

Life is research; thus, the memoir.

By Fenton Johnson, Associate Professor of English, on the faculty of the creative writing program at the University of Arizona. Fenton Johnson is the author of two novels, *Crossing the River* and *Scissors, Paper, Rock*, as well as *Geography of the Heart: A Memoir* and *Keeping Faith: A Skeptic's Journey among Christian and Buddhist Monks*. (See full bio at end of article.)

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Research deepens and enriches memory. I search for prompts, which in turn direct the research, which in its turn sparks memory. I take issue w/ the panel description's use of the word "objective" – as in, "the researcher's objective findings." Vladimir Nabokov, who would know, wrote that reality is the only word that ought always to be enclosed in quotation marks – "reality." The great beauty of creative nonfiction is that, while the writer is morally and aesthetically bound in service to *truth*, she or he is liberated from service to the mythology of objective fact.

Now that is not at all to advocate making up facts or distorting them for the sake of aesthetic convenience. If we betray our memories, or if we refuse to put them to the test of fact, then we'll have a distorted view of the truth.

Flannery O'Connor, who knew whereof she spoke, wrote that your beliefs will be the light by which you see, but they will not be what you see, nor will they be a substitute for seeing. What she's saying is that our belief systems – our moral values, whatever they may be – are quite literally the light by which we see; without the light they shed we can see nothing. But she's also pointing up the distinction between "the light by which we see" and the world around us. The first is not the same as the second, and to assume as much is a kind of fundamentalism, i.e., working from the assumption that what I believe is the same as the world itself, and so everybody else had better get on board fast. She's saying that while a system of beliefs, of moral values is essential for the writer or the artists, we can't substitute it for an open and mindful encounter with the world that is.

O'Connor also says that anyone who has survived childhood has enough to write about for a lifetime, and that's true, but one visits and revisits that interior life through the lens of research, which serves both to amplify and to particularize the experience. Life is like water – it takes the shape of the vessel into which it's poured; remove the vessel and it's lost. Research is a tool with which the writer shapes and carries memory, the vehicle for one's personal mythology.

Oscar Wilde said the first duty in life is to adopt a pose; what the second duty is, no one has yet ascertained. Not only is a personal mythology essential, but it must grow and change over time. Our great contemporary challenge is the construction of a national mythology built on cooperation and sustainability rather than on conquest and exploitation.

I offer, for example, the observation that the two great strands of the human condition are the active life and the contemplative life. I came to this understanding courtesy of the research I've done into a wide variety of spiritual traditions, seeing how each tradition develops and cultivates paths for the contemplative even as it accommodates those more engaged with worldly life. Today I realize that my understanding of this dialectic between contemplation and action is rooted in having a mother who made the greatest imaginative leap the Kentucky hills afforded in the 1930s, converting from Bible-Belt Protestantism to marry my father, a bourbon-making Roman Catholic. I see how my ongoing ideological schizophrenia roots itself in her identify as a seeker – when I was a child and the Jehovah's Witnesses rang the doorbell, she invited them in and argued with them; and of course in a story I've told many times, she was a lifelong host to the comings and goings of the Trappist monks at the nearby Abbey of Gethsemani.

But I'd have had no comprehension of the historical context of my mother's leap – I'd have had no understanding of the origins and implications of the dueling Protestant and Catholic theologies in my character – without the research I've done into the spiritual traditions of the world. She participated in the Roman Catholic Church with all the fervor of the convert. At the same time, when I asked her if we were really going to go to hell because we'd spent the previous Sunday working on the family cabin in the woods, she looked conspiratorial and said, "You don't have to believe everything they tell you," as thoroughly a Protestant take on the matter as anyone might muster – as thoroughly Protestant as her sniffing, in response to some comment I made about the Pope, "I never had much use for authority."

We live and write on a spectrum of fiction, with the *New York Times* at one end and maybe *Finnegan's Wake* at the other, though there are days when I feel the front page of the *Times* and *Finnegan's Wake* have more in common with each other than I can comfortably accommodate. (On those days I write fiction.) The delight of the memoirist's trade is the understanding that one is shaping the vessel even as it is serving as the means into which to pour the stories of our lives. It's that symbiotic relationship, between the past and the present, between what has happened and the here and now, between being shaped and shaping, between destiny and free will, that is the memoirist's proper and richest territory.

As for practical tips,

– Reviewing graduate school applications: while a well-written straightforward memoir drew attention, my colleagues and I were all drawn to those braids of personal experience and memory, and memory with observation and research – a memoir in service to the heart *and* to the head, which after all are inseparable, two words for the same consciousness.

– Experience – Chekhov, who knew whereof he spoke, would have said "long and bitter experience" – has taught me not to allow my undergraduates to write straightforward memoir until the second half of the semester. For the first half of the semester I tell them that they must use the first person but they cannot write about themselves. I require that their first project be primarily or significantly research-based. I feel it of utmost importance to give them the tools to look outward – to situate themselves on a continuum of human history, in which it's possible to balance respect for tradition with the need for growth and change. I know that the inquiring mind looking outward will or ought to be drawn inward, only now with the perspective and the tools with which to undertake that more dangerous interior journey.

Eudora Welty, who knew whereof she spoke, wrote, "All serious daring begins within." By way of making the point, I teach examples – in the Lopate anthology that we all know and love, John McPhee's *Search for Marvin Gardens*, Wendell Berry's *An Entrance to the Woods*. Albert Goldbarth's funny and astonishing essay collection *Many Circles*, anything by Guy Davenport, Annie Dillard can get a little breathless for my taste but she's almost always founded in solid research – all these are good examples. The current issue of the *Georgia Review* features a fine essay by Catherine Reid that interweaves a memoir of helping her mother through dying with a birdwatcher's investigation into avian mythologies. *Keeping Faith* turned into such a book, though I didn't realize that until I began writing it.

– For the writer: Keep a good paper trail, and if you don't know how to do that, talk to somebody who does.

– Read poetry, which can keep you honest and teach you a great deal about the shaping of the sentence and narrative line.

A successful memoir is a product not of the self-obsession of a selfish, me-first generation but evidence of literate people's recognition that the written word has replaced the story sung by the winter fire as our means of establishing and preserving cultural memory.

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as *Geography of the Heart: A Memoir* and *Keeping Faith: A Skeptic's Journey among Christian and Buddhist Monks*, a meditation on what it means for a skeptic to have and keep faith. He has contributed stories and cover essays to *Harper's Magazine*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and many literary quarterlies, and received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and more.