



Daniel Nester

Straddling the Working Class Memoir

I'd been writing about the past for so long I couldn't see an end. That's not exactly promising for any writing, much less a coming-of-age memoir, whose last chapters must demonstrate I had, in fact, Come Of Age. An agent told me on the phone that, to make the book more sellable, I needed to go on a road trip and end the book with 'That Reunion Scene from Other Memoirs, the one that appears in many books' third acts.

You know that scene. Our memoirist, now grown up, sends an Insane or Eccentric Parent a copy of their manuscript, the one that tells their story. Later, they meet at a coffee shop. The memoirist asks the Insane or Eccentric Parent if he or she had read the manuscript that tells their story.

"I did," the Insane or Eccentric Parent says. "And you know what? You got it *right*."

They embrace, and the memoirist walks tall into a tidy denouement.

Another agent, in an otherwise polite rejection, wrote the following:

I'm afraid we can't sell working class memoirs, much less by a white male with no drug addiction or criminal past... We do much better with middle-class memoirs, such as ones by [Name Redacted] and [Name Redacted], preferably with a voyage of some sort, and a life lesson.

Up until reading that email, I had never thought of my memoir's story in terms of class, middle or working or otherwise. It's entirely possible I'd been talking to the wrong agents. I also considered another possibility: many memoirs don't take place in the same world as mine did.

My memoir, *Shader*, tells the story of my growing up in a very Catholic family in Maple Shade, New Jersey, a blue collar town near Philadelphia. Its cast of characters includes a truck driver father, a salt-of-the-earth mother, and a designer jeans-wearing sister. It's about record stores and the nerds who frequent them. It's about my working at a car wash, the humiliating rites of puberty, being the first person in my family to attend college, and discovering the world beyond my small hometown.

It tells, in other words, a working class story.

A word about the words *working class*. Thirty years after the memoir takes place, definitions of working class must now address several different, even conflicting criteria. Are we talking about household incomes? Education levels? Do we include self-consciously downwardly mobile bohemians? Wage slave temps? Underpaid academics? My personal definition of working class comes my 1980's childhood: people who work with their hands and bodies for someone else's economic benefit.

One day, more recent than I would like to admit, I searched for "working class" in my Word document. I came up with four results.

This number seemed low. I couldn't help but ask: Am I ashamed of identifying as working class? Not exactly. More like ambivalent. When I was growing up, the moment I realized there was something called the working class and that I was part of it, I couldn't wait to escape it and never return. While other guys in my town worked on their cars, played street hockey, and got in rock fights, I read *Mad* magazine, practiced trombone, and collected new wave records. There was no question I didn't fit in. Decades after moving away, after years of college and graduate school and working in offices and classrooms, I realized I had just as much, if not more things, in common with folks in my working stiff hometown than the middle class world which I inhabit now.

There's a term for people like me. I am a "straddler," someone raised working class who moved into the middle class and now straddles two worlds, two identities, two temperaments, two narratives.

Alfred Lubrano, author of *Limbo: Blue-Collar Roots, White-Collar Dreams*, popularized this term for those who begin life in the working-class world and end up middle class. “I am two people,” Lubrano begins his book. “I now live a middle-class life, working at a white-collar newspaperman’s job, but I was born blue collar. I’ve never quite reconciled the dichotomy” (1).

We never said we were working class in my family. Never. We considered ourselves middle class. If I am honest about it, I’d say we were descended into poverty for stretches. Several Christmases, my parents scraped together generic knock-offs of toys my sister and I put on our lists. My dad worked as a truck driver for over thirty years. He wasn’t a long-haul trucker like in the movies, a lovable tough guy who cruises interstates in a convoy with a CB and a chimpanzee sidekick. Mike Nester wore trucker hats unironically. He loaded up trucks with 55-gallon drums and made local deliveries on the overnight shift. I remember my dad walking out to his rusted-out Impala, a Fred Flintstone–style lunch box under his arm, leaving for night shift work as my sister and I got home from school. My mom worked part-time at my Catholic elementary school. In the morning, she scooped the tail-ends of lipstick tubes out with her pinky.

In my town, adults worked on their cars and lawns, and kids played sports and drank beer in the woods. We were among millions of working-class people in the United States who lived in working-class towns doing working-class work, as my grandmom liked to say, *one paycheck ahead of the next guy*.

Life as a straddler presents one dichotomy; writing memoir as a straddler presents another. Memoir tells the story, essentially, of a person’s transformation or finding an identity. It accounts for the making of a person, an apprenticeship in discovering oneself. A straddler’s identity, already split into two, can’t present a tidy progression from past to present. This is perhaps one reason why Frank Conroy’s *Stop-Time*, which lives in a world of cruel poverty and working class subsistence, uses double-perspective narration to deepen our sense of where our story ends up. In a short prologue and epilogue which take place ten years

after the last chapter, we deduce our narrator has turned out alright. He lives with his wife in a small house in the English countryside, where he writes in the afternoons. “Life was good,” he writes, “and conditions were perfect for my work” (10). But we also sense something is amiss. He races his Jaguar into London to play piano, and on the way home runs lights and drives in the wrong lane, anything “to maintain the speed and streak through the dark world” (10). Conroy, “blinded by some mysterious mixture of guilt, moroseness, and desire,” straddles present and past, but just barely holds on. You can find this double perspective through flashbacks, stories-within-stories, *mise en abymes* in straddler memoirs such as Mary Karr’s *The Liar’s Club* or Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, where the teller finds her place in the world, but doesn’t prize ownership of truth over the search for it, or draws straight lines from innocence to experience to wisdom.

I only mention “working class” once myself: the other three mentions appear in quotes. In an early chapter, I classify my hometown, Maple Shade, New Jersey, as a “working class town” surrounded by other very well-off municipalities. Even using the term for pure explication reads as cold and clinical, like the staccato exposition of an NPR correspondent reporting on the strange ways of a distant country. The lack of mentions may also qualify as my abiding by that old writing workshop axiom: “show, don’t tell.” It may also mean I am uncomfortable, as I suspect many working class writers are, with memoirs that employ moving out the working class as a plot device, where one’s background is something to be overcome and defeated.

As a newly-minted straddler memoirist, I’ve grown obsessed over distinctions: rich, middle class, voluntarily downwardly mobile, working class, working class with an asterisk. The website for Payday, “devoted to exploring working class art and life,” features a bibliography of “North American Working Class Autobiographies.” Included in the list are books “by middle class authors who, for one reason or

another, take up working class life for a time.” I find this distinction absurd, even a bit comical; it summons up visions of faux working class memoirs that stress a time-specific hardship, where our memoirist goes native by mimicking our values with the proletariat karaoke of trucker hats, tattoos, and Dickies. In the introduction to her collection of working class women’s writing, *Without a Net*, Michelle Tea discusses her frustration with the *Nickel and Dimed*, Barbara Ehrenreich’s bestselling account of performing working-class jobs, which she called a “well-paid slumming vacation.” “Where are the stories of the poor people who don’t get to leave these lives when the story is completed?” Tea asks. Working class people rarely get to tell their own stories and are usually written *about*, and even then, she writes, “it’s always the tragedy that is documented.”

It is tempting for working class writers to write only about the hard times and to describe the world of their childhood--parents, siblings, hometowns--with the broad brush of saintly, static wisdom. This happens even in the best working class memoirs, and Elizabeth Bidinger, in *The Ethics of Working Class Autobiography*, describes this problem as “not just a literary one but a human one, the challenge of characterizing a way of life that is different from the author’s present, without presenting the people who live it as monolithic, ossified, and ‘other’”(32).

Straddler memoirists write elegies, not tragedies. They know they’ve crossed over, that where they’re from no longer exists. It’s like the South Jersey accent I once had and can’t get back: no one speaks that way anymore. The accent has evolved. Straddler memoirists must find ways to tell an old story in a new voice.

