

MEMOIR & ME: AN EVOLUTION

Jennifer Lauck

Critical Paper & Program Bibliography  
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the MFA (Master of Fine Arts) in  
Creative Writing, Pacific Lutheran University, August 2011.

## **Memoir & Me: An Evolution**

### **The Call**

Memoir is the writer's investigation of meaningful events in her life—events the writer reflects on as honestly as possible while implementing literary devices. Memoir writing, the actual act of remembering and reliving, via literary devices, is also a way to see into the truth of the human experience as well as to detoxify from traumatic events.

Twelve years ago, I wrote a memoir I titled *Jennifer Juniper*, after a Donovan song from the 1960's. The dreamy, disembodied lyrics went: “Jennifer Juniper, lives upon a hill. Jennifer Juniper, sitting very still. Is she sleeping? I don't think so. Is she breathing? Yes, very low.”

To my mind, the song was symbolic of the era as well as the relationship I shared with my adoptive parents, Janet and Bud. Both died when I was a small child—Janet from complications related to a cancer growth in her spine, when I was seven, Bud from a heart attack, when I was nine.

From my own view of childhood, it seemed my parents were a long ways off—as if at the bottom of a hill—even though we all shared the same home. It also felt that I was with them but remained very still within a hidden place in myself. And, when they spoke of me, it was often in the third person.

When he was alive, my father often hummed this Donovan tune to himself and perhaps that's why the title and the lyrics stuck with me as they did. Only when I was grown and looking back at my father's life, as well as my mother's life, did I pull all the

shreds of memory together and begin to stitch a semi coherent whole from our brief time together in the form of a memoir.

*Jennifer Juniper* went out to a slew of literary agents in the form of sample chapters and a cover letter. Within weeks, my submissions were promptly rejected and returned in my self addressed stamped envelopes. Most often I was being rejected because memoir wasn't selling and/or was a fad that had come to an end. In her "no, thank you," letter, Molly Friedrich of the Aaron Priest Literary Agency wrote that Frank McCourt's book *Angela's Ashes* had glutted the market and was likely the last we were going to see of memoir. Friedrich was McCourt's agent, which was why I had approached her. She wished me good luck though, unaware that I would bring her letter to our first meeting, when in fact she did become my agent. Another agent, Richard Pine, wrote that I should forget trying to sell my book, writing: "Unless you are famous, no one will publish your memoir. No one cares."

At the time I received these responses from professionals in the industry, I was not surprised or even defeated. As I often tell many hopeful memoir students today, getting published is not easy. Unknown writers have been known to break into the business but it is rare. The best path towards publication is a slow and steady one, where a writer works hard on at her craft, submits often to contests and periodicals and accepts rejection gracefully.

At the time I had shaped and submitted my first memoir, I had done my homework on the business of publishing and knew I had a better chance of being struck by lightning than getting published. At this time in publishing history, hopeful American writers submitted about a million books for publication each year. Of those,

perhaps sixty thousand would be published via commercial, university and independent publishers. Of those sixty thousand, less than three hundred would make it to *The New York Times* Bestseller list and perhaps six to ten would make it to recognition on The Oprah Winfrey Show—the single most important media outlet for reaching the market of book buyers.

Considering my odds, some questioned the sanity of having written a memoir in the first place. Most people I knew thought it odd that a young woman, in her thirties, would write her life story. “What could have possibly happened to you anyway?” came the question. Another was, “Why would you write a memoir, it’s not like you’re famous or anything.”

My former husband, who had only known me as a woman who had been a moderately successful local journalist, thought I had gone mad—not just for attempting publication but for the actual writing. For nearly three years, prior to my packaging those self-addressed stamped envelopes, sample chapters and cover letters to literary agents, he had watched me hunch over a keyboard and wrestle memories of my past across the page. He questioned why I would willingly place myself in the position to recount and render as story horrible childhood memories filled with tragedy and trauma. To him, my pursuits in memoir seemed a form of masochism. Since there was no money to be made by my venture, he also considered my efforts to be a ridiculous waste of time and energy that could be better directed towards working at a job that paid the heating bill and helped fund our retirement account.

