Some Suggested Practical first Steps in selecting from a myriad of Autobiographies on which to write a review for a class assignment by DBL

An assignment that requires a student to select an autobiography to review should put the genre of Autobiography in its historical context and show awareness for the genre of autobiography itself. If a student studies Homer's Iliad and Odyssey or the Epic of Gilgamesh or the Voyage of the Argo, the student should be aware that this work classifies in the area of Epic writing. If a student is studying Romantic poetry of a particular poet (Wordsworth, Byron, Keats, Shelley, etc.) they should know the characteristics of Romantic poetry versus classical or Baroque poetry. As a genre the Victorian novel will differ from the post-modern novel. Genre is a key way to understand the essence of any work, as noted by Aristotle in his work, the Poetics, that analyses the structure and characteristics of the genre of Tragedy. So too a student should be "aware" of the varied multi-faceted and diverse genre of different kinds of "autobiography" within the genre of autobiography. A librarians job in part is to serve to guide students to better understand a subject. Even if the student has translated the professors instructions in a skewed way, "go to the library and get an autobiography to review for a book report" what distinguishes the mediocre Lake Woebegone librarian from a good or excellent librarian is a librarian who knows the subject from a larger scope of seeing the forest for the trees, and thus able to guide the student better in selecting "what particular autobiography they might end up choosing for themselves." "To give the student what they want" should first recognize that many students in the library do not know exactly what they want and secondly to help the student clarify what they want once they have seen the topic from a wider perspective.

A student can pair down their topic by an ethnic group such as "Jewish autobiography." The student should be aware there is a growing body of academic interest in the genre of Jewish “self fashioning” that constitutes the genre of Jewish autobiographical memoir (Zichronot) which is also characterized by works such as: (1) Michael Stanislawski’s Autobiographical Jews: essays in Jewish self-fashioning (Seattle, 2004), (2) Jeremy Popkin’s History, historians, and Autobiography (Chicago, 2005), (3) David Carlson’s “Autobiography” in Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann (eds.), Reading Primary Sources (Ny, 2009), (4) Marcus Mosby’s Being for myself Alone (Stanford, California, 2006), (5) Alan Mintz’ Banished from their Father’s Table: loss of faith and Hebrew Autobiography (Bloomington, Indiana, 1989), etc (6) Mark Krupnick’s, Jewish writing and the deep places of the imagination, Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005); (7) Jeffrey Shandler’s, (ed) Awakening lives : autobiographies of Jewish youth in Poland before the Holocaust, (New Haven : Yale University Press, 2002); (8) Jocelyn Cohen’s, My future is in America : autobiographies of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, (New York : New York University Press, 2006); (9) Rosemary Howitz’, Elie Wiesel and the art of storytelling, (Jefferson, N.C. : McFarland & Co., 2006); (10) Zevi Scharfstein’s, ha-Ḥeder be-haye ‘amenu,([New York] : Shilo, 1943 [based on 44 Jewish autobiographies]); (11) Richard Kagen’s, Inquisitorial inquiries, (Baltimore, Md. : Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); (12) Louis Finkelstein’s (ed) Thirteen Americans : their spiritual autobiographies, (New York : Institute of Religious and Social Studies ; distributed by Harper & Brothers, 1953); (13) Steven Rubin, Writing our lives : autobiographies of American Jews, 1890-1990, (Philadelphia : Jewish Publication Society, 1991). Increasing interest in the subject of research in Autobiographies and Memoir is illustrated by library guides such as those found at: http://libguides.tourolib.org/autobiography. Library guides can be a starting point but not the last step in any students initial research, to help them see the broader topic structurally in its various modalities.
as well as direct them to good websites, bibliographies, and database for research in the area. The bibliographies on the TC. library guide may include many books not available in the TC. library system, but if a student has an idea of what is out there, that widens their consciousness of the topic from a more mature perspective. The student can also place an ILL for an autobiography they may find in the library guide bibliographies if they are motivated to do so. In the reference interview the librarian needs to clarify what pathways the student might pursue and first have the student specify exactly what they "interpret " the Professor assigned for the research topic. Thus a student often will come in and ask, "do you have any autobiographies" to which a good librarian in the reference interview will ask, "what particular genre of autobiography do you want to focus on?"

