WRITING LIFE STORIES

HOW TO MAKE memories into MEMOIRS,
ideas into ESSAYS, and life into LITERATURE

FULLY REVISED SECOND EDITION

BILL ROORBACH
with Kristen Keckler, PhD

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For Reba
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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Bill Roorbach writes fiction and nonfiction, and is the author of numerous books, including a novel, *The Smallest Color*, and a book of stories, *Big Bend*, which won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. The title story, "Big Bend," won an O. Henry Prize as well. *Temple Stream: a Rural Odyssey*, his most recent book, won the 2006 Maine Book Award in nonfiction and received a Furthermore Grant from the Kaplan Foundation. Other books are *Into Woods* (essays); *Summers With Juliet* (memoir); *A Place on Water* (essays, with Robert Kimber and Wesley McNair), *A Healing Touch* (essays, with Gerry Boyle, Wesley McNair, Richard Russo, Susan Sterling, and Monica Wood). Bill is also the editor of the Oxford anthology *Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: The Art of Truth*. His short work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *New York*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and many others. He has taught at the University of Maine at Farmington, Ohio State, and Colby College, and currently holds the William H.P. Jenks Chair in Contemporary American Letters at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts. He lives in Farmington, Maine, and is at work on a novel. For more information, updated biography, signed copies of books, news about readings and workshops, and to send queries and comments directly to the author, go to www.billroorbach.com.

Kristen Keckler is a teacher, writer, and editor whose PhD (University of North Texas) is in the field of creative nonfiction. She writes in all genres—nonfiction, fiction, and poetry—and her work has appeared in numerous magazines and journals, including *Ecotone*, *Sonora Review*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *cold-drill*, *Palo Alto Review*, and *Concho River Review*. She was editor-in-chief of *North Texas Review* and an editor of the Katherine Anne Porter Prize in Short Fiction, a national book contest co-sponsored by the UNT Press. On the way, she's worked as a clown, a cook, a librarian, and a group home counselor. She's just completing a memoir about life and work called *What Do You Do?*

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TENTH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

PREFACE

So much has changed in the ten years since the first edition of *Writing Life Stories* was published. For writers, perhaps the biggest development has been the wholesale advent of the Internet, with its constant evolution, its endless opportunities for interaction, for instant research, for locating and speaking directly to readers via e-mail, blogs, and Web sites. Everyone's typing now. Continuing events like those of September 11, 2001, bring subtle changes in outlook around the world and underscore the need for freedom of expression everywhere. Cell phones, merely irritating in 1998, are everywhere, including my pocket.

In my own life, other shifts: my daughter, Elysia, was born in 2000; my mother, Reba, died in 2006. In between, both of my beloved dogs died, as well. I left a tenured position at Ohio State University to write full time, only to accept an endowed chair elsewhere when the opportunity arose. The new car I bought when this book first came out now has 150,000 miles on it. Time for change there, as well.

Memoir as a popular genre has moved past most of its early controversies, and enjoys new standing in the world of letters and in the university. But there's also brand-new hullabaloo, such as the James Frey scandal—an ex-addict makes stuff up, then lies about lying—or the Deborah Rodriguez dustup: did all she said happened *really* happen at her beauty school in Kabul? And is this the end of the world? Of course it's not. That roar you hear comes from the explosive power of narrative as applied to real life. What is the role of memoir and the essay in the quest for truth? Or even Truth? You'll answer these questions over and over, always in your own way, with every paragraph you write.

To ensure breadth of outlook, I enlisted the help of a writer very different from me, Kristen Keckler, and together we have brought *Writing Life Stories* to a new century. Kristen adds a woman's point of view to what had been an excessively male enterprise, as well as a scholar's clear eye (her PhD is in the field of creative nonfiction). She's younger than I am, too, a whole generation younger, and she helped me see that cassette tapes were no longer the best way to record anything. And of course, that was just the beginning of her contribution.

