Name: _____

Period: _____

Creative Writing – Memoir
Mr. Belknap

Directions:

1. **Activate** your brain.

2. **Read** the excerpts from the first two chapters of Judith Barrington's *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art*.

3. As you read, **annotate for takeaways** (what we, as writers, should know going forward). Remember to **read actively** and to **annotate heavily.** Annotations are graded.

DUE: _____

Not sure what killer annotations look like? Check out the samples on the class Haiku page.

What Is Memoir?

When I was young, famous men—usually retired generals, Shakespearean actors, or the disillusioned relatives of such people—wrote "their memoirs." I never read them but imagined them to be the boring ramblings of old fogies puffing themselves up. "So-and-so is writing his memoirs" was a phrase I might have heard occasionally. "So what?" would be my unspoken response as I turned back to my favorite reading: long, exciting novels with complicated plots and a cast of characters that required concentration.

Like many people today, I confused "the memoir" with "memoirs." It was easy to do back then, when the literary memoir was not basking in the popularity it currently enjoys. The term *memoirs* was used to describe something closer to autobiography than the essaylike literary memoir. These famous-person memoirs rarely stuck to one theme or selected out one aspect of a life to explore in depth, as the memoir does. More often, "memoirs" (always preceded by a possessive pronoun: "my memoirs,""his memoirs") were a kind of scrapbook in which pieces of a life were pasted. Of course, the boundary between these genres was not—and still is not—as clearly delineated as

I have made it sound. Sometimes a book will be subtitled "a memoir" when it would seem really to belong more appropriately under the heading of memoirs or autobiography. Ned Rorem's *Knowing When to Stop: A Memoir*—which contains excerpts from journals and a variety of styles that, however fluent and interesting, do not form a shapely whole—is an example of such a book.

In my early reading days the memoir was in short supply. Looking back, I see that certain writers were paving the way for the contemporary literary memoir—Virginia Woolf, for instance, laid the groundwork for the frankly personal writing that would later become widespread. At the time, however, the library seemed to offer only fiction or essay. Essays were hard work, and I grumbled when, at twelve or thirteen, my English teachers made me read authors such as Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt. Now that I am writing my own stories, I have come to realize that the modern memoir belongs to the same family as those essays. Phillip Lopate, in his illuminating writings about the essay, includes the memoir (along with rumination, anecdote, diatribe, scholarship, fantasy, and moral philosophy) under the general heading of "the informal or familiar essay." It is not any particular form, he says, that distinguishes this kind of essay, but the author's voice.

The great essayist Montaigne understood that "in an essay, the track of a person's thoughts struggling to achieve some understanding of a problem *is* the plot, is the adventure." Rather than simply telling a story from her life, the memoirist both tells the story and muses upon it, trying to unravel what it means in the light of her current knowledge. (One place where this musing voice was not possible was in the African-American slave narratives that nevertheless form a part of the modern American memoir's history. Trying to appear "objective"—to narrate simply the facts of her life without interpretation or judgment—the author of a slave narrative was all too aware of potential accusations of being inflammatory.) The

contemporary memoir includes retrospection as an essential part of the story. Your reader has to be willing to be both entertained by the story itself and interested in how you now, looking back on it, understand it.

In order for the reader to care about what you make of your life, there has to be an engaging voice in the writing—a voice that captures a personality. In all kinds of informal essays, including the memoir, the voice is conversational. One modern relative of the informal essayist is the newspaper columnist, whose chatty style is immediately recognizable in contrast to the impersonal, expository style of the formal essay or of the journalism found elsewhere in the newspaper. Memoir, like column writing, requires that the reader feel *spoken to*. In

VOICE

Barbara Drake, writing about poetry says: "*Voice* is the medium and instrument of poetry, whether that poetry is spoken aloud or read silently. Voice is also the mark of the individual poet." This definition is also true for prose writing. We tend to think of voice as being something we hear; it can be squeaky or mellow, loud or soft. But in writing, voice is what we hear in our head: the medium.

