



Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir

William Zinsser (Editor) , Russell Baker (Contributor) , Jill Ker Conway (Contributor) , Annie Dillard (Contributor) , Ian Frazier (Contributor) , Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Contributor) , Alfred Kazin (Contributor) , Frank McCourt (Contributor) , more... Toni Morrison (Contributor) , Eileen Simpson (Contributor) ...less

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An indispensable book by writers who have experienced firsthand the rewards and challenges of crafting a memoir

Anyone undertaking the project of writing a memoir knows that the events, memories, and emotions of the past often resist the orderly structure of a book. *Inventing the Truth* offers wisdom from nine notable memoirists about their process (Ian Frazier searched through generations of family papers to understand his parents' lives), the hurdles they faced (Annie Dillard tackles the central dilemma of memoir: what to put in and what to leave out), and the unexpected joys of bringing their pasts to the page. Featured authors include Russell Baker on *Growing Up*; Jill Ker Conway on *The Road from Coorain*; Annie Dillard on *An American Childhood*; Ian Frazier on *Family*; Henry Louis Gates Jr. on *Colored People*; Alfred Kazin on *A Walker in the City*; Frank McCourt on *Angela's Ashes*; Toni Morrison on *Beloved*; and Eileen Simpson on *Poets in Their Youth*.

Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir Details

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From Reader Review *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* for online ebook

Susan says

I like to write down quotes from books I like, and with this book, I wrote down so many quotes, I just about copied the whole book. One of my favorite essays was from Toni Morrison, and she wrote: "If writing is thinking and discovery and selection and order and meaning, it is also awe and reverence and mystery and magic."

Elizabeth says

I didn't read all of the interviews with Annie Dillard and Toni Morrison because I found them too abstract.

Margaret Adams says

Another book read for a class. *Inventing the Truth* is a collection of interviews with writers about their experiences writing memoir. The best by far was Jill Kee Conway's "Points of Departure." Otherwise, more like a collection of promotional materials for books than a book itself. As someone whose life fantasies include reading the entire New York Times Sunday Book Review section every week, this is not entirely damning praise, but it still felt like the pyramid scheme of reading.

Tony Page says

William Zinsser declares in his introduction 'this is the age of the memoir'. He reports on a project begun in 1986 that produced this fascinating compilation from nine famous memoir writers describing their craft in their own words. I couldn't put the book down. The following short paragraphs summarise what I took away.

When the life history in your mind has not been critically analysed, and when the painful parts tend to grow and overwhelm the good bits, then the plot that guides your life is not the one you really want, and you might need to do something about it.

Writing your own memoir is doing something about it, shining a light on a particularly vivid or important period of your life, often the childhood. Unless this past is confronted, the good bits may be fading into obscurity along with the rest. Serious work to piece together what we find also lets us recover all kinds of other lost resources: humour and compassion and values and heritage. Done thoroughly and well, this work softens the heart of the writer, and also the hearts of the readers. That is the art.

But memoirs will come across badly if the craft is not properly developed possibly producing a random and callous confession of toxic feelings, a bashing of parents or former friends, or a sordid trotting out of something for the masses to marvel at. If you can learn the craft of creating a narrative shape to the writing that brings a kind of resonance for others, then others may make their own associations; and become

nourished as a result.

In the midst of this endeavour, shame and guilt, will rear their ugly heads and endanger the project. This includes your own shame and guilt, and that of the family and friends surrounding you. Your intended outcomes, and the likely impact of publication have to be worked through, without losing your distinct truth in the equally valid truths of your siblings and parents and uncles and aunties and friends, who have their own different story that they may or may not wish to expose.

Until we can declare our truth authentically and kindly, thousands of others in our worlds may be reluctant to declare their truths, and collectively we will continue limping along in the semi-darkness.

