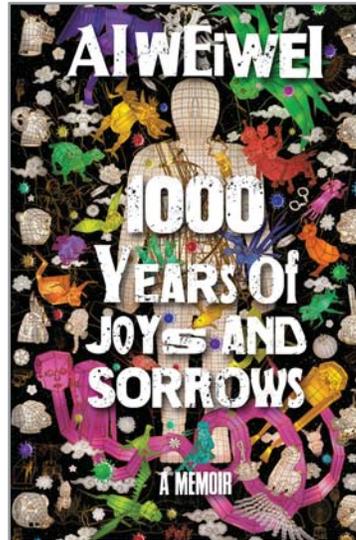


1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows

Author: Ai Weiwei (b. 1957)
Translated from the Chinese by Allan H. Barr
Publisher: Crown (New York). Illustrated. 400 pp.
Type of work: Memoir
Time: 1910 to the present
Locales: Numerous locations throughout China, including Beijing, Fantianjian village in Zhejiang Province, and Xinjiang Military District; New York

1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows is both a memoir by the internationally renowned artist Ai Weiwei and an intimate biography of the artist's father, Ai Qing. Through the life stories of these two creative minds, the volume offers a complex and troubling history of China from within, encompassing the years from the rise of Mao Zedong to the present.



Courtesy Penguin Random House

Principal personages

AI WEIWEI, the author
 AI QING, his father, a renowned poet and writer
 GAO YING, his mother
 AI DAN, his brother
 AI LAO, his son
 LU QING, his wife, an artist
 ALLEN GINSBERG, his friend, a poet
 ULI SIGG, Swiss ambassador to China and advocate for Chinese contemporary art
 MAO ZEDONG, a revolutionary and the first head of state of the People's Republic of China
 WANG FEN, a documentary filmmaker and Weiwei's partner; Ai Lao's mother

While imprisoned for eighty-one days on charges of “inciting the subversion of state power” in 2011, artist and activist Ai Weiwei developed the idea of writing a memoir that would connect the threads of his life and work to that of his father, the renowned poet Ai Qing. Conceived as a lasting gift to his son, Ai Lao, the book, titled *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows* (2021), recounts a century of family history alongside the political and social history of China. Originally written in Chinese, the translation into English by Allan H. Barr has received critical praise. While the book includes a

Because you were the greatest of our actors, and you threw away
greatness like trash.

Because you could not take seriously what others took as their lives.

Because in this you made mockery of our lives.

Because you died encased in fat

And even then, you'd lived too long.

Oates builds on the poem for six more pages, and the repetition and structure produce an incantatory or dream-like effect. Oates recounts numerous aspects of the actor Marlon Brando's life, including quotes, snippets of interviews, references to his movies and the characters he played, mention of his children, his exemplary skill as an actor, and problematic events from his personal life resulting in Oates labeling him a male predator. The poet paints a full portrait of Brando, someone who was an incredibly gifted actor but also a very troubled man who did not live up to his idol status. The anaphora puts all of these aspects of his life on equal footing and helps integrate the disparate parts of him into a more coherent whole. The word Oates chose for the anaphora, "because," is also significant since "because" often begins the answer to the question "why?" Oates is searching for answers. Why did psychologists conduct experiments that caused pain and suffering ("Obedience: 1962")? Why is America making it more difficult for women to get an abortion ("Doctor Help Me")? With the use of anaphora in "To Marlon Brando in Hell," Oates suggests that we can grieve for our idols even when they do not reach the standards of humanity we expect from them.

Most reviewers, such as Emilia Phillips from the *New York Times*, found Oates's collection satisfactory. Phillips praised the collection's ability to offer "compelling insights about toxic masculinity and human brutality." Poems such as "Doctor Help Me" examine and challenge the power structures men have historically created. No matter how many valid reasons the women offer their doctors for why they need an abortion, their pleas are ignored. Barbara Egel of *Booklist* agreed, stating, "Oates concentrates her powerfully unnerving sensibility into poems that challenge and haunt." Oates's poems on psychological experiments, such as the one in which baby rhesus monkeys are removed from their mothers and kept in isolation, both challenge the purpose of such research and haunt readers with the subjects' visceral reactions to such pain and inhumanity. Of the reviewers, only William Logan of the *New Criterion* was highly critical of the collection, noting that it was "largely a gallery of Madame Tussaud horrors," and finding the only redeeming poem "Too Young to Marry but Not Too Young to Die" because of the compelling nature of the subject. Though reviewers were not unanimous in their praise of Oates's collection, most found Oates's poems powerful in their insights on mourning and grief.

beings were part of a single mind. Here, as sometimes happens in theoretical physics, scientific thinking takes on a religious dimension, giving the novel a quasi-spiritual quality.

