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BUT ENOUGH ABOUT ME

What does the popularity of memoirs tell us about ourselves?

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most of them still alive, that it is simply out of the question. What makes an autobiography worthless is, after all, their mendacity.

Freud ended by suggesting that the five-thousand-dollar advance that had been offered was a hundredth of the sum necessary to tempt him into such a foolhardy venture.

Unseemly self-exposures, unpalatable betrayals, unavoidable mendacity, a soupçon of meretriciousness: memoir, for much of its modern history, has been the black sheep of the literary family. Like a drunken guest at a wedding, it is constantly mortifying its soberer relatives (philosophy, history, literary fiction)—spilling family secrets, embarrassing old friends—motivated, it would seem, by an overpowering need to be the center of attention. Even when the most distinguished writers and thinkers have turned to autobiography, they have found themselves accused of literary exhibitionism—when they can bring themselves to put on a show at all. When Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s “Confessions” appeared, shocking the salons of eighteenth-century Paris with matter-of-fact descriptions of the author’s masturbation and masochism, Edmund Burke lamented the “new sort of glory” the eminent *philosophe* was getting “from bringing hardily to light the obscure and vulgar vices, which we know may sometimes be blended with eminent talents.” (The complaint sounds eerily familiar today.) When, at the

suggestion of her sister, Virginia Woolf started, somewhat reluctantly, to compose an autobiographical “sketch,” she found herself, inexplicably at first, thinking of a certain hallway mirror—the scene, as further probing of her memory revealed, of an incestuous assault by her half-brother Gerald, an event that her memory had repressed, and about which, in the end, she was unable to write for publication.

As it happens, Woolf, the tentative memoirist, met Freud, who wouldn’t dream of writing a memoir, when both were nearing the end of their lives; Woolf’s nephew Quentin Bell reported that the psychoanalyst presented the novelist with a narcissus. Whatever Freud may have meant by the gesture, it nicely symbolizes the troubling association between creativity and narcissism, an association that is nowhere as intense as when the creation in question is memoir, a literary form that exposes the author’s life without the protective masks afforded by fiction.

Such self-involvement, as Ben Yagoda’s fact-packed if not terribly searching book “Memoir: A History” (Riverhead; \$25.95) reminds you, is just one of the charges that have been levelled against memoirs and their authors over the centuries, the others being the ones that Freud was so leery of: indiscretion, betrayal, and outright fraud. But it’s the ostensible narcissism that has irritated critics the most. A decade and a half ago, the distinguished critic William Gass fulminated against the whole genre in a scathing *Harper’s* essay, in which he asked, rhetorically, whether there were “any motives for the enterprise that aren’t tainted with conceit or a desire for revenge or a wish for justification? To halo a sinner’s head? To puff an ego already inflated past safety?” The outburst came at a moment when a swelling stream of autobiographical writing that had begun in the late eighties was becoming what Yagoda calls a “flood.” By the end of the nineties, a *New York Observer* review of one writer’s first book, a memoir, could open with an uncontroversial reference to “this confessional age, in which memoirs and personal revelations tumble out in unprecedented abundance.” (The memoirist in question was me; more on that later.)

By now, the flood feels like a tsunami. Things have got to the point where the best a reviewer can say about a personal narrative is—well, that it’s not like a memoir. “This is not a woe-is-me memoir of the sort so much in fashion these days,” the book critic of the *Washington Post* wrote recently in an admiring review of Kati Marton’s “Enemies of the People,” an account of how the journalist’s family suffered under Communist rule in Hungary. But, as Yagoda makes clear, confessional memoirs have been irresistible to both writers and readers for a very long time, and, pretty much from the beginning, people have been complaining about the shallowness, the opportunism, the lying, the betrayals, the narcissism. This raises the question of just why the current spate of autobiography feels somehow different, somehow “worse” than ever before—more narcissistic and more disturbing in its implications. And it may well be that the answer lies not with the genre—which has, in fact, remained fairly consistent in its aims and its structure for the past millennium and a half or so—but with something that has shifted, profoundly, in the way we think about our selves and our relation to the world around us.

