TELL ME TRUE

Memoir, History, and Writing a Life

Edited by
PATRICIA HAMPL
and ELAINE TYLER MAY

Borealis Books is an imprint of the Minnesota Historical Society Press.

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The Minnesota Historical Society Press is a member of the Association of American University Presses.

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

♾ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

International Standard Book Number
ISBN 13: 978-0-87351-630-3
ISBN 10: 0-87351-630-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tell me true : memoir, history, and writing a life / edited by Patricia Hampl and Elaine Tyler May.
p. cm.
ISBN-13: 978-0-87351-630-3 (cloth : alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 0-87351-630-3 (cloth : alk. paper)
1. Autobiography. 2. Biography as a literary form. 3. History in literature. 4. Truth in literature I. Hampl, Patricia. II. May, Elaine Tyler.
CT25.T448 2009
809'.93592—dc22 2008016607

Contents

PATRICIA HAMPL & ELAINE TYLER MAY
Introduction 3

FENTON JOHNSON
The Lion and the Lamb, or the Facts and the Truth: Memoir as Bridge 9

ANNETTE KOBAK
Whose War? 25

HELEN EPSTEIN
Coming to Memoir as a Journalist 43

JUNE CROSS
All in the Family 57

MICHAEL PATRICK MACDONALD
It's All in the Past 69

ELAINE TYLER MAY
Confessions of a Memoir Thief 83

ALICE KAPLAN
Lady of the Lake 97

FENTON JOHNSON

The Lion and the Lamb or the Facts and the Truth: Memoir as Bridge

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WITH AN EXCERPT FROM
Geography of the Heart: A Memoir

FROM *Geography of the Heart: A Memoir*

On a discouraging night not long after Larry's death, I wrote my next-older sister, who had herself helped a lover through his death from leukemia. "Tell me, O older and wiser sister," I wrote, "how long will this grief last?" Older and wiser, she wrote back: "Grief is never over. The time will come when you control your grief rather than the other way around. You'll draw upon those memories when you need and want them, rather than having them show up uninvited. But your grief will never go away, which is the way it should be. It and Larry are part of who you are."

I am a man of few landscapes. Twice I have moved away from San Francisco and twice I have returned, not because of its tolerance or its fog (though I value both) but because I wanted to be near old friends. Looking back, I see that I was trying to re-create in a big city something like the blood family among whom I'd been raised, where on each walk to school I passed two centuries of my genealogy lying in the churchyard.

Now I am not much past forty, but of those whom I returned to be near, many are dead. Even in this city of small neighborhoods, many of the men from whom I learned to respect myself will not unexpectedly round the corner some bright autumn afternoon; I run little risk of the pleasant dangers of random encounters with my past, except in the recesses of my heart.

These days I visit with those dead men, my friends and lovers, though (as my sister predicted) on my terms, not theirs. The imperative to live presses its demands and I comply. Though I commonly have vivid dreams, I seldom dream of them; I never dream of Larry, a fact that saddens me. Maybe after I finish this book, I tell myself, that will change.

But writing is a contemplative profession. In exchange for solitude and various financial and psychological insecurities, I am given the luxury to daydream, and when in midafternoon I release my mind to wander, this is the place it often chooses to visit:

A large grassy bank cradled in the oxbow bend of a river flowing through a deciduous place, curving past a hardwood forest of oak and hickory and walnut—the landscape of my childhood asserts itself, though

here and there a redwood pierces this temperate forest's profile and the stream runs clear and gravel-bottomed; I have lived many years in northern California: Mitt-leaved sassafras in the undergrowth—the air smells of cinnamon as I push through. The riverbank is populated with men, men who have loved me and whom I've loved, and men whom I've wanted to love: men I wanted to date but hadn't the courage or time to ask; men who rejected me, men whom I rejected; men I saw only once, on an airplane, in a bar, on a crowded bus, on a nearly empty beach, in a foreign land, in a classroom, in a church. Many of them are surely ill or dead, but they are all here, sons of the mothers of the world, alive and full of joy on the grassy bank of my heart, here at the cusp of their lives and somewhere in their midst sits Larry, my Larry. Young enough still to be beautiful, old enough to know the meaning of the coolness beneath the sun's warmth; old enough to know that every shadow promises night; old enough to know death. I cross that river to join them. We are gathered by a river where we have knowledge of time outside of time, of death without death, and there on the grassy green bank of my east-west heart, in the endless low-slanting sun, we give ourselves over to making memory and remembering.

