

Signature's



GUIDE TO

Memoir Writing



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Striking a Chord: The Key to Harmony and Music in Writing

by PAMELA DES BARRES

It certainly helps in my writing workshops that many of my students have read my two memoirs, *I'm With the Band* and *Take Another Little Piece of My Heart*. My love of music permeates every page and draws kindred spirits into my holy passion for what was once called the devil's music.

I was tossed, turned, and molded by the rock and roll that grew me up — the hot beat, pounding bass, the insistent screaming guitar — and Bob Dylan’s words stinging me into a brash new reality. “You shouldn’t let other people get your kicks for you,” he demanded, and I was immersed and electrified, the way I feel standing in front of a Van Gogh painting, entering the swirl and majesty of his eternal brush strokes. I wasn’t alone. Someone else on the planet understood my churning, burning yearning. I was going to get my own kicks, rules be damned. Bob Dylan told me to.

Music is a uniting force, and all great art not only connects us to the artist, but to each other, reminding us that we are all in this unruly, unpredictable soupy mess together.

Everyone has a song, a set of lyrics, a piece of music that has been transformative, a series of notes strung together that recall a time and place loaded with juicy life experiences. Like being taken away by a wafting scent, we are pulled by the chords and lyrics into the past, bringing it brightly back to life to be put onto the page.

Some of the first exercises I give a new group of writers involve musical memories. Did your parents listen to music? What was the first music you remember hearing as a child? What was the first record you bought with your own money? Recall your first live musical experience. What song describes who you are down deep inside? What artist speaks your language?

Describe a memorable concert. What was your most recent live musical experience? Did you catch the eye of the guitarist?

The fervor people feel for their favorite music breaks the ice of fear and they’re eager to share their crucial memories with the rest of us, who are equally keen to reflect, reveal, and remember.

For the Favorite Song prompt, I ask the students to bring the tune to class for us all to hear after they’ve read the piece aloud. Since I have every age group in my workshops, we get to listen to a wildly diverse passel of songs. From David Cassidy to Sting to Lennon /

We all want to be heard.

McCartney to Cheap Trick to Joan Jett to Pharrell, the possibilities are obviously endless, and we get to know each other in a way that only a favorite song could reveal. When the girls write about their very first live musical experience, we are transported and transfixed, a member of the audience ourselves.

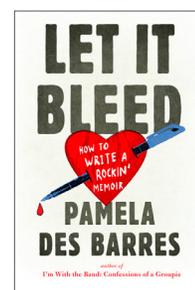
My first concert is pretty unbeatable as on August 23, 1964, I was in the fifth row at the Hollywood Bowl to see The Beatles. Along with my students, I’ve contributed a few pieces for *Let it Bleed*. I was determined to catch Paul’s eye, and I did:

“I know he’s seen me like I know

his first name is really James. That Ringo was born Richard Starkey, that John’s birthday is October 9, that Paul’s mother died when he was only fourteen, that he was named after his dad, Jim, who played the trumpet, that he has the longest leanest legs in rock and roll... Slowly, slowly, the oh-so familiar music comes back to me, barely discernible over the howls and yipping of my besotted compatriots. The Beatles played for 23 minutes and then they were gone. Girls are fainting and holding each other up beside me as I numbly walk out of the Bowl. My Beatle friends talk loudly, animatedly about the show, but I am silent and sure and wildly alive. I have been seen.”

We all want to be seen. We all want to be heard. Whether we make it or listen to it, our music reflects who we are. Who did you see in concert for the first time? What is your favorite song? If it’s for the world, or just for yourself, reflect, remember, let yourself get taken away by those precious musical notes and life-altering lyrics. Get your own kicks by writing it down.

PAMELA DES BARRES is the author of *Let It Bleed*.



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Cathartic It's Not: Revisiting a Cult Childhood Through Writing

by REBECCA STOTT

When the doctors told my father his cancer was inoperable, and he'd stopped thumping walls and furniture with his huge fists, his thoughts turned back to the memoir he'd been writing. He had to finish it, he said. And he'd need my help. He had to try to understand what happened to them all. He'd got stuck back in 1959, he said, the beginning of the 'Nazi decade' of the cult we had both been born into. It was too hard to write. Too painful. It was like a thicket in his head.

'You can't call it the Nazi decade,' I said, battling back tears. 'Nothing that happened to you - to us - in the 1960s is equivalent to the scale of what the Nazis did.'

'It's not the scale,' he said, 'it's the

pattern. Cults evolve in exactly the same ways.'

He died six weeks later, leaving his computer open on an unfinished page, and a room full of scattered and yellowing papers, books, diaries, poems, plays, and letters.

I began *In the Days of Rain* as a promise to my father. 'But this has to be your story too,' my daughter Kez said, her eyes wide when she pulled the gaffer tape off the boxes of stored papers and challenged me to begin. 'It's never going to be a full story unless it has the women and children in it alongside the men.'

As she read my father's prison diaries and his poetry, his notebooks full of his gambling winnings and losings, her questions came thick and fast.