A next question will be to guide the student to perhaps include in their book report a brief overview of the genre of autobiography and why they may have picked their particular autobiography from the myriad sea of millions of autobiographies written in history. This is important because it gives perspective and shows maturity on the part of the student, regarding how and why they chose the autobiography they did for the assignment. The student can summarize “the state of knowledge” in the field and deploy footnotes to concisely and briefly situate the “constellations of thought” and opinion that exist amongst the scholarly community regarding autobiographies in general as a genre and also their own selected autobiography and its “interpretative reception history”. When searching a database like Proquest for book reviews on an autobiography the student can specify “document type”= Review. The student can also specify “peer reviewed scholarly articles” vs. trade or popular publications. While there may be scholarly attention to popular culture that is very academic, most professors prefer the use of peer reviewed sources. In vernacular these types of scholarly sources are up to the “grey poupon (mustard) and of high grade, a gold standard in academic scholarship. These sources have often gone through a committee of experts in the field who find that the article makes a positive contribution and furthers the state of knowledge on the topic further along. Peer reviewed articles often have footnotes and bibliographies, method, and in science often joint authorship of lab teams. Further in a database like Proquest the student can specify that they only want “full text” articles which save them the time of proceeding with what is called “the article linker process.” The article linker process is employed when a student wants an article full text either as pdf or html format. It requires at TC library homepage clicking on “EJOURNALS” plugging in the name of the journal, then honing in after a run of the journal across a scope of dates is generated in on YEAR-Volume-Issue-Pages, going from general to more specific.

The broader category of Jewish autobiography is described in the Yivo Encyclopedia (see :http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Autobiography_and_Memoir ) . In classifying an autobiography in its historical context one can ask, is it that of a

(a) “prominent political personality” like Golda Meier’s My Life, Chaim Weizmann’s autobiography or Menachem Begin’s White Nights,

(b) academic reminiscences as those of Gershom Scholem (From Berlin to Jerusalem) or Jacob Katz (1904-1998, With My own Eyes: The autobiography of a Historian), or Cyrus’ Adler’s autobiograpahy,
(c) or the numerous Yiddish autobiographys documented by the National Yiddish Book Center list (Bi, Biography, Autobiography, Memoirs, over 855 titles).

(d) rabbinic autobiography such as :(1) Eldad ha-Dani (Babylonia, 9th C.), (2) David ha-Reuveni , (3) Abraham Yagel's Gei hizzayon (16th C.), (4) Rabbi Yehudah Areyeh (1571-1643) of Modena's Hayyei Yehudah, (5) Rabbi Yosef Karo's Maggid Meisharim (Safed 16th C.), (6) Shlomo Molcho's Hayyat Kaneh, Hazon Shelomo Molcho, (7) Renegade Solomon Maimon Leibensgeschichte (1754-1800) and (8) Rabbi Eliyahu David Rabinowitz [known as ADERET] three part work: Seder Elayahu, Nefesh David, Achar Eliyahu. (8) Rabbi Yakov Emden’s Megilat Setarim, (9)Rabbi Chaim Vital’s Sefer HaHezyanaot and its commentary by Rabbi Yitzchak of Kamarno, (10) Rabbi Yitzchak Zilber’s Chtoby ty otaloya evreem.

(e) Is it champion womens' consciousness, issues, and concerns as can be found in works such as the Memoirs of Glukel of Hamelin, the autobiography of Donna Gracia, and documented by the JWA at: http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/autobiography-in-united-states and the spring 2004 issue of the journal Nashim at: https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/nashim/toc/nsh7.1.html

Thus as we can see "giving the student what they want in the area of autobiography" ideally requires knowing the types of autobiographies genre wise, and the sub-topic enumeration in this area, i.e the different types and classification of autobiographies. Guiding a student in the reference interview is also an art, as each reference interview is unique, for one never can totally predict what another human soul will say or is thinking. Thus a good reference librarian can and should never be replaced by an automated “user friendly system.” IF this were to occur, librarianship would be at risk. Not just from the perspective of providing good librarians for the public, but at risk for librarianships’ calling and mission to serve an educational purpose and “sheparding” the flock of knowledge seekers, into the wellsprings of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge.