

Your Reader Is Not Your Therapist

And other thoughts on memoir writing

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We were eight weeks in when I began to worry that Chris, my therapist, was getting bored.

To be sure, he always appeared attentive and engaged, nodding empathically at the right moments and chuckling at my attempted flashes of wit. But still, I worried we were losing something. I'd already told him the essentials of my life story, covered all the big moments, uncovered the most salient neuroses of my past. Now it was all about the quotidian present—anxieties about finances and relationships and apartment-hunting and all the middling concerns of a mostly privileged human in the twenty-first century. And so I grew anxious: was I doing enough to keep our sessions interesting? Was Chris happy to see me, or did he (heavens, this would be the worst) get a sinking feeling each Wednesday, when he looked at his calendar: *Oh, not him again!*

I had to make certain this would not happen, and so on the train from Brooklyn to Chris's Midtown Manhattan office, I would cycle through all the issues troubling

me—failed romances, failed financial plans, failed exercise regimens, and so on—then search for a narrative on which to hang a hook: a vignette, an incident, a *story* to tell. Stories have action in them, and human minds, including human therapist minds, I deduced, are well-suited for focusing on action; we can't help it, like a cat watching a scurrying mouse on the other side of a windowpane. And since narrative is nothing without its thematic underpinnings—choices, insecurities, conflicts, obsessions; all the abstractions threading through our lived experiences—we'd have all the ingredients for some terrific therapy.

Chris would not be bored.

Except, of course, it was not my job to keep Chris from becoming bored. This I realized only after several weeks of anxious pre-therapy pondering about how to structure each session. What I was doing, it occurred to me one day, was making the same mistake many others make about memoir writing, but in reverse: lots of people confuse memoir-writing with therapy, unburdening

themselves to readers in attempted catharsis; I was confusing therapy with memoir writing, hoping to keep my therapist engaged, entertained, and eager to get to the next chapter.

There's a curious dichotomy in the public conception of memoir. On the one hand, it is often derided as the self-indulgent, narcissistic navel-gazing of the me-me-me era, a product of the self-esteem movement of the '80s, multiplied by an internet age in which every voice can and must be heard.

On the other hand, there are the individuals who declare their story to be so vital that to withhold it would do the world a disservice. One aspiring memoir writer said to me once, "My life story is a hundred-million-dollar Steven Spielberg motion picture." Her story was not uninteresting, but I thought she'd vastly overestimated its blockbuster potential. It was also clear that her need to tell it was greater than the public's need to hear it.

What both types have in common is misapprehending the genre, seeing memoir as little more than acts of public therapy, meant more for the author's unburdening than for the reader's edification. For the former class, such self-exposure appears untoward. For the latter, it offers catharsis. Lost by both is the recognition of the genre as an art form that, in complementing its narrative core, examines, probes, weaves, and illuminates, not for the writer's benefit but for the reader's.

To be fair, those deriding the genre intimate something true enough. In his book *The Art of Time in Memoir*, the writer and literary critic Sven Birkerts notes that if "the memoirist, more than the novelist or poet, finds himself accused of navel-gazing, of unseemly self-involvement," it isn't completely without reason. "For at some level it's true—necessarily—that the self-chronicler, possibly more

than most mere mortals, is fascinated by the minutia of his own experience."

Mining one's life experience for artistic inspiration, however, is not in and of itself worthy of derision. The fact that a work of art is self-indulgent does not automatically make it bad art. If art is for the artist's

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pleasure alone, however, it's a quick route to artlessness. Like a tree falling in the forest with no one around, art without a beholder is without resonance and, as a creation, remains incomplete—so it is not the artist's need that is paramount but the consumer's. Memoir, too, therefore, is for the reader's benefit, not the writer's. As with all art, it requires not only the creative impulse but also an understanding of craft as well as the discipline and skill to employ it.

The woman with the hundred-million-dollar-motion-picture life story told me she hoped to write a book about it, and I resisted asking her, why a book? Why not, indeed, a motion picture? Or she could tell her story in verse—haiku, maybe. Or write a song. Or draw a series of paintings. Or use any of the other art forms through which we tell stories and convey feelings and ideas about the human experience. I resisted asking, but I am almost certain of the answer: she thought writing was easy. Or at least that it did not require the talent or dedication (or



collaboration—as in film or dance) of other art forms. In fact, I suspect this woman did not think of her hundred-million-dollar project as art at all. She just needed to tell her story, and if she could speak it, why not write it?