If her grandpa and great grandpa were compliance officers in the cult, how much had they been responsible for the suicides, breakdowns, and family break-ups she was reading about? How could we have lived in Brighton, the hippie capital, but have been so closed off from the world that we'd not even heard of The Beatles or of the first moon landing? Did grandpa become a pathological roulette player after he left the cult because of those experiences? What was it like when he went to prison? Had he really taken me to see thirteen productions of *Macbeth* in a single year?

My memories came flooding back. I remembered my father carrying me, four years old, clutching my stuffed rabbit, from the car into the Brethren meeting room before dawn every Lord's Day for the first



of four meetings that day. I could hear the men preaching about the Rapture, describing the terrible things that were going to happen to all the worldly people when we disappeared off the planet. I could see the women sitting in the back rows in silent subjection to God and to the men. I remembered the rage I felt at the cheating I saw: My father preached about the wickedness of radios but I knew, even if

mother was sent in 1902, not just because she was epileptic but because she was considered too ‘wilful.’ Bit by bit, Kez and I tried to see the world through all their eyes – the men caught up in the power, the frightened women, even the cult leader. Sometimes I felt furious; sometimes compassion overwhelmed me.

Was writing the book cathartic?

inbox. They came from ex-Brethren around the world my age, my father’s age. These people were strangers to me but they had lived through what we had lived through. They wrote to tell me that they had never known the full story and now that they did they understood why they had bad dreams. They wrote to describe conversations with their children and grandchildren that they had never been able to have before. One of them wrote to say ‘please thank Kez for pulling off that gaffer tape.’ Sometimes catharsis comes from unexpected places. Sometimes catharsis needs to be a collective act.

He died six weeks later, leaving his computer open on an unfinished page, and a room full of scattered and yellowing papers.

my mother didn’t, that he kept a radio in the tire compartment of the car. He listened to the cricket scores on it.

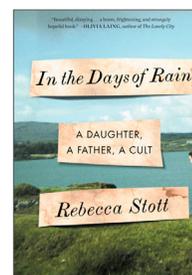
I wrote much of my book in the early hours of the morning when the house was quiet and when the noise of the kitchen freezer hummed on like the sound of my father’s breathing in his last days. Page by page I put the story together, my father’s, mine, the story of the Brethren, the story of the cult leader, the two elderly Brethren sisters who drowned themselves, the Brethren father who killed his family and hanged himself. I found the asylum in Melbourne where my great grand-

people have asked. It wasn’t. It was like pressing on a bruise you didn’t know you had. It hurt. I discovered terrible things. I wrote mostly at night. I had bad dreams. ‘But surely when you finished?’ they’d say. ‘Surely then, you must have had a sense of closure.’

No, in the days immediately before publication I sat in my kitchen sweating with horror at what I had done. ‘What good would my book do?’ I asked Kez. Should that terrible history have just been left well alone? Had we opened a Pandora’s box? What about Brethren retribution? Family censure?

Two weeks after publication, the emails started to pour into my

REBECCA STOTT is the author of *In the Days of Rain*.



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How a Memoir is Mostly About Modesty

by CLAIRE DEDERER

A month before I published my first memoir, I took to my bed. I was overcome with terror and embarrassment. All the shameful, humiliating things I'd confessed about myself danced in my head as I lay there clutching the counterpane. Now the world would know what a terrible person I was.

Luckily I had just enough sense to reach out to a fellow memoirist, Lisa Jones. She had published just a few months before, and she told me the feeling of exposure I was experiencing was normal. She also told me a reassuring story about how Jeannette Walls hid under her desk before *The Glass Castle* came out, emerging only to telephone her publishers and ask to be released from her contract.

The Walls story helped; what helped even more was when Lisa told me that my feelings of squeamishness and embarrassment meant I'd done my job correctly. Readers, she promised, would respond to the passages of the book that had been difficult for me to write. She wrote in an email that I reread dozens of times: "You're simply a nice carpenter who has helped make a shelter for other people's uneasiness by exposing your own." The phrase lodged in my head; I turned to it whenever I was gripped by fear. Maybe my self-exposure would help someone else. It seemed unlikely, but I clung to the thought.

It turned out Lisa was right. When my book was published, a surprising thing happened – well, surprising to me anyway. Readers came up to me after events and tearfully, passionately told me that what I'd written made them feel less alone. Sometimes they'd throw their arms around my neck and hug me. And they invariably mentioned the parts of the book that had been the most difficult, most shameful to write: the parts

where I savagely laid bare my ambivalence about motherhood, wifehood, daughterhood.

I learned an important lesson: As Lisa said, you don't build a shelter for the reader out of your security or ease; you build it out of your unease. A shelter – a book – built out of only a writer's successes and comfortable moments is no kind of shelter at all.

I've come to believe this is the essential moral function of memoir: to say the difficult thing, so others don't feel alone. Because the memoirist is writing nonfiction, the consolation she offers is unique. She says the dark,



uncomfortable truth, in her own voice. The understanding that this is nonfictional pain – that it really happened to the writer – is enormously comforting to the reader. No other art performs quite this same task – though maybe songwriting or documentary filmmaking come close.