It all started late one night in 371 A.D., in a dusty North African town miles from anywhere worth going, when a rowdy sixteen-year-old—the offspring of an interfaith marriage, with a history of bad behavior—stole some pears off a neighbor’s tree. To all appearances, it was a pointless misdemeanor. The thief, as he ruefully recalled some thirty years later, was neither poor nor hungry, and the pears weren’t all that appealing, anyway. He stole them, he realized, simply to be bad. “It was foul, and I loved it,” he wrote. “I loved my own undoing.”

However trivial the crime and perverse its motivations, this bit of petty larceny had enormous consequences: for the teen-ager’s future, for the history of Christianity and Western philosophy, and for the layout of your local Barnes & Noble superstore. For although the boy eventually straightened himself out, converted to Christianity, and even became a bishop, the man he became was

tortured by the thought of this youthful peccadillo. His desire to seek a larger meaning in his troubled past ultimately moved him to write a starkly honest account of his dissolute early years (he is disarmingly frank about his prolific sex life) and his stumbling progress toward spiritual transcendence—to the climactic moment when, by looking inward with what he calls his “soul’s eye,” he “saw above that same eye of my soul the immutable light higher than my mind.” The man’s name was Aurelius Augustinus; we know him as St. Augustine. His book was called “Confessions.”

As Augustine, a teacher of rhetoric, well knew, there had long been a tradition of biographies of accomplished men—Plutarch’s *Lives*, say, written at the end of the first century A.D.—and of autobiographical accounts of daring military escapades and the like. (Xenophon’s *Anabasis*, for instance, written in the fourth century B.C., recounts how he and his troops managed to make their way back to safety after getting trapped behind enemy lines deep in what is now Iraq.)* But Augustine was the first Western author to make the accomplishment an invisible, internal one, and the journey to salvation a spiritual one. The arc from utter abjection to improbable redemption, at once deeply personal and appealingly universal, is one that writers have returned to—and readers have been insatiable for—ever since. Augustine of Hippo bequeathed to Augusten Burroughs more than just a name.

To be sure, the autobiography as an entertaining record of hair-raising or merely risqué scrapes has also proved resilient, from Benvenuto Cellini’s ribald “Autobiography” to Errol Flynn’s outrageous “My Wicked, Wicked Ways.” (“I played regularly—or irregularly—with a little girl next door named Nerida,” the actor reminisced about his childhood in Australia.) But the memoir’s essentially religious DNA, the Augustinian preoccupation with bearing written witness to remarkable inner transformations, remained dominant during the sixteen centuries from the “Confessions” to Burroughs’s “Running with Scissors.” Among the earliest vernacular memoirs in the post-Classical tradition were so-called “spiritual autobiographies”: St. Teresa of Ávila composed one in Spanish, as did St.

Ignatius Loyola. A fifteenth-century woman named Margery Kempe, whose autobiographical journey included some rather less exalted matter (not least, how she negotiated a sexless marriage with her avid husband), gave us what is considered to be the first memoir in English.

After the Reformation, the Protestants took up the form, partly in response to the Puritan call for “a narrow examination of thy selfe and the course of thy life,” as the sixteenth-century divine William Perkins put it. The memoir as a negative examination of the self, a form in which to showcase our reasons to be, in John Calvin’s words, “displeased with ourselves,” indelibly marked the Anglophone autobiographical tradition thereafter—as did a resultant vaingloriousness about the extent of one’s waywardness. The title of John Bunyan’s “Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners” (1666), a masterpiece of the conversion narrative, is an allusion to an epistle of Paul: “Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.” Bunyan’s book spawned a line of unholy-er-than-thou first-person narratives that has culminated in the memoirs of abjection with which we are surrounded today: James Frey’s “A Million Little Pieces,” with its Day-Glo depictions of addiction and recovery; Kathryn Harrison’s “The Kiss,” a reminiscence of father-daughter incest; Toni Bentley’s “Surrender,” about the author’s penchant for anal sex. The list, as we know, goes on. The crucial moment in the evolution of the suffering-and-redemption memoir from its religious origins to its profane zenith (or nadir) today occurred as the Age of Faith yielded to the Age of Reason. Yagoda rightly emphasizes the importance of Rousseau’s “Confessions”—published in 1782, four years after the philosopher’s death—for the secular transformation of the genre. (The “Confessions” came at the beginning of a boom in memoir-writing that some found deplorable. By 1827, John Lockhart, the biographer of Sir Walter Scott, could rail against “the mania for this garbage of Confessions, and Recollections, and Reminiscences.”) Rousseau’s work is striking now less for its frankness, which left little of the memoirist’s life to the imagination, than for the way it anticipates the present in its representation of memoir-writing as a kind of therapeutic purge. One of the most interesting

passages in the “Confessions” mirrors Augustine’s “Confessions” in recounting an ostensibly minor youthful infraction. In Rousseau’s case, it was the theft of a bit of ribbon in the house of the family he worked for. Rousseau’s crime had more serious immediate repercussions than Augustine’s: when the theft was discovered, he blamed a young woman who worked as a cook in the same household. Forty years later, the only way he could ease his guilt was to write about it:

This burden, then, has lain unalleviated on my conscience until this very day; and I can safely say that the desire to be in some measure relieved of it has greatly contributed to the decision I have taken to write my confessions.

For better or worse, Rousseau gave impetus to the transformation of “confession” into a secular, public, and purely literary gesture. He understood that this secularization was a step “without precedent,” as he writes at the beginning of the “Confessions.” In the hands of a great thinker the form could yield great insights; but few of us are Rousseau. Once the memoir stopped being about God and started being about Man, once “confession” came to mean nothing more than getting a shameful secret off your chest—and, maybe worse, once “redemption” came to mean nothing more than the cozy acceptance offered by other people, many of whom might well share the same secret—it was but a short step to what the *Times* book critic Michiko Kakutani recently characterized as the motivating force behind certain other products of the recent “memoir craze”: “the belief that confession is therapeutic and therapy is redemptive and redemption somehow equals art.”

Virtually at the time that Rousseau was writing, redemption was being redefined on this side of the Atlantic, too. From the start, there had been a strong taste in the Colonies for tales of rescues and escapes—local incarnations of those old adventure memoirs. The seventeenth century saw a number of best-selling accounts by settlers who had been captured by “savages” and later escaped. (These, Yagoda suggests, provided the blueprint for the subcategory of contemporary American memoir that includes Patti Hearst’s 1982 account of her kidnapping by the Symbionese Liberation Army.) But a hundred years later another, new kind of

escape memoir began to emerge, one that combined previous strains—the memoir as a record of dangers overcome and as a road map of spiritual renewal—while giving them a powerful new political resonance: the slave narrative. Running the gamut from the several reminiscences of Frederick Douglass, which the author revised and republished a number of times between 1845 and 1892, to the 1849 life story of one Henry (Box) Brown, who escaped to freedom by mailing himself by parcel post from Virginia to Philadelphia, these autobiographies by slaves and former slaves are remarkable for being among the first memoirs that were meant to serve as politically meaningful testimony to systemic crimes against an entire people. As such, they anticipate both in form and in function the numerous memoirs written by survivors of the Holocaust and other government-sponsored genocides of the twentieth century. (The earliest of the slave narratives were, in fact, contemporaneous with a vast body of political escape narratives that Yagoda, with his nearly exclusive focus on the Anglophone tradition, nowhere mentions: the memoirs written by those who fled the French Revolution and often landed on distant and improbable shores—one acquaintance of Marie Antoinette’s milked cows near Albany—before returning, eventually, to France. In these autobiographies, elements of both witness literature and survival epic are combined.)

What the slave narratives, the émigré accounts, and the Holocaust and genocide memoirs have in common is that, in them, the stakes of redemption are much higher than ever before. Now the “soul’s eye” that Augustine spoke of was turned outward as well as inward, documenting the suffering self but also, necessarily, recording the tormenting other. The implicit and conditional universality in Augustine’s suffering-and-redemption narrative—“This happened to me, and could happen to you, if you did what I did”—became indicative and explicit in the memoir of political suffering: “What happened to me happened to many others.” Each of these witness memoirs had to bear an awful burden, standing in for the thousands of memoirs that would never be written. As the “I” became “we,” the personal journey that had begun in the fourth century was transformed, by the

end of the eighteenth, into a highly political one. The conversation between one's self and God had become a conversation with, and about, the whole world.

