

“Crafting” the Past: Writing Your Story as a Means of Empowerment

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Questions to Ask Yourself:

1. What parts of your personal story are you interested in exploring through writing?
2. How could using the craft “tools” of creative nonfiction (such as image, persona, tone, point of view, tense, scene, dialogue, etc.) help you tell that story in a way that feels imaginative but also true to your experience?

Writing Prompts To Try:

Focus: Look to the Specific, Pocket-sized, and Concrete

Write about an item that you wish you had saved or kept. It must be something that could fit into your pocket or a small lunch box. Describe the physical attributes of the item in great detail. Why is/was it significant to you? Where did the item come from, and where is it now? What does the item reveal about you?

Next, write about an item (also small) that you would throw into a magical fire that leaves no trace of it on the planet—it would be erased from the internet and elsewhere. This item should be of personal significance to you. Be specific in describing the physical attributes about this item. Why destroy it? How might its absence affect you or someone else?

Honesty: “Sometimes, you just have to turn your mother’s picture to the wall and start writing.” — Peter Knupfer

Write about something from your past or present that you wouldn’t want your mother/father to read. You know the one. Yeah, write about that.

Perspective: Humans Not Villains

Write about someone who has wronged you in some way—perhaps a stranger who was rude to you at the bank, your mother, an ex, or your dearest friend. Let yourself write freely in this first draft by expressing all of your indignation and emotion as you describe what happened and how you feel about it. A few days later, reread what you wrote, and underline 3-5 sentences that best capture how you have portrayed this person. Take notice of your word choice and how you frame the situation.

Next, begin a new draft. This time, try to refocus your lens by stepping back and trying to look at the situation as objectively (and creatively) as you can. Rather than focusing on how *you* were wronged, try to focus on *the person* who wronged you. You’ll likely need to use your imagination in a big way. What might their day/week/year have been like when they wronged you? What might this person behave like when they are alone? What might their desires and interests and difficulties be? Underline the sentences that best reflect how you portray this person in your latest draft.

Note that this exercise is *not* about absolving people of their wrongs, particularly in instances of abuse, etc., but simply about crafting recognizable humans, rather than “types” or villains. Repeat this drafting of the same set of experiences as many times as you like. With each draft, try to locate the humanity (and complexity) in this person and circumstance as much as possible.

Suggested Reading:

Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Technically fiction, but largely drawn from Alexie's personal experiences, this book tells the story of Junior, a teenager on the Spokane Indian Reservation who decides to attend a nearby rural all-white school.

Antonetta, Susanne. *Body Toxic: An Environmental Memoir, Make Me a Mother: A Memoir, and Mind Apart: Travels in a Neurodiverse World*. Antonetta turns a curious and sharp mind toward the outside world but is unafraid to give the reader close views of what is inside--including her experiences living with bipolar disorder.

Bechdel, Alison. *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*. This graphic memoir explores the complicated relationship between the author and her mother, whose ongoing presence in Bechdel's life shapes the narrative as it unfolds.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. Composed as a two-part letter to his son (a great example of using the craft tool of "epistolary form"), Coates asks and to some extent attempts to answer difficult questions about race in America: both historically and in the contemporary moment.

Covington, Dennis. *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia*. In this book Covington, a journalist, returns to his childhood region of Appalachia to investigate an attempted murder-by-snakebite amongst a group of Pentecostal mountain folks, and realizes that their faith--and his-- is much deeper than he might have originally thought.

Hampel, Patricia. *Multiple Titles*. Maybe begin with *I Could Tell You Stories*, which serves both as a vehicle for Hampel's personal stories about being a woman and a writer and a person of faith, and as a philosophical argument for the importance of memoir. Also contains a chapter on the ethics of writing about family and friends.

Karr, Mary. *Lit*. All of Karr's memoirs are excellent and speak to various issues of identity. *Lit* explores Karr's experience of battling alcoholism as a young mother while also trying to build an academic career. A powerful story of grace and community.

Kimmel, Haven. *A Girl Named Zippy: Growing Up Small in Mooreland, Indiana*. This book is a great example of writing one's childhood experiences; the young Haven is reminiscent of a midwestern Scout Finch. Kimmel's Quaker background is also a part of the story.

Lee, Li-Young. *The Winged Seed*. Best known as a poet, Lee uses his gift for lyricism to tell the story of his family's long journey from China to the United States, where his father became a Presbyterian Minister.

Rodriguez, Richard: *Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography* and *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. Ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, education, and religion are all present here.

Sedaris, David. *Multiple Titles*. Sedaris's essays are at turns hilarious and heartbreaking, and far more nuanced and serious than his humorous tone might at first lead you to believe.