Memoir travels through the world under a black reputation for narcissism. The memoir gets a bad rap as a self-involved art form, and why not? It is after all about just that: the self. And it's true there are many narcissistic memoirs out there – the ones where the writer only wants to self-aggrandize.

We've all read memoirs like that. Telling the truth about shameful or uncomfortable experiences is one of the ways memoir pushes back against narcissism and becomes an act of generosity to the reader.

I've just published my second memoir. My new book is about sex and adolescence and midlife despair, a kind of neighborhood of ultra-personal themes, each built almost entirely of bricks of humiliating moments. The book seems made of discomfort, of unease. And I won't pretend it was a breeze to get all this down on paper. But this time around, as I wrote, I had a new strategy. Where I once would have procrastinated, or grown avoidant, or hemmed and hawed when I tried to write about uncomfortable memories, now I knew – from my own experience with readers – that was the good stuff, the stuff to draw near. I pounced instead of cringing.

CLAIRE DEDERER is the author of *Love and Trouble*.



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The Reluctant Memoirist: Moving from Fiction in Uncertain Times

by ELIZABETH L. SILVER

I never set out to become a memoirist. It wasn't that I was one-sided in my creative aspirations. I longed to write fiction – novels and short stories, scripts for the stage and screen. Some of my personallifeinvariablywindsupinthosefictional worlds. I'm also not a particularly private person.

I share intimate details of my life with select friends and family and even new acquaintances, granting unconscious permission for them to similarly share their own lives with me, and together we create a private intimacy in the form of friendship that lasts. Friends, family, parenthood, the relationships that define our lives – all necessarily placed on paper in memoirs, which help us understand this shared vulnerability of life, the absolute need to connect. Memoir allows this unspoken bond between reader and writer, in many ways creating a one-sided friendship. But a friendship, an intimacy that helps me when I read, I hope will accomplish the same when I write.

When my daughter had a stroke at six weeks of age, my world stopped and the only way I could make meaning of it was to write about it. So I put down my fiction, and after a great deal of time away from the page, I began writing again. Only it was in the form of essays. I researched abstract concepts of uncertainty, read medical narratives. This was the world my life was becoming, a nebulous world of what may or may not have become my future. Placing those sentiments in a fictional world felt escapist in a way that nonfiction didn't. I didn't want to escape. I wanted to embrace my real life, whatever it was becoming.

Writing about one's own life while it is happening is living life in perpetual conflict. Do you wait until the moment has passed to sit, contemplate, and make meaning of it?

Or do you write through the moment, capturing the perspective and emotions only as you could while in existence? Instructors of writing often recommend that memoirists allot sufficient time for the experience to be understood, re-calibrated in time and memory, before it finds its way onto the page as art. But the experience of *uncertainty* is so immediate, so urgent. Once enough time passes to analyze it, you are only living retrospectively, in what psychologist Daniel Kahneman calls the "remembering memory," which is different from the "experiencing memory" and therefore unable to capture the *experience* of uncertainty, which is so universal that it must be told contemporaneously.

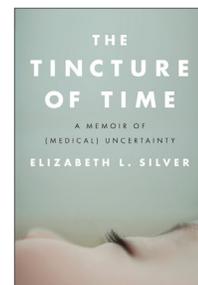
The memoir I wrote, chronicling the uncertainty of medicine in the light of my daughter's stroke, quite simply could never have been written with such clear hindsight of her recovery. A book that details the wiry passages of the unknown could not be properly captured with a fully known outcome. The emotions may not have been as accessible; they would have been interpreted and reinterpreted, perhaps in important but altogether different ways. The narrative might also be important, but it, too, would be a different one. It would exclusively tell a tale of overcoming illness instead of the fear of experiencing it while living under the cloud of that uncertainty.

Fiction is different. Fiction is my first love. Fiction is where I've always felt at home. But with non-

fiction, I've found a new home, a new means of expression that feels as comfortable as fiction does. It stretches different muscles. Though my first book was a novel, I find it difficult to take on one label, make the presumption that we are only one type of a writer, that we can only write one genre, one story. Storytelling is storytelling. The right story will yield the right format, the right medium. What is more frustrating than a movie adaptation that should never have been made? The story will choose the medium, the genre; as writers, we follow suit.

Memoir and fiction are narratives equally. They each borrow truths, they each use perspectives, they each impart meaning on life. One needs fact-checking a lot more than the other, but both can be told in the same way. I wrote my novel over five years and this memoir over two and a half years. I wrote them both in fragments. I wrote them both out of order. I wrote them both trying to convey a particular message. And both, I hope, represent a truth.

ELIZABETH L. SILVER is the author of *The Tincture of Time*.



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Learning to See: Advice for New Memoirists

by MARK MATOUSEK

A memoir is a universe unto itself, an imagined world of real-life characters, events, and locations brought together to tell a story that exists in memory alone. Constructed from unsailable facts, every memoir is a work of fiction, in fact, a rough simulacrum of the past, more a dreamscape than a photograph.

This is the life-giving freedom of memoir: to reimagine what has happened to us; to foment meaning from meaningless things; to give form, physicality, to what is formless. Every memoir must happen *some-where*; a narrative must have a stage to be effective, a setting the reader can recognize that grounds the action in time and space. Without a stage, there is no story. There are just fragments, phantoms, and half-baked characters in search of a coherent author. Nobody wants to read that book.