A writer's voice is usually considered to be developed when it becomes recognizable. This may seem odd, given that the writer will sometimes assume the persona of another character or another aspect of herself. The fiction writer may speak through many very different characters, yet voice is something like the fingerprint of the writer—not the persona on the page but the writer with her own particular linguistic quirks, sentence rhythms, and recurring images. The memoirist needs to have this fingerprint too, even if she only speaks as herself.

earlier days, this conversational quality included direct address from the writer to the reader ("Gentle reader..."), but this faded from view after the heyday of the memoir in the mid-nineteenth century. Still, even without the direct address, modern memoirs aim to speak intimately to their readers, and those readers like to experience them as if they were sitting in a comfortable chair listening to a series of confidences.

Although the roots of the memoir lie in the realm of personal essay, the modern literary memoir also has many of the characteristics of fiction. Moving both backward and forward in time, re-creating believable dialogue, switching back and forth between scene and summary, and controlling the pace and tension of the story, the memoirist keeps her reader engaged by being an adept storyteller. So, memoir is really a kind of hybrid form with elements of both fiction and essay, in which the author's voice, musing conversationally on a true story, is all important.

Sometimes when I teach the memoir, a student will ask: "But how is the memoir different from autobiography?" Certainly some memoirs are booklength and therefore contain as much material as many autobiographies. But a memoir is different, and the difference has to do with the choice of subject matter.

An autobiography is the story *of a life:* the name implies that the writer will somehow attempt to capture all the essential elements of that life. A writer's autobiography, for example, is not expected to deal merely with the author's growth and career as a writer but also with the facts and emotions connected to family life, education, relationships, sexuality, travels, and inner struggles of all kinds. An autobiography is sometimes limited by dates (as in *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography to 1949* by Doris Lessing), but not obviously by theme.

Memoir, on the other hand, is a story *from a life.* It makes no pretense of replicating a whole life. One of the important skills

of memoir writing is the selection of the theme or themes that will bind the work together. Thus we discover, on setting out to read Patricia Hampl's *Virgin Time,* that her chosen theme is the Catholicism she grew up with and her later struggle to find a place for it in her adult spiritual life. With a theme such as this laid down, the author resists the temptation to digress into stories that have no immediate bearing on the subject, and indeed Hampl's book tells nothing about many other aspects of her life, although it abounds in good stories. Vivian Gornick's memoir *Fierce Attachments* sets as its theme the story of the author's relationship with her mother. By setting

FIRST PERSON

(Because so many of you never had this in school.)

When we say something is written "in first person," we mean "first person singular." We mean that the narrator uses "I."

First person (singular)	I	I woke up this morning.
Second person (singular)	You	You woke up this morning.
Third person (singular)	He/she/it	He woke up this morning.
		Susan woke up this morning.
		The cat woke up this morning.
First Person (plural)	We	We woke up this morning.
Second person (plural)	You	All of you woke up this morning.
Third person (plural)	They	They woke up this morning.
		Susan and Jill woke up.
		The whole family, including the cat, woke up this morning.

boundaries, the writer can keep the focus on one aspect of a life and offer the reader an in-depth exploration.

When you select the material for a memoir, you will be keeping other material for later. Most people only ever write one autobiography, but you may write many memoirs over time. Mary Clearman Blew compares this process with the making of a quilt:

> *Remember that you have all colors to choose from; and while choosing one color means forgoing others, remind yourself that your coffee can of pieces will fill again. There will be another quilt at the back of your mind while you are piecing, quilting, and binding this one, which perhaps you will give to one of your daughters....*

Another way of looking at the difference between memoir and autobiography is expressed by Gore Vidal in his memoir *Palimpsest*. "A memoir is how one remembers one's own life," he says, "while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts double-checked." Although some memoirs do, in fact, call for research, the verifiable facts are not generally as important as they are in autobiography, where the author includes much that is beyond the realm of memory.

