

The Memoir and the Memoirist: Reading & Writing Personal Narrative

Thomas Larson

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Sandwiched between *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* (AD 398) and *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah (AD 2007) are thousands of memoirs. Both intimate and intriguing, these personal stories represent a form of expression that has become enormously popular in the last twenty years, dominating bestsellers lists nationwide. Rising concurrently are books and articles that seek to analyze the memoir and explain its enduring popularity and prodigious growth.

Contributing writer for the *San Diego Reader*, memoirist, and writing coach Thomas Larson thoroughly explores the genre from a place of love and critical thinking. He dives headfirst into a sea of human stories, explaining and comparing, bringing readers a better understanding of the uniqueness of the niche.

As a form, memoir has developed and distinguished itself from autobiography and biography. Rather than a sweeping look at the author's life from birth until the present, often a tale told by a so-called "great man" at the end of his life, memoir has scratched its way to the surface by revealing the lives of common people in uncommon circumstances. Larson explains that both known and unknown figures have embraced the personal narrative as a tool for self-expression and self-aggrandizement, healing and analysis, immediacy and personal mythology.

Musing on the theme articulated by Virginia Woolf as the *I-then* and *I-now*, Larson explains that the tension between those two voices, the same person separated by time and experience, becomes part of the narrative. "And yet the 'I' of the memoir can be the subject of the work. How do I understand the person I was then in light of the person I am now? [...] Though much time and many realizations may separate the two I's, it is nigh impossible to keep the voices of today's narrator and of yesterday's narrator apart."

By deconstructing the memoirists' technique Larson is able to highlight the special category that memoirs occupy. Much controversy has ensued from recent revelations of padding, lying, and fictionalizing in popular books, most notably James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*. While Frey willfully embellished his story, the discourse on the veracity of memoirs and the nature of memory itself is part of what makes the genre so interesting. "By writing this book I hope to clarify what memoir is as an antidote to its alleged fictional bias."

Written with clarity, Larson's contribution to the analysis of both what drives writers to deliver to a hungry audience the intimate details of their lives, and his opinions about the reason why we keep reading, makes for an enlightening book.

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