As the implications of the memoir have grown in importance, so has the seriousness, and the consequences, of another complaint made about it: what Freud called "mendacity." The need for certain kinds of memoir to be true goes back to Augustine's "Confessions": if the anguish and the suffering aren't real, there's nothing to redeem, and the whole exercise becomes pointless. It is precisely the redemption memoir's status as a witness to real life that makes the outrage so loud when a memoir is falsified. (By contrast, if Errol Flynn bedded ten more or ten fewer starlets than he claims, you don't feel cheated.) This outrage tends to be exacerbated when the book in question claims to bear witness to social and political injustice. Yagoda, who is at his energetic best when indicting phony memoirs, gleefully recounts how a book called "The Blood Runs Like a River Through My Dreams"—one of three memoirs by a Native American writer called Nasdijj, in which the author rehearses the catalogue of sufferings (fetal alcohol syndrome, migrant life, homelessness, H.I.V. infection) that fuelled his resentful rejection of Western ways—turned out to have been written by a twice-married white Midwesterner whose other literary output includes gay S. & M. erotica.

The 1999 *Esquire* essay on which "The Blood Runs Like a River Through My Dreams" was based was nominated for a National Magazine Award; the book itself was ecstatically reviewed in the Native American literary press. ("Raw, poignant, poetic, and painful.") The effusiveness of the reception explains, to some extent, the violence of the reactions when such memoirs are revealed as phonies: beneath it lies, all too clearly, a kind of shame—shame at the ease with which we have been seduced, and at how naked our desire is for certain kinds of narrative, however improbable or tendentious or convenient, to be true.

Indeed, the reactions to phony memoirs often tell us more about the tangled issues of veracity, mendacity, history, and politics than the books themselves do.

This was already true of the nineteenth-century slave narrative and the way it was sometimes exploited. One of the most interestingly convoluted cases concerns the publication, in 1836, of a book called “The Slave, or Memoirs of Archy Moore”—a startling account of maltreatment, incest, and revenge told by a light-skinned African-American slave. The fact that it soon became clear that the book was a novel—by a Harvard graduate named Richard Hildreth, a New Englander who, during a stay in the South, had been deeply shocked by the treatment of black slaves—didn’t bother some abolitionist reviewers; for them, what mattered was the “terrible truths” from which Moore’s fiction had been constructed. In a letter to the Boston *Liberator*, the abolitionist author Lydia Maria Child went as far as to claim that Hildreth’s novel was more powerful than an authentic narrative written by a slave called Charles Ball. “The extracts I have seen from Charles Ball are certainly highly interesting,” she wrote, “and they have a peculiar interest, because an actual living man tells us what he has seen and experienced; while Archy Moore is a skillful grouping of incidents which, we all know, are constantly happening in the lives of slaves. But it cannot be equal to Archy Moore!”

The story of “Archy Moore” anticipates the contemporary willingness to accept as works of social or political witness stories that turn out to be works of fiction. In the preface that Frey was obliged to add after the extent of his fictionalization in “A Million Little Pieces” created an outcry, he writes, “I hope these revelations will not alter [readers’] faith in the book’s central message—that drug addiction and alcoholism can be overcome, and there is always a path to redemption if you fight to find one.” After the publication, in 1983, of Rigoberta Menchú’s memoir describing government atrocities against indigenous Guatemalans, investigations by a Middlebury College professor and by a reporter for the *Times* revealed that some of the incidents in the book hadn’t happened the way she described. (Among other things, a brother who Menchú said had died of starvation didn’t exist.) Menchú, who won the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize, retorted that her book expressed a “larger truth” about the sufferings of her people. Yagoda reports that one sympathetic Wellesley College professor of Spanish—a modern-day Lydia

Maria Child—declared, in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “Whether her book is true or not, I don’t care.”

One of the most interesting defenses of memoirs that turn out to be “enhanced” or downright invented is that they accurately reflect a reality present not in the world itself, as in the case of “Archy Moore” and Rigoberta Menchú, but in the author’s mind. This line of argument raises a question that goes to the heart of our assumptions about literature, about the difference between fictions and nonfiction, and about truth, fiction, and reality itself.

At the beginning of 2008, critical and public irritation with memoirs reached a new peak, during a bewildering onslaught of phony-memoir revelations that were made within weeks of one another. There was “Love and Consequences,” a memoir of inner-city gang life by a mixed-race girl living with black gang members, which had been written by a white woman who had gone to a fancy prep school. And there was “Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years,” by Misha Defonseca, a Belgian woman who wrote about having survived the Holocaust by wandering around Europe with a pack of friendly wolves, but who turned out (a) not to have left Belgium and (b) not to be Jewish. In a statement published after the scandal broke, Defonseca declared, “The story in the book is mine. It is not the actual reality—it was my reality, my way of surviving.” (She added, “The truth is that I have always felt Jewish.”)

