2 | The Truth Contract Twixt Writer and Reader

The whole journey is toward the truth, or toward authenticity, agency, and freedom. How could it possibly help to plant a lie in the middle of it?

Edward St Aubyn

When I think of all the stiff pronouncements I've made demanding truth in memoir over the years, I'm inclined to hang my head. I sound like such a pious twit, the village vicar wagging her finger at writers pushing the limits of the form. Forgive me, I am not the art police. The wonderful thing about what comedian Stephen Colbert calls the "truthiness" of our era is that you can set any standard that blows up your coattail. Novelist Pam Houston claimed her novels are 82 percent true and ascribes that same percentage to her nonfiction—fair enough. I guess in today's literary landscape, you can choose your own percentage.

You can always hide behind the fiction label, as Truman Capote did (perhaps first) in 1966 with his "nonfiction novel," *In Cold Blood*; or as Philip Roth did in 1993 with his roman

à clef *Operation Shylock*, which he published as fiction, while claiming it was God's own truth. (Ditto: my favorite parts of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* are more memoir than fiction.) Or you can make a general disclaimer, as John Berendt did in 1994, confessing that in *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* he took "certain storytelling liberties, particularly having to do with the timing of events." I took this to mean that he telescoped time to move the story along. In fact, the book's murder—its central drama—occurred years before Berendt got there. So many scenes—including his own run-in with the victim and a popular cross-dressing character's role early in the investigation—are pure fiction. Which he at least admitted to, albeit somewhat slyly in back pages.

That's me speaking temperately as I can about other writers' artistic freedom, which I would go to the mat for. No writer can impose his own standards onto any other, nor claim to speak for the whole genre. I would defend anybody's right to move the line for veracity in memoir, though I'd argue the reader has a right to know. But my own humble practices wholly oppose making stuff up.

As a reader, I am way less temperate in my opinions. It niggles the hell out of me never to know exactly what parts the fabricators have fudged. In her recent interview in *The Believer*, Vivian Gornick claims to falter at truth telling, even in putatively nonfiction forms.

> I embellish stories all the time. I do it even when I'm supposedly telling the unvarnished truth. Things happen, and I realize that what actually happens is only partly a story, and I have to make the story. So

> I lie. I mean, essentially—others would think I'm lying. But you understand. It's irresistible to tell the story. And I don't owe anybody the actuality. What is the actuality? I mean, whose business is it?

Well, if I forked over a cover price for nonfiction, I consider it my business. While it's great she owned up to her deceits, it's hard to lend credence to any after-the-fact confession, especially one as vague or self-justifying as this one. It's as if after lunch the deli guy quipped, "I put just a teaspoon of catshit in your sandwich, but you didn't notice it at all." To my mind, a small bit of catshit equals a catshit sandwich, unless I know where the catshit is and can eat around it.

So here I stand with my little stick, attempting to draw a line in the dirt for the sake of memoir's authenticity. Truth may have become a foggy, fuzzy nether area. But untruth is simple: making up events with the intention to deceive. Even in this day of the photoshopped Facebook pic, that's not so morally hard to gauge. You know the difference between a vague memory and a clear one, and the vague ones either get left out or labeled dubious. It's the clear ones that matter most anyway, because they're the ones you've nursed and worried over and talked through and wondered about your whole life. And you're seeking the truth of memory—your memory and character—not of unbiased history.

Forget how inventing stuff breaks a contract with the reader, it fences the memoirist off from the deeper truths that only surface in draft five or ten or twenty. Yes, you can misinterpret—happens all the time. "The truth ambushes you," Geoffrey Wolff once said. (More on those hair-raising reversals in a later chapter.)

But unless you're looking at actual lived experience, the more profound meanings will remain forever shrouded. You'll never unearth the more complex truths, the ones that counter that convenient first take on the past. A memoirist forging false tales to support his more comfortable notions—or to pump himself up for the audience—never learns who he is. He's missing the personal liberation that comes from the examined life.

Liberation how? you might say. Why isn't it just as good to make up a version of events you can live with and stick to that? If your goal is to polish up a fake person you can sell to a public you perceive as dumb, the unexamined life will do perfectly well, thank you.

