

Memoir's Companions

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Introduction, Talk Highlights and Resources

Intro

Any life may contain a story that begs to be told. The memoirist's job is to give this story shape and resonance. We imagine this as a solitary excursion into personal history. A memoir writer, however, needn't retreat into seclusion. In fact, I'm here this evening to advise against it.

Don't get me wrong. A healthy amount of solitude, for a writer, if such is to be had? I'm all for that. Go for it. But don't get carried away. When we're done here this evening, I'll have banished all visions of lonely garrets from your writerly minds.

In this session, we'll consider six companions to memoir-making—not all of them human, mind you—that may make all the difference, not just to a book, but to an author's experience of writing it.

Companion #1: Doubt

“While Winifred had completed *Poor Caroline*, *Virginia Woolf*, and *Mandoa, Mandoa!*, this autobiography had plodded interminably along, the testament not only of youth but of an undistinguished and retarded literary career. Again and again, convinced that the reading public would never be interested in the story of an obscure free-lance writer, I was tempted to abandon it...”

—Vera Brittain, *Testament of Friendship*, 1940

At its best, memoir is a piece of talking history, a single voice calling to us out of the midst of some profound historical event—or, as in my case, some everyday joy capped by tragedy. It's the micro tugging us down through the macro. It's the difference between watching a flock of geese veer off in the distant sky—a marvel, for sure—and encountering a single goose alongside the river path, staring you down. It is someone's experience gathered up somehow like wind in a net, given shape and form, distilled.

Even so, I had to ask myself (again and again I asked): What was compelling about my story? People make and lose friends all the time; people die of cancer, or succumb to other cruel fates, all the time. Why indeed, was I writing this, beyond the obvious effort to make myself feel better?

Doubt can derail you. But it also has its uses. It can force upon you some hard questions. Why write this down? Why does it matter?

The answers to such questions needn't be groundbreaking. They need only be convincing enough to keep you at your desk. For in the end, if you've done your job, the work will make your case.

Companion #2: Memory

“If any one faculty of our nature may be called *more* wonderful than the rest, I do think it is memory. There seems something more speakingly incomprehensible in the powers, the failures, the inequalities of memory, than in any other of our intelligence. The memory is sometimes so retentive, so serviceable, so obedient—at others so bewildered and so weak—and at others again, so tyrannic, so beyond control!”

—Fanny Price, in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*

“If, as much modern philosophy suggests, the world is fragmentary and unknowable, and if, as neuroscience now suggests, memory is influenced by a region of the brain that allows for inaccuracy in order to arrive at sense, what do we do with the idea of *the real*?”

—Aislinn Hunter, from her essay “The Truth Goes On Solving Nothing,” in the collection *A Ragged Pen: Essays on Poetry and Memory*

“Part of our difficulty in trusting ourselves is that in talking of memory we are inclined to use geological metaphors. We talk about buried parts of our past and assume the most distant in time are the hardest to reach: that one has to prospect for them with the help of a hypnotist, or psychotherapist. I don't think memory is like that: rather it is like St. Augustine's ‘spreading limitless room.’ Or a great plain, a steppe, where all the memories are laid side by side, at the same depth, like seeds under the soil.”

—Hilary Mantel, *Giving Up the Ghost*

In the epilogue to *The Last Goldfish*, I describe how I once interviewed my parents about Lou and me: “I sat across from them with a notebook. I wanted to know if my memories of those early years of our friendship meshed with theirs. Was it true that they'd been wary of her at first, but had been quickly won over? ‘I remember being grateful that you'd found a friend,’ my mother said. ‘That you weren't alone.’”

I was thrown: her answer was so at odds from what I recalled.

But I didn't let that disparity alter the account that wound up in the book, about how suspicious my mother seemed, to my 14-year-old self, of this new friend of mine: this “chatty redhead who had divorced parents and didn't go to church.”

I had to trust that the tenor of our individual memories each represented one aspect of a multipronged story, and that my own angle on things had settled the way it had for a reason. Memories can serve as portals. That an experience remains with us is alone evidence of its significance. But that's not the whole story. The *way* a memory cures in us reveals something about why it's there at all.