This justification of a literary fraud on the ground that it is true to the writer’s interior world—a world that helps the author “cope” or “survive”—strikingly echoes the self-defense offered by Frey. “People cope with adversity in many different ways,” he wrote, adding that his mistake had been “writing about the person I created in my mind to help me cope, and not the person who went through the experience.” Behind such tortured psychological self-justification lies an aesthetic consideration familiar to anyone who has ever gone fishing: the experience he actually went through wasn’t nearly as compelling as the one he

wrote down. “I wanted the stories in the book to ebb and flow, to have dramatic arcs, to have the tension that all great stories require,” Frey explained.

Such claims add up to a quite valid defense of a certain literary genre, but the genre in question isn't memoir—it's the novel. The novelist, after all, is a writer who has a vivid internal reality that wants expressing; who invents stories with dramatic arcs and tensions that point the reader toward a message; and who imagines himself or herself into the experiences of others in order to populate those stories with psychologically real characters.

The seemingly pervasive inability on the part of both authors and readers to distinguish their truth from the objective truth is nothing new in the history of modern literature; it goes right back to issues that were simmering away as both the memoir and the novel were emerging in their contemporary forms, at the turn of the eighteenth century. Yagoda points out the curious fact that Daniel Defoe, the earliest major novelist in the English-language tradition, cast many of his novels as memoirs, thereby complicating a relationship that has remained vexed right up until the present. In 1719, a well-known author called Charles Gildon published a tract demonstrating that a popular book that claimed to be “The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures” of an English mariner, and which came complete with an editor's note (“neither is there any Appearance of Fiction in it”), was a pack of lies. The mariner in question was Robinson Crusoe, and Gildon was, of course, right; like all novels, it was, in one sense, a pack of lies. And yet like all great novels it expresses something we know to be true. But the truth we seek from novels is different from the truth we seek from memoirs. Novels, you might say, represent “a truth” about life, whereas memoirs and nonfiction accounts represent “the truth” about specific things that have happened. A generation after Defoe and a generation before Rousseau, the philosopher David Hume was pondering the difference between memoir and fiction—a difference that, ultimately, may have as much to do with readers as it does with writers. Yagoda cites a passage from “A Treatise of Human Nature” (1740) in which Hume

compared the experience of a reader of what he called “romance” to that of a reader of “true history”:

The latter has a more lively conception of all the incidents. He enters deeper into the concerns of the persons: represents to himself their actions, and characters, and friendships, and enmities: he even goes so far as to form a notion of their features, and air, and person. While the former, who gives no credit to the testimony of the author, has a more faint and languid conception of all these particulars; and except on account of the style and ingenuity of the composition, can receive little entertainment from it. By “entertainment,” Hume meant intellectual stimulation and illumination—what we have been seeking from memoirs, in one way or another, since St. Augustine. It’s a genre in which truth value is necessarily of greater importance than are aesthetic values. Two and a half centuries later, in a reaction to the revelation that Binjamin Wilkomirski’s “Fragments,” the 1995 account of the author’s experiences as a Latvian Jewish child experiencing the horrors of the Holocaust, was a fiction (the author was a Swiss Gentile whose real name was Bruno Grosjean), a Holocaust survivor named Ruth Klüger suggested that a fraudulent memoir—particularly a fraudulent account of extreme trauma—could, precisely because it lacks truth value, never amount to much more than a kind of perverse aesthetic experience, a trashy entertainment (in the more familiar sense of that word):

When it is revealed as a lie, as a presentation of invented suffering, it deteriorates to kitsch. . . . However valid it may be that much of this may have happened to other children, with the falling away of the authentic autobiographical aspect and without the guarantee of a living first-person narrator identical with the author, it merely becomes a dramatization that offers no illumination.

When readers defended Frey on the ground that his book, however falsified its “memories” were, had nonetheless (as he had hoped) provided them with the genuine uplift they were looking for, they were really defending fiction: an uplifting entertainment that can tell truths but cannot tell the truth.

