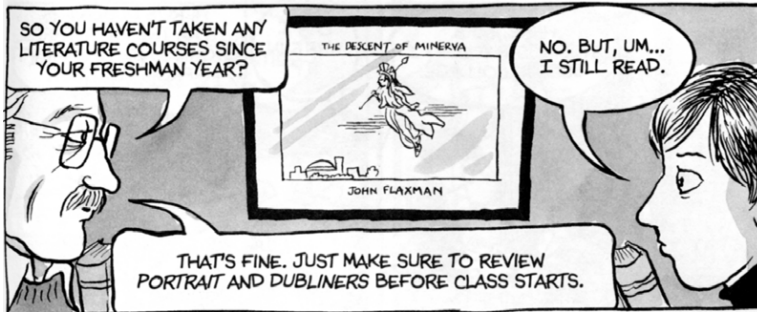


the changing profession

The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of the Memoir

NANCY K. MILLER

FOR I WAS BEGGING ADMISSION TO NOT JUST ANY ENGLISH CLASS, BUT ONE DEVOTED TO MY FATHER'S FAVORITE BOOK OF ALL TIME.



AND INDEED, I EMBARKED THAT DAY ON AN ODYSSEY WHICH, CONSISTING AS IT DID IN A GRADUAL, EPISODIC, AND INEVITABLE CONVERGENCE WITH MY ABSTRACTED FATHER, WAS VERY NEARLY AS EPIC AS THE ORIGINAL.



NANCY K. MILLER is Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. Her most recent books are *But Enough about Me: Why We Read Other People's Lives* (Columbia UP, 2002) and the coedited collection *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community* (U of Illinois P, 2002). She coedits the journal *WSQ*.

At left: Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Boston: Houghton, 2006) 203.

So, I'm just like everybody else. I go to the bookstore. I pick out a book I love. If it says memoir, I know that—that maybe the names and dates and times have been compressed, because that's what a memoir is.

—Oprah Winfrey on *Larry King Live*,
11 January 2006

I wanted the stories in the book to ebb and flow, to have dramatic arcs, to have the tension that all great stories require. I altered events all the way through the book.

—James Frey, *New York Times*, 2 February 2006

Sometimes the facts threaten the truth.

—Amos Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*

Of course it is impossible to tell the truth. For example, how does one know it? I will not belabor the difficulty by telling you how hard I have tried. And if compulsion forces me to tell the truth, it may also lead me into error, or invention.

—Kate Millett, *Flying*

Is it autobiography if parts of it are not true? Is it fiction if parts of it are?

—Lynda Barry, *One Hundred Demons*

IT WOULD BE HARD TO BE SMARTER THAN OPRAH. IF PHILIPPE LEJEUNE, OUR REIGNING autobiography guru, were to appear on *Larry King Live* to discuss James Frey's best-selling memoir *A Million Little Pieces*, I don't think he would disagree with Oprah's logic. When you go to the bookstore and pick out a book that says "memoir" on it, you expect to be reading the truth, even if, being a sophisticated modern reader, you also realize that some of the details might not stand up to Googling. That's still the deal, what Lejeune called in 1975 "the autobiographical pact" (*On Autobiography* 13) and recently updated for the benefit of lycée students, in response to their many e-mails asking for clarification, now that the biographical was an official subject on the school

reading list: "The autobiographical pact is the engagement that an author takes to narrate his life directly (her life, or a part of it, an aspect of it) in a spirit of truth" (*Signes* 31).

A spirit of truth? That sounds perilously close to what Steven Colbert dubbed "truthiness" on *The Colbert Report*: "the quality by which a person purports to know something emotionally or instinctively, without regard to evidence or to what the person might conclude from intellectual examination" ("Truthiness"). As it turned out, Colbert was reinventing a word that already existed in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but it still garnered the award from the American Dialect Society as the "2005 Word of the Year." While Colbert had launched *truthiness* on Comedy Central to mock the rhetoric of contemporary political discourse, the word was quickly seen to apply to the Frey controversy. In his column "Truthiness 101: From Frey to Alito," Frank Rich connected the dots linking the political and the literary and underlined the dangers of living in "the age of truthiness": "This isn't just a slippery slope. It's a toboggan into chaos, or at least war. . . . It's as if," Rich observed despairingly, "the country is living in a permanent state of suspension of disbelief."

Whether or not one shares Rich's despair over the condition of our national cultural values, the flurry of controversy generated by *A Million Little Pieces* raised questions about the reading, writing, and reception of autobiography that might seem familiar to MLA members as a discussion, if not of Coleridge's "poetic faith," then of genre (a word rarely used by media commentators).