There are two levels to setting in memoir: the external and the internal, the physical and the emotional. Physical setting is only a start. For a story truly to come to life, external location must be animated through the lens of the writer's imagination. A memoir must have its own atmosphere,

which is formed where geography and emotion meet. Without atmosphere, memoir is a dry husk, a story with no palpable *there* there. Thinking back on the memoirs I've loved, it's their atmosphere that has remained with me decades later, long after plots and characters have been forgotten. Atmosphere is the soul of memoir, the afterglow that lingers when form is long gone. Forty years after reading *The Snow Leopard*, I can still

Every memoir must happen somewhere; a narrative must have a stage to be effective, a setting the reader can recognize that grounds the action in time and space.

smell the blistering cold and the pine sap, combined with Peter Matthiessen's loneliness, as he grieved his dead wife in the Himalayas (though the story's structure has long since disappeared). Twenty years after reading *The Cloister Walk*, its atmosphere is still close to me – candles flickering in the gloom of a monastery, silence made vivid by spiritual hunger – though I can't recall a single passage of Kathleen Norris's wonderful book.

Atmosphere is conjured through impeccable detail, the selection

of physical signs and symbols that best reflect the memoir's emotional journey. This requires precision, practice, and craft; also, an archaeologist's patience for sifting through enormous piles of rubble in search of the fragment that captures the whole. While writing *Mother of the Unseen World*, for instance, I spent time in the little South Indian town where Mother Meera has her ashram school for underprivileged children. I'd been in India many times

before and was filled again with a storm of discordant feelings that strikes me whenever I visit, seeing beauty and horror crammed so close together, gorgeous homages to spiritual glory planted in dung heaps of suffering and

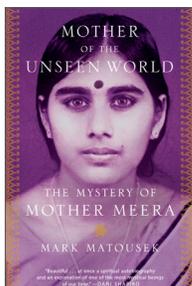
filth.

I'd struggled with the atmosphere in *Mother of the Unseen World*. How to avoid the clichés and stereotypes that this country invites with her extremity? I'd written about India before, but a subtler atmosphere was needed here, since Mother Meera herself is so subtle, working in silence, under the radar. But the telling details had eluded me, keeping me stuck with manuscript. Then, one evening, the inertia gave way. Walking toward town in search of dinner, I turned off the busy avenue and

found what I'd been looking for. There, underneath a mimosa tree, I found a Brahma bull tethered to an ancient washing machine, its nose buried deep in pile of garbage. The bull was nearly skeletal, his coat the same beaten-up color as the dirt that he was standing in. The animal raised its head to greet me, a mess of old vegetables smushed in its mouth. It seemed to be saying, *Here I am. What took you so bloody long to find me?*

This was the image I'd been waiting for, this "holy" beast strapped to a rusty appliance. It symbolized what I was feeling exactly, the poignant collision of ancient and modern, the contradiction of sacred and profane. This sad-funny picture of the Brahma bull helped me conjure the hybrid atmosphere required to write this difficult book. Our job as memoirists is to recognize such telling details where we find them, training our eyes to the shining thing poking up from the rubble of meaningless things: to isolate the things that matter. The art of memoir is learning to see.

MARK MATOUSEK is the author of *Mother of the Unseen World*.



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Don't Make It Up: Eight Rules for Writing Memoirs

by JAIME LOWE

I DON'T WRITE ONE UNLESS YOU FEEL LIKE YOU ABSOLUTELY HAVE TO.

It's a painful process, kind of like pouring acid into an open wound or sticking chopsticks into your eyeballs or searching for metaphors that aren't cliché. It's hard emotional work. It's hard writing work. Things you thought were sealed, emotions tucked neatly into a solved and resolved corner come frothing and festering out. Be prepared for tears and trauma and many hours thinking about ways to express those traumas in logical sentences.

2 FIND A GOOD SPOT TO WRITE WHERE YOU CAN CRY COMFORTABLY.

For me, many days during the process were spent crying in one of two coffee shops where they now think I'm a lunatic. I have confirmed this by writing a book

called *Mental*. Sometimes when I would get into the deeper and darker portions of my life — times that I couldn't believe a stranger put me in a cab, or a stranger let me use his phone, or a stranger let my mom sleep in his room to make sure I was taking medication — I would cry just thinking that I was alive and typing and thinking about these moments in past tense, that I had survived. Then my face would get all red and bloated and I'd start hyperventilating and water would drip down my cheeks and the baristas would look away, embarrassed for me. Be prepared to publicly cry. Sometimes I would just start crying on the subway apropos of nothing. It still happens actually. If you see me, look away.

3 GET YOURSELF A COUPLE PAIRS OF OFFICIAL WRITING PANTS.

It's impossible to write a memoir if you are not comfortable.

Leggings, sweat pants, karate pants — anything with an elastic waistband is preferable. My friend Amy gave me some very righteous surfer, batik-looking pants. When I put those on, it's time to write. Sometimes I wear them for many days in a row, that's when I risk losing my relationship. (More on that in Rule # 7.)

