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## Where Memory Fails, Writing Prevails: Using the Fallacies of Memory to Create Effective Memoir

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In the opening pages of *The Liars' Club: A Memoir*, Mary Karr recounts the evening her mother torched her and her sister's belongings in a giant bonfire in the backyard. She also recalls the pattern of Texas bluebonnets that decorated her pajamas and describes the pale yellow golf shirt worn by the doctor called to the scene, painting a vivid portrait that includes a chest of drawers tipped on its back "like a stranded turtle" and the nutty smell of the police officers' coffee mixed with the odor of gasoline from the flames. Karr was only seven years old at the time this trauma occurred, but that night, she says, represents her sharpest childhood memory. Her ability to recall these rich, sensory details serves as the driving force behind her timeless memoir about an erratic childhood in East Texas, the reason why her book is often held up as one of the genre's gold standards, an example that future memoirists should study and, perhaps, emulate.

But in her book, there is one memory that lies just beyond her reach for nearly thirty years, a moment so powerful and traumatic that its true clarity eluded her for decades. "It went long unformed for me, and I want to keep it that way here," she writes. "I don't mean to be coy. When the truth would be unbearable the mind often just blanks it out. But some ghost of an event may stay in your head" (9). Neuroscientists and psychologists say that people who have suffered the kinds of trauma described in *The Liars' Club* are capable of suppressing memories of their most painful experiences. Within the pages of her memoir, Karr expresses the sharpness of some memories and acknowledges the loss of others. With

the power of both, she delves into the story of how she and her sister, Lecia, survived a childhood marred by alcoholism, domestic instability, sexual abuse and death.

The controversy of truth in memoir is as old as the genre itself. But a different incarnation of that question involves the science of memory: scientific research shows that memory is biologically prone to distortion, making pure truth an unattainable goal. But in the hands of a skillful writer, distortions of memory create more truth than memory itself. The unconscious and biological act of distorting memory is a key element in Karr's narration. Patricia Hampl, Joan Didion, Mark Doty and others routinely explore the limitations and contortions of memory in their writing. What's most important to the story is not the memory itself, but the reason why it was distorted in the first place.

### **How Memories Are Made and Lost**

The process of writing about memory, as well as the controversy regarding the genre of memoir, is perhaps best understood through the neuroscientific research of Daniel L. Schacter, professor of psychology at Harvard University. In *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers*, Schacter categorizes the seven miscues of memory: transience, blocking, misattribution, suggestibility, absent-mindedness, persistence and bias. Each of Schacter's so-called sins of memory can be found in the writings of some of our most celebrated contemporary memoirists.

Over the years, researchers have produced hundreds of studies and articles on these limitations of memory, with many of their most profound discoveries coming in the last few decades. To study how memories are made and recalled, neuroscientists use magnetic resonance imaging, or MRI, to detect changes in the brain's blood supply, which shows areas of cognitive activity by measuring the amount of blood flow to specific regions of the brain. Two primary areas are more active when human beings are in the process of remembering: the inner left temporal lobe, which is associated with emotion, and the lower left frontal lobe, which is associated with word choice. As a result, associations that lead to remembering

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are called “triggers,” and they are usually sensory—sounds, smells, tastes, etc. In the opening pages of *The Liars’ Club*, Karr gives readers several sensory clues: the smell of gasoline and coffee, the black smoke from the bonfire. Creative writing teachers often use sensory triggers as writing prompts because of their power to tap into the regions of the brain associated with memory, emotion and word choice—all of which are essential elements of memoir. In *The Nonfictionist’s Guide: On Reading and Writing Creative Nonfiction*, Robert Root describes a technique he calls “captioning,” or using photographs as visual writing prompts. “I ask people to draw upon images stored in their minds, stuffed in their billfolds, tacked on their bulletin boards, and use them to trigger memory, develop descriptions, and spark reflection,” he writes. “The visual is one of the thresholds we can cross to enter all forms of nonfiction, especially—but not exclusively—memoir” (47).

