

David Sheff's Wisdom for Memoir Writers

- Whatever you write in a memoir, whatever effect it has, you've got to live with it forever. Don't hurt people.
- Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* is an incredibly valuable tool for all writers, and memoir writers in particular—a bible. Borrowing from Anne: Write a shitty first draft. Spill it all, then go back and fix it later. The prospect of writing a book can be overwhelming and paralyzing. As the title suggests, take it bird by bird—a single story, moment, or revelation at a time.
- Don't take writing a memoir lightly. Take your time. Do your work. Second-guess and third-guess yourself in terms of what to keep and what to cut. Accept nothing short of the truth.
- If what you're writing about wasn't intense, you wouldn't be writing about it. Writing a memoir can dredge up every awful feeling all over again. Make sure you have the support you need to make it through.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Darin Strauss

Half my life ago, I killed a girl.

I had just turned eighteen, and when you drive in new post-adolescence, you drive with friends. We were headed to shoot a few rounds of putt-putt. It was May 1988. The breeze did its open-window work on the hair behind my neck and ears.

—Opening, *Half a Life*, 2010

What a way to start a memoir: “Half my life ago, I killed a girl.”

All was well, more than well, in Darin Strauss's life. He was married with twins on the way, and he'd published three novels, and all of them were hits. He'd won a Guggenheim Fellowship, his novels had been widely reviewed and praised and named as various “Best ofs,” and . . .

“I had this secret, kept from the world,” Darin told me, speaking of the accident in which he'd “killed a girl.” “It had formed me. It had malformed me.” And so he chose to write his first memoir—also his last, he says.

The critical and commercial success of Darin Strauss's

memoir seems proof that memoirists need not choose between art and therapy when practicing their craft. A memoir can be a sort of literary support group, led by an experienced expert who shares his own trauma for the benefit of all concerned.

THE VITALS

Birthday: March 1, 1970

Born and raised: Roslyn Harbor, Long Island, New York

Home now: Brooklyn, New York

Family: Married to Susannah Meadows; identical twin sons

Schooling: Tufts University; New York University

Day job: Professor in New York University's creative writing program

Notable notes:

- *Chang and Eng*, Darin's first novel, was a *Los Angeles Times* and *Newsweek* Best Book of the Year. Darin and Gary Oldman are adapting the novel for film.
- After publication of his second novel, *The Real McCoy*, which was a *New York Times* Notable Book for 2002, Darin won a Guggenheim Fellowship in Fiction Writing.
- *Half a Life* won the National Book Critics Circle Award.

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THE COLLECTED WORKS

Memoir

Half a Life, 2010

Novels

Chang and Eng, 2000

The Real McCoy, 2002

More Than It Hurts You,
2008

Darin Strauss

Why I write about myself

I thought I'd never write nonfiction. Nonfiction wasn't my thing. But I had this secret that I'd kept from the world, and for some reason, at a certain moment, I felt I needed to transform that secret into print.

I was thirty-six. My wife was pregnant with our kids. I'd lived with the accident exactly as long as I had before it. The confluence of those events returned me to that afternoon; I had a more visceral understanding of what it would be like to lose a child. The events of the book had happened exactly half my life earlier. They had formed me. They had malformed me. It was time to face the past. And the way I deal with things, and figure out what I actually feel about them, is to put them to paper.

As someone who follows Updike's dictum ("A writer's responsibility is to get published"), I suppose it was pretty much inevitable. I teach storytelling, and I always tell my students that if they have a story to tell, it's their responsibility to tell it.

I think a memoirist's brain acts out the coal-to-diamond

process. A story puts pressure on the brain; the book is what comes out.

I wrote three books before I was ready to tell this story. I would have been unable to write *Half a Life* at eighteen—at twenty-five—at thirty—had someone tried forcing me to. Even when I thought I was ready, the execution was tough. I couldn't expose half of myself. I had to jump in and expose everything.

