



# Half a Life

## A Memoir

By *Darin Strauss*

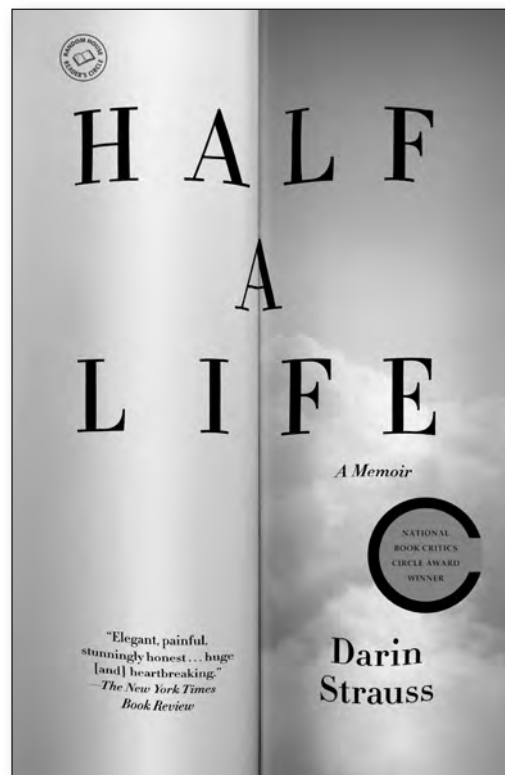
WINNER, NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS  
CIRCLE AWARD (AUTOBIOGRAPHY)

“Elegant, painful, stunningly honest . . .  
huge [and] heartbreaking.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Darin Strauss has spent a good part of his adult life reliving, regretting and reflecting on a single, split-second incident. *Half a Life* is a starkly honest account of that fateful moment and his life thereafter . . . penetrating, thought-provoking.”

—*The Washington Post*



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### • note to teachers

Half his life ago, when Darin Strauss was a teenager on his way to play mini-golf with a car full of friends, with little more on his mind than graduation and maybe a day at the beach, a life-changing event occurred: sixteen-year-old Celine Zilke—a schoolmate—inexplicably crossed two lanes of traffic on her bicycle, made impact with Strauss’s car, and was killed. Almost two decades later, Strauss continues to reflect on the event, meditating on the strange collision of the comprehensible—*this is what happened*—and the incomprehensible—*this is what can never be known*. This is the premise for Strauss’s award-winning memoir, *Half a Life*.

With *Half a Life*, Strauss treats difficult subject matter sure to provoke an emotional response, but the book is ultimately as uplifting as it is educational. Refusing to shy away from even the most challenging insights and observations, he offers candid, courageous dialogue about the universal human experience. We have all experienced, or will surely experience, tragedy or loss as an unavoidable part of living and, in its reminder of this, the book calls to mind the all-too-casual phrase “Life happens.” The deeper and unique message of the book, however, manifests in Strauss’s self-conscious recollections of himself as a young man; namely, tragedy often does not wait for us to be fully grown, or prepared. It can touch us even when we are still trying to decide who we are, perhaps before we have become mindful of our identity or cognizant of our power to influence (both willingly and unwittingly) the lives of others. And in fact, the book is about these events that form our identity—the shaping, life-changing moments and how we handle them, the unexpected misfortunes that call us to attention and demand something of us.

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## • note to teachers (continued)

In writing *Half a Life*, Strauss has joined the ranks of a long list of writers of so-called “confessional” literature, deeply personal and introspective works. As you share this book with your students, however, it is most important to emphasize this fact: Strauss’s memoir is more than just a simple retelling of a tale. It is evidence of Strauss’s undertaking of certain thoughtful and *human* acts: introspection, reflection, and compassionate thinking. “We’d had the accident at the age when your identity is pretty much up for grabs,” Strauss says with careful deliberation, shifting momentarily from the singular narrative voice that one would expect of a memoir in favor of the more truthful and mindful plural. And in this *Half a Life* distinguishes itself, offering both a focused explanation of how a single unexpected event can shape one’s own life and a courageous meditation on how a single moment can change the course of *many* lives. With equal thoughtfulness, economy, and precision throughout, Strauss recalls the event and records the steps of his ongoing journey to understand and accept with a stunning awareness of the depth and range of tragedy.