We meant to just freshen these pages a little, but in the end, Kristen and I have wrought great changes. Old friends of *Writing Life Stories* will find plenty here to re-charge their batteries, lots of new ideas and fresh instruction. First-time readers will join those returning to find new exercises in every chapter, clearer explanations of difficult issues like the use of metaphor, more up-to-date information on publishing, examples from newer writers and more recent titles to complement the dozens of examples in the original edition, and a much more sophisticated look at the Internet. We've updated the very popular reading list with scores of new books in our field, every one of which challenges and ultimately changes the way we think of memoir, literary journalism, and the personal essay—those genres which together have come to be thought of and taught as creative nonfiction.

The new *Writing Life Stories* is still the perfect book for the independent writer trying to find her way into a whole lifetime of great material, but it's also much improved as a tool for the creative nonfiction or composition classroom.

Thanks for taking us home. Let us hear how you do!

INTRODUCTION

> *In most books the I, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking. I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience.*
>
> —*Henry David Thoreau*

Gow Farris had a lifetime of stories and ideas. He surely had something to say. Yet when he sat down at his keyboard to get it written, nothing came, or nothing he cared to show anyone, certainly nothing like the stories he'd always told at family parties, the stories his kids said he'd better write down, the stories his grandchildren were starting to ask for. The surprising thing was that Gow had been a newswriter for forty-five years: forty-five years of writing other people's stories; forty-five years of a confident professional approach to the facts; forty-five years of successful writing for a major newspaper.

Retirement brought this: silence.

Silence when he'd expected his life and humor and lessons to pour out whole, short memoir after short memoir, essay after essay, article after article, book after book. What was going wrong?

He needed a change of place, that's all. He kissed his wife good-bye (his third wife, truth to tell, quite a story there: death and heartbreak in the first marriage, betrayal and loneliness in the second), called a rental agent he knew on Cape Cod, hied himself for an amazingly inexpensive off-season ten days to Nantucket, where many writers had gone before him. Perfect. The surf pounded distantly, no phone to ring, no visitors, no pressures upon him, not even mail.

"My brother died when I was eighteen," he wrote. Always, he'd wanted to write a memoir of his brother. But nothing followed, just ten straight mornings of staring at his notebook. Guilty walks (longer each day), hourly snacks, resharpened pencils.

Occasionally he wrote lame sentences of description (his brother's great size, his brother's big teeth, his brother's favorite expression) that did nothing to bring his clear memories of the lost sibling to the page, nothing to shape those memories into something someone else might enjoy reading—a memoir—much less into anything resembling literature. Afternoons he roamed the October beach in writerly despair.

During the night before his last day on the island, he woke to a fit of inspiration, clicked on the bare bedside bulb, took notes for a different project, a memoir of his career. Next morning he didn't pause for breakfast, rushed to the kitchen table (he'd come to distrust the little desk his landlord had provided), wrote, "I was a newspaperman for forty-five years," and kept going, ten pages, a rush of words, great relief, something to show for his trip and the lonely days of his vigil.

Home the next night, he pulled out his pages and read. This didn't take long.

He read fast and with growing embarrassment. What he'd meant triumphantly to show his new wife, he tucked into his desk drawer beneath a stack of similar pages. The day's ferry ride and drive home had given him enough perspective to hear clearly how the opening of his journalist's memoir came off: pompous, puffy, wordy, nostalgic, nothing like what he'd envisioned in that moment of wakefulness, as far from the truth as Pluto from the sun. Gow was a reasonable, humble, reserved person; Gow was a precise and no-nonsense man. Why couldn't he get that on the page?

I know Gow's story because after a couple more months of false starts and increasing discouragement, he signed up for a summer class I happened to be teaching at the University of Vermont. First day of class he sat there glowering at me.

Gow Farris was pissed.

And Gow, of course, is not alone.

Janet Bellweather had taught writing for nine years to high-school kids, knew all the rules, knew what she liked when it came to student work, knew how to get even the most challenging kids to pull off their headphones and write. Her particular pride came in helping her young students see that what they had to say mattered, that their lives were important, that they could reach readers. She had wonderful exercises. The kids had a blast. She'd march around the room giving praise and advice, urging and scolding, reading passages aloud. Janet was a great teacher, funny and smart and eloquent, passionate and caring, maybe even a little eccentric.