I think that's why there's a general sense among writers that memoirs are less good than novels. It's not that the best memoirs are worse than the best novels; that's not true. But there are fewer excellent memoirs. Why? When they fail, often it's because you can sense some protection in every paragraph. The author has two purposes: one, to tell the story; two, to make himself look good, to protect himself. Generally, that's not something you feel in a novel. Which is to say, a novelist isn't telling a story while protecting his characters. You have to throw personal concerns out the window if you write a memoir.

That's why I'd never write another memoir. There's still stuff in my life I'm not comfortable writing about. I know now it takes boldness to write a good memoir; I don't want to be bold all the time. With *Half a Life*, I tried to have the bravery to write about this one thing fully. I didn't want to protect myself, and I wouldn't be so unguarded next time because there are other things to protect besides oneself. There are relationships I want to protect, so I won't write about fatherhood or marriage. I don't want to hurt my relationships with my wife or my kids.

My twenty-page book

I just wanted to write about the incident, not about anything beyond that. I had no intention of writing a full book. In particular, I didn't want to write an autobiography in which I talked about myself in different contexts. Me at six, going to kindergarten; me at forty, learning to be a dad. Who'd care? The one interesting detail of my life—the one book-worthy detail—was the accident.

Initially, *Half a Life* was going to be a thirty- to forty-page book. It'd focus just on that accident, for just the amount of space I needed to focus on it. My publisher said, "That's not possible—you can't do a book that short." I said, "What if it was about just the incident?" My publisher said, "Pad it out with memories," and crap like that. I said, "That's not what I want to do with this particular story. That would be disrespectful." I wasn't going to do it.

Then Dave Eggers said *McSweeney's* would do a thirty-page book if I wanted. Great—sign me up! But in the writing I went on longer than I thought I would. Just because I felt this freedom to write only what I wanted to write, it turned out to be a two-hundred-page book.

It didn't feel good

I'm a hider. It felt weird to write about myself. It was profoundly uncomfortable.

In particular, the accident at the heart of the book was something about which I was very unwilling to talk to people, even in a personal way. Add to that my generally private nature

and you have a reluctant memoirist. It would have been much easier to tell the story if I could hide behind the wall of my imagination. But that felt wrong and disrespectful and I couldn't do it.

There were other challenges, too. While I was writing *Half a Life*, I worried about everything I worry about when I'm writing fiction. Authenticity. Honesty. Artfulness. Being respectful. The limits of my talent.

With the memoir, I also worried about remembering right. I did the best I could with my memories. I wanted the book to be as accurate as I could make it. I didn't want to invent stuff.

I once talked to Dani Shapiro about truth and memory in memoir. We agreed that remembering the best you can is okay, as long as you're not lying. A memoir is not a history book. It's a record of your life as you remember it. You could write the same story every ten years, and each book might be less accurate than the last—but the accuracy won't necessarily determine which is a better book. We don't judge memoirs by that criterion.

What makes a memoir isn't just what you remember; it's your insights about what you remember. Again, a twenty-year-old's memoir might be more accurate in terms of the details, but it won't be better than a sixty-year-old's memoir, because the older author will likely have more insights that put the story in a larger context.

I'd rather read a great writer's shaky recollection than a fourteen-year-old's exact recollection.

And then it felt better

The anxiety went away once I realized that I had to look at writing a memoir the same way I write a novel—that this was a story about a character who's flawed, and all I had to do was expose that character, flaws and all.

Now when I teach memoir, I tell my students to change the "I" to a "she"; this makes it easier. It gives the requisite distance. How much easier it is to say "she is messing up here, and is unlikable" than "I am . . ."

If you write your character that way—if you actually do a word replace—it frees you to write with an honesty that's pretty hard to come by otherwise.

I know I did my best to be authentic, and I know I really was honest. Those are the things I stand by. I don't know about the art of it; I'm a terrible judge of my own work after I'm done with it. But I'm proud of the book.