4 DO NOT GET IN SO DEEP THAT YOU CAN'T PULL YOURSELF OUT.

People have asked if writing about your past, especially a painful past, is cathartic. And I have to say, no. Not at all. Writing is excruciating. Sitting alone for a couple years with past, present and future traumas and the anxiety of revealing them all to criticism and friends and family, no, that's not fun and doesn't feel good. It feels very naked and scary and if you write a memoir, you'd better be ok with that. There were rab-



bit holes that I went down that reintroduced difficulties that I had already dealt with after decades of therapy. It took many days of watching “Shark Tank” and “NCIS: Los Angeles” to recover.

5 BE PREPARED FOR EVERYONE TO KNOW MORE ABOUT YOU THAN YOU KNOW ABOUT THEM.

After my therapist read a draft of my book, he said he felt like he knew me better. I’ve been going to him for twenty years.

6 ENGAGE IN OTHER ACTIVITIES BESIDES WRITING ABOUT YOURSELF.

Try volunteering or altruistic pursuits, if you like that kind of thing. Or walk a dog or go running or box or make collages or start to knit or play bridge or visit old age homes (whether you know anyone

there or not), basically get out of your head; it’s a terrible place to be and since that’s your full-time job, you need a break.

7 PROTECT YOUR LOVED ONES; THEY DON’T WANT TO HEAR ABOUT YOUR MEMOIR ALL THE TIME. THEY LIVED THROUGH SOME OF IT WITH YOU.

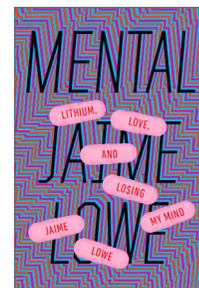
Relationships suffer during book writing. Mostly it’s because of the sweatpants but also because of the nature of the process.

8 THE LAST RULE OF MEMOIR CLUB: DON’T MAKE IT UP.

If you don’t remember or you don’t have artifacts, ask everyone around you. Take this opportunity to interview all the crushes you ever had. Small details trigger other memories or might lead to questions that wouldn’t normally arise. (Why didn’t you

take me to prom? Did we smoke weed and THEN go to Subway or go to Subway and then smoke weed?) Details are important and getting them right is what makes writing good. This is your life but there were witnesses and they can help piece together what happened. It’s not always what you think or what you remember.

JAIME LOWE is the author of *Mental*.



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Five Lessons to Be Learned While Writing a Memoir

by SHEILA KOHLER

When I came to write a memoir, I had already published thirteen books of fiction. I imagined I would not have too many problems writing about my life. It turned out to be much more difficult than I had thought and in the process I learned a few lessons which I will share with you here.

STRUCTURE

It is necessary to structure a memoir just as you would a piece of fiction. You cannot just write down the truth. This seems obvious, but somehow we feel, or I did anyway, that when writing about our lives we have to put it all down. Obviously you cannot. You have to find a beginning, a middle, an end. You have to decide where the story starts and where it will stop. You have to *tell* a story. There has to be a selection, a forward movement, a gradual process of revelation, which doesn't mean you cannot flash back, but things have to change. People have to change or move toward a process of change. The reader cannot know all from the start. Basically you can use all the techniques of fiction: you can start at the end, foreshadow, reiterate, and use reversal just as one does in fiction. The use of the scene is always engaging and draws the reader into the plot of the story with a few lines of dialogue, a description of place, conflict.

DIFFICULTY

It will probably be much harder and take longer than you think. What is difficult is handling material with heat, dangerous material, material one may have used on a slant in fiction but now must be stated as facts, which have to be faced straight on without flinching. This is often upsetting – though it may be cathartic. Fiction obviously avoids many legal pitfalls as well as

awkwardness with relatives who may not like what one has to say. One has to be courageous but not foolish: small corrections can be used to disguise. I learned too that one can say anything about people who are no more! (At least from a legal point of view.)

THE RIGHT DISTANCE

The most difficult thing is probably to find the right distance from the material. One cannot be too far from it nor can one be too close. It was only after years of writing about my sister's life and death as fiction that I was finally able to confront writing a memoir. Finding the right distance from this difficult material is necessary to keep the interest of the reader but also to be able to use it as an author must in order to hold the interest of the reader.

DISAPPROVAL

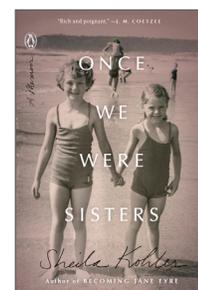
I found that my family was not as shocked as I thought they might be. I had told them not to read the book if they feared they might be upset: I speak frankly of my own life as well as my sister's and some secrets are necessarily divulged in the book, but when I left the galleys in a room where my grandson was sleeping he could not resist, he told me, and took up the book. He told me he had read it in one night with much interest. I asked if he was shocked. "It would require more than that to shock me," he said, smiling at me. I can

only hope the rest of the family will react similarly!

