

THE MEMOIRIST'S QUANDARY

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LE DILEMME DES RÉDACTEURS DE MÉMOIRES

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“Gonna write a new story,” the singer-songwriter says, about his life (Gorka, 2003). Not too many of us “write a new story” of our lives, but some do: an accountant turns bank robber, as happened in Winnipeg last year, or a spouse goes out for a package of cigarettes and never comes back, a politician steals a \$50,000 ring, perhaps subconsciously knowing that he has just found a way out of a too burdensome political career. Not too many of us take such wild leaps from one kind of story into another, but sometimes, some of us do.

“Gonna write a new story,” the singer says, and then what? He might have meant that all he was going to do was to change the way he thinks about his life, that he is going to reinterpret it, maybe give it a sunnier slant, stop accepting blame for everything that goes wrong, or stop taking himself so seriously. Or perhaps he is going to forget a lot of his old stories about himself told him by his mom, or his high school principal, that made him feel unchangeable, in order to start seeing the world as a place to have fun, to follow one's bliss, to get less involved, because, what the heck, you're only going to die anyway.

My mother clung to her one story all her life. It was that she was “of good family,” by which she meant a family once, long ago, connected to aristocracy,

a family of means, a genteel family, a family of people with decent hearts and minds, for whom pride, dignity and courage were the watchwords, and in whom, therefore, a sense of superiority to the common run of humanity had been bred. She was wedded to that story, saw no possibility of another. She had been taught that no circumstances could diminish her, because being “of good family” held within it the requirement that she always be better than any such circumstances.

In fact, her branch of the family had fallen on hard times just before the Depression, when she was a teenager, from which it never recovered. Before too long she found herself – given her story – in an inappropriate marriage, living in a log house in the northern bush country of Canada, with too many little children, and no money. In this situation, she nevertheless continued to apply the family story and its watchwords. She was, indeed, not personally diminished by her circumstances. But she saw herself, all her life, as living the wrong life, a tragic life, but which, given her family’s ethic, she could not admit to, nor talk about. Was this madness? Or was it noble? For after all, what she had had was a life that we all have, just one damn thing after another, you might say, but nonetheless, one with a lot of satisfaction and rewards.

She could have dropped her family story in favour of another one that was probably truer than the first: that all her family, for a couple of hundred years, had been and were pioneers, moving from one frontier, creating villages and farms out of the wilderness, and then moving on to the next frontier to do it again, and to do it always with great courage and in the face of tremendous hardships. That is, creating a country, as the saying goes, with their own sweat, blood and tears. A life, I choose to believe, far more noble than the first, that of being a misplaced descendant of the aristocracy. If she had recognized her story as this different one, would she have had a more satisfactory, less tinted-with-the-tragic life? Despite every fact being the same, would she yet have been happier?

When Dr. Randall first called me to ask me to speak at a conference on narratology, I said, “On what?” I had never even heard the word. I ended my formal education in literature in 1963, that is, before the term “postmodernism,” with regard to literature, was in wide use, nor had the term “narratology” even been used in any of my classes in English literature. Imagine my chagrin when I discovered both had been used by theorists since nearly the beginning of the twentieth century, and that the groundbreaking papers and books on narratology were being published even as, in 1958, I sat in English 102 with Professor Romalduz reading Chaucer and Shakespeare. And further, the system of thought now permeating many fields and disciplines, the sheer volume of the material, the particularity of the language, meant that I would never be able to master it in the few months I had before this evening, even if, God help me, I’d wanted to.

I had already suffered through something called “the breaking of the canon” – that is, the demotion of the writers we Western hemisphere university students in the fifties all studied (mostly dead White males) and the raising up of those who had never been on that old list: worthy books written by women and others, all who had been marginalized by mainstream literary society, as being incapable of writing as well as those dead White males. I had already had to listen to people more expert than me insisting there is no such thing as a “great” writer – this in the face of Shakespeare, Tony Morrison, V. S. Naipaul and a lot of others. I had even, eventually, come to the place where I could admit there was much to be admired in the post-modernist attitude toward literature. (For example, not the “breaking” of the canon which, I think, sometimes involved throwing out the baby with the bath water, but absolutely, with its widening.)