Nancy says

I love Zinsser. I love his writing, his thought process and his mind. His writing (included in this anthology) is planted on earth, graspable. He's an awesome editor as shown in this work. The collected essays deal with the many considerations inherent in memoir. This anthology includes the work of Dillard, Baker, Kazin, Morrison and Thomas. Dillard suggests that the re-writing of a memory will implant the edited version in the mind of its maker (71). Zinsser says, "Memoir is a window into a life" (21). Morrison equates memory to a flood, "All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir by William Knowlton Zinsser

My review

rating: 4 of 5 stars

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Writers are like that: remembering where we were...the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It's an emotional memory..." (119).

[View all my reviews.](#)

Judy says

This collection of essays and Q & A's with several well-known memoir writers isn't a how-to but more a "how I did it." As a writer who has discovered how shockingly difficult it is to get a grasp around a memoir theme, I hoped some of these authors would throw me a lifeline.

My biggest takeaways from the book were that it is normal to realize you cannot rely on memory alone in reconstructing one's past; that focusing on a period of time in one's life will help narrow down the scope and

angle, and how much research these writers did to verify what they thought they knew, as well as to discover new and sometimes exciting facts that shed new light on the families they thought they knew.

I especially enjoyed Russell Baker, Frank McCourt and Toni Morrison's essays.

Lise says

Lots of wonderful insight on the process of writing memoirs. My favourite excerpt below from Toni Morrison:

"You know, they straightened out the Mississippi in places, to make room for houses and liveable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. "Floods" is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding, but remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory - what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of our imagination is our "flooding."

Paula Bartlett says

Excellent reference book if thinking about writing a memoir. Just plain good reading too! Various authors contribute but anything by Zinsser is excellent.

Wendy says

There are a few gems here -- the latter part of Annie Dillard's "To Fashion a Text" and Toni Morrison's excellent guide to the history of African American memoir: "The Site of Memory." The bibliography is also fascinating, to see what writers were reading as they wrote their memoirs. Otherwise, this book hasn't quite made the transition from spoken presentations to published essays, and the product is neither solid craft advice nor strong personal essay.

Sharon Barrow Wilfong says

In this anthology of writers' memoirs, we meet many different sort of writers, journalists, novelists, professors at universities who teach all sorts of things not necessarily related to writing but have all written a memoir of some type or other.

Each writer discusses why they wrote from the angle they chose. Russell Baker decided to narrow his memoir to his relationship with his mother and her impact on his life. This meant leaving out most of his life, but

allowed a straight line to take the reader from A to B without getting side tracked.

Some writers had interesting childhoods. Jill Ker Conway, a professor, wrote about growing up in Australia. She shares what motivated her to write about her complicated, personal relationships and the challenges of rising through the echelons of a University as a woman.

Alfred Kazin writes of growing up inside the Jewish culture in Brooklyn. His objective is to get the reader to see every stoop, traffic sign and the smells coming from the restaurants and see the people brushing by on the crowded streets.

Toni Morrison believes everyone should look at their historical self, the actual history and the perceptual as a minority. She believes black writers have two objectives: to say this is my personal history, but also the history of my race.

Annie Dillard doesn't believe in memoirs but rather that we should use our personal experiences to write our stories, so, according to her, it follows that every story a writer pens is really a memoir on some level.

Each writer offers their own perspective and insight in how to write about one's life or at least aspects of it.

Ironically, when I read samples of some of these writers' books on commercial sites, I didn't find their writing very interesting. Which goes to show that one can write well about a topic without necessarily living up to another person's expectations of that topic.

This book however will be of interest to anyone interested in writing and receiving the ideas and thoughts of successful, published writers.