THE TRUTH

Obviously there is no such thing as "one truth" when one looks back on a life. When I asked people (my sister's children, mainly) for information about their mother and their father, they told me different things. I had to learn to trust my own judgement, faulty as it might be, to know that what I wrote would not ever be the whole truth, the only truth, but just one version of a life. In the end what was important to me was expressing my own truth about a tragic situation, telling the world what I had lived, what I had learned, and how I had felt. I can only hope that this effort at a certain emotional honesty will be of help to others who have confronted anything similar in their own lives.

SHEILA KOHLER is the author of *Once We Were Sisters*.



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The Surprising Side of Family Memoir

by KATHLEEN FLINN

I thought that my third book would be a sweet string of stories about camping trips and casseroles, and in many ways, that's true. But I also discovered two of the key players in my history were guilty of bigamy and bootlegging, and that my last name shouldn't actually be Flinn.

Every family has their stories, the ones they repeat again and again. Not unlike the recipes that show up at every family gathering, such as my mother's deviled eggs or my uncle's corn flake-crusted chicken. As I unraveled some of these stories, it was obvious years of retelling caused some tales to grow bigger and more complex, not unlike a hurricane gaining strength over warm water.

Then, there are the stories no one tells. My Uncle Clarence was a known alcoholic who was hit by a car as a young man. My mother was devastated, and even though his daughter lived with us, the subject seemed too fragile to touch. I finally asked my mother directly and discovered that the story around his death was even more tragic than I ever imagined. He had been sober, and hit by a soldier home on leave – a noble young man who drove three hours to my grandparents' home and knocked on their door. "You're not going to like me," the soldier told them. "I'm the one who killed your son."

The story of the soldier prompted me to notice something curious. My maternal grandfather, Charles Henderson, turned eighteen the year that World War I broke out. Yet, he never fought. When I asked around my normally talkative family, my queries were greeted with silence. Finally, I appealed to my sister-in-law, a trained genealogist who handed over a surprising secret: Grandpa had been busted for trying to

sell homemade whiskey to an undercover sheriff's deputy as a teen. He wasn't an outlier; he just grew up in Carter County, Kentucky, an area known for its moonshine. He spent some time in the county jail, a fact he admitted when he turned up after receiving a draft notice a year later. Instead of being sent to the front lines, he ended up training as a cook at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, then the largest military base in the United States. If it wasn't for whiskey, he might have died in the war and I wouldn't be here.

My paternal grandfather and I never met, and until I started the book I didn't think about him much. As I waded into his murky history, I learned that he was a handsome, charming, and ultimately brutal man, a bigamist who left my grandmother with eight children to raise alone in the Great Depression. His real last name was James Flint, not Flinn. He changed this detail to avoid detection after bailing out on his first marriage, which he ended by desertion, rather than by divorce. You could do that back in the 1920s. People didn't have social security numbers and there were no computers to track our every move. So, my name should really be Kathleen Flint, a name that's Welsh, not Irish. Make of that what you will.

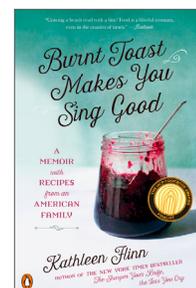
But perhaps the most startling thing that I learned was the most wonderful.

I knew my maternal grandparents were good people. What I didn't know was the level of generosity

they showed to everyone. I encountered dozens of stories about how they gave away so much when they themselves often had so little. In these tales, they renewed my faith in people and perhaps in something greater than us all. My grandfather would give away bushels of food to neighbors in need, or help till a garden or slaughter a hog. My grandmother would write letters to aging relatives, visit sick friends, or even take a bouquets of flowers to a neighbor she noticed seemed a little blue. Neither ever expected anything in return. Grandma Inez called it "Sunshine Work." But as my grandfather said, there's something about generosity. "You can't give it away, it always comes back to you." When that soldier showed up on their doorstep, I learned they both hugged him and the three of them cried together.

So if you set out to write a memoir about your family, you may find surprises. Sometimes you uncover what you wished you had not found. Other times, you get to tell a tale that everyone should know.

KATHLEEN FLINN is the author of *Burnt Toast Makes You Sing Good*.



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On the Othering Inwardness of Memoir

by ROGER COHEN

I was brought up to be part of something, yet I held myself from it. The something was England. It never quite became mine. I tried to attune myself to it, but there was always a false note. The other something was my family, yet it contained deception and concealment. I had to conceal myself in turn. Apartness became a part of me, perhaps even what defined me.

The writer is the stranger, the outsider, and the self-onlooker,

guage afforded the possibility of presenting a slightly different face to the world. I learned several. I wrote about wars, lives swept away, ravaged by powerful forces, displaced. Otherness became my natural habitat, a vantage point that suited me and enabled me to evoke the world as I saw it.

Nevertheless with time, as choices narrowed, I felt I had to turn my gaze on myself — on my Jewish family's upheavals in each generation, on the silences that had

particularly my mother's mental breakdown, in as much detail as possible. I believe I have done so. In me, as a result, a new acceptance has taken form, an acceptance that feels like a possible prelude to peace. In a sense, I had to write myself out of otherness and into myself in order to become whole. But the gift of detachment will always be part of the writer's repertoire, the writer's nature.

The writer is the stranger, the outsider, and the self-onlooker, at once within and without.