Companion #3: Reflection

“...the moments of revelation which compensate for the chaos, the discomfort, the toil of living. The crown of life is neither happiness nor annihilation; it is understanding... These are the moments in which all the disorder of life assumes a pattern; we see; we understand; and immediately the intolerable burden becomes tolerable; we stand for a moment on the slopes of that great mountain from the summit of which we can see truth, and thus enjoy the greatest felicity of which we are capable.”

—Winifred Holtby, *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Memoir*

In a memoir, some memories need telling, full stop. Others invite reflection, and grow more resonant in its wake. That reflection arises from the natural filtering that takes place within us when we're not exactly looking. Its articulation is one of the gifts we seek, as readers, from literature.

...To piece the narrative of *The Last Goldfish* together, I flung those all memories I'd recorded down like crumbs, and followed the trail they made. What did I find at their end? Only myself: but the me I am now, with the memories reaching out behind me.

The first thing to reckon with was just how many there were. All had been crucial for the journey I'd undertaken. That didn't make them all relevant to the story I had to tell. I had to toss some of those memories (now reconstituted as scenes in a manuscript) away.

This is where the art of memoir is the flipside of fiction: instead of starting with a blank space and filling it with an alluring, made-up world, the memoirist must retrieve one defined reality from the vast overlapping jumble of a life. It took me years of retracing my steps, up and down my long trail of memories, to figure out what I needed in order to tell this story, and what could be left behind.

...It's memory's "workings" that get interesting while you're writing. Things happen. One event connects to another in a way you didn't anticipate. Retelling an anecdote, moment by moment, may jolt a writer into an awareness of what was really going on at its core, or what about it still stings. Or it may offer an unexpected sense of gratitude, or joy.

Companion #4: Craft

“I hardly know how to write about myself. Any style you pick seems to unpick itself before a paragraph is done. I will just go for it, I think to myself, I'll hold out my hands and say, *c'est moi*, get used to it. I'll trust the reader. This is what I recommend to people who ask me how to get published. Trust your reader, stop spoon-feeding your reader, stop patronizing your reader, give your reader credit for being as smart as you at least, and stop being so bloody beguiling: you in the back row, will you turn off that charm! Plain words on paper. Remember what Orwell says, that good prose is like a window-pane. Concentrate on sharpening your memory and peeling your sensibility. Cut every page you write by at least one-third. Stop constructing those piffling little similes of yours. Work out what it is you want to say. Then say it in the most direct and vigorous way you can. Eat meat. Drink blood...”

—Hilary Mantel, *Giving Up the Ghost*

These are matters of craft that hold true for any form of writing, be it poetry, fiction, memoir, you name it—and they are crucial to practice, to sharpen and hone. On top of these, your story needs narrative drive. It needs structure. We could spend all evening—all month—working over any one of these. I spent years sorting out the structure for *The Last Goldfish*. Ought it be chronological? Thematic? Episodic? Circular? Interspersed with flashbacks? I tried several of these before finding the answer. Sometimes the structure required is obvious, the voice ready-made. But you still need to drill down to the paragraph, sentence, word. Even character is a matter for the memoirist to get a handle on. You're not making people up, but you are taking real people from real life, and, in essence, sculpting them out of words.

Craft is comprised of the tools that we lay out upon our writing tables when we sit down to work. Day to day, we have these tools with us, these implements. It's easy to forget they're here. We ought to take them out each morning and polish them to a brilliant shine.

Your facility with a given tool, be it your way with dialogue, your ability to set a scene, your prowess with transitions, your knack for smoothing out the kinks in a sentence, will fluctuate. But over time—much time, comprised of much writing, much handling, much deliberate tinkering—that facility will improve, and each tool, one by one, will become a trusted companion, one you can't imagine ever having done without.

