

On Memoir, Truth and 'Writing Well'

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Heard on [All Things Considered](#)

[Transcript] MICHELE NORRIS, Host:

This is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED from NPR News. I'm Michele Norris.

The memoir has taken a bit of a beating recently after it was discovered that a series of bestsellers contained a good deal of fiction, along with fact.

There's the disputed case of Augusten Burroughs, who turned his troubled life into the bestseller *RUNNING WITH SCISSORS*. He's now being sued for defamation with a demand that the book be re-labeled as fiction.

And there's Normal Curry. Her bestseller described an honor killing in Jordan. It was withdrawn by the publisher after charges of fabrication.

And then, of course, there was *A MILLION LITTLE PIECES*, a bestseller filled with a mountain of inaccuracies. A web site discovered that the writer, James Frey, had embellished his story of drug use, alcoholism and betrayal. The saga of Frey's initial denial and eventual admission played before millions on Oprah and Larry King Live. It added to the odor surrounding memoir, but it also served to boost the sales of his book.

It's not surprising that one of the best-known teachers of the art of writing memoir has been thinking a lot about the genre.

William Zinsser first published *ON WRITING WELL*, the classic guide to writing non-fiction, in 1976. It's nearly ubiquitous in writing classes. Next month, a 30th anniversary edition will be released. It features a new chapter on what makes for a good or a bad memoir. Zinsser says that sometime in the 1990s, memoir, aided by the appetites of talk shows, veered off in the wrong direction.

WILLIAM ZINSSER, Host:

Suddenly, no family was too dysfunctional, no memory too squalid or shameful to be trotted out for the amazement and wonderment of the masses, so a tremendous number of memoirs got written during the '90s to fill this carnivorous maw of the talkshow hosts, and memoirs really became therapy. Everyone was a victim. They were talking about codependency, anorexia, abuse, abandonment and a lot of bashing, bashing of their parents, bashing of everyone who had ever done them wrong, and so memoirs became a somewhat debased form at that point.

However, during the same time, there were wonderful memoirs being written, which dealt with forgiveness and compassion and with humor. They don't regard themselves as

victims. They're saying, in effect, we've survived without resentment to get on with our lives. So that, to me, is the difference between the good memoir and the bad memoir.

NORRIS: So you noted in one of your essays that writing was out and whining was in.

ZINSSER: Exactly. And I don't think readers will put up with whining, and I don't think they should. I think if people still have this residual anger from all the things that happened to them when they were young, they should dispose of it somewhere else because memoir, at its best, can be an act of healing.

NORRIS: Now, with this avalanche of memoirs, we've also seen more than a few that have been filled with fabrications and I wonder if you think those two things are related or as bookshelves filled up with memoirs, are authors feeling, perhaps, a bit of pressure to embellish their life story, to make it stand out from the pack?

ZINSSER: Well, I don't think all authors, in general, are. Famously, of course, there's James Frey, and Frey embellished a lot of his life, and this has caused a tremendous furor. To me, one of the interesting things is that this is not objectively an important story in news terms and yet the story refuses to die. It keeps turning up, and I think the reason it refuses to die is that I think it has become a metaphor for the fact that there is a crisis of truth in this country.

I think it's a metaphor for a deeper anxiety that the truth no longer matters to the people who are running our lives. The White House lies to us. Corporations lie to their stockholders. They're manipulating figures, ransack their companies. Medical companies lie to their patients about defective heart implants. Congress is certainly less than honest about the extent to which lobbyists are paying for the laws of the land.

I think there is this great, not only anxiety we feel, I think a deep sorrow we feel in the country as citizens that the decencies that have made America great have been so tarnished.

NORRIS: In your classic book *ON WRITING WELL*, you note that memoir is the act of inventing the truth, so how do you make sure that when you reach inside your memory bank, you're actually pulling out something that's genuine, that's true, because so many people, one family can all go through the same event and walk away with entirely different recollections of an experience.

ZINSSER: Well, sure, that's absolutely right, Michele. Memory, which we think of as a wonderful writer's tool, and it is, and is a tremendous search mechanism, is very fallible. If you get your siblings all in the same room and ask them about some event that happened to you all when you were younger, you will get four different versions, and they will all have their own validity.

But, to me, the important thing for writers is intention. To me, intention is the writer's soul. We can write to affirm and to achieve the truth. We can write to obfuscate and to squirm away from the truth.

I feel, as a writer, that I have a contract with my readers to write the truth of my experiences, my life and my past to my best ability to remember them, but I think the intention of every serious, good writer is to have a contract with the reader, which the reader can think, I can trust this man to be telling the truth about his life to the best of his or her ability.

NORRIS: Many of the bestselling memoirs of late have been written by authors who are relatively young and I wonder if you think there's a threshold that you have to reach before you can look back and start to reflect on the life that you've lived.

ZINSSER: Well, that's a good question, and I don't really know, but I think if you've lived a little longer, it probably helps, but there is no threshold, no. The main thing is to make an honest transaction with events that you remember that you think will have some pertinence for your readers, for other people.

NORRIS: The reason I asked that is I wonder if there is a dichotomy between the whimsy of youth, but also in youth worrying about what others think of you as opposed to the, I'll say the dis-inhibition of advanced age.

ZINSSER: Well, I don't think you should ever worry what people think of you, and I think you should write, whatever you're writing, you should write entirely for yourself. Don't try to think what editors want, what publishers want, what agents want. They don't really know until they see it, so I think the important thing is to get it down. In terms of family history, one of the saddest sentences I know is I wish I had asked my mother about that. I wish I had asked my father about that.

Writers are the custodians of memory so it's extremely important to get to people, interview your parents, your grandparents. Don't worry what anybody else thinks. The important thing is to be a recorder of the past, but it's very important to work, I think, writing family history, whether anyone ever sees it or not.

NORRIS: William Zinsser, it's been great talking with you. Thanks so much.

ZINSSER: You too, Michele. Thanks a lot.

NORRIS: William Zinsser is the author of *ON WRITING WELL*, the classic guide to writing non-fiction. Next month, Harper Collins will publish a 30th anniversary edition, including one new chapter called *Writing Family History and Memoir*. To read Zinsser's advice on how to get started writing a memoir, go to our web site, NPR.org.

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