“I’m like Boxer, the horse in *Animal Farm*,” my dad used to say. “They’ll work me until I die.” He stopped working, but not of his own volition, when the trucking company went belly up in 1980. I saw first-hand what it looks like when a man is demoralized by not being able to work, how a man feels useless when he can’t feed his kids. I also realized there were people who could not afford things, people like us, and there

were others who did not give money a second thought. I wanted to help. I didn't know what to do. So I got a job.

Starting in fifth grade, I had started work after school for the janitor at my church. I liked getting an envelope of money to support my substantial Pac Man and new wave cassettes habit. When things got leaner at home, when we put a kerosene heater in the middle of the living room to save on heating bills, I got a better-paying job, this time at a car wash, where for the next five years—weekends, summers, days off—I wiped down windshields and bumpers as they came off the track. I enjoyed the work, but I didn't want to stay in a working-class town filled with tough guys and jocks with a low tolerance for kids who walked around town with a boom box with new wave cassettes.

In his essay "Terror of Mentors," Philip Lopate describes his own "working class mistrust of the university environment" (159). It's a mistrust I shared negotiating my college surroundings, especially the first years, when I would move back and forth between the worlds of manual labor and academe. College didn't make sense until I met Afaa Michael Weaver. Weaver worked at a factory for years before he went on to become an award-winning poet and professor, and it was in his classroom that I first found a way to straddle blue and white collar worlds on the page. I learned that I didn't need to hide working-class traits—gruff speech, showing emotion in public, a love of low culture—as I made my way in the world of writing. My point of view mattered. I may have left my working class town but the working class attitudes came along with me. I still work like a dog, speak plainly at meetings when I shouldn't, curse a too much, and laugh loudly, perhaps too loudly, at the corniest of jokes.

Writing my memoir, I learned working class objects appear more distant in the mirror than they appeared. Eventually they catch up to you. In a bit of method acting memoir research, I recently took my car through an old school car wash, the kind that still employs wipers who towel down their car. I wanted to

bring back the five-plus years I spent outdoors, wire-brushing whitewalls, toweling down hoods, and power-spraying bumpers. That afternoon, as the track pulled my car through the soap sprays and pirouetting brushes, no one appeared to swarm around with Windex and towels. They were attending to some high-roller type who was complaining about how the antenna on his Mercedes had been bent from the brushes. I was going to speak up so someone could dry off my little Honda, but instead grabbed a couple rags and did it myself. All the familiar body movements from five years working at a car wash came back: my arms spread across front bumper, hood, my back tilted to swipe the side doors; then, finally, the windshield. When I finished, my muscles remembered those aches from 30 years ago, when I would perform these same tasks on 500, 600 cars in one day.

For those of us who write about working and growing up working class, the past doesn't disappear. It's not something we reject or grow out of or adopt for a period of time. For straddlers, our working life becomes part of our bodies, like a phantom limb that occasionally twitches. It demands your attention. It wants you to tell your story and get the job done.

Works Cited

- Bidinger, Elizabeth. *The Ethics of Working Class Autobiography: Representation of Family by Four American Authors*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc.: 2006.
- Cline, Cheryl, ed.. "North American Working Class Autobiographies." *Payday* N.p., 30 June 2015. <<http://www.steamiron.com/payday/autobio.html>>.
- Conroy, Frank. *Stop-Time: A Memoir*. New York: Penguin, 1977.
- Karr, Mary. *The Liar's Club*. New York: Penguin, 1996.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. *Woman Warrior: The Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*. New York: Vintage Reprint, 2010.
- Lopate, Phillip. *Portrait of My Body*. New York: Anchor, 1996.
- Lubrano, Alfred. *Limbo: Blue-Collar Roots, White-Collar Dreams*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2004.
- Tea, Michelle, ed. *Without a Net: The Female Experience of Growing Up Working Class (Live Girls)*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2003.