Truth And The Art Of Memoir

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This past fall, I led a dozen students through a workshop in memoir writing, an intensive experience that made me reflect on the perils and rewards of the form. Whether discussing student work or that by contemporary masters like E.B. White and Vivian Gornick, we returned again and again to a central question: How do you transform the raw stuff of life in a way that makes it interesting for others, while remaining true to your experience? Like any good art, successful memoirs are the product of hard work and time. Lots of time.

For students, it meant learning how to handle the emotionally volatile aspects of their lives in order to gain perspective and self-knowledge. Sometimes they discovered how to find a "narrator" or "voice" that let them channel their experience with greater distance. At other times, it meant putting aside a project until they were ready to return to it.

A friend who helps edit Lilith magazine tells the story that for the longest time she couldn't understand why she didn't receive more submissions by child Holocaust survivors; then some years ago the floodgates broke open and the stories and essays poured in. "It's as if they had to finish raising their kids or complete their professional lives before they could allow themselves to start unpacking their earlier experience," she said. I've noticed this, too; my father's first cousin, who as a teenager survived the Warsaw Ghetto and the murder of her immediate family, was already in her 60s before she started telling her harrowing story to the larger world.

None of which is to say that terrific memoirs are solely the province of the mature writer. To read Lucy Grealy's "Autobiography of a Face" or parts of Nick Flynn's "Another Bull---- in Suck City" is to discover young writers transmuting their (often tragic) experience into poetry and wisdom. Even Oprah's latest book club pick, Elie Wiesel's seminal memoir "Night," was originally composed in Yiddish by the author when he was not even 30.

Thanks to James Frey's distortions in "A Million Little Pieces", it appears as if it's not just one best-selling memoir but also the entire form that is suddenly under fire. Like reality TV or Bush administration politicos, a new wave of memoirs published over the past decade are just the latest sign of a "relativistic culture," in the words of New York Times critic Michiko Kakutani, one which champions spin and distortion.

I don't disagree with Kakutani. Like any sane person, she finds herself living in an Orwellian "reality-based community" (as a presidential aide called the fourth estate back in 2004). But critics have been complaining for at least a decade that memoirs are terribly self-indulgent and narcissistic on the one hand, and that they play fast and loose with the truth on the other.

Since the form exploded in popularity during the 1990s, with the success of books like Mary Karr's "The Liar's Club" and Frank McCourt's "Angela's Ashes," some critics have equated success with some basic lack of artistic integrity. Then again, a string of scandals involving dubious memoirs such as Lillian Hellman's "Pentimento" and Benjamin Wilkomirski's notorious "Fragments" haven't exactly helped matters. Even very fine writers including Dave Eggers and Vivian Gornick have been implicated in the fray, charged with blending characters, distorting facts, making up scenes.

There's no doubt that as we plunge ever deeper into a world of relativism and spin, we must insist on the primacy of truth. Yet, surely there's a distinction between the manipulative distortion of an entire story to fit a preconceived pattern, and the artistic license that allows one to recapture the central truth about an experience while tailoring — or, yes, creating — minor details. What is important to remember is that memoir is a form that is not fiction, but not quite fact either; it lies somewhere between, where the experience of recollection is as integral to the story as the facts themselves.

Memoirists are bound to events in a way that novelists or poets are not. Mary Karr put it best in a New York Times Op-Ed, when she wrote that she wishes as a memoirist to remain "hamstrung by objective truth." It's a telling phrase. Writers don't need to wait forever to tell their stories; they need only live long enough to learn how to honor the facts. As Elie Wiesel and others have shown, this wisdom can come at any age. ■

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