Biography audiobook scripts

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The Longest Silence

Science, inventors · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 1 minute

[Mid-book — the winter of 1917; Tesla is sixty-one, nearly bankrupt, alone in a Manhattan hotel room]

By the time Nikola Tesla moved into the Hotel St. Regis, most of the world had stopped listening to him. Edison had won the public battle. Marconi had claimed the Nobel. The Wardenclyffe Tower — that great dreamed instrument of global wireless communication — was being torn down that same year for scrap, to settle his debts.

He fed pigeons from his window ledge each morning with the care of a man who had decided that kindness, at least, was still available to him. Hotel staff remembered him spending hours with one particular bird, a white female with grey-tipped wings, talking to her gently, the way a person talks to someone they have known a long time.

What Tesla understood, and what his century could not yet build the tools to prove, would take forty more years to be confirmed. The tragedy of his life was not that he was wrong. It was that he was right at the wrong time — and had no talent whatsoever for pretending otherwise.

Fire and Forward

Civil rights, abolition · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

[Opening — the night of her first escape, September 1849]
She left in the dark, which was the only time that belonged to her. The plantation of Edward Brodess sat quiet under a harvest moon, and Araminta Ross — who would become Harriet Tubman, who would become Moses, who would become a name that entire governments would both fear and fail to catch — walked north for the first time in her life.
She was approximately twenty-seven years old. She had a head injury from childhood that caused her to fall suddenly unconscious, without warning, sometimes in the middle of a thought. She had no papers, no money, and no map. She had hypersomnia, narcolepsy, and what she called "visions." She also had a precision of purpose so total that it functioned, in the field, like a sixth sense.
She would go back. That is the part people forget, or perhaps find hardest to hold. She crossed the line to freedom and then — thirteen times — she went back to bring others with her. She said later that on her railroad she never ran her train off the track, and she never lost a passenger. The record bears her out.

Pale Blue Ambition

Science, space · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

[Late in book — 1994; Sagan is ill; the Voyager image has just been taken]
Carl Sagan had been pushing for years to get NASA to turn the Voyager 1 camera around. The engineers resisted — there was nothing scientifically useful to photograph from that distance, and the maneuver risked damage. Sagan kept asking. In February 1990, six billion kilometres from Earth, the camera turned.
The resulting photograph showed Earth as a fraction of a single pixel — a pale blue dot suspended in a sunbeam, smaller than a mote of dust against the black. Sagan stared at it for a long time. Then he wrote what many consider the finest paragraph he ever produced: a meditation on human vanity, on the smallness of our conflicts and the magnitude of our opportunity, on what it means to be here at all.
He died six years later, at sixty-two. He did not live to see the Mars Pathfinder land, or the first confirmed exoplanet, or any of the hundred confirmations that followed his decades of argument. But he had turned the camera around. He had made the cosmos something people felt rather than merely calculated. That, his colleagues said, was perhaps harder.

The Examined Life

Art, Mexico · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

[Midpoint — the bus accident, 1925; Frida is eighteen]

On September 17th, 1925, a wooden bus collided with a streetcar in Mexico City. The handrail that impaled Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo Calderón entered her left hip and exited the other side. She sustained a shattered spinal column, collarbone, ribs, pelvis, and right leg. Her right foot was crushed. She was eighteen years old and had been planning to become a doctor.

She spent a month in hospital, much of it in a full-body cast, staring at the ceiling. Her mother commissioned a mirror to be fitted above the bed. Frida began to paint herself. She would go on to paint herself thirty-five more times — not, as she explained, out of vanity, but because she was "the subject I know best." She was also, for much of her life, the subject she could reach.

The accident did not make Frida Kahlo. But it made the conditions under which she had no choice but to become her. Pain, she said, was not what her paintings were about. They were about the fact that she had survived it. The difference, in every canvas, is visible.

