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How to Tell a True Story

Nine years ago I was teaching summer school at a university outside of Boston when in a small Scottish town my stepmother died. Her death was, from my perspective, sudden. On my way to class I found a letter in the mailbox from Aunt Marian; I read it on the bus. Janey, my stepmother, had had a fall and was in hospital but not to worry she was making good progress. I don't remember what I taught that day but I do recall my anger. Her accident, I foresaw, would mean new problems, new difficulties, for me. I was still angry when the chairman came into my office with a message that Janey was very ill. I hurried home immediately and made arrangements to fly to Glasgow. Then I phoned the hospital, Perth Infirmary, only to discover she was already dead. A week later a birthday card arrived. A nurse had written the address and a joke about Janey's many gentlemen visitors. She herself had signed the card, shakily, "love M."

I did not go to her funeral. I knew I would have to return later to deal with her possessions, and I was too poor to make two transatlantic trips and too young to understand the complex reasons for which one might attend a funeral where no other mourner would be offended by one's absence. Instead, I decided to write a story about her. The question was how? She was almost fifty when she married my father, and I knew only snatches about that large part of her life that had already occurred. I wanted to honor her memory, to be faithful to the facts, as I understood them, including our deep estrangement, and yet to do merely that would have resulted in a skinny, parsimonious, undignified story. I needed imagination as well as memory.

Over the course of a difficult autumn I wrote the story, "Learning by Heart." It was a long story, a hundred pages, with two braided narratives. One strand of the narrative was what I remembered of my childhood and adolescence with my stepmother, and I wrote the material as if I were writing an essay. Although I was presenting it as a story, I wanted readers to think, oh yes, this really did happen. The other strand was my imagining of Janey's life. The life I did not know and had no

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means to discover, I dreamed up on the page. And in a number of ways I signaled to the reader that this part of the narrative had a different ontological status, was true in a different way. I wrote it as fiction.

I am not sure how well "Learning by Heart" succeeds, but since then, in and out of the classroom, I have pondered how the intuitive choices I made in writing that story might be refined. I began to notice that I often gave my students conflicting advice. A student would bring me a story about a family with three children. Sometimes I would say, why do you need Edwina, Margaret, and Theo? It just confuses your reader. Why don't you collapse Edwina and Margaret into a single character and just have two children? Sometimes, however, I found myself saying the opposite. Why only have three children? I would ask. Why not have five? Or go for broke—have seven?

In the first case I was advising the student along the traditional lines of story writing. Be expedient. As Sydney Cox says in his opinionated book *Indirections*, every sentence, every detail, should reveal character, deepen the theme, and advance the plot. The pleasure of this kind of narrative is not that we think we are reading about the real world but, rather, that the wings of symmetry are unfolding around us; briefly, we are on a planet where human behavior makes sense. I call this fiction.

In the second case I was clearly suggesting an alternative strategy. The authority of the story was coming, in part, from the degree to which it made the reader feel that the events described really had occurred. And the way to strengthen the story was to increase this effect. Rather than expediency, I urged the student to make the story messier, more confusing, in other words more lifelike. I call this anti-fiction.

Throughout this century it seems to me an increasing number of authors have been choosing to have five children rather than two. We can find story after story, novel after novel, where the boundaries between author and character, real and imagined, are blurred and our experience is closer to reading autobiography or history. I do not mean to suggest that there are simply two, exclusive choices. Rather, I see a continuum, stretching from tales beginning "Once upon a time . . ." where we are blithely expected to believe that a wolf can pass for a grandmother, to the most explicit anti-fiction, works whose authors blatantly encourage what Sartre might have termed a hemorrhaging between fiction and reality. In Joan Didion's *Democracy* and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* characters share the names and occupations of their creators.

Once I got a glimpse of the continuum I wondered what lay behind these alternatives and how the signals were given to the reader. The first question invites a comet's tail of speculations. My suspicion is that most

authors make these choices unconsciously, as I did, because of their prior relationship with the material. But at a deeper level, farther into the astral debris, lurks the demon of how to give our work authority. By the end of her life my stepmother had very few visitors. What right had I to ask my readers to be among them? To endure the wallpaper and the antimacassars and, worst of all, my stepmother's boring, tyrannical conversation.

