

The best memoirs about big topics that won't totally depress you

Katya Cengel

8-10 minutes

1. [Home](#)
2. [Violence books](#)
3. Katya's list



Who am I?

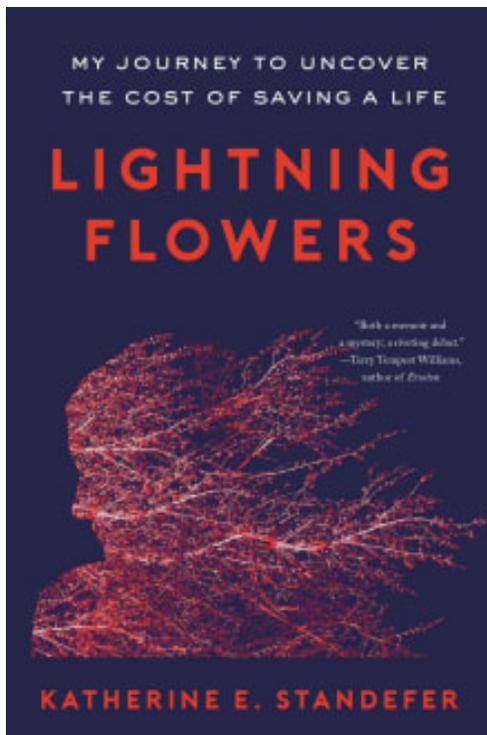
As a journalist I have seen and experienced amazing things. As a memoirist my job is to make you shiver as I take you down a crumbling Ukrainian coal mine, laugh in frustration as I argue with a customs agent charging me \$100 for a few bootleg CDs and smile with happiness when I finally locate my Ukrainian date after a classic miscommunication. I'm recommending memoirs that will take you on adventures, tackle serious topics, but leave you with hope, and oftentimes a smile of understanding. Even if you haven't covered a war, faced death, or disappeared, these writers speak to the universal hopes, fears, and disappointments of human life.

The books I picked & why

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Lightning Flowers: My Journey to Uncover the Cost of Saving a Life

By Katherine E. Standefer,



Why this book?

Having been called an “enigma” by a doctor on more than one occasion, I know well the frustrating battle of rare medical conditions. What I like about this book is the way Standefer finds beauty and wonder in physical ailments.

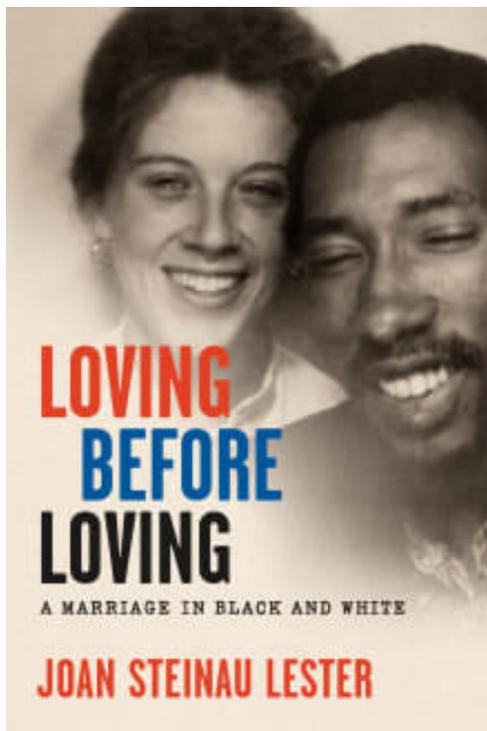
Standefer wasn’t struck by lightning; she has a heart defect that could kill her and leads to her being fitted with a defibrillator while

she is still in her 20s. Instead of becoming a passive patient, Standefer questions everything about her condition from her treatment to the metal that is now inside of her, traveling as far as Africa to track down where the metal is mined. Ill health has not shrunk her world, it has expanded it, an inspiring outlook for anyone who has ever spent time as a patient.

- Buy at:
- Bookshop.org
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Loving before Loving: A Marriage in Black and White

By Joan Steinau Lester,



Why this book?

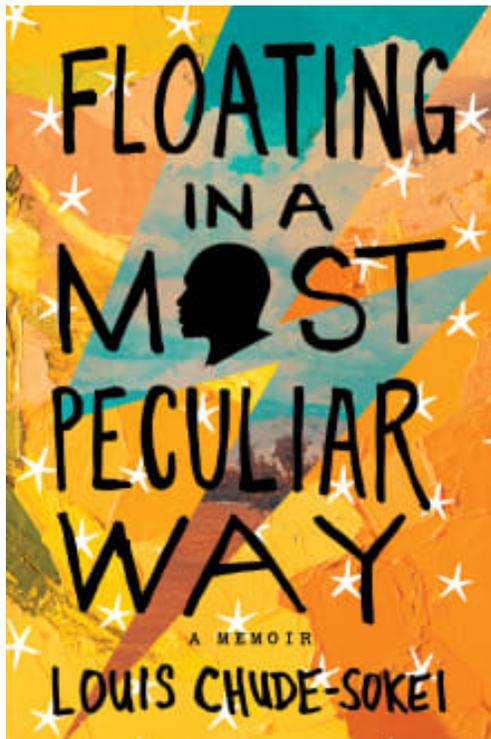
As a woman, I have experienced my share of sexism but it dims in comparison to what Lester faced in the 1950s and 1960s. When applying for a job at a bookstore, a young Lester is told the store can't hire girls because they only have one toilet. Her plucky response—she could use the same toilet as the men—is one reason I enjoyed this book so much.