The key to a healthy memory appears to lie in the strength of the NMDA receptor. George Johnson, author of *In the Palaces of Memory: How We Build the Worlds Inside Our Heads*, explains how British scientists tested rats in 1986 by dropping them into a tank of water. The rats had to learn to find a platform upon which to climb up out of the water. At first, they swam around the tank at random until they happened upon the platform, but after a while they learned to go immediately to the right place. Then, the scientists repeated the experiment on rats that had been dosed with a drug blocking their NMDA receptors. The untreated rats found their swimming platforms right off, but the drugged rats never remembered the way. Instead, they reverted to swimming around the tank at random (Johnson 87).

In *The Liars’ Club*, Karr acknowledges that some of her memories have faded or have been lost entirely through the years. She wrote her memoir as a single mother, long after the events of childhood were behind her. When Karr writes about the death of her grandmother, she is not particularly sad when the mean, critical woman dies of cancer. She remembers capitalizing on sympathy from neighbors—tears, she said, could manifest free Popsicles. At least that’s how Karr remembers it. Her sister Lecia might say otherwise. “If I gave my big sister a paragraph here,” she writes, “she would correct my memory. To this

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day, she claims that she genuinely mourned for the old lady, who was a kindly soul, and that I was too little and mean-spirited then to remember things right” (47). Karr’s decision to defer to her sister accomplishes two things. It acknowledges that some of her memories have faded over time, which lends an element of sincerity to the text. It also flips the narrative and introduces an alternate reality, since her sister’s version of the memory is drastically different than hers.

This move is what Schacter refers to as transience, the natural process of forgetting. The past fades with new experiences, details are forgotten with age, and the neural connections that encode information weaken over time, he says. According to researchers Delys Sargeant and Anne Unkenstein, authors of *Remembering Well: How Memory Works and What to Do When It Doesn’t*, there are essentially two kinds of memory. Immediate memory is information that is received but not organized or processed in a way that is meaningful, like the phone number of a new acquaintance or a list of items to get at the grocery store. Enduring memory is information that is processed or manipulated in some way, and then stored for later retrieval. We may repeat it, spell it or write it down in order to give it meaning. A new friend’s birthday may be easier to remember if it’s the day before your mother’s birthday, for example. The area of the brain where information is transformed from immediate memory to enduring memory is the parahippocampal gyrus, located deep inside the left temporal lobe (Schacter 24). To understand how the past is forgotten, researchers point to the work of neurobiologist Joseph Tsien, who identified the NMDA receptor, a gene that facilitates retention. The receptor, which is found in neurons in the brain, creates a protein that assists the flow of information from one neuron to another. When the neurons are active at the same time, information is transmitted across the synapse, or the space between the two neurons. When this transmission is successful, a circuit is completed and an enduring memory is made. When it is unsuccessful, forgetting is likely to occur (Schacter 38).

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In another scene, where her father is driving the family to a restaurant to celebrate her birthday, Karr begins by writing about what she cannot remember but only assumes happened because it has happened before:

I don't remember our family driving across the Orange Bridge to get to the Bridge City café that evening. Nor do I remember eating the barbecued crabs, which is a shame, since I love those crabs for their sweet grease and liquid-smoke taste. I don't remember how much Mother drank in that bayou café, where you could walk to the end of the dock after dinner and toss your leftover hush puppies to hungry alligators. My memory comes back into focus when we're drawing close to the Orange Bridge on the way home. From my spot in the backseat...I want to see Mother's face, to see which way her mood is drifting after all the wine. But I'm staring at the back of her head in its short, wild tangle of auburn curls (137).

Karr's focus is not on the cuisine or the bayou café or even the hungry alligators. It is on the emotional state of her mother, a woman whose dramatic shifts in mood will shape the lives of her two children for years to come. Later in the scene, Karr's mother grabs the steering wheel in an attempt to drive off the bridge. Her father fends off her mother by hitting her, which the girls know because they hear "a loud noise in the front seat like a branch cracking." The scene ends as the two are fighting on the front yard, with the whole neighborhood watching. Karr begins the section by telling us what she cannot recall, but when her emotions are pulled into the scene because of her mother's shifting mental state, her memories return. Karr's decision to write like this shows readers how precarious and sensitive she is to her mother's despair. The effect is much more powerful than if Karr had simply told readers that she was, at that moment on the bridge, worried about her mother's feelings.