In a recent fit of homesickness I reread *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, a novel I think of as essentially Scottish that happens to be set in London. As usual, I was consoled by the darkness and fog, but this time I was also struck by Stevenson's use of documents: letters and Dr. Jekyll's confession. Looking at other nineteenth-century novels—*Wuthering Heights*, *Dracula*, *The Woman in White*—I discovered a startling number of interlocking narrators, diaries found in locked boxes, death-bed confessions, and, of course, letters. These authors knew that their incredible tales needed authenticating, and they approached their readers like a prosecutor a jury, bombarding us with testimonials from expert witnesses.

In this century such devices have fallen out of fashion but not because we have become more credulous as readers. If anything, our credulity has declined, and we are liable to read a letter in fiction as yet more fiction. There are gorgeous counterexamples. Part of the brilliance of Nathaniel West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* is the inclusion of letters from Miss Lonelyhearts's constituents that are absolutely integral to the plot and to the anguished voice of the novel. More recently, A. S. Byatt paid homage to the nineteenth century in her novel *Possession* by including a fabricated poem. The novel captivated many readers, but most I suspect soon realized that they could follow the plot without reading the poem and turned those pages with increasing speed.

Not only have we grown wary of devices, but we have decided to privilege memory over imagination, or so it seems to me. In the current climate a novel set in Vietnam, written by someone who had not been there, would be unlikely to meet with the rapturous reception of *The Red Badge of Courage*. Certain experiences—war, other races, some illnesses, perhaps other sexual orientations—are no longer deemed appropriate territory for the imagination. We want the author to be writing out of memory. Even a kind of impersonal memory—the American-born, Jewish author writing about the Holocaust—is preferable to none. The long tradition of the amateur writer is under siege. Authors, along with other people, are now expected to have credentials.

We are even reluctant to permit an author to write fully about a character of the opposite sex, as witness our overwhelming assumption that first-person narrators are the same gender as their authors. In "Learning

by Heart" I did not bother for many pages to identify the narrator as a young woman, a version of myself; I knew the reader would think that anyway. These assumptions, which can do so much for our work when we follow them, become problematic if we want to contradict them, especially I think for women writing about men. A dozen great fictional heroines—Pamela, Moll Flanders, Molly Bloom, Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina—sidle out of my bookcase, swishing their skirts courtesy of their male authors, but not a single man, suited by a woman's pen, steps forward to keep them company. Perhaps writing about men, like the ascent of K7, is something that most women are not interested in, but one would like to feel sure that it is a genuine choice, rather than a constraint.

Optimistically, I like to think that this narrowing of authorial authority has as one of its main origins the widening of the canon and the general recognition that minorities are willing and able to speak for themselves. But I also wonder if it might not be linked to the surge of anti-fiction. Authors have been encouraging readers to map fiction onto the real world, and even when we want to we may have trouble now in reversing that trend. Perhaps Lewis Carroll's "Sylvie and Bruno Concluded" might serve as a cautionary tale. In this story Carroll describes Sylvie and Bruno's attempts to find an accurate map. Eventually, the two children end up with a one-to-one map and wreak havoc among the local farmers by blocking out the sun.

Putting aside these vexed matters of authority and autobiography, I want to explore in a little more detail what makes readers think, just from reading, that some stories really happened and in others that the question is irrelevant. As with the job interview, first impressions are vital, so a good place to look is the openings of a few familiar works.

Here is Joyce embarking on his great voyage:

Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed. A yellow dressing-gown, ungirdled, was sustained gently behind him on the mild morning air. He held the bowl aloft and intoned:

—*Introibo ad altare Dei.*

Halted, he peered down the dark winding stairs and called out coarsely:

—Come up, Kinch! Come up, you fearful jesuit!