What I asked instead was this: “Have you written before?” What I meant was, *Do you have any notion of writing craft? Have you published, say, an 800-word essay before trying to craft your 50,000-word masterpiece?* She hadn’t, she said. She would’ve loved to write, of course, but she led a very busy life and it was really a shame but she just didn’t have the time.

“It’s so great that you got to tell your story,” many people have said to me after my own memoir was published. What went through my mind was, maybe it was and maybe it wasn’t, but memoir writing isn’t about catharsis or about *getting to tell your story* or even, really, about the story itself.

“The question is not what happened when, but what, for the writer, was the path of realization,” Sven Birkerts writes. The memoir writer, he notes, uses “the vantage point of the present to gain access to the hidden narrative of the past.”

If this sounds a lot like psychoanalysis, then we might in fact be back on the therapist’s couch, except that we are not on it for ourselves. The *path of realization* and the hidden narrative we gain access to is not for the writer but for the reader. The value of memoir is not in how interesting the story, or in its motion-picture potential, or in the writer’s need to tell it, but in the writer’s ability to convey a truth that will resonate on the frequency of the reader’s own life. Memoirists share their experiences not because they’ve lived extraordinary lives, but in the hope that their narrative might illuminate something about life through its very ordinariness.

“Why are we reading, if not in hope of beauty laid bare, life heightened and its deepest mystery probed?” Annie Dillard asks in *The Writing Life*. “Why are we reading if not in hope that the writer will magnify and dramatize our days, will illuminate and inspire us with wisdom, courage, and the possibility of meaningfulness, and will press upon our minds the deepest mysteries, so we may feel again their majesty and power?”

Such was my error with my therapist: it needn’t have been my concern whether *be*, through my story, found *beauty laid bare* and his own life illuminated. Unlike the writing desk, the couch is for the benefit of its occupant alone. The memoirist, on the other hand, must remember the audience. Sure, it can be helpful to forget it briefly during the writing process, but it is ultimately the audience who needs to be served if the work is to achieve its desired intent. In short, therapy is for your benefit; memoir is for the reader’s.

A friend who’d suffered a traumatic childhood asked me once for advice on writing his memoir, and at first I demurred; I couldn’t quite distill my unease with much of today’s memoir writing into neat bullet points. On reflection, though, I felt an irresistible charge to offer at least these two points. The first was, “Do your therapy first.” Too often, the urgency of unprocessed emotion creates a mess on the page, which makes that *path of realization* and *the hidden narrative of the past*, that most essential object of memoir, nearly impossible to uncover.

The second point was by far the more important one: “Be a writer before you are a memoirist,” I told my friend. Be a writer because you are passionate about narrative and ideas. Be a writer because you love words, because you love the rhythm of language, because, to you, there is nothing so

musical as the perfect sentence, nothing so arresting as a vividly described image.

"People who read are not too lazy to flip on the television; they prefer books," Dillard writes, and this is something the would-be memoirist would do well to remember. Be a writer because you believe this to be the best form for your art. Don't be a writer because you want to *tell your*

story, or because you think it will bring you catharsis. Be a writer because you know what the written word can do, and that you, with skill and discipline and careful study of the craft, might just have a chance at doing it well enough. Be a writer because you, too, are a reader, and if you work hard enough, diligently enough, you might just become the writer you yourself want to read. ●

Shulem Deen's Top Ten Rules for Memoir Writing

- 10 You don't need to have had an "interesting life," only the ability to see life in interesting ways.
- 9 Memoir isn't autobiography; its unifying principle should be thematic, not just "My Life."
- 8 Just because it happened doesn't mean it's interesting. Be selective with both scenes and details.
- 7 Don't come dressed in a three-piece suit. If your memoir doesn't embarrass you at least a little, you're not doing it right.
- 6 If you've been wronged: press charges, file a lawsuit, or hire a hitman. Never, ever, ever use memoir to get back at someone.
- 5 Write from your scars, not from your wounds. If you need to, do your therapy first.
- 4 Find your three-act narrative arc early on, and you'll avoid having to trash hundreds of pages.
- 3 Sections and chapters must have a cumulative effect. If it doesn't propel the narrative—by helping to build tension, or resolving it—it doesn't belong. Cut it.
- 2 Be truthful. This should be obvious.
- 1 Always remember this: memoir might be about you, but it's not for you. It's for your reader. Respect that.