

Collective Biography: intertwined lives

Some of the most interesting books in the library don't fit neatly into any category. So-called collective biographies--books that illuminate more than one life--are scattered throughout the nonfiction collection, with the largest group perched between travel and history, in the 920s. Here's a list of some of these oft-overlooked treasures.

[Angela's Ashes: a memoir](#)

by McCourt, Frank

920 MCC

"When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I managed to survive at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood." Out of the ashes comes this phoenix of memoirs.

[The Beatles: the biography](#)

by Spitz, Bob

920 BEA

How many bands' stories would warrant nearly a thousand pages? The personal histories of the Beatles are assembled into social and cultural history. Yeah yeah yeah!

[The Brother Gardeners: botany, empire, and the birth of an obsession](#)

by Wulf, Andrea

635.0941 WUL

If horticulturists ruled the world, it wouldn't be an Eden. 18th century gardeners' greed for new varieties spurred adventure, innovation gardening practices--and a fair degree of conflict. The British Empire was also a seedsman's dream, but horticultural imperialism ran into problems with that pesky North American spirit of independence. To an extent, the "brother gardeners" of Wulf's title, bridged that gap, but human frailty and political verities tested their brotherhood sorely. Is this a gardening book? History? Biography? Yes. Yes. Yes.

[Brothers: George Howe Colt on his brothers and brothers in history](#)

by Colt, George Howe

306.8752 COL

Never have the fluid mechanics of sibling relationships been more mesmerizing. Colt moves easily between his own story as one of four brothers and acute portraits of Edwin and John Wilkes Booth, Vincent and Theo Van Gogh, and the Marx Brothers.

[Elegy for Iris](#)

by Bayley, John

920 BAY

Literary alchemy: Bayley's paean to his wife, the novelist Iris Murdoch, transmutes tragedy--her disappearance into Alzheimer's--into celebration of their long lives together. It's treasure trove.

[English Eccentrics](#)

by Sitwell, Edith

920 Si8

It took one to know one (or many): Dame Edith cackles as she trots out this gallery of British zanies. Wicked fun.

[Everybody was so Young: Gerald and Sara Murphy, a lost generation love story](#)

by Vaill, Amanda

920 MUR

What might have been a cautionary tale of the tarnishing of gilded youth here is given depth and narrative force. Gerald and Sara Murphy emerge as complex beings enmeshed in the complex lives of Picasso, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Dorothy Parker, Cole Porter, and others. "There was a shine to life wherever they were," said the poet Archibald MacLeish. Vaill captures that allure.

[The Hare with Amber Eyes: a hidden inheritance](#)

by De Waal, Edmund

920 DEW

The improbable survival of 264 Japanese netsuke--tiny, carved jade figurines--is also a compelling family saga. De Waal's family, wealthy Viennese Jews, acquired the netsuke in the 1870s, and ensconced them in a luxurious home that was seized and plundered by the Nazis. Portable and valuable, the jade should have disappeared. That it didn't, and how it didn't, becomes part of the tale of how this scion of the "grain lords" of Europe became a distinguished ceramicist and the curator of the jade hare's tale.

[Having our Say: the Delany sisters' first 100 years](#)

by Delany, Annie Elizabeth and Delany, Sarah Louise

92 D37

200+ years of rich experience, recounted with warmth and grace, would be enticement enough to read this lovely book. That the Delaney sisters' experience is set in a grand historical context, the progress of black women from slavery to professional recognition, is a bonus.

[Microbe hunters](#)

by de Kruif, Paul

920 DEK

This is a classic of science writing, a fine gift to a young, inquiring mind or a seasoned, still questing one; a book that you may go out and buy after checking it out here. True, intellectual adventure; vivid history; fascinating science: this is a book that many scientists cite as a catalyst to their career choice. Most have a battered, childhood copy on their bookshelf at home. And many still dip into it from time to time.

[Must You Go? my life with Harold Pinter](#)

by Fraser, Antonia

920 FRA

The title is Antonia Fraser's agonized question to her husband, the playwright Harold Pinter. And the answer was, Yes, as Pinter was terminally ill. Fraser's skill as a biographer helps illuminate her account of their intertwined creative and personal lives. She doesn't gloss over awkward details (broken marriages in the background), but this is essentially a love story, neither plain nor simple.

[My Traitor's Heart: a South African exile returns to face his country, his tribe, and his conscience](#)

by Malan, Rian

920 M29

What do you do when your country is tainted by evil? How do you reconcile patriotism with

institutionalized injustice? How do you continue to love a flawed homeland? Can you go home again? Rian Malan, whose family helped build apartheid, left South Africa for Los Angeles, eschewed politics to become a rock critic, and then decided to confront these questions head-on. This remains an essential investigation not only of apartheid, but of what it means to be part of a community.

[Nicholas and Alexandra](#)

by Massie, Robert K.

920 MAS

History, biography, travel, adventure; a love story; a cautionary tale: this book is all of these, and the readers who have made it a longtime bestseller have done so for a panoply of reasons.

[No Ordinary time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: the home front in World War II](#)

by Goodwin, Doris Kearns

920 R67

This classic melding of history and biography is a perennial library favorite. Read it as the history of a marriage, a partnership, a social revolution; it's all of the above, narrated with flair.

[Nothing Daunted: the unexpected education of two society girls in the West](#)

by Wickenden, Dorothy

920 WIC

"Unexpected education" is what two turn of the 20th century society girls, bored by their expected roles, sought successfully when they took off to teach in the hinterlands of Colorado. At the turn of the 21st century, the granddaughter of one of those young women used their letters to fashion a dual biography that is also a social history of the West, in all its crude vigor.

[Out of Egypt: a memoir](#)

by Aciman, André

920 ACI

Aciman's luxurious prose is pitch-perfect, his characters--his family of wealthy (sometimes) and eccentric (always) Egyptian Jews--fascinating, their story bittersweet. To be a Jew is to lose everything--twice, an aunt observes. Worldly goods, yes; humor and flair, no. Newly impoverished, in flight to Paris, the Aciman clan never loses its flamboyant edge.

[Parallel Lives: five Victorian marriages](#)

by Rose, Phyllis

306.8 ROS

Rose intended this study of five celebrated Victorian couples to bolster a theory of marriage as a political unit. Whether or not this book proves her case, it offers ample entertainment and intellectual sustenance. The players are accomplished and eccentric, their relationships often awry, and Rose's appreciation of their quirks loving.

[Positively 4th Street: the lives and times of Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Mimi Fariña, and Richard Fariña](#)

by Hajdu, David

920 HAJ

You had to be there (or read this book). The post-Beatnik, pre-hippie folkster Village scene comes alive in this gossipy but acute chronicle. The superb guitarist Dave van Ronk (everybody's mentor) and the "doomed young genius" Richard Fariña are rescued from nascent obscurity. Dust off your LPs and sing along.

[Professor and the Madman: a tale of murder, insanity, and the making of the Oxford English dictionary](#)

by Winchester, Simon

423 WIN

Murder, madness, and lexicography: what more could one ask? The title says it all.

[The Russian Album](#)

by Ignatieff, Michael

920 Ig5

Ignatieff's family saga is Russian history as well, its characters Tolstoyan in their complexity, Dostoevskian in their amplitude. For all that he eschewed the temptation to write historical fiction, the author delivers anything but "just the facts, ma'am; just the facts"; there's real style to the writing.

[Two under the Indian sun](#)

by Godden, Rumer

920 G54

Timeless. The "two" are the writers Jon and Rumer Godden as children, the India now Bangladesh, the Raj long gone. It was "a time when everything was clear"-- a golden childhood. It's an idyll, and a classic.