A word here about travel writing, which is an example of how fluid are the boundaries we have put around various types of writing. While often discussed as a separate genre, travel writing often overlaps with memoir. Sybille Bedford's *A Visit to Don Otavio: A Traveller's Tale from Mexico* is just one example of how nonfiction writing that gives information about a place can also accommodate the personal travel story that reads like memoir. Alice Adams's stories of Mexico have some of the same qualities.

The boundaries between the genres are sometimes hard to pinpoint, but the more you read, the more you will recognize the subtle differences between them. I have been asked, for

example, if one could write a memoir in verse form. I think the answer rests in the nature of the "I." Many, if not most, contemporary poems have a first-person speaker, yet this poetic "I" seems qualitatively different from the "I" of the memoir. It is a vehicle for the poem, offering insight into the speaker's perceptions, but more like a transparent lens than a direct portrayal of the speaker herself as a character. In memoir, the "I"

THE NARRATOR

The narrator is the protagonist of your memoir. It's a term also used in fiction and poetry, and refers to whomever is telling the story.

When thinking about your memoir or discussing it with your writing group (if you have one), you should always refer to the character who is you in the story as "the narrator," not as "I." Similarly, your friends or colleagues should refer to the protagonist of your story as "the narrator" and not as "you."

Although you are both the writer of the memoir and the central character of the story, they should be treated as two distinct entities. Thus, a friend could appropriately ask: "why did you [the writer] describe the *narrator* [protagonist] as a mouse on page three?" (Not: "Why did you describe *yourself* as a mouse on page three?")

Separating *yourself as writer* from *yourself as protagonist* will help give you the necessary perspective to craft the memoir as a story. It will also decrease the degree to which you feel exposed as others critique your work. (The information you reveal about yourself is the same no matter what terminology is used, but it can be less uncomfortable to hear others speak of "the narrator's" intimate experience than of "your" intimate experience.)

becomes a developed character—an actor in the story. Vivian Gornick, in her excellent book, *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative,* offers many insights into the importance of the narrator's voice.

Not every author of true stories chooses to label her work memoir, even if it has many characteristics of that genre. *The Night Gardener* by Marjorie Sandor and *Never in a Hurry* by Naomi Shihab Nye both contain stories that could be called memoirs. Nye's book is subtitled "Essays on People and Places," locating it in the larger category of personal essay; Sandor's is simply subtitled "A Search for Home," though in both cases the writings abound with the kind of stories we think of as memoir. *Dwellings* by Linda Hogan is subtitled, even more mysteriously as far as genre is concerned, "A Spiritual History of the Living World," but the jacket copy tells us that this is a work of nonfiction, and the personal storytelling certainly hints at memoir.

Of course memoirs can be about any kind of life experience. Some are lighthearted and in places laugh-out-loud funny like *My Family and Other Animals,* Gerald Durrell's memoir of his family's sojourn on the island of Corfu. Others, like *Survival in Auschwitz* by Primo Levi, confront the reader with the author's experience while serving as an important historical record. J.R. Ackerley's *My Dog Tulip* is a small gem rooted in domestic life while Ernest Shackleton's *South: A Memoir of the Endurance Voyage* embraces huge frozen tracts of an unfamiliar world.

Students often struggle to define the boundary between memoir and autobiography, or memoir and travel writing, and sometimes wonder which personal essays are memoirs, but they rarely ask about the difference between memoir and fiction, perhaps because it seems obvious that one is true and the other made up. But the more I think about memoir, and thus about truth, the less obvious—and the more important—that distinction becomes. After all, not everything in a memoir is factually accurate: who can remember the exact dialogue that

took place at breakfast forty years ago? And if you can make up dialogue, change the name and hair color of a character to protect the privacy of the living, or even—as some memoirists do—reorder events to make the story work better, how is that different from fiction?

In memoir, the author stands behind her story saying to the world: this happened; this is true. What is important about this assertion is that it has an *effect on the reader*—he reads it believing it to be remembered experience, which in turn requires the writer to be an unflinchingly reliable narrator. In fiction, a story may be skillfully designed to sound like a true story told in the first person by a fictional character (who may be a quite unreliable narrator), but if the writer presents it as fiction, the reader will usually perceive it as fiction. Readers tend to look for, even to assume, the autobiographical in fiction, but they also recognize the writer's attempt to fictionalize, just as they recognize in memoir the central commitment not to fictionalize.