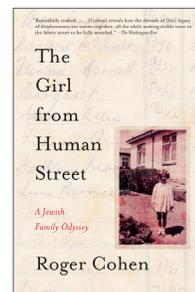
at once within and without. The writer lives and observes, both at once; and the observer needs a little distance from the protagonist, who may be one and the same person. This is not easy for other people to understand. The Polish poet and Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz once observed that when a writer is born into a family, the family is finished.

It was natural for me to become a journalist and foreign correspondent. I felt at home elsewhere. I had a gift of empathy with the suffering of others. I slipped into others' lives with ease, and that is what you have to do to describe those lives. Each foreign lan-

weighed on me, the deception that had troubled me, the forgetting that had left me unanchored. This was not easy. Otherness helps the writer but may hurt the human being. I found I had to take what I had learned about observation and intuition over a lifetime of journalistic endeavor to comprehend where my own story had begun, what my family had left behind, and why being Jewish in England was always a state associated with a mild unease.

I have been asked if I was trying to exorcise a difficult past through the family memoir I have now written. The answer is no. But I did want to understand that past, and

ROGER COHEN is the author of *The Girl from Human Street*.



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How to Get to Who You Really Are in Memoir

by AGATA TUSZYŃSKA

I was afraid of this book. For a long time I did not touch pen to the family secret. Years passed before I could reveal what I thought was “the horrible truth” – my mother is Jewish. I found out at the age of nineteen.

The smell of garlic, traditionally associated in Poland with Jewish cooking, meant nothing to me. I didn't know sweet carrots with raisins were called tzimes. I did not recognize the Semitic features of my grandfather and his sisters. I didn't know what Jews should look like and never gave it a thought.

I assumed that there must have been an important reason why the information about my mother's and thus my own Jewishness was kept from me. It seemed like something not to brag about, some guilt or flaw, and certainly no cause for pride.

My mother kept silent. She never spoke of her hometown of Łęczycza, or how she survived the war, or how her own mother died. I never heard at home the words "ghetto" or "the Aryan side." But my father, the son and grandson of Catholic Polish railwaymen from Łódź, also kept silent. The past wasn't celebrated in our household. If it had been, I was to keep the secret as well. To be Jewish seemed shameful to me. My family history grew out of fear: fear of the Polish Jews who survived the war, fear of being different, fear of those for whom gas chambers were built.

It was a difficult story to tell. An account of my own life touched upon other members of my family. It betrayed their silence. An answer to all doubts was the truth – my truth. But is it only my own truth?

After years of living in an almost schizophrenic duality, I wrote *Family History of Fear*. Writing

a surprise. I was unaware of how many people would be concerned with it, in various social and ethnic constellations. My readers felt encouraged to personal revelation. I too spoke openly about myself for the first time, not just about the Jewish "flaw" of my life, but about other family secrets as well.

My story became public property. Yes, it was my choice, but it was also a surprise.

about myself created a special challenge. The edge of the knife that I'd honed on others, I now directed at myself and my family. The girl from a Polish home, decorating a Christmas tree, becomes half Jewish after a lengthy and painful process. Opening the secret that defined my identity and retelling it in a book made for a dramatic exit out of solitude into the limelight.

My story became public property. Yes, it was my choice, but it was also

To whom has this story become important? Certainly to all those who shared a similar fate, to Polish Jews burdened with dual heritage. It reflects the fate of wartime children, hidden like my mother in closets, secret places, attics, living on Aryan papers long after the war had ended. There are their children, "Generation Two," my peers who absorbed the fear with their mother's milk. But there are also their neighbors, those Poles for whom the Polish-Jewish coexistence belonged to a common history, who miss the multiculturalism of the country they once knew, who understand what they lost, what was taken away from all of us. For them, this Polish-Jewish saga completes their Polish landscape.

My book tour events were also attended by those in whose



families things were hidden – origins, shotgun weddings, homosexuality, other issues. “You think,” said a young woman from Warsaw, “that being half Jewish is so bad. Believe me, try being half Gypsy.”

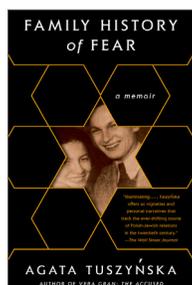
The young listened most carefully. In a Lublin library a group of high school students packed an entire floor. I spoke about expanding the sphere of memory by supplementing it with family and personal history, one’s own history. I said to collect the stories from the Christmas table and from family visits to the cemetery. I told them to look at Great Grandpa’s medals, jot down Grandma’s recipe for gingerbread and pierogi. Ask your mother about her high school friends and your uncle about his time in jail. Remember the courtyard view from your window. Find your own place in the magic glass of a mutable reality. They can find strength in memory and security in history.

My long-term fear turned into support from my readers. My public act of confession encouraged them to look at their own families, to sort out their own genealogies. Memory and the past create us, no matter what we do or don’t think about it. Silence cannot alter it and a secret will not change it.