Blueprint

Politics, British history · Adult (30-45) · Neutral British · 90 seconds

[The wilderness years, 1932 — Churchill is fifty-eight, out of power, widely considered finished]

There is a photograph taken of Churchill at Chartwell during the early 1930s that his biographers return to often. He is laying bricks. Not supervising their laying, not gesturing toward the project — laying them himself, with a trowel, in a flat cap, with the focused economy of a man who has decided that the thing in front of him is the only thing. He had taught himself bricklaying at fifty-four. He found it, he wrote, "soothing to the agitated mind."

He was writing four books, painting nearly one hundred canvases, and warning anyone who would listen about Germany. Almost nobody was listening. The press called him a warmonger. His own party considered him an embarrassment. He drank too much, spent too much, and was in serious financial difficulty. He was also, by every account, painting some of his best work.

What the wilderness years produced in Winston Churchill was not patience — he had none of that. They produced something more durable: a man who had rehearsed failure often enough that when the genuine crisis arrived, he was not afraid of it. He had already spent a decade in the dark. He knew how to work there.

The Weight of Numbers

Science, LGBTQ history · Adult (40-55) · Neutral British · 90 seconds

[Near the end — 1952; Turing is forty, prosecution imminent]

Alan Turing reported his own burglary to the police in January 1952. A man he had briefly befriended had sent an acquaintance to steal from him. Turing gave the officers a full account, including, with characteristic directness, the nature of his relationship with the original acquaintance. He appeared to have no understanding of what he had just done. Or perhaps — and this possibility deserves to be held — he understood perfectly, and considered it irrelevant.

He was charged with gross indecency. He accepted chemical castration rather than prison, on the grounds that prison would interrupt his work. He continued to work. He wrote papers. He ran. He kept his appointment book. His friends said he seemed, through all of it, genuinely puzzled by the state's interest in his private life — not offended, not frightened. Puzzled.

He had broken the Enigma cipher. He had invented the architecture of every computer that would follow. He had written the foundational paper on artificial intelligence. The government that prosecuted him had relied on his work to win its war. He died in 1954. The inquest returned a verdict of suicide. The apple beside his bed had been bitten into. Whether it was poisoned was never tested. He had spent his life asking machines whether they could think. The question of what his death meant was left, like so many of his problems, to us.

Unbroken Ground

Literature, American history · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

[The years of silence — ages 7 to 13; she has stopped speaking entirely]
For five years, Marguerite Johnson did not speak. She was seven when it started. Something had happened to her — something the adults around her handled with the particular mixture of fury and shame that communities use when they cannot protect their children and cannot bear to look at what that cost. She went quiet. Not as a choice, exactly. As a conclusion.
A woman named Bertha Flowers changed this. She invited the silent girl into her home and read to her — aloud, with feeling, with the particular seriousness of someone who believes literature is not decoration. She gave her books and asked her to read them back, to use her voice, to understand that the words of others could become the scaffold on which you built your own.
Maya Angelou — the name she would take, the voice that would become one of the most recognized in American letters — emerged from those five silent years with a precision of language that people who have always spoken freely rarely develop. She had listened, for five years, with everything she had. When she spoke again, it was with the authority of someone who had learned that words, used well, are the one thing that cannot be taken back.

First Principles

Science · Adult (40-55) · Neutral British · 90 seconds

[Opening — the shed in Paris, 1898; Marie and Pierre Curie at work]

The shed was not much. A leaking roof, inadequate ventilation, temperatures that dropped below freezing in winter. Marie Curie worked in it every day for four years. She was processing pitchblende — tonnes of it, hauled in by wheelbarrow — searching for the element she was certain was there. Her hands were permanently scarred by the time she found it. She carried the burns for the rest of her life, not knowing what was causing them.

The element was radium. The discovery earned her the first of her two Nobel Prizes. She remains the only person to have won the award in two different scientific disciplines. She is also the only woman in the photograph taken at the 1911 Solvay Conference of physics, in which two dozen of the world's greatest scientists are assembled. She sits at the table, bent over a page beside Henri Poincaré, looking not at the camera but at the work.

