



Happy Days: Mencken's Autobiography: 1880-1892

H.L. Mencken

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With a style that combined biting sarcasm with the "language of the free lunch counter," Henry Louis Mencken shook politics and politicians for nearly half a century. Now, fifty years after Mencken's death, the Johns Hopkins University Press announces **The Buncombe Collection**, newly packaged editions of nine Mencken classics: *Happy Days*, *Heathen Days*, *Newspaper Days*, *Prejudices*, *Treatise on the Gods*, *On Politics*, *Thirty-Five Years of Newspaper Work*, *Minority Report*, and *A Second Mencken Chrestomathy*.

Most of these autobiographical writings first appeared in the *New Yorker*. Here Mencken recalls memories of a safe and happy boyhood in the Baltimore of the 1880s.

Happy Days: Mencken's Autobiography: 1880-1892 Details

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Jay says

I felt little sympathy (if that's the word) for our narrator throughout. Or perhaps it was a lack of admiration. Still, the book felt complete, and I somewhat warmed to his character in the last 10 pages or so. Memoirs, or at least proper memoirs of the traditional style, are a bit of a mystery to me. I simply haven't read many (or any, that I recall) previously. And perhaps that is a fault of mine, not of Mencken's.

Regardless, it was a worthwhile book. If one can digest Mencken's race-related language (and his perspectives about all things in general) in the context of his era rather than in the context of our own, then one can perhaps get beyond a reflex of offense to instead get an inside view to the author's time, and of the Baltimore in particular of that time. In that way, the book offers something worthwhile. And besides, books and authors must be tried, just like foods. I won't likely taste this author again, but I'm still glad I tried it because whether or not I prefer a food (or author) or not does not change the fact that it's objectively interesting. Crap, what was I getting at...

Eileen says

Believe it or not Mencken actually had a happy childhood, and he records it here. His humor is all there minus the biting criticism. His vocabulary is amazing (had to look up a lot of words) but the way he puts words together is so delightfully creative it caused me to smile or laugh at nearly every page. And it gives a very instructive picture of what growing up in nineteenth century Baltimore was like. Delightful read.

Robert Maier says

Finished it and loved it. Not as densely written as Notes on Democracy, so an easier, lighter read. Can't wait to see what unfolds. I bought it used on line, and turned out to be a first edition. Unfortunately unsigned, but nice to hold it. It's in great condition for 73 years old. A dazzling portrait of Baltimore seen through a young boy's eyes at the end of the 19th century. Written like poetry.

Thorne Clark says

This is a pretty remarkable book, particularly because it is presented as nothing more than a rambling recollection loosely arranged into topical groupings. Like most memoirs written by white men before, say, the eighteen- or nineteen-nineties, it is replete with jaw-dropping statements about race and other races (in the form of both the expected prejudices, as well as one or two intimations of a jarring broad-mindedness). This made the book difficult to appreciate objectively, and generally added to the feeling that while a first-class writer, H.L. Mencken would probably be an insupportable bore if you were to be stuck in an elevator with his resurrected soul. That, and he is clearly a blowhard. But a self-aware one with a well-developed

sense of humor, philosophy, and psychology to make him very enjoyable company when you -- as the reader -- get to dictate the length of your encounters.

Sam Ingham says

Charming account of life as a child in 1880's Baltimore. Surprisingly warm, especially for the curmudgeonly Mencken.

Graychin says

The first installment of what became his *Days* trilogy, *Happy Days* is Mencken's memoir of his childhood in Baltimore during the 1880s and 90s. If you know Mencken from his journalism, you'll expect explosive prose and robust misanthropy, but you'll only find the former here. This is indeed a happier Mencken, but really it's no loss to the reader. This book must be, I think, one of the great American autobiographies. It's hugely fun. It should be noted that the book contains a great deal of casual racism that will offend our present sensibilities. Nonetheless, for its prose, its comic qualities, and as a window into the good and the bad of American life in the late nineteenth-century, *Happy Days* is worth the time.

Matthew Dambro says

Absolutely delightful first volume of Mencken's autobiography. A more caustic wit never appeared in the history of American journalism. This volume of the trilogy traces what can only be described as an idyllic childhood in late nineteenth century Baltimore. The pages turn themselves and the events and people are described with a love that even his world famous biting satire cannot hide. He is a curmudgeon's curmudgeon.

Tony says

HAPPY DAYS. (1940). H. L. Mencken. ****.