As the one at the page, weeping and writing, writing and weeping, I didn’t have an excuse or an explanation for my choice to be a writer and to be a writer of memoir. I

only knew that something unknown about myself lived in the unexplored shadows of the past and that writing was my way into that past.

As Rilke wrote in his *Letters to Young Poet*:

Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you to write; find out whether it is spreading out its roots in the deepest places of your heart, acknowledge to yourself whether you would have to die if it were denied you to write. This above all—ask yourself in the stillest hour of your night; must I write? Delve into yourself for a deep answer. And if this should be affirmative, if you may meet this earnest question with a strong and simple “I must,” then build your life according to this necessity. (19)

Rilke’s answer was my own—writing wasn’t a whim but a necessity. I had no delusions of grandeur and not even the slightest hope of being published and rewarded financially for my time at the page but still I did the work because a force greater than me called me to do so. And I diligently pursued publication, not because I believe such a thing would come to pass, but rather as a form of good faith shown towards my efforts and myself. While it was a tiny glimmer, I held out hope that if I tried to get published, just tried, I might get that lucky break, win a handful of coins for my efforts (thus calming my practically minded husband) and earn more time in order to continue to write.

Mary Karr, who wrote *The Liars’ Club* talks about her own reason to write memoir in *The Paris Review*:

I needed the cake. Like Samuel Johnson said, “No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money.” I was newly divorced, a single mom feeling around for

change in pocket lint. I didn't have a car, which meant taking my kid to the grocery store in his red wagon, and two hours of bus time to pick him up after school on days I taught. [...] Hoping to get a book advance was like saying, Maybe I'll be an Olympic gymnast. I envisioned some small press might cough up a few thousand bucks after the book was finished. (np)

Karr, unforgiving, focuses for this interview solely on her intention to make money from her writing, in order to care for herself and her child and her comments don't stray that far away from my own intentions. She wasn't looking to get rich but she was looking for sustenance in order to do the larger work of caring for her child and providing for her own life as a writer.

For context, it must be said that when I put myself to the task of writing memoir and responding to that deep and haunted call to write, I was in my early thirties and about to become a mother myself, which I felt—in my bones—was the single most important job a human being could undertake. Motherhood was a long-term proposition; children would be in my care for eighteen odd years. And it was also a complex job that required a heightened sense of vigilance and wisdom. All manner of disaster and mayhem could visit our lives—from disease to bullying to drug use to learning disorders. I had to be at the ready as advocate and caregiver for my children—should I have them—and something in me knew that I did not possess the tools of heart and mind to be the best possible mother. In facing myself honestly, I knew I was a woman haunted by unknown demons and unless I found, fought and conquered those demons, they would overtake me and perhaps overtake my children.

As quoted in *The Portable Jung* edited by Joseph Campbell, Carl Jung said:

Generally speaking, all the life which the parents could have lived, but of which they thwarted themselves for artificial motives, is passed on to the children in substitute form. That is to say, the children are driven, unconsciously, in a direction that is intended to compensate for everything that was left unfulfilled in the life of their parents. (165)

Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist, influential thinker and the founder of analytical psychology, gave voice to the sense I carried within my own being. I felt, more than I knew with my intellect, that children were both separate from the parents but were also like sieves that would unwittingly absorb the unconscious material that lurked in the shadows of the mother and the father. While I could do nothing about my children's father, meaning I could not dive into the realms of his shadows and sorrows, I certainly could take up the mantle of my own history and look, as courageously as possible at memory ignored, forgotten, or even repressed.

Like a woman who has a baby without the interventions of pain medications or drugs that force labor, I was pressing myself fearlessly into mind numbing and inexplicable pain. And I went, like a laboring mother, with a kind of blind faith, believing that my efforts would produce some form of victory (although I had no idea what form it would take—perhaps a book?). A laboring woman goes through hours of contractions and pain to transform and open her body enough to release her child through the birth canal and her triumph is two fold. There is the baby she lifts to her breast and there is the knowledge she has gained about her own capacities to suffer and endure. To wisely nurture and raise a child from babe to adult, a woman must know her most gentle

and her most fierce capacities. She must know what she can endure and her long labor gives her this great and undeniable knowing.

