Arts & Humanities

So You Think You Can Write a Memoir?

Lilly Dancyger ’12JRN on the art of writing about yourself — and making other people care about your story.

By
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Lilly Dancyger (O’Malley Studios).

Lilly Dancyger ’12JRN edits personal essays and memoirs for two online publications and a literary press, and she teaches classes on memoir writing. She is the editor of *Burn It Down*, a new anthology of essays on women’s anger, and is working on her own memoir, *Negative Space.*

Tell us a little about your writing classes.

I teach classes for writers from different backgrounds and at all levels. One of my favorites is a class for writers with a book project already underway. We dig into how to shape personal experience into narrative, and the ways in which a story can start to take on its own life.

So what makes a great memoir?

It’s all about that alchemy of transforming the raw material of experience into something special. It’s important to have a good story to tell, but there has to be more to it than merely recounting the events of your life. A big part of my job is telling people that the worst or most powerful thing that ever happened to them sounds boring. I don’t say it to be mean! But I often find myself explaining that just having an experience — no matter how shocking or unusual — is not enough. A great memoir articulates something about being human and it will resonate with readers regardless of whether their lives look anything like the writer’s.

You don’t have to be famous to write a memoir, right?

No! Memoir used to be almost exclusively written by famous, influential people as a way to cement their legacies. That’s not true anymore, though celebrity memoirs still hold strong on the bestseller lists — Michelle Obama’s *Becoming* has sold more than ten million copies so far. But if you’re not a celebrity, you have to rely on artistry to drum up the interest that’s inherent in stories of famous people’s exploits. The non-celebrity literary memoir is as much about exceptional storytelling and craft as it is about having an interesting life.

Can you name recent memoirs that exemplify the best of the genre?

There are so many to choose from. Tara Westover’s *Educated*, about being raised by survivalists and not setting foot in a classroom until the age of seventeen; Terese Marie Mailhot’s *Heart Berries*, about growing up on a reservation; Stephanie Land’s *Maid*, about her time working as a house cleaner and struggling to provide for her

daughter; and Kiese Laymon's *Heavy*, about a Black boy growing up in the South and grappling with weight, trauma, and societal failings, are a few that come to mind.

Why do these stories resonate with readers?

Because the writers use their personal experiences to elucidate something universal. Westover describes a childhood most readers can't relate to directly. She's kept out of school for her entire childhood, burying guns and canned peaches to prepare for the apocalypse. But while the circumstances she describes — in vivid, gripping detail — may be foreign, the feelings at the core of the story are universal: her desire to believe the best of her parents; her ambition to escape her circumstances; her loyalty to family that she often puts ahead of her own well-being. In *Maid*, Land's struggle to make the smallest amount of progress toward a more stable life is more common than many realize. It resonated with readers who saw their experience, or their mothers' experience, reflected in literature for the first time.

Trauma seems to be a recurring feature in literary memoirs.

Yes — the hardest stories are often the most gripping, because the stakes are higher. We want to know how memoir writers — including all of the ones I listed above — made it out OK. Writing about traumatic experiences can also be deeply healing for a writer, but there's more to it than that. As an editor I see a lot of personal essays that seem entirely motivated by the writer's need to document and share their pain. The writer revels in the catharsis of writing but hasn't taken the necessary next steps of processing that experience and turning it into something universal. When writers come to me with their raw personal experiences, I understand the weight of the trust they're putting in me, and I push them hard to shape those experiences into essays that transcend the events they're based on. I remind them that "what happened" is a lump of clay for them to sculpt, and it's up to them to shape it into something beautiful. As an editor and a writer, I'm always pushing for the bigger story buried under the surface of personal experience.

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