In this way, when you name what you write memoir or fiction, you enter into a contract with the reader. You say "this really happened," or you say "this is imaginary." And if you are going to honor that contract, your raw material as a memoirist can only be what you have actually experienced. It is up to you to decide how imaginatively you transform the known facts—exactly how far you allow yourself to go to fill in the memory gaps. But whatever you decide about that, you must remain limited by your experience, unless you turn to fiction, in which you can, of course, embrace people, places, and events you have never personally known. While imagination certainly plays a role in both kinds of writing, the application of it in memoir is *circumscribed by the facts,* while in fiction it is *circumscribed by what the reader will believe.* These very different stages for the imagination allow recognizably different plays to be acted out on them.

You may interpret this contract with the reader differently from other writers, perhaps feeling freer to tamper with the de-

tails or choosing to invent more of the dialogue. Some memoirists, like Fern Kupfer in *Before and After Zachariah*, conflate several characters into one composite character and acknowledge in the book what they have done. Others reorder events into a different chronology or, like Deborah Tall in *The Island of the White Cow*, compress several years into one. (For some reason, I feel freer to mess with time than with people.) But although there is room for disagreement about many of these choices, you will gain little of value if you end up abusing the reader's trust. Making up a "better ending" to your story, while presenting it as true, or, worse still, inventing a whole piece of your life because it makes a good memoir, will often backfire. Readers may initially believe you if your deceptions are clever, but the more successful you are as a writer, the more likely it is that you will eventually be caught. Lillian Hellman's "memoir," *Pentimento*, (later made into the film *Julia*) caught the public's imagination and was highly acclaimed, but later turned out to be more or less untrue: Hellman had never even met the real-life Julia. Had she lived to produce more memoirs, her disillusioned readers would have been less willing to place their trust in her words. In any case, her reputation undoubtedly suffered.

Even if no one ever finds out that you tampered with the facts, your memoir will suffer if you are dishonest. It is very difficult to be both candid and deceptive at the same time, and a memoir does need to be candid. Tampering with the truth will lead you to writing a bit too carefully—which in turn will rob your style of the ease that goes with honesty. Dishonest writing is very often mediocre writing. Especially when written in the first person, purporting to be true, it has a faint odor of prevarication about it. It's the kind of writing that leaves some of its readers with a nagging doubt: *What exactly was it I didn't believe?*

Of course, none of this should prevent you from speculating about the facts. Readers easily recognize the honesty of

your desire to make sense of whatever few facts you may have. Musing on what *might* have been behind that old photograph of your grandmother, or telling the reader how you've always *imagined* your parents' early lives, is not the same as presenting your speculations as facts. Mary Gordon, for example, in *The Shadow Man*, speculates about her father who died when she was seven, using imaginary conversations and, at one point, actually trying to become him by writing in his voice. None of this is presented as anything other than her search for the real man behind the idealized figure she had preserved over the years.

One last characteristic of the memoir that is important to recognize is one which also applies to essays, and which Georg Lukacs described as "the process of judging." This may seem problematic to some aspiring writers, since so many of us have been influenced, through various therapeutic or self-help philosophies, to believe that judgment is bad. We connect it with "judgmental," often used nowadays as a derogatory word. But the kind of judgment necessary to the good personal essay, or to the memoir, is not that nasty tendency to oversimplify and dismiss other people out of hand but rather the willingness to form and express complex opinions, both positive and negative.

If the charm of memoir is that we, the readers, see the author struggling to understand her past, then we must also see the author trying out opinions she may later shoot down, only to try out others as she takes a position about the meaning of her story. The memoirist need not necessarily know what she thinks about her subject but she must be trying to find out; she may never arrive at a definitive verdict, but she must be willing to share her intellectual and emotional quest for answers. Without this attempt to make a judgment, the voice lacks interest, the stories, becalmed in the doldrums of neutrality, become neither fiction nor memoir, and the reader loses respect for the writer who claims the privilege of being the hero in her

own story without meeting her responsibility to pursue meaning. Self-revelation without analysis or understanding becomes merely an embarrassment to both reader and writer.

