

Six words to describe a life?

Can just six words sum up a life? That is the premise of an Internet challenge that resulted in thousands of submissions and recently the publication of a book.

“Not Quite What I Was Planning” is a collection of almost 1,000 of the best of these six-word memoirs.

The idea of describing a life in six words was launched online by the Smith Magazine website, whose motto is “Everyone has a story.”

This project is perfect for the Internet, which celebrates participation, pithiness, and personal sharing. Like the 140-character messages on “Twitter.”

“This book is a glorious mishmash,” the editors note in their introduction. “It’s a thousand little windows into humanity — six words at a time.”

I heartily agree with their assessment that the memoirs are “always entertaining, often inspiring, and totally addictive.”

We get surprisingly meaningful glimpse of the lives behind the six words. “Thought I would have more impact,” laments one person. Concludes another: “Cheated organizational systems but never people.”

Some of the memoirs are from the famous, like Stephen Colbert: “Well, I thought it was funny.”

Or from Dr. Jane Goodall: “Forest peace, sharing vision, always optimistic.”

“Fearlessness is the mother of reinvention,” says Arianna

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Huffington.

According to Joyce Carol Oates: “Revenge is living well, without you.”

But most of the memoirs are from ordinary folks who just wanted to share something about themselves — in six words.

The results are as diverse as people are.

From the disappointed: “Coulda, shoulda, woulda: a regretful life,” to the really satisfied: “I travelled each and every highway.”

Some could become new sayings, like: “Time heals all wounds? Not quite.”

Or how about? “Thought long and hard. Got migraine.”

Many are from people who are summing up a life well lived. From: “I’m not afraid of anything anymore,” to: “I wouldn’t change it a bit.”

Others, maybe not so much: “I watched a lot of television,” admits one.

And another: “Nothing

profound, I just sat around.”

Some people are finding their way: “Taking a lifetime to grow up.”

Others definitely have found it: “Now I blog and drink wine.”

Some clearly relish life: “Saw the sky and started walking.”

Some seem just content: “Became more like myself every year.”

Some are learning along the way: “Followed yellow brick road. Disappointment ensued.”

Or: “Followed rules, not dreams. Never again.”

As one might expect from the Internet, those submitting memoirs are often iconoclasts.

“I coloured outside of the lines,” states one. Adds another: “Asked to quiet down; spoke louder.”

Some comment on the little things that comprise a life: “Never liked the taste of beets.”

Others describe the big picture: “Afraid of everything. Did it anyway.”

Some combine both: “Seventy years, few tears, hairy ears.”

Or: “Found great happiness in insignificant details.”

And even: “Never really finished anything, except cake.”

Some are wistful at lost opportunities: “Extremely responsible, secretly longed for spontaneity.”

Or: “My life’s a bunch of almos.”

But others recall their

success: “Ran away with circus; never returned.”

Or note their turnarounds: “Marked time till 55, reborn thereafter.”

“My family is overflowing with therapists,” is but one of many comments about childhood, growing up and family life.

From the importance of birth order: “Middle of seven made me me,” to what lies ahead: “Afraid of becoming like my mother.”

Fortunately, things often work out in the long run: “I’m my mother and I’m fine.”

Or: “Overjoyed I’m not like my sister.”

One person takes the longer view: “Born at 23, childhood doesn’t count.”

“Not Quite What I Was Planning” is a wonderful publication.

It’s hard not to just keep turning the pages.

After all, waiting to be discovered are gems like: “Supported the sublime with uncurbed enthusiasm.”

These six-word memoirs follow in a long tradition of short accounts that sum up ourselves to one another.

Think of inscriptions on monuments, mottos on city crests, mission statements on organization reports, epitaphs on graves.

New technologies like texting and tweeting mean that we global citizens will communicate more and more in brief bursts.

A succinct (i.e. six-word) description of the book? Thoughtful, inspiring and lots of fun!