

Adult Nonfiction

BIOGRAPHY & AUTOBIOGRAPHY



Buffalo Gal: A Memoir

Laura Pedersen

Fulcrum

Softcover \$15.00 (256pp)

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“After working my way up from clerk to trader, combined with the advent of financial instruments known as index options, by age twenty-one I was a millionaire,” the author writes. Seldom since Jane Eyre’s quiet “Reader, I married him” has one sentence of English so utterly reversed the fortunes of a gawky heroine with humble origins. Pedersen survived the ignoble fate of her parents’ divorce-induced poverty in the culturally and economically depressed tundra of northern New York State, and traded it in for the security of the temperate south, that is, in the legal institution of the New York Stock Exchange.

Pedersen tells the story of her vindication in a book that is as defiantly irreverent and generously comic as it is fiscally instructive.

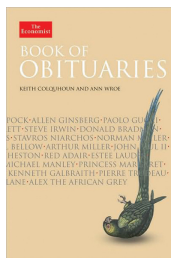
Jane Eyre was fiction’s magical thinking about unavailable men; *Buffalo Gal* is an accomplished woman’s coming-of-age nonfiction (she was born in Buffalo in 1965) in which the men are stoic and fleeting and the mothers are energetically defeated. There’s her eccentric father who leaves his only child to fend for herself, her starchy mother of an antiseptic nature who fittingly becomes a nurse, her Danish grandfather’s rags-to-rags relocation to Buffalo in the Great Depression, a funny high school drama teacher so gay that if he didn’t exist she would have had to imagine him as her savior. But her bedrock of psychological grit and iron—that wacky Buffalo optimism of its blizzard-blessed locals who build so many backyard swimming pools—is what yields the author’s success. An only child misdiagnosed as retarded by her simple family doctor, she is almost militantly comic in claiming her slacker status while proving her mental health by amassing a time capsule of life in the 1970s’ Rust Belt.

The book is compulsively readable, and owes its deadpan delivery to the fact that she has performed stand-up comedy on national television (*The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Late Night with David Letterman*, *Today*, *PrimeTime Live*, etc.). Indeed, so brightly brittle is she (over her parents’ divorce, for example) that one almost murmurs, “But how does that make you feel?” Perhaps that’s the sequel.

Far from resting on her millions, Pedersen is the author of eight books, was one of President

Clinton’s Ten Outstanding Young Americans in 1993, and now teaches in New York City’s East Harlem. As she says, “the only difference between comedy and tragedy is where you end the story.” She ends on a high note, as a hometown Buffalo export who does her town proud.

Leeta Taylor



The Economist Book of Obituaries

Keith Colquhoun and
Ann Wroe

Bloomberg Press

Hardcover \$29.95 (410pp)

978-1-57660-326-0

For generations, obituary notices in newspapers and magazines soberly noted the passing of the newsworthy—statesmen, plutocrats, and other pillars of the community, along with famous entertainers, artists, socialites and the like—summing up their subjects’ lives in a factual, decorous way. A couple of decades ago, the obituary began to be seen as a concise form all its very own, a sort of biographical sonnet where wry wit and colorful detail spiced up boilerplate facts like age and surviving family. Today, no longer just an announcement of death, the obit has acquired new cachet.

The Economist was founded in 1843, but this distinguished British weekly only published its first obituary in 1995 and ever since has confined itself to just one per issue. What it lacks in comprehensiveness, however, it makes up with its wide variety of subjects, and this fascinating book culls more than 200 of the most outstanding: each a vivid thumbnail of a life, and, taken as a whole, a slightly eccentric, impressionistic history of the past hundred years or so.

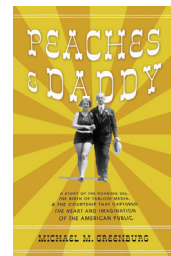
Selected by Keith Colquhoun and Ann Wroe, *The Economist’s* obituary editors since the page was initiated, the collection ranges the globe, and doesn’t even limit itself to the human race: one of the most charming entries memorializes Alex, the articulate African Gray parrot who helped pioneer our understanding of animal intelligence. The book’s alphabetical organization produces unexpected juxtapositions, as when four contiguous pieces zip us from novelist Saul Bellow to director Ingmar Bergman to Bip, the clown created by legendary French mime Marcel Marceau, to Jean Bedel Bokassa, Emperor of Central Africa, whose lunatic whimsies seem funny until we learn of his arbitrary, barbaric cruelty.

Elsewhere we meet centenarian veterans of the First World War, and one of the Japanese soldiers who held out on isolated Pacific islands for decades after the Second. Rosa Parks is commemorated with appropriate respect, Anna Nicole Smith rather less so. The book offers up a smattering of Royals, from Princess Margaret to Marie-José, last queen of Italy, and Henri d’Orleans, pretender to the throne of France

until his death in 1999. Scores of other capsule biographies explore every continent and just about every occupation known to mankind, each granted a two-page spread featuring a photograph and four columns of description that provides context and anecdotes as well as vital statistics.

Because this is a British book in origin, it includes dozens of men and women more or less unfamiliar to American readers, which injects an enjoyable sense both of discovery and of cosmopolitanism. *The Economist Book of Obituaries* combines a dash of irreverence with the thoroughly professional skill of long-seasoned journalists, and while not by any stretch a systematic Who’s Who, it is both informative and a delight to browse.

Peyton Moss



Peaches and Daddy: A Story of the Roaring 20's, The Birth of Tabloid Media, & The Courtship that Captured the Heart and Imagination of the American Public

Michael Greenburg

Overlook Press

Hardcover \$25.95 (320pp)

978-1-59020-046-9

Real estate multi-millionaire Edward West Browning married Nellie Adele Lowen in 1915. He built a twenty-four-room Manhattan penthouse for them that included an interior aviary, a miniature lake stocked with Japanese goldfish, and a turtle and frog garlanded fountain that spewed the colors of the rainbow. One person said that Browning “combined magnificent opulence with inconceivable bad taste.” In 1918 Nellie adopted three-year-old “Little” Marjorie, and in 1920 five-year-old Dorothy “Sunshine.” But by 1923, Adele had had her fill of Edward, and she ran off with a dentist, taking Little Marjorie with her. Divorce followed.

With Dorothy’s sister and mother gone, Browning tried to make up for the loss by providing ponies and miniature railways to the left-behind Sunshine on his estate’s four hundred fifty acres. For transportation she selected a peacock-colored, stretch Rolls Royce “equipped with a four-foot-high motion picture screen.” The child, however, still suffered from loneliness and Edward placed adoption ads in 1925: there were 12,000 applications.

At the end of the selection process, sixteen-year-old Mary Louise Spas flashed a golden-toothed smile that made Browning choose her. The New York Department of Public Welfare became involved, taking umbrage at a male divorcé adopting a female child of sixteen. The adoption was later annulled as it was discovered she was twenty-one.

To assuage his failure at marriage and adoption, Edward became active in sponsoring youth-oriented dancing clubs and high school