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The Lion and the Lamb or the Facts and the Truth: Memoir as Bridge

In 1894, a rural Kentucky entrepreneur sold New York businessman A. W. Dennett the frontier log cabin in which he claimed Abraham Lincoln had been born almost a century earlier. To quote Mark Twain, who makes a cameo appearance in this story: How singular! Yes, and how lucky! since Dennett parlayed the cabin into a business, transporting it around the country for exhibition as the Lincoln birthplace. Each time the cabin was broken down and reassembled, it lost an inch or two to the process; after several years of touring, it was placed in storage, considerably worse for the wear.

Then a committee of leading Americans, among them Twain, President William Howard Taft, Ida Tarbell, William Jennings Bryan,

and Samuel Gompers, came together in a campaign to build the cabin a suitable home. To draw up the plans, they engaged John Russell Pope, later the nation's leading neoclassicist, architect of the Jefferson Memorial and the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

Pope designed a Greek temple for the Kentucky woods, a massive structure of rose granite and marble rich in numerology (one step for each year of Lincoln's life; a column for each of the original colonies) but with a minor problem: the interior rooms were too small to accommodate the cabin. Pope designed his monument to house not a real log cabin but an imaginary cabin that conformed to his conception of Lincoln's humble origins. But the corpses of history must conform to their tombs, so the sponsors lopped off several more feet of the cabin in order to squeeze it into Pope's mausoleum.

I know all this because I was born in Kentucky, a few miles from the Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historical Park. Taking the word of its guides as gospel, I grew up believing that the cabin—now reduced to the dimensions of a good-sized backyard tree house—had been the first home of our most beloved president. Ever sensitive to tourists and taxpayers, the park service stood by the myth until enough time had passed, at which point it quietly recast its brochures in the passive voice, describing the cabin as "traditionally held" to be Lincoln's birthplace. Today its web page reads, "an early 19th century Kentucky cabin symbolizes the one in which Abraham Lincoln was born."

Is there meaning to be found amid the murky facts surrounding the mud-chinked cabin that a wily Kentuckian assembled from logs he claimed to have found scattered about the original Lincoln farm and that he sold to a gullible (or enterprising) Yankee businessman? If the highest aspiration of human culture—of science and art, history and memoir—is not fact but truth, where does the story of the Lincoln birthplace cabin fall?

I was born in the Kentucky hills in 1953, a peculiar historical moment in a peculiar historical place. In the late 1920s and 1930s my mother regularly saw movies at the small theater in the county seat;

at ninety years old she still warbles lyrics from the musicals of the day, a living testimonial to the power of music to aid and prompt memory.

Then she married my father and moved to the far reaches of the county, into a world of narrow valleys and steep ridges. The movie theater in the county seat closed, victim of television's explosive growth, but the television signals were not yet strong enough to reach our remote village. Well into the age of electronic media, I grew up with little access to television and none to film.

Instead I grew up hearing endless stories from the whiskey-making, hardscrabble culture of the Kentucky hills, stories that shaped me for life, a fact I learned as soon as I left for college. I would be sitting on the floor of the hallway of my freshman dorm at the high-toned California university where I'd come on scholarship, relating some childhood memory to my classmates. Their first response was disbelief, so impossible was it for them to imagine a world so far removed from the universally prosperous suburbia of their experience. But I knew how to tell a good story, and I kept my audience engaged until invariably a listener piped up, "Would you *please* get to the point!" "The point?" I asked, genuinely puzzled. Even then I understood that the telling of the story *was* the point, that the facts of the story mattered less than sharing the communion of the word, the telling and the listening as entry point to a world outside of linear time.