As insane as it seemed to my husband and friends and as uninteresting as the created product, *Jennifer Juniper*, was to literary agents, it turned out that my personal labor of memoir writing would drag out for eighteen long years. My triumphs, and there would be many, would include re-titling my memoir *Jennifer Juniper* to *Blackbird: A Childhood Lost and Found*, securing Molly Friedrich as my literary agent, international publication, a position on *The New York Times* Bestseller List and a visit to *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Yet these were meager accomplishments when measured against the rich psychological spoils collected as a result of my long and exhaustive quest.

### **Why Memoir?**

As a young girl, I had always been a reader. I loved books of all kinds but favored collections and leaned to autobiography. By twelve, I had read all of the *Little House* books written by Laura Ingalls Wilder and in my twenties, I absorbed all six of the autobiographical books of Maya Angelou.

The book *Girl, Interrupted*, by Susanna Kaysen was the first book I found that was called memoir (even though it was shelved at the store under autobiography and has such a reference on the cover). Kaysen's book related her experiences as a young woman in a psychiatric hospital in the 60's after being diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. Composed of a series of penetrating vignettes, Kaysen acts as an objective observer of her own madness. She writes:



It is easy to slip into a parallel universe. There are so many of them: worlds of the insane, the criminal, the crippled, the dying, perhaps of the dead as well. These worlds exist alongside this world and resemble it, but are not in it[...]although it is invisible from this side, once you are in it you can easily see the world you came from." (6)

In reading this book, I was captured by the way Kaysen used the tools of literature—that is to say scene, summary, dialogue and very specific detail—to tell her tale. And yet in turning the book over in my hands, I saw that it was listed not as memoir but as autobiography.

Next came Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club*, and within the first page, I was hooked; "My sharpest memory is of a single instant surrounded by dark" (3).

The writing of Karr and Kaysen (as well as Angelo and Ingalls before them) emboldened me to imagine that I too could document a life, offer up a history including interactions with those I loved and hated and that I could also, at some level, understand what it all had meant—that childhood I had scrambled away from faster than a wild bird released from a cage.

In reading Karr's book, I asked myself what was my sharpest memory. I also studied her writing to see if I looked very closely at the way she shaped her lines and paragraphs, if I might be allowed access into her method of bringing that memory (and others attached to it) to life.

There were some in my life, spouse and friends, who would ask why I didn't write fiction but the truth of the matter was truth itself. I didn't want to hide my story

behind some made up façade or template. Not only was that going to be a great deal of work—first find the truth and then alter it into a fictionalized story—but it was also going to go against the principal of my quest which was to know, once and for all, the truth. I wanted to stop hiding under veils and lies and even denial.

Thus the appeal of memoir, which in those early days of books like *The Liars' Club* and *Girl, Interrupted* appeared to be a truthful accounting of events in one's life.

Truth was also my background. I had been schooled as a journalist and worked in the television news business for several years. The who, why, where, what and when of story telling had been worked deeply into my pattern of writing. I had also been taught that in order to offer up a balanced and fair report, I couldn't take sides but was to be a witness who presented the facts as they were, allowing the viewer to form his or her own opinions.

This early training was very important for my future as a memoirist and an investigator into my own past. Detachment, that art of being focused and unemotional, in the face of truly horrifying circumstances, would be necessary. As an investigative reporter covering "hard crime" meaning murders, drug busts and domestic violence, I saw things that haunt the soul. There was the man who killed his three children, his wife and himself, the two drug dealing teens who shot and killed a forest service worker who had a wife and four children, the Bonneville Power worker who raised horses as a hobby and had been abducted by a serial rapist. On and on it went for several years and I was there, at the scene of these crimes, gathering up the facts, throwing up behind the news car and then getting myself to the TV station in order to type up and present my report by the five o'clock news hour.