She had no trouble turning out the pages. She wrote short memoirs of her youth, many poems, an essay a month, even a column for the school district's award-winning newsletter. Her writing was sometimes funny, but seldom eloquent or passionate, and never eccentric. She showed it to friends, but few said much of anything when they were finished reading. A wan smile here and there. But never the praise and approval she wanted, except from her mother, who didn't understand why *The New Yorker* didn't buy every word. Janet didn't expect miracles on that order, but she couldn't understand why smaller magazines didn't seem interested in her. She had a folder of rejections thick as the phone book in Manhattan, where she lived. In rare moments of clarity, Janet knew why the magazines didn't take her work: it just wasn't as good as she knew she could make it. What was the problem? Why couldn't she do for herself what she did for her students every day?

Janet turned up in a memoir class I taught for the Riverside Writers' Group in New York City and right away—first night's class—raised her hand to make a comment, and in the course of this comment (ostensibly about writing memoir), she made it clear that she, too, was a teacher, that she, too, had written plenty, and, finally, that she didn't really need a class or know what had possessed her to sign up. She knew all the rules, she'd read all the books, she certainly didn't need us. Her intensity was both charming and frightening. She was nearly shouting: "I only want this class so that I might have an audience." She had a truly great essay subject: being single and wanting to stay that way.

Okay, Janet, okay! You're in the right place!

As were a wonderful, long list of my college and graduate-school students over the years, with more compelling stories than time to write them all (a semester is a bureaucratic unit, not a creative one), though sometimes the barriers to expression were a little different: "How do I get an A?" and more seriously, "Why should anyone want to read my story? I'm only eighteen (or twenty, or twenty-four) years old."

Drama is drama—the young woman whose sister was murdered had an obvious story, but then again, so did the young man in the same class who wrote about a different sort of disaster: a B on a high-school math test when he'd expected an A.

The story's in the telling.

Mindy Mallow-Dalmation was a junior at Colby College, where I taught briefly as a visiting professor. She was one of the ninety percent of my students convinced she had no true story to tell. I mean, she'd barely had a life yet! And what was so interesting about her struggles to find love while wearing black from head to toe? Who gave a flying flirt about her semester in France? Her obsession with her weight, her looks? Her love of exotic cooking? Her parents' withholding of love and praise? Her goofy hyphenated name? Weren't these just the standard woes of self-absorbed American college kids everywhere?

Yes, Mindy.

And no.

Other writers who have turned up in my classes: an accomplished poet (four fine books published, multiple awards), struggling unexpectedly with the switch to nonfiction; a physician with an amazing story—not getting told—of an internship in the Amazon; a Holocaust survivor whose book on his teen days in Warsaw, then Auschwitz (including a miraculous escape), was crawling past nine-hundred pages with no end in sight; a technical writer who wanted to find escape from aircraft manuals to write about his love of flying, but who—in his clinically self-aware way—knew his writing was dull, flattened by years of mechanical sentence making; a college professor in bioethics who wanted to dramatize bioethical case studies for a lay audience, but who couldn't get characters to emerge from the extraordinary people he'd known; a former nun who wanted to write about her faith, how it was broken, how it lately had come to be restored; a wildly successful "chick-lit" novelist who was struggling to find the nerve required to tell her own (not very romantic and not very comical but scary-as-hell) love story; a high-school kid bubbling over with the charming story of a horse, a girlfriend, and a homemade steeplechase; a businessman who wanted to combine tales of his travels with advice about commerce in Asia; a college sports star with a potentially career-ending secret; the list goes on and on. Good people all of them (well, all but one or two), with wonderful ideas and compelling stories and fascinating lives not coming to the page quite as simply as they'd hoped.

Welcome, welcome.

You, too: welcome. You and your stories are in the right place.

> *All the arts depend upon telepathy to some degree, but I believe that writing offers the purest distillation. I didn't tell you. You didn't ask me. I never opened my mouth and you never opened yours. We're not even in the same year together, let alone the same room … except we are together. We're close.*
>
> —*Stephen King*

A Note on the Exercises

I have designed this book to take you by way of exercises through a series of approaches to certain branches of the vast field that's come to be called creative nonfiction, and especially to the making of memoir. The usefulness of any one exercise may not seem apparent at first, but if you trust yourself and trust the exercise, if you do the work on a steady (preferably daily) basis, you'll soon find what you're looking for: access to memory, access to material, access to ideas, access to the unconscious, and, finally, access to meaning—some corner of understanding that is both satisfyingly personal and invitingly universal, something readers will care about and like.