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When you sit down to begin working on a memoir:

First, remind yourself that you are not writing your autobiography: You do not have to write your entire life. So begin thinking in terms of theme and focus.

Second, get into an opinionated, or at least questioning, frame of mind.

Third, go to the library and check out a few good memoirs to read.

And finally, above all, remember that it's essential to *find your voice*. You can begin practicing right away.

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

❶ Think of a family story you have told or have heard told many times. Make notes about it and decide what the *theme* of the story is. Then write the story down succinctly. Do not stray from the theme and do not explain who the people in the story are. Do not give background information.

❷ Imagine you are talking to a close and trusted friend. Write down your thoughts about the story from #1 above as if talking it over with that friend, assuming she has already heard the story. Do you think it is true as told? What was left out so that everyone could feel comfortable with its being a family story? What does it say about the people involved and what does it say about you?

❸ Write the whole story again incorporating some of the speculations from #2 or letting some of the insights from #2 change the way you tell it.

❹ Pick a few other well-known personal stories (don't write the stories; just name them: "the story about the time when..." etc.). For each one, write down "I used to think this story was about ... [fill in], but now I think it's really about... [fill in]."

❺ Make a list of your family's (or other close-knit group's) classic stories—those that are often repeated. For each one,

make notes on what purpose you think it serves, or what myths it fosters in the family or group.

❻ Make a list of ways you could focus a memoir, starting with certain defined periods of time, such as "The year I went to college," or "first grade," or "the year my mother died."

❼ Make a list of themes you could use to focus a memoir, such as your relationship to food, sex, a sibling, your work, your dog, houses you have lived in, your political views, etc.

❽ Pick a particular person—a close friend, trusted family member, interested teacher or mentor—and imagine telling her or him all about one of the topics generated in #6 or #7. Write down what you confide, including actually addressing the person by name. Notice, as you read through what you've written, whenever the writing does not use the kind of words you would use if you were actually talking. Revise it to make it sound more like a spoken conversation.

2

Who Cares? and Other Thoughts on Getting Started

Many of us," writes Natalia Rachel Singer, "have gotten one too many 'who cares?' written in red ink on our work." The real question for anyone writing from his or her own life, she goes on to point out, is "why do *you* care about this?" But it can take a long time for the memoirist to get to that second question. The red ink, the echoes of "nobody could possibly be interested in *my* life," and the implications of self-indulgence raised by that persistent "who cares?", all combine to crush self-expression. One of your first tasks, then, is to ask yourself: why do I care about this? The answer will make you feel entitled to tell your own story—to accept that it is not only worthy of being written down but fit material for literature—something you want to revise and craft until it is beautiful. In time you will even come to believe that your story is important for other people to read.

Singer also points out that women and people of color, in particular, have felt the brunt of the "who cares?" syndrome. Memoirists from all backgrounds may find it hard to believe that their own lives are suitable subjects, but the authoritative voice required for writing memoir can be particularly elusive

for those traditionally denied authority in the world, those more accustomed to being the objects than the subjects of literature. Speaking with authority for some feels both unfamiliar and dangerously presumptuous.

Nancy Mairs describes her particular struggle. Just beginning work on the material that ended up as *Remembering the Bone House*, she took some written sketches of houses she had lived in at different times to a workshop taught by "a well-known southwestern writer of nonfiction." This writer told her that her memoirs were not readable, but added: "If you were already a famous person this might not matter." Initially stopped by this devastating criticism, Mairs responded logically: "I hadn't any chance of becoming a famous person. No fame, no life. I put the copy book with its blotchy black-and-white cardboard covers away." Later, being both smart and persistent, Mairs began to question whether fame was an authentic requirement for writing memoirs and returned to the work to produce one of the most moving and beautifully crafted memoirs of our time.