She knew the work would outlast the exclusions. She was correct. Her notebooks are still radioactive. They are kept in lead-lined boxes at the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Researchers who wish to read them must sign a liability waiver. Even now, a century later, she requires a form of protective equipment to approach.

The Distance

Philosophy, feminism · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

[Midpoint — 1949, the publication of The Second Sex; immediate reaction]
The reviews were extraordinary in their venom. François Mauriac, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, wrote to one of the book's editors that Simone de Beauvoir's vagina had no secrets from him. The Vatican placed it on the Index of Forbidden Books. Albert Camus said it made French men look ridiculous. He did not explain why this was the book's problem.
De Beauvoir had expected controversy. She had not expected the specific quality of male panic the book produced — the way it made men reach for insult in the first sentence, before the argument, as though the argument were not worth engaging and the woman making it was. She observed this with a cool interest that she admitted, privately, cost her considerably.
The Second Sex would sell twenty-two thousand copies in its first week. It would be translated into forty languages. It would be cited by virtually every significant feminist theorist who followed. What de Beauvoir had done, with characteristic precision, was simply describe the structure of a thing that everyone could see and no one had yet named. The fury, she noted, was the confirmation.

Long Walk

Politics, South Africa · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

[Robben Island, 1966 — the lime quarry years]

The lime quarry was designed to break men. The work was punishing, the sun reflected off the white stone damaged the eyes, and the guards had instructions to ensure that the prisoners understood, at all times, the nature of their situation. Nelson Mandela had been on Robben Island for two years. He would be a prisoner for twenty-four more years, sixteen of them on this island.

What happened in the quarry was not what the quarry was designed to produce. The prisoners — lawyers, doctors, teachers, activists — held seminars in the stone dust. They debated philosophy, economics, and law. They argued about the movement, about strategy, about what kind of South Africa they intended to build when they were free, if they were free, which was not a given. Mandela taught others. Others taught him. The guards watched and did not understand what they were seeing.

Years later, Mandela said that prison had given him something he might not otherwise have developed: time to think without the pressure of consequence. He had been forced, by circumstance, to become patient. He did not recommend the method. But he acknowledged the result. The man who walked out of Victor Verster Prison in 1990 was not the man who had been imprisoned. He was, in almost every measurable way, larger.

No Shortcuts

Civil rights, abolition · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

[The pivotal moment — learning to read, age twelve, against explicit prohibition]
The law in Maryland was clear: teaching an enslaved person to read was a criminal offense. Hugh Auld, when he discovered his wife was giving the boy lessons, stopped them at once, and explained why in words the boy never forgot. Give a slave an inch, Auld said, and he will take an ell. Learning would spoil him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave.
Frederick Douglass, who was approximately twelve years old, heard this and understood it as the most useful piece of information anyone had ever given him. He wrote later that in those words he saw "the white man's power to enslave the black man." He also saw its inverse. He spent the next three years teaching himself to read from scraps, from white children's discarded lesson books, from any printed surface he could find.
The Narrative he would eventually write — published in 1845, a bestseller on two continents — was not the work of a man who had been given literacy. It was the work of a man who had stolen it from a system designed to keep it from him, and who wrote with the urgency of someone who knew exactly what it had cost. No sentence in it was easy to write. None of them read that way.