When compared to the reports I gathered, my childhood was actually on par. I had been adopted in 1963 and my mother (just seventeen-years-old at the time) had been forced into an illegal relinquishment. As a three-day-old infant, I was placed in the home of Bud and Janet Lauck, a young couple who lived in Carson City, Nevada and who had a natural son named Bryan who was three years old. Bud, an accountant by trade, secured me from the family doctor who owed him money. My arrival was an opportunity to clear a debt.

Janet Lauck suffered from a complex and mysterious illness. She had a tumor removed from her spine, eleven inches long, just after the birth of her first child (the reason she couldn't have more children). The tumor, benign, was removed but grew back and forced Janet into bed. She suffered a series of infections and had to undergo several surgeries to remove a kidney, her reproductive organs and even cut away at the tumor that continued to re-grow.

When I was six, Janet overdosed on Seconal and Valium in my presence. My father institutionalized her at least two times that I could discover via my investigation and finally, while he was involved with another woman, Janet died when I was seven years old. My father promptly married his lover, the mother of three of her own children and eighteen months later, he died of a heart attack. I was nine.

My stepmother, panicked by the awesome responsibility of five children and widowhood, sent me to live in a communal house in central Los Angeles where I was hired out as kitchen and office help to help provide income. By the time I was eleven years old, I was moved to live with a distant relative on my father's side of the family who adopted me yet again. My name was changed and I was assimilated into a new

home and community. My adoptive brother, Bryan, was sent to another family and at the age of twenty-three, shot himself after a long bout of depression.

As Mary Karr writes: "...when fortune hands you such characters why bother to make stuff up?" (qtd. in *The Liars' Club* xi).

I had no inclination or energy to do more than find the truth and pull it together in a semblance of coherent story telling which I called "memoir."

### **Definitions**

What is memoir anyway? How do we, in this time, define the genre? It seems this very inquiry sparks debate because no one can provide a definitive answer.

While some insist memoir is the same as autobiography, meaning an accounting of life that holds to the facts of what happened, when, with whom and how—something like a journalistic report—others refuse to hold memoir to such standards.

For example, in the book *Memoir: A History*, Ben Yagoda is firm in his insistence that memoir is indeed the same as autobiography and interchanges the two terms as he charts the long history of memoir writing all the way back to stories of the Hellenic Wars. Yagoda writes:

[...] I use the word "memoir" and "autobiography"—and, on occasion, "memoirs"—to mean more or less the same thing: a book understood by its author, its publisher, and its readers to be a factual account of the author's life. (1)

While there are many who hold that memoir is the same as autobiography, Yagoda seems to me making no distinction between the two genres—blending them into

one whole—in order to make a strong case against autobiographical fraud, meaning that the writer of the autobiography/memoir claimed to be writing a story about their own life but was flushed out (and exposed) via investigation. A popular example of such a fraud is *A Million Little Pieces* (listed now as a semi-fictional memoir but initially as a memoir) by James Frey. *The Smoking Gun* website published investigative findings in “A Million Little Lies” showing that Frey “fabricated or wildly embellished details of his criminal career, jail terms and status as an outlaw.” This investigation by *Smoking Gun* began when reporters at the site were unable to find a mug shot of Frey. In fact, no booking photo could be found despite the fact that Frey claimed to have been a convicted felon.

Other autobiographical/memoir fraud includes a writer who claimed to be of native American descent but turned out to be a white man living in North Carolina and a woman claiming to be a survivor of the holocaust, who was in fact, not Jewish and had no Jewish family. Due to these fraudulent accounts, Yagoda draws this conclusion: “The past four decades will probably be remembered as the golden age of autobiographical fraud” (246).

While fraudulent memoir/autobiography may be abhorrent, it seems a little misdirected to lump memoir as a genre and expressive form of writing with autobiography and then hold it to such a level of intense accountability. Such an endeavor forces much deeper thought about the terms “truth” and “writing” in general. It’s common knowledge that history, written by the winner, makes most history textbooks a collection of inaccuracies. Any journalist who has worked in the business for a few days is also well aware that “truth” must be altered and even eliminated from a report, especially if the “truth” causes harm to advertisers, upper management or even

stockholders (thus the birth of comedians who mock the news like Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show*). Even the Bible is not a truthful document, translated countless times by various papal authorities in order to serve dogmatic agendas.