John Gardner, the quirky teacher, novelist, controversial medievalist, and all-around literary luminary and daredevil (he died in a tragic motorcycle crash), thought exercises were valuable because of the low stakes. And it's true; it's easier to set out to make something small than something large (like, say, the story of your life). Then again, Norman Mailer said that exercises are worse than useless, even damaging, precisely because the stakes are so small. Why waste time on something that doesn't count? All writing should be out there at the edge or in close to the heart, vital and urgent and necessary. I'm in between these titans (and getting crushed by huge ankles). I do think drills, the memorization of rules, are a waste of time. But when exercises discover material or open the vaults of memory or give access to real emotion or offer points of entry into the massive story that is a human life and mind, the stakes are high, indeed, and what may seem at first mere practice turns out to be writing of the most urgent kind.

To be taught, one must be willing to learn. One must be willing to change, sometimes in fundamental ways, because to learn *is* to change. A writer who really wants to make the next step—to grow—must learn to have compassion for herself as both writer and learner (so difficult for Mindy Mallow-Dalmation), must give up the idea that she's already arrived (remember Janet Bellweather?), must give up the idea that he already knows what to do (think of Gow Farris).

Here's a Confucian aphorism: "If you don't know where you are going, get there by a way you don't know."

And here, Shunryu Suzuki's famous observation from his peaceful and important (and perhaps puzzling) book, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*: "In the beginner's mind are many possibilities, in the expert's mind there are few."

I like Donald Hall's one and only exercise, which he recommends in his essay "On Ambition," and which I'll freely paraphrase here: Write something better than the best thing ever written. Take all the time you wish.

The exercises in this book are meant to discover mounds of juicy material for you, of course. They're meant to give you practice, for sure. They're also meant to help you develop and then further develop your critical eye. But quietly, they are meant to challenge the ways you already write, the ways you already find material, the ways you have settled into and that—if my own experience and the fact that you have read this far are any indication—are no longer producing satisfactory results, much less great results.

Nancy Kuhl, one of my graduate students back when I taught at Ohio State (and now a well-regarded professor and much-published poet and nonfiction writer), included a note when she offered the use of some of her writing for this book: "I was a little resistant doing these exercises. When I examined that resistance, I learned some very valuable things about my writing process. So, for me, part of what was important about these exercises was paying attention to my own response to the assignments and thinking about what my response revealed about me as a writer."

Yes!

We all want to get to the masterpieces of our writing lives by the shortest route possible. Trouble is, the shortest route possible is always the road ahead. Honestly examining whatever resistance you find in yourself and overcoming it (just simply doing the exercises is probably the best way) is going to be a key step in your improvement as a writer. In fact, it's the surest shortcut. Most of my students, and by extension most of the readers of this book, and probably you, gentle reader, are already good writers. It's certainly hard to turn the clock back, be a beginner again, a learner. I'm glad you're willing to try.

YOUR FIRST MILLION WORDS

R.V. Cassill, in his classic book of instruction, *Writing Fiction*, says a writer's apprenticeship isn't over until his first million words have been written.

Time to get to work.

CHAPTER ONE

GETTING STARTED

> *I certainly don't [enjoy writing]. I get a fine warm feeling when I'm doing well, but that pleasure is pretty much negated by the pain of getting started each day. Let's face it, writing is hell.*
>
> *—William Styron*

Why is it so hard to sit down and write? Great expectations, for one thing. Our favorite high-school English teacher, Janet Bellweather, is infinitely patient and caring with her charges at P.S. 239, but from herself expected excellence (yes, *The New Yorker*) instantly.

Our friend Gow Farris thought he'd take on a new kind of writing and an entirely new subject (his own life) and get it perfect—prize winningly publishable—the first time he tried.

