



My Life

[by James Fant]

Everyone is talking about it, so should you join in the discussion? This week, our reviewer discusses Bill Clinton, whose life has been an open book since 1992, and his recently-released memoirs, *My Life*, to see if there is anything to be gleaned from its pages that we don't already know.

Walking the streets of Washington one summer in the mid-1990's, I was suddenly stopped, along with two other hapless pedestrians, by a man in a ninja-like uniform with a black baseball cap and a machine gun. He refused to say why we had to stand in place. Our irritation soared with the boiling temperature and the swamp-like humidity. Our captor constantly whispered into a wireless mike attached to his throat. He was like a deranged, heavily armed sports fan, and we were on the wrong team. We stood there eyeing the muzzle of the gun and wilting in the heat. My shirt soaked through. At long last, the source of our inconvenience hove into view: a black crocodile of limousines and Chevrolet Suburbans with flashing sirens and roaring engines. The Presidential motorcade. We stood there as a literally captive audience, and looked through the endless procession of bulletproofed, blacked-out windows for a glimpse of the man himself. We were not disappointed. As one of the limousines drove past, the unmistakable face of Bill Clinton appeared in a clear window, with his striking helmet of silvering hair and the warm smile of a man greeting old friends. He waved at the three of us. Our tension and irritation, which was palpable, melted into something like gratitude. The Clinton charm had done its magic.

Whether you take this anecdote as a trivial performance by a master politician, or the preening vanity of a megalomaniac, the point is that Bill Clinton made an effort to connect with us, his audience, however small, however briefly. Or that is the way we felt about it, anyway. He, the most powerful man in the world, was aware that we were caught up in his security cordon, and the wave was a kind of "sorry for all the trouble." It worked. That

you are reading this now demonstrates just how well.

So I picked up his just-published memoir with the aid of a back brace and a clear memory of the ex-President's touching awareness, indeed solicitousness, towards me in an eminently forgettable quasi-encounter. Whether his concern was genuine or not is finally unknowable and, for the three of us at that moment in time, beside the point: there it was. Would that he were as mindful of the readers of this massive tome as he was of the three people trapped on the sidewalk on that muggy day a decade or so ago. That encounter lasted moments; anyone reading this book from cover to cover may have the benefit of climate control, but will need to be prepared for a much longer wait.

There are inherent problems in reviewing any book by Bill Clinton. First, there is the political angle: most reviewers conflate their views of the man and his presidency with his memoir. This applies as much to the left as it does to the right; some of his most scathing reviews have been penned by Democrats. I do not claim any special objectivity, but I propose to consider the book as first and foremost a literary artifact. With time, after the Clinton hoopla is long forgotten, that is what it will become. Let the historians and political hacks slog out his legacy; here, it is the former President's prose that concerns us.

Second, there is the confession of past dishonesty by the author of *My Life*, which is never really past. In the world of prose, it is ever-present. If the boy who cried wolf was removed from the wolf's stomach for a last hurrah, and he proceeded to buttonhole you

with a long, rambling tale of his life, your internal lie detector would go into overdrive. So it must here.

Third, there is the former President's exquisitely Pilate-like awareness of language. Any man who finds the word "is" more richly intricate than a millefeuille concocted by one of the world's foremost pastry chefs creates a special problem for his readers. To decipher one of his haikus is to be daunted; to be handed a thousand page opus by him is to know despair. The permutations of meaning are staggering. At one stage, Clinton suggests that if he were asked the right questions during the Gennifer Flowers deposition, he would have given the right answers. That admission, while lawyerly, prompts a further thought: what questions did he have in mind when he wrote this book, and are they ours? What is not said becomes as difficult to decipher as what is.

But try we must.

Dan Rather was the first to compare *My Life* with U.S. Grant's memoir. I do not know if Mr. Rather has read the former president's memoir, or how long ago he did so, but the contrast between the two books is more revealing than the comparison. Historically, Americans have favored the plain spoken. As a stylist, Grant wrote a lean, almost clipped prose; he turned a gimlet eye on the Civil War from the unparalleled vantage point of its victorious commanding general. In the process, he created a sort of masterpiece. The book was thoroughly "modern;" it was also a bestseller. Mark Twain was the editor and booster of the project; he could even be described as the *eminence gris* behind it. Had Twain had a hand in *My Life*, I can imag-



ine some spectacular rows with the author and a much better book.

In the case of Bill Clinton's memoirs, I would say the spirit presiding over some of these pages, and of our age itself, is more like Doctor Phil's. Much of the language of contrition, for instance, will sound oddly familiar because it has become commonplace. Just as every murder mystery contains at least one body and a villain, no political memoir these days would feel complete without the almost ritualistic soul-searching that is dramatized on daytime television. In short, we have gone from the bully pulpit to the bully confession-al. In these blighted times in which we live, it is more "a badge of honor" to have sinned and tearfully confessed it than not to have sinned at all.

