

# Everything But the Truth?

It is the authority of the truth-the idea of truth, anyway-that makes the memoir attractive to readers. "Some story!" we say to survivors of plane crashes and cancer and dysfunctional families after they have written a moving narrative.

We all like good stories, especially those taken from real life. But we also don't like being lied to. Lying-like cheating and stealing-is almost always wrong from an ethical perspective. But *shaping* the truth when writing memoir is an acceptable aspect of the craft. So where are the boundaries here?

Here's a story (and it really *did* happen). A few years ago I had a student in my nonfiction seminar at Iowa State University. Chris was a terrific writer with a real eye for metaphor and a feel for narrative construction. He wrote about his colorful family-the men were all bookies, small-time hoodlums, con-men. I remember in particular one scene where his father had deserted the family, and on the same night a glass chandelier had come down in the dining room. There was a description of his mother, left with children and bad debts, on her hands and knees, picking up shards of glass out of the rug. She turned to her twelve-year-old son: "I'll never get the glass out of this shag. We'll have to wear shoes in this house *forever*."

Well, Chris got his A, graduated, moved on. The next year, I had his girlfriend in a class. One day she was in my office and offhandedly shared that she was going to Chris' parents' home for Thanksgiving.

"Parents?" I raised an eyebrow. "Oh, is his mom remarried?" I asked. I pictured the woman who could not get the glass out of the rug. Well, good for her, I thought.

No. My student shook her head. Same parents. Married for almost thirty years, she told me.

And his father? What does Chris' father do? I pressed on, recalling the stories of seedy apartments in grimy cities, of the police knocking on the door, of a family on the run.

"Why, he's an English teacher," the girl said, and at the same moment must have seen my jaw drop. "Uh oh," she added.

Suddenly I wasn't just surprised-I was angry. I told her to give a message to Chris that if he were ever back in town to watch out for me. I may have encouraged her to rethink a relationship with someone who was capable of such duplicity. In class we had discussed interpreting and shaping the story. Someone had called this "accessorizing the truth." Sensing that his father's life as an English professor would make for dull reading (he may have been right on that score), Chris did more than our creative judgments could ever have allowed. We had sat in a workshop and carefully talked about a life that Chris had constructed exclusively from his imagination. Chris had lied. And we, his readers, were betrayed.

That afternoon, I went back and read the final that Chris had written for my class. One of the questions had to do with defining what creative nonfiction is. Chris wrote:

The distinction between the genres is economic, I think. There's money to be made in fiction, money to be made in nonfiction. Publishers like to keep things straight. And readers-some readers at least-they like to keep things straight. Some people want to read true things. Some people don't. Me, I don't give a shit. True, false, fiction, nonfiction, journalism-it all ends up as fiction in the end.

It all ends up as fiction in the end? I don't accept that. But the literal truth isn't always the artistic one.

The question of lying comes up all the time in the creative nonfiction classes I teach. Iowa State is a tech-ag-engineering kind of place, and most of my students are fairly literal-minded. "But *that's* how it happened," they sometimes say I suggest changes that would tighten a narrative and pep up the prose. "Your memoir shouldn't read as slowly as real life," I tell them. We need to give memoir writers permission to lie, but only when the reconstructed version of the story does not deceive the reader in its search for the aesthetic truth.

To my mind, there are three kinds of "lies" that are acceptable-indeed sometimes even necessary-in memoir writing. The first are the little white lies that are "created" when memory has blurred the details. Was your mother wearing a blue coat or a red coat when she picked you up at school that morning? Your teacher's peculiar habit of drumming her fingers-was it on the desktop? The chalkboard? The point is, you need a brilliant color for the coat as you looked through the window and saw your mother approaching. You need a place for the teacher to drum those fingers, a habit that foreshadows her threat.

Then there are the lies that narrative structure often demands: composite characterization, compression of time, omission of unnecessary detail. When I was writing *Before and After Zachariah*, a book about family life with my severely handicapped child, my editor suggested some changes. I had too many friends' names in the book, she told me. She couldn't keep them all straight-my memoir was beginning to read like a Russian novel. The editor suggested taking out the events which added new people and making composite characters out of some of the others.

So the three friends who drove with me to the hospital, cooked meals, called in the middle of the night, became one person, a sort of paradigmatic friend who was always there for me. Since the use of composites is fairly controversial, I noted in the acknowledgments that for the "sake of privacy and clarity, some characters in this book have been fictionalized and some names and places have been changed." This statement at least protects the reader from feeling duped.

I also compressed time to move the narrative along at a more energetic rate: the events of a week-long hospital stay were told in the frame of an afternoon; test results came with alacrity. I left out the details that clogged the narrative. It wasn't necessary to record all the conversations with all the health-care professionals who came to my home.

The third type of lying-and the most creative-is really a kind of conjecture, what I call "the gift of perhaps." How do we tell what we do not know? How do we reveal what we have not witnessed? Fiction writers make up stories all the time by using conjecture: "What if?" they say, and start spinning a yarn. The idea of a conflict-based hypothesis (what if a man was obsessed with killing a whale to avenge his loss. ..?) becomes the source for great fiction. Conjecture can serve the same purpose in memoir.

Look in your family album, which probably contains some pictures of generations you have never met. Your grandmother as a laughing young girl in a white dress next to your somber grandfather. Did she love him? Or did she really want to marry a young man from her church, poorer than she, and not considered a good match? In other pictures your grandmother isn't smiling. Did she forever mourn her first child, a baby girl lost to diphtheria before her second birthday? Perhaps.

Here's a memory as I recall it: Me in college-upstate New York on a day in May so beautiful that my breath catches as I walk up the hill from class. I go to my motorcycle parked along the street. My English teacher has just chosen my paper to read to the class as a "sterling example." He has told the class that I am a "real writer"; I look down toward my lap, assuming modesty. Outside, I kickstart the bike and ride-too quickly-down the street. I am twenty years old and wearing tight, white jeans and my long hair, blonde, freshly ironed, blows behind my back. I have this thought: "It will never get any better than this."

Now this is true: I had a motorcycle in college. I used to iron my hair. I did once write an English paper that my professor read to the class. ) I remember being twenty on a beautiful spring day and thinking, "It will never get any better than this." But did all this happen on the same day? Were the jeans white? Were those the professor's exact words of praise? And does it matter? The truth of the story is the narrator's perception of youth, of fleeting time, of the longing to capture a golden moment. And that's the truth I've told. No lie.