Though *Half a Life* is brief enough that it may be read in a single afternoon, it is sure to stay with your students long after they have set the book down. Weaving a story of strength, adaptability, resilience, and acceptance, it is a book of lessons without any pretensions. “We can try our human best at the crucial moment, and it might not be good enough,” Strauss observes. Honest and insightful, Strauss’s memoir is a gripping, ultimately hopeful story of what we must carry with us and what we can overcome. It is proof of the healing power of storytelling, delivering a message that anyone can understand and carry with them—that everyone *should* carry with them:

We go on. We do the best we can.

## • about the book

When questions arise in interviews about the origins of *Half a Life* and the impetus to write about this tragedy and its overwhelming impact, Strauss speaks of the birth of his twin sons and the sudden realization that the accident had taken place more than half his life ago. He speaks of writing about the event as a private act, a project intended only as another form of therapy to help him come to terms with the new perspective that these life changes had afforded, the new thoughts that had risen to the surface. In a Q&A with award-winning author Colum McCann,\* Strauss offers, “I [write] as a way to take hold of my thoughts. I write to figure out how I feel and what I know about something.” Though Strauss had been writing fiction, his meditations on the death of Celine Zilke and his role in the tragedy wound their way into each work. In “Secrets and Lies,” an interview with *Newsweek* writer Jennie Yarbor,\*\* Strauss explains, “I realized after I wrote [*Half a Life*] that all my novels are about this subject and I hadn’t known it.” In July of 2008, Strauss was featured on an episode of NPR’s *This American Life*\*\*\* entitled “Life after Death” to speak about the experience that he had, until that moment, made every effort to keep private. Struck by the positive response from listeners, he continued on. In 2010, *McSweeney’s* published Strauss’s story, and excerpts were printed in *The Times of London*, *GQ*, and *The Daily Mailer*. Random House published the trade paperback in 2011 into their Reader’s Circle program, which includes a full Reader’s Guide of discussion questions, the interview with Colum McCann, and an additional essay.

*Half a Life* has since been awarded the 2011 National Book Critics Circle Award for Autobiography. It was named a *New York Times* Editor’s Pick, an *Entertainment Weekly* Must Read, and a Best Book of the Year by NPR, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and many other venues.

\*Colum McCann’s Q&A with Darin Strauss is available at: <http://tinyurl.com/7lfodm6>

\*\*“Secrets and Lies” is viewable at: <http://tinyurl.com/7sualgs>

\*\*\*NPR’s *This American Life* segment with Darin Strauss can be heard at <http://tinyurl.com/27drbbn>



## • about the author

**Darin Strauss** is the internationally acclaimed author of three novels: *Chang and Eng* (2000), *The Real McCoy* (2002), and *More Than It Hurts You* (2008). *Chang and Eng*, based on the lives and deaths of famous conjoined twins Chang and Eng Bunker, was an American Library Association Alex Award winner and bestseller, appearing on many “best book” lists including those published by *Newsweek* and the *Los Angeles Times*. The book was also nominated for the PEN Hemingway Award, the Barnes and Noble Discover Award, and the New York Public Library Lions Award, among others. Inspired by the tragic tale of Norman Selby (better known as world-champion boxer Charles Kid McCoy), Strauss’s second novel, *The Real McCoy*, was named a *New York Times* Notable Book and was recognized by the New York Public Library as one of the “25 Best Books of the Year.” In 2006, Strauss was the recipient of a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship for his work in fiction. *More Than It Hurts You*, his third novel, which told the story of a Long Island family in crisis, was another best seller and also appeared on countless notable book lists. *Half a Life: A Memoir*, his first work of nonfiction, won the National Book Critics Circle Award for best autobiography of 2010.

Strauss is a clinical associate professor for NYU’s creative writing department.

More information is available on the author’s official website: [www.darinstrauss.com](http://www.darinstrauss.com)

## • teaching ideas

*Half a Life* is an ideal text for **common reading and book discussion groups**, for many of the discipline-focused reasons below:

There are many possibilities for utilizing *Half a Life* in **English and literature** classes. If you are using *Half a Life* as your primary text in a general literature class, help your students break down the book by evaluating elements such as form, theme, style, and point of view and asking corresponding questions such as: What is the relationship between the form and style of the book and key themes such as memory, truth, or coping? What points of view are represented in the text and what can we learn from them? Discussions may also be centered on any major theme (memory, coping, tragedy, truth, identity, or judgment, to name just a few). *Half a Life* is also an excellent text to use within a lesson in how we read. Encourage your students to reflect on their own response to the book. Celine’s family, Strauss, and his schoolmates all react to the tragedy of Celine’s death and form certain judgments. Invite students to consider their reaction and to think about what influenced their judgments. How does this compare to how we read—the judgments that we make when we are confronted with a story on a page? What factors influence our judgment of the narrator or characters and our overall interpretation of the work? *Half a Life* can also be effectively compared to many other works of literature—other memoirs, coming-of-age stories, or works about tragedy, death, and coping. Focusing on the nature of the book as memoir, consider how it fits within our ideas about this genre and, alternatively, how it challenges our expectations of this genre. Discuss truth and point of view. How has the event shaped Strauss’s life? How does *Half a Life* extend beyond the boundaries of memoir to consider how others were affected? Since death and tragedy are regular themes in literature, you might choose to compare the text to other works that take these as key themes. Consider how Strauss’s point of view compares to others represented in literature. Finally, by evaluating the book as a coming-of-age story, you might create a lesson that helps your students to consider what truths or shocking insights about growing up the book reveals.

## • teaching ideas (continued)

*Half a Life* can also be used profitably in many other classes. **Psychology** students might consider what the book has to say about subjects such as death, memory, identity, coping, guilt, or consequence. The book could also be utilized in **sociology** classes, by studying Strauss's representation of the "social" aspects of coping, with specific focus on the book's treatment of rituals and patterns of human behavior. Those studying **philosophy** might use the text as catalyst for dialogue about topics such as fate and determinism, happiness and acceptance, causality, existentialism, guilt, the knowable and the unknowable.

## • discussion and writing

1. What various meanings does the title of the book have?
2. Explore the significance of the epigraph, a quotation from John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction* (1).
3. Evaluate the form of the book. What correlation is there between the structure of the book and its major themes?
4. What is Strauss referring to when he speaks of "plagiarized 'emotional' reaction[s]" (10)? What causes him to have such reactions?
5. How does Strauss describe shock and trauma? What words and analogies does he employ to characterize these experiences?
6. What does Strauss mean when he says that "[o]ur lives are *designed* not to allow for anything irrevocable" (30)?
7. Evaluate Strauss's descriptions of self-conscious reactions and social guilt. What examples of these are presented in the text?
8. Invite your students to discuss their own reactions and feelings about Strauss's response to the tragedy. What stages does Strauss seem to go through as he faces this tragedy and copes with its aftermath? Are any of his reactions shocking or unexpected?
9. Strauss says that his "stomach would turn heavy" (39) when he read a certain passage from Hemingway's story *Soldier's Home*. Why does this passage hit so close to home for Strauss?
10. What points of view are represented in the text? Is *Half a Life* told only from Strauss's point of view? How does Strauss establish a sense of the range of the effects of tragedy?
11. Discuss the variety of reactions that Strauss encounters upon his return to school after the accident. Are these reactions warranted, understandable? Why or why not?

## • discussion and writing (continued)

12. Consider judgment as a theme of the text. Who judges Strauss and what do they base their judgments on? Is he judged fairly? Consider Strauss's self-assessments.
13. Why is Strauss disturbed by the press's characterization of Celine Zilke?
14. Strauss speaks of "rituals" in the book. What rituals are evidenced in his memoir? What is the purpose of these rituals?
15. Why does Strauss reference Amy Hempel's story "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried" (96)?
16. Evaluate Strauss's statement: "To be alive is to find a way to blame someone else" (102).
17. What does Strauss mean when he says that "All [he] wanted was to hold [his] assumptions to the light, and to watch them sparkle in their facets, as all sham gemstones do" (103)?
18. Throughout the book, Strauss often depicts himself as someone awaiting blame. Why might he characterize blame as a "godsend" (114) even though he is aware of his innocence?
19. Discuss the meaning of Strauss's observation that "the questions of guilt and worth are managed with indifference, by nasty chance" (119).
20. What does Strauss say are the "problem[s] of confessing" (123)?
21. Discuss the Harold Brodkey quotation that opens Chapter 4: "My ideas, my language, support me in the face of disastrous horror over and over." Why might this quotation be particularly meaningful to Strauss?
22. How did the tragedy described in *Half a Life* ultimately shape Strauss's identity and influence the course of his life?
23. What inspired Strauss to write the book? What new perspectives was Strauss faced with when he began writing *Half a Life* and how might these have changed his perceptions of the tragedy?
24. At the conclusion of *Half a Life*, what does Strauss say is the only certainty? What are some of the things he has learned?

