

Dani Shapiro

Why I write about myself

Writing memoir started for me by accident, as did much of my writing life and everything good in it.

By 1997 I'd written three novels, and I became aware that there was something haunting me that ran through all of them. In each book, something came out of the blue—some sudden catastrophe—and overtook the protagonist. To whatever extent we're ever in control when we write fiction, I knew that this was something I wasn't in control of. I wasn't walking the dog; the dog was walking me.

I had this instinct that I needed to stop fictionalizing the story that was haunting me: my parents' car accident, my father's death, my mother's broken bones, the way my entire family changed in an instant. Telling the story in my novels, I hadn't remotely accomplished what I'd hoped. The only way to do that was to write it as a memoir.

I'm not a believer in memoir as catharsis. It's a misapprehension that readers have that by writing memoir you're purging yourself of your demons. Writing memoir has the opposite effect. It embeds your story deep inside you. It mediates the relationship between the present and the past by freezing a moment in time.

Truth in memoir is a lie

The idea of truth in memoir is absurd. Memory is utterly mutable, changeable, and constantly in motion. You can't fact-check memory.

If I'd written my first memoir twenty or thirty years later, it would have been an entirely different book. The relationship between my self and my story would have changed. I'd be at a different point in my life, informed by different life experiences.

Here's a case in point. While I was working on *Devotion* in 2009, I found myself rewriting a scene I'd described a decade earlier in *Slow Motion*. There was a copy of *Slow Motion* three feet from my desk, but I decided not to read the scene the way I'd written it the first time. I wrote it as I remembered it in 2009.

When I compared the two versions, every detail was identical, except one. In both, it's a crystal clear, freezing February day in 1986. I'm in a hospital corridor, moments after my father died. I'm wearing a tight black skirt and a gold silk blouse and high-heeled boots. In *Slow Motion*, my sister bursts in and says, "Why aren't you with Dad? How could you have left his room?" I realize that I've betrayed my father; it's a tenet of Orthodox Judaism to never leave a body alone.

In *Devotion*, the same thing happens—except it's my uncle, not my sister, who's furious at me for leaving my father alone. I'm wearing the same outfit, the weather is the same, the same words are said, I have the same emotional response, but those words are coming out of the mouths of two different people. I didn't even think for one second of aligning the scenes so the two memoirs would be in sync. That would have been cheating,

and not the point of memoir at all. Besides, it also struck me as a great teaching story.

When *Devotion* came out, my friend the great Buddhist teacher Sylvia Boorstein told me, "You've written a book about what you know now." The idea being, that's all we can do. We'll know more later. That's always true for a writer, but it's truest of memoir. Sometimes I think the perfect life's work for a memoirist might be to write the same book every ten years.

I don't write about me. I write about that girl

Whenever I publish a memoir, people ask me how I can stand to feel so exposed. But when I'm writing, I don't feel that I'm remotely exposing myself. When I wrote my first memoir, *Slow Motion*, I came to think of my younger self as "that girl." Or sometimes even, "oh, that poor girl."

Vivian Gornick refers to this phenomenon as a surrogate persona. It's not a trick. Particularly in writing *Slow Motion*, I had a willingness to reveal some unattractive, difficult, unethical, complex aspects of my own behavior. It was part of my history that I was trying to excavate and take and shape. But I didn't feel I was exposing myself; rather, I was creating that persona, that character.

One of the greatest gifts of writing memoir is having a way to shape that chaos, looking at all the pieces side by side so they make more sense. It's a supreme act of control to understand a life as a story that resonates with others. It's not a diary. It's taking this chaos and making a story out of it, attempting to make art out of it. When you're a writer, what else is there to do?

How I know it's a memoir

I've never had a piece of fiction announce itself as what it wants to be. A few short stories morphed into longer pieces, but those were more like tryouts for novels than stories. Every piece I've ever written announces itself as what it wants to be, whether fiction or memoir. I've occasionally had a short story grow into a novel, but otherwise—whether essay, story, memoir, novel, or screenplay—the thing knows what it wants to be, the form it wants to take.

But when it comes to the work itself, novels are shyer, slower to come into focus. Fiction requires a tremendous amount of patience. A single image or a piece of language might stick around a long time before everything else fills in around it.

It's different with memoir. When I'm embarking on a memoir it's crystal clear. It's a very different feeling. Memoir is much more assertive. Memoir comes up and bangs me on the head and says, "This is what you're doing." There's a lot I don't know when I begin—the way in, the structure. All of that isn't necessarily clear, but the fact of it is. The writer sitting at her desk knows whether she's in the territory of imagination or in the territory of memory.

Memoirists have to cull and pick and choose and be very discerning about what we put in and leave out of our stories. There should be a sign above the desk of every memoirist that reads, "Everything doesn't belong."

One of my favorite quotes about writing is what Aristotle wrote, in *Poetics*: "Action is not plot, but merely the result of pathos." If you have characters, you have pathos. If you have pathos, you have action. That's plot.