Beginning with the later prophets, in a remarkable transformation mapped out by philosopher and religious historian Mircea Eliade,* the Jews began to see time not as round but as linear. Previous peoples, including the Jews, had understood time as circular, in the way still characteristic of Asian religions and philosophies. In this circular interpretation, time is a continuous recycling of birth, life, death, and

* *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History,* trans. Willard R. Trask (1954; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971) and *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion,* trans. Willard R. Trask (1959; New York: Harper & Row, 1961).

rebirth, the unending loop that Buddhism labels "samsara." People lived for and by eternal, ever-repeating cycles—the rising and setting of the sun, the waxing and waning of the moon, the sun's apogee and perigee at its solstices marking the changing of the seasons, the miracle and mystery of growth and decay, birth and death.

The cultivation of memory—most frequently through music and orally recited poetry—was an essential component of these preliterate cultures. Music and oral recitation were vehicles and prompts for memory, enabling storytellers to preserve and recall epic narratives. In doing so the speakers reinforced the circle of time, establishing the dependence of the current generation on those who came before as well as its responsibilities to those who would follow. Priests led their communities in rituals designed to propitiate the deities, thus ensuring that the circle of time remained unbroken. They memorized and performed their duties with precision, since the slightest variation from how things had always been done might displease the gods and goddesses and so incur their wrath.

In contrast, later Jewish prophets began to perceive time as leading to an end point. A messiah arrives to liberate the chosen people from their suffering; shortly afterward, the world ends in apocalypse. The damned are damned, the chosen people are saved, end of story, end of history. In contrast to the once universally held perception of time as round and recycling, these prophets placed the universe on a line. Time became not a circle but an arrow, and the Jews (and by process of inheritance, Christians and Muslims) saw themselves at its tip.

Who can say why those later Hebrew prophets arrived at this revolutionary change in perception? Perhaps it was the outcome of the Jewish defeat, enslavement, and exile in Persia, circumstances so desperate that they demanded rethinking the tribe's relationship to time. However the transformation came about, Eliade argues that the emergence of the perception of time as linear rather than circular offered a powerful alternative to the once omnipotent allegiance to tradition. More and more people came to measure their lives by

the clock and the calendar rather than by the sun and the moon. Culture, which had offered a brake and a caution against change, began to dismiss tradition as dated and to encourage and celebrate the innovative. In his insistence on reason as a gift from God, medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas unwittingly facilitated the rise of empiricism, in which interpretations once taken for granted were required to demonstrate their validity through objective measurement. New disciplines were born, among them the social sciences (the designation is telling), which sought authority through facts and statistics. Historians abandoned their ancient role as moralists and became chroniclers and analysts. Progress became our most important product.

An astute critic notes that the most literate ancients possessed prodigious memories—Augustine peppers his *Confessions*, to offer one example, with references that demonstrate an encyclopedic and intimate recollection of Scripture. All the same, whether as scribbled notes or BlackBerries, as technology proliferated it took charge of remembering, and our capacity to remember atrophied like any unused muscle.

Writer William Dalrymple describes a recent, analogous transformation in the storytelling traditions of the Gujar tribes of Rajasthan, one of the more rural states of India:

> The Gujars are very often illiterate, and illiteracy seems an essential condition for preserving the performance of an oral epic. It was the ability of the bard to read, rather than changes in the tastes of his audience, that sounded the death knell for oral tradition. Just as the blind can develop a heightened sense of hearing, smell, and touch to compensate for their loss of vision, so it seems that the illiterate have a capacity to remember in a way that the literate simply do not.*

Cultures based in circular time are clearly capable of invention—the wheel, the plow, and the sword predate by millennia the rise of

* William Dalrymple, "Homer in India," *New Yorker*, November 20, 2006.