But whether you're a memoirist or not, there's a psychic cost for lopping yourself off from the past: it may continue to tug on you without your being aware of it. And lying about it can—for all but the most hardened sociopath—carve a lonely gap between your disguise and who you really are. The practiced liar also projects her own manipulative, double-dealing facade onto everyone she meets, which makes moving through the world a wary, anxious enterprise. It's hard enough to see what's going on without forcing yourself to look through the wool you've pulled over your own eyes.

To watch someone scrutinize a painful history in depth—which I've done as teacher and editor and while working with former drunks trying to clear up ancient crimes—is to witness not inconsiderable pain. You have to lance a boil and suffer its stench as infection drains off. Yet all the scrupulous self-examinations over time I've been witness to—whether on the page or off—always ended with acceptance and relief. For the more haunted among us, only looking back at the past can permit it finally to become past.

. . .

How does telling the truth help a reader's experience, though? Let's say you had an awful childhood—tortured and mocked and starved every day—hit hard with belts and hoses, etc. You could write a repetitive, duller-than-a-rubber-knife misery memoir. But would that be "true"? And true to how you keep it boxed up now, or to lived experience back then? Back then, those same abusers probably fed you something, or you'd have died—and maybe you felt grateful for their crumbs, or furious, or even unworthy. No doubt you were either given false hope, or you cooked up futile schemes to win them over, to improve your lot. Or you fought back and rebelled. Or you disassociated much of the time. Or some awful part of you admired their strength, and you fantasized about being as strong yourself. It's the disparities in your childhood, your life between ass-whippings, that throws past pain into stark relief for a reader. Without those places of hope, the beatings become too repetitive—maybe they'd make a dramatic read for a while, but single-note tales seldom bear rereading.

The most fastidious writers do overhaul their versions based on later information. When Jon Krakauer was stumbling around oxygen-deprived and brain-damaged on Mount Everest, he misidentified people he ran into in a blinding blizzard—mistakes he corrected in later versions of *Into Thin Air* (1997). I also know Krakauer drives his publishers crazy revamping stories decades old, as he recently did when he spent ten years learning organic chemistry well enough to revise his idea of what seed poisoned the protagonist of *Into the Wild* (1996). Krakauer spends more time rechecking and revising than

almost any nonfiction writer I know, which says much about his devotion to getting things right.

My friend Frank McCourt's mother denied stuff like sleeping with her own cousin, but who wouldn't? Certainly that outrage didn't make or break *Angela's Ashes.* Way worse in terms of maternal malfeasance was letting an underfed girl die in bed, which Mother McCourt never denied. What would motivate Frank, who loved his mother, to make up the incest if it weren't true? Oh—and Kathryn Harrison's father, a fundamentalist Christian minister at the time, denied having sex with her: no surprise. You have to suspect these obviously self-interested detractors. Other than them, I haven't heard a single credible story from a memoirist pal about family faultfinding.

Lest you think I'm some crazed lone gunman for the truth, I offer this fact: the autobiographers whose practices I've admired up close over the decades have—almost to a one—shown their manuscripts around prepublication. And none faced major challenges to their versions based on family complaint. My sample includes Geoffrey and Tobias Wolff and Lucy Grealy, and former students Koren Zailckas and Cheryl Strayed. Also, yours truly. I was asked by a minor character to cut a tangential anecdote in my last book. Other than that minor blip, no one I know has overhauled pages based on family outrage. But interviewers and audiences are gobsmacked when I mention this. No one believes memoirists aren't constantly assaulted by detractors and naysayers and lawsuits.

How is that possible? Well, as Frank Conroy said of his mother's response to *Stop-Time,* "She felt it was my version of events." The best memoirists stress the subjective nature of reportage. Doubt and wonder come to stand as part of the story.

