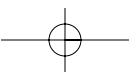
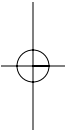
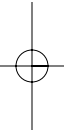


PART I

The Ideas Behind
the Process



MEMOIR VERSUS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Writing stories about your life is like plying the waters of some familiar yet exotic sea. It is the act of casting your sails for adventure.

Imagine it: The sun melts in a thousand shades of orange on a long horizon as your tiny craft cuts through swells, undaunted by the gathering challenge, because out in the haze awaits—you can see it—the dream of your story, the possibility of immortalizing your life experience, of speaking the truth of what you have seen, and heard, and felt.

This can be a long voyage, full of tempest, but I know of no other that can net such riches, for when you write a memoir you change your life. When you set down a truth about the past, a new future dawns.

Yet, before you begin this process, you need to understand what a memoir really is. We can't set sail on this adventure unless we're in the same boat, so let's get clear: Life stories fall into two big clumps. There's memoir and there's autobiography.

THE IDEAS BEHIND THE PROCESS

What's the difference?

Memoir involves the whittling away of a whole lot of stuff that you have lived and a focusing on one slim section, full of power, that demands to be told. This section may be told chronologically, but it does not necessarily have to be, if the story itself would best be served by some different approach. (You'll learn about structure in part 2 of this book.)

Autobiography is an overview of your entire life told chronologically from the "I was born" stage to the "and here I am now" stage.

For the purposes of this book, I am dealing with the slice-of-life memoir in which you identify one potent period and you explore it through vivid imagery, honest voice, stunning compassion, and a deep awareness of the larger issues at play that guide your story in a subliminal way—myth, metaphor, and current issues of the day. In this book we are not working with the autobiography.

In the process I will lead you through in this book, I encourage you to work with childhood stories, because they are ripe with material. Certainly you can apply this same process to any other segment of your life. It's simply an approach you are learning. It can be used again and again.

That said, I do believe the most successful memoir is written about periods of our life that are further away in the mists of memory.

Why?

Because you have some distance from the time period you are exploring. You need that depth of perspective to make sense of the events. Distance gives you wisdom, alternative views, and the possibility of compassion, all elements central to emotionally moving and exciting stories about your life.

Setting sail on this voyage of writing stories about your life, or

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stories that I call memoir, puts you squarely in the territory of what people in the publishing industry call narrative nonfiction. And it's good to know a little bit about that body of water.

Why do they call it narrative nonfiction?

Because in this form of writing you narrate (tell a story) about something that actually happened (nonfiction).

Narrative nonfiction has a gazillion other shapes besides memoir and autobiography, and you might hear about them in a conversation or read about them in an article. Here are some of them, with brief definitions:

- **Literary nonfiction:** A name given to writing that narrates a story using many of the devices of literature to make the writing poetic
- **Creative nonfiction:** A term referring to the use of creative writing techniques mixed in with a nonfiction story, often making the result seem like a novel
- **Essay:** A name given to a piece of personal writing in which the voice of the writer is prominent and which makes some kind of big, or subtle, point
- **Literary journalism:** A term used if the written story includes a kind of journalistic reporting about the world

Whatever the mix of writing techniques used, we have to agree on a term we will use here, together, on this journey, and because I teach a variety of techniques for writing your story—techniques that incorporate literary devices, creative writing skills, the logic of the essay writer, and the reporting of the journalist—and because I insist on teaching a slice-of-life story format, I use the term “memoir.”

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Memoir comes in many sizes and shapes. What I urge you toward in *Shimmering Images* is a kind of writing that

- Drives the reader forward to find out what happens
- Sings with the honesty of your individual voice
- Reads like a novel in places
- Offers reflective wisdom, in your authentic voice, that touches hearts and taps into the larger world out there, offering opportunities of interest for many readers

Don't worry, I'll teach you how to do these things. One step at a time.

CLAIMING YOUR VOICE

To write compelling memoir, you must first believe you have the right to speak, the right to tell your story, to be heard. You have to believe the story you are telling is important, key to your understanding of life and key to others'. For some, this is the highest wall to climb in writing stories about your lives, because too often you have been told that what you think, feel, and have experienced doesn't matter. You may spend a good part of the first few chapters of *Shimmering Images* battling—both inside yourself and in discussions with family and friends. It may come up again and again, stopping you as you progress. That's okay. I expect it. You should expect it, too.