As long as there has been the written word there have been and will continue to be opportunities for fraud. Yagoda, for all his outrage about fraudulent memoir, which he insists is not memoir at all but “autobiography,” might admit that all writing—since advent of the written word—is questionable.

Autobiography and memoir are not the same thing and cannot act interchangeably. Autobiography is a factual account of somebody’s life that is ruled by chronology and is date driven. Memoir is memory and the perception of memoir. Memory isn’t factual and no one should claim it is. Memory is personal to the perceiver and to explore memory is to explore a personal truth of perception.

Dr. Clark Moustakas, one of the leading experts on humanistic and clinical psychology, wrote in his book *Creativity and Conformity*:

Knowing the content of an experience does not convey its unique meaning any more than knowing that a tree has a trunk and branches tells how it will be perceived by the different people who see it. The “facts” of human behavior have little meaning in themselves. It is the manner in which they are perceived and known that reveals how they will be expressed in behavior. (4)

Moustakas is telling us that self-experience is positively different from objective view where the observer exists separate from that which they perceive. He writes:

If twelve people viewing, as a scene, observe that there are eight trees but I see only a pattern of light and color and movement, I claim of configuration, even though all the others see eight trees. It is the integrating meaning in perception that determines the nature of individual reality, and not the number of objects or traits tabulated by a machine or observed in a detached manner. (64)

Truth is what Moustakas talks about here, the truth of perception verses a recounting of detached and provable facts. Memory, highly personal and even debatable, provides a framework for exploration that is very personal about the nature of being.

In Greek mythology, Mnemosyne was the goddess of memory and also the mother of the nine Muses who inspired the creation of literature and the arts.

Is this how memory merged with literature to make memoir? Is it possible that literature and art are born from memory, where all experience lies in wait for interpretation? After all, we cannot write what we do not know nor can we create what isn't within us, or what we haven't become aware of.

Holding true to this root and to the name itself, I would suggest memoir defined is one's memory presented via an artistic model, what we might commonly call literature, which means the memoir writer takes up storytelling tools including setting, character development, dialogue, detail infusion and plot line arc in order to render a section of a life as a story.

In *Reality Hunger*, David Shields writes:

In English the term memoir comes directly from the French for memory, *memoire*, a word that is derived from the Latin for the same, *memoria*. [...] Embedded in Latin's *memoria* is the ancient Greek *mermeros*, an offshoot of the Avestic Persian *mermara*, itself a derivative of the Indo-European for that which we think about but cannot grasp: *mer-mer*, "to vividly wonder," "to be anxious," "to exhaustingly ponder." (40)

And this is the goal of the memoir. A memory, or a moment of one's memory is exhaustingly pondered in the way that one might pick up an object and study it from many different angles. The writer's task is to hold to the memory as best as possible, detailing what is remembered and then studying that memory, via the storytelling, from all directions—practical, philosophical, emotional, physical, mental and even sensory. As an experience is pondered, exhaustingly, the writer is able (hopefully) to glean deeper meaning from an otherwise surface experience. An example would be: a man goes to the market, purchases a newspaper, runs into an old lover and cannot remember her name. Without exploration, this is a meaningless experience. With examination, via a method like memoir, the writer (let's say in this case, the man going to the store) can explore his memory of that moment in the market, connect it to memories of being the woman's lover, and discover a bridge back to old dreams he set aside in order to travel a safer more predictable life path perhaps out of fear or even conditioning. The purchase of the paper goes to the rote routine of reading daily news where he has become a helpless observer of a world that drifts by him in a series of documented disasters. The appearance of the lover becomes an opportunity to back track and recapture the earlier



passion of youth and even, if he is hoping to make change in life, act as impetuous to change his present situation.