The problem is not, as one might imagine, restricted to the literature of popular culture. On the heels of the Frey furor, Oprah announced that Elie Wiesel's *Night* would be the selection to follow *A Million Little Pieces*. Oprah and Elie traveled to Auschwitz together (a video of the trip is available for \$12.95 from Oprah's Book Club). At the same time, a new edition and translation

of Wiesel's Holocaust narrative were announced. Coverage of the new version, which would contain a few emendations (including Wiesel's true age at the time of his concentration camp experience), noted that despite the documented authenticity of the author's experience, the book had suffered from genre confusion: "At times over the last 45 years," *Night* had been "classified as a novel on some high-school reading lists, in some libraries and in bookstores" (Wyatt, E1).¹ But whether the word enlisted to discuss the phenomenon is *genre* or *category* or *classification*, it seems clear that autobiographical writing in the early part of the twenty-first century is posing sticky problems of reception. Or, as Oprah concludes when Larry King presses her to say whether she still recommends Frey's book:

What I think is, is, this is going to open up the discussion for publishers. And you know, as you know, I recommend books and have been for a long time. And, for me, the bigger question is, what does this mean for the larger publishing world in the entire—in this memoir category, because, as James was saying earlier, this is a new category? (*Larry King Live*)

A new category? A new problem? An old problem with new names and new stakes?² Famously, Art Spiegelman took issue with the *New York Times* when its book review editors placed *Maus II*, the second volume of his cartoon narrative about his parents' Holocaust experience, in the fiction category of the best-seller list. "I know that by delineating people with animal heads I've raised problems of taxonomy for you," he wrote in a letter to the editors. "The borderland between fiction and nonfiction has been fertile territory for some of the most potent contemporary writing," he observed. "Could you consider," Spiegelman wondered facetiously, asking the editors to think harder, "adding a special 'non-fiction/mice' category to your list?" (The *Times* complied, noting that the publisher, Pantheon, listed the book as history/memoir.) A decade

later, the cartoonist Lynda Barry coined the term "autobifictionalography" to describe her work; *One Hundred Demons* is based on her life, she says, but she tries "to make myself look as cool as possible" (Interview). In *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*, Gillian Whitlock uses the term "autographics" to describe works like Spiegelman's *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. Today many critics and publishers casually refer to graphic memoirs like *Maus*, *One Hundred Demons*, and Alison Bechdel's "tragicomic" (her word) *Fun Home* as "graphic novels" (Wilsey).³

Appearances to the contrary, genre is pretty intractable, never more so than when its distinctions seem hopelessly out-of-date. Despite the slippage in terminology, and despite the ingenuity that writers and artists deploy to deal with the autobiographical project that purports to convey some aspect of a life story, when readers choose a memoir, they make certain assumptions.⁴ No doubt such readers would agree with Lejeune's formulation to lycéens, that the difference between fiction and nonfiction boils down to the writer's relation to the truth: "If you, reader, judge that the autobiographer hides or alters a part of the truth, you might think that he is lying. On the other hand, it's impossible to say that a novelist lies" (*Signes* 31).

How can you tell for sure that the autobiographer isn't lying? You can't, or maybe you can to some degree, on small (or not so small) verifiable items, thanks to thesmokinggun.com, as Frey learned to his chagrin.⁵ Dave Eggers, more cleverly, offers this disclaimer:

The point is, the author doesn't have the energy or, more important, skill, to fib about this being anything other than him telling you about things, and is not a good enough liar to do it in any competently sublimated narrative way. At the same time, he will be clear and up-front about this being a self-conscious memoir, which you may come to appreciate. . . . (xix-xx)

Despite the many pages of front matter that play with the reader—including the ultimate dismissal: if you don't like it, "PRETEND IT'S FICTION" (xxiv)—the writer, having exploited all the potential contradictions of the pact, can't help bowing to the rules of the genre or at least to its spirit.

Is it impossible to say that a fiction writer lies?

Some novelists, like Amos Oz, object to the fiction label on those grounds. Shortly before the publication in English of *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, Oz discussed the book with David Remnick, who visited the author in Israel. "Much of it," Remnick states, "is clearly the result of memory and memory reconstructed from reading and conversations with older relatives. . . . Using the evidence, but also the liberties of a novelist, Oz tries to portray things as hidden to him as his father's love affairs and his mother's tortured inner life." Immediately following this account of the author's project (earlier in the piece Remnick unhesitatingly calls the book a memoir), Oz himself jumps in. "I don't like to be described as an author of fiction. Fiction is a lie. James Joyce took the trouble, if I am not mistaken, to measure the precise distance from Bloom's basement entrance to the street above. In *Ulysses* it is exact, and yet it is called fiction. But when a journalist writes, 'A cloud of uncertainty hovers . . . '—this is called fact!" (Remnick).