A question that Yagoda never really explores is why, now in particular, there seems to be so much blurring between reality and fiction. (He doesn’t mention, for instance, the scandals involving fraudulent journalism—Stephen Glass, at *The New Republic*, and Jayson Blair, at the *Times*—that erupted in the very period when similar scandals were staining the reputations of memoirists.)

The answer to this question suggests why it's hard not to feel that there is, in fact, something distinctive about the current cycle of memoir proliferation and anti-memoir backlash.

Reality itself is a term that is rapidly being devalued. Take reality TV: on these shows, "real" people (that is, people who aren't professional actors) are placed in artificial situations—they go on elaborately arranged dates, are abandoned on desert islands, have their ugly apartments redecorated, or are dumped into tanks of worms or scorpions—in order to provoke the "real" emotions that the audience tunes in to witness (disappointment, desire, joy, gratitude, terror). This craving on the part of audiences for real-life displays of increasingly extreme emotion (over, say, the carefully rehearsed emotions that are provided to us when we go to the theatre or to the movies) surely stems from the rise, in the seventies, of talk shows whose hosts put ordinary people and their problems in the spotlight: first, Phil Donahue and, later, Sally Jessy Raphael and Montel Williams. These TV shows helped create and promulgate the wider culture of self-discussion and self-exposure without which the recent flurry of memoir-writing and reading would be unthinkable. More important for the history of the memoir, they created a context for the huge popularity of Oprah Winfrey, who has used her show as a platform for people to tell—or, in the case of authors, to sell—their remarkable life stories; and who has, not coincidentally, fallen prey to more than one fraud. (In addition to Frey, Winfrey promoted what may be the strangest phony-memoir case of all: that of Herman Rosenblat, a Holocaust survivor who embellished his true story of survival in the camps with an invented, sentimental twist—his "angel," a little girl who, he claimed, threw apples to him over the camp's fence.) Winfrey's susceptibility suggests how an immoderate yearning for stories that end satisfyingly—what William Dean Howells once described to Edith Wharton as the American taste for "a tragedy with a happy ending"—makes us vulnerable to frauds and con men peddling pat uplift. As Frey's preface reminds us, the grander the dramatic arc, the likelier the tale is to be a tall one.

But Winfrey's—and, by extension, her audiences'—hunger for good stories at any price also suggests that the trauma-and-redemption memoir, with its strong narrative trajectory and straightforward themes, may be filling a gap created by the gradual displacement of the novel from its once central position in literary culture. Indeed, shows like Winfrey's, with their insistence on “real” emotions, may themselves have created an audience for whom fictional emotions are bound, in the end, to seem like little more than “dramatization without illumination.” If you can watch a real lonely woman yearning after young hunks on a reality dating show, why bother with *Emma Bovary*? More significant, the premium placed by these shows on the spontaneous expression of genuine and extreme emotions has justified setups that are all too obviously unreal—in a word, fictional. In a way, not only the spate of memoir hoaxes but the recent proliferation of what Yagoda calls “stuntlike” memoirs—narratives that result from highly improbable stimuli (“One Man's Quest to Wash Dishes in All Fifty States”)—arise from a deeper confusion about where reality ends and where make-believe begins.

This awkward blurring of the real and the artificial both parallels and feeds off another dramatic confusion: that between private and public life. The advent of cell phones has forced millions of people sitting in restaurants, reading on commuter trains, idling in waiting rooms, and attending the theatre to become party to the most intimate details of other people's lives—their breakups, the health of their portfolios, their psychotherapeutic progress, their arguments with their bosses or boyfriends or parents. This experience of being constantly exposed to other people's life stories is matched only by the inexhaustible eagerness of people to tell their life stories—and not just on the phone. The Internet bears crucial witness to a factor that Yagoda discusses in the context of the explosion of memoirs in the seventeenth century (when changes in printing technology and paper production made publication possible on a greater scale than before): the way that advances in media and means of distribution can affect the evolution of the personal narrative. The greatest outpouring of personal narratives in the history of the planet has occurred on the Internet; as soon as there was a cheap and convenient means to do so, people enthusiastically paid to disseminate their

autobiographies, commentaries, opinions, and reviews, happily assuming the roles of both author and publisher.

