

11/20/09 - Memory, Fact, Imagination, Research: Memoir's Hybrid Personality

1

The best that a would-be nonfiction writer can do is to use imperfect language to invoke

imperfectly remembered events based on imperfect perceptions.

?David James Duncan

At a writers' conference not long ago, I gave a public reading from "Trading Off," a memoir that for the most part dramatizes a turbulent relationship I'd had with an old high school baseball coach. During the q and a, I was asked the usual questions: "Did it really happen the way you wrote it?" "Did your coach really do those perverse things to you?" And the one that almost always comes up; "If you were only fifteen, how can you remember exactly what was said in the coach's office?"

Predictable as they are, those questions go right to the heart of some of the more provocative issues that literary memoirists are currently debating. Issues such as; does the writer have to stick to the literal facts of the story? What should writers do when they can't remember the details of an important incident, situation, or conversation? Can they/should they invent or embellish the events? And if so, to what end?

My first impulse is to advise aspiring memoirists to write the entire narrative first, just the way they remember it. Include all the specifics, names and situations. I say this because ideally when we're writing memoir, we're hoping to create a compelling story? a story that another human being can enter. And to that end, we want the work to ring true. But what does that phrase, "to ring true," really mean?

2

{A} memoir is not about what happened, but why you remembered it the way you did. That's where the story is. That's what we talk about.

?Kim Barnes

I started thinking about these matters while I was attending an AWP (Associated Writing Programs) convention a few years back. As part of a panel discussion on truth and invention in nonfiction, memoirist Fern Kupfer gave a talk entitled "Everything *But* the Truth?" in which she made a clear distinction between "literal" and "artistic" truth. At one point, she said something to the effect of the following. I'm paraphrasing here. The question of lying comes up all the time in the creative nonfiction classes I teach, Kupfer said, "But that's how it happened' my students sometimes say when I suggest changes that would shore up the narrative and pep up the prose. 'Your memoir shouldn't read as slowly as real life,' I tell them.

Kupfer went on to say that we need to give would-be memoirs permission to {imagine and embellish}, but only when the reconstructed version of the story does not deceive the reader in its search for the aesthetic truth.

By raising the issue of aesthetic truth?which I'll talk more about later?Kupfer is moving into a controversial area. Some writers and editors contend that memoirists should remain faithful to the facts and events, much like good journalists are expected to do. Others like Kupfer, Vivian Gornick, and Patricia Hampl, believe that imagination cannot help but alter memory.

For myself, I believe that the type of memoir a writer produces is determined at least in part by that writer's sensibility?that is, how he/she sees the world?as well as by how that writer views and defines the genre. Someone who believes that memoir should be an accurate, literal rendering of the past will compose a different kind of work from a writer who, like myself, sees memoir as a form of self-discovery and self-exploration. Then too, the writer who positions herself as a witness/observer will see a different reality than the writer who places himself at the center of his own story.

Maybe it's because I'm now in my sixties that my current memoirs tend to be more self-interrogative, more speculative. The impulse behind the piece about my baseball coach (the one I cited earlier), in fact, evolved out of a nagging mid-life itch?an urge to go back into my past and examine that turbulent relationship. That

impulse, however, didn't just appear. It was triggered by a disturbing situation that arose during what at the time was my then current life. To make a long story short, I was allowing myself to engage in a series of professional compromises with specific colleagues?peers and superiors? that were making me at first uneasy, and then angry with myself. Against my own beliefs, I was, for some reason, electing to take the high ground?maybe to avoid the conflict and *tsuris* I knew would be the end result.

Those responses, those avoidances, I soon found, were starting to call up rather specific memories of other childhood compromises that I'd made with an old high school baseball coach?a man I hadn't thought much about almost five decades. Being a memoirist, I naturally began to see this as potential raw material. And so I started writing down any similarities, any connections I could come up that might link my behavior in the present situation with my colleagues with and my childhood experience with this coach.

In "Trading Off," the stand alone memoir I referred to earlier, the narrator?the "I, who is a version of my younger self?discovers why he had allowed himself to make the kinds of tradeoffs with that coach that he did. One reason was that at fifteen, he?meaning I?desperately wanted to play baseball for the high school team. Coach Kerchman knew it too; and at the time he used that knowledge to manipulate me?in some deliberately cruel ways.

He had the power. That was pretty clear. And at fifteen, what choices did I have?other than to walk away from the situation?which at the time was an unthinkable option. I was *that* obsessed with making the team. But even back then, at some level I was aware of the costs?if not yet the larger implications?of making such deals. And now, here I was in my early sixties making similar tradeoffs with colleagues and superiors. And I wanted?no, check that?*I needed* to understand why.

