



# Ethics in Memoir Writing

## An Instructional Dialogue

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# What Are Your Goals?

- Because of the potential to hurt yourself and others, ask:
  - Why am I writing this?
  - Who do I want to read this?
  - What do I want the reader to feel/know that he or she didn't before picking up my memoir?
  - What makes my experience special?

# Principles of Memoir Writing

- Memoir writing is the nonfiction form closest to novel writing
  - Memoirs must have a beginning, middle, and end.
  - They must tell a compelling story about a life-changing time if they are to be commercially successful.
  - Because their benefit is somewhat intangible, the experience or the writing must be earthshattering.

# Start with the Action

- As with novel writing, you must begin with a problem; watch the tendency to give too much background. Let the story unfold from the point of crisis.
- Every scene must move the story along to its logical, satisfying conclusion. Watch the tendency to include everything that happened.
- Show, don't tell. Write in the moment.

# Memorable Opening Paragraphs

- “I was sitting in a taxi, wondering if I had overdressed for the evening, when I looked out the window and saw Mom rooting through a Dumpster. It was just after dark. A blustery March wind whipped the stream coming out of the manholes, and people hurried along the sidewalks with their collars turned up. I was stuck in traffic two blocks from the party where I was heading.”
- “I wake to the drone of an airplane engine and the feeling of something warm dripping down my chin.”
- “My father and mother should have stayed in New York where they met and married and where I was born.”

# Truth in Memoir Writing

- Novelists have an advantage over memoirists: they don't have to worry as much about including real people in their stories.
- Libel/defamation hold people up to public ridicule. And generally, especially for public officials, if it's provably true—conviction, arrest record, and the like—you're safe.
- You cannot libel a dead person. But in some circumstances, their estates or survivors may sue you if your work opens them, not the dead person, up to ridicule.

# What Is Truth in Memoir?

- What if what you remember is hurtful to other people?
- When you write about private citizens, you are also open to the possibility of invasion of privacy suits, even if what you write is true.

# What Is Truth in Memoir?

- There's no shortage of debate on this topic
  - Concentration camp kindness leads to real-life love more than a decade later!
  - Half-white, half-Native American grows up in South Central LA as a drug-running gang girl!
  - Boy soldier in Sierra Leone!
  - Girl raised by wolves after Nazis abduct her parents!
  - Girl soldier in Eritrea!



# What Is Truth in Memoir?

- What if you're just writing it to let off steam?

# What Is Truth in Memoir?

- What if you turn it into fiction?
  - be aware that simply changing someone's name or not being a best-seller doesn't protect you from litigation.
  - You need to be sure the person is so different from real life as to not be recognizable to people who would know him or her.

# What Is Truth in Memoir?

- And, of course, there's the situation that started all the current controversy: James Frey and *A Million Little Pieces*

# What Is Truth in Memoir?

“As has been accurately revealed by two journalists at an Internet Web site, and subsequently acknowledged by me, during the process of writing the book, I embellished many details about my past experiences, and altered others in order to serve what I felt was the greater purpose of the book. I sincerely apologize to those readers who have been disappointed by my actions.”

# What Is Truth in Memoir?

“I didn’t initially think of what I was writing as nonfiction or fiction, memoir or autobiography. I wanted to use my experiences to tell my story about addiction and alcoholism, about recovery, about family and friends and faith and love, about redemption and hope. I wanted to write, in the best-case scenario, a book that would change lives, would help people who were struggling, would inspire them in some way.”

# What Is Truth in Memoir?

“There is much debate now about the respective natures of work of memoir, nonfiction, and fiction. That debate will likely continue for some time. I believe, and I understand others strongly disagree, that memoir allows the writer to work from memory instead of from a strict journalistic or historical standard. It is about impression and feeling, about individual recollection. This memoir is a combination of facts about my life and certain embellishments. It is a subjective truth, altered by the mind of a recovering drug addict and alcoholic. Ultimately, it’s a story, and one that I could not have written without having lived the life I’ve lived.”

# What Is Truth in Memoir?

"Frankly, I don't even care. I don't care if somebody calls [*A Million Little Pieces*] a memoir, or a novel, or a fictionalized memoir, or what. I could care less what they call it. The thing on the side of the book means nothing. Who knows what it is. It's just a book. It's just a story. It's just a book that was written with the intention to break a lot of rules in writing. I've broken a lot of rules in a lot of ways. So be it."

# What Do Others Say?

- Nan Talese, Frey's publisher, to *The New York Times*:

*“Nonfiction is not a single monolithic category as defined by the best-seller list. Memoir is personal recollection. It is not absolute fact. It’s how one remembers what happened. That is different from history and criticism and biography, and they cannot be measured by the same yardstick.”*



# What Do Others Say?

- Samuel G. Freedman, teacher of nonfiction book writing at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism in the *Columbia Journalism Review*:

*"I have yet to hear a persuasive argument for why conducting scrupulous research for a memoir or family history should be considered antithetical to high literary achievement."*

# What Do Others Say?

- Joyce Johnson, book editor, writing teacher, and memoirist to the *Chicago Tribune*:

*“In a good literary memoir, you’re basically rendering the essence of the experience. Whether someone is called Jane or Susan, who cares?”*

# Memoir or Fiction?

“For reasons sufficient to the writer, many places, people, observations and impressions have been left out of this book. Some were secrets and some were known by everyone and everyone has written about them and doubtless will write more.