I can imagine you right now, holding this book and thinking: Who am I to tell my story? Who cares? Who will listen?

Right?

Yep, that's part of the process. We deal with it and move on.

In my classes and workshops this is always the first order of business. Expect insidious doubt to rear its head as you scratch away the layers of convention that keep you from telling the truth of your life. Expect it to keep coming back. Greet it. And

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then get on with the next chapter. That's what you must do, because of course your life does matter, and the stories you write about your life are some of the most important work you can do in the world, because once you have written those stories, you will have changed your life.

So, expect that nasty little naysayer to show up. Refuse to let it silence the storyteller in you. Push forward. Keep reading these chapters. You will get a story written by the end of this book.

First you must claim your life. You must believe in every fiber of your being that you have the right to your reality: the way you interpret how things happened, the way you remember them. It doesn't matter in the world of this book, in the world of art and creativity, in the world we are creating right here, how other members of your family remember the year you were twelve, or how an old lover says that day on the lake unfolded, or how friends report that last evening at the dinner table.

In another place and time, those interpretations might be of importance (and maybe you will even work some of those conflicting views into your final written story). But right here and right now, what is central is that you know your truth—the version that resonates in your bones, electrifies the very skin of your being—is the one truth that will make your writing soar, that will grab readers by the throat and keep them coming back again and again to hear your voice tell them how it was.

TRUTH VERSUS FACT

Let's talk about truth. This subject will pop up again and again as you work on your stories. It's a valid discussion for the writing of life stories. Just remember: Every time it appears and you begin to question yourself and what you are writing, come back and read this chapter.

So okay . . . there you are working along, writing your stories, and you hear yourself saying, "But if my sister doesn't remember it the way I do, then what's the truth?" Or your lament may go like this: "If I make up conversation, it can't be factual, right? I kind of remember what happened that day, but do I have the words right? Am I writing memoir?" At this point you spiral into confusion, self-doubt, and get lost in worry and dread. I've watched this happen over and over with writers.

Let me say simply: There is the small truth of fact, and there is the larger truth you create when you make art.

Storytelling is art.

Making a story from life experience reflects a serious investigation of the human condition. When you use all the skills of the storyteller to write a story that seeks universal connections, that

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links your life to the lives of other humans, you take your experience beyond the act of simply reporting facts.

When you make a truth with story, you use the timeless skills of the storyteller to give the reader an experience that will change his life. That is why we write stories, to take ourselves and the reader into a new realm where the spirit can be repaired. That's what story does: It addresses the soul in some elemental way far beyond the lining up of minuscule details.

Story, the essence of narrative, is art. Writing life stories borders on the mystical because you, the writer, become the master of reality. You make sense of chaos. You bring order to life events through narrative; you attach meaning to events. That act is more than reporting facts; it is an act of creation. Art is creation. Memoir is art.

Get this clear: Writers of life stories are not journalists. The key reason for your work is not to report facts. Your responsibility does not lie in getting the facts right at the expense of truth—some deeper reality accessed and presented through the craft tools of the discipline of writing, tools that give you the power to create universal connections.

Facts over emotional truth is not the point.

Writers of memoir are storytellers, and the point of a personal story is to make a truth that resonates for you, that closes the experience around a narrative and brings it to completion. Narrative (story) that has a beginning, a middle, and an inevitable close (an end) is a kind of art that soothes the soul. That is what we are doing here. That is what I am teaching you to do.

Certainly you do whatever you can to get the facts as correct as possible: What was the name of the town? How many years did Peter live across the street? Was it a Buick Electra? What did your grandmother say that day? You do the research necessary to

Truth Versus Fact

fill in the factual gaps: You talk with participants, weighing their feedback with your own; you look it up online or in a book; you plumb your memory.

After all the confirmation of facts, remember that in the end it is your truth created from your memory and your experience.

Your memory serves up the past in the way it does for a complex set of reasons that have to do with who you are and what you value. So, yes, you do everything humanly possible to get the facts right, according to you, and then get on with it, remembering that what you are really doing here by writing your life stories is recording the deep resonant, honest, compassionate truth that resides inside your heart, that links your experience to the experiences of hundreds of other humans on this planet. And you have the right to do that. You have the right to be heard.