The novel uses its environmental and scientific themes to discuss pressing contemporary issues, notably climate change. Alyssa's commitment to environmental justice in life demonstrates that the Byrne family was long interested in climate change. This theme comes to the fore particularly when Robbie works on a homework project Theo assigns during a period of homeschooling. Robbie is instructed to describe "life on the Mississippi" in the present day and contrast it with how it was when Mark Twain wrote his 1883 novel with that title. What Theo expects will be a simple project takes the better part of a week, during which Robbie makes extensive notes and drawings based on internet research. When asked for a brief report, Robbie argues that life is practically extinct on the Mississippi River due to the toxins that humans have poured into it and is very likely that way in all American rivers. When Robbie asks, in turn, why people let this happen and sees the worried look on his father's face, he reassures Theo, and says, "Don't worry, Dad. We might not figure it out. But Earth will."

Reviews of *Bewilderment*, though generally quite positive, noted some issues, particularly with Powers's on-the-nose political messaging. In the United Kingdom, where the novel was shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize, Leo Robson's review in the *New Statesman* described Powers as a "handwringing novelist of ideas," and asserted that while these ideas lent greater weight to the heartwarming father-son narrative, it also made the novel's emotional elements "grating." Adam Roberts's review in the *Guardian* echoed these complaints about Powers's "didactic" tone and overt preachiness but complimented the novel's science-fiction elements and appreciated the references to earlier works in the genre. He noted that Theo often dwells on the 1966 novel *Flowers for Algernon*, by the American science-fiction writer Daniel Keyes, in which a man with an intellectual disability undergoes a type of brain surgery first done on a mouse named Algernon. The experiment is briefly successful, with a marked increase in the man's IQ, but the success does not last, a result with parallels in the narrative of *Bewilderment*.

Reviewers in the United States noted similar issues, and some felt the book failed to live up to Powers's earlier work. In his *New York Times* review, Dwight Garner criticized the novel's "saccharine" environmental themes and overreliance on politics at the expense of plot. According to Garner, Powers delivers interesting moments that depict groundbreaking science, such as the mind synchronization between Alyssa and Robbie, but fails to depict compelling emotional drama, terming the novel "shallowness that requests to be taken seriously." In a more positive review, Meera Subramanian, writing for *Orion Magazine*, treated the novel as "an exercise in grief, personal and planetary." Compared to Powers's earlier novel *The Overstory*, Subramanian conceded that *Bewilderment* felt more limited in scope and overt in its political and moral messaging. Despite this perceived lack of subtlety, Subramanian still felt *Bewilderment* succeeded as an "exploration of what loneliness bears" as well as a "practice in radical empathy."

racial identity. The result is an unsettling and often exhilarating reading experience. The protagonist of *The Sympathizer* is the Captain, an officer in the South Vietnamese counterintelligence Special Branch who, in reality, is an undercover agent spying for the Communists. As South Vietnam falls, he is tasked with following an ARVN general into exile in the United States to monitor the activities of the counterrevolutionary resistance movement there. This leads to intrigue and murder as the Captain attempts to protect his cover and carry out his mission.

The Captain describes himself as the sympathizer because he is a man divided against himself. The son of a French priest and Vietnamese peasant, he is rejected and looked down upon by the Vietnamese people among whom he grew up. Though he identifies as Vietnamese, he is intensely conscious of his European heritage, reinforced by education in a colonial French lycée. His allegiances are further complicated by college years in the United States, which leave him fluent in English and attracted to American popular culture. Though he supports the Communist North Vietnamese in what he regards as a war of anticolonial liberation, he still feels a deep connection to the French and Americans; he has empathy for all sides. This is symbolized by his two blood brothers, friends who had defended him from bullying in school. Bon is an ardent anti-Communist whose family was killed by the enemy. Man is a Communist agent who acts as the Captain's contact with the North Vietnamese. The novel culminates with the Captain and Bon participating in a doomed reconnaissance mission into Vietnam. They are captured and incarcerated in a reeducation camp run by Man, who has been severely disfigured by a napalm strike. Here, Man tortures the Captain because of his nonconformist spiritual bifurcation. In Man's view, he must pay for sins of omission as well as commission. The novel ends with the Captain and Bon on a boat with refugees escaping from Vietnam.