“The need to create one’s identity,” wrote the great journalist, Ryszard Kapuściński, “helps to create order within oneself. To understand who we are, no matter how difficult, becomes a guide to all activity.” We are created by

the generations of our ancestors, their fates, houses, pictures, their baggage. Who we are depends on who they were, what they did, what paintings hung over their tables. To which God they prayed and in what language. What they dreamed about and how they built their lives. They create us, the absent generations, whose talents and weaknesses we inherit as well as we inherit their attachments to soil and water, the color of their eyes or hair. We can’t excise them from our fate, or reject their presence and influence, their voices. Let’s listen to them. As long as we still can, let’s ask questions. Let’s describe old photos and search for the graves. As long as there is someone to ask let’s keep asking.

AGATA TUSZYŃSKA is the author of *Family History of Fear*.



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The Perfect Scene

by JENNIFER FINNEY BOYLAN

One suggestion I have for writers of memoir is that you should use the same rule to structure your scenes that you would use to decide when to arrive at, and when to leave, a cocktail party. That rule might be summarized: *Come in late, and get out early.*

Let's say you're invited to a party that begins at 9 PM. What time do you arrive?

Some folks might say 10, others closer to midnight, but almost no one would say, *arrive exactly at 9 PM.* I admit that I have had a few friends who can be regularly depended upon to do just this, but let's be honest: their exactitude is embarrassing. It makes me like them less.

Plus, being the first person at a party is mortifying. You stand around, watching your host take cheese out of the refrigerator. As Jimmy Durante use to say, "It's mortifyin'."

And in just this way, you don't want to start your first scene—or any scene, for that matter—from square one. Don't write the narrative equivalent of people who arrive at a 9 o'clock party at 9 o'clock. Arrive late—not so late that your reader (or your host) is overly confused. Arrive precisely

late enough to be interesting.

Example: What is the most commonly used opening sentence in stories written by student writers? I can assure you it's something like, "Ring! Ring! Ring! said the alarm clock."

When I teach an intro fiction class, I can be relatively certain that at least one or two stories every semester begins with an alarm clock ringing. When I was a young writer, I'm sure I used that opening myself more than once.

Why do apprentice writers begin with the Alarm Clock Opening? Because they aren't quite sure

Don't write the narrative equivalent of people who arrive at a 9 o'clock party at 9 o'clock. Arrive late.

where to begin, so they begin at the beginning, with a character waking up. The story often then follows the character as she walks down the hallway to the bathroom, brushes her teeth, puts on her clothes, has breakfast, and then walks outside, where a spaceship lands and an alien points a ray-gun at them and they dissolve into a sentient mist of energy-light-heat. (For instance.)

A much better opening to this story might be, "As I dissolved into a sentient mist of energy-light-

heat, I had a last, lingering thought about my daughter...."

That's coming in late.

You can always flash back from the sentient cloud of mist to the events that led up to it. But as a general rule, it's best to begin with that moment, with the story already under way. This is true whether it's the opening line of a story, or whether it's a single scene happening in its middle.

By the same logic, you don't want to end your story too late.

If the last guest at the party leaves at 3 AM, what time do you, the

perfect guest, leave? Hint: it's not 3 AM, unless you're helping with the dishes. If it were me, I'd want to be on my way by about 1:45 AM at the latest. I would

want people to think that my exit marked the moment the party started going downhill. Because I am that entertaining.

So let's say your first draft ends something like this: "The aliens returned me to human form and suddenly I found myself on the sidewalk. My daughter stood before me. 'Where have you been?' she asked me. I told her all about the aliens, but she didn't believe me. We went out to Arby's and had some curly fries, and then I drove us both home and as I got into bed,

I turned out the light and thought, ‘What a weird day that was.’ Then I fell asleep, and dreamed about nothing.”

This paragraph is the equivalent of someone who stays at your party until 3 AM and doesn’t even help with the dishes.

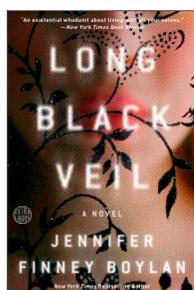
This story really wants to end like this: “The aliens returned me to human form and suddenly I found myself on the sidewalk. My daughter stood before me. ‘Where have you been?’ she asked.”

That’s getting out early.

Of course there are times when you want to linger on your ending, just as there are times to begin a story with a long, slow buildup.

But on the whole, if you structure your scenes using the logic of arriving at, and departing from a party, your reader will always think of you as—well, what else?—a welcome guest.

JENNIFER FINNEY BOYLAN is the author of *She’s Not There* and most recently *Long Black Veil*



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Feeling Inspired?

GET STARTED WITH THESE REFLECTION
PROMPTS FROM
Passion PLANNER

1

What drives you to write and how does this drive manifest itself in your work?

2

Review some memorable parts of your life. What details stand out and how do they fit into your story?

3

Assess your current memoir writing process. Are you happy with how you spend your time and energy? What adjustments would you make?

4

What are the three biggest lessons you've learned from this guide? Transform them into actionable steps for your own memoir writing journey.

5

What steps can you take to make sure you are practicing self-care and maintaining a healthy work/life balance when it comes to your writing?

6

Take some time to gameplan how you're going to write your memoir. What is your ultimate goal and what are concrete actions you can take to move towards it?