The Craft and the Cost

Art, science · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

[Midpoint — the notebooks; what he finished vs. what he didn't]
Leonardo da Vinci left approximately seven thousand pages of notes. He left perhaps twenty completed paintings. The disproportion is instructive. He was interested in everything — anatomy, hydraulics, optics, botany, architecture, music, the flight mechanics of birds, the movement of water around obstacles, the nature of shadows in different atmospheric conditions — and in completing almost nothing.
His patrons despaired of him. Lodovico Sforza waited sixteen years for an equestrian statue that was never finished. The monks of San Donato could not compel him to complete the altarpiece they had commissioned. He would begin a project with an intensity that looked like certainty, and then abandon it at the moment it stopped being a question and became merely an answer.
What the notebooks contain is not failure. They contain the most complete record we have of a human mind refusing to choose a single subject. He wrote in mirror script, from right to left, which some scholars attribute to left-handedness and others to a desire for privacy. Either way, to read him you must hold his words to a mirror. It seems appropriate. Leonardo spent his life turning things around to see what the other side looked like.

The Speed of Thought

Science, computing · Adult (40-55) · Neutral British · 90 seconds

[Opening — 1833; Ada Byron is seventeen, meets Charles Babbage for the first time]
The Difference Engine was the size of a wardrobe and had not yet been built. Charles Babbage kept the demonstration model in his drawing room and showed it to selected visitors on Saturday evenings — scientists, poets, politicians, anyone he considered worth impressing. Most visitors saw a clever machine. Ada Byron, aged seventeen, saw something else.
She asked Babbage to show her the drawings for the full version. She asked questions that he later said no one else had asked — not about how it worked mechanically, but about what it could do beyond calculation. Could it compose music? Could it produce algebraic expressions? Could it, in some meaningful sense, be instructed? Babbage wrote to a friend afterward that the young woman had "translated" his engine in her mind into something larger than he had imagined it to be.
Ada Lovelace died at thirty-six. In 1843, nine years before her death, she wrote the document that is now considered the first computer program — an algorithm for the Analytical Engine that had not yet been built, to compute numbers that had not yet been computed, for a machine that would not exist in her lifetime. She signed her published work with her initials only. She was the daughter of Byron. She was the mother of something that had no name yet.

The Wound and the Bow

Literature · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

[Late in book — 1961; the writing has stopped; the end is approaching]

By 1961, Ernest Hemingway had stopped being able to write. Not intermittently, not seasonally — permanently, which he knew, though he spent the last two years of his life refusing to accept it. The electroconvulsive therapy he underwent at the Mayo Clinic destroyed the memory he had been using to complete the memoir that would become A Moveable Feast. He wept about this openly. He said there was no point to anything if he could not write.

His biographers argue about the causes: the accidents, the alcoholism, the depression that ran through his family like a wire. What they agree on is the cruelty of the particular failure. Hemingway had built a style on compression — on the theory that you could leave things out and the reader would feel them anyway, that the dignity of movement came from what was not said. In the end he could not leave things out because he could not remember them.

He died in July 1961. He was sixty-one. He left behind a body of work that changed the way English prose moved — shorter sentences, harder nouns, the loaded space between what characters say and what they mean. The style he invented has been imitated so many times that it no longer sounds like an invention. That, usually, is the sign that something has actually worked.

Still Moving

Civil rights · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

[The evening of December 1st, 1955 — correcting the mythology]

The story that Rosa Parks was tired from work and simply didn't want to move has been told so often that it has become a kind of comfortable fiction — the spontaneous act of an exhausted seamstress. Rosa Parks herself spent years correcting it. She was tired, she said, but not in her feet. She was tired of giving in.

She was, at the time of her arrest, secretary of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP. She had attended the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee that summer, where civil rights strategy was discussed and planned. She had been removed from a Montgomery bus before, twelve years earlier, by the same driver who arrested her in 1955. She had thought about what she would do if it happened again. When it happened again, she knew.

The simplification of Rosa Parks into a tired woman serves a particular purpose: it makes her act seem accidental. Accidental acts can be admired without being examined. What she actually did was considerably more difficult: she made a deliberate choice, in full knowledge of the cost, in a moment she had — in some sense — been preparing for her entire adult life. That version requires something of the people who hear it. That is probably why it is less often told.