Michelle says

The sensationalism of TV talk show in the late 1980's brought a shift in autobiography that would create a new "memoir genre". The national fascination for featured topics relating to alcohol/drug dependency, depression/emotional disorders, attempted suicide, abuse/co-dependency, obesity/eating disorders, etc. Many authors of these memoirs bashed their parents, and/or centered on themes of further negativity, shame, victimhood, self-indulgence. Many of these memoirs would become international bestsellers. "Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir" (1998), William Zinsser takes a close look at the positive art of memoir expression by bestselling authors of that time: Russell Baker, Mary Karr, Jill Ker Conway, Frank McCourt, Eileen Simpson, Alfred Kazin, Anne Dillard, Ian Frazer, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Toni Morrison.

The authors discuss what makes the genre particularly successful. Readers feel a connection, find inspiration and even nourishment. The writers reflect on the past, sometimes in pain, but offer compassion/forgiveness. There is no self-pity, whining, judgment, or hunger for revenge. A good memoir is carefully crafted and

constructed, it simply doesn't fall into place. The writer of any form must determine what to add and what to leave out, and has absolute control over the writing. There are both good memoirs and bad ones, they must be above all interesting, revelatory, and truthful.

Russell Baker stated: "Talking too much for a writer is death". Jill Ker Conway avoided the re-creation of the "male myth", and stressed the impossibility of getting the unspoken truth from brief edited TV version of memoir. Frank McCourt stressed the value and redeeming quality of writing to educate while using entertainment/humor. Anne Dillard emphasized that memoir is not the place to air grievance, or for real/imagined attacks. Dillard doesn't believe in authors "kicking people around", or writing about those unable to defend themselves. As a writing teacher her input was strong and on task. Ian Frazer discussed the first person narrative of family history, and "fake boring books" often associated with this theme, and how to make it more interesting for the reader. Toni Morrison wrote about the biographical slave narratives important in African American (Black) History. Also, the differences of self-reflection and the craft of fiction where the two genre's "embrace".

The authors provide additional insights on the titled books/memoirs they wrote, also an excellent resource that reviews books written in this time period. Memoir remains a popular best selling genre, this book is a highly recommended must read classic for all authors/readers. This title was available in e-book format at our public library.

John says

More inspiring than actually helpful, INVENTING THE TRUTH is a collection of memoirs on writing memoirs. This INCEPTION-like premise works, not because it's a particularly interesting concept, but because the book's editor, William Zinsser, chose a group of extremely articulate and engaging writers for this compilation, writers who could discuss the gradual dehydration of paint and still make it sound compelling. The book is a collection of interviews, essays and speeches; most of the material is biographical or historical in nature, with just a small portion dedicated to giving tips as to HOW the writing of a great memoir is actually done. I can't really say I learned much from reading this, but it certainly imbues one with an overall infectious enthusiasm for the subject material--as well as for that of writing in general. Considering how little interest I usually have in reading memoirs as compared to other kinds of writing, it's impressive how well this book held my attention.

julieta says

If you're looking for tips on writing a memoir, or just enjoy memoirs in general and want to read what may be behind some, this is the book! I really enjoyed all of the essays here included, I am always reading about memoir writing, its really one of my pastimes, and this will be included in my recommendations if anyone asks me over dinner for a good book on memoirs.

George Ilsley says

An excellent anthology for writers or those interested in the creative process. Of course, some essays resonate more than others. I particularly enjoyed the piece by Henry Louis Gates. Worth reading and re-

reading.

This is not (directly) a "how to write memoir" book, but in a way it is: because through their stories the writers demonstrate that there are many paths to inventing the truth, and inventing your own path may be necessary to your story.

Terry says

I was enticed by the title, Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir, because I have been skeptical about the veracity of many of the memoirs I have read and felt that they contained considerable "invention". As I read Zinsser on the unreliability of memory and Baker on the possibility that accuracy does not equal truth and even Dillard on the danger of using memories in a memoir, I have come to accept and embrace the proposition that memoir has to do with truth which is not synonymous with fact. I even found support in Morrison's intimation that it might take fiction to get at truth. So, this fine, slim volume has given me a way to appreciate memoir, while still preferring to find truth in novels.
