

# MEMOIRS

{ A memoir is a reckoning. Are you ready to “invade another’s space”? }

By Gregory Martin

**Y**our memoir is in its final stages of revision. Readers of your manuscript—experienced writers you trust because they have a track record of not telling you what you want to hear—are telling you to send it out. Now the most difficult question you face has nothing to do with craft and everything to do with your willingness to do harm.

All good stories explore conflict and suffering. As Charles Baxter put it: Heaven is not story-friendly. Memoir explores the conflict and suffering in the lives of real people, and no matter how hard you try—to implicate yourself, to aim for fairness and compassion over score-settling, to flee the moral high ground and the dubious poses of victim, martyr, avenging angel—there is no avoiding it: Your story will inflict damage—willful damage—on real people. The truth hurts. It hurts you, and it hurts your characters, who are not—not really, not ever—words on a page.

There is no “getting it right.” You try your best to tell the truth as you experienced it. But the only inner life you know is your own. The rest is speculation. You are turning real people into characters. This is an offense, a violation, a trespass, and you should acknowledge it and permit yourself to be unsettled by what you are about to do. In *The Faith of a Writer: Life, Craft, Art*, Joyce Carol Oates writes: “To write is to invade another’s space, if only to memorialize it; to write is invite angry censure. ... Art by its nature is a transgressive act, and artists must accept being punished for it. The more original and unsettling their art, the more devastating the punishment.”

I have had people I love not talk to

me for years because of something I wrote and published. They did not dispute the truth of what I’d written. They wanted to know why I couldn’t have just kept the story to myself. Good question. The world is full of stories. Ask yourself: Why does the world need yours? What absence in the world does your story address and attempt to fill?

To answer this question affirmatively likely requires more faith in yourself, and the vision expressed by your work, than you usually grant yourself. Which is as it should be. The art of memoir, by its very nature, comes equipped with its own built-in litmus test: How willing are you to expose and hurt real people in the pursuit of some larger, difficult to justify, greater purpose?

Conflict in fiction hurts *aesthetically*, which is another way of saying that the hurt is a kind of pleasure. Memoir inflicts this pleasure as well, as long as the reader is not a “character” in the book, or as long as the reader does not love a “character” in the book in real life. Make a list of the characters in your book. Add to this list the people who love the characters in your book. Imagine facing each of these people, one at a time, in a small, quiet room. What will they say? What will you say in return?

A memoir is a reckoning, and among its final reckonings is the author’s decision to tell the story at all. If you are not properly unsettled by these questions, if you are not even remotely tempted to abandon your story because of the possibilities these questions call to mind, then perhaps your story has not explored and dramatized its conflicts fully enough. Mary Karr said of writing her third memoir, *Lit*, “I threw this book away twice. I walked around in my bathrobe for three days and made

obscene gestures at the rafters.”

Can you stand by your own limited account? Do you believe your story will do more good than harm? Do you need to seek certain people’s permission to tell this story? Do you need to at least let these people read your draft before submission, so that you might give audience to their concerns and allow them to enlarge your sense of your story and its stakes?

I’m often asked by students in memoir workshops some version of the questions: Can I be sued? Do I need to have my story vetted by lawyers? My answer is that, if your story is accepted for publication, your editor can think this through with you. But you need to think hard about the real-life implications of your work long before it reaches any editor. If you have, and afterward, if you can’t quite breathe deeply, if you become aware of a low-level underlying anxiety to all your waking hours, a kind of agony, at the thought of what might happen if your story *does* get published, then maybe you’re ready for submission.

## Gregory Martin

Gregory Martin is the author of *Mountain City*, a memoir about the life of a town of 33 people in remote northeastern Nevada that was named a *New York Times* Notable Book. His essays have appeared in *Creative Nonfiction*, *Kenyon Review Online*, *Orion* and *The Sun*. He teaches in the creative-writing program at The University of New Mexico.

## RESOURCES

- **The Faith of a Writer: Life, Craft, Art** by Joyce Carol Oates
- **I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory** by Patricia Hampel