Postmodernist writing in Canada, mostly deconstruction, included the breaking apart of words and phrases with brackets, slashes and hyphens, and the addition of witty asides that undermined the writer’s own story, and a good deal of essentially annoying self-reference. What was the point, I kept asking myself, of even bothering to tell a story if at every turn you were going to question it, undermine it, and deny it? What was gained by this uncertainty?

The situation in Canada is that a huge number of well known writers survive financially by teaching in universities – we all had to suffer through those few years when the products of those writers became unreadable. The rest of us would have wondered if our writing careers were over, except that the reading public couldn’t figure this work out either, and a little study by the rest of us showed that it was breathtakingly easy to mimic, whether we understood it or not. In literature, at least, many of us fought back at once against the excesses of the postmodernist movement, especially where it spoke so arrogantly of the impossibility of fixing a narrative in a permanent and singular fashion, and even of “the death of the author.”

Those few years of extreme intellectual ferment in university English departments when the postmodernist theoreticians were more or less terrorizing everybody else, showed **not** that they were right, but instead that what the world wants – what people want – is *story*. The 2003 CBC Massey Lectures were delivered by the American First Nations writer, Thomas King. He calls his series *The truth about stories: A native narrative*, First Nations people being way ahead of the rest of us, because “story” is the basis of their cultures, always has been, and is recognized as such. But back in 1999 Robert Fulford gave the same series of lectures and his was called *The triumph of narrative: Storytelling in the age of mass culture*. And triumph it is: we are seeing the rise of a new paradigm, a new model applied in both literature and the social sciences called “narratology.” And what it insists *is story* makes the world go

round. A constant through all cultures and all the ages we know anything about, is the basic human drive to tell stories. It is through the stories we tell about it that we understand the world, in the science-based intellectual world, a belated insight if ever there was one.

At the same time, though, in the turmoil of the late sixties and early seventies, with the rise of feminist literary scholarship, we heard and read feminist scholars, many of them intellectually acute, thrillingly rage-filled, and yet, for many of us, both the extremity of their rage and the declarations they made, way over the top. If that was the authentic voice of womanhood, a lot of us thought, privately, secretly, there was no way we were going to be able to live up to it either.

But those feminist literary scholars did perform that absolutely vital task of showing women that we did not have a history – we did not have a *story* we had written ourselves – and thus, that we did not have authentic female role models. They showed us and the world that for the most part we had been mute about our real lives, and when we did speak, in memoirs and autobiographies, we spoke from within the confines of the patriarchy, and not with our own, authentic voices. They showed us that we had to learn to tell the truth about our lives, each of us to save our own souls, if no one else's.

But what were our own authentic voices? What was our true story? The world-wide and ages-old oppression of women was now out in the open, but in the cacophony of voices, the individual woman and her own voice, her own story, often got lost. To then have literary scholars turn around and tell us that the author was dead, and also that no one could never speak authentically, was to render us mute yet again, and heartbreakingly, just when we were beginning to believe in the possibility of telling our own stories, of saying once and for all, *I exist, I am*. Although I have written now fifteen books, the first published in 1984 when I was forty-four, and the fifteenth to be published in 2005, I am best known for the book I published in 1994, called *The perfection of the morning: An apprenticeship in nature*. Although it was my eighth, most readers, having never heard of the first seven, thought it was my first book. Now, I hung around universities long enough to know that it is there considered bad form to talk about one's own book, but as I am talking about finding and telling one's own true story and as it is the one that taught me most of what I know about memoir-writing, I am going to fly in the face of that tradition. I have called this talk "The Memoirist's Quandary" because written memoirs also belong in a discussion of story-telling, and a discussion about story-telling inevitably encounters the problems all memoirists face.

My original intent in writing that book was to talk about what Nature might be and how one might learn from it. I wanted to do all of this because it seemed to me that bookstores and libraries were full of newly-written books

that were, if not outright lies, certainly misjudgements and misinterpretations, often self-serving, about this subject. I certainly didn't think I was the only one who knew what I knew, but I couldn't find anyone current who was saying it.