There is nothing in these events that renders them immediately fictional. In fact, the quotidian subject matter could easily find a place in an essay, but Joyce gives us unmistakable signals that we are on the

planet of fiction. There is no visible narrator. The act of writing is concealed. We are made to believe that the words sprang up on the page without effort. Characters are shown to us through action and dialogue. There is no initial attempt at explanation. There is considerable specificity of detail and a kind of heightened density to the style. From our earliest listening and reading we have learned to understand these as the hallmarks of fiction. We are not, I think, allowed for a moment to take this as biography or history.

Here, on the other hand, is Proust:

For a long time I used to go to bed early. Sometimes, when I had put out my candle, my eyes would close so quickly that I had not even time to say "I am going to sleep." And half an hour later the thought that it was time to go to sleep would awaken me; I would try to put away the book which, I imagined, was still in my hands, and to blow out the light; I had been thinking all the time, while I was asleep, of what I had just been reading, but my thoughts had run into a channel of their own, until I myself seemed actually to have become the subject of my book: a church, a quartet, the rivalry between François I and Charles V.

The paragraph continues to explore this confusion between waking and sleeping, book and self. In his dreamlike state the narrator ponders the act of writing: "the subject of my book would separate itself from me, leaving me free to choose whether I would form part of it or no." There is an absence of dialogue and a lack of immediacy; right away we are being told that events are remembered. Most noteworthy of all, we are in the presence of a narrator who is not immediately distinguished from the author. Crucial to *Remembrance of Things Past* is the narrator's situation as an only child, and such is the autobiographical force of the writing, that I think almost all readers are amazed to discover that Proust had a brother. Surely we can be forgiven our confusion when Proust not merely tolerates but encourages it. The narrator of this novel is not named for many hundreds of pages, but, when at last he is, his name is Marcel.

Over and above all this the basic difference between *Ulysses* and *Remembrance of Things Past* is between the third person and the first. The third person is the "once upon a time" voice that signals we are being told a story. In "Learning by Heart" I was being absolutely conventional when I put the parts about Janey's life that I was largely inventing in the third person and the part that I had actually experienced in the first person. But the way in which I used the first person would not have been

possible without the example of Proust. There were, after all, plenty of first-person novels prior to *Remembrance*, but reading, for example, *Tristram Shandy*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Jane Eyre*, we have, I think, no impulse to confuse author and narrator. For one thing, these authors carefully separate themselves from the narrator. Look at the opening paragraph of *Great Expectations*.

My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip.

Could Dickens have mentioned Pip's name a little more often in the first paragraph? Reading on, we find in Pip's fanciful description of the tombstones of his relatives the density and the unnatural specificity of fiction, and, although events are clearly in the past, neither the act of remembering nor writing is invoked. My first thought was that even a reader who knows nothing of Dickens's early life would suspect that more than the name of the narrator is being fictionalized. But that is the wrong way round. We are being so clearly signaled that this is fiction that the question, "Did these things really happen?" does not occur, any more than we ask if a wolf in a nightgown would really make a convincing grandmother. This kind of opening was later passionately subverted by Salinger's Holden Caulfield, who announces that he is not going to tell us "where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and . . . all that David Copperfield kind of crap."

In shifting the boundaries between the self and the book, Proust, I would argue, has had a far greater influence than Joyce. A host of fictional memoirs has been published since *Remembrance of Things Past*, some of which have sought to extend the continuum of anti-fiction even further. How far this can be done without the reader wondering why this material is being called fiction is a question to ponder. A few years ago the French writer Marguerite Duras, after a long silence, published a short novel, *The Lover*. The novel centers on the relationship between a fifteen-and-a-half-year-old French girl and her Chinese lover. The American edition had a photograph of the young Duras on the front cover, and it was widely mentioned in reviews that this novel was heavily, if not entirely autobiographical.

