

Making much of the moment: A guide to the micro-memoir How to craft excellent flash nonfiction.

By Beth Ann Fennelly | Updated October 26, 2018 | The Writer | writemag.com

After finishing my last book – a novel I co-wrote with my husband – I planned to get right back on the saddle and begin another novel. I mean, sure, first I'd relax for a week or two, indulge our kids with movie marathons and lazy-morning pancakes, attend to the household repairs, and catch up on correspondence, but then I'd commence a Big New Project.

The relaxing part went off without a hitch. But that reascension-to-the-saddle part was giving me pains. My brain seemed cored of the Big and New. Weeks went by and I wasn't writing anything besides little personal jottings in my notebook. My husband tried to comfort me: *You've just spend four years researching and writing a novel; you're probably still processing.* And I reassured myself with something my teacher Miller Williams once told me: "You can't get pregnant when you're pregnant."

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But when my pregnancy entered its fifth trimester, I began to get a little panicky. Maybe I should try to return to my first love, poetry. But the poems wouldn't come out and play. The essay form, always fruitful between projects, also

abandoned me. All I was writing was those scribbles in my notebook, strange little snippets of my life.

Yet I was enjoying those snippets. In fact, writing them was giving me the same pleasure I'd gotten from fiction, poems, and essays. I began to consider that maybe I *was* writing – but in a form I hadn't recognized as writing. These little clusters of sentences: What if they weren't supposed to "add up to something" but instead

were somethings? What if they were exactly the size they were meant to be? I began to page through my jottings. Some were simply memories that seemed to hold more than themselves. Some were quirky observations. Some were tiny scenes, bits of overheard conversations that, with the surrounding noise edited out, seemed to reverberate. I called these little flash creative nonfiction pieces (the shortest were one sentence, the longest a few pages) “micro-memoirs.” Labeling them allowed me to write more of them, and relax into the joys of them. Unlike the novel, micro-memoirs were low-stakes. If one failed – well, so what? Throw it away, all 30 precious words of it, and write another. Unlike the historical novel, these required no research. And, after spending so much time in the heads of characters, my own head, my own experiences, seemed newly fresh.

And so now I have a book coming out in October, *Heating & Cooling: 52 Micro-Memoirs* (W. Norton). When writer pals hear about my project, they’re intrigued. “It sounds fun!” they say. “I want to try one!” they say. Guess what? It *is* fun. Want to try one? Read on.

The moving parts of the micro-memoir

A true hybrid, the micro-memoir strives to combine the extreme abbreviation of poetry, the narrative tension of fiction, and the truth-telling of creative nonfiction. The form might be considered a subset of the larger category of “flash nonfiction,” but it’s hard to draw strict lines here, because the recent proliferation of boundary-busting work is accompanied by a proliferation of terms – Anne Carson’s “short talks,” J. Robert Lennon’s “anecdotes,” Sarah Manguso’s “aphorisms,” James Richardson’s “ten-second essays:” all of these could at times be called “micro-memoirs.”

At its most basic, a micro-memoir is written in sentences, drawn from personal experience, and strives to create a world in as few words as possible. How many words is the upper limit? That,

too, isn't uniformly agreed on. Dinty W. Moore, the energetic writer and editor who's done more for short-form nonfiction than anyone else, accepts essay submissions of 750 words or less for his online magazine, *Brevity*, so that might be a helpful guideline. But some great examples of the form are much, much shorter. Amy Hempel's "Memoir," for example, reads in its entirety: "Just once in my life – oh, when have I ever wanted anything just once in my life?"

Before we discuss further what micro-memoirs are, it might be useful to discuss what they're not: fragments. Micro-memoirs aren't slivers of a bigger creation. They're designed to stand alone; they are, as Lia Purpura writes in her *Brevity* craft essay "On Miniatures," "workable things on very small scales" and therefore "radically self-sufficient."

Nor are micro-memoirs excerpts of, or failed attempts at, longer essays. The size of the prose is the size of their thinking, perfectly realized. One doesn't read a great micro-memoir and think, "Wow, I'd love to see the fuller version of that," in the same way one doesn't see

a hummingbird and wish it were an eagle. What a micro-memoir *doesn't* say is part of the way it makes meaning. As David Mamet writes, "Omission is a form of creation."

Making a micro-memoir

One thing the micro-memoir is particularly suited for is an exploration of a moment, particularly a moment that seems small or unimportant, but, when viewed from the right perspective, with the right attention, reveals itself to be central to identity. What are the moments who make us who we are?

To find an idea the right size for a micro-memoir, consider your quirkiest memories. Forget about the big memories, like meeting your beloved or witnessing a tragedy. We know why those events were important to us, and how they shaped us. Telling the story of how you met your

beloved, while fun, is a neatly labeled anecdote. You don't discover something new about yourself while sharing it. So instead of the processed or oft-repeated, consider memories that you retain without understanding why.

Say you have a vivid image of your friend Kimiko driving away from your house with her green scarf rolled up in her car window, the fringe flapping. Why, given all of the things you've forgotten about that visit with your friend, does that idiosyncratic image linger in your hippocampus? To find out, stay in the moment. Tease out its emotional complexity. Perhaps you discover the memory carries some strange feeling of dread. Why? Because the scarf is the same color as the lime Jell-O that was sitting on Kimiko's hospital tray, untouched, the last time you saw her? Or because her breezy wave reminded you of your son's first bike ride after the training wheels were removed, his wave that caused his bike wreck? Or did you remember the dancer Isadora Duncan, strangled when her long silk scarf was caught in the rear hubcaps of her convertible?

If this memory leads you into a complex cause-and-effect chain – which is to say, plot – maybe you're looking at the seeds of a short story or longer essay. But if the moment is dignified by white space – if it seems to grow in importance by not being subsumed in a larger narrative, if it doesn't want to be welded into the upside-down check mark of the Freytag triangle, then, friends, you have the makings of a micro-memoir.