Phyllis Bruce at HarperCollins Canada read the manuscript and persuaded me that I needed to drop the lecturing-lecturing tone and to explain to readers how I had arrived at my various "rules," or bits of wisdom, as to how to develop this relationship, and what I believed to be the important things about nature. It was only then that I began to flesh out the framework with stories out of my own life, meant only to explain how I had come to know what I was asserting. I **thought** that I was telling stories of my own life **only** to make clear my points about the amazing power and overwhelming significance of nature. When the book was published, I couldn't classify it, other than to say it was nonfiction, and so I waited for the trade paper *Quill & Quire* to publish its list, according to genre, of all the books published in Canada during the previous six-month period. When it arrived, there was my book, classified under "Memoir."

And that is how, finally, I discovered myself to be a memoirist.

It was not a conventional memoir, with its emphasis on trying to identify and describe the possibilities, the meaning of nature, and its treatment of dreams and visions as factual and significant. Because I was struggling so hard to tell "the truth," (first of all, to find it), and because, I suppose, of the way my mind works when left to its own devices, and not trying rigidly to adhere to some learned-in-school form, readers did not "recognize" what I had written. But all of these demurrers and fears – that I would be seen as a New Age idiot, that I would be seen as a madwoman, I accepted as the price of being able to do the work, which was to me, as often, a great joy. They were not really my own quandary.

The memoirist's quandary begins with choosing the story the memoir is going to tell. Just as no one can take a "slice of life" and make it into a successful stage play – because there is so much "trash" in daily life, 'ums' and 'ahs' and total banality and trivia, red herrings, dead ends and irrelevancies, mixed in with the significant and interesting – one can only take part of one's experience to write about, screening out all of the above, or what the writer considers to be irrelevant.

In order to explain my choice of material included in the memoir, I wrote this in the preface to *The perfection of the morning*:

But nonetheless, there's a way in which all nonfiction is fiction: the backward search through happenstance, trivia, the flotsam and jetsam of life to search out a pattern, themes, a meaning is by its nature an imposition of order onto what was chaotic. It's an attempt to give a linearity to events, many psychic, which had no linearity, which, if anything, were a spiral,

or had more the hectic quality of a dream. What is true are thoughts, dreams, visions. What may or may not be true are the order and timing of events, the perception and linking of them. If it's true on the one hand that everything is what it seems to be, and I constantly remind myself of this, on the other, there is a way in which it's also true that nothing is. I begin to think like the Bushmen as Laurens van der Post reports them as believing, that in the beginning a dream was dreaming us, and like Clifton Fadiman who said that the older he gets the more his life seems to him to have been, rather than a series of actual events, one long, interesting dream. In writing what the world will call autobiography, I am torn between facts and history and the truth of the imagination, and it is to the latter, finally, in terms of my personal history, that I lean.

The experts are right in that there is certainly a way in which you can't tell The Truth; you can only tell the truth you choose. That is what is so interesting about the process of writing a memoir: that as one writes, other possibilities as to what is the truth begin slowly to percolate through the psyche, and many the would-be memoirist, I will bet, has given up that book in the face of such uncertainty, and, in the face of the multiplicities of any human life.

I spent weeks sifting through my twenty years of journals to select the details and the stories and mini-stories that would construct what I wanted to say. As I wrote, I believed, not that I was constructing a fiction that would pass for truth, but that I was finding and slowly demonstrating – crazy at it might be turning out to be – the one true story about myself and my life up to that point. As I wrote I came to understand more about myself and carefully, week by week, I constructed a version that I thought made sense of how I came to know what I knew about nature, and how at the same time and working in both directions, I had come to be the person I now believed myself to be.

But in the last weeks before *The perfection of the morning* was to be released, I grew more and more uneasy. Finally, I phoned my editor and said, "The whole book is a lie; I don't even know what the truth is." If she chose to respond to this, experienced editor that she is, as merely a writer's pre-publication jitters, I knew it to be coming from my nearly overwhelming sense of all the stories I might have told, of everything I'd left out, with my sense of the impossibility of the task I'd set myself, and with my disintegrating control on the story.