Mindy Mallow-Dalmation just didn't think her life would be of much interest to anyone but her therapist, and even her therapist fell asleep half the time (Mindy said, to much laughter, in our classroom there at Colby College). And something else—the stuff she really wanted to talk about? The hard stuff? The kind of icky stuff ? She didn't really actually in fact want to talk about.

Ease and instant excellence are illusions, illusions that successful writing conjures up, illusions that make it hard—maybe impossible—for Janet Bellweather or Gow Farris (or perhaps you) to believe that their (or your) favorite writers have gone through anything like the struggles Janet pretended not to have or the unexpected battle that made Gow so furious. And the idea that we aren't interesting, that more than likely people are going to make fun of how boring we are (while at the same time hiding all the most important stuff out of shame or self-protection) leads to crippling self-doubt, the kind of self-doubt that Mindy pre-empted with a continual, always articulate but obfuscatory attack on American culture, and jokes, really funny jokes, lots of jokes, and a wry, sometimes furious refusal to delve past the ironic surface of things.

To compound the problem, partners and friends and parents (and certainly we ourselves) are caught up in the old myth of talent: you have it or you don't, and there's no sense in struggling along if your first efforts aren't Shakespeare (or, more to the point, since we're talking about memoir here), Annie Dillard, Mary Karr, Frank McCourt, or Augusten Burroughs.

So often what's missing is compassion: compassion for the poor soul who turns to writing after a long day of less satisfying work; compassion for the creative one, who can't rest till the story is made, even while those around him play; compassion for the learner, too, the person who at any age sits down to write thinking she already has what it takes, only to discover, as all good writers continually do, that there is still a lot to learn; compassion, in the end, for you, gentle writer, for you yourself.

EXERCISE ONE: *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*

Of course the name of this exercise comes from an Ernest Hemingway story, but I can't help but think of Virginia Woolf when I give this assignment, which is about compassion, really, about having compassion for yourself as learner and seeing to the needs of that learner.

In her series of lectures and subsequent book A Room of One's Own, published in 1929, Virginia Woolf points out the unhappy fact that women often didn't (and don't) have a place where they might get some thinking and work of their own done, away from the duties of the mother, the wife, the housekeeper (and today, all of the above plus full-time employment, elder care, late-life graduate degrees, cell phone and e-mail accounts).

The idea here—male or female—is to set yourself up in a decent writing environment. Not too beautiful (lest you get distracted by the view), not too Spartan (lest you find it best avoided), but a place you can hope to be uninterrupted for the blocks of time available for writing.

In my house, I used to write in a small attic room (hot in summer, but that was okay) with a single window looking on grapevines and bird feeders, a spruce tree, a lilac, a tamarack, the porch roof, the clothesline. That room is now my daughter's—Elysia, born in 2000. Which was the year I converted an old sugar shack into a studio. I like being out separate from the house, have a sense of walking to work in the morning, even if the walk is only a hundred feet or so. My desk is simply an old door set on two-drawer file cabinets. Add a good chair (my aching back), an old lamp, bookshelves along the walls, a maddening laptop, a long row of bubbled-glass windows. Also a lot of junk: seashells, coins, stacks of old manuscripts, canceled checks, piles of letters, CDs, maps, odd postcards and cookie fortunes and notes to myself, a sleeping bag for naps, a wood stove for winter heat, a calculator, scissors, blank notebooks (empty and full). (The story of building that little haven can be found in my book Temple Stream, which among many other things includes the story of the birth of my daughter.) And now even that refuge is more often than not superseded by a secondary desktop in my office at some new job, the arm of a couch in a hospital waiting room, or the coffee table at a new friend's house on the road, even a nice, flat rock in a goat's cozy crag.

If there's nowhere obvious to set yourself up, be like the great Lakota chief Crazy Horse, who said, "This is my lodge!" wherever he had to stay, even when finally imprisoned. (Since we're on the subject of writing nonfiction—and since in chapter five I'll quote from the book—I think it's appropriate to let you know that I learned about Crazy Horse in Ian Frazier's beautifully hybrid work of memoir, history, journalism, and geography, Great Plains.)

Say out loud: "This is my office!"

Don't get fancy; just give yourself some continuity.