The author's irritation about what's truth and what fiction, what's fact and what invention, explodes in an early chapter of *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, but the reader of Oz's memoir in English is spared the outburst. This five-page chapter was deleted from the English translation, though it appears in the French, and directly precedes the chapter that begins with the sentence I've quoted in my epigraph: "Sometimes the facts threaten the truth" (32; ch. 5 in English). Was the chapter deleted because the publishers deemed that English-language readers, unlike the French, could not

tolerate a few pages of metacommentary on genre in a five-hundred-plus-page book?⁶

Oz opens with a question in almost the same terms as Barry's in *One Hundred Demons*: "Basically, what is the part of autobiography and fiction in my narratives?" And answers with heavy sarcasm: "Everything is autobiography: if one day I were to write a love story between Mother Teresa and Abba Eban, it would no doubt be autobiographical, but it wouldn't be a confession. All my work is autobiographical, but I've never confessed." Oz's investment in the distinction becomes even clearer in the next line when he turns to the behavior of readers: "The bad reader wants to know all, immediately, 'what really happened.'" The bad reader for Oz is like the journalist who asked Nabokov on television whether he was "really so hooked on little girls" (in English). Like Nabokov, whom he evokes with obvious sympathy, Oz feels persecuted by the bad reader and rude journalists who want to know, for instance, whether his wife was the model for the character Hannah in the novel *My Michael*. The bad readers are relentless in their unseemly and dumb curiosity: what really is your book about? (*Histoire* 39). Can't they read?

What would be better? The mistake the bad reader or the nosy journalist makes is looking for the "heart of the story in the interstices between the creation and its author." The better path would be to look in the space that connects the text and the reader (41). The chapter concludes with Oz's advice to those who wish to become good readers of his books. "Don't ask if these are real facts. If it's what happened in the life of the author. Ask yourself the question. About yourself. As for the answer, keep it to yourself" (43). This seems fair enough advice to the reader of a novel. But why has Oz inserted this user's manual into his memoir, a book about the life of the author? But is it a memoir? The French translation, which features on its cover the same photograph of mother, father, and Amos

that appears in the pages of both the English and the Hebrew editions, also bears the classification “roman”—novel or fiction. The back jacket of the English edition is labeled “Biography and Autobiography.”

Reviewing a memoir about a mother’s death, A. O. Scott dissects the hostility between writer and reader of the sort that Oz displays in the missing chapter: “How is this any of your business? Why are you telling me this?” Readers have their standards, if authors don’t. “And so, in a way that novels rarely are,” Scott observes, “memoirs are governed—and frequently constricted—by considerations of tact. The writer must judge how much exposure, of self and others, is appropriate.”⁷ Like speech acts, memoirs perform effectively, felicitously, as J. L. Austin’s phrase goes, only on condition of common cultural consent, but writers often misjudge how much exposure is appropriate. This might explain why memoirs are so often subjected to the critical police. This we want to hear, that we don’t. Too much information, as people say now. Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on your taste, autobiographers don’t really care. “I am well aware that the reader does not require information, but I, on the other hand, feel impelled to give it to him,” Rousseau announced early in his *Confessions*, revisiting a childhood scene (31).

The distinction between forms matters to readers. How else did Oprah know that she was going to love Frey’s book *before* she read it? She knew because the book jacket identifies the genre and subgenre to which it belongs: a memoir of addiction and recovery. Oprah, like her audience, warms to the story of redemption. In this tendency to preselection, she behaves like many women and feminist readers of what Liz Stanley designates auto/biography:

Woman enters bookshop, browses along shelves. Stops, picks up and quickly puts down collection of essays on Hegel and feminism. Moves on, picks up and reads end of

new feminist detective novel. Spots new biography of X, looks closely at front cover, reads blurb on back cover, flicks through a page or two, then goes to centre eight pages of photographs and scrutinises each with care and concentration.

Although Stanley describes here the effect of photographs in auto/biography on the woman in search of a good read, I want to link photography and the pleasure that comes from genre satisfaction in my effort to understand what it is that readers seem to look for in life stories: “lives-with-meaning” (20). As Adriana Cavarero expands on Stanley’s fable, “We are in a bookstore. The editorial horizon that envelops us means that the narration does not appeal to the protagonist of the story, as though it were a personal gift, but rather to the reading public” (71). We do not know “what she has found,” Cavarero says of the questing reader, but “we know fairly well what she was seeking” (74).

A woman, Oprah, any member of the “reading public,” enters a bookstore and scans not an infinite cornucopia of books but a selection of those that already make sense in terms of the “editorial horizon.”⁸ Or, as Scott describes the display:

Like any other widely practiced kind of writing, the memoirs that crowd the front tables of your local bookstore sort themselves into distinct if not always mutually exclusive subgenres. Every person is different, of course, but the accounts that our utterly special fellow citizens give of their lives and families nonetheless tend to conform to certain recognizable templates.

Recognizable, yes—but also now culturally inflected. It’s not only “our utterly special fellow citizens” whose psyches are on offer for our perusal as we cruise the aisles of Borders or Barnes and