The Other Side of the Sky

Science, space · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

[The John Glenn orbit, 1962 — what "check the girl's numbers" actually meant]
Before John Glenn would board Friendship 7 for the first American orbital spaceflight, he made one request. The electronic computers had run the trajectory calculations. Glenn did not entirely trust them. He asked NASA to have the numbers verified by hand — by the mathematician he trusted. "Get the girl," he said. "If she says the numbers are good, I'm ready to go."
The girl was Katherine Johnson. She was forty-three years old. She held degrees in mathematics and French, had graduated summa cum laude at eighteen, and had been working in the Guidance and Navigation Department at NASA Langley since 1953. She was also required, under the still-active racial segregation policies of Virginia, to use a separate bathroom, a separate dining room, and separate coffee urns from her white colleagues.
She checked the numbers. They were good. Glenn orbited the Earth three times and returned safely. Katherine Johnson went back to her desk. She would continue at NASA for three more decades, calculating trajectories for the Apollo missions and the Space Shuttle program. She was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2015, aged ninety-seven. When asked how she had navigated a career built on being overlooked, she said she had simply done the work. "You are no better than anyone else," her father had told her, "and no one is better than you." She had taken this literally. It had proved, over a career of sixty years, entirely sufficient.

What Remains

Politics, India · Mature (55+) · Neutral British · 90 seconds

[The Salt March, 1930 — the walk to Dandi]

On the morning of March 12th, 1930, Mohandas Gandhi left the Sabarmati Ashram with seventy-eight followers to walk two hundred and forty miles to the sea. His declared intention was to make salt — an act that violated the British Imperial Salt Laws, under which Indians were forbidden from producing or selling salt and required to buy it, taxed, from their colonial government. The viceroy was advised not to worry. He did not worry. Gandhi was sixty years old, walked with a staff, and wore sandals and a dhoti. He stopped in every village along the route, spoke to the people, and asked them to join him. The crowd grew. By the time he reached the sea twenty-four days later, he bent down, picked up a handful of wet salt from the beach, and held it up. Across India, the signal was understood. Millions began to make their own salt.

The British arrested sixty thousand people over the following months. They did not arrest Gandhi immediately, which was a strategic error — leaving him free meant leaving the image of an old man with a handful of salt as the defining one of the resistance. He had understood something that the Empire had not: that the act mattered less than the image of the act. He had given the world a picture it could not unknow.

Against the Current

Literature · Adult (40-55) · Neutral British · 90 seconds

[Midpoint — the writing of Mrs Dalloway, 1923–24; her working method]
Virginia Woolf wrote standing up, at a writing board she had built to her own specifications, in a lodge at the bottom of the garden she used specifically for work. She wrote with a dipping pen in purple ink, on cheap paper, and revised in pencil. She wrote in the mornings and read in the afternoons and walked — long, specific walks that she described in her diary as essential to the composition of sentences. She said she worked out problems in prose while moving.
Mrs Dalloway was built from a technical experiment she called the tunnelling method — digging back through a character's past from the present moment, so that the reader discovered history through the sieve of now. It was a formal invention. It solved a problem that the traditional Victorian novel, with its omniscient narrator and sequential chronology, had always created: the flatness of a life when told in order.
She published nine novels, several essay collections, and kept a diary for twenty-seven years that is now considered a masterwork in its own right. She struggled with what her century called neurasthenia and what ours would call bipolar disorder, and managed it — when she could — through the discipline of work. The work is what she trusted. The walks were for the sentences. The sentences were for everything else.

The Proof

Science · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

[1919 — the solar eclipse confirms the theory; Einstein becomes a public figure overnight]

On November 7th, 1919, the Times of London ran a headline that read: "Revolution in Science — New Theory of the Universe — Newtonian Ideas Overthrown." The photographs taken during the solar eclipse of May that year had confirmed Einstein's general theory of relativity. Light bent around the sun exactly as he had predicted. Newton's mechanics, which had described the physical world for two hundred and thirty years, had been superseded.