In a 2009 interview with *The Paris Review*, Karr explained why some of her memories are clearer than others. "Certain moments are vividly conceived during adrenaline rushes—falling in love, thinking

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you're about to get hit by a bus," she said. "But the brain isn't a file cabinet. As I age, my memory fades... Plus, sometimes what you forget says as much psychologically as what you remember."

### **When Memories Are Elusive**

Blocking occurs when there is information we know that we know, but we cannot retrieve it, often because it is emotionally charged. Blocked memories can range from something as simple as forgetting a friend's last name to something more serious, like suppressed abuse. Schacter observes that people typically remember recent traumatic events in vivid detail, but under the right circumstances, they can block those experiences almost entirely (80). University of Oregon psychologist Michael Anderson has conducted extensive studies on selective retrieval, showing that people who have unwanted memories can push them out of awareness. According to neurological imaging, this cognitive unconsciousness is associated with reduced activity in the hippocampal region of the brain (associated with memory encoding and retrieval) and increased activity in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex. Anderson and his partner, Benjamin Levy, determined that the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex worked to disengage, or shut off, the hippocampal region of the brain, resulting in suppression of undesirable memories (Anderson and Levy 191). In 1998, the question of traumatic amnesia was put to the test when a Toronto woman named Cynthia Anthony pleaded not guilty to a charge of killing her month-old baby. During the trial, photographs of the baby triggered a memory that she had not recollected during the police investigation—that she had tripped over a television cord and dropped her infant onto hard ceramic tile. A psychiatrist testified on her behalf, telling to the jury that severe and sudden trauma can account for such extreme cases of memory blocking. Anthony was ultimately acquitted of the murder charge (cited in Schacter 79-80).

As Karr continues *The Liars' Club*, details of her previously blocked memory begin to reveal themselves. One hundred and forty pages after she introduces "the dim shape" of her unwanted memory, the traumatic events unfold in the book's most emotionally intense scene. In it, Karr's mother is in the

midst of mental collapse; she is burning the children's belongings in a backyard bonfire, ransacking the house in a drunken rage and finally, standing at the doorway to her daughters' bedroom with a kitchen knife in her hand.

Memory returns to Karr through sensory triggers: the smells of turpentine and lighter fluid, the familiar pattern made by the setting sun against her bedroom window, and the shade of pink lipstick in her mother's scrawl on the bathroom mirror. Karr explains how she psychologically removed herself from the moment as it occurred, giving readers cause to understand why she would have blocked it from her memory for so long. "No sooner do I choke down that scream than a miracle happens," she writes. "A very large pool of quiet in my head starts to spread. Lecia's face shrinks back like somebody in the wrong end of your telescope. Then even Mother's figure starts to alter and fade" (155-6). By delaying the revelation of this emotional experience, Karr shows how the magnitude of the moment, and the subsequent blocking of it, shaped the rest of her childhood. The decision to allow the memory to be blocked until the middle pages of the book, rather than revealing it in the opening chapter, illustrates how deeply she was affected by her mother's emotional collapse. The event, and how Karr endured it by disappearing into herself, became a defining moment in her childhood—and a defining moment in the pages of her memoir.

### **When We Misremember**

Misattribution happens when the memory is present, but some part of it is wrong. This distortion of memory could present itself as *déjà vu*, the nagging feeling that most of us have had that we are reliving a previous experience. Or it could manifest in something more serious, such as the wrongful conviction of a criminal based on inaccurate eyewitness testimony. The infrequent but intense feeling of *déjà vu* is often interpreted as evidence for the existence of reincarnation, but science sees it as false memory. In a *New York Times Magazine* article in 2012, Evan Ratliff described the research of Canadian

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cognitive psychologist Endel Tulving, who in the 1970s discovered a distinction between episodic memories (memories of our experiences and events in our lives) and semantic memories (facts and information we remember). When we recall an experience, we tend to do so in pieces and flashes that may not be linear. As we summon our episodic memories, we mentally recreate, or relive, the original experience as we see it in the present, Tulving said. That feeling of familiarity that comes when recreating a memory further validates the belief that we are reliving an experience that was real. Schacter reports that brain activity is similar whether people are remembering memories that are true or memories that are false. Both the frontal lobes and the inner temporal lobe near the hippocampus are active in true and false recognition, which could explain why people so adamantly stick to their so-called memories even after those memories have been proven false.

