
With a Foreword by Russell Baker Anecdotal, inspiring, frequently amusing, and elegantly concise, the obituary page of The New York Times has earned a huge following. The Last Word is a fascinating compilation of 100 of the most colorful, entertaining, and touching obits that have appeared in the last few years. The collection deliberately omits celebrities to concentrate on an eclectic mix of lesser-known men and women whose compelling lives have often changed the world they lived in. You may not have heard of Julian Hill, but he changed your life as the inventor of nylon. You’ll meet others like him: a quiet man who braved the hostility of racists to integrate the University of Georgia; a woman who turned chopped liver into a million-dollar business; the man who gave the Beat Generation its very name; and a reclusive woman who turned a $5,000 nest egg into a $22 million fortune that she left to a school she never attended. The collection also includes commentary by some of the Times’ finest writers and contributors such as Jules Feiffer, William E. Geist, James Gleick, Charlayne Hunter-Gault, Anna Quindlen, William Styron, and Wendy Wasserstein.

My Personal Review:
I teach Memoir Writing to local seniors and I routinely use this book as an example of outstanding biography. It’s one thing to write a 250 word bio but quite another, and much more demanding, to pen a few-hundred-word last goodbye to someone and do it with panache. The NY Times has three books of obituaries, this is the most recent. The quality of the writing is, in many cases, superior to anything in the rest of the newspaper (all the obits here were published in the Times). I especially like the reviews of Robert McG Thomas, who died within the past year at age 60. His obituaries deserved a Pulitzer. His obits are worth the price of the book. Everybody deserves a last word. These obits are not just about famous people but about average joes and Janes who have been extraordinary human
beings. I'd even recommend this book for spiritual reading because the lives here are inspirational. I teach writing and am always on the lookout for examples of prose that will knock my socks off. This is one helluva book.

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