Einstein was forty years old. He became, within weeks, the most famous scientist in the world — then, very quickly, simply famous in the way that transcends any particular field. Newspapers printed his photograph. He received thousands of letters from the public, many of them from people who wanted him to explain the theory and many more from people who wanted to tell him about their own theories, their personal experiences of time, their dreams.

He answered a remarkable number of them. He had grown up being told he was slow, possibly learning disabled, certainly not academically promising. He had failed his entrance examinations. He had worked in a patent office because no university would hire him. What the letters gave him, he told a colleague, was a reminder that curiosity about the universe was not a specialist condition. It was, as far as he could tell, simply human. He considered that both the most hopeful and the most useful thing he had ever learned.

The Mountain Refuses

Environment, Africa · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

[Mid-book — 1977; the first trees; what a tree actually means]

Wangari Maathai's insight was so simple that it took years for institutions to take it seriously. The women of rural Kenya were walking further each year to find firewood and clean water. The soil was eroding. The rivers were silting. The land was becoming less

and less able to support the people who lived on it. The cause was deforestation. The solution was trees. She gave women seedlings and taught them to plant them. She paid them for every tree that survived.

The Green Belt Movement was founded in 1977 with seven trees planted in Kamukunji Park, in Nairobi. By the time she won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 — the first African woman to receive it — the movement had planted over fifty-one million trees. The Nobel Committee recognized something that environmental organizations had been slow to see: that planting trees is not a horticultural act. It is a political one. It is a claim on the future. It says: we intend to be here.

The Kenyan government under Daniel arap Moi beat her, tear-gassed her, imprisoned her, had her characterized as insane in the national press. She planted more trees. She said later that the trees had taught her something about resistance: you do not argue with a tree. You do not convince it. You simply make the conditions for it to grow, and then it grows. She had decided to apply the same logic to herself. The mountain, she was fond of saying, does not negotiate. It simply refuses to move.

Twenty-Two on the Beach

Exploration, Antarctic · Adult (40-55) · Irish (light) · 90 seconds

[Mid-book: April 1916. The Endurance has sunk, and twenty-eight men have reached Elephant Island]

Ernest Shackleton had brought every one of his men off the ice alive. Now he had to work out how to keep them that way. Elephant Island was a strip of rock and shingle at the edge of the Southern Ocean. No ship would come looking for them there. Nobody knew they were there at all.

The nearest place with people in it was the whaling station on South Georgia, eight hundred nautical miles away, across some of the worst sea on the planet. The only boat fit to try it was the James Caird, twenty-two and a half feet long, decked over with canvas and sealed with oil paint and seal blood.

He took five men. He left twenty-two behind under Frank Wild, with two upturned boats for a roof. The crossing took sixteen days. They landed on the wrong side of South Georgia, and three of them walked across its unmapped mountains for thirty-six hours to reach the station.

It took four attempts and more than three months to get back to Elephant Island. When the Chilean tug Yelcho finally came in, Shackleton stood in the bow and counted the figures on the beach.

There were twenty-two. Every one.

The British Hotel

Medicine, Caribbean · Adult (30–45) · Neutral British · 1 minute

[Opening: London, autumn 1854. Mary Seacole asks to be sent to the Crimea]

In the autumn of 1854, a Jamaican woman of nearly fifty went from office to office in London, asking to be sent to the war. Mary Seacole had nursed cholera patients in Panama and yellow fever patients in Jamaica. She had references. She was turned away, again and again, by people who did not feel the need to explain why.

So she paid her own passage. With a business partner, she built a store and canteen near Balaclava and called it the British Hotel. She sold meals and supplies to officers, and carried food and medicine to the wounded.

The war ended and left her bankrupt. She wrote a book about her life, and it sold. Supporters held a four-day festival to raise money for her. The army had not wanted her. The army, it turned out, remembered her.