In *Firebird: A Memoir*, Mark Doty recalls moments so vivid that readers picture them like frames from an art film: the cool darkness of his local movie theater, the tea-like stains of his grandfather's tobacco spit, and the "jagged curve of black wire pulling together a violet seam" (25) of the cut his father suffers when he falls on broken glass. By first examining these clear memories, we can more easily make sense of the distorted ones that come later. Doty's memoir is about growing up gay and finding voice as a poet, but it primarily explores his relationship with an artistically talented but alcoholic-dependent mother who he loves intensely but feels he disappoints by being gay. In chapter six, he describes the afternoon she caught him singing in his bedroom dressed in drag as Judy Garland. Later in the book, she pulls a gun on him one day after school. "I can only see us—they—through a diminishing lens, the telescope's wrong end: they're tiny, in the impossibly elongated hall, the mother swaying a little from side to side in order to maintain her balance, her eye lined up with the sight at the top of the pistol, lined up with the heart of the boy, who stands with his hands at his side, as if in acquiescence," he writes (177).

Interestingly, both Doty and Karr describe pivotal emotional moments as though they were looking through the wrong end of a telescope. The use of such a metaphor, which appears often in

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literature, conveys a sense of withdrawing from reality and shifting perception, perhaps as a coping mechanism. Lewis Carroll's fictional Alice in *Alice in Wonderland* saw things as too small or too big, and even became small herself after slipping down the rabbit hole. Carroll used the metaphor to explore identity, perception and the changes people go through, particularly during the move from adolescence to adulthood.

Doty's vivid recollections in *Firebird* are powerful and significant, but his most effective and meaningful memory is one that is distorted to the point of misattribution. In it, Doty remembers his childhood friend, Mikey, who is teased for being mentally disabled. Doty comes home from school one afternoon to find police cars in the driveway at Mikey's house. The boy's father has shot and killed his family, including Mikey, and then himself (61). Decades later, Doty finally learns the truth about this false memory, and the truth that emerges from distortion is the most striking revelation in *Firebird*:

Thirty-seven years later I'll have dinner with my father in a Tucson steakhouse, and we'll set to reminiscing about East Twenty-second Street, that raw, dusty corridor where the wind pushed the tumbleweeds down the middle of the street. He'll say, "Remember when that woman killed her family?" And I'll say, "Wasn't it the father?" but in fact I've got it wrong. And maybe that's why I can't remember the reaction of the boy I was to the erasure of a family, to the detonation of a parent's rage: I wasn't paying attention, exactly, to the facts of the story; I was revising it into something I could bear (62).

This steakhouse conversation reveals Doty's innermost truth: as a boy, he was so enamored with his mother that he could not comprehend the horror of a mother killing her own family. Just as Mikey was teased for being disabled, so was Doty disdained for being gay—and the biggest source of contempt for Doty's homosexuality was his own mother. The notion that his mother's shame would drive her to consider murder is too much for him to bear.

In a 1999 review in *The New York Times*, Michael Upchurch notes that Doty tips off readers in *Firebird's* prelude that distortion and the correction of distortion will play important roles in his memoir. Doty opens with a description of a *perspectyfkas*, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch perspective box with multiple lenses through which viewers see the box's contents. From one angle, the contents are distorted. From another, they are clear. "Maybe around some corner, at some angle I'll finally discover, if I lean into the eyepiece, if my eye works hard enough to probe the hidden recesses—I'll find them...the family I can't seem to see through any more direct means," he writes. "They are hard to approach; they don't want to be known. Memory confounds and veils them, and were they ever clear to begin with?" (6).

### **The Power of Suggestion**

Research also shows our tendency to incorporate information from outside sources into memory. When we remember something, the information is rarely recalled exactly as it was received. Suggestibility is why judges sometimes order juries to be sequestered. Psychologists Henry Roediger and Kathleen McDermott experimented with suggestibility and its influence on false memory. Their test subjects were read a list of associated words, such as "thread," "pin," "sewing," "sharp" and "point." Later, subjects were asked which words they had been read. Subjects often recalled hearing the word "needle" though it had not been read to them (cited in Schacter 98).