our conception of linear time. But these cultures did not privilege innovation. The Chinese invented gunpowder and moveable type but saw them as novelties. Societies required a linear consciousness of time to *exploit the full potential* (such an American phrase!) of the newfangled, with the result that one invention after another changed the world in the space of a generation. To our perception of time as linear, we owe the invention of penicillin and the atomic bomb; the liberation of oppressed peoples and the rise of Bible-thumping televangelists; the privileging of desire over duty, individual rights over community obligations.*

For most Americans, completing the transition away from story-telling and oral history to technology-based media has been if not painless at least organic. Immigration had already loosened ties to the past, and in any case popular culture is by and large American culture, with the images and types of mass media by and large drawn from prosperous white American lives.

But for peoples in tradition-based cultures, the avalanche of urban pop culture represents the obliteration of memory. They must let go of the chain of stories that joins them to their pasts in exchange for iPods and PCs—assuming they can afford them. They are being

* Urban sophisticates are fascinated by contemporary writing from less developed cultures in part because it so often portrays this transition from circular to linear time. In his poignantly titled novel *Arrow of God* (1964), Nigerian Chinua Achebe's priest-protagonist Ezeulu refuses to allow his people to harvest their ripening yams even though to delay the harvest—as tradition requires—will spoil the crop and lead to famine. For Ezeulu, to violate tradition is to betray his priestly responsibilities, breaking the circle of time and severing the link to all that has come before. In desperation the villagers convert to Christianity—a philosophy that permits and encourages progress; a philosophy of linear time. A generation later South African writer J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) portrays a white father and daughter forced to choose between the values of the progress-oriented culture of the cities and the circular culture of the tribal people among whom they have chosen to live. In America the memoirs, essays, and novels of N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa) and Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo) portray the dislocation of native peoples whose communities are islands of circular time surrounded by linear, progress-oriented culture.

asked—or more often required—to exchange allegiance to tradition for allegiance to global consumerism. Where once they could assume a more-or-less secure place in the intricate web of a traditional society, now they find they are useful to global capitalism only so long as they can turn a profit.

The structures of traditional cultures were often hierarchical and discriminatory, but they provided their members with meaning—and before and above all else people need and seek meaning. While the prospect of seizing control of one's individual destiny has irresistible appeal to so many people for whom tradition represents oppression, other, less adventuresome people prefer pattern and ritual and the reason for being these provide, even at the price of what we in linear, progress-oriented cultures perceive as their individual identities.

The increasingly fierce resistance of tradition-based societies to Western culture has its roots in the visceral fear that it represents the death knell for cultural memory. Political and religious dogma have become vehicles through which that fear expresses itself in violence.

In revisiting these thoughts, I see I have implied an artificial dichotomy between a linear, "masculine" time of history and a circular, "feminine" time of art; between a linear, "masculine" time of science and a circular, "feminine" time of religion. In fact these are symbiotic, existing in no duality, as Buddhism teaches. As evidence of their interdependence, I offer memoir, which rests one comfortable foot in the "masculine" world of history and its other foot in fabulous "feminine" fiction.

That is emphatically not to say that in writing memoir I fictionalize, i.e., that I make it up. In writing memoir only a hack makes it up. In writing memoir the rule of the game—the discipline that provides the vessel for memoirists' words—is our contract with the reader that our writing is as truthful to memory as we are capable of being and that we will let the reader know, directly or by implication, how reliable we feel ourselves to be. In *Angela's Ashes* Frank McCourt does

not need to tell us that he is fictionalizing his description of the moment of his birth; he could hardly have been taking notes. In recalling his French governess in *Speak, Memory,* Vladimir Nabokov tells us up front that he "was not there to greet [Mademoiselle]"—but then he so vividly imagines her descent from the train amid the depths of the Russian winter that two sentences into his description we've forgotten that he's writing fiction. A lesser writer might have been content to leave us dazzled by sleight of hand, but Nabokov, ever the literary trickster, ends this gorgeous passage by gently reminding us that we've been had:

> Very lovely, very lonesome. But what am I doing in this stereoscopic dreamland? How did I get here? Somehow, the two sleighs have slipped away, leaving a passportless spy standing on the blue-white road in his New England snowboots and stormcoat. The vibration in my ears is no longer their receding bells, but only my old blood singing. . . . The snow is real, though, and as I bend to it and scoop up a handful, sixty years crumble to glittering frost-dust between my fingers.