Companion #5: Books and authors

“In the ongoing process of becoming a writer, I read and reread the authors I most loved. I read for pleasure, first, but also more analytically, conscious of style, of diction, of how sentences were formed and information was being conveyed, how the writer was structuring a plot, creating characters, employing detail and dialogue. And as I wrote, I discovered that writing, like reading, was done one word at a time, one punctuation mark at a time. It required what a friend calls ‘putting every word on trial for its life’: changing an adjective, cutting a phrase, removing a comma, and putting the comma back in.

“I read closely, word by word, sentence by sentence, pondering each deceptively minor decision the writer had made. And though it's impossible to recall every source of inspiration and instruction, I can remember the novels and stories that seemed to me revelations: wells of beauty and pleasure that were also textbooks, private lessons in the art of fiction.”

—Francine Prose, *Reading Like a Writer*

It wasn't just sound examples of craft that these authors offered, but a perspective that, over time, allowed me to situate the loss of my friend in the larger scheme of history and humanity. You can't read, for example, Mistry's *A Fine Balance* and ever again truly believe that you're personally hard done by. You can't get to know the characters hemmed into Mavis Gallant's tightly bound realities and continue to presume—as youth often does—that to have control of one's own destiny is a matter of course.

Reading memoir, which I also did avidly, gradually allowed me to have faith in the substance of my own story, unvarnished. It forced me to accept that to write about my

lost friend meant also writing about myself. I couldn't tell her story, I could only tell mine—but there was no reason I couldn't let her star in it.

...All of these books served as models of what was possible. I studied their structures, their pacing, their tone, the details that brought them to life, what they told versus what they left out.

...These books offered a variety of examples on how to bring a close friendship to life for a reader, how to welcome a reader into the life of that friendship, and/or how to gently steer them toward the rift caused by death, the sorrow of loss. But more than this, they offered company: both in my experience of loss, and in trying to articulate that experience, especially all the wonder of the beforetime, the joy that made the loss so significant. How do you find pacing and drama in an ordinary, largely contented life? This was a longstanding impasse of mine that books such as these went a long way toward helping me resolve.

Companion #6: Fellow writers

I stumbled upon a small group of equally determined, likewise fledgling writers. For years, the four of us met weekly, pouring over each other's poetry and prose, celebrating what worked and mercilessly homing in on what didn't. We were all on a steep learning curve; I'm sure at times we steered one another off-course. But our commitment to undertake the work of becoming writers together was profound, not just for our work, but for our lives. We mulled the merits of this or that approach together; we passionately compared notes on the books we'd read; we served as one another's audience; we flailed and tried things out; we became, through our linked striving, bound up in one another's efforts, struggles, achievements, and lives.

There are those who might find this indulgent—a bunch of writers in a coffee shop, brows furrowed, debating whether Greta the cook really belongs in this story, or is simply a distraction; rejoicing over the description of a feather, say, the aptness of a metaphor; gleefully X-ing out adjectives; spiritedly debating the placement of a semi-colon. If you're determined to pit us against a team of emergency room doctors and nurses, we may flounder.

But ask yourselves this: Where will those doctors and nurses turn for solace, for sustenance, when their demanding, harried day allows? In all likelihood, to some form of art. TV, perhaps. Music. Possibly to poetry, or to a story someone like one of us took the time to write down. Should they do so, I'd hope the story they chose was set down properly and well, by an author wielding their craft with as much practiced skill as the medical professionals had spent their shifts wielding theirs.

This is what my friends and I were learning, together, how to do, amid the pulsing glow of possibility that emanates from such a collective pursuit. In such cases, on some level, whether the story ever gets written to anyone's satisfaction becomes irrelevant. It's the meaningful toil, the coming together over that toil, that matters—it's that very glow which, after every session, travelled with each of us out into the street and the day's fading light, and carried on with us as we walked or drove to our separate homes.

Recommended Memoirs etc.

You'll notice the books below, especially those related to craft, aren't all purely to do with writing nonfiction. Sound writing principles and aspects of craft in many senses cross genres. As a poet, I've taken much of my learning from authors in that camp: poets often make great essayists, and they love to espouse on craft and process. I've also included here some examples of reading I did that was related to my project—either examples of form, on theme, or actual headlong research into my subject area—just to show one possible way to approach one's topic, to place it in a larger context, one that extends beyond one's personal experience.