In *Firebird*, Doty occasionally recasts people from his past, including members of his own family, as actors and actresses from movies. For example, his neighbor, Vi, comes over with her husband to play pinochle and crazy eights with Doty's parents, only to end the evening in some kind of argument. This recreation reveals to readers the significance of art and film in Doty's life, as well as how the imaginative world of make-believe has colored his childhood experiences. He writes, "Vi is a total blank to me: I find that my memory has completely replaced her with Vivian Vance: broad-hipped, salty and vivacious, quick with a retort" (92).

For Patricia Hampl, the illuminating falsehoods that turn up in first drafts often lead to greater revelations of truth. In her essay, “Memory and Imagination,” Hampl observes that writing from sheer memory is a myth because other elements, whether they are associations or suggestions from outside sources, are bound to creep in: “No memoirist writes for long without experiencing an unsettling disbelief about the reliability of memory, a hunch that memory is not, after all, just memory” (25). In this revealing essay about her first piano lesson, Hampl recalls how the first draft of her text included a particular music book decorated with pictures of children and animals. She later realizes that she didn’t actually own the book but envied children who did. She allows the book to exist in revised versions of her essay. In doing so, the book becomes a symbol that reveals the deepest meaning of the piece.

If we, as readers, were given opportunity to read only Hampl’s revised draft of the piano lesson, in which the music book is scrubbed out in the name of accuracy, we would never know the significance of the author’s distorted memory. With the distortion, we get a direct line into her consciousness. The red music book is the embodiment of the author’s desire: “Now I can look at that music book and see it not only as a detail but for what it is, how it acts. See it as the small red door leading straight into the dark room of my childhood longing and disappointment. That book *becomes* the palpable evidence of that longing” (31).

### **Losing Our Places**

Absent-mindedness occurs when information fails to become part of our memory because we are distracted, aging or ill. It is the reason we can drive home after work and arrive in our driveways without any memory of having driven there. Mistakes of absent-mindedness can range from something annoying like misplacing the car keys to something alarming like forgetting your identity. Research shows that absent-mindedness is most likely to occur when a person is distracted just as the brain is receiving new information. The distraction interrupts the encoding process, so the new information is never developed

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as enduring memory. Neuroimaging tests have shown that research subjects asked to perform two tasks at once have less activity in the lower left part of the frontal lobe, the area that plays a vital role in encoding (Schacter 44-7).

In *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales*, neurologist Oliver Sacks details the cases of his patients, many of whom have suffered memory loss due to certain medical conditions. One patient, Jimmie, has lost the ability to create new memories because of a neurological disorder called Korsakoff's syndrome. In the book, Jimmie thinks it is still 1945, that he is nineteen years old and fresh out of the Navy. He has lost the ability to remember events, even those that occurred only moments earlier. Mira Bartok, author of *The Memory Palace: A Memoir*, suffered a brain injury following a car crash, rendering some of her memories lost both temporarily and permanently. In her elegant and compassionate memoir, Bartok, who is an artist and children's book author, sets out to reexamine her life. While rediscovering her art and her past, she reunites with her mother, a once-talented pianist whose life has been ravaged by schizophrenia. Throughout the book, Bartok triggers her memory with certain objects, particularly pieces of art or her mother's belongings, and she uses these triggers to tell the stories of her past:

I held the photo album up to my nose. It smelled like my mother used to smell—cigarettes and Tabu, her favorite perfume—our sense of smell, the strongest trigger of all, the only sense that travels directly into the limbic system in our brain. I thought of my mother's small white face in the hospital bed, her delicate, cold hands. Then another picture of her rose up in my mind, her hands hovering over mine at the piano—a younger Norma; my mother in the bloom of life, a dark-eyed beauty in a red silk dress, her face unreadable, listening to something no one else can hear (31).

In that sentence, which is long and lovely, Bartok writes exactly as memories come—impulsively and associatively. The act of remembering takes her places she did not know existed until she smelled her

mother's favorite perfume. Her decision to let objects unlock the past mimics the neurological process of using sensory cues to trigger memory and rediscover her mother, as well as her own identity.