My point is that in speculating on the childhood/adult connection, I found myself having to reshape and rearrange certain events, situations, and conversations in order to get a better grasp on why, even today, I'm still prone to making compromises that I'm not always comfortable with. Was there a pattern of behavior here, I began asking myself? And that's the kind of thing memoirists tend to look for.

As far as memory serves me, the incidents, situations, encounters, and particularly, the confusions that I wrote about all happened. But clearly, not in the exact sequence they might have originally occurred.

Still, I'm convinced that I would not have stumbled upon the connection between my adult and childhood behavior had I simply reconstructed or retold the events of the relationship with the coach in the exact sequence in which they had occurred?if indeed I could even remember what that sequence was.

Consequently, I understand what writer Pam Houston means when she says, "I'm not going to tell the story the way it happened. I'm going to tell it the way I remember it."

In my case, I remember it in the context of urgently having to write about it. And that's a much different undertaking than relating the story to old friends over a drink?or even writing it simply because it happened.

As the controversial memoirist Vivian Gornick, rightly maintains, "What happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the larger sense that the writer is able to make of what happened. For that the power of imagination is required."

To me, that's what distinguishes a memoir from a reminiscence. And that is essentially the heart of the matter here, is it not?

3

The aims of the imagination are not the aims of history.

?Cynthia Ozick

Let's explore more fully the notion of how imagination alters memory. First, there's what Phillip Gerard in his very fine book, *Creative Nonfiction* calls "the truth of event." Author Mary Clearman Blew says about the family memoir she wrote, "I struggled for a long time with the conflicting claims of the exact truth of the story and the emotional truth as I perceived it." And then there's the "aesthetic" truth that Fern Kupfer refers to. That's three different truths. What's wrong with this picture?

What these three writers are referring to when they talk about "emotional" or "aesthetic truth"?as opposed to the truth of "event"?is inherent in what Annie Dillard

describes as the act of "fashioning a text."

Let me explain. As Gornick suggests, in a literary memoir the writer's personal story is frequently—and maybe, always?—less important than the larger meaning or human connection that he/she discovers—hopefully, during the process of writing. And, if the work is crafted with careful attention to language, detail, and most especially, form, it becomes much more than a direct confession or retelling of one's own personal story. Whether a memoir succeeds or fails as literature then, has a great deal to do with the writer's skill and ability to shape his/her experience into a satisfying "aesthetic" whole.

In another vein, poet Stephen Dunn says, "Just because it happened to you is no reason to write about it. You have to be interesting or no one will care."

I admit that it's an unequivocal, maybe even a harsh judgment. But depending on your own notions of what literary work is, it has some merit to it. My colleague, Mimi Schwartz, tempers Dunn's assertion somewhat when she says, "You have to believe that writing about this is the most urgent thing in your life. And that you're the only person who can tell this story."

And as Marge Piercy maintains, "The writing of a {literary work} is taking life as it already exists." She goes on to paraphrase Eudora Welty, who once said, "What distinguishes {literary writing...from journalism, is that inherent {in a literary text} is the possibility of a shared act of the imagination between its writer and its reader."

Ok, right about now, I'll bet you're all wondering where this is going, aren't you? But hang in there with me for a bit longer, ok?

If what these writers say makes sense, then most memoirists admittedly are unreliable narrators—as Pam Houston has suggested. Her implication is that when we retell past events—even if it's simply to reminisce—we invariably embellish our stories. And whether we do this to make better sense of what happened, or if our impulse is simply to make the story more interesting, we still wind up becoming subjective, even self-constructed, personas in our own stories, our own narratives.

If you're still skeptical, here are some other variables to think about. Language by its very nature distorts human experience. After I'd written the memoir about my coach, that version became more vivid to me than the actual events and memories it was originally based on. As Stephen Dunn explains, "Your memory of your past becomes your past."

Annie Dillard suggests that a similar phenomenon occurs when you try to describe a dream. In her essay, "Fashioning a Text," she writes, "at the end of the verbal description you've lost the dream but gained a verbal description. You have to like verbal descriptions a lot to keep...this sort of thing {up}."

There's also the shifting nature of memory itself. A while back my wife and I were watching slides of a European trip we'd taken about ten years ago. In addition to disputing our different versions of what it felt like to have visited St. Peter's or the Louvre, we were also in disagreement about whom we were with, what our itinerary was, and even the angle of the sun at the moment we took the slides.

So, in the context of writing literary memoir, what are the implications of all this?

4

We like to pretend there are no conventions in nonfiction??conventions' are for works of the imagination, and memoir is ?nonfiction.' Which is the same word we use for the newspaper.