Putting aside these marketing techniques, one of the most obvious things about reading the opening pages of Duras's novel is the way she shuttles back and forth between France and Indochina, between her fifteen-year-old and her present self. It could, I suppose, give the effect

of muddle or disorganization, but in fact it strengthens our sense that the events described have really occurred. Duras is simply remembering and picking out what she wants to tell us. When I went back to "Learning by Heart" I realized I had done the same thing. Janey's story moved steadily forward with the occasional memory embedded in the flow; it was hard enough to make things up without skipping around. But in the part that I was remembering I found it almost impossible to progress chronologically. Describing Janey's marriage to my father, I skipped a quarter of a century to report my reading of the letters she had received at that time. Not one of the twenty-odd letters referred to me. The only reason for such an omission could surely be Janey's failure to mention that she was acquiring not only a husband but a stepdaughter.

In the nineteenth century Duras would probably have used letters or a sensational secret diary to support her story. Late in the twentieth century, however, she relies upon a heavy hemorrhaging between reality and fiction. No one could attack the plot because she was telling us that these events really happened, but, if pressed too closely, she could protest that this was fiction. Several times in *The Lover* the narrator claims that she has never written about this material before, and, now that she is, she plans to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Even fairly soon after publication, however, astute critics were diagnosing a hole in the heart of the novel. And now Duras is agreeing with them. She is advertised as being at work on a new book that will reveal what the scandalous relationship in *The Lover* concealed—namely her incestuous relationship with her brother.

I do not mean to sound as if I am taking Duras to task for mendacity per se. My concern is not whether the events described in a work of fiction occurred but, rather, the techniques by which an author might make a reader believe they did. All authors omit and select. When I discover that Proust has a brother, it does not detract from the beauty and authenticity of his portrayal of an only child. In "Learning by Heart" I described at length my loneliness and isolation. The truth is that for a good part of my childhood we lived near a family with four children who frequently took me in, but I never mention them. I like to think that this omission was not merely a bid for reader sympathy but also a way to clarify the story, to allow Janey and my relationship with her to emerge more clearly. No, my charge against Duras is not the omission but the way in which the omission distorts the material, as, for instance, Dickens's attempt at a happy ending to *Great Expectations* seems to distort all that the novel has been moving toward.

Besides the techniques I've already suggested—vagueness, the invocation of remembering and writing, shuttling, hemorrhaging, the

absence of dialogue—I've discovered three more techniques that help to create the illusion of anti-fiction. One, which I do not advocate to my students, is what I'm rather nervously going to call "bad writing." Fiction tends to be well written. A surprising number of characters and narrators reach what, if one stops to think, are quite unrealistic heights of eloquence. It follows, then, that one way for authors to make their work seem real is by the judicious use of bad writing.

I was a little hard-pressed to find an example of this outside of my own work, but I think you can glimpse what I'm talking about in the opening of Camus's novel *The Stranger*, a novel for which I have great admiration.

Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know. I got a telegram from the home: "Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours." That doesn't mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday.

The old people's home is at Marengo, about fifty kilometers from Algiers, I'll take the two o'clock bus and get there in the afternoon. That way I can be there for the vigil and come back tomorrow night. I asked my boss for two days off and there was no way he was going to refuse me with an excuse like that.

I am playing the devil's advocate, of course, in suggesting that this is bad writing, but what I'm getting at is obvious. The prose is painfully flat, almost to the point of being simplistic. Even though these sentences demonstrate what Carver called "fundamental accuracy of detail," many writers would hesitate to write them. They seem too unadorned, too unliterary, to transport the reader, but at least in *The Stranger* they effectively create a narrator in whose capacity for violence and lack of self-analysis we come to vividly believe. The anti-fiction quality is further strengthened by the uncertainty: "Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe." After all, if it's fiction, there is no reason for any vagueness. We can just decide whatever we want.

From these opening sentences Camus leads us forward to the moment of murder. And this is another technique of anti-fiction I want to suggest, although *technique* may not be the correct term. Fiction tends to offer us conventional post-Freudian psychology. Motivation is one of the principle ways in which fiction makes sense. Readers as well as writers are deeply committed to this, and, even when a writer tries to prevent us from making certain connections, we often insist on doing so anyway. In *Aspects of the Novel* Forster describes plot as the causal relation between events: the king died, and then the queen died because of grief.