In her 2009 memoir, *Past Forgetting: My Memory of Lost and Found*, Jill Robinson writes about the slow process of memory retrieval after brain trauma. The work, which is based on her own amnesia following an epileptic seizure, reflects on how certain memories are lost while others remain and whether emotion influences recollection. Robinson's text begins in a fragmentary style—short sentences, short paragraphs. This slightly broken language and piecemeal cognition appropriately conveys her experience to readers. She is fresh from a coma, using her observational skills to figure out who she is and what has happened. As she grapples with finding her place, so do readers:

It is night. Someone brawny is sitting beside me. "Hello..."—male voice—"now have some soup." He tries to feed me. I can't taste the name of it. "You could have drowned," he is telling me, "but you got out of the pool somehow."

I touch his arm lightly. "This is very patient, nice of you to sit here with me."

"I am your husband."

"I know—but I don't know." Tears. "If you know what I mean" (2).

### **When the Mind Consumes**

When we cannot help but recall things we would rather forget, it is called persistence. In one study, psychologist Kevin Ochsner showed subjects a series of positive, negative and neutral photographs. Later he asked them which photos they recognized. They recalled more positive and negative pictures (smiling babies and disfigured faces, for example) than neutral pictures (such as plain buildings). When Ochsner asked questions about the positive photos, his subjects said the images were familiar. When he asked about the negative photos, subjects recalled specifically what they thought and felt at the time they first saw the pictures. Ochsner's research (cited in Schacter 164-5) showed that our attention is drawn to

that which is emotionally charged. Trauma, shock and sadness can lead to persistence thoughts, and persistent thoughts lead to obsession.

In *My Brother*, a memoir about a sibling who is dying from AIDS, Jamaica Kincaid uses a distinctive, cyclical style of prose to explore the complexities of familial relationships and the meandering nature of memory. The book is characterized by disturbing thoughts of death and intense honesty regarding how we feel about the people we are supposed to love. By examining the illness and, ultimately, the passing of her brother, Kincaid also explores her deteriorated, precarious relationship with her mother, of whom the author is not particularly fond. Kincaid's writing style is obsessive; she often repeats words and phrases that conjure intense images of suffering and resentment. Her sentences are long and rambling, bordering on distracting. She presents memories without context, over and over, in the same way that people retell parts of their lives that are painful. As readers, we understand through her chosen writing style that she is attempting to come to terms with the horrible details of not only her brother's death, but also of her childhood: "Whatever made me talk about him, whatever made me think of him, was not love, just something else, but not love; love being the thing I felt for my family, the one I have now, but not for him, or the people I am from, not love, but a powerful feeling all the same, only not love (51).

Joan Didion writes similarly in her book, *Blue Nights*, in which she describes the devastation of losing her 39-year-old daughter, Quintana Roo, to illness. *Blue Nights* is a companion text to Didion's earlier work, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, which is the story of her husband's sudden death. Unlike Kincaid, Didion's prose in *Blue Nights* is characterized by short sentences and short paragraphs that serve to slow down the narration in a way that implies fragmentation of thought. She repeats certain words and phrases exactly as a troubled mother would, ruminating on haunting memories and pain she cannot escape:

"You have your wonderful memories," people said later, as if memories were solace.

Memories are not. Memories are by definition of times past, things gone. Memories are the Westlake uniforms in the closet, the faded and cracked photographs, the invitations to the

weddings of the people who are no longer married, the mass cards from the funerals of the people whose faces you no longer remember. Memories are what you no longer want to remember (64).

When she was five or six years old, Quintana told her mother that when someone dies, those who survive shouldn't dwell on the death. But in *Blue Nights*, Didion does exactly that—she dwells. She ponders and persists, through repeated phrases and rhetorical questions that convey to the reader a sense of persistent thought. The repetition becomes most obsessive in the last several chapters, where Didion's writing style mimics the turbulent thoughts swirling inside the mind of a tormented mother:

The light outside was already darkening. The summer was already ending and she was still upstairs in the ICU overlooking the river and the surgeon was saying she wasn't in great condition when they put her there.

In other words she was dying.

I now knew she was dying.