## • beyond the book: suggested activities

1. Ask your students to write an essay about a defining event from their past that considers how this event has influenced their life and contributed to the formation of their identity. Next, have them consider the event from someone else's perspective, writing about how others were also affected by this event. Discuss with them how this exercise fosters self-reflection and empathetic thinking and response.
2. Have your students write about an experience they shared with a friend or family member. Then, ask them to interview this person about the same event. How are the two recollections similar? How do they differ? Consider facts and emotional reactions. What does this activity tell us about memory and the genre of memoir?
3. As an alternative to the exercise in #1, ask your students to consider their reaction to a tragedy to which they have no direct, personal connection—perhaps one they observed in a news media outlet or heard about elsewhere. Have your students discuss their reactions to the news of the event, discussing compassion, understanding, and judgment.
4. Compare *Half a Life* to other works of literature that take tragedy or death as key themes. What is consistent among the texts and how have our views on death, tragedy, and coping changed?
5. In “Secrets and Lies,” an interview with *Newsweek* writer Jennie Yarbor, Strauss explains that each of his three novels are in some way connected to *Half a Life*. “My first book is about twins who are attached, two people who are joined and can't escape each other. And this book is about me and the girl who died and how we can't escape each other in a way. My second book is about a guy who is a fraud and a con man masquerading as someone else, and that's how I felt, I think, about this. My third book is about this terrible thing that happens in a family and no one wants to talk about it,” he says. Assign each student one of Strauss's novels and have them write an essay that considers the link between the novel and *Half a Life*. Discuss the relationship between fiction and autobiography, comparing with other examples of semi-autobiographical texts. Several titles are suggested in the list on the following page.

## • other titles of interest

**The following is a list of suggested works that can be studied alongside *Half a Life*:**

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|---|--|
| <i>The Apology</i> , Plato  | <i>I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings</i> ,<br>Maya Angelou                     |
| <i>Armies of the Night</i> , Norman Mailer  | “ <i>In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried</i> ,”<br>Amy Hempel          |
| <i>The Art of Fiction</i> , John Gardner  | <i>Let’s Take the Long Way Home</i> , Gail Caldwell                          |
| <i>The Art of Losing: Poems of Grief and<br/>Healing</i> , Kevin Young, ed.   | <i>On Death and Dying</i> , Elisabeth Kubler Ross                            |
| <i>Atonement</i> , Ian McEwan   | <i>Poetics</i> , Aristotle   |
| <i>Blue Nights</i> , Joan Didion  | <i>The Poetry of Robert Frost</i>  |
| <i>Catcher in the Rye</i> , J. D. Salinger  | <i>A Separate Peace</i> , John Knowles                                       |
| <i>The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson</i>  | “ <i>Soldier’s Home</i> ,” <i>In Our Time</i> ,<br>Ernest Hemingway          |
| “ <i>Confessional</i> ” <i>Writing and the<br/>Twentieth-Century Literary Imagination</i> ,<br>Miranda Sherwin, ed. | <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> , Harper Lee                                    |
| <i>Confessions</i> , Jean-Jacques Rousseau  | <i>Slaughterhouse-Five</i> , Kurt Vonnegut                                   |
| <i>Day</i> , Elie Wiesel  | <i>This Wild Darkness</i> , Harold Brodkey                                   |
| <i>Death Be Not Proud</i> , John Gunther  | <i>The Tragedies of William Shakespeare</i>                                  |
| <i>The Death of Ivan Ilyich</i> , Leo Tolstoy   | <i>The Unnamable</i> , Samuel Beckett  |
| <i>Early Novels and Stories and Later Novels<br/>and Stories</i> , William Maxwell                                  | <i>The World Is the Home of Love and Death:<br/>Stories</i> , Harold Brodkey |
| <i>A Grief Observed</i> , C. S. Lewis   | <i>The Year of Magical Thinking</i> , Joan Didion                            |
| <i>A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius</i> ,<br>Dave Eggers   |  |

## • about the author of this guide

**Jennifer Banach** has written on a wide range of topics from Romanticism to contemporary literature for publishers including Random House, Houghton Mifflin, EBSCO, and Oxford University Press. She served as the contributing editor for *Bloom’s Guides: The Glass Menagerie* and *Bloom’s Guides: Heart of Darkness*, edited by Harold Bloom for Facts on File, Inc. She is the author of *How to Write about Tennessee Williams*; the forthcoming *How to Write about Arthur Miller* and *How to Write about Kurt Vonnegut* (also edited by Harold Bloom for Facts on File, Inc.); and the forthcoming *Understanding Norman Mailer* to be published by the University of South Carolina Press.



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