What he did not say was that if the king dies and then a little later the queen dies, the reader will, willy-nilly, link the two events, even if the author tells us firmly that they have nothing to do with each other.

One of the most frightening things about the world, however, is that action and motivation are often not so neatly connected. I would argue that part of what Camus accomplishes is the creation of a much more complex psychological model, a model that partakes not so much of the glibness with which we too often analyze others but of the mystery with which we speak of ourselves. In writing about Janey, I felt reluctant to the point of paralysis to attribute motivation to her. She was a giant of my childhood, and neither time nor mortality can dwarf her. This was one of the major reasons I wanted my account of our relationship to sound true; I wanted to block both my own and the reader's easy attempts at psychoanalysis.

Lastly, as an anti-fictional technique I want to point to what I call the use of history. It is surprising how many stories and novels contain absolutely minimal references to current events, to anything beyond the characters and their relationships. Jane Austen, as has often been remarked, makes no reference to the Battle of Waterloo. This exclusion seems to suggest that both readers and writers yearn in art for a certain kind of transcendence of the everyday. It also means that, as soon as we start to connect the lives of our characters with the real world, we are taking a step toward making our fiction sound like anti-fiction. For four years of my childhood I attended a girls' school, which I prayed nightly would be closed down or burned to the ground. But, as I explain in "Learning by Heart," the major fact in bringing about the closure of the school was not my prayers but the shrinking of British colonies, which led to fewer people working abroad who needed to send their daughters home to be educated.

All these techniques I've been listing, except bad writing, can be found to gorgeous effect in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. This book, dedicated to its characters, takes as one of its main themes the connection between fact and fiction. In "How To Tell a True War Story" the narrator says, if you ask whether a story is true and the answer matters, you've got your answer.

For example, we've all heard this one. Four guys go down a trail. A grenade sails out. One guy jumps on it and takes the blast and saves his three buddies.

Is it true?

The answer matters.

You'd feel cheated if it never happened. Without the grounding

reality, it's just a trite bit of puffery. . . . Yet even if it did happen . . . you know it can't be true, because a true war story does not depend upon that kind of truth. Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth.

Here I think O'Brien delineates the dilemma of all serious fiction writers. However we approach our work and the world, we are trying to get at that truth that lies beyond absolute occurrence.

Most of the examples I've offered demonstrate the strength of anti-fiction, but one of the major hazards of the enterprise can be seen, I think, in the experiences of a friend who wrote a series of personal essays about Israel. "Very nice," responded an editor, "but who would want to read about you?"

I immediately applied this chilling question to myself. When I stopped to think, it seemed at first glance very odd that, on the one hand, it would never occur to me to write my autobiography because my life is so pedestrian and, on the other hand, I persist in writing stories that are more or less autobiographical. As the editor says, why should anyone be interested in reading about me?

I think the answer lies in the nature of fiction and art in general. Art has the power to transform the world, and nowhere is that power more evident than when applied to the unpromising material of the everyday. In the hands of Flaubert the relationship between a poorly educated serving woman and her parrot becomes a subject of resonance and beauty.

In the case of Janey, however, I lacked confidence in my ability to transform, and there were too many suitcases of truth that I wanted to smuggle into the story. I would never have got them all onto the planet of fiction. Instead, I tried to create the illusion that Janey had lived and died in the way I described. I knew that this illusion could be immensely seductive but if I failed to rise above the anecdotal then the reader would balk and say, but why should I want to read about Janey and you?

Machiavelli urged the Prince in the service of the state to become a great liar. In the service of truth writers, I think, need to follow this advice. I may not be able to control my autobiographical impulses, but there is a measure of control to be gained over the way in which I reveal my secrets. Will I send them forth into the world as fiction? or anti-fiction? or some mixture of the two? As Proust so simply and elegantly says, "the subject of my book would separate itself from me, leaving me free to choose whether I would form part of it or no." Writers are always present in their work. The question is how.