The great memoirists do not conceal their uncertainties but use them as another tool for making art. They work both from empirically, historically verifiable fact and from the art of constructing and handing on the best of all possible stories. They work, in fact, in both linear and circular time.

Even now I write stories because to take up the pen is to remove myself from the linear time of calendar and clock and enter instead into circular time, the time of religion and philosophy and art, the time of eternity, the time of God.

Memoir is by definition a vehicle for subjectivity. The label gives notice to readers that they are entering the funhouse of individual memory, in which a great deal of the pleasure derives from the entry the writing affords into the writer's deepest consciousness. And paradoxically it is through subjectivity that one best gains access to truth, the enduring, timeless wisdom that enables us to have and keep faith

in ourselves and in each other, in our collective capacity to live in harmony with each other and with our planet.

What distinguishes memoir from more conventional approaches to recording and analyzing experience? A friend offers an old saw—"The victors write history, the losers write their stories," a joke that contains a powerful truth: stories have a way of outlasting victories. If someone had told me when I was in my early thirties that I would publish a memoir shortly after I turned forty, I would have rejected the suggestion outright. Memoirs were something you wrote when you were old, after your hair turned gray, assuming you still had hair. And then HIV arrived in America and my partner died, and—motivated by the impulse to preserve his story and that of my community for those who followed—I wrote *Geography of the Heart* in response to the imperative of the historical moment. A universally familiar example makes the point more emphatically: millions more readers worldwide know the poignant story of Anne Frank's life in hiding than know the facts of Hitler's rise to power.

A successful memoir is not a product of the self-obsession of a selfish, me-first generation; it is evidence of literate people's recognition that the written word has replaced the story told by the winter fire as our means of establishing and preserving cultural memory.

Linear time is individual time, in which our first commitment is to ourselves, to our particular lives, achievements, and stories. Circular time is community time, in which individual interests are secondary to those of the family, tribe, or nation. Memoir arises from the intersection of these two ways of living through time. It conflates the empirically verifiable facts of history—the particular events that make up the linear time of calendar and clock—with the timeless, circular consciousness of art. Memoirists write in service not only to fact, though the facts are and must be our tools, but to truth. We are in service both to linear and circular time, to progress and eternity.

The same might be said of history, but only when its authors bow in Franciscan humility before the power of their pens—the power

of the written word. Historians who abandon the illusory power of "objectivity"—who acknowledge forthrightly their perspectives and limitations—are submitting to the discipline of art and so to the discipline of truth.

We require the facts to form accurate formulations of the truth. Traditions founded in warm desert climates once forbade eating shellfish, probably because the risk of spoilage was so great; now we understand that with proper refrigeration the oyster can be our world. Once the imperative for tribal reproduction and the risks of sex and pregnancy forbade sexual activity except under highly restricted circumstances; now we have the means, if not the will, to control both reproduction and the physiological risks that accompany intimate contact. Disciplines that work from a linear understanding of time (e.g., science, conventionally produced history) provide facts with which we may test and retest our truths in an eternally changing world. Working from these facts, disciplines that subscribe to a circular understanding of time (e.g., fiction, poetry, religion) arrive at, evaluate, and modify our enduring truths. We are at a moment of utmost historical significance, where we have the combination of prosperity and historical perspective required to understand and practice this truth: Science and religion, history and art—these cannot and must not exist as dichotomies. Each way of being and seeing requires the other if it is to evolve and prosper.

The conception of time as linear enabled society to progress from the generations that preceded ours. It enabled our forbears to imagine a better world and then act to achieve it. Life is better now for so many people—as a gay man I count myself among them—because we liberated ourselves from the notion that because we had always lived a certain way we must continue to live that way forever.