We also have to distinguish between memories wrangled

over at the supper table and memoirs combed over and revised dozens of times before being published. Everybody's personal history is jam packed with long, wheedling family arguments in which every reporter represents a personal view of history as irrefutable reality. Such arguments are private and informal. And we tend to argue as if we're right for stone certain. We've all wallowed in such never-resolved mudholes. Common memory rifts involve either (1) unknowable interpretation—someone's inner intent or motives; or (2) chronology—dates or how long something went on or how often; and/or (3) disagreements about place—where something went down. We all screw such facts up, it's true, either unintentionally or in heated crusade to prove our private takes on family history. Many a loved one has engaged in hyperbole or stretched the bounds of evidence or dug in her heels to prove a point that's wrong.

But ask yourself, how many of your clan would just flat out make up stuff that everybody knows is bullshit, then publish it? Publishing lies requires a whole different level of sociopathy. For veracity's sake, it doesn't cost a memoirist the reader's confidence either to skip over the half-remembered scene or to replicate her own psychic uncertainty—"This part is blurry." Any decent comp teacher schools you to work in the realms of *maybe* and *perhaps*. The great memoirist enacts recall's fuzzy form. That's why we trust her.

As we've lost faith in old authorities, our confidence in objective truth has likewise eroded. Science and scripture and church doctrine were once judged unassailable founts of truth. History was told from the viewpoint of the victors—cowboys good, Native Americans bad. We've learned to question the Pentagon report and the firm presidential denial. Histories and biographies often open with "positioning essays" explaining the

writer's innate prejudices. And while formerly sacred sources of truth like history and statistics have lost ground, the subjective tale has garnered new territory. That's partly why memoir is in its ascendancy—not because it's not corrupt, but because the best ones openly confess the nature of their corruption.

The master memoirist creates such a personal interior space, with memories pieced together, that the reader never loses sight of the enterprise's tentative nature. Maxine Hong Kingston and Michael Herr don't manufacture authoritative, third-person, I-am-a-camera views. Their books don't masquerade as fact. They let you in on how their own prejudices mold memory's sifter. By transcribing the mind so its edges show, a writer constantly reminds the reader that he's not watching crisp external events played from a digital archive. It's the speaker's truth alone. In this way, the form constantly disavows the rigors of objective truth.

So how have memoirists' families reacted? Toby Wolff claimed he was corrected on small points, mostly of chronology, but basically stuck by his memories, which remained uncorrected by family. So a dog his mother found adorable he persists in calling ugly.

Geoffrey Wolff felt honor-bound by an idea of history: "Readers are very sophisticated," he wrote. "They understand that a promise has been made." But he was also suspicious of those unshakable icons of evidence for the average historian—documents like letters and tax returns and diaries.

> Documents are tricky things too. And I was dealing with my father—a systematic liar. You can't report

> annual income on the basis of his 1040 form. And I'm looking at a copy of his resume right now. It lists the head of the CIA as a reference, cites degrees from Yale and the Sorbonne.

To give a more innocent example, how many of us have our actual weights on our drivers' licenses? And yet a historian might draw on such records—or letters or diaries—as authoritative facts.

Bending the truth wasn't always part of the autobiographer's tool kit. In the middle of the last century, when Mary McCarthy published *Catholic Girlhood*, memoirists weren't even supposed to cobble up dialogue from memory. Her nonfiction standards were those for histories and biographies and journalism—forms then still held to be fairly irrefutable. Whether we were more gullible or more secretive or the standards more rigorous then, I can't say—probably all three.

So while McCarthy claims her book "lays a claim to being historical—that is, much of it can be checked," she apologizes in six long italicized streaks for her then-edgy liberties, including innocent mistakes: "*But perhaps we didn't 'know' it was the flu.*" Even to put *know* in quotes back then acted as a hedge against the then almost-inviolable standards of precision that a memoirist may feel free of today. Here are some of McCarthy's major apologies:

1. On reconstructing dialogue: "*Many a time in the course of doing these memoirs, I have wished I were writing fiction. The temptation to invent had been very strong, particularly when I remember the substance of an event but not the particulars. Sometimes I have yielded,*

as in the case of conversations. . . . They are mostly fictional. . . . Only a few single sentences stand out. Quotation marks indicate that a conversation to this general effect took place, but I do not vouch for the exact words" (emphasis mine).