The sad part of such stories is that these discouraging messages so often come from teachers or mentors—people we look to for encouragement and validation. For this reason, it is essential to pick your teachers carefully. If you want help in starting to write memoirs, you don't want to fall into the clutches of a famous writer who has been hired to teach at a writing workshop solely because of his name's ability to attract students, rather than because of any teaching skill. You should not have to grapple with someone who secretly thinks you should be writing about *his* life rather than your own.

But making the right choice is not always easy. Reading potential teachers' published work can give you some insights into their attitudes, but even if they are really good on the page, you can sometimes be badly surprised in the classroom. Asking around among previous students can also be useful, but beware the "star-struck" mentality that afflicts some students

of unscrupulous teachers, particularly those few students chosen by the famous writer for encouragement at the expense of the others in the class. Naturally, the select few will speak well of such a teacher, but the teacher you are looking for will be equally generous to all his students. I advise very thorough research. There are good, supportive, honest teachers out there. There are also egomaniacs.

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Whether you are a beginning writer setting out to learn about the memoir or an experienced writer turning from poetry or fiction to this new form, it is important to remember that it takes time to learn. Writers, more than most other artists, seem to expect of themselves instant expertise. Perhaps this is because we all use words in everyday life, whereas we don't all use violins or oil paints. With other art forms, it is more obvious that there must be a long apprenticeship.

We writers see this attitude—the belief that writing is as easy as getting out of bed—expressed all around us. Bill Roorbach, writing on apprenticeship, records comments from nonwriters similar to ones most of us have heard. There was the couple who, hearing that Roorbach had published a memoir about traveling with the woman who later became his wife, told him, "We could have written that book.... Always wanted to take off a month and write the darn thing." And the doctor at a cocktail party who told him she was going to take six months off and write *her* story. Roorbach's satisfying comeback was, "You know, you've inspired *me!* I'm going to take six months off and become a surgeon!" The point, of course, is not to put down people who are ignorant about the time it takes to become a writer but to establish, in the face of a denial that can seriously undermine our learning process, the fact that a long apprenticeship is needed in literature as in any other field that requires the acquisition of skills.

APPRENTICE

Apprentice (from the French *apprendre:* to learn): One bound by legal agreement to serve another for a certain time with a view to learning an art or trade in consideration of instruction and, formerly, of maintenance; hence a beginner; tyro; novice. *(Webster's Collegiate Dictionary)*

Today, the would-be writer must patch together an apprenticeship. If you are serious about the craft, your learning may be helped along by various writing teachers through writing programs or workshops, or sometimes through less formal meetings or correspondence. If you are very lucky, you may find one teacher to see you through all or part of a long apprenticeship, but more likely you will work with several teachers, as well as peer groups that offer support and critique. But remember that extensive reading is probably the most important ingredient of your apprenticeship, whether or not you have a teacher. You will never become a good writer if you urgently want to write but do not have an equal passion for reading.

Most successful writers today no longer live the lives that those in earlier times enjoyed, when they were able to take young writers under their wings, read their early efforts, correspond with them, and generally help them through their apprenticeships. Nowadays, almost all literary writers work long hours, often at things other than their writing, and struggle to find time for their creative work. Many writers do serve as mentors through classes or workshops, or by offering critique of manuscripts for pay. In these circumstances, when you set out to find a mentor you should exercise restraint. *Do not* approach a writer with four hundred typescript pages under your arm (or even four), with a view to getting a free critique. If you want the expertise of a successful writer, you should offer to pay for his or her time.

I once heard the poet Olga Broumas say that it takes at least ten years for someone to become a poet. A similar statement could be made about becoming a memoir writer. During that ten years (or however long it takes for you to feel that you can move beyond apprenticeship), strangers or acquaintances will ask what you do. If you tell them you are a writer, as Roorbach points out, they will almost certainly ask what you have published. Better to say you are an apprentice writer, which has a lot more dignity than an unpublished writer in the eyes of the world, where to be an unpublished writer is to be either a dilettante or a failure. People who never think about these things seem to assume that a real writer is born with a book already on the best-seller list.

