

Memoir: Introduction

Wiki Definition

So what exactly is memoir? –

‘A **memoir** is a collection of memories that an individual writes about moments or events, both **public or private**, that took place in the subject’s life. The assertions made in the work are understood to be factual. While memoir has historically been defined as a subcategory of **biography or autobiography**...the genre is now differentiated in form, presenting a **narrowed focus**. A biography or autobiography tells the story “of a life”, while a memoir often tells “**a story from a life**”, such as touchstone events and **turning points** from the author’s life’.

Earliest essayists:

- Montaigne (1570-1592--actively wrote essays to record his own character and humor)
- William Hazlitt (18th century English essayist) along with
- Samuel Johnson (poet, essayist, playwright, critic)
- Charles Lamb (late 18th century to early 19th century essayist: Essays of Elia: Dream Children: most notable work)
- Ralph Waldo Emerson (19th century American essayist/poet, critic)
- Ernest Hemingway, Edgar Allen Poe, Virginia Woolf (stalwart fiction authors wrote essays (20th century))

Modern writers of essays/memoir

Maya Angelou (phenomenal essayist, author of award-winning memoirs 'I know Why The Caged Bird Sings, 7 other autobiographies)

James Baldwin (almost Maya's contemporary, wrote 'Letters From The Native Son')

Annie Dillard (Pulitzer prize winner for 'Pilgrim at Tinker Creek: nature writing/narrative nonfiction)

Joan Didion, David Foster Wallace, Zadie Smith, Phillip Lopate, George Saunders, Bernard Cooper and many more (markers of evolution in lit. nonfiction)

Memoir as a genre of literature

Full of creative play of thoughts

Free from traditional constraints of storytelling

First person narrative: the authentic voice which is the trademark of literary nonfiction writing

Intimate narrative account: how we think, feel & act as individuals, how we make our own history, what we personally remember, & what we don't

Many features of fiction writing apply in memoir too: facts, research, imagination, use of subconscious, dramatic dialogue and action etc.

Other Important Aspects in Memoir/Personal essays

POV (points of view) from multiple sides, apart from the narrator himself/herself

The narrative arc: Interweaving the past and present in the narrative

Contrasts and conflict:

Revealing the personal identity

Separate threads and the threads woven together

Popular notion v/s Reality in Autobiographical Writing

Popular notion: Celebrities writing their memoir with ready-made readership to sell books are the successful memoir writers

Reality: The genre of autobiography/memoirs/creative nonfiction is written with the purpose to tread the path where social history and personal reflections are combined together for a lasting impact.

ALL MEMORABLE PERSONAL STORIES/BOOKS OF CREATIVE NONFICTION HAVE UNIVERSAL VALUE/ APPEAL BECAUSE OF THE STORYTELLING.

What makes memoirs/autobiography relevant and memorable?

Universal truths and **metaphorical presentation** of life through the lens of the essayist/memoirist

Truths and experiences which are relevant to others--readers might gain some personal value from you writing about it

We humans share a common humanity in our very nature, and love reading about other people's lives, their **insights** into it.

Writing personal essays and memoirs is **cathartic**, which purges our mind, body and soul and it is a form of art which might be therapeutic to the readers as well, due to the universal truths they portray.

The Prominent Themes in Memoir Writing

Self-exploration and knowing one's self in terms of the **family**, the surroundings, the greater **universe**

The inward and outward **journey** of the writer in terms of gaining **awareness**, greater **understanding**, **empathy** towards not only one's own self, but towards the fellow humans, the family and familial ties, the physical and societal surroundings

Many essayists have dealt with these recurrent themes in their writing:

Social commentary and themes of 'rites of passage' life events eg childhood, puberty, relationships and bereavement, which we all go through.

The voice and the style in memoir/Creative Nonfiction

The writer of memoir/autobiography must have a distinct style which is a blend of the traditional and contemporary, using various literary styles and techniques to engage, surprise and enlighten the readers.

A good writer of creative nonfiction reads a lot, and reads like a writer, which means he keeps on analyzing sentence, diction, tone, voice, the point of view (POV) and other stylistic features in nonfiction/fiction and implements them in his own writing.

The 'Voice' of the author, according to Author Jack Hart, is nothing else but the persona of the author revealed in his writing.