So if we're feeling assaulted or overwhelmed by a proliferation of personal narratives, it's because we are; but the greatest profusion of these life stories isn't to be found in bookstores. If anything, it's hard not to think that a lot of the outrage directed at writers and publishers lately represents a displacement of a large and genuinely new anxiety, about our ability to filter or control the plethora of unreliable narratives coming at us from all directions. In the street or in the blogosphere, there are no editors, no proofreaders, and no fact-checkers—the people at whom we can at least point an accusing finger when the old-fashioned kind of memoir betrays us.

Yagoda's relentless focus on the genre's opportunistic low points obscures the fact that there are some very great memoirs. He devotes little space to masterpieces like "The Education of Henry Adams," a choice he wants to justify on the ground that his approach is "historical" rather than "aesthetic." This odd tactic—a general study of the novel that failed to celebrate the great ones would give us very little sense of why we read novels—betrays how suspicious he is of the idea that intimate revelations can have motivations other than exhibitionism or "commercial enterprise."

And yet sometimes memoir may be the only way to cover a subject effectively. Fifteen years ago, I found myself unable to complete a study of contemporary gay culture that I'd contracted to write. The book was meant to be a more or less straightforward examination of the way in which the books, movies, and art that gay people were producing, and the way they partied, shopped, travelled, and dined, reflected gay identity. But the deeper I got into the subject, the harder I found it to isolate just what "gay identity" might be—not least because I and most of the other gay men I knew seemed to be torn between the ostensibly straight identities and values they'd been brought up with (domesticity, stability,

commitment, mortgages) and the “queer” habits and behaviors made possible in enclaves that were exclusively gay. Because I didn’t want to suggest that I somehow stood outside those tensions and instabilities, I felt I had to write, in some part, about myself. This was the book that the reviewer introduced by alluding to “this confessional age.”

As for Freud’s charge that memoirs are flawed by mendacity, it may be that the culprit here is not really the memoir genre but simply memory itself. The most stimulating section of Yagoda’s book is one in which he considers, albeit superficially, the vast scientific literature about memory and how it works. The gist is that a seemingly inborn desire on the part of *Homo sapiens* for coherent narratives, for meaning, often warps the way we remember things. The psychologist F. C. Bartlett, whom Yagoda quotes without discussing his work, once conducted an experiment in which people were told fables into which illogical or non-sequitur elements had been introduced; when asked to repeat the tales, they omitted or smoothed over the anomalous bits. More recently, graduate students who were asked to recall what their anxiety level had been before an important examination consistently exaggerated that anxiety. As Yagoda puts it, “That little tale—‘I was really worried, but I passed’—would be memoir-worthy. The ‘truth’—‘I wasn’t that worried, and I passed’—would not.” In other words, we always manage to turn our memories into good stories—even if those stories aren’t quite true.

Anyone who writes a memoir doesn’t need psychology experiments to tell him that memories can be partial, or self-serving, or faulty. A few years ago, I was on a plane coming home from Australia, where I’d been interviewing Holocaust survivors for a rather different kind of personal narrative: an account of my search to find out exactly what happened to my mother’s uncle and his family, who were Polish Jews, during the Second World War. As I interviewed survivors from the same small town where my great-uncle had not survived, I asked not only about my relatives and what might have happened to them but about the tiniest details

of life before, during, and after the war: what they ate for breakfast, who their middle-school teachers were, how and where they spent their school holidays.

Both the mad ambition and the poignant inadequacy of those interviews—and perhaps of the whole project of reconstituting the past, anyone’s past, from memory—came home to me on the long flight home. I was sitting next to my brother Matt, a photographer, who was shooting portraits of the survivors we were interviewing, and about halfway through the flight some kids toward the back of the plane—a high-school choir, I think it was—began singing a seventies pop song in unison. Matt turned to me with an amused expression. “Remember we sang that in choir?” he asked.

I looked at him in astonishment. “Choir? You weren’t even in the choir,” I said to him. I’d been the president of choir, and I knew what I was talking about.

Now it was his turn to be astonished. “Daniel,” he said. “I stood *next* to you on the risers during concerts!”

Matt was talking about a shared history from 1978—a comparatively recent past. The people we’d just spent ten days with, struggling to find the keys that would spring the locks of their rusted recollections, had been talking about things that had happened sixty, seventy, even eighty years before. I thought about this, and burst out laughing. Then I went home and wrote the book. ♦

*Correction, February 11, 2010: Xenophon’s *Anabasis* was written in the fourth century, not the early third, as originally stated.

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