In fact, writing memoir takes not only apprenticeship in the craft itself but the constant gathering of suitable themes, incubation time, and the musing on your material that will bring insight to the final story—a preparatory period that is needed for all kinds of creative writing. Susan Griffin describes it as a difficult time during which she fears "that there is no intrinsic authority to my own words." "I...clean off my desk," she says. "I make telephone calls. I know I am avoiding the typewriter. I know that in my mind, where there might be words, there is simply a blankness. I may try to write and then my words bore me." But when the time *is* right, the waiting will have been worth it. "Because each time I write, each time the authentic words break through, I am changed. The older order that I was collapses and dies. I lose control. I do not know exactly what words will appear on the page. I follow language. I follow the sound of the words, and I am surprised and transformed by what I record."

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Once you are comfortable with the idea of being an apprentice and have put aside thoughts of agents, publishers, audience,

fame, or fortune—none of which is conducive to good writing—it is time to think about what it is that you really care about.

In deciding what to focus on, you can find important clues by examining your preoccupations: What things do you think about over and over? What stories haunt you? Which people from the past do you dream about? What makes you passionate when you think about it or talk about it? What do you argue about? Most of us have ongoing obsessions, sometimes as a result of difficult, tragic, magical, or unexpected events or circumstances in our lives. Sometimes these are the things we studiously avoid writing about, but sooner or later we come to realize they are our bedrock material. The fact is that writing, like any creative undertaking, carries with it both pain and great joy. The pain is often inherent in the most fertile subject matter; the joy lies in transforming that subject matter and thus moving through it in a way that helps us grow while we create something of value to others.

If you have already begun a few memoirs and find yourself feeling impatient with them as you read and reread them, chances are they are not pushing you to a place of deep exploration. Or you are stopping short of the deeper truths that you both want and don't want to uncover. In this way, writing mimics life: you have to be willing to take enormous risks to reap enormous rewards.

As you get started, it will be important for you to keep a notebook in which you write down random ideas, images from dreams, snatches of conversations from the past, and anything else that comes into your mind that hints at a memoir waiting to be written. It always seems odd to me that a story can stay buried in my memory for years and years, but the minute it surfaces into consciousness as a story idea, it is likely to get lost. If I don't grab it as it begins to form itself as a narrative, it can become permanently erased, and even if I remember the general subject matter, the voice that started narrating in my

mind eludes me. It is a good idea to have a notebook small enough to carry with you and to keep one beside your bed. In the middle of the night you will be convinced that your great idea will wait for you until morning, but, sadly, a great many fine stories have been lost with the ring of the alarm clock. You can become adept at recording the important phrase or image that will later take you back to that moment of insight when you glimpsed the story. For some, it's the opening sentence that leaps to mind; for others, a shadowy shape of the whole thing, or maybe even the heart of the story. Whatever it is for you, write something in your notebook that will bring it back when you have time to explore it.

Some books on writing life stories offer long lists of subjects to jump-start you. They include things like the arrival of a sibling, your first day at school, career choices, getting married, and so on, but these can often lead to wooden writing that bypasses the heart of the matter. It is not the obvious landmarks of a life that hold the passionate moments, the transformations, and the painful growth: those lie within incidents and relationships that are unique to each of us. So rather than taking off from such a list, create your own list. Find that haunting story that has nothing to do with what looks like one of life's "big moments." Use your notebook to search diligently among your lifelong preoccupations.

You may, at this early stage, find yourself struggling to stay with the writing. You may be looking for any excuse to get up from your desk. At this point I suggest you do the "blocks exercise," listed under "Suggestions for Writing" at the end of this chapter, and spend some time validating your difficulties and fears. Beware, though: it is easy to spend all your available writing time thinking or even writing about *not writing*—some writing groups, for example, talk endlessly about their difficulties but never actually write anything. So do not go overboard. Use the blocks exercise to take a good hard look at what gets in your way, write about it, and then move on.