In order to protect others, in order not to be sued, or else driven out of the community, I had left out much more than I had put in to create what had become the narrative of my own becoming. Besides that, I had carefully selected from a number of possible stories the story I would tell: not the years I spent on the campus at University of Saskatchewan, nor those very significant first years, until the day of my thirteenth birthday when our

family arrived in Saskatoon, nor the fourteen years of my first marriage. All of these were important parts of my life, and all of them would have been just as true. I had made a careful selection of what I would put in and what I wouldn't. In some ways then, I wasn't telling the truth. My own thinking was that if I put in, for example, all the dreams I had had instead of just a few I judged to be significant, the storyline would be muddled, my points would be lost in all the "noise," and so I told only the parts that would bolster the storyline I'd chosen.

The memoirist's quandary includes the discovery of all the many selves, all the many possibilities of stories, from which one has to choose. Life is just too large, too multifarious, too huge and too intricate to ever put it all in a book, any book, from Proust's *Remembrance of things past*, (although he tried), to Elly Danica's *Don't: A woman's word*. And to the extent and degree one leaves parts out, the writer might be said to be constructing not nonfiction, but fiction.

Second, the choice of "voice" is essential to the success of a memoir. What's this? How odd that one would have to choose, or somehow manufacture a voice, and the "right" voice at that, when one is, after all, simply telling the story of one's own life. And yet, the writer does. The fact is that the literary "voice" and the writer are not one and the same in a memoir; not even the very best, not even the most moving, and not even in the one where the writer is clearly struggling to be as "truthful" as possible. Time and time again, people who know the writer personally say that the author who wrote the successful memoir is "not really like that." (Carolyn Heilbrun talking about the American memoirist May Sarton being a famous case.) The voice the writer chooses will determine what the writer can and can't say.

In my case, I did not have a literary voice when it came to writing about myself and I was stymied for a long time because I couldn't write my book if I couldn't hear in my head how I wanted to sound. Like a soprano about to engage with a new piece of music, I had to try out various ways of sounding until I found one that felt natural to me, and yet wasn't entirely the voice I use in everyday discourse. Then I had to make sure to stick to that voice, because if a writer breaks or changes it, the impression of an unreliable narrator is created. If the memoirist cannot be trusted to tell the truth – if that is the reader's ultimate determination – then the memoir will fail.

I had written myself a new story. In mid-life I moved to a cattle ranch in a very remote area. Because I had come to a huge area with a tiny population, growing tinier by the minute, and a very definite, set-in-concrete, and not terribly charming sub-culture that I had to come to terms with – and was failing and continued to fail – I was forced back on my own resources. Because I was, thus, questioning everything about myself, I had to find myself or die; I had to find a reality or go insane. So I began to walk the prairie

every day and to write in my journal what I saw and what I thought and felt about myself and my life, all the while making the excruciating effort to search out the truth of each moment.

As every narrative theorist knows – as anyone over the age of six or eight knows – ‘truth’ is a pretty unstable concept. I am a reasonably well-educated person, better-educated, I think, than the average person, but there is a great deal about the world that I do not know, and a great many subjects of which I am ignorant, and a great many books I have not read. How was I to tell any kind of truth about anything when I am so thoroughly ignorant about the world?

I had a test, and it had to do, finally, with my stubborn little self and its private history in the world: It was, as I said in the book, that *no one would ever again tell me what I thought, or felt, or knew about my own person, my own psyche, the (of course, ever-changing) meaning of my own existence in the world.* I would do this by rooting out every remembered detail, and all the other versions of the tiny but significant events of my life. I would read whatever I could find about ways of understanding such difficulties, and then I would do my best to stand back as an uninvolved viewer might, and weigh all the different versions, and decide whether I had been right or wrong, or to what degree I had been of each, sparing myself not at all. I would come to a conclusion, and I would then accept that as the “right” one, the version that felt most true to me – “me” as a single consciousness struggling in the world to be a human being.