Ten Pages From Madras

Science, mathematics · Adult (30-45) · Light Indian English · 90 seconds

[Opening: Madras, January 1913. A shipping clerk posts a letter to Cambridge]

In January 1913, a clerk at the Madras Port Trust sent a letter to a mathematician in Cambridge he had never met. He was twenty-five. He had no degree. He had failed his college examinations, more than once, because he would not stop doing mathematics long enough to study anything else. He had taught himself from one borrowed textbook, a dense list of several thousand results, and then gone far beyond it.

The letter ran to about ten pages, and most of it was formulas. No proofs. Just results, set down one after another, as if they were obvious.

G. H. Hardy very nearly put it aside. Letters from amateurs claiming great discoveries arrived all the time. But he kept reading, and he took the pages to his colleague John Littlewood, and the two of them worked through them. Some of the results were already known. Some were wrong. And some, Hardy concluded, had to be true, because nobody would have had the imagination to invent them.

Srinivasa Ramanujan arrived in Cambridge in 1914. Within four years he was a Fellow of the Royal Society. He died in India in 1920, at thirty-two, and left behind notebooks that mathematicians are still working through today.

After Seventy

Art, Japan · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 1 minute

[Late in the book: Edo, around 1830. Hokusai is past seventy]

Katsushika Hokusai was past seventy when he made the picture the world knows him by. A great wave, clawed at the crest, about to fall on three boats of rowers, with Mount Fuji small and still in the distance.

By then he had been working for more than half a century. He had changed his artist's name more than thirty times, and moved house, by most accounts, over ninety. He was not a man who settled.

A few years later, in the afterword to a book of views of Fuji, he wrote that nothing he had made before the age of seventy was really worth noticing, and that he hoped to keep improving past a hundred. He was, by every account, serious. He died in 1849, at eighty-eight, still working.

The Same Gate

Aviation, civil rights · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

[Opening: Chicago, 1920. A manicurist decides she is going to fly]

In 1920, Bessie Coleman was working as a manicurist in a Chicago barbershop, listening to men back from the war talk about France. Some of them talked about the pilots. She decided she was going to be one.

No flying school in the United States would take her. She was a woman, and she was Black, and in 1920 either one was enough. So she took French classes at night, saved what she could, found backers, among them the publisher of the Chicago Defender, and in November she sailed for France.

She trained on the Somme estuary in planes made of wood and wire. In June 1921 she became the first African American woman to earn an international pilot's license.

Back home, she flew in air shows, doing loops and figure eights over crowds of thousands, who called her Queen Bess. And she used the only power a performer has. When she learned that one audience would be kept apart by race, she refused to fly until the organizers agreed that everyone would come in through the same gate.

She died in 1926, at thirty-four, when the plane she was rehearsing in went into a dive over Jacksonville. She had been planning to open a flying school. For people like her.

The Sixth Leaflet

War, resistance · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral British · 1 minute

[The end: Munich, 18 February 1943. The last leaflets]

On the morning of the eighteenth of February, 1943, Sophie Scholl and her brother Hans carried a suitcase of leaflets into the main building of the University of Munich. It was the sixth leaflet their small group had written. They called themselves the White Rose.

They left stacks outside the lecture halls while classes were on. Then Sophie pushed the last of the pile over the balustrade of an upper floor, and the pages fell into the hall below.

A caretaker saw them. They were held until the Gestapo came.

Four days later, they were tried before the People's Court and sentenced to death, with their friend Christoph Probst. They were executed that same afternoon. Sophie was twenty-one. The sixth leaflet was smuggled out of Germany, and later that year Allied planes dropped copies of it over German cities.

Six Dots

Invention, disability history · Adult (30-45) · Neutral American · 90 seconds

[Opening: Coupvray, France, 1812. A three-year-old in his father's workshop]

Louis Braille lost his sight to a tool that was never meant for him. He was three years old, playing in his father's harness workshop in the village of Coupvray, east of Paris, when an awl slipped and struck his eye. The wound became infected. The infection spread to the other eye. By the age of five, he was completely blind.