2. On proper names: *"I have not given the right names to my teachers or fellow students. . . . But all these people are real, they are not composite portraits. In the case of my near relations, I have given real names [as with] neighbors, servants and friends."*
3. On the nature of her memory: *"There are several dubious points in this memoir. . . . Just when we got the flu seems to be arguable. According to newspaper accounts, we contracted it on the trip. This conflicts with the story that Uncle Harry and Aunt Zula brought it with them. My present memory supports the idea that someone was sick before we left, but perhaps we didn't 'know' it was [that lethal] flu."*
4. Or on the nature of the false, implanted memory: *"We did not see [our father draw a revolver]. . . . I heard the story from my other grandmother. When she told me, I had the feeling that I almost remembered it. That is, my mind promptly supplied me with a picture of it."*

The memoirist's truth has been devolving (or evolving) since *Girlhood*. In McCarthy's later book, *Intellectual Memoirs* (1992), our culture's truth transformation was nearing completion. She talks almost scornfully about "the fetishism of fact," but in *Girlhood*, she's still heeling to that notion.

Whatever your deal with the reader, I argue for stating it up front, like Harry Crews in his 1978 *A Childhood: The Biography*

of a Place. His concept of "truth" is way more wiggly than the Wolffs' and mine, but he admits it. With his first sentence, he embraces gossip and hearsay and all manner of apocrypha.

> My first memory is of a time ten years before I was born and takes place where I have never been and involves my daddy whom I never knew.

Lest you disparage this type of gossip, the gospels are probably all stories passed on by folks who heard them from other folks. Without other people's stories, Crews cannot hook himself to his long-lost ghost father, and we embrace his method partly from empathy for his yearning for his old man—and partly because it's all so fun to read.

> Did what I have set down here as memory actually happen? Did the two men say what I have recorded, think what I have said they thought? I do not know, nor do I any longer care. My knowledge of my daddy came entirely from the stories I have been told about him.

Crews claims that whatever errors in detail he may make, the stories he's been told remain true "in spirit." Whatever that means, it does scoop out a fairly big escape hatch for somebody writing nonfiction.

Plus Crews trains us in his methods of amplification early—not just through his use of rumor, but by drawing on his child's imaginative point of view, as when he has a long talk with his dog, Sam, early on.

> "If you was any kind of man atall, you wouldn't snap at them gnats and eat them flies the way you do," I said.

> "It ain't a thing in the world the matter with eatin gnats and flies," he said.
>
> "It's how come people treat you like a dog," I said. "You could probably come on in the house like other folks if it weren't for eatin flies and gnats like you do."

So Crews lets us know that his path vis-à-vis external veracity or reporting history is undulating as a snake's.

Later in the book, he writes about an injury that just could not have gone down as described. He's playing pop-the-whip during hog scalding time—when whole carcasses are dropped in boiling water so their bristles can be scraped off. Crews claims he landed in the boiling water "beside a scalded, floating hog."

> I reached over and touched my right hand with my left, and the whole thing came off like a wet glove. I mean, the skin on the top of the wrist and the back of my hand, along with the fingernails, all just turned loose and slid on down to the ground. I could see my fingernails lying in the little puddle of flesh made on the ground in front of me.

So devoted am I to this undervalued memoir that I phoned a doctor pal in a burn unit to be sure whether a kid could suffer such an injury without crazy scarring or loss of limb. Of course he couldn't.

But hyperbole to the point of unreality fits with Crews's Georgia cracker milieu, which can trace its roots both to southern gothic at its most violent and grotesque and to tall tales from around the campfire, such as Mark Twain's celebrated jumping-frog story where in order to win a bet the gambler Jim Smiley did "foller a straddle bug to Mexico." Hyperbole often reflects a culture's excesses in savagery and appetite, and at one point,

Crews quips, "Anything worth doing is worth over-doing." (The unspoken battle cry of many an alcoholic such as myself.)

Since anybody's handling of the truth derives from her nature, and I know nobody's nature so well as my own, I feel obliged to detail my own practice, though I do so with no more authority than any other memoirist.