The Sympathizer purported to be the written confession that the Captain composed for Man in the reeducation camp. *The Committed* (2021) continues the confessional style of the first book. In this case, it is the former Captain's record of his activities in Paris in the early 1980s, written in a medical rest home for a less dangerously inquisitorial audience of a lawyer and a Maoist PhD. In theory, one can enjoy *The Committed* without having read the previous novel; through exposition and flashbacks, Nguyen fleshes out his protagonist's checkered history. Despite this, the story of the narrator's inner travails is such a direct continuation from *The Sympathizer* that readers may want to begin with that novel before picking up the story in *The Committed*.

The Committed picks up where the previous novel left off. The narrator has lost both his rank and his mission as a spy; he is more than ever a man without a country,



Courtesy BeBe Jacobs

Viet Thanh Nguyen

First Person Singular

Author: Haruki Murakami (b. 1949)
First published: *Ichininso Tansu*, 2020, in Japan
Translated from the Japanese by Philip Gabriel
Publisher: Alfred A. Knopf (New York). 256 pp.
Type of work: Short fiction
Time: 1960s–present
Locale: Japan

First Person Singular is a collection of eight short stories by the international bestselling author Haruki Murakami.

Principal characters

SAYOKO, the high school girlfriend of the narrator in “With the Beatles”

THE SHINAGAWA MONKEY, a talking monkey in “Confessions of a Shinagawa Monkey”

F*, an unattractive woman whom the narrator of the short story “Carnaval” befriends
 HARUKI MURAKAMI, a semi-fictional version of the author who narrates “The Yakult Swallows Poetry Collection”

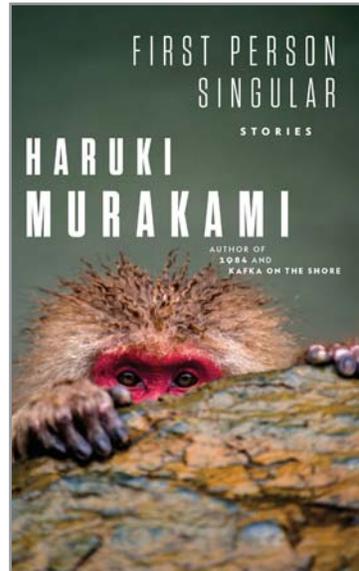
UNNAMED NARRATOR, the main character in “Cream” who fails the university entrance exam

YOUNG WOMAN, a waitress and poet who has an affair with the narrator of “On a Stone Pillow”

UNNAMED NARRATOR, a college student and music fan in “Charlie Parker Plays Bossa Nova”

UNNAMED NARRATOR, the main character in “First Person Singular”

Throughout his celebrated literary career, Japanese author Haruki Murakami has been known for writing novels and stories helmed by characters who, like him, have a variety of eccentric interests, including an affinity for cats, the Beatles, jazz music, and personal reflection. A few of his works, including the love story *Norwegian Wood* (1987), adopt a more realist approach, but others, particularly his short stories in the 2006 collection *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman*, often place his characters in surreal situations. This frequent overlap between Murakami’s passions and those of his characters has led some readers to believe that the author’s characters are based entirely on himself. However, despite these parallels, Murakami and many critics insist that his work does not fall into the designation of the classic Japanese “I-novel”—a literary



Courtesy Penguin Random House

reading the book chronologically but listening to the audiobook out of sequence, writing “both experiences felt right.” Reading the book in order allowed him to “absorb the historical context with clarity.” However, listening to it out of sequence helped him to “feel how that history rendered to [his] community”: “I was disoriented; I felt the heaviness. I felt despair. I was emotional; I felt activated. I was angry. I finished the audiobook and I cried.”

The rare, albeit brief, criticism of *Four Hundred Souls*, is buried in the otherwise positive review offered by Sabastian Modak for the *New York Times*. In reference to the audiobook format, he wrote that “the stories . . . can at first sound disjointed in their different approaches.” However, he also recognized what they all have in common—“an urgent mission to autopsy history as it’s long been taught in this country, and to pull at the threads between the past and the present as a way of showing just how intact they are.”

