



## Breaking the conventions of memoir led to a richer, more dramatic story

**M**Y CRAFT PROBLEMS in writing *Mountain City* began with the very premise of the book—a memoir of the life of a town of 33 people in remote northeastern Nevada. I wanted the book to be a memoir, but I didn't want it to be about me. When I started *Mountain City* at age 25, self-awareness was not my strong suit, but I somehow knew better than to write a book of profound reflections about my life up to that point. What I wanted was to make a record of this place I loved and the people who lived there, before it all disappeared.

One solution came early. I chose six main characters: my grandfather and grandmother, my uncle Mel and aunt Lou, my cousin Graham, and Rosella Chambers, a 91-year-old widow and dear friend to me and my family. I would be a minor character, a lens through which my main characters' stories were told. (I wasn't raised in Mountain City; my mother was. I had visited most of my life and lived there for a year after college.)

But one story I wanted to tell took place in 1919. How could I write a *memoir* about a time before I was born? Other stories, from the recent past, took place in Mountain City when I wasn't living there. How could I tell these stories in the conventional first person of memoir?

A memory is not a story but a blur out the corner of the mind's eye. To make a story out of memory requires amplification, emphasis, speculation. To make a story out of other people's memories—and call it memoir—is a recipe for trouble. I knew from the start I would be getting all kinds of things “wrong.” But I didn't want to

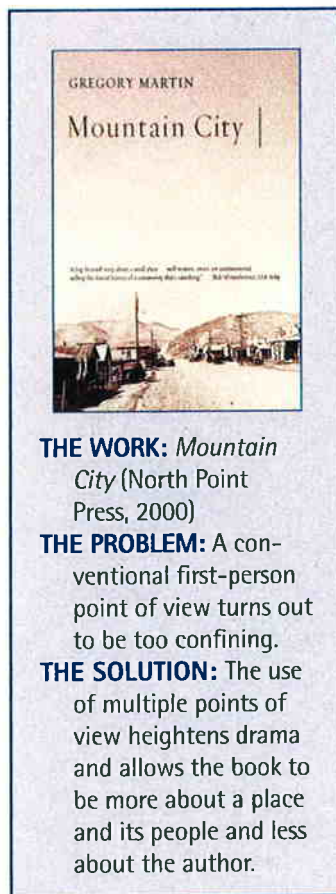
write fiction. The people I wanted to write about were real, and I wanted to write about real things that happened to them. These stories were as “true” as nonfiction stories can be—in telling them, I had no intention to deceive.

But even when relying on my own memory, I confronted my limited understanding. How could I say what some event meant to my grandfather? I couldn't have my characters think things I didn't know they thought. I couldn't render them thinking anything, because that would violate the first-person point of view.

One solution was to explicitly speculate about what my characters were thinking:

I wonder if Gramps's feelings for Graham now are a reflection of his own fear, as if Graham were a mirror in which Gramps sees himself in the time to come: blind, dependent, invalidated.

But I often balked at this strategy because I did sometimes know my characters' thoughts. I knew how Gramps felt about the first time he visited Mountain City, in 1919, when he was a 6-year-old boy. He told me the story one night in his living room while I watched, and he listened to, a Denver Broncos game on TV. (He had macular degeneration; the screen was a blur of color.) I didn't want to limit my story to his direct dialogue, which I scribbled onto yellow sticky pad after yellow sticky pad. (I'm no oral historian.) I wanted the freedom to speculate and elaborate upon his memories, not unlike a jazz musician elaborating upon the melody of a stan-



**THE WORK:** *Mountain City* (North Point Press, 2000)

**THE PROBLEM:** A conventional first-person point of view turns out to be too confining.

**THE SOLUTION:** The use of multiple points of view heightens drama and allows the book to be more about a place and its people and less about the author.



dard. I wanted to clothe him, render his gestures and expressions; I wanted to paint the landscape he never described because he knew I could supply it myself. But my reader couldn't. I wanted to incorporate things I understood from knowing him all my life and apply them to his character as a boy. I wanted more than memories. I wanted a lot more. I wanted access to the thoughts of that 6-year-old boy.

And so I made two leaps. I wrote the story in the third person. And I granted myself omniscience. At the time, I thought this was *forbidden*. A memoir told in the third person, limited omniscient? This was six years before James Frey's problems, but still, I imagined some kind of investigation. Never once did I think, "It's

my book, why not just do what I want?" One hears all the time that you have to know the rules before you can break them. Well, all right. But it's also true that you can make your own rules—as long as it's clear to the reader what they are, and as long as you follow them.

The day begins before dawn. The sky is dark and shadowed with clouds as Oliver takes the bucket to the pump, where he will draw water from the well. He is six. He is small and wiry, his hair blonde and uncombed and curly. He is dressed in patched jeans and shortsleeves, though it is not yet 5 a.m. He knows what cold is like and this is not cold. ... It is the Fourth of July, 1919, and today the Tremewan Family will travel north to Mountain City for the celebration.

Speculation is the engine of all art. Fiction speculates upon the significance of a set of possibilities—imagined characters, imagined places, imagined times. Memoir speculates upon the significance of a set of memories—remembered people, remembered places, remembered times.

I finally decided that, to write the book I wanted to write, I would have to appropriate other people's memories as my own. Which is sometimes the way memory works. My memory of the day I learned to ride a bicycle is a murky amalgam of inarticulate thoughts and sense impressions suffused by memories of my father's stories based on his own memory of that day. To say that this memory is *mine* is to slip into the ambiguity at the heart of language.

I should probably say that writing a memoir from multiple points of view isn't something I recommend lightly. It can work. And for me, the writing that explores and blurs the boundaries of genre and category is the most compelling. But the dangers are many. Confusion. A sense of arbitrariness. A loss of credibility. *Who's* telling the story now? Why is it being told *this* way? How does *he* know what they were thinking? The gall! Luckily, no one really warned me, and I didn't learn any of this until I was too far along to turn back. #

### Gregory Martin

Gregory Martin's memoir, *Mountain City*, was a *New York Times* Notable Book. An instructor at the University of New Mexico, he is now at work on a novel.

## Before and After

### Changing POV improved the story

#### Problem

While drafting *Mountain City*, I found that limiting myself to the first person drained some stories of suspense. If I told the reader how I knew what Rosella was thinking when she broke her hip, then I would be telling them not to worry because she would end up all right.

That winter, Rosella broke her hip. She fell on the concrete floor of her garage. She told me that the first thing she thought of was Riley, sitting in his wheelchair in the nursing home. She said she didn't want to live like that, like death warmed over.

#### Solution

Rendering the story in third-person limited omniscient and the present tense

makes the scene dramatic and the outcome uncertain.

Rosella lies on the concrete floor of her garage, her hip is broken, and she's alone. She doesn't cry out or cry. She lives on a hill four blocks up from town and two blocks from her nearest neighbor, and she couldn't make her voice reach that far if she wanted to. And she doesn't. She doesn't cry out or cry because she is ninety-one and knows those things do no good ...

Rosella's hip is broken, and she's thinking of being found on the concrete floor of her garage, cold and alive. She's thinking of Riley sitting in his wheelchair. She's thinking of that big open room. She's thinking, *No. Not if I can help it.*

—Gregory Martin