Though, like Crews, I quote wild tales and rumors from my cracker past, I just have zero talent for making stuff up. While I adore the short story form, any time I tried penning one myself, everybody was either dead by page two, or morphed back into the person they'd actually evolved from in memory. Stuck in an airport with an uncharged reading device, I'll pop for crap nonfiction before a crap novel.

Early on, I was lied to—often and with conviction—kicked off by two phrases: "I'm not drunk" (most always a lie) and "Oh, don't worry; everything's fine," which was true just often enough to mess with my head. In high school, both the fake notes my sister forged to skip school and her excuses for breaking dates with boys held the seeds of unwritten novels, and one of the sayings that still graces her holiday table would make a worthy family crest: "A good lie well told and stuck to is often better than the truth."

All this quite literally made me crazy. I grew up not trusting my perceptions, and buying Freud's theory that the truth would free me, I set out on a lifelong quest to figure out what the hell happened in my childhood. While my mother threatened suicide when I initially tried to probe her past, by my mid-twenties, she gave in. Unearthing the truth led to radical healing in my otherwise fractured clan, and she died sober and much loved.

For me, making stuff up—as I first did in trying to tell my story in novel form five years before I embraced memoir—put me off the scent of what I was born to tell. Even trying to use pseudonyms messed with my head something awful. Some inner corrector kept saying, *But that's not John, it's Bob.* So in rough drafts, I had to work with real names, which got changed in a global search-and-replace only at the end.

One reason I send manuscripts out to friends and family in advance is: I often barely believe myself, for I grew up suspicious of my own perceptions. Plus my kinfolk had changed their stories so many times, I was hoping their signing off on pages would finally end my own lifetime's speculation.

Long ago, when I was younger and broker and looked easier to boss around, a publishing executive tried to nudge me into inventing a scene in my first book when I say good-bye to my mother. "The reader has to know how that went down at that moment. . . ." But I remembered zip about the scene and wound up guessing about it instead:

> Mother must have squawked about our leaving. She would have yelled or wept or folded up drunk and sulking. I recall no such scene. . . . The French doors on that scene never swung open. . . . Mother herself was clipped from my memory. She did promise vaguely to come for us soon, but I can't exactly hear her saying that.

And here's the kicker: I'd now guess that she felt liberated once we left—such is the nature of time reversing an opinion. When I was younger and Mother alive, we both found it easier to pretend she'd fought for us. But I never actually saw Mother fighting for our company—she always much preferred

the wild freedom of solitude. Were I starting the book over, I'd guess she didn't mind our absence overmuch.

Though *The Liars' Club* rang true to me when I wrote it, from this juncture it seems to have sprung from a state of loving delusion about my family. In those days, I still enjoyed a child's desperate tendency to put sparkles on my whole tribe. Were I writing that story today, I'd be less generous to them while perhaps shining more empathy on my younger self. Whether age has granted me more wholesome care for the girl I was, or whether life's ravages have ground down my heart so I'm more self-centered, I can't say. Am I healthily less codependent or a bigger bitch? You could argue either way. Although I'd fix a wrong date or point of fact for the book to correct it as written record, I couldn't alter any major take on the past without redoing the whole tome. The self who penned that book formed the filter for those events. I didn't fabricate stuff, but today, other scenes I'd add might tell a less forgiving story.

Which brings me to the wellsprings where a writer's biggest "lies" bubble up—interpretation. I still try to err on the side of generosity toward any character. Like I mention Mother throwing my birthday lasagna at my daddy in one of the zillion fights that felt like my fault, but I also mention her cleaning it up after he was gone and lighting candles on a German chocolate cake—a scene that, if left out, would've skewed her into seeming worse than she in fact was. Anne Fadiman writes about a nineteenth-century sailor who comes home to a starving family at Christmas with a bushel of oranges. He locks himself in a room and devours them solo while his kids scratch at the door. He's an asshole, right? Until you learn he had scurvy.

Metaphorically speaking, I always make room for any evidence of scurvy in my characters, any mitigating ailments. In my last memoir, I couldn't report a malicious quip from my ex-husband without mentioning that he never spoke to me that way. Maybe that's why it stayed carved in my psyche: it was out of character. A writer whose point of view was closer inside the past might only concentrate on feeling wounded by the insult without tacking on that fact, because it could jar the reader from the instant. Mostly, I try to keep the focus on myself and my own peccadilloes.