There was now no way to avoid knowing it. There would now be no way to believe the doctors when they tried not to seem discouraging...She would die. She would not necessarily die that night, she would not necessarily die the next day, but we were now on track to the day she would die.

August 26 was the day she would die" (159-60).

Hamna Zubair, a writer for the media outlet Dawn.com, wrote in a book review of *Blue Nights* that Didion's relentless questioning and intense self-examination give insight to readers about her emotional status. "Enough of Didion's trademark literary cool is intact for us to appreciate how she leaves a trail of questions unanswered in the wake of her narrative, forcing us to form our own opinions about her behavior," Zubair writes. "Vivid imagery and relentless repetition do the rest of the work, giving *Blue Nights* a haunting poeticism that echoes Didion's inner distress."

## When Memories are Filtered

Schacter's seventh sin of memory is the distortion of bias, or remembering past experiences through the filter of some other frame of knowledge. He divides bias into five categories: change, consistency, stereotype, egocentric and hindsight. Most relevant to memoir is hindsight, which involves filtering experiences of the past through knowledge held in the present. Here, the literary use of hindsight and the neuroscientific explanation of hindsight diverge; what science sees as a distortion of memory is, for memoir, a critical component of storytelling. It is how writers make sense of their experiences and how they convey that perspective of understanding to their readers.

To examine this type of bias, scientists asked a group of subjects on the day before the 1980 presidential election (which was, of course, held on a Tuesday) to make a prediction about who would win—Ronald Reagan or Jimmy Carter. Other subjects were asked on Wednesday who they would have predicted would win had they been asked to do so on Tuesday. Those who were asked on Wednesday predicted a much higher percentage of votes for Reagan, the ultimate winner, than for Carter (Schacter 147). The experiment showed the social influence of knowing the reality of a situation after it has occurred—or what can be considered the “I knew it all along” mentality.

When it comes to writing, however, hindsight emerges as something entirely different. Hindsight in memoir happens when a writer finds some new element of awareness, knowledge or clarity that allows her to see the past in a more illuminated light—or what could be called the “what I didn't know then” mentality. The ability to look back at an event or series of events with this new frame of awareness need not distort or falsify the writer's memories. It need not diminish the memory or attempt to reconstruct the past. Rather, it serves to add a dimension of understanding that the writer did not previously have access to. Once the deeper understanding is reached, the writer can put the experience into proper context or perspective, for herself as well as for her readers.

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In his critique of the genre, Sven Birkerts, author of *The Art of Time in Memoir: Then, Again*, contends that hindsight is what distinguishes memoir from autobiography. Without hindsight, writers simply recount the events of their past. With it, they connect their past to their present, which allows them to make meaning of their life experiences. “The point—the glory—of memoir is that it anchors its authority in the actual life; it is a modeling of the process of creative self-inquiry as it is applied to the stuff of lived experience,” Birkerts writes. “Through its careful manipulation of vantage point it simulates the subjective sense of experience apprehended through memory and the corrective actions of hindsight” (190-1). If memories are the bricks in memoir, then hindsight is the mortar. Or, as Vivian Gornick might say, hindsight is the tool writers use to connect their situation (the circumstances of their lives) to their story (the emotional experience of their lives). In *The Situation and The Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*, she writes that connecting to story is what reveals the memoirist’s most authentic truth. “What happened to the writer is not what matters,” she contends. “What matters is the larger sense that the writer is able to make of what happened” (92).

In the first chapter of *The Tender Bar: A Memoir*, J.R. Moehringer describes his father, Johnny Michaels, as a popular New York City radio personality. Even though his father was absent, Moehringer listened to him growing up, and referred to him as The Voice. The passage reveals the sense that Moehringer makes of his actions and circumstances, but more importantly how those actions and circumstances open to a specific element of the author’s sense of self:

When Grandma and Grandpa went to war over the grocery money, when Aunt Ruth threw something against the wall in anger, I’d press my ear close to the radio and The Voice would tell me something funny or play me a song by Peppermint Rainbow. I listened so ardently to The Voice, achieved such mastery at shutting out other voices, that I became a prodigy at selective listening, which I thought was a gift until it proved to be a curse. Life is all a matter

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of choosing which voices to tune in and which to tune out, a lesson I learned long before most people, but one that took me longer than most to put to good use (17).

