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## Narrative Disruption in Memoir

While reading *Men We Reaped*, by Jesmyn Ward, I was struck by a short passage that describes how things have changed in the narrator's hometown, DeLisle, Mississippi. She writes it used to be that if someone stole your car radio, you would call around until you came up with the name of a suspect. Then you would go to that person's house, make a big scene, and you'd get your radio back. Now . . .

By the time you get to the thief's house in the afternoon, a house that has no electricity and a rotting floor, they will have pawned your radio, and they will have smoked it, and their eyes, jittery in the skull, will slide past you to the red dirt, to the sky, to the trees waving overhead, and they will lie until you gave up to follow the trail elsewhere, until you leave. (Ward 33)

In the middle of describing the confrontation over the stolen radio, the narrator notes the things that the thief's eyes slide to: "the red dirt, to the sky, to the trees waving overhead" (Ward 33). This digression falls in the middle of her circumstantial summary about the effect crack cocaine has had on her town, which interrupts the flow of the sentence; it adds nothing to the sentence's main point. However, in an distanced or objective way, it helps reader better imagine the experience of standing on a front porch and confronting a junkie. A more distanced or objective report of the incident, this kind of digression would feel out of place. Why isn't a disruption in the flow of this narrative experienced as jarring and unnecessary? What in the narrator's approach allows her to get away it, and why is it so effective?

If narrative is the straight-ahead engine of the story, digression is its indirect, yet insistent, emotional heart. Digression interjects points of focus and intensity at unexpected junctures. It reminds us of how thoughts and emotions insert themselves into our own everyday lives. In this way, it creates an

intimacy with the reader. I'd like to suggest four key characteristics of narrative disruption that help explain its effectiveness.

The first, obviously, is that it is disruptive. Just as any artistic gesture has meaning only in relation to something else, disruption requires context. A disruption inserts itself into an established context. It halts the narrative progress and signals there is something—a thought, a reflection, an aside—that must be stated before the narrator goes any further.

Second, it is presented as the narrator's internal voice. The disruption gives the impression that this is something that occurred to the narrator in the middle of telling the story. It lets us enter the mind of the narrator and creates the feeling that we are hearing the narrator's true thoughts on the subject. This is particularly effective in memoir, as memoir requires not only details of a story but also reflection on the story. The narrator in a memoir must show *and* tell. Disruption, experienced as the narrator's thoughts, is a powerful and convincing tool for revealing the narrator's perspective on the story.

Another characteristic is that it tends to intensify the emotion of the narrative. A disruption implies the speaker feels this needs to be said. It communicates urgency and highlights the speaker's emotional relationship with the narrative. Whether or not we share the narrator's perspective, we do know it is something that is important to him/her.

Finally, we experience this disruption as happening in real time, as though the narrator is in the process of thinking and is sharing his/her thoughts as they occur. We have a sense that the narrator isn't merely stating what happened, but is reflecting on the narrative at the moment of writing it.

In another example from *Men We Reap*, these elements of disruption combine to communicate the intensity of the narrator's grief. As she discusses coming home for her brother's funeral, she reveals that this will not be the end of the deaths of young men in her life:

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I had been out of college and without a job for almost a year, but I'd booked a ticket and flown home from New York City for Mardi Gras. This added to my considerable credit card debt. I didn't care. I needed to go home, even if only for three days. My brother was newly dead. I expected him to be alive every day when I woke. On that February day, I did not know he was only the first. It was raining and chilly. We were all subdued . . . (Ward 27)

The narrator interrupts the telling of her trip home to make a statement about the depth of her grief, "I expected him to be alive every day when I woke" (27). While we knew how difficult her brother's death was for her, this sentence helps us more fully realize its emotional weight. It tells us that she was still absorbing her brother's death. The next sentence pulls us completely out of the narrative and into the now: "On that February day, I did not know he was only the first" (27). This enacts the narrator's actual process of thinking. Although the setting is in the past, this insertion is from the present moment, as though the thought came to her in the moment of writing. It foreshadows the deaths that are to come.