Lester is repeatedly pushed to the sidelines even as she takes up the fight for civil rights, devoting herself to bettering the lives of others while setting aside her own dreams—for a time. Luckily Lester never completely loses her nerve. Her second act is a fun adventure to follow for those who have faced their own setbacks, no matter their gender.

- Buy at:
- [Bookshop.org](https://www.bookshop.org)
- [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com)

Floating in a Most Peculiar Way: A Memoir

By Louis Chude-Sokei,



Why this book?

I have a fascination with countries that don't fully exist and have visited a few myself. So when I learned that Chude-Sokei was from a country that really no longer exists, I was hooked. The country in question was not one I recognized. Biafra was a short-lived African state that declared independence from Nigeria in 1967.

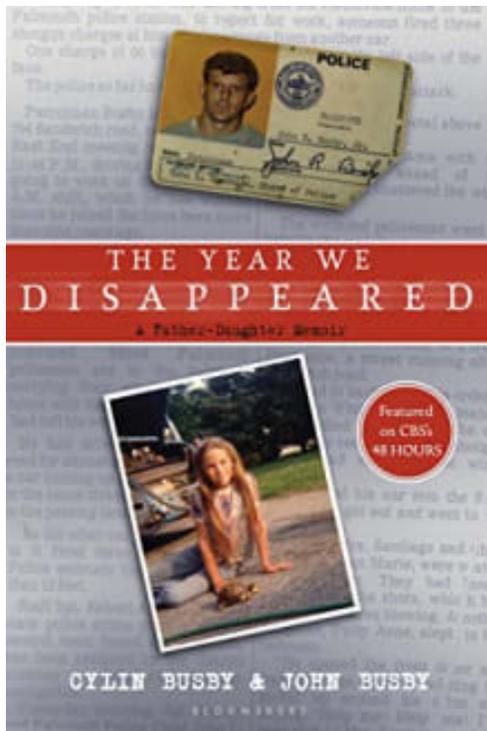
What kept me reading the book though was the humor Chude-Sokei uses to describe his unique situation as the “first son of the first son” of a leader of a country that was “killed” in 1970, as his mother puts it. Chude-Sokei's tales of growing up an African in Jamaica followed by his yearning to become a Black American in Inglewood, Los Angeles will resonate with anyone who ever struggled with their identity.

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The Year We Disappeared: A Father-Daughter Memoir

By Cylin Busby, John Busby,



Why this book?

When I was 10 I disappeared from my life for a while. I left school, home, and my family to live in a hospital for several months. This break in my own childhood narrative is what got me into the Busby story. Cylin Busby was nine years old when her dad, John, a police officer, was shot. Her father survives, but the family is forced to disappear for their own protection.

While the book is written by a father and daughter, it is Cylin's young nine-year-old voice that pulled me in, reminding me what it

is like to be a child and powerless as the world around you falls apart. That sounds dark, but children have a way of finding hope. This story has a happy(ish) ending.

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- [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com)

Girls Don't: A Woman's War in Vietnam

By Inette Miller,



Why this book?

As a female journalist who has lived and worked abroad, including in sometimes unsafe situations but excluding war, I was drawn to Miller's story about covering the Vietnam War. In 1970 young American women were not supposed to go to Vietnam. They were

supposed to get married, and Miller did—to a member of the military whose job proves her ticket to Vietnam.

As one of the rare female reporters in Vietnam, Miller captured stories her male colleagues couldn't or wouldn't cover such as how young Vietnamese girls were often tricked into the sex trade. An outsider in the “old boys club” of news and war Miller is able to understand better than her male colleagues how the war is impacting the locals who have in some ways been made outsiders in their own country.

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5 book lists we think you will like!

