

English 2020

## Researching Your Own Life

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nusement) to outgrow shame. Other requirements of the personal and the self's quandaries, through bringing back news of the larger world. of the so-called formal essay. Yet language of an essay, a firm sense of the impersonal essay narrator. Edmund Wilson and Lionel Trilling, them as fully developed characters their not referring personally to

self into a character, whether the narrative voice. I would further ing oneself into a character is not er a potential release from narciss- sufficient distance to begin to see precondition to transcending the says that can touch other people.

As strange as it may sound, all memoir is a process of researching one's own life. By that I mean rethinking, of course. I also mean reimagining and perhaps revising—because to see the past anew is often to view it, even at great distances, more clearly. But in the context of these remarks, I mean the word *research* to imply just that—research, a diligent and systematic inquiry into a subject (in this case yourself) in order, as even the most basic dictionaries will say, “to discover or revise facts, theories, or opinions.”

I would venture to guess that many of the best recent memoirs demanded that the writers engage in the wonderfully tedious necessities of research. For instance, Doris Kearns Goodwin, with the instincts of the biographer and historian, surely searched spool after spool of microfilm about the Brooklyn Dodgers' 1951 season for her coming-of-age book, *Wait Till Next Year*. As she said, “If I were to be faithful to my tale, it would be necessary to summon to my own history the tools I had acquired in investigating the history of others. I would look for evidence, not simply to confirm my own memory, but to stimulate it and to provide a larger context for my childhood adventures. Thus I sought out the companions of my youth, finding almost everyone who lived on my block, people I hadn't seen for three or four decades. I explored the streets and shops in which I had spent my days, searched the Rockville Centre archives, and read the local newspapers from the fifties.”

The kind of research that Goodwin engaged in was something like reliving the past, and her most interesting insight in describing her research process may be her focusing on her belief that it did not merely confirm the “facts” for her but, more importantly, stimulated her memory of the past. For the memoirist, research can bring the story out of the shadows into the light of the present day. Even in a story like Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club*, a book saturated in the chang-

ing stream of memory, the author confirmed the <sup>Key</sup> veracity of what she had written by having her sister, Lecia, audit the facts. In addition, Karr's mother answered questions and did information gathering for her. As was the case with Goodwin's narrative, Karr's was most assuredly brought to more vivid life because of the research that she did.

It's probable that even a memoir like *Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt benefited from some elements of research. The magic of the book, certainly, is McCourt's ability to transform his voice into the evolving child's. As William Kennedy said, McCourt "inhabits the mind of the child he was with such vital memory that boyhood pain and family suffering become as real as a stab in the heart." But there are many moments that McCourt could not have reasonably recollected without some unearthing of documents—the letters written under the name of Mrs. Brigid Finucane or Philomena Flynn, for example. My guess is that McCourt had notebooks and scrapbooks to sift through much as a scholar of early American history will have diaries and family Bibles.

Memory is an archive like any other and can be used as such. The materials stored there can sometimes be tested against other sources. Your memory, after all, is only one person's opinion, and if you can get some evidence to support that opinion, it will make it more cogent, probably more specific and more complex, as well. But rather than speaking for other writers of memoir, let me use my own experience in writing *Dreaming of Columbus: A Boyhood in the Bronx* as an example that may be either representative or anomalous but certainly indicative of what can be true of the relationship between memoir and research.

When the idea for the narrative of *Dreaming of Columbus* first began to germinate, it took root in my imagination as a novel. It wasn't long, though, before I saw that it was a work of nonfiction. The line between memoir and fiction is often blurred, but I'm fairly sure that I know why I stepped across the line from imagining the invented Bronx of the 1960s to describing the historical place and time. I felt that the story had a meaning that was in the actuality of it, in the solidity of the bricks, the smell of the bus exhaust, the existence beyond words of the characters who lived in the stories in the book.

I sensed that the theme had been given to me by the narrative, that the dreams of escape and return, the longing to go and the desire to stay forever, were part of how the "simple facts" had invented a meaning. And that meaning would be there, speaking in its own true voice, only if the stories of the Bronx were both factual and true. Truth, without question, is the ultimate goal, but sometimes truth is not enough. Sometimes the historical reality, even in our deconstructed new world, pro-

vides a shape and substance that would otherwise not be there.

In order to write *Dreaming of Columbus*, a recollection of the Irish Catholic Bronx of decades ago, I felt compelled to do various kinds of research. Even though I started writing from the premise that all memoir may be a lie, that Steven Millhauser was probably right when he said, "memory is merely one form of imagination," that memory's highest function may not be to recollect what has happened but rather preserve meaning or make meaning, I still felt obligated to get the facts right. If I didn't make sure that the little details were accurate, then on some important level for me the book would not be speaking the truth that it was intended to tell. So, early on in the writing process it became apparent to me that old-fashioned research was going to be an integral part of reconstructing the Bronx of the 1960s. What I didn't realize until I was far into the story was that, as with Goodwin's, my memory was stimulated by my research into my own past, that the story of the past came alive for me as I engaged in the adventure of going back, of once again searching for what had seemingly been lost.