Book-length

- *All Things Consolated*, Elizabeth Hay
- *Aurora Borealice*, Joan Steacy
- *Belonging: Home Away From Home*, Isabel Huggan
- *Beyond the Pale: Folklore, Family and the Mystery of our Hidden Genes*, Emily Urquhart
- *Black Berry, Sweet Juice*, Lawrence Hill
- *The Boxer's Heart*, Kate Sekules
- *Clerks of the Passage*, Abou Farman
- *Everything Rustles*, Jane Silcott
- *For the Time Being*, Annie Dillard
- *Giving Up the Ghost*, Hilary Mantel
- *Halfbreed*, Maria Campbell
- *Lost in Translation: Life in a New Language*, Eva Hoffman
- *Not Yet*, Wayson Choy
- *On Boxing*, Joyce Carol Oates
- *Paper Shadows*, Wayson Choy
- *Paradise Piece by Piece*, Molly Peacock
- *Reading Jesus: A Writer's Encounters with the Gospels*, Mary Gordon
- *Sugar Ride*, Yvonne Blomer
- *This is Happy*, Camilla Gibb
- *Travels With Herodotus*, Ryszard Kapucinski
- *The Way of a Boy*, Ernest Hillen
- *A Woman in Berlin*, Anonymous

Memoirs of Friendship and/or Loss

- *After Daniel*, Moira Farr
- *All We Leave Behind: A Reporter's Journey in the Lives of Others*, Carol Off
- *Common Magic*, Bronwen Wallace (poems)
- *Death Be Not Proud*, John Gunther

- *A Disappearance in Damascus: A Story of Friendship and Survival in the Shadow of War*, Deborah Campbell
- *Into the Tangle of Friendship*, Beth Kephart
- *Let's Take the Long Way Home*, Gail Caldwell
- *One Strong Girl*, Lesley Buxton
- *Testament of Friendship*, Vera Brittain
- *Truth and Beauty*, Ann Patchett
- *A Very Easy Death*, Simone de Beauvoir
- *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion

On Friendship, Loss, Death or Dying (philosophy, psychology, etc.)

- *The Book of Eulogies*, ed. Phyllis Theroux
- *Friendship*, A. C. Grayling
- *The Funeral: Vestige or Value?* Paul E. Irion
- *How We Die*, Sherwin B. Nuland
- *On Death and Dying*, Elizabeth Kübler Ross
- *Treatises on Friendship and Old Age*, Marcus Tullius Cicero
- *Western Attitudes Toward Death: from the middle ages to the present*, Philippe Ariès

Personal Essays/Literary Journalism

- *The Beholder's Eye: A Collection of America's Finest Personal Journalism*, ed. by Walt Harrington
- *Best Canadian Essays*, various editions
- *Best American Essays*, various editions

Banff Centre anthologies:

- *To Arrive Where You Are: Literary Journalism from the Banff Centre for the Arts*, ed. Kim Echlin, Barbara Moon, Don Obe
- *Cabin Fever: The Best New Canadian Nonfiction*, ed. Moira Farr, Ian Pearson
- *Why Are You Telling Me This?: Eleven Acts of Intimate Journalism*, ed. Heather Elton, Barbara Moon, Don Obe
- *Word Carving: The Craft of Literary Journalism*, ed. Moira Farr, Ian Pearson

On Writing and Craft

- *Elements of Style*, Strunk and White
- *How Fiction Works*, James Wood
- *The Marram Grass: Poetry and Otherness*, Anne Simpson
- *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*, Jane Hirshfield

- *On Writing Well: An informal guide to writing nonfiction*, William Zinsser
- *Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them*, Francine Prose
- *Steering the Craft: A 21st Century Guide to Sailing the Sea of Story*, Ursula K. LeGuin
- *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*, Thomas King
- *The Writing Life*, Annie Dillard