In some form or fashion, each essay articulates how ongoing generations have inherited four hundred years of freedom-fighting against racial oppression, as structural forms of racism continue to evolve in America. Despite this recognition, the book leaves the reader or listener open to the possibility of the collective societal power to create a new world order as editor Keisha Blain poses the question, “Are we our ancestors’ wildest dreams?” While she is not convinced that her question can be answered in the affirmative, she does believe that “we can help chart out a path that leads us all to a better future—the kind of future that will more closely resemble” those dreams.

Author Biography

Ibram X. Kendi is the founding director of the Boston University Center for Antiracist Research, the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Humanities at Boston University, and a 2021 MacArthur Fellow. He has written eight books, including five number-one New York Times Best Sellers. His book *Stamped from the Beginning* won the 2016 National Book Award.

Keisha N. Blain is an associate professor of history at the University of Pittsburgh. A 2022 New America National Fellow, she is the author of *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (2018) and *Until I Am Free: Fannie Lou Hamer’s Enduring Message to America* (2021).

Valandra, MBA, MSW, PhD

Review Sources

Review of *Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America, 1619–2019*, edited by Ibram X. Kendi and Keisha N. Blain. *Kirkus Reviews*, 1 Feb. 2021, www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/ibram-x-kendi/four-hundred-souls. Accessed 10 Oct. 2021.

King of the Blues

The Rise and Reign of B. B. King

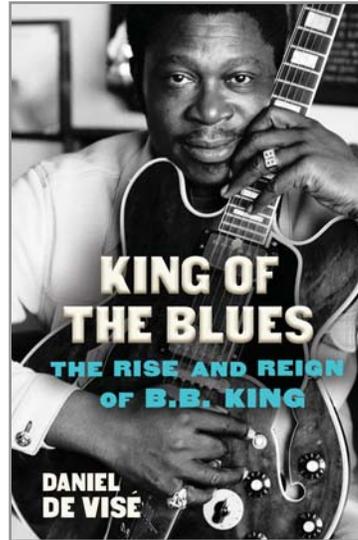
Author: Daniel de Visé
Publisher: Atlantic Monthly Press
 (New York). Illustrated. 496 pp.
Type of work: Biography
Time: 1925–2015
Locales: Mississippi; Memphis, Tennessee;
 elsewhere in the United States

In King of the Blues: The Rise and Reign of B. B. King, Daniel de Visé chronicles the life and career of the titular acclaimed blues singer and guitarist, whom he presents as one of the most influential American musicians of the twentieth century.

Principal personages

RILEY B. “B. B.” KING (1925–2015), an acclaimed blues musician
 NORA ELLA PULLEY, his mother
 ALBERT KING, his father
 BOOKER T. WASHINGTON “BUKKA” WHITE, his cousin, a Delta-blues musician
 MARTHA LEE DENTON, his first wife
 SUE CAROL HALL, his second wife
 NORMAN MATTHEWS, his close friend and longtime member of his entourage
 WILLIS “BEBOP” EDWARDS JR., another close friend and member of King’s entourage
 CATO WALKER JR., his longtime driver
 POLLY WALKER, Cato Walker’s wife and King’s longtime secretary
 LAVERNE TONEY, King’s longtime personal assistant
 SIDNEY ALEXANDER SEIDENBERG, his manager for several decades

A Pulitzer Prize–winning investigative journalist, Daniel de Visé made a name for himself as a biographer with works such as *Andy & Don: The Making of a Friendship and a Classic American TV Show* (2015), about performers Andy Griffith and Don Knotts, and *The Comeback: Greg LeMond, Thirty-Odd Shotgun Pellets, and the World’s Greatest Bicycle Race* (2018), a biography of cyclist Greg LeMond. With the 2021 book *King of the Blues: The Rise and Reign of B. B. King*, de Visé continues in that vein, bringing his own passion for music into a project that required numerous years of interviews and research into the life of the legendary blues performer B. B. King. A vocalist, guitarist, and band leader, King made substantial contributions to the blues genre as well as to music as a whole throughout his career, especially during the latter half of the twentieth century. While King’s life and career has previously been



Courtesy Grove/Atlantic, Inc.