The first form my research took was into books—but not into history books of the period. Rather, I was drawn back to those books that had shaped my view of the world when I was a youngster. Flannery O'Connor once said that "the writer is initially set going by literature more than by life," and although this may not be the case for all writers, it definitely was true for me. As a young boy, I found my place in the world in books. Therefore, rereading some of the stories that had been important to me then—*The Life of Kit Carson*, *Youngblood Hawke*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Catch-22*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—was like slipping back in time.

For instance, in rereading *Kit Carson*, which I hadn't looked at since fifth grade, and *Youngblood Hawke*, which I hadn't read since I was fourteen, I found myself recalling vividly what solace books had given me growing up. Rereading those two books allowed me to place myself back in my childhood: "Books became an escape from the present, in the classroom at St. Philip Neri or in the living room at home. Books were a way to forget the world, what Richard Wright called 'a drug, a dope.' And they were addictive. The more I read, the more I wanted to read. For me Kit Carson was a pathfinder. He led me toward Don Quixote and David Copperfield, Pip and Tom Sawyer, the Joads and the Lilliputians. He also led me back to the world, to see how close I could bring my changing vision of possibility to the rigid nature of things. The stories I read made me feel as if I were threading a needle, squinting through whatever aperture the world would allow."

And even though *Youngblood Hawke* was not the same reading experience for me as an adult that it had been for me as a child, I was able to remember what the book had said to me as an adolescent: “. . . a voice in the book told me then to watch and wait; it suggested that living and creating are one and the same, that writing is an act of faith, that, perhaps, all real adventure begins in the imagination.”

My research also took a traditional path into the history of the period, particularly the 1960s. I read newspapers, magazines, and books recounting the events of the Vietnam War, the Kennedy assassination, Woodstock, and any other moments that seemed to me to be watershed points in my own life. I watched videos about the times and listened to music that I might not have heard for years.

I remembered that on the day after President Kennedy was shot, my mother took me to Madison Square Garden to see the New York Knicks play the Detroit Pistons. In order to bring that night back to me more tangibly, I read the newspaper accounts of the day after the assassination and the accounts of the Knicks' victory.

Facts can be a catalyst for remembering: “I don't recall much about the game except a feeling that the whole event was surreal. Jumping Johnny Green of the Knicks flew magically into the air for rebounds while gravity held the seven thousand of us in our seats, and our young president had just been shot. Newspapers strewn about the stadium announced, ‘Kennedy Killed by Sniper.’ News of the assassination had been played over and over again so many times during the twenty-four hours that the murder seemed little more than a nightmare created by the media.”

The last shape that my research took was in the form of something akin to time travel. I went back to the Bronx half a dozen times over the course of a three-year period, revisiting places that were landmarks of my youth—St. Philip Neri Elementary School, Mt. St. Michael High School, Fordham University, Villa Avenue, Harris Field, the bars, the pizza parlors, the subway stations, the apartment buildings, and any other spot that held an important place in my memory. Along the way, I spoke with many former teachers, old buddies, a few ex-girl-friends, and some present-day residents of the borough.

In the course of reentering my past, I was checking the details of my memory and igniting new recollections. All sorts of questions were answered. What did the pews in the chapel feel like as I slid my hand across the grain of wood? Was the underpass at Bedford Park Boulevard a tunnel of noise, as I remembered it had been? And what of the apartment buildings, the color of the sky in summer as opposed to winter, the sound of the subway rattling along the Grand Concourse,

the way the light broke through the stained glass windows of the church?

Returning to the haunts of my youth gave texture and definition to my memories and created a new dimension to my experience. Such research not only gave me another way of seeing the past but another frame for such memories, as well. The present-day Bronx gave me an access to the past that I might not have had otherwise: “As the heavy doors to St. Philip's creak slowly to a close, I see a young woman standing in the frame. Her face could be my sister's at graduation in 1960. The same blue eyes, looking down as if she is ready to raise them at any moment toward an unexpected guest. The same brown hair, a dark wave crashing to her shoulders. The same smile, the lips tugged together and curving toward laughter. Narrow-shouldered, slim as the slant of door light, ready to leave, she is the image of my sister in the Bronx then. With a few inches of light left, she looks up, her eyes clear and patient, and smiles at me as if she regrets my going, our mutual turning into memory.”

For me, the act of writing a memoir became an opportunity to travel backward in time. As Joan Didion said, we write to discover what we think. I read and traveled and gathered notes and in the process discovered what the past meant to me. Disparate lines of research twisted into a thickened cord of recollection. You may not be able to repeat the past, as Gatsby wished, but you may be able, through research, to reenter it, relive it in your imagination, and re-create it for the future.

## EXERCISES

✓ 1. Choose an event from your past—a confirmation, a birthday celebration, a Fourth of July picnic—for which you have a collection of photographs, and write a narrative of 1,500–2,000 words using the photographs to help you create the scene.

2. Talk to someone else who was also present at the event in number one above, and write a narrative of approximately 1,000 words based on your interview.

3. Reflect on the nature of memory/memoir after comparing the two experiences you had in completing numbers one and two above. Write approximately 1,000 words.

You now have 3,500–4,000 words of memoir—the rough draft of an essay.