

# The Washington Post

## The Deconstructed Writer

*As Best as She Can Half-Remember*

By Helen Epstein

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What is memoir?

"A tale taken from life," writes memoirist Vivian Gornick, "related by a first-person narrator who is undeniably the writer. Beyond these bare requirements, it has the same responsibility as the novel or the short story. . . . What actually happened is only raw material; what the writer makes of what happened is all that matters."

In a lecture to writing students at Goucher College in suburban Baltimore last month, Gornick, a longtime heroine to nonfiction writers, surprised her audience when she spelled out in more detail just what she meant by that. Over a 30-year writing career, Gornick said, she had created composite characters, "composed" scenes and juggled time frames to advance her narratives, according to a student who wrote about the event for Salon.com. NPR book critic Maureen Corrigan then accused Gornick of having violated the nonfiction "contract" between writer and reader.

News of this latest skirmish over ethics in memoir quickly spread via the Internet to writing colonies, workshops and summer programs around the world, and to the legions of other people in the writing establishment. Hundreds of colleges and universities now offer instruction in memoir or "creative" or "literary" nonfiction, reflecting the trend of professionalization of the arts as well as a response to the way theoretical concerns have edged out the study of writing in many English departments.

There was a time when an aspiring writer would sit down to try to write a novel; nowadays, he or she is more likely to attempt a memoir. The popularity of the autobiographical is mirrored in performance art, docudramas, documentaries and maybe even reality television.

It's because so many readers are interested in "what actually happened" that Gornick's remarks hit a nerve. Novelists advertise their work as a product of the imagination and often emphasize that in a prefatory disclaimer. Memoirists, on the other hand, claim their work as a representation of actual or, as Honor Moore puts it, "vividly half-remembered" experience. Some, like the late Mary McCarthy, alert the reader to having taken certain liberties with their narrative,

but many do not. What is the memoirist's contract? Should memoirists tell readers that they have changed names and places, "composed" scenes, made up characters, rearranged time? Are there any rules?

Earlier in the summer, Patricia Hampl and I had been discussing those questions with students at a writing program in Prague. She had come to memoir from poetry, where no one expects verifiable facts. Instead, "there's a convention -- even a cliché -- that's called "poetic license." I came to memoir from journalism, where facts are supposed to be the currency. I had been trained to write in the third-person voice, strive for objectivity, hold memory suspect, pursue several kinds of documentation, honor accuracy and submit my work to the scrutiny of trained, hands-on editors.

While accuracy in memoir is also a matter of honor, few of the other conventions apply. The first-person enjoys unchecked authority; objectivity has been debunked as a canard; literary and scientific theory question the validity of memory; and the economics of publishing have made hands-on editors nearly extinct. Memoir is a hybrid form, integrating techniques of fiction, poetry, travel writing, journalism, historiography and the essay. That's one of the reasons writers like it. They get to "show and tell," as Hampl puts it.

Partly because it's a hybrid form, there's little accountability for memoirists and, as in other areas of contemporary culture, a lot of getting away with murder. While Hillary Rodham Clinton may be bound by some irrefutable facts, who can contest her personal memories? Some writers say they're writing strictly what they remember; some that they recognize no boundary between fact and fiction; some lie outright and tell the reader; others, like Gornick, reject traditional journalistic standards for a deeper emotional truth. All claim they're writing memoir.

In her book "I Could Tell You Stories," Hampl dates the appearance of memoir in the West to the year 397 when the Roman Catholic bishop Augustine, living in what is now Algeria, wrote what he called his "confessions in thirteen books." Unburdened by post-modernism or psychoanalytic theory, believing that the examination of memory was the only sure road to self-knowledge and autobiography the clearest way to articulate it, his confessions demonstrate "the passionate nature of the pursuit of meaning as it courses through a life."

Augustine was concerned primarily with his relation to God, as were the earliest female autobiographers, such as Hildegard of Bingen or Saint Teresa of Avila. They were not primarily literary people. Nor were subsequent memoirists -- aristocrats, public officials, the rich and successful who wished to document their triumphs. Some used the form to record family lineage; others, like Gluckl of

Hameln, a 17th-century Jewish woman in Hamburg, used it to leave behind an ethical will for her children. It was unusual for a member of the literati to resort to memoir; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, though, used it to rebut slander and hold up his life as a model.

Most good memoirs are like picaresque novels of the soul, journeys of intellectual quest where the author's gradual understanding of the meaning of experience is as interesting as the experience itself. As V. S. Naipaul has written: "However creatively one travels, however deep an experience in childhood or middle-age, it takes thought (a sifting of impulses, ideas, and references that become more multifarious as one grows older) to understand what one has lived through or where one has been."

Because it is so strongly rooted in the specifics of time and place, memoir depends as much on accurate rendition of facts as on the writer's intellectual and emotional honesty. "When we label a piece of writing non-fiction," writes Philip Gerard in his book "Creative Nonfiction," "we are announcing our determination to rein in our impulse to lie. . . . The hardest part of writing creative nonfiction is that you're stuck with what really happened -- you can't make it up."

In my own writing, I've certainly been tempted to lie: to secretly conflate two incidents into one or two similar people into one in the way some social scientists and psychotherapists writing case studies routinely do. I've often wished to rewrite the artistically inconvenient way things really happened. But I don't like reading about composite characters even when the author has let me know about them. I've learned that altering anything -- even the names that I've sometimes been compelled for legal reasons to change -- compromises the integrity of the work.

When we read powerful memoirs of private life such as James Baldwin's personal essays, Eva Hoffman's "Lost in Translation," Tobias Wolff's "This Boy's Life," Maxine Hong Kingston's "Woman Warrior," Esmeralda Santiago's "Almost a Woman," Jan Morris's "Conundrum" or Kay Redfield Jamison's "An Unquiet Mind," their impact derives not only from their aesthetic power but from our trust that the authors are writing about actual people and events. This is crucial in 19th-century slave narratives and 20th-century survivor memoirs from every continent.

Like Maureen Corrigan, I'm a fan of Gornick's many books and was surprised by her reported remarks at Goucher. The degree of literary license, like taste, may be one of those things you can't argue, and the line between representation, composition and invention can be very hard for writers themselves to discern.

But I think they should tell the reader what they think they're doing. That's what makes memoir not fiction.

Helen Epstein is the author of five books of nonfiction, including "Where She Came From: A Daughter's Search for her Mother's History" (Plume). She lives in Massachusetts.

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