And that was based on the truth I accepted, that is, that to be human is to be flawed, that often there is no right, and no wrong, that in the end all one can do is be one’s best self. And so I knew, at every juncture, that the reader might pity me for being such a numbskull, or be angry with me for being so relentlessly self-critical – or not enough – or wonder where my rage was, and so on and so on. And I expected to be excoriated for my endless failures as a human being. I didn’t really care, though, at least, not most of the time, because, as Carolyn Heilbrun has so wisely said, women come to writing simultaneously with self-creation. I had written a book I would never have to write again. After twenty years of pacing the prairie, pretty much alone, all day every day, slowly I stripped back the superfluousness and uncovered that thread of continuity that I identify as my self.

With the part of my self that confounds cognitive psychologists and philosophers alike, the quiet one that sometimes speaks, that oversees everything as if not a part of it, I began to see how I had always been *me*, despite such vicissitudes I could not even begin to tell you, but which, I am sure, are just like your own. I came to be this person here before you today, who insists there is a reality, even if it may only be that internal voice that sometimes speaks, through “the clouds of unknowing,” with startling clarity and even

more startling wisdom, and that can alone change a life utterly, in the absence of any other, more conventional catalyst.

In the wake of such power, such groundedness, I think I can see the paradigm of *story*, as not the eternal truth found at last, but instead, as one more useful tool for helping us to understand the human condition. What a long time it took for the academic world to find and articulate what human beings have always known, and always made use of, if not been able to express. *Let me tell you my story*, we say at last, and one of the moments of greatest human intimacy begin.

I might go on to say that that is what memoirs do, and why we read them, because in reading about someone else's struggle to come to terms with one's self in the world, we hope to find echoes of our own struggle; we hope to find in that story of one person's struggle and ideas about it, answers, or at the very least, a scintilla of enlightenment about our own selves and our own struggles in the world. Memoirs, Helen Buss says, (herself a memoirist and literary critic and theorist from the University of Calgary), quoting Georg Misch, appear when many people feel their lives are not congruent with the culture in which they live, or the public culture, that "they seek to regain the harmony and inner tranquillity' of a right relationship with nature and with the spiritual world." So, at last, women are writing memoirs, gay people are writing memoirs, Aboriginal people are writing memoirs, and immigrants, and other people marginalized by the mainstream culture.

My Second World War battles, my life in crime, my lovers, my battle with disease or alcoholism or an eating disorder, or my rise from poverty and obscurity to fame and wealth, are some of the subjects of memoirs. But the best memoirs are always about *becoming*, about "the emergent self," about, as the American writer, teacher and memoirist, Patricia Hampl puts it, how one consciousness has navigated the world. This is both what they are about and wherein their fascination lies, rather than in the narrative of events itself, as interesting as those events might be: Not just the facts, but *what it was like*. Having said that, I have said the most important thing I know about memoirs, and the hardest part about them from the memoirist's point of view: how to find that particular truth, the grappling with it, and the telling of it – the attempt to tell it, sometimes repeated, each version slightly different, each a little more detailed, or adding new detail, each version inching closer to a personal truth. (And, I might add, never, ever quite reaching it.) From Gore Vidal: "In literature. . . the true confessors have been aware that not only is life mostly failure, but that in one's failure or pettiness or wrongness exists the living drama of the self."

Recently, just after I had spoken in a particular community, I received a letter from two women who had been there. I had half-jokingly lamented that I had planned to be Margaret Atwood, but had failed, and as a result

of my twenty-five years of writing, had earned little money and won no truly major prizes. If they had loved the woman of my book, the letter-writers were gravely disappointed in me in person. They scolded me for being ambitious, declared their deep disappointment in me, and went on to recommend some steps I might take to be more the person my memoir had led them to believe I was.

I was stung enough to respond. I said that they had made a mistake in thinking that I was my book, that people move on but books do not, and that their advice might have been very useful to me before I wrote the book, but that the very act of writing it had rendered their advice moot. Further, that it is very annoying to artists to find that the public thinks it is just fine if they live in poverty all their lives, although they do not recommend this for any other class of people in society. I said that they had mistaken the “I” of my memoir for the entire, fixed, “I” of my being. They did not respond to my response.