Mencken (1880-1956) had published a fragment of his memoirs in *The New Yorker*, and was encouraged by their editor to expand the writing to book form. He did better than that; he expanded the work to three separate titles, of which this is the first. All of the titles are available in the recent publication of The Days Trilogy from The Library of America because I feel the pressure of a pile of library books that may not allow me to cover all three in time. In this first volume, Mencken essentially covers his boyhood in Baltimore in the 1890s. It struck me that his life was very much like that I grew up with in the 1940s in Philadelphia. He grew up in a middle-class neighborhood. His father owned a cigar business and sold his wares through a local store and one in Washington. The city at the time was composed of mini-neighborhoods where most of the action occurred at the borders. Each neighborhood consisted of enclaves of various ethnic groups, who fanatically defended their territories. Most of the boys, however, managed to grow up playing the same games and going to the same style schools that most of us are familiar with. Boys then were pressured into joining 'gangs', though they were much different than gangs of today – they were more social clubs. Mencken worked in his father's store and managed to get a few trips to Washington to visit the other store,

too. His was a typical boyhood. The only difference that I could find was that police were objects of fear and distrust in his day, although that changed as he grew up. He also described his early ambitions to become either a chemist or a writer. After forays into both fields, he turned out to become a writer, primarily for a variety of newspapers. His reading was limited as a child, but he did manage to find his 'favorite' book: Huckleberry Finn. This volume was written in a lively, readable style, with glimmers of Mencken's wit peeking through. Recommended.

Glenn Robinson says

This is an amazing book about the life and times of HL Mencken in Baltimore during the 1880's. Aspects of life and living that we do not know of or think of nowadays- no phones, no tv, no automobiles...no texting, tweeting....back when kids played outside until dark-games that I had heard of and forgotten about it-leap frog, for instance. He shared many stories of adults in the neighborhood who had served in the Civil War- Whites and 'Afriamericans.' He shared stories of taking the train to visit Washington, DC, which was one of the first cities with pavement-white pavement, which was too bright in the summer to be around.

Paul Bauer says

A surprisingly warm and affectionate account of his childhood. Perhaps the most entertaining childhood memoir I've read.

Peter says

Mencken's childhood memories are wonderful for two chief reasons: as excavations of the lost world of comfortable German-American Baltimoreans of the 1880s, and for the incredible vigor that HLM got into his prose.

HLM is, I think, more notable for his talent as a sentence-crafter than to any claims to wisdom, and we are treated to some beauties:

On his baby fat: "This adiposity passed off as I began to run about, and from the age of six onward I was rather skinny, but toward the end of my twenties my cross-section again became a circle, and at thirty I was taking one of the first anti-fat cures, and beating it by sly resorts to malt liquor."

On his father's (who owned a cigar factory) professional palaver: "They fell to talking of the illustrious personages they were constantly meeting in Washington - Senators who had not been sober for a generation, Congressmen who fought bartenders and kicked the windows out of night-hacks, Admirals in the Navy who were reputed to be four-, five- and even six-bottle men, Justices of the Supreme and other high courts who were said to live on whiskey and chewing tobacco alone."

These quotations capture the spirit of Happy Days - cynical and critical, but pleasantly entertained by the faults of the world. It's a deeply conservative mindset. HLM critiques not because he wishes to revise the world, but because there is so much entertainment in doing so. The pleasure in reading Happy Days is only alloyed by his treatment of blacks. While I wouldn't expect Mencken to be politically correct (or even

generous), it is fair to expect him to have been as critical and clear-eyed towards racial stereotypes as he was towards most things. Afterall, Mencken did famously excoriate the Klan when it surged in the twenties. He was not a standard-issue bigot. Instead, Happy Days' frequent accounts of young HLM's black acquaintances do little to rise above pernicious southern tropes.

(I read this one in the Library of America's collection of HLM's memoires, which includes his appendecized revisions - "Days Revisited." Days Revisited is probably only required for the completist who needs a list of every one of HLM's childhood neighbors and the history of their progeny, eg, but it is a useful account of which of HLM's relatives he believed were stupid, nincompoops, idiotic, etc.)

nobody says

this was a lot better then the Choice Of Days collection, which only has about a third of each of the Days books.

Alger says

Great reading.

A man who knew what words meant describing scenes of his happy and prosperous childhood. Told with wit and ironic nostalgia, but most of all told with unblinking honesty.

Fair Warning: What will appall those who have not dipped before into the rich stream of benevolent racism that essentially defines American Letters from the Colonial Period straight through to the Civil Rights Era, is how casually offensive racial and ethic tags are dropped into a story, sprinkled in by the author like a cook adds salt to a dish. Mencken was no saint, he was solidly a man of the South writing to people who thought as he did and that populace was not going to gag on an offensive slang reference to a man's color, indeed most humor in the 1920s REQUIRED offensive racial caricatures. I refuse to defend Mencken on this point, and not just because I don't believe he would want me to. Cynical humanism is woven tightly throughout Mencken's worldview, and for a man so contemptuous of the Boobooisee and their utter lack of self awareness this blind spot of his that allows him to denigrate the powerless can be extremely jarring. It probably has a lot to do with why he is almost ignored today as a man of letters. I will not defend Mencken, but if there is any small grace to his approach to writing that might allow us to forgive him his slurs, it is that like in early Twain, he was an equal opportunity slanderer who loved and despised all humanity greatly and in equal measures. Unlike Twain, however, Mencken never grew past the habit of seeing the other. I have read too much literature from this period to continue to be shocked by the habits of a writer who died before casual racism became taboo.

So I like the book despite this massive flaw, not because of it.