In *The Liars' Club*, the author carefully balances two personas. She presents the innocent, unguarded observations of Mary Karr the child with the insightful, discerning perspectives of Mary Karr the survivor. What connects the two personas is hindsight; her voice is in the scene relaying the situation but it is also somewhere floating above, telling the story from a more reflective vantage point. In a scene that takes place at the zoo, Karr describes how her mother seems restless and confined, like a panther stuck in a cage: "Looking back from this distance, I can see Mother trapped in some way, stranded in her own silence... Sometimes seeing her that way in memory, I want to offer her a glass of water, or suggest that she lie down in the shade of the willow behind her" (55). It is hindsight, revealed by the phrase "from this distance," that connects Karr the child at the zoo to Karr the adult daughter of a mentally unstable mother. It casts the zoo experience in a context that can only be fully understood and appreciated after Karr has grown up, after she has become an adult herself and can view her memory through a lens of maturity and experience.

In the second chapter of *The Memory Palace*, Bartok describes a photograph in which her schizophrenic mother is holding Mira the newborn. "If you could see the entire picture, you would notice me on my mother's lap looking up at her, smiling," she writes. "What you can't tell from the photo is that not long after it was taken, my mother tried to fly out of a second-story window" (33). Only through hindsight, the kind that results from a lifetime spent with a mentally-ill mother, can Bartok the adult author truly "see the entire picture." Only through hindsight can she show that picture to her readers—because without it, the picture is incomplete.

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## Why Bother With Memoir?

In “Memory and Imagination,” Hampl explores the “little lies” that reveal themselves in first drafts of memoir—lies that are more telling than facts, she says, because they lead to places where undiscovered truths reside. Even Hampl, known for her introspective and honest essays, questions the point of memoir, given the subjective nature of memory. But memoir, she says, is a hybrid form that mimics the quality of the memories from which it is made. It can only be what it is—a personal perspective on why certain events in our lives occurred in the manner that they did:

Memoir must be written because each of us must possess a created version of the past. Created: that is, real in the sense of tangible, made of the stuff of a life lived in place and in history. And the downside of any created thing as well: We must live with a version that attaches us to our limitations, to the inevitable subjectivity of our points of view. We must acquiesce to our experience and our gift to transform experience into meaning. You tell me your story, I'll tell you mine (32).

According to Birkerts, the literary critic, it is fair and reasonable to hold journalistic writing up to the demands of absolute truth. Newspapers report truth. Documentaries investigate subjects or events. They must be factually accurate. But that doesn't work with the genre of memoir, he says. If everyone has a different definition of absolute truth based on their personal biases, experiences and perceptions, then what frame of reference do we use to establish what is true and what is fabrication? Memoir is not so much about the true recounting of events as it is about how the author made psychological sense of those events. To debate otherwise is to miss the point of memoir entirely. “Every memoir,” Birkerts writes, “is a more or less successful working out of the old Socratic injunction: ‘Know thyself.’ The pressure on the individual to find meaning—an integrated narrative of personal experience—is as intense as it has ever been, and the need for exemplary works, for vicarious enactments, is, if anything, growing” (190).

If the neuroscience is correct and human beings are biologically prone to manipulating their experiences in order to create and recall memories, then what is the value of memoir and how does this information fit into the ways writers conceive the genre? One might ask, if memory is intrinsically prone to distortion, then why not simply refer to all memoir as fiction?—but such a question is overly simplistic and not conducive to substantive discussions of memoir as study into the genre itself progresses.

Sometimes the truth of memory lies not in its reality but in its distortion, which is something that expert memoirists have discovered and used to express the meaning of their experiences, and with this research into the brain functions of memory, we have new ways to understand the stories we shape into memoir. The effect of this neuroscientific research on how memories are created and how they deteriorate has profound implications for how memoirists come to understand the stories that shape their lives. Writers who understand the neuroscience of memory can use the absences and the distortions of their memories to reveal their deepest truths. Sometimes the story lies not in what we remember, but in how we misremember. If we can understand that our brains do not manipulate us into deception on the page, we can start to consider the reasons and implications for how and why we remember what we do, which provides new avenues for deep memoir.

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