I'm thinking of Mario Puzo, who, flush from the success of his novel The Godfather, decided to build himself a beautiful office off the back of his house, a large, bright room with two huge desks and everything a writer could possibly want. Trouble was, he couldn't write there, and before long he went back to the kitchen table, where, amid the bustle of his household and in the midst of the lives of his children, he got back to work.

> *Talent alone won't make you a success. Neither will being in the right place at the right time, unless you are ready. The most important question is: "Are you ready?"*
>
> —*Johnny Carson*

MEMOIR IS MEMORY'S TRUTH

Let's try for a working definition of the word *memoir*: A memoir is a true story, a work of narrative built directly from the memory of its writer, with an added element of creative research. In memoir, the writer is also the protagonist—the person to whom the events of the story happen—or at least an observer closely involved with the protagonists. Memoir arises in and exists only because of the first-person singular: the *I* remembering.

When I say memoir, I don't mean one's memoirs (plural) in the sense of one's whole life presented as a historical artifact. That's for the famous—heads of state, Nobel Prize winners, heroes, celebrities—tomes not infrequently ghostwritten (and not infrequently written badly, come to think of it). I mean memoir (singular) in the sense the word is used by the editors of, say, *Harper's Magazine* or *The Sun* when they publish narratives of real lives. I mean memoir in the sense that Frank Conroy's publishers use when they characterize his classic story of youth, *Stop-Time*, and in the sense Jeannette Walls's publishers use when they talk about her harrowing book about her eccentric family, *The Glass Castle*.

Phillip Lopate (an important teacher of mine, whom I will certainly quote again) has wryly called such work "half-life memoirs," works created before much of the story can be known. But, of course, the ambition of memoir (as opposed to memoir*s*) isn't often historical but *literary*. Information is almost never the first goal of memoir; expression often is. Beauty—of form, of language, of meaning—always takes precedence over mere accuracy, truth over mere facts. The successful memoirist respects facts, uses them accurately, rigorously represses the human impulse to lie or embellish, but knows that truth is both different from facts and greater than facts, and not always their sum.

Memoir is a report to others from foreign territory: the territory of the writer, of the self, of an *I*. When I say memoir, I only mean memory put to the page (as if memory could be put to a page—that "putting" is an act of art, not transcription, a fact we quickly recognize when we go to try). I do mean a true story, unadorned, but always a true story laid down with the understanding that memory can be faulty, that images fade, that the *I* itself is a construction, a kind of fiction capable only of representing part of the writer at any given time.

Tobias Wolff said it well in the small acknowledgments paragraph preceding his first book-length memoir, *This Boy's Life*:

> I have been corrected on some points, mostly of chronology. Also my mother thinks that a dog I describe as ugly was actually quite handsome. I've allowed some of these points to stand, because this is a book of memory, and memory has its own story to tell. But I have done my best to make it tell a truthful story.

In fiction writing, the contract with the reader has to do with "that willing suspension of disbelief which constitutes poetic faith" (Samuel Taylor Coleridge's memorable and oft-quoted or paraphrased or just plain butchered line). The writer implicitly says, *I'm making this up, but please go ahead and pretend all of it really happened. Enjoy.* In memoir, the writer implicitly says, *Hey, this is factual. You can believe it. Enjoy.* Both fiction writer and memoirist, of course, may be fudging a little or a lot: the fiction may be based absolutely in fact; the memoirist may be, consciously or unconsciously, a liar. When it comes to ourselves, we all have blind spots, whole blind oceans. Dishonest or honest, the contract remains the same, and thus readerly enjoyment remains the same. Every writer of memoir has his own conscience to grapple with, his own ethical stance when it comes to matters such as invented dialogue, compound characters, telescoped time. What constitutes artistic license, and what constitutes lying? The border shifts writer to writer, story to story. But there *are* borders. Best is to go with your conscience, to write in good faith. Because even the best liars get caught sometimes, and the results can be unfortunate, even ugly.

Terry Gross asked David Sedaris (on her NPR program, *Fresh Air*) how true his poignant and often hilarious memoirs are. "True enough," Sedaris replied.

Good answer.