If Dan Rather left Twain's numinous touch unmentioned, Clinton is well aware of the precedent and he has quietly summoned the great author for assistance from beyond the grave. I believe that one of *My Life's* central, unstated arguments is that Bill Clinton is, in one very important respect, a postmodern Huckleberry Finn. Clinton is the amiable country boy redeemed, like Huck, by his identification with and good-heartedness towards people who have been, and continue to be, wronged. Instead of saving one man, this reading of his life and presidency goes, Clinton worked hard to help the disadvantaged and the downtrodden, and he should be forgiven for everything else.

There is of course a more apt comparison from Twain's corpus, and it resonates even more deeply. Bill Clinton is more the avatar of wily, smooth-talking Tom Sawyer, with Hillary playing the stern but loving Aunt Polly. Al Gore is Sid. And Kenneth Starr, of course, is mean Injun Joe.

My Life begins with Clinton's early, earthy childhood in Arkansas. This is a more human tale than the book's soporific litany of presidential meetings and campaign stops, and therefore a more interesting one. In fact,

the book would have been better if it were split in half, if not into thirds, with Clinton the boy as hero, or anti-hero, of Part I. It is a compelling, moving story, well worth the price of admission. The Huck motif makes its first appearance: there is the alcoholic stepfather; the incipient yearning for escape; the precocious humanity. In particular, Clinton's treatment of "Daddy" is humane and dignified. Whether or not Clinton has "worked through" this issue, to use the parlance of pop psychology, he has treated him with a great deal of humanity, and deserves our praise. Of such seeds are great memoirs made.

Clinton's ticket out of childhood deprivation was not the Mississippi River, but education. He became the pilot of his own steamboat, not drifting aimlessly down the river on a raft, but powering through the treacherous rapids that blocked his way with a nuclear-powered ambition and a razor-sharp intellect. This puts clear water, or if you prefer muddy water, between Clinton and his literary role model, whose unselfconsciousness was the opposite of the former President's hyperselfconsciousness, so characteristic of our contemporary culture, and so different from Grant's.

More than a few readers will doubtless buy the book to re-witness the Lewinsky debacle, which, for many, has become the central affair, in both senses of the term, of the Clinton presidency. They are hurtling towards disappointment. How does the President deal with her? Well, we already know how he "dealt" with her, in the most sordid detail imaginable. It is his treatment of her in print that concerns us here. He does not, unfortunately, become any more chivalrous towards his former intern in hindsight. He describes the affair as a "moral error." This is an interesting qualification. What other sort of error could it have been?

Because we are aware of Clinton's mastery of language and his careful parsing of words, we must dig deeper. The "moral" qualifi-

cation delimits the sin to the realm of the merely personal. It tarnishes his character, he hopes, but not his presidency. All's fair in love and politics - but is it in lust? The shade of Talleyrand whispers agreement along with him that "worse than a crime, it was an error."

Every presidency has its dark and grained spots. Kenneth Star relentlessly tried to find these and hold a mirror to them, at great expense, and with only limited success; and Clinton hates him for it. Clinton's loathing of the man burns like a blowtorch through the book. It was Demosthenes who wrote the *Philippics* to condemn Philip of Macedon; this portion of the book is, in a very real sense, the *Billipics*. He does an altogether less convincing job than the famed Greek orator of antiquity in castigating his enemy, which is odd, considering the former president's considerable rhetorical skills.

As befits the first postmodern president, Clinton presents his life almost as an array of narratives. He calls these "parallel lives," but in a book of this size, their genesis is less important than their overall effect. The gestalt is of a man who has struggled but not quite succeeded to create an integrated personality. He has failed to meld these stories into something like a convincing whole. More editing could have at least created the illusion that he succeeded. In addition to behaving at times like an antihero, Clinton strews these tales in your path in a manner that suggests even he himself has not made sense of them. And so, he winds up, both literally and figuratively, on the couch, banished like Darren from *Bewitched* from the matrimonial bed after his lusty, picaresque and perverse assignations with the intern.

As an apology, and an apologia, *My Life* falls short. U.S. Grant was dying of cancer when he wrote his memoir. Bill Clinton appears to be the picture of health and at his comparatively young age, he has a number of years in front of him to try to influence how others view his legacy. Moreover, one could fairly



ask if there was ever a Vaudevillian hook strong enough to yank him off the stage. As long as the man breathes, and no doubt for long after, he will continue to enthrall his friends as well as his enemies.

He is, in part at least, a Tom Sawyer who wants to be remembered as a Huck Finn. The trouble with the incipient Huck theme of course is that Clinton is not a gormless youngster floating down the mighty Mississip, but an Oxford-educated lawyer whose adult life has been as spectacularly worldly as Huck's youth was parochial. But if history is kind to him, even if the sordidness of the Lewinsky affair is always remembered, his genuine solicitousness towards the disadvantaged will not be forgotten. Whatever view you take of the man, his skill as a politician jumps through the pages like an electric charge. He bristles with energy; with life; with humanity. The book does, too, in parts.

And, as Huck himself said about Twain, we hope that "he told the truth, mainly. There was things he stretched, but he mainly told the truth."