“There is no mention of the Stade Anastasie where the boxers served as waiters at the tables set out under the trees and the ring was in the garden. Nor of training with Larry Gains, nor the great twenty-round fights at the Cirque d’Hiver. Nor of such good friends as Charlie Sweeny, Bill Bird and Mike Strayer, nor of Andre Masson and Miro. There is no mention of our voyages to the Black Forest or of our one-day explorations of the forests that we loved around Paris. It would be fine if all these were in this book but we will have to do without them for now.

“If the reader prefers, this book may be regarded as fiction. But there is always the chance that such a book of fiction may throw some light on what has been written as fact.”

# Memoir or Fiction?

“My grandmother switches her prayers to St. Ann, patron saint of difficult labor. But the child won’t come. Nurse O’Halloran tells my grandmother, Pray to St. Jude, patron saint of desperate cases.

“St. Jude, patron of desperate cases, help me. I’m desperate. She grunts and pushes and the infant’s head appears, only the head, my mother, and it’s the stroke of midnight, the New Year. Limerick City erupts with whistles, horns, sirens, brass bands, people calling and singing, Happy New Year. Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and church bells all over ring out the Angelus and Nurse O’Halloran weeps for the waste of a dress, that child still in there and me in me finery. Will you come out, child, will you? Grandma gives a great push and the child is in the world, a lovely girl with black curly hair and sad blue eyes.”

# Memoir or Fiction?

“Matanni, my grandmother said it began deep inside my mama’s womb when she was pregnant with me. Mama ate those little green crab apples that grow beside the toolshed. She ate oodles of them, popped them into her mouth like rock candy, crunched, and swallowed one right after another until not one was left to ripen on the tree. ‘Green apples ain’t no baby’s nourishment,’ she said, ‘but in the beginning they was all your mama could hold down.’”

# Memoir or Fiction?

“The sun pinks the sky in the west, a place where the eye loves to rest in this open land. Already the lore of its history tickles my curiosity, even though at this moment I am four years old. I hear of Indian chiefs and the frontier, if not from books, then from the pictures all around town proclaiming our cowboy heritage—neon signs, billboards showing an Indian chief in full headdress, peace pipe slung from an arm as casually as a gun. Right now the picture of an Indian, wearing only a blanket and standing in front of the Santa Fe Chief, hangs on the waiting room wall, wreathed in smoke rising like a mysterious code to the ceiling.

“I read the code here, tapping feet in open-toed suede shoes. I stare at my mother’s toes, as if to memorize an intimate part of her, bringing my gaze up her shapely legs, my stomach in a pang, the scenes that brought us to this moment fresh in my mind.”

# Memoir or Fiction?

“...To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o’clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously.

“In consideration of the day and hour of my birth, it was declared by the nurse, and by some sage women in the neighbourhood who had taken a lively interest in me several months before there was any possibility of our becoming personally acquainted, first, that I was destined to be unlucky in life; and secondly, that I was privileged to see ghosts and spirits; both these gifts inevitably attaching, as they believed, to all unlucky infants of either gender, born towards the small hours on a Friday night.”

# Memoir or Fiction?

“My father was the kind of dad who kept a nude photo of you when you were three in the downstairs bathroom, the one that guests would use. He did this to my little sister, Lindsey, thank God. At least I was spared that indignity. But he liked to tell a story about how, once Lindsey was born, I was so jealous that one day while he was on the phone in the other room, I moved down the couch—he could see me from where he stood—and tried to pee on top of Lindsey in her carrier. This story humiliated me every time he told it, to the pastor of our church, to our neighbor Mrs. Stead, who was a therapist and whose take on it he wanted to hear, and to everyone who ever said ‘Susie has a lot of spunk!’”



# Memoir or Fiction?

“I wake to the drone of an airplane engine and the feeling of something warm dripping down my chin. I lift my hand to feel my face. My front four teeth are gone. I have a hole in my cheek, my nose is broken and my eyes are swollen nearly shut. I open them and I look around and I’m in the back of a plane and there’s no one near me. I look at my clothes and my clothes are covered with a colorful moisture of spit, snot, urine, vomit and blood. I reach for the call button and I find it and I push it and I wait and thirty seconds later an Attendant arrives.”

# What Is YOUR Truth?

As Shakespeare wrote:

*This above all:*

*To thine own self be true,*

*For it must follow as dost the night the day,*

*That thou canst not then be false to any  
man.*

# Resources

- *Your Life as Story* by Tristine Rainer
- *The Writer's Journey* by Chris Vogler
- *Writing the Breakout Novel* by Donald Maass
- National Association of Memoir Writers ([www.namw.org](http://www.namw.org))



# Thoughts?

Thanks for coming!

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