

## Getting to know you, getting to know all about you

The extracts below are taken from a range of texts. Read them all in turn, then choose one – you're going to use the opening of your chosen extract to produce the opening of your own life story.

**Middlesex**  
Jeffrey Eugenides

I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974. Specialized readers may have come across me in Dr. Peter Luce's study of "Gender Identity in 5-Alpha-Reductase Pseudohermaphrodites," published in the *Journal of Pediatric Endocrinology* in 1975. Or maybe you've seen my photograph in chapter sixteen of the now sadly outdated *Genetics and Heredity*. That's me on page 578, standing naked beside a height chart with a black box covering my eyes.

My birth certificate lists my name as Calliope Helen Stephanides. My most recent driver's license (from the Federal Republic of Germany) records my first name simply as Call. I'm a former field hockey goalie, longstanding member of the Save-the-Manatee Foundation, rare attendant at the Greek Orthodox liturgy, and, for most of my adult life, an employee of the U.S. State Department. Like Tiresias, I was first one thing and then the other. I've been ridiculed by classmates, guinea-pigged by doctors, palpated by specialists, and researched by the March of Dimes. A redheaded girl from Grosse Pointe fell in love with me, not knowing what I was. (Her brother liked me, too.) An army tank led me into urban battle once; a swimming pool turned me into my friend; I left my body in order to occupy others -- and all this happened before I turned sixteen.

**The Catcher in the Rye**  
J.D. Salinger

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth. In the first place, that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two hemorrhages apiece if I told anything really personal about them. They're quite touchy about anything like that, especially my father. They're nice and all – I'm not saying that – but they're also touchy as hell.

**David Copperfield**  
Charles Dickens

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. I begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o'clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously.

In consideration of the day and hour of my birth, it was declared by the nurse, and by some sage women in the neighbourhood who had taken a lively interest in me several months before there was any possibility of my becoming personally acquainted, first, that I was destined to be unlucky in life; and secondly, that I was privileged to see ghosts and spirits; both these gifts inevitably attaching, as they believed, to all unlucky infants of either gender, born towards the small hours on a Friday night.

**The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid**

Bill Bryson

My kid days were pretty good ones, on the whole. My parents were patient and kind and approximately normal. They didn't chain me in the cellar. They didn't call me "it". I was seen as a boy and allowed to stay that way. My mother, as you'll see, sent me to school once in a while, but otherwise there was little trauma in my upbringing.

Growing up was easy. It required no thought or effort on my part. It was going to happen anyway. So what follows isn't terribly eventful, I'm afraid. And yet it was by a very large margin the most fearful, thrilling, interesting, instructive, eye-popping, lustful, eager, troubled, troubled, confused, serene and unnerving time of my life. Coincidentally, it was all those things for America, too.

**Anita and Me**

Meera Syal

I do not have many memories of my very early childhood, apart from the obvious ones, of course. You know, my windswept, bewildered parents in their dusty Indian saris standing in the open doorway of a 747, blinking back tears of gratitude and heartbreak as the fog cleared to reveal the sign they had been waiting for, dreaming of, the sign painted, tarred and emblazoned in triumphant hues of red, blue and white, the sign that said simply, WELCOME TO BRITAIN.

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I slept in a drawer, probably, swaddled in back copies of the Daily Mirror. My mother only found out about Kennedy's assassination two weeks after the event, when she read the reversed newsprint headlined on my damp backside. She didn't follow the news, no telly, no radio, no inclination, being a simple Punjabi girl suffering from culture shock, marooned and misplaced in Wolverhampton.

Of course, this is the alternative history I use in job interview situations or, once or twice, to impress middle-class white boys who come sniffing around, excited by the thought of wearing a colonial maiden as a trinket on their arm.

**Arthur & George**

Julian Barnes

A child wants to see. It always begins like this, and it began like this then. A child wanted to see. He was able to walk, and could reach up to a door handle. He did this with nothing that could be called a purpose, merely the instinctive tourism of infancy. A door was there to be pushed; he walked in, stopped, looked. There was nobody to observe him; he turned and walked away, carefully shutting the door behind him.

What he saw there became his first memory. A small boy, a room, a bed, closed curtains leaking afternoon light.

**Roots**

Alex Haley

Early in the spring of 1750, in the village of Juffure, four days upriver from the coast of Senegambia, West Africa, a manchild was born to Omoro and Binta Kinte. Forcing forth from Binta's strong young body, he was as black as she was, flecked and slippery with Binta's blood, and he was bawling. The two wrinkled midwives, old Nyo Boto and the baby's grandmother, Njisa, saw that it was a boy and laughed with joy. According to the forefathers, a boy firstborn presaged the special blessings of Allah not only upon the parents but also upon the parents' families; and there was the prideful knowledge that the name of Kinte would thus be both distinguished and perpetuated.

**In My Own Time**

Nina Bawden

My mother was once a long-jump champion of Norfolk. I have no evidence of this but I have always believed it to be true, and it would not have been, for her, a particularly achievement: she was long-legged and athletic, still fit enough in her seventies to turn a meat cartwheel. Perhaps the fact, the truth, is recorded somewhere. If not, there is no one left alive to ask. I have to rely on what I remember.

All our stories begin before we are born. Not just the blue eyes or flat feet we inherit, but the stories we hear from uncles and aunts, from grandmother and grandfathers. Even if oral history is no more reliable than the party game of Chinese whispers, everyone bringing to it their own subjective lumber of myths, half-truths, fancies and deceits, it is still these family stories that tell us who we are and help to shape our lives.