Once the writer has vetted their own experience in a work of memoir and then presented it for others to think about, the writer can invite the reader into the result of that struggle which may hold wisdom for the reader as well. In fact, this is what Michael Gladwell wrote, as part of his definition of memoir, in *The New Yorker*: “What the memoirist owes the reader is the ability to persuade him or her that the narrator is trying, as honestly as possible, to get to the bottom of the experience at hand.” (qtd. in *Reality Hunger*, 39).

Gladwell might also be saying that only the most exhaustive and complete study of an experience, which is done by a memoirist, can bear fruit and if such fruit can be delivered whole, then it is of interest and even benefit to those who consume it in the form of an essay or a memoir. One person’s experience has a chance to transform an individual, via examination and then go on to touch and transform many people. Selfhood becomes collective consciousness.

Yet the issue of truth becomes a real sticking point for many who attempt to define this genre. That an event really happened or didn’t happen seems to be the thing that keeps some readers and critics from accessing what might be learned from the memoir writer’s attempt towards truth. From *Reality Hunger*:

Truth in memoir is achieved not through a recital of actual events; it’s achieved when the reader comes to believe that the writer is working hard to engage with the experience at hand. What happened to the writer isn’t

what matters; what matters is the larger sense that the writer is able to make of what happened. (41)

The idea of the “self” is a place to rest one’s attention. Self hood, the nature of self, is a wholly human perspective. A tree doesn’t seek to know its nature. It is just a tree and yet it is alive. A dog doesn’t seek to know itself, it is just present to where it is and yet it is also alive. Yet a human being, with reflexive consciousness, knows it is present in time and place and he/she knows of this presence. It is interesting to note there is no tension in a tree or a dog. Each move by timeless laws and instinct and yet humans are largely disoriented wherever they find themselves. Humans largely do not act from instinct but from reason. They define, categorize, judge, assimilate and think, think, think.

Which is what memoir is. It is thinking, on the page, via the tools of literature—meaning story telling—about remembered experiences of the past. Memoir writing is also remembering more than we are allowed to remember due to the passage of time and the forward motion of living that escorts us, relentlessly, toward the future. Memoir writing is a halting of that forward motion and going back, on the time line, in order to pick up bits and pieces of wisdom that were carelessly or ignorantly dropped along the way.

### **Why Do We Love Memoir?**

Memoir is an explosive cultural phenomenon that dominates publishing at this time. According to Neilson Bookscan, which tracks about seventy percent of U.S. book

sales, total sales of memoir increased four hundred percent between 2004-2008. In 2007 and 2008, in England, seven of the top ten best selling hard covers were memoirs.

Judith Shulevitz, a journalist, editor and culture critic, wrote in *The New York Times Book Review* section: “That we love these books (memoirs) to the point of nearly drowning in them is [...]plain fact[...]why do we love these books as we do?”

In *Reality Hunger*, Shields has a passage that states we (readers) hunger for reality because we experience so little of it (10) and perhaps that is true. With more technology in front of us, demanding our time and attention away from each other and from the natural world, perhaps we find our way to memoir in order to feel connected to our tribal roots of community via the thread of story.

From the highest levels of public life to the quiet corners of obscurity, memoir is being created and often sold. Less than two years after leaving office, former President George Bush has a memoir to promote and nationwide we can find low residency creative writing programs jambacked with men and women interested in writing (and publishing) their unique experiences of addiction, loss, confusion, trauma and tragedy in the form of memoirs. It is a memoir gold rush—where even fiction writers who once mocked the genre find themselves stepping in. Elizabeth McCracken, a novelist who wrote *In the Giants House*, penned a memoir titled *An Exact Replica of a Figment of my Imagination*, which was about the stillborn death of her first child. On a *National Public Radio* interview, in January of 2009, novelist Elizabeth McCracken said: “I probably, especially had some scorn for memoirs that were about the worst thing that ever happened to you. Then something really, really bad happened to me and I realized I needed to write about it.”

