



# MEMOIR

AN INTRODUCTION

G. THOMAS COUSER

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G. Thomas Couser

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Because I intend this book not for fellow scholars but for general readers and undergraduate students, I did not base it on new research. And as a result, I cite few secondary sources. It was a pleasure and a luxury to work in this uncharacteristic way. Naturally, I drew on my accumulated knowledge of the field, as expressed in my previous books and articles. But that work in turn relies on the work of numerous colleagues in the field. Thus, I owe much to my fellow practitioners.

One source stands out because it is so recent and so pertinent: Ben Yagoda's *Memoir: A History*, which offers a useful and timely overview of the development of memoir.

I am deeply indebted to two colleagues who graciously read and commented on the book in draft: Paul John Eakin and Susannah Mintz. I also benefited from the response of Margaretta Jolly, a reader for Oxford University Press. Julie Rak generously shared work in progress. An opportunity to speak at the University of Virginia, at the invitation of Alison Booth, helped me clarify and refine my argument. Brendan O'Neill has been a writer's dream of an editor. And I owe a special debt to Chris Morehouse for advice and assistance with my proposal.

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# INTRODUCTION

Memoir, memoir, memoir! Doesn't anyone write autobiography anymore?

So it seems. "Memoir" has eclipsed "autobiography" as the term of choice for a certain kind of life narrative. Moreover, and more significantly, memoir now rivals fiction in popularity and critical esteem and exceeds it in cultural currency. According to various cultural commentators—critics, scholars, and reviewers—this is an age—if not *the age*—of memoir.

As evidence, consider this statistic, gleaned by Ben Yagoda from Nielsen BookScan: "Total sales in the categories of Personal Memoirs, Childhood Memoirs, and Parental Memoirs increased more than 400 percent between 2004 and 2008" (7). That's phenomenal growth.

Other evidence is less empirical but still significant.

- As I write this preface in November of 2010, George W. Bush's just published memoir, *Decision Points*, is the subject of reviews and multiple news stories.
- Among its fifteen hardcover nonfiction best sellers, the current issue of *The New York Times Book Review* (November 21, 2010) lists seven memoirs. In order, they are *Life*, by Keith Richards; *Unbearable Lightness*, by Portia de Rossi; *Me*, by Ricky Martin; *They Call Me Baba Booey*, by Gary Dell'Abate; *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, volume 1; *Assholes Finish First*, by Tucker Max; and *Shit My Dad Says*, by Justin Halpern. A number of these represent new niche subgenres: de Rossi's and Martin's have to do with coming out as gay, de Rossi's has to do with anorexia, and

Halpern's is a memoir of a father. Remarkably, Mark Twain's is the latest, but not the final, installment of material first published one hundred years ago. With it, he greatly extends the life-span of his life narrative.

- Of the current twenty paperback nonfiction bestsellers, *eleven* can be classified as memoirs. In order, they are *Eat, Pray, Love*, by Elizabeth Gilbert; *The Glass Castle*, by Jeanette Walls; *Three Cups of Tea*, by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin; *Stones into Schools*, by Greg Mortenson; *Are You There, Vodka? It's Me, Chelsea* and *My Horizontal Life*, both by Chelsea Handler; *Dewey, the Small Town Library Cat Who Touched the World*, by Vicki Myron with Bret Witter; *Just Kids*, by Patti Smith; *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*, by Rhoda Janzen; *I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell*, by Tucker Max; and *Same Kind of Different as Me*, by Ron Hall and Denver Moore. Some are memoirs of participation in historical events: Mortenson's books have to do with institution building in Afghanistan. In contrast, Myron's *Dewey* revolves around her relationship with the titular "library cat." But memoirs of pets comprise a new niche narrative that flourishes alongside personal narratives of world-historical events. The memoir craze seems to offer something for everyone; narratives in a range of registers from the sublime to the ridiculous.

Finally, of the nine nonfiction books reviewed, three were memoirs: *Missing Lucile: Memoirs of the Grandmother I Never Knew*, by Suzanne Berne; *Why Not Say What Happened?* by Ivana Lowell; and *Must You Go? My Life with Harold Pinter*, by Antonia Fraser.

One difference between memoir and fiction is apparent already: many serious memoirs are one-offs by people who made their reputations in other areas (Richards, Mortenson, and Smith) rather than books by professional writers like Gilbert (the author of other memoirs and novels). Although best-selling memoirs are predominantly by celebrities, especially entertainers, there's a surprising degree of overlap between best sellers and books reviewed. Of the best sellers listed earlier, those by Richards, Twain, Gilbert, Walls, Mortenson, Smith, and Janzen are taken seriously enough

to get reviewed in selective media like *The New York Times Book Review*, the nation's flagship review. Several of the rest are so-called nobody memoirs—memoirs by hitherto anonymous individuals. Ironically, the publication of such narratives helps to explain the ascendance of the genre: it appears to be open to anybody, i.e., “nobody.” Sometimes, the newcomers even carry off the prizes: though Patti Smith is hardly a nobody, she is not known primarily as a writer, yet her account of her intimate relationship with the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe won the National Book Award for nonfiction in 2010.

In the marketplace for fiction, whether literary or mass-market, authors have always constituted brands: loyal fans can be counted on to buy and read the latest work by Philip Roth, Stephen King, Louise Erdrich, or Jodi Picoult. With memoir, the branding phenomenon is relatively new. Not long ago, memoirs were limited by the implicit rule: one to an author. But that has changed. In today's market, if a memoir sells well, its author is likely to follow it up with another. Mary Karr and Lauren Slater have published multiple memoirs before reaching middle age. And among those writers listed before, Handler, Mortenson, and Max have more than one book listed at the same time!

Meanwhile, other writers may seek to cash in on the success of a particular memoir. Memoir sometimes spreads within families, as if contagious. Frank McCourt's memoir, *Angela's Ashes* (1996), was followed by his brother Malachy's *A Monk Swimming* (1998) and their younger brother Alphie's *A Long Stone's Throw* (2008)—as well as Frank's sequels *'Tis* (1999) and *Teacher Man* (2005). Close relationships can also spawn memoirs, as in the case of Gail Caldwell's *Let's Take the Long Way Home* (2010), a memoir of her friendship with Caroline Knapp, who died of lung cancer not long after publishing her memoir of alcoholism, *Drinking: A Love Story* (1996); and Ann Patchett's *Truth and Beauty* (2004), an account of her friendship with Lucy Grealy, author of *Autobiography of a Face* (1994). Similarly, memoirs of certain kinds of experience—like miserable childhoods, dysfunctional families, and recovery from substance abuse—constitute subgenres that attract habitual readers. The popularity of the so-called misery memoir seems to be behind a 2003 *New Yorker* cartoon by Alex Gregory. A young woman reclining in a dormitory window seat pens a letter to her parents: “Dear Mom and Dad: Thanks for

the happy childhood. You've destroyed any chance I had of becoming a writer."

Somewhat subtler evidence of memoir's currency is the way it has percolated into other areas of our culture. When it was revealed that James Frey's narrative of his recovery from substance abuse, *A Million Little Pieces* (2008), contained considerable distortions of fact, he was roundly roasted in various media. After he was dressed down on TV by Oprah Winfrey, who had enthusiastically promoted his book, various other commentators, including journalists like Frank Rich and memoirists like Mary Karr, chimed in. Karr's criticism reflects a significant dynamic of the memoir boom—resentment and resistance by writers who consider themselves literary artists—even, or perhaps especially, when they have made their fame in the same genre.

Tellingly, too, literary novelists are beginning to work the upstart genre into their fictions—often to satiric effect. For example, one of the titular characters in Cathleen Schine's 2010 novel *The Weissmans of Westport* is a literary agent whose career craters when several of her clients' memoirs are exposed as hoaxes. Laura Lippman's 2009 novel *Life Sentences* addresses memoir writing more fully and more thoughtfully. When her protagonist, Cassandra, approaches childhood friends and acquaintances as sources for her third memoir, she finds that some balk because they resent the way they were depicted in her first two books.

Worse, one friend—not a reader—responds with incredulity and scorn to her new project:

"I'm writing a book. About all of us."

"What kind of book?"

"A memoir, something like my other books—" Cassandra could tell from Fatima's expression that, unlike Tisha, she had no idea that Cassandra was a writer. "About how we were then and how we are now."

"Who would want to read such a thing?"

To this point, the joke is on Fatima. Unbeknownst to her, Cassandra's previous memoirs have sold well—better than her novel. But at this point the scene takes an interesting turn:

Cassandra could see no polite way to point out that thousands of people would like to read what she wrote. *As long as it was a memoir, not a novel.* (184)

Here we detect the contemporary novelist's awareness that many publishers and readers favor the novel's sibling genre, the memoir.

Despite her apprehension about the rival genre, Lippman offers quite a sympathetic view of the memoirist's predicament. Here Cassandra encounters a skeptical reader at a signing of her novel:

"Why do you get to write the story?"

Cassandra was at a loss for words.

"I'm not sure I understand," she began. "You mean, how do I write a novel about people who aren't me? Or are you asking how one gets published?"

"No, with the other books. Did you get permission to write them?"

"Permission to write about my own life?"

"But it's not just your life. It's your parents, your stepmother, friends. Did you let them read it first?"

"No. They knew what I was doing, though. And I fact-checked as much as I could, admitted the fallibility of my memory throughout. In fact that's a recurring theme in my work."

The woman was clearly unsatisfied with the answer . . . Cassandra would have liked to dismiss her as a philistine . . . But she carried an armful of impressive-looking books . . . The woman was like the bad fairy at a christening. *Why do I get to write the story? Because I'm a writer.* (4)

On the one hand, Cassandra recognizes that the genre tests the limits of her memory, the faculty that gives the genre its name, and she realizes that her writing *does* involve others. On the other (trumping) hand, she insists on her right *as a writer* to tell what is inevitably others' stories as well as her own. That right, she claims, inheres in her talent and her profession.

As it turns out, however, her research leads her to knowledge that is not only potentially harmful to some of the subjects, if published, but that also undermines the premise of her first memoir. She aborts the project



and returns her advance, renouncing her right to write her story. But she uses her new knowledge to issue an updated edition of the flawed memoir, with an explanatory, revisionist epilogue. Even if the new book is a success, however, it will not be the blockbuster the proposed book might have been. Cassandra has been made to pay a monetary price for her hubris as a memoirist. Feeling somewhat penitential, she resolves to “try fiction again. Why not? She had been writing fiction all along” (335). Lippman steers her protagonist back to the safer, implicitly higher, ground of the novel.

Memoir has permeated contemporary culture—other genres and media—to the point of saturation. In *Memoir: A History*, Ben Yagoda said it well: “Memoir has become the central form of the culture: not only the way stories are told, but the way arguments are put forth, products and properties marketed, ideas floated, acts justified, reputations constructed or salvaged” (7).

And yet, pervasive as memoir has become, it is not well understood by the general public. Unlike fiction, which is taught early and often in American classrooms right through university, memoir is still treated with relative neglect, leaving the impression that it needs no explanation. Hence this book, which is meant to fill a gap by providing readers of memoir (and writers, too) with a comprehensive approach to memoir, illuminating its key aspects.

I’ve already hinted at some of the questions raised by the rise of the memoir. Exactly what *is* memoir? What, if anything, distinguishes it from autobiography and other forms of what we now call life writing? What distinguishes it from the novel, which it resembles in many ways? (The two genres can be thought of as siblings who grew up together, often borrowing each others’ clothes.) What are the precursors and sources of contemporary memoir? What’s new about contemporary memoir and how does it reflect and illuminate the culture at large? What particular ethical issues does it raise? I hope to provide answers to all of these questions and more to enable readers to approach memoir in a more sophisticated way—at once more appreciatively and more critically.

The book’s central premise is that memoir, though related closely to the novel, is fundamentally different from it. The chapters explore and draw out the ramifications of this idea. Here’s the plan.

Chapter 1, “What Memoir Is, And What Memoir Is Not,” sorts out what the slippery term “memoir” means and why it has come to be the preferred term for literary life writing. In addition, it locates memoir within the context of a media constellation that represents the lives of actual human beings: portraiture, both painted and photographic; documentary films and biopics; oral anecdotes and family lore; blogs and electronic diaries; social media like Facebook; the obituary and death notice; the scrapbook, and so on.

Unlike the novel, then, memoir is the literary face of a very common and fundamental human activity: the narration of our lives in our own terms. It is rooted in deep human needs, desires, and habitual practices. Nearly everyone engages in some form of this. So while it is not well understood as a literary enterprise, it is found all around us, all the time. While memoir is one among many life-writing genres, it comprises a number of distinct subgenres. So an understanding of what genre is and how it functions is necessary to an appreciation of memoir.

Hence chapter 2, “Memoir and Genre.” Memoir may take the form of—among other things—conversion narrative, confession, apology, testimony, and coming-of-age narrative. The distinctions among these are primarily functions of the relation between the narrator and his or her early self. A convert or confessor defines him- or herself in opposition to some earlier self; an apologist (contrary to the intuitive sense of the term) *defends* an earlier self. (Most memoirs of politicians and public servants—like ex-presidents—are apologies, in the lit-crit sense.) And whether one casts one’s personal history as a conversion, confession, or an apology speaks volumes in and of itself.

In any case, categorizing works is not the *end* of genre analysis but its starting point. The goal is not to *classify* works but to *clarify* them. We can’t fully understand what a particular author or story is doing without some sense of the operative conventions, which are a function of its genre. Especially in life writing, then, genre is not about mere literary form; it’s about force—what a narrative’s purpose is, what impact it seeks to have on the world.

Memoir shares many narrative techniques and devices with the novel—so much so that sometimes the two are indistinguishable on the basis of internal evidence alone. This should not be surprising, since the

modern novel emerged as an imitation of life writing. As fiction developed, however, it acquired a larger repertoire of techniques than that available to the memoirist. The imaginative *range* of fiction is also much greater, precisely because, unlike nonfiction, it can entertain counterfactual scenarios. It is the different relations that fictional and nonfictional narratives have to the world that create these distinctions between their formal repertoires.

Chapter 3, “Memoir’s Forms” should help readers better appreciate the *way* that memoir represents human experience. For example, it explores the difference between “scene” and “summary” and suggests that scene may be more effective in fiction than in memoir. Pushed too far in the direction of “immediacy” of effect, scene may undermine the distinctive *work* that memoir does.

For the novelist, ethical matters are relatively simple and straightforward; it is enough to avoid plagiarism and libel. And doing so is relatively easy. The novel, being entirely imagined, cannot lie, and novelists cannot be accused of deception or misrepresentation within their fictions. If they conceal the identities of any real individuals on whom characters are based, they are immune to charges of libel.

Memoir is very different; in memoir, authors necessarily portray others, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to conceal their identities. This opens up a Pandora’s box. The ethical dangers of memoir stem from the fact that, unlike fiction, it is rooted in the real world and therefore makes certain kinds of truth claims.

As a result, memoirists assume two distinct kinds of obligations—one to the historical or biographical record and another to the people they depict. While utter fidelity to factual truth in memoir is not possible—and may not even be desirable—we also need to insist on some degree of veracity. The controversy over Frey’s memoir of his substance abuse and recovery illustrates the risk of detectable inaccuracies.

Chapter 4, “Memoir’s Ethics,” then, explains what kinds of scenarios involve the greatest temptations and risks of deception and imposture. The most objectionable kinds of hoaxes are those in which people of privilege pretend to be members of marginalized and oppressed populations—such as Holocaust survivors or indigenous people. Regardless of one’s motives (although they are pertinent), appropriating an ethnic, racial, or religious identity that is not one’s own violates the identity claim basic to memoir as

a genre. On that ground alone it is unethical. But there is also the problem that false testimony can devalue or displace true testimony.

The memoirist, then, has obligations to others. Memoirs that arise out of intimate relationships—between parents and children, between siblings, and between partners—can be particularly dicey. The most complicated relationships are those that involve inherently unequal structures: those between parents and children.

Ben Yagoda's *Memoir: A History* provides a comprehensive history of the memoir from its beginnings in antiquity to the present. But it is scant on the backstory of the modern memoir in North America, where the colonial era was characterized by writing in very utilitarian, instrumental genres. Hence chapter 5, "Memoir's American Roots." Significantly, much early American literature was what we would call life writing today: letters, diaries, chronicles, and occasional poetry. Even more important are the nonfictional genres that were integral to the colonial enterprise: narratives of exploration and settlement, narratives of Indian captivity, and conversion narrative. What we find in North America may not look like modern memoir, but it did provide the antecedents for various other modern life-writing genres.

Similarly, the nineteenth century produced a number of precursors for modern memoirs. For example, Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years before the Mast* is a forerunner of contemporary narratives in which a middle-class person deliberately samples working-class life (books like Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*.) Thoreau's *Walden* is more ambitious: it models an exemplary alternative lifestyle. Thoreau is not "slumming," like Dana and Ehrenreich; he is carrying out an experiment in sustaining life using minimal resources. In doing so, he adapted and updated various earlier genres of life writing, such as the conversion narrative, the Indian captivity narrative, and slave narrative.

This chapter also explores monuments or masterpieces of American life writing by Benjamin Franklin, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Mark Twain (who experimented with pseudonymous autobiography), Henry Adams (who wrote his autobiography in the third person), Henry James (who pioneered the memoir of childhood), and Gertrude Stein (who had the nerve to write *her* autobiography as that of her partner Alice Toklas). This chapter establishes that literary memoir is not a recent upstart: well before the twentieth century, American literature was rich in

precedents for much of what has been hailed as valuable in contemporary memoir. This chapter enables contemporary readers to understand where contemporary memoir came from—not only what may be new about it but how it may update prior examples.

Chapter 6, “Contemporary American Memoir,” explores the diversity, richness, and innovation of contemporary memoir. One innovation is the nobody memoir. Such memoirs put on record many different kinds of experience—lives not previously narrated. As it happens, a good many nobody memoirs are accounts of what it’s like to live in, or as, some *particular* body. And that has often meant writing about *odd* bodies, those with anomalous somatic conditions of some sort—illnesses or disabilities. A few conditions—breast cancer, paralysis, HIV/AIDS, deafness, and autism—have produced very large bodies of literature. Numerous other conditions—some seemingly obscure or rare (Munchausen syndrome by proxy)—have been represented in small numbers of narratives. In the case of some conditions (like autism, Down syndrome, and Alzheimer’s), the production of personal memoir was hitherto thought to be impossible.

So contemporary memoir has been a threshold genre in which some previously silent populations have been given voice for the first time. These are historically and culturally significant developments.

Another significant cluster of memoirs are narratives of fathers and mothers (especially fathers) by their children. This is a function of the aging of the baby boom generation. As their parents grow old, ill, and die, significant numbers of baby boomers have reflected in print on their upbringing. Some are the children of celebrities (Joan Crawford, Ronald Reagan), who capitalize on their parents’ fame; others are well-known writers (e.g., Philip Roth, Sue Miller) who take advantage of *their* fame to put the lives of their parents on record. Some, like Mary Gordon, investigate the lives of parents with deep, dark secrets. Most are attempting to complete unfinished business of one sort or another.

The late twentieth century also witnessed the advent of an entirely new kind of life narrative: the graphic memoir. The best, and best known, examples of this are Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*. Graphic memoirs are drawn rather than (or in addition to) written. This makes them not only new, but postmodern, since they deploy a

medium considered “low” or popular to treat serious, sometimes tragic, materials (the Holocaust, parental suicide).

This chapter also reckons with the “stunt memoir,” or “shtick lit”—the record of a temporary experiment in behavior or lifestyle. Examples are A. J. Jacobs’s *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man’s Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible* and Norah Vincent’s *Self-Made Man*, in which she recounts posing as a man for a year. Some grow, opportunistically, out of blogs. But others, like *No Impact Man*, call into question the basis on which the authors and others conduct their lives; they have transformative potential.

Finally, there is the postmodernist memoir, such as Lauren Slater’s *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* and Dave Eggers’s *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. Oddly, but perhaps significantly, there are few such memoirs, probably because one feature of postmodernism—the open acknowledgment of the artifice of the text—is inconsistent with the nature of memoir.

Chapter 7, “The Work of Memoir,” explores why we read memoir differently from fiction. Granted, fiction and memoir can look very much alike: one cannot always determine whether a given narrative is a novel or a memoir by examining the text itself. But we invest in them very differently. Rightly so. Once we have determined that a narrative is a memoir rather than a novel—usually on the basis of extra-textual cues—our response toggles to a different mode.

So while memoirs, like novels, traffic in character, plot, conflict, and suspense, we tend not to respond to these elements in the same way. The reason is that novels and memoirs have different statuses. In one way, characters in memoir are of course authorial creations; we know them only as effects of words on the page. But at the same time, they are representations of real people, who are vulnerable to harm. With memoir, too, we become interested in how character is formed by real events—or at least how the narrator understands that process: how one *I* (the protagonist) becomes another (the narrator). Because the essence of memoir is to make identity claims, we rightly focus on the nature of the identities in question.

So this chapter deals directly with the recognition that, while the memoir and the novel may mirror each other in *form*, in *force* they may be quite different. Memoirs take on the world more directly than novels,