

# WRITING THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL:

## JOYS & PITFALLS

\*Writing autobiographical FICTION can be joyous as well as dangerous.

The joys are that it:

1. Lets you supplement Imagination (and research) with one of the most valuable resources you possess: MEMORY.

“Memory and imagination are our only resources. Our stories are either remembered or imagined or—and this is most often the case—they are both remembered and imagined, they come out of a combining of the two resources.”

2. Lets you document history, and yours is bound to be like others’ living in your particular time/place; through the specifics of your life, you arrive at universality.

“When we are using the material of our own history, we are most likely to find passion and to engage in that rigorous weighing and balancing of chance and choice, of surprise and inevitability, that the well-considered story requires of us.”

3. Lets you revise history: God-like, you get to use troubling experiences from your life but *with a different outcome* to achieve a greater truth.

4. Lets you render settings more accurately (and suggestively) than those from imagination or research.

“ . . . autobiographical writing leads us naturally toward concrete writing, toward language that involves the nose, tongue, ears, skin and especially the eyes, as well as the mind.”

5. Lets you exploit an expertise you possess to produce greater verisimilitude, more genuine conflict.

6. Gives you great raw material from which to craft plots for stories.

“If carving stone is more difficult than molding clay, then chipping something that really happened into a usable shape for a short story must be at least as much of an accomplishment as making something up.”

7. Lets you create characters that may be more vivid because you become more *responsible* toward them.

8. Lets you more generously love *all* your characters, since they’re based on real people with human mixture of good/bad.

“If in doubt, treat your characters as if you loved them. If you’ve got to make some sort of adjustments with your character, try being generous, try letting that character—even if it’s a treacherous, nasty-hearted character—be his or her best self, or maybe even *better* than his or her best self.”

9. Gives you more insight into what makes your fictional characters “tick” by basing them on real people you’ve known.

10. Lets you protect real people *more* (as compared to writing nonfiction, memoir, etc.). (Key: change real people radically in your fiction—gender, age, etc.—and make them composites.)

“I believe the writer must do whatever he can to avoid such trouble [hurting family, friends, enemies], but I believe finally he cannot allow the opinions and feelings of others to stop or to interfere with his writing. Autobiographical writing will bring you to the point of having to make not just one but a number of hard choices between the life and the work.”

11. Lets you weave the issues that excite and affect you into your fiction, so you can explore the conflicts they cause for your own as well as the reader's understanding.

“What I want in a story . . . is the quality of passion and of necessity. I don't want what the writer throws out of his closet onto the floor behind him; I want his best brandy, and I want him to take me to the special room where he keeps the thing in the house that he cares about the most, and I want him to tell me about it in such a way that I begin to care for that thing, too.”

12. Provides therapy, the chance to heal from your life's wounds.

“In the first place, we write for the work itself. In the second place we write for ourselves. And in the third place, we write for others.”

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THE JOYS		THE PITFALLS	
1.	Lets you supplement Imagination (and research) with one of the most valuable resources you possess: MEMORY.	Lets you fall into the “autobiographical trap”—don’t be a slave to memory. Invent!	
2.	Lets you document history, and yours is bound to be like others’ living in your particular time/place; through the specifics of your life, you arrive at universality.	By inviting comparison to the literal historical truth, you find some readers irritated at your “wrong” version, fictional though it is.	
3.	Lets you revise history: God-like, you get to use troubling experiences from your life but <i>with a different outcome</i> to achieve a greater truth.	You let the revisionist revenge urge corrupt the greater fictional truths you should be striving for.	
4.	Lets you render settings more accurately (and suggestively) than those from imagination or research.	You are dismissed by readers and critics as a regional writer, local colorist; or worse, as #2, some readers disagree w/ your version of reality.	
5.	Lets you exploit an expertise you possess to produce greater verisimilitude, more genuine conflict.	Readers are less fascinated than you are; research might give your characters more exotic professional lives.	

6.	Gives you great <i>raw material</i> from which to craft plots for stories.	You transfer the “real” story whole-cloth, forgetting basic plot craft (arc, tension, etc.).
7.	Lets you create characters that may be more vivid because you become more <i>responsible</i> toward them.	You fail to protect identities of real people enough by changing names and gender, creating composites, etc.
8.	Lets you more generously love <i>all</i> your characters, since they’re based on real people with human mixture of good/bad.	You’re too close to those who’ve caused you pain or joy; you either idolize or hate them, polluting your perspective.
9.	Gives you more insight into what makes your fictional characters “tick” by basing them on real people you’ve known.	You can never truly know all the motives of another person, but you can completely know (and clarify for the reader) the motives of made-up people.
10	Lets you protect real people <i>more</i> (as compared to writing nonfiction, memoir, etc.).	There’s <i>always</i> a danger of harming someone, no matter your motives or your methods, by using them in fiction.
11	Lets you weave the issues that affect and excite you into your fiction, so you can explore the conflicts they cause for your own understanding as well as the reader’s.	Issues take over and story becomes propaganda for your pet cause rather than meaningful, balanced and <i>fair</i> exploration. Or issue is boring, irrelevant, or writer’s a crackpot!
12	Provides therapy, the chance to heal from your life’s wounds.	Could poison the source or ignore reader’s needs in favor of writer’s; leave writer even more wounded or confused.