At the same time, though I am the beneficiary and practitioner of reading and writing and am fully committed to the literate world, I imagine an ideal world where we could understand that the printed

word does not fix the story on the page but makes it available to a new generation of interpreters. In my dreams we could retain access to the slow workings of circular time—the time of all those purveyors of oral tradition, our poets and storytellers and philosophers—while living by the linear time of the written word.

Paradoxically, technology may be our means to that end. Our cultural obsession with plagiarism originated with the invention of moveable type, which allowed for mass production of books and gave birth to the notion of intellectual property—the principle that an individual or corporation owns exclusive rights to the public life of an idea or story. For better or worse the Internet is dismantling that principle daily, as millions worldwide access and copy and modify others' work. As a writer with a financial stake in the process, I view this development with dismay, but as a storyteller I am intrigued by the prospect of millions of individuals reclaiming the right to shape and retell the old stories in ways that reflect the realities of their lives.

I begin my undergraduate creative nonfiction classes by telling students that facts are malleable, truth is enduring. "No, no," they cry, "it's the other way around." The semester becomes a process of demonstrating that facts, like statistics, can be manipulated to any variety of interpretations (recall the history of Lincoln's birthplace cabin), but truth proves itself across time. *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Energy is equivalent to mass times the speed of light squared.* These are overarching truths that prove themselves across generations of testing against the confusing and contradictory facts of experience.

Truth lies not in fact but in beauty; not in the cabin where Lincoln was purportedly born but in the longings for saints and profits that brought its logs to be found, assembled, and enshrined; neither in head nor heart alone but in the understanding that these are integrally intertwined and cannot be separated without doing violence to both.

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Earlier I referred to the perceived opposition of science and art, history and myth, fact and fiction. The great promise of postmodern relativism lies in our understanding these as complements rather than opposites. As poet Alison Hawthorne Deming wrote, our new world is "not either/or but both/and." These disciplines must become not distinct and opposing but permeable and interpenetrating.

Already we have models in our most enduring thinkers and writers—too many to name, but as worthy representatives I offer Albert Einstein in science and N. Scott Momaday in literature: Einstein's writings include passages that read like mystical treatises, and Momaday incorporates anthropological research into his renderings of tribal history. The work of these thinkers and writers and those like them will endure because they actively cultivated a synthesis of science and art, history and myth. They propose to us a world which may respect and celebrate both individual rights and community obligations.

Memoir accesses both means of living through time, circular and linear, communal and individual. In doing so, the memoirist contributes toward healing the deepest wound of Western culture—that is, the artificial (if once useful) division between mind and body, head and heart, fact and truth. If we could understand and live through time as a spiral—the intersection of line and circle, containing and expressing both the facts of history and the truths of art—perhaps we could more competently create stories that enhance our capacity to live in harmony with each other and our fellow creatures.

A grand claim for what most perceive as a minor art, but we must begin somewhere, and where better than memoir? All human knowledge begins in our prodigious capacity to remember. This much is plain: the great challenge of the present century is not exterior but interior. At least for the moment, Western culture has conquered the planet. Now our challenge is to learn to live in harmony with our Earth, with each other, and with ourselves.

In a world in which the facts are so easily manipulated, what is truth, and how may we know and preserve it? Worldwide we are witnessing violence with its roots in the tension between science and religion, history and memory, the law and the heart, reason and faith. Extremists from both sides would have us believe that these forces are mutually destructive when in fact we are at a moment when we may draw upon and give expression to both, creating a synthesis and achieving what Zen Buddhists aptly call "nonduality."

Is it not the responsibility of the magicians of the earth—its artists and scientists and priests and writers—to propose and model peace? Perhaps memoir, a vessel so particularly well suited to embrace both the head and the heart, fact and truth, can provide us one means through which seemingly hostile disciplines can make constructive peace, in which the scientist will lie down with the priest, the historian with the fictionist, the lion with the lamb.