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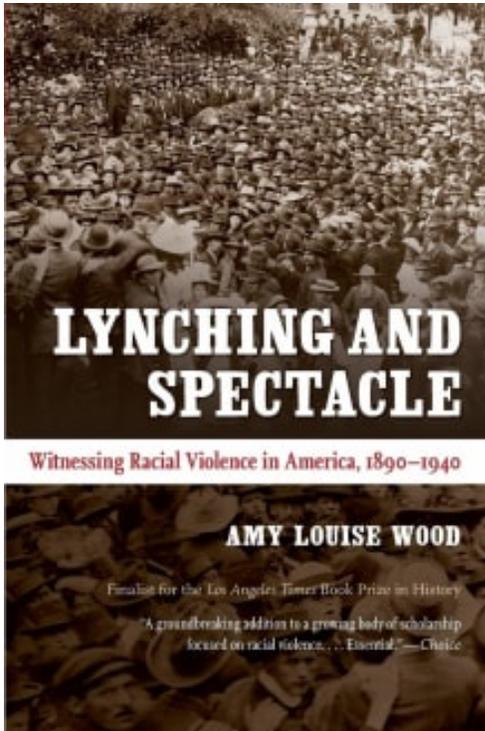
[Violence](#) ← Explore 32 books about violence

And, 3 books we think you will enjoy!

We think you will like *Lynching and Spectacle*, *On Killing*, and *Violence in War and Peace* if you like this list.

Lynching and Spectacle

By Amy Louise Wood,



Recommended by David Livingstone Smith

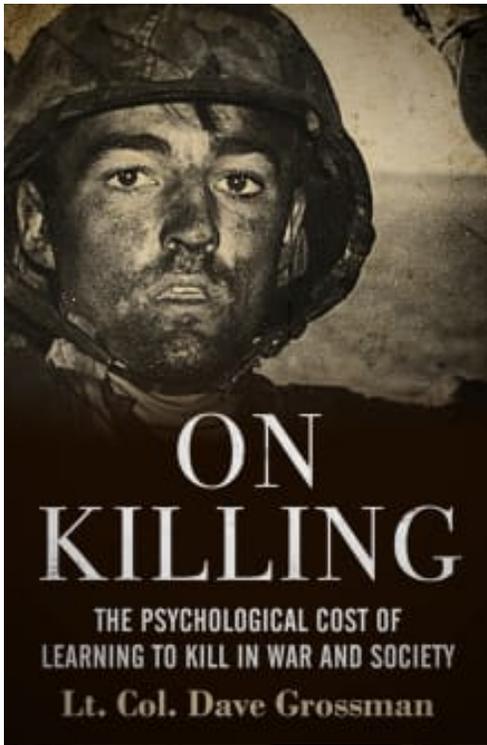
From David's list on [inhumanity](#).

Most people's idea of lynching is the sanitized version that they have picked up from movies and TV. However, the practice of lynching, as it was carried out in the United States from the late 19th to well into the 20th century, was far more hideous than a few people hanging a man from a tree. This classic contribution concentrates on spectacle lynchings. These were public lynchings attended by hundreds or even thousands of spectators. They involved hours of torture and bodily mutilation, often culminating in the victim being burned alive. *Lynching and Spectacle* is a vital read for anyone wishing to understand the full horror of American Racism.

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On Killing

By Lt. Col. Dave Grossman,



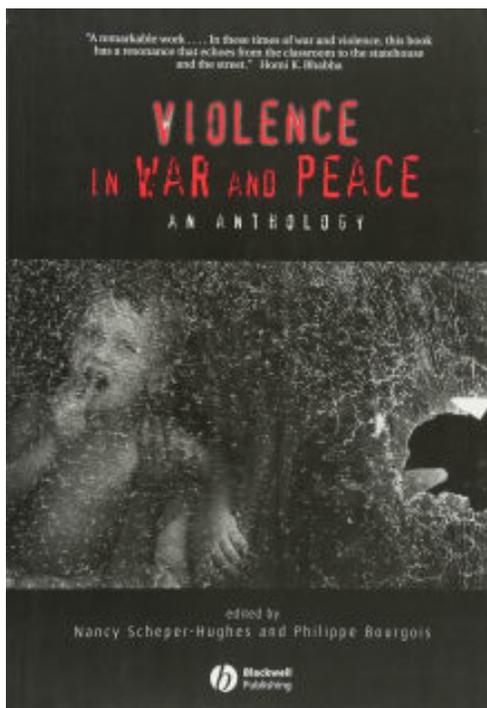
Grossman is a former Army Ranger who digs deep into the psychological impact of taking human life through countless interviews with fellow soldiers of all kinds. Combining these accounts with thorough psychological research, Grossman comments on society's collective aversion to killing while helping us understand its complicated acceptance—and even encouragement—of wartime killing. What was most surprising to me was that historically, only about 4% of soldiers even fire their weapon during war, and how obviously that skews from the “norm” of combat portrayed in popular media. It’s an honest, eye-opening,

and important piece of work that should be required reading for every service member, police officer, or anyone tasked with carrying society's heaviest burden.

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Violence in War and Peace

By Nancy Scheper-Hughes (editor), Philippe I. Bourgois (editor),



The editors of this volume are two of the most important and influential medical anthropologists in the world and major scholars of violence. In addition to collecting a set of useful texts on violence, the introduction to the volume is a piece of writing that I have returned to many times.

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