? Patricia Hampl

It seems to me that this all comes down to a matter of where one locates oneself on a spectrum?or a continuum. Those like me who accept a blurring of boundaries between memoir, fiction, and say lyric prose and poetry will agree with Patricia Hampl, who describes memoir as a "hybrid" or "mongrel" form.

In an AWP interview a while back, Hampl claims that

Memoir rightly does belong to the imaginative world...once writers and readers make their peace with this fact there will be less argument over the ethical question about the memoir's relation to ?facts' and ?truth.' But as long as we try and nudge memoir into the same confines of nonfiction that we expect for example, from journalism, we'll have these battles with people taking rigid positions. Meanwhile

people will continue to write their first person tales, trying to make sense of their lives in one context or another."

As I've said, I have no trouble subscribing to the notion that imagination transposes, even reorders and reshapes memory. I think that transformation is an important part of what literary writing is all about. But I also believe that memory itself is not necessarily untruthful.

Here's an illustration from "Trading Off." It describes the first encounter I had at fifteen, with Coach Kerchman. All you'll need to know here is that our next door neighbor, Gail Sloane, was Kerchman's secretary in the Hygiene office. Rumor had it that Kerchman had a crush on her. So the summer before baseball tryouts, my father prevailed upon Gail to ask Kerchman if he would invite me to the tryouts as a favor to her.

This is the scene as I originally wrote it.

It was early September, my first day of high school. Baseball tryouts were in February, so I figured I had plenty of time before I had to worry about Kerchman. In first period home-room, though, Mrs. Klinger handed me a note, "Be at my office 3 o'clock sharp." It was signed by Mr. K. The rest of the day was a blur. I couldn't hold a conversation, I picked at my lunch, and every time I opened a book, my thoughts drifted. By three, my stomach was in knots.

Kerchman's "office" was across from the boiler room, deep in the bowels of the ancient brick building. To get there, you had to walk past the showers and through the boy's locker room. As I opened the stairwell door, I inhaled the steam from the shower, and above the hum and buzz of locker room banter and casual small talk, I heard the clackety-clack-clack of aluminum cleats hitting the cement floor. An entire bank of lockers was reserved for Angelo Labrizzi, Mickey Imbrianni, and Leon Cholakis, the football studs I'd been admiring for the past year. I'd seen them around school and at the State Diner jock table; but here in their domain, they had an even more potent aura. As far back as grade school, this was a prestigious, exclusive club I'd dreamed of belonging to.

Though football would never be my sport, playing varsity baseball

offered some of the same privileges. I'd already witnessed it for myself: Adults? your own parents, and your friends, actually paid money to watch you play; cheerleaders chanted your name ("Steinberg, Steinberg, he's our man, if he can't do it no one can."), and they kicked their bare legs so high you could see their red silk panties. After school, you sat at the jock table in the State Diner; you got to wear a tan leather jacket with a big blue and red "R" across the left breast, and your girlfriend wore your letter sweater to school. Maybe the biggest ego-trip of all was when everybody watched with envy when you left sixth period Econ to go on "road trips."

I tried to push those thoughts out of my mind as I timidly knocked on Kerchman's door. "It's open," he rasped in a deep, gravelly voice. The room was a ten-foot-square box, a glorified cubby-hole, smelling of Wintergreen, Merthiolate, and stale sweat sox. The brown cement floor was coated with dust and rotted-out orange peels; and on all four sides were make-shift-two-by-four equipment bays, which overflowed with old scuffed helmets, broken shoulder pads, torn jerseys and pants, muddy cleats, and deflated footballs, all randomly piled on top of one another. Mr. K stood under a bare light bulb wearing a baseball hat, white socks, and a jock strap, He was holding his sweatpants and chewing a plug of tobacco. "You're Steinberg, right?" He said my name, "Stein-berg," slowly, enunciating and stretching out both syllables.

"I don't beat around the bush, Stein-berg, You're here for one reason and one reason only. Because Gail Sloane told me you were a reliable kid. What I'm looking for, Stein-berg, is an assistant football manager. I'm willing to take a chance on you."

I wanted to run out of the room and find a place to cry. Assistant football managers were glorified water boys; they did all the "shit work," everything from being stretcher bearers to toting the equipment.

He sensed my disappointment and waited a beat while I composed myself. "Gail also tells me you're a pitcher," he muttered, as he slipped into his sweat pants.

Another tense beat. Finally, he said, "In February, you'll get your chance to show me what you've got."

And to make certain there was no misunderstanding between us, Kerchman added, "Just like everyone else."

?I knew it,' I muttered under my breath. I was pissed off at myself for allowing my father to ask Gail to put in a word for me. Too late now, though.