For the record, here are the liberties I've used, which all seem fairly common now:

1. Re-creating dialogue. I've often said, "The conversation went something like this," but most readers presume as much. Also, by not using quotation marks in later books, I seek to keep the reader more "inside" my experience—the subjective nature eschews the standards of history, I think.
2. Changing names to protect the innocent. Most of my friends had a hoot choosing their pseudonyms.
3. Altering the name of the town. Most minor characters like the sheriff and school principal I don't bother to track down. They might be dead, but if they are alive, I don't want the responsibility of perhaps misremembering them.
4. Blurring details of somebody's appearance for the sake of their privacy. I've only done this many times for minor characters—a mayor, say. But for the neighborhood rapist in *Liar's Club*, I didn't want folks in my hometown to mistakenly blame one of the local delinquents. I gave the culprit braces, which nobody in our neighborhood had, and changed a few other things.

With *Lit*, I hoped my ex-husband would vet the manuscript pages, but when I spoke to him in advance, he claimed to prefer being blurry.
5. Moving back and forth through time when appropriate and giving info you didn't have at the time, which breaks point of view. (If your next-door neighbor turned out to be, say, Ted Bundy, you might mention that in parentheses because you know the reader would care to know.) It's still apparent when I do this that I speak from another time.
6. Telescoping time: "Seventeen years later, Daddy had a stroke. . . ." Or using one episode to stand for all of seventh grade. The action points for a given period represent it wholesale. I skip dull parts.
7. Shaping a narrative. Of course, the minute you write about one thing instead of another, you've begun to leave stuff out, which you could argue is falsifying. What was major to you might have been a blip on somebody else's radar.
8. Stopping to describe something in the midst of a heated scene, when I probably didn't observe it consciously at that instant. This is perhaps the biggest lie I ever tell. I do so because I am constantly trying to re-create the carnal world as I lived it, so I keep concocting an experience for a reader. I have taken that liberty, but because I'm Catholic, I feel guilty about it.
9. Temporarily changing something to protect a friend at her request. My friend Meredith had been a habitué of asylums, but she still didn't want me to publish a school scene of her razoring at her wrist, because it would torment her aging mother. She agreed to let a mutual friend stand in for her, so the suicidal friend is Stacy in the first edition and Meredith in later ones.

10. Recounting old fantasies. My inner life is much bigger than my outer life. And some fantasies from the past seem gaudily true. 'Course, I say they're only fancies, not fact. In *Liars' Club* I also made up two of the tall tales, which are meant to be bullshit anyway.
11. Putting in scenes I didn't witness but only heard about—though I admit as much. From *Lit*: "So vivid is the story of mother's final drunk with Harold—so painterly in its grotesque detail—that I take the liberty of recounting it as if I were there, for a good story told often enough puts you in rooms never occupied."
12. Vis-à-vis interpretation: be generous and fair when you can; when you can't, admit your disaffinity. My general idea is to keep the focus on myself and my own struggles, not speculate on other people's motives, and not concoct events and characters out of whole cloth.

3 | Why Not to Write a Memoir: Plus a Pop Quiz to Protect the Bleeding & Box Out the Rigid

If you are silent about your pain, they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it.

Zora Neale Hurston

Asking me how to write a memoir is a little like saying, "I really want to have sex, where do I start?" What one person fantasizes about would ruin the romance for another. It depends on how you're constructed inside and out, hormone levels, psychology. Or it's like saying, "I want a makeover, how should I look?" A Goth girl's not inclined to lime-green Fair Isle sweaters, and a preppy scorns black lipstick.

I've said it's hard. Here's how hard: everybody I know who wades deep enough into memory's waters drowns a little. Between chapters of *Stop-Time*, Frank Conroy stayed drunk for weeks. Two hours after Carolyn See finished her first draft of *Dreaming*, she collapsed with viral meningitis, which gave her double vision: "It was my brain's way of saying, 'You've been looking where you shouldn't be looking.' " Martin Amis re-