Is a digression that enacts the process of thinking a particular feature of memoir? Does memoir more readily allow for these kinds of turns? Perhaps, but not always in the same way. Sr. Helen Prejean, in *Dead Man Walking*, employs much more of a reportorial style than *Men We Reap*. While both memoirs focus on the killing of young men, Prejean is more interested in providing the straightforward story of the men on death row. The narrator still includes her own thoughts and feelings as she details her experiences accompanying these men to their deaths. However, we generally don't see the leaps outside of the narrative that occur with *Men We Reap*. An exception to this is when prayer is introduced into the narrative, such as in this example when an old priest gives communion to Prejean and to Pat Sonnier on the day of Sonnier's execution:

The old priest says prayers in Latin and takes the communion wafer from the container and places it on Pat's tongue, then into my outstretched hand.

"The body of Christ," he says.

“Amen.”

*Yes, in this place I believe that you are here, oh Christ, you who sweat blood and who prayed “aloud on in silent tears” for your Father to remove your own “cup” of suffering. This man about to die is not innocent, but he is human, and that is enough to draw you here.*

The priest leaves. I feel sorry for the old man. (Prejean 81)

The prayer in italics disrupts the report of the communion scene. Although italics are used, nothing in the exposition tells us there is a shift from external description to the narrator’s thoughts in prayer. It is as though, in her urgent desire to respond in some way to the situation, the narrator cannot bother to make the appropriate transitions. As with *Men We Reap*, the abrupt shift intensifies the emotional stakes. It is no coincidence that these unexpected shifts to prayer occur during the most dramatic moments in the book, the last hours of the two men she accompanies to their executions.

A middle ground between these two approaches is evident in Joy Castro’s *The Truth Book*. While the narrator is not as prone to the frequent, quick-cut disruptions as Ward’s narrator, she is willing interrupt the narrative to strongly emphasize a point that adds insight and emotional weight to the story. When the narrator recounts the time she called her stepmother after her father committed suicide, her intention is to thank her stepmother for the kindness shown to her and her son, yet the narrator notes that saying the words is harder than she expected. When the stepmother responds with silence, the narrator becomes nervous and begins to think of all the things she doesn’t say:

I don’t say that I’m taking five courses, or that the dean would give me only two weeks off for childbirth, or that I can’t afford a fifty-cent soft drink between classes. I don’t talk about what it was like to have been the only pregnant student I’d even seen on our country-club campus ragged in my Goodwill clothes and hand-done haircuts against its smooth lawns and pretty brick buildings, or about taking the bus downtown once a month to hear lectures

about the basic food groups so I can get the WIC cards for our orange juice and milk,  
or . . . (Castro 192-193)

Her list of struggles and challenges continues for over a page. About halfway through, she mentions her child. The references to her child increase until the list morphs into all the ways that she has overcome her challenges. Before bringing us back to the phone call with her stepmother, she finishes with this triumphant statement: “I don’t utter the powerful new thought that’s been pulsing through me: *If I can do this, I can do anything*” (Castro 193). The disruption of the list of hardships serves to intensify the emotion. The repetition of “I don’t say . . .” adds an incantatory urgency to the narrator’s situation, and creates a sense of nonstop, overwhelming challenges. The fact that it unexpectedly ends on a positive note gives us the sense that this is being said at the same time it occurs to the narrator.

Disruption is not solely found in memoir. The technique is used widely in contemporary nonfiction and fiction. However, given that memoir taps into the memory of a singular, individual perspective, the technique seems especially well suited for this genre. Disruption does not advance the narrative, instead it helps us understand the emotional world of the narrator. In a genre that derives much of its impact from its relationship with “what really happened,” disruption deepens our identification with the narrator and, as a result, draws us more completely into that person’s story.

## Works Cited

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Prejean, Sister Hellen. *Dead Man Walking*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994. Print.

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