Memoir is not journalism, though journalism relies more heavily than many journalists like to admit on the same faulty human memory—that subjective sieve—that memoir does. (Old Russian insult: "He lies like an eyewitness.") This is a fact you need not repeatedly apologize for. The vagaries of memory are a given, accepted by readers of memoir, and might be stated once and for all as follows: I'm going to have to fill in some of the details where memory or my photo albums or my journals don't help me; to get to the truth, I'm going to have to make up certain things or disagree with the memories of others.

Disclaimers can be helpful—just a note before a stretch of dialogue, something like, "We talked, and it went something like this." Or, "My first abusive boyfriend—let's call him Jackson Phist—charmed me at first." A disclaimer can amend the contract with the reader, and as long as she's been warned what she's getting, she's got little reason to complain. Maxine Hong Kingston uses fiction in the service of nonfiction in her great book *China Men*. She announces that her father won't talk about his past, particularly not about the route of his emigration from China to the U.S., and then tells us that she's just going to have to make his story up. She does this in a sophisticated way, using extensive research to learn the four ways Chinese men her father's age could have come to the U.S., then creating a detailed story for each way, each story starring her silent father. The result is a much bigger story than her father's alone, and it carries a conviction that, despite the use of fiction and despite his silence, his story is getting told.

Then there's the blanket disclaimer. On the copyright page at the beginning of his book *Dry* (about trying to heal from serious alcohol and other addictions), Augusten Burroughs includes a nicely boxed "author's note":

> This memoir is based on my experiences over a ten-year period. Names have been changed, characters combined, and events compressed. Certain episodes are imaginative re-creation, and those episodes are not intended to portray actual events.

There are a lot of good reasons to change names, to combine characters, to compress time in a dark memoir, even good reasons to create episodes—we'll get to these reasons in future chapters.

But a readerly indulgence of your making things up in specific instances doesn't mean you'll get indulgence for lying in big ways. Approximating the words from a lecture you attended long ago at your modest college is something quite different from saying you studied under Robert Lowell at Oxford. A forgettable night in jail that turns into hard prison time is certainly stretching things too far. (But then again, so is a month of media attention on James Frey when much bigger and far more dangerous liars were and will always be afoot.)

Truth can be slippery, but one thing I know for sure: fiction is fiction, fact is fact. If you have half a conscience, you'll know where the line is, always, and always you'll earn for your work the name *nonfiction*, take honest part in what John McPhee has called "the literature of fact."

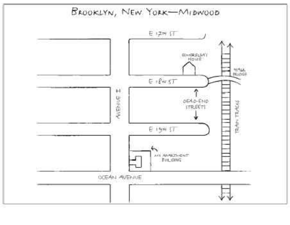
Even the Truth Can Be Hard to Believe

Facts or no, if your reader doesn't believe you, you're sunk as a memoirist. Much of the advice in this book is, in effect, advice about making the truth believable, with all the artistic tools at our disposal.

Weirdly, sometimes it's easier to capture a certain species of readerly belief when you're consciously making fiction. When I give readings, people will often come up to me after a short story or novel excerpt—pure fiction—and say confidingly, "I *know* that was you." I can't tell you how many people believe I have teenage children, all because one of my characters in a short story did. People believe I

CHAPTER TWO

MEMORY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HOUSE
WALK BRIDGE
E 18TH ST
AVENUE H
DEAD-END STREETS
TRAIN TRACKS
E 19TH ST
MY APARTMENT BUILDING
OCEAN AVENUE

CHAPTER THREE

SCENEMAKING

CHAPTER FOUR

BIG IDEAS

CHAPTER FIVE

CHARACTERS AND CHARACTER

CHAPTER SIX

STAGE PRESENCE

CHAPTER SEVEN

FINDING THE FACTS

CHAPTER EIGHT

METAPHOR AND MEANING

CHAPTER NINE

SAYING IT RIGHT

CHAPTER TEN

BUILDING A BUILDING

CHAPTER ELEVEN

GETTING PUBLISHED

APPENDIX A

"INTO WOODS"

APPENDIX B

“THE OLIVE JAR”

APPENDIX C

"ON APPRENTICESHIP"

APPENDIX D

SUGGESTED READINGS IN CREATIVE NONFICTION

Writing Reference

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