people on our planet whose lives have little or nothing to do with globalism. Many or most of these people probably know little or nothing about "globalism," just as many or most of us in the more "developed" world know little or nothing about their lives. We're certainly not reading autobiographies or memoirs about them. We're barely reading the most interesting memoirs or autobiographies here; many or most of which are pushed off the shelves by too many inconsequential celebrity stories, few of which qualify as serious memoir, autobiography or biography. So the Memoir goes, or doesn't go!

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