Then Kerchman said. "So what's it going to be, Stein-berg?"

It had all happened too fast. I couldn't think straight. In a trembling, uncertain voice, I told him I'd think about it and let him know tomorrow.

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Almost five decades later, how accurate is my memory? I do recall that Kerchman asked me to be the assistant football manager, when all the while I was thinking that he was going to invite me to baseball tryouts. I vaguely remember what his office looked like, and I vividly recall what it smelled like. But who knows if the specific items I described were arranged in just that way? And I don't remember if he called me out of class on the first day of class, or if I initiated the visit on my own. Or, if this happened sometime during the first week of school and not on the first day. And, of course, I had to reconstruct some of the dialogue.

But I did not imagine or invent the scenario I just narrated. I unquestionably did meet with him. And he was standing in the middle of that tiny room wearing only a jock strap, socks, and baseball hat. Who could forget that image? Well then, did I see and hear all this on that particular afternoon? And would it have made a difference if I had? What's authentic here is the numbing despair and humiliation I felt at that moment. And for as long I write (and tell) the story of that encounter I'll continue to claim that this is the real truth?just as I remember it.

Thus far, I've made a case only for memory and imagination, qualities that identify a given memoir as a literary work. For me, that's the "creative" in creative nonfiction. But it's only part of the equation, part of the challenge presented by this genre.

5

Research is essential, whether telling a coming-of-age story, investigating a family secret, or recreating the legacy of several generations. Whether we write about a world we know intimately or are just discovering, research leads to more layered and authentic narratives.

?Mimi Schwartz

The notion that memoirists rely exclusively on memory and imagination to craft their narratives is a persistent misconception. Memoirs are set in real time and in real places; and they include real people and real events. Let's agree then, on this much. Whatever else we think of the form, none of us would be inclined to trust a writer who fabricated those truths. So it goes without saying that the memoirist's—or for that matter the journalist's—credibility rests on those things that can be verified—even fact checked. To my mind, that's the "nonfiction" part of creative nonfiction. Let me illustrate very briefly by referring back to "Trading Off."

Originally, I wrote it as a stand-alone essay/memoir. But over time it became the impetus for *Still Pitching*, a full-length memoir I wrote about growing up in New York City from the late 1940's until the late '50's. The memoir is set against a backdrop that sports historians even today still call "the golden age of NY baseball."

Here then, are some verifiable facts. During the post war years from 1947-1958, one or more frequently two of the three New York teams—the Yankees, the Giants, and the Brooklyn Dodgers—played in and won the World Series. That's how the term "Subway Series" was coined. And if you were a young boy growing up in New York during that time, you couldn't avoid baseball whether you liked the sport or not.

Those ten years were also the setting for my own coming of age. And like most adolescents, I wanted to fit in, to find a place where I belonged. But I also wanted to distinguish myself by pursuing something at which I could excel. As it turns out, becoming a baseball pitcher was that something.

That inner struggle is the central narrative, the personal story, if you will, in *Still Pitching*. Where in the stand-alone piece, I needed to focus almost the entire narrative on the relationship between the coach and me, in the book length memoir,

the personal story needed a larger context. And so, I set the body of the memoir between two major baseball-cultural-historical events; 1947 when Jackie Robinson became the first black player to break the major league color barrier and 1957, when the Dodgers and Giants left New York for California. Their departure, to be sure, marked the end of my childhood. But it was also the beginning of major league expansion. And for me and many others of my generation, this still serves as a marker for a myriad of other changes in the larger culture.

Before, during, and even after writing *Still Pitching*, I spent hundreds of hours reading baseball histories and period histories about New York, as well as looking at microfiche, videos, and newspaper and magazine clips about New York City in the 50's, and about baseball in New York during that period. One sports writer, Roger Kahn, even titled his book, *The Era 1947-1957: When the Yankees, the Giants, and the Dodgers Ruled the World*. All hyperbole aside, there were other cultural and historical events, other forces, other people—entertainers, politicians, writers, and so on—that came to bear on the personal story I was telling. And to get the names, places, situations, and dates right, I needed to research all of that as well. Moreover, I also talked to people—friends, acquaintances, teachers, family members, sports writers, and baseball historians—who lived during that same time.

So then, we're back to my original claim that memoir is indeed a hybrid genre. Which means that the narrator's personal story—which evolves out of memory and imagination—and the research and reportage—are both, in one way or another, the necessary raw materials that the writer still has to organize and craft into a coherent narrative. And *that*, as Annie Dillard suggests, is how you "fashion a text"—which, in the end, is what all literary writers—memoirists, poets, and fiction writers—must do.

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