But, in fact, we writers can't entirely help ourselves. “Notes” enter our voices that we don't even hear, so intent are we on what we want to say. As Mark Twain wrote, “An autobiography is the truest of all books; for though it inevitably consists mainly of extinctions of the truth, shirkings of the truth, partial revealments of the truth, with hardly an instance of plain straight truth, the remorseless truth is there, between the lines, where the author-cat is raking dust upon it, which hides from the disinterested spectator neither it nor its smell . . . the result being that the reader knows the author in spite of his wily diligences.”

The author's “wily diligences” of course, include the hardest, most unforgiving fact of all about memoir: that it is betrayal. The family secrets are right there, the writer is panting to write them down, because, of course, all one's failures can be blamed on someone else, and often, justifiably. And all memoirists have to face the potential outcome of publication: Everything from libel suits, to exile from the family, to public censure, or worst of all, the horrifying realization of one's own nakedness in the world. And yet, to blame others is to write a failed memoir. When it comes to blame, I tell my students, it's “just the facts, Ma'am,” and let the reader make the judgement.

Last of all, I'd like to address the criticism of the memoirist as self-involved, (aside from the obvious idiocy on the face of it of such a remark). The American memoirist and writing teacher Vivian Gornick says in her book about memoir-writing, *The situation and the story*, that none of us exists in a vacuum, and that the time and the place are essential to a meaningful memoir. Patricia Hampl points out that European memoirists tend to be less “self-involved” than do Americans, in that they retreat from personal revelation in favour of an historical/cultural truth about their time and place.

Europeans, as we all know, are steeped in history in a way that most North Americans haven't so far been.

It is my experience though, that even in writing a new story, the most important part of being human doesn't change, for we are still dragging our real selves along from kitchen to office or to jail. You will have already heard that I believe in a *real self* independent of the stories told about us, to us, and that we tell to ourselves about who we are. Imso Kim Berg, in a paper called *Constructivist Therapies: Solution-focused and narrative*, says, "There is no reality; there are only stories we tell about reality." I have to disagree, although I do not claim to know what *reality* might be either. But I point out that even this scholar will get the flu, and if she says she does not have the flu and is just fine, thank you, she will, nonetheless, still be running a fever, coughing, sniffing and spewing germs around. Some poor prisoner undergoing torture in an Iraqi prison, I am sure would be indignant to be told she is only living in a story, not reality.

So I think there is both a real self that is at once unique and universal, and that there is something behind all the stories that is reality, even if I cannot tell you what it is, and do not expect to be able to in this life. That is why, while celebrating its utility, I am a bit uneasy about accepting wholesale the narratology paradigm. Our bodies and the Earth insist on the existence of some kind of reality, which may simply dissolve on our physical deaths. And our souls insist on the existence of the hard nugget of *self*.

"Gonna write a new story," the singer told us, and that is what more and more of us are trying to do when we write our memoirs. We are going to write a new story about ourselves, only this time we will set the record straight, we will tell the one true story about ourselves. "Gonna write a new story," and then what? In the end, all he offers is that he is "gonna beat back sorrow for a little while."

The interesting, the truly wonderful thing about memoirs is that in writing one's story, the best of memoirs reiterate the oldest one of all, the one that we can all relate to and recognize, about what philosophers have called "the human condition," and the sorrow – and the joy – of finding our own unique ways to come to terms with it. There is no uninteresting life; nor any life unworthy of a memoir. There is only the failure to recognize that the interest lies, not in the events themselves, but in the revealed texture of the individual soul.

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SHARON BUTALA est l'auteure de quinze ouvrages documentaires et de fiction. Elle a passé sa vie en Saskatchewan, dont les trente dernières années sur le ranch familial de son mari dans le sud-ouest de la province, qui appartient maintenant à La Société canadienne pour la conservation de la nature, et qui a pour nom Old Man On His Back Prairie Heritage and Conservation Area. Elle a remporté le prix Marian Engel en 1998 pour l'ensemble de son œuvre; en 2002, elle a été nommée Officier de l'Ordre du Canada, et elle s'est vu décerner deux doctorats honorifiques. Dans son dernier livre intitulé *Lilac Moon: Dreaming of the real West*, elle tente de répondre à la question, « Qu'est-ce qui fait de quelqu'un un Canadien de l'Ouest? »