He was a bright child and a gifted musician. At ten, he won a place at the Royal Institute for Blind Youth in Paris. The school had only a handful of books for its pupils, printed in huge raised letters, heavy to carry and slow to read.

Then, in 1821, a former artillery captain named Charles Barbier came to demonstrate a system of raised dots, designed so that soldiers could read messages in the dark. It was clumsy. Twelve dots to a cell, based on sounds rather than spelling, and no punctuation.

Louis was twelve. He went to work on it. By fifteen, he had reduced it to six dots, a cell small enough to read under a single fingertip.

The Institute did not officially adopt his system until 1854. He had died two years earlier, at forty-three. But his pupils had been teaching it to one another for years.

The Cliffs at Lyme

Science, fossils · Adult (25-40) · Neutral British · 1 minute

[Opening: Lyme Regis, 1811. A girl and her brother on the cliffs]

Mary Anning was twelve when she and her brother Joseph dug a strange skeleton out of the cliffs near Lyme Regis. Joseph had found the skull. It took Mary months to find the rest. It was one of the first ichthyosaurs ever recognised by science.

The Annings were poor, and their father was dead. They sold fossils to tourists to pay the rent. Mary went out after winter storms, when the cliffs had slipped and fresh bones showed, and she knew that the same landslides could kill her. One very nearly did.

She found the first complete plesiosaur. She found the first pterosaur in Britain. Gentlemen scientists bought her finds and wrote the papers.

The Geological Society of London did not admit women. When she died in 1847, its president paid tribute to her anyway.

Twenty-Four Years to Mecca and Back

Travel, medieval world · Mature (55+) · Neutral British · 90 seconds

[Opening: Tangier, June 1325. A young scholar of law sets out on pilgrimage]

In June of 1325, a twenty-one-year-old named Ibn Battuta left his home in Tangier to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. He set out alone. He wrote later that leaving his parents was like a bird leaving its nest.

He came home twenty-four years later.

In that time he crossed North Africa, Arabia, Persia and Anatolia, sailed down the coast of East Africa, and went on through Central Asia. He served for years as a judge in Delhi, under the Sultan Muhammad bin Tughluq, and fell dangerously out of his favour. He was robbed, and shipwrecked, and married several times. He reached the Maldives, then, by his own account, China. Historians estimate he covered something like seventy thousand miles. He was, by any measure, the greatest traveller of his age.

Then he went out again, across the Sahara to the empire of Mali.

When he finally settled, the Sultan of Morocco asked him to tell his story to a young scholar named Ibn Juzayy, who wrote it down. The book they made is usually called simply the Rihla, the Journey. It is one of the richest first-hand records we have of the fourteenth-century world, from the Atlantic to the China Sea.

Ghost Gums

Art, Australia · Adult (40-55) · Australian · 90 seconds

[Mid-book: Central Australia, 1936 to 1959. The painter and the law]

Albert Namatjira learned watercolour in 1936, at thirty-four, while working as a guide and camel man for a visiting painter named Rex Battarbee. Namatjira was an Arrernte man from the Hermannsburg mission, west of Alice Springs. He had grown up in that country. He painted it like someone who knew every ridge by name.

His first solo exhibition, in Melbourne in 1938, sold out. Within a few years his red ranges and white ghost gums were hanging in homes right across Australia. He met the Queen. He was the most famous Aboriginal man in the country.

He was also, under Northern Territory law, a ward of the state. He could not freely buy land, or vote, or buy a drink.

In 1957 he and his wife, Rubina, were granted full citizenship, which was presented as an honour. It meant he could vote, and buy land, and buy a drink. His family, who were still wards, could not. And among his people, what you had, you shared. In 1958 he was convicted of supplying alcohol to a relative, and sentenced to six months with hard labour, reduced on appeal.

He served two months in custody. He died the following year, at fifty-seven.

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