I didn't read more than a handful of these books during the creation of my own books. Yes, there have been the memoirs that inspired my own writing but on the whole, I find many books written today to be a bit sad and even disquieting. In some cases, I even find myself distancing myself from many memoirs out of sheer embarrassment. I recall a book titled *A Child Called It* by Dave Pelzer, which I picked up after hearing the buzz of *New York Times* Bestseller again and again. In the bookstore, standing by an enormous display of Pelzer's books, ten feet wide and just as tall, I read about three pages of *It* and felt queasy. Pelzer writes:

I'm late. I've got to finish the dishes on time, otherwise, no breakfast and since I didn't get dinner last night I have to make sure I get something to eat. Mother is running around, yelling at my brothers. I can hear her stomping down the hallway towards the kitchen. I dip my hands back into the scalding rinse water. It's too late. She catches me with my hands out of the water.

SMACK! Mother hits me in the face and I topple to the floor. (3)

I can't say what exactly felt wrong about Pelzer's writing, it just felt "bad" in my body—like I ate something rotten. Perhaps there was a lack of truth in his writing or in his interpretation of his life experience. I am not sure but the book felt untrue and a part of me felt that Pelzer would do better to spend more time in analysis or perhaps spiritual practice verses writing. His storytelling felt wrong. There seemed a lack of heart in his words. It felt crazed and crazy to me and thus I put it down.

Other memoirs, which enjoyed stunning success, added to my confusion about this genre. For instance, there was Pulitzer Prize winner, *Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt, which provoked such a feeling of wrongness, I didn't set the book down but instead threw it across the room. The helplessness of the mother, who continuously placed her children in situations of poverty (to the point of death for two of the small ones), infuriated me beyond words.

And then there was *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert, which seemed to be less about memoir and more about framing her life in such a way as to capture the attention of an audience who enjoyed romance genre reading. Gilbert apparently pre-sold *Eat, Pray, Love* prior to writing it, pitching it as a three-country extravaganza of travel which would take her in Italy, India and Indonesia and then crafted a story that appealed to the masses who are hungry for adventure, romance and copious quantities of pasta.

In *The Houston Chronicle*, Gilbert was interviewed on this question of what is going on with the publication of all these memoirs. She attempted an answer to this question by saying it was her belief that we were living in the age of memoir for women. She felt that women had more authority, independence, education, literacy, financial independence, and time (due to the fact there was less social obligation to marry and become housewives) and voila—a genre is born. “This is brand new,” Gilbert was quoted as saying. “We (women) have a lot of curiosity.”

In *The Austin Chronicle*, Susanna Kaysen doesn't attempt to bring understanding to the collective interest in memoir or to make the writing of memoirs part of a gender movements but rather says, on a very personal level, that she wrote memoir because readers seemed to like them. She also said that she has now stopped writing memoir

since she believes there are too many in the marketplace and that readers inaccurately think they are real versus being what she calls “artifacts”:

The author tells you what the author wants to tell you in the way the author wants to tell you it. I don't expect memoirs to be true in every detail, and I don't think that the fact that they're true automatically makes them interesting. What makes the facts interesting is that they are told in a way that resonates with somebody else's experience. Which is exactly what you do in a novel. I don't see that much difference between writing a novel and writing a memoir. (np)

When she is questioned in this interview about a memoirist being “responsible to the truth,” Kaysen responds that a writer can’t “betray the truth of human experience as you understand it.”

Kaysen points to my own sense about memoir. We, as humans, seek truth in our human experience and perhaps this is the reason why memoir is being published and read to such a degree at this time. Evolution is taking place. With each passing day, humans are moving through time and changing. Look at the Mayan Calendar, which is in its final rotation and now brings humans to the end of a 16.4 billion year cycle of evolution that began with cellular development and delivers us now to a new consciousness (Edelman, 112-113) which philosopher and author Eckhart Tolle calls a new earth. Look at the ancient Chinese system of time, now making it's final shift from a five thousand year of Yang cycle to a to five thousand year Yin cycle. Perhaps we are all part of a social experiment on the largest scale in that we are awakening—like it or not—to a new consciousness and memoir a part of that emergence. As Rilke wrote:

We must assume our existence as broadly as we in any way can; everything, even the unheard up, must be possible in it. That is at bottom the only courage that is demanded of us; to have courage for the most strange. (*Letters*, 67)

How else can we humans encounter the uncertain conditions of being and experience? Memoir, by the nature of the form, invites a person beyond an accounting of mere facts that everyone can agree on and into the much deep realm self knowing. Via the storytelling the memoirist can assume existence as broadly as possible and commit to life even as she is threatened and challenged by the very conditions of living.