A flawed character: me

When the book was being edited, the editors kept telling me to change things because they made me look bad. I said, "That's how I know I'm doing something right and the book is working. The only justification for doing a book like this is to tell the truth about yourself. There's no moral justification for writing a book to make yourself look good."

For example, the first scene in the book is the accident. I was in shock. Everyone was standing around the cars. Some pretty young girls came out of their cars, and I was flirting with

them. The editors said, "You have to take that out. It makes you look bad."

I'm aware that flirting at the accident scene doesn't make me look good. But I was writing the book for someone who went through a similar thing. In real life, we do inappropriate things at inappropriate times. If I didn't tell the truth in order to make myself look better than I was, the book might make that person feel worse about himself. Someone who did something inappropriate might think, I went through something, and I didn't handle it as well as this guy.

That convinced me to emphasize my flaws. Anywhere I had selfish, inappropriate thoughts, I kept them all in the book. Every chance I got, I made myself look bad. If nonfiction is any good, it has to be harder on the protagonist than on anybody else. The problem with so many memoirs is that they're propaganda. It's an argument for the defense. I wanted to write an argument for the prosecution.

We have the right to privacy as Americans, but not as memoirists. I very jealously guard my privacy when it comes to the parts of my life I choose not to write about. But once I write about something, I can't then say I won't talk about that. If you're going to write a memoir and you're not going to talk about what makes it painful with 100 percent honesty, I'm not going to waste my time reading it.

No one's forcing you to talk about this stuff, so don't think you can broach a subject that no one's asking you to broach, and then demand that walls be put around it at the same time.

Amy Hempel tells a good story about when she was in a beginning workshop with Gordon Lish. He had the class write about the one thing that most embarrassed them. The only re-

striction was that you had to write it as honestly as possible. She said that out of that class of fifteen people, seven or eight published pieces they wrote in that class. If you write something honestly, it'll be worth reading. If you don't, it doesn't matter how good a writer you are. The reader will feel it.

Therapeutic?

I held a different standard for the other characters in the book. The girl in the book, she's dead. I wanted to protect her and her family. There were things I left out about her and them. Protecting her memory, leaving out these things, made me look worse, but I felt I had no moral choice.

Before I wrote about it—before I faced it—I knew that my representation of the accident wasn't admirable in any way. It was the opposite. I was searching for the wrong answers. Being in denial isn't really the best way to learn to deal with something terrible.

Writing the book was completely therapeutic. William Gass says if writing is cathartic, you're not doing it right, because writing well is so hard that you don't have time for catharsis. Well, either I did it wrong or Gass was wrong, because writing *Half a Life* was cathartic for me.

I think Gass was wrong. When you write your own story, you have to face it in order to make decisions about how you're going to tell it, what to emphasize, what's important. Those things that help us shape the story also help us shape our understanding of the events we're writing about. I found it very advantageous in dealing with them.

Keep those cards and letters coming

When you write fiction, people don't write you as often, and when they do, it's: "I liked it." Or: "I didn't like it." With a personal story, often people feel compelled to share their own stories. I must have gotten a thousand such stories. I'd love to do a book of these e-mails: people baring their most personal wounds, in the most beautiful ways. Not beautiful because they're well crafted, necessarily. But the honesty and emotion—it floored me.

I got a Guggenheim. It helped

Some writers don't like having an advance. It puts them under too much pressure. But knowing I'll be published again lets me stop worrying about that, at least.

Getting a big award for my memoir was really gratifying. You put yourself out there, and it's a little scary. I talked a big game after it was published, but I was also pretty worried about it. I thought, I did sort of make myself look bad. Maybe I should have listened to my editor. Maybe people will come after me. To have the memoir do well was a relief—even more so than other books. To get bad reviews for a novel sucks. But bad reviews for a memoir feel exponentially worse, because they can be about you as a person.

Darin Strauss's Wisdom for Memoir Writers

- Write the first draft of your memoir in third person, not first. That'll make it easier for you to be tough on yourself, as you should be.
- If you commit to a memoir, you have to commit fully. If there's stuff you want to avoid saying, write a different book.