

Writing a True Story: Memory, Narrative, and the Experience of Writing

Professor Robert P. Yagelski

UNIVERSITY^{AT}ALBANY

State University of New York

. . . with the passage of time you will always find yourself imagining that you might have said this or that, even believing that you actually said those words, so that what one narrates often becomes more real than the actual events narrated, however difficult it may be to put real events into words . . .

José Saramago, *Baltasar and Blimunda*



Madeline Szerafinski White

- Teacher
- Activist for social justice and racial equality
- Catholic nun



Stanley
(Madeline's
father)

Sophie
(Madeline's
mother)





Why did Sister Marlene (Madeline) leave the convent after twenty years of devoted service?

All you have to do is write one true sentence.
Write the truest sentence that you know. . . .
And then go on from there.

Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*

Is the act of writing
an act of truth-seeking?

The **experience** of writing-in-the-moment
can have a profound and even
transformative impact on the writer's
sense of self as a being in the world.



Writing is as much an **ontological** act
as it is
a communicative or epistemic act.

Truth lies in
the **act of writing** a story,
not in the story itself.



Our experience and the meaning we make of our experience through language are not the same thing.



Speech is embodied thought.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty,
The Phenomenology of Perception

The text produced by an act of writing
can never contain the thing it is about.

That reality within which we intra-act—what I term agential reality— . . . is not a fixed ontology that is independent of human practices, but is continually reconstituted through our material-discursive intra-actions

Karen Barad, *“Getting Real”*



Writing is “a material instantiation of language.”

Karen Barad, “*Getting Real*”

The text cannot contain the experience
of writing that text.

The text and the **experience** of writing
it are not the same.

The text—the story—cannot contain all of what we know or believe to be true in the moment. We must seek that truth in **the experience of writing.**



In order to live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future.

Barbara Hardy, “Towards a Poetics of Fiction”

We organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative—stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on.

Jerome Bruner,

“The Narrative Construction of Reality”



Narrative “has been used in the personal existential project of constructing a coherent life out of the chaos of experience.”

Crispin Sartwell, *End of Story*

Narratives themselves fail of coherence. Every characterization of actions allegedly ordered into the structures of plot will always turn out to be radically in excess of any possible narrative. Every narrative is just as plainly slapped together from bits of a possible randomness.

Crispin Sartwell, *End of Story*



The act of storytelling
is an act of living in the moment.

If we could only let go of the need to impose order on the world, then we could learn to let the world be. That would be a lesson of love.

Crispin Sartwell, *End of Story*



The experience of writing at the moment of writing can be a way to let the world be and to simply *be* in the world.

Christmas, 1971

Memory is dynamic and unstable, at odds with our attempts to grab hold of it in writing and make it permanent as a foundation for understanding our present selves.

Jane Bessette, “Past-Writing”



When we refigure “experience” as “memory,” we emphasize the slipperiness of our perceptions of the past: the ways in which **changing present circumstances reconfigure our sense of what happened.**

Jane Bessette, “Past-Writing”



Writing the past cannot be understood in terms of truth, except in Joan Didion's sense of a subjective truth: the "truth of how it felt to me."

Jane Bessette, "Past-Writing"



If we cannot write objectively true or reliable accounts of our past experiences, what does it mean to write a true story based on our memories of those past experiences?



Our memories are only ever as reliable as the most recent story we told ourselves.

Robert Nash, “Are Memories Reliable?”

Remembering is an act of
storytelling.

Robert Nash, “Are Memories Reliable?”

The Narrative Hypothesis:

Narrative is “not only a prominent form of human communication but also a fundamental way to represent knowledge and to structure the mind.”

Nicolas Szilas, “Towards Narrative-Based Knowledge Representation in Cognitive Systems”



How does the instability and unreliability of the memories of Madeline around which I am constructing this story affect **the truth of the story?**

Christmas, 1971

Can I write a true story about Madeline,
even if my memories are not
themselves true?



Autobiographical memory is a vehicle
for self-expression and definition.

Katherine Nelson, “Self and Social Functions:
Individual Autobiographical Memory and
Collection Narrative”

It is necessary to see the relation between memory as an individual function, its role in the phylogenetic scheme of adaptation, and narrative as the medium of share memories, collective memories, and fictional creations.

Katherine Nelson, “Self and Social Functions”

Narrative is a **cultural invention**, one that may be adopted by individuals in organising their own autobiographical memories.

Katherine Nelson, “Self and Social Functions”



Whereas the meaning for the individual resides in the re-experience, the imposed narrative is a way of establishing shared (not idiosyncratic) meaning.

Katherine Nelson, “Self and Social Functions”



That moment in Christmas of 1971
exists in this act of storytelling—not as a
separate, autonomous event or fact.

The **truth** I am trying to find
emerges
in this **act of writing** this story
at this moment.

My memories of Madeline are inseparable from the social, cultural, and historical contexts within which the experiences I am remembering took place.

Autobiographical memory is more important to the individual today in both its social and personal functions [for] maintaining identity within a somewhat fractured community.

Katherine Nelson, “Self and Social Functions”



The need to write true stories is
as pressing as ever.

Hvala!