As Clark Moustakas writes:

To be alive is to be involved with life and this means being committed[...]. Without commitment, without relatedness, life has no meaning[...] yet inevitably these bonds of relatedness will be threatened and challenged by the uncertain conditions of living, by shattering experiences with others by disease and death, by any search for perfection and morality in an imperfect and immoral world. (*Creativity*, 106)

### **Final Thoughts**

As so often is the case in life, when the student is ready, the teacher appears. Memoir became the teacher that guided me, very slowly, to meet myself. That readers came along, meaning, that I was published and read by others was never the goal but in fact became the surprising (and sometimes unpleasant) outcome.

Once done with the exhausting and brutal work of memoir writing, which was often no less the hard labor of giving birth (which I had also done, twice), publication meant I could not take a break to enjoy my spoils but rather had to explain it further to those who would read it.

In one case, a person I had written about attacked me as a fraud. While he had had his identity changed to protect his privacy, he outed himself on a website of his own creation, wrote several thousand words of ridicule of my memoirs, bringing under question facts of dates and times of events I had written about and even lobbied my publisher to have the book classified as fiction versus memoir. While I ignored this person, who turned out to be as abusive in real life as he had been in my memory, it was extremely difficult to endure such an attack.

Then there were the readers who wrote me letters, wanting to share their own stories of childhood struggle—pages and pages of sorrowful tales—and many more who wanted me to answer a whole series of additional questions in order to make my life experience more understandable.

Once the hero completes his journey, conquers the kingdom and comes home with his bounty, he seeks rest—not a tireless recounting of what he has gone through. And yet, due to the machine of marketing and publishing, I had to recount again and again which actually served to deepen my perceptions and understanding.

As result of my own work in memoir writing, I finally was able to know and conquer my greatest demon, unbeknownst to me, which was that I had suffered an identity loss and trauma as a result of being separated from my mother at birth. Empirical evidence, widely available but largely denied in our culture, is that mothers



and babies develop deep attachment to each other over the course of gestation and that to separate mothers and infants results in a wide variety of complex side effects including but not limited to shock, grief, and trauma in the brain (Verrier, 42).

As part of my long quest into memory (via memoir) and my unique perceptions of my experience, I was able to uncover this previously unknown (at least to me) data about adoption related trauma. And armed with this new information, I went on to find my original mother and reunite with her after being apart for forty-four years. Memoir, that exploration of my memory became a vehicle that delivered me to an opportunity to expand my perceptions and change my future.

Memoir writing has been my investigation of meaningful events in my life—events I reflected on as honestly as possible while implementing literary devices. Memoir writing, the actual act of remembering and reliving, via literary devices, became my way to see into the truth of my human experience as well as to detoxify from the traumatic events of my childhood—which continued to haunt and pollute my adulthood. Memoir is a gift to the writer, when used, not as a tool to prove events of a life happened or didn't happen or even to make one successful in the commercial sense. The gift of the genre, when applied as an investigation of the self and one's perception of events in one's life, is nothing less than total transformation. A journey that began, for me, into exploring my memory of my adoptive parents, their lives and their deaths ended up taking me onward to explore nearly all of my lived experiences including maturing into adulthood, marriage and motherhood. That long, tireless quest delivered me all the way back to the very beginning, to my birth mother and my memories and perceptions which had been shaped in the womb and even upon my own birth. Not until the genre of

memoir had presented itself, did I have a way to diagram, study and reflect so deeply on the essence of myself. That I can go on to publish my writing, as memoir, and offer up my very personal discoveries makes my life long journey an opportunity for one person's consciousness to become collective consciousness. A most valiant enterprise, indeed.

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