In memoir you've already had the pathos, the action, the

plot. The question is which story you'll tell, which window you'll look through. What's the frame around that story? What's the art in the telling? What's the discovery? I know what happened, so now what? What's interesting about this? What's a narrative that's interesting to read, to write? You're putting pieces together to see what kind of music they make. It's like stitching together a quilt, creating order that isn't chronological order—it's emotional, psychological order.

Writing well is the best revenge

Revenge is a really terrible reason to write a memoir. One, it doesn't feel good ultimately. Two, it doesn't make for a good book. Revenge on the page reeks. A writer with an agenda is no longer trustworthy. She becomes an unreliable narrator of her own life.

Students have asked me how a writer knows if she's writing out of revenge. Here's a clue: she thinks to herself, "I can't wait for so-and-so to read this."

Most memoirists' impetus comes from a profound need to understand and be understood. The crafting, the culling of a story is an act of control. You're saying, "Understand this about me, about my family, my history, my story."

Kurt Vonnegut once said that every writer writes for an audience of one. That audience changed for me with each memoir. With *Devotion*, I had the feeling that someday my son might read that book and be able to understand his mother and a time in our lives from my point of view. I imagined that after I was gone, the book might be meaningful to him.

With *Slow Motion*, my father was my audience of one, even

though he had been dead for quite a few years. I was trying to get our relationship right on the page. I have a working philosophy that's deepened over the years that we have no control over what happens to us, but we do have control over what we do with it, how it deepens us or doesn't deepen us. All my writing life, memoir has been an ongoing attempt to look at my relationships with both of my parents again and again through the lens of the passage of time.

Memoir gives you special things to worry about

When I was writing *Slow Motion*, I was very conscious of not wanting to hurt my mother. I didn't care about my ex-boyfriend. My father was dead. I had other relatives in the book, but they didn't come off in a negative way. If I could have sent my mother on an around-the-world cruise and had her come back when the book had passed from public consciousness, I would have done it.

As I was writing *Slow Motion*, I had to play tricks on myself to keep going. First, I told myself that I didn't have to publish it. It was completely unrealistic, of course; I had a contract, and I'd already spent the money. But telling myself I could change my mind gave me freedom to write without self-censorship.

When I finished the first draft, I asked a friend who had a teenage daughter to give it a "mother read"—to look for potshots, anything that felt unnecessary and hurtful. My friend came back with a couple of phrases and sentences and I took them out. They weren't necessary to the arc of the book or the characterization of my relationship with my mother.

I waited until the book was in galleys to give it to my mother. Here's what I learned: it was useless to have worried about what

would upset her. She was angry about tiny details in the book that I hadn't even considered, and yet the things I did think would upset her sailed right by. The moral of the story was, We can't know what is going to impact another person, or why.

After I gave my mother the galleys, her therapist called and asked me to meet with her. What can I say? We were all New York Jews. I gave the therapist a set of galleys so she could read it before my mother did. After she read it, she said she didn't think there was anything that would upset my mother, that it was very fair to her. I had two thoughts. First, that this therapist didn't know my mother at all, and second, that my mother had been wasting her money for years.

Ultimately, though it took a long time to really sink in, my mother was devastated by the memoir. She was a very difficult person, and when people in her life heard that her daughter had written a memoir, they all read it as a way of trying to understand her: her doorman, her lawyer, her dentist, her neighbors. I couldn't have imagined such a thing happening. It was like she was in *The Truman Show*. The whole thing was very sad and painful, but not painful enough for me to wish I hadn't written the book.

Burrowing in

Writing memoir for me feels like I'm burrowing inside myself to a small place where all of this remains very much alive. Our stories are always somewhere within us. We need only to get still enough to look. Anne Sexton was once asked why she writes about such painful subjects and she responded that pain engraves a deeper memory. I think this is true. Though, of course, in time we can find light and humor even in the darkest moments.

I live a domestic, contented life. More and more I feel there's no contradiction and no delineation between my domestic life and my creative life. One can't exist without the other. There is this life and there is this driving need to dive into that place that then expands, and that world is as large and encompassing when I'm inside it as the world that's all around me.

Dani Shapiro's Wisdom for Memoir Writers

- Know your reasons for embarking on this memoir. If one of your reasons is revenge, stop. Wait. Writing from rage, or from the sting of betrayal, or whatever it might be that is motivating you, will produce an incoherent story. Be sure you have enough distance from your material so that you are able to think of yourself as a character.
- Don't worry about what people will think as you're writing a first draft. This manuscript will not magically fly from your desk and onto the shelves of your local bookstore. You'll have time to worry about people's feelings once you've gotten a draft down. But if you begin with this kind of fretting, you'll stop yourself before you've even started.
- Remember that you're telling a story. Not everything belongs. Understand that you may write other memoirs down the road, but come to know the frame around this story. Just because it happened to you does not make it relevant. Choose carefully what to put in and what to leave out.