As you get going, it is important, too, to go to other peoples' memoirs for inspiration. Although there are an astonishing number of aspiring writers who seem to be uninterested in other people's books, you simply cannot be a good writer unless you are also a good reader. Just as composers go to concerts and artists visit galleries, writers read. You will learn, in the most enjoyable way, more about style and language from reading good literature than you will ever acquire from workshops and how-to books. Reading other peoples' memoirs will give you concrete ideas about how to organize your own stories and demonstrate just how many different approaches you can take.

Other peoples' memoirs, too, will remind you of how much you can care about someone else's experience when it is written well. It is useful to keep a list of memoirs that have moved you so you can go back to them when you want to check out how they did that. For me, one such memoir is *Road Song*, Natalie Kusz's engrossing story of life in Alaska and the terrible accident that so badly disfigured her face. Reading her book, I was absolutely engaged with her particular challenge, even though it was far from any experience of my own. For the time it took me to move from front cover to back, her difficulties became mine; her environment—though I had never been to Alaska—became home. From time to time I was reminded of something in my own life that, though quite different, had called up a similar response to Kusz's, but often I simply left my own experience and shared hers. Later, when struggling to believe that my own story could possibly matter to unknown readers, the fact that I had read and identified with Kusz's story helped me. Although the memoir I was working on was about the difficulty I had had in grieving for my parents, who drowned when I was nineteen—certainly not an experience shared by most potential readers—I realized that, if I did it well, some of those readers could have that same experience of identification that I valued so much. Moments in my life might

resonate with moments in theirs. They might even step right outside their familiar histories and share mine for a while.

Whenever a story allows you to enter it in this way, remember that it is because the writer herself has grappled with the events she is recounting and has passionate thoughts about their consequences in her own life. Which brings us back to the importance of caring. Part of why *you* care, of course, is because you can tell how much *she* cares. So start thinking right away about what matters in your own life—what has most challenged you, formed you, influenced you. Start making lists and notes. And from time to time remind yourself who cares: *You do.*

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

❶ This is what I call the "blocks exercise." It has several different parts to it. Don't read ahead, but do each section in turn. If necessary, cover the page below as you go along. If you do this with a writing group, have one person read the instructions for one section at a time, including the time allowed for writing, and keep to the time limits for each part.

➤ First, make a long list of everything you can think of that gets in the way of your writing. Think of things that fall under the headings of both "external" (taking care of children, cleaning the house, spending eight hours a day at work, etc.) and "internal" ("I've nothing new to say"; "my life's not interesting"; "people will be shocked," etc.). Keep adding to the list even after you think it's done. (5 minutes)

➤ Read through the list and check the item that has the most power over you. It may be a different one next week, but follow your instinct for *today*. (2 minutes)

➤ Imagine you are talking to a trusted friend. Write a two- or three-page description, in first person, of a *particular* time when you grappled with this problem. Be specific: Where were you? What thoughts did you have? Don't generalize to other times. (25 minutes)

➤ Now go back and read through the story you've just written and turn it from first person into third person.

Substitute a name that is not your own for the first "I" and change the pronouns to he or she, altering verbs to fit. Don't rewrite the whole thing—just be prepared to be messy! (5 minutes)

➤ Finally, read aloud (or silently if you are in a group) the story in its new third-person form. When you have listened to yourself read it, make some notes on the following or discuss with your group. (20 minutes)

How do you feel about the narrator? Are you sympathetic to her, or are you impatient? What advice would you give her? (There are no right answers.)

Do you have a different relationship to the subject you chose when it is written in first and third persons? If so, write yourself a reminder that you can always, in the future, get some distance from your material—particularly when generating painful stories—by switching to third person.

Do verb tenses also have this power? Try out a passage in both present and past tense. Use the same story if you like and see if the present tense brings you and your reader closer to the subject matter. (See Chapter 6 for a discussion of the pitfalls of narrating in present tense.)

❷ Write about someone from the past who made you feel that your life or your stories were important.

❸ Write about someone from the past who made you feel that your life or your stories were *not* important.

❹ Write about someone whose story or life provided inspiration or encouragement to you.