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Biography

The Economist Book of Obituaries
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For generations, obituary notices in newspapers and magazines soberly noted the passing of the newsworthy—statesmen, plutocrats, and other pillars of the community, along with famous entertainers, artists, socialites and the like—summing up their subjects' lives in a factual, decorous way. A couple of decades ago, the obituary began to be seen as a concise form all its very own, a sort of biographical sonnet where wry wit and colorful detail spiced up boilerplate facts like age and surviving family. Today, no longer just an announcement of death, the obit has acquired new cachet.

The Economist was founded in 1843, but this distinguished British weekly only published its first obituary in 1995 and ever since has confined itself to just one per issue. What it lacks in comprehensiveness, however, it makes up with its wide variety of subjects, and this fascinating book culls more than 200 of the most outstanding: each a vivid thumbnail of a life, and, taken as a whole, a slightly eccentric, impressionistic history of the past hundred years or so.

Selected by Keith Colquhoun and Ann Wroe, *The Economist*'s obituary editors since the page was initiated, the collection ranges the globe, and doesn't even limit itself to the human race: one of the most charming entries memorializes Alex, the articulate African Gray parrot who helped pioneer our understanding of animal intelligence. The book's alphabetical organization produces unexpected juxtapositions, as when four contiguous pieces zip us from novelist Saul Bellow to director Ingmar Bergman to Bip, the clown created by legendary French mime Marcel Marceau, to Jean Bedel Bokassa, Emperor of Central Africa, whose lunatic whimsies seem funny until we learn of his arbitrary, barbaric cruelty.

Elsewhere we meet centenarian veterans of the First World War, and one of the Japanese soldiers who held out on isolated Pacific islands for decades after the Second. Rosa Parks is commemorated with appropriate respect, Anna Nicole Smith rather less so. The book offers up a

smattering of Royals, from Princess Margaret to Marie-José, last queen of Italy, and Henri d'Orleans, pretender to the throne of France until his death in 1999. Scores of other capsule biographies explore every continent and just about every occupation known to mankind, each granted a two-page spread featuring a photograph and four columns of description that provides context and anecdotes as well as vital statistics.

Because this is a British book in origin, it includes dozens of men and women more or less unfamiliar to American readers, which injects an enjoyable sense both of discovery and of cosmopolitanism. *The Economist Book of Obituaries* combines a dash of irreverence with the thoroughly professional skill of long-seasoned journalists, and while not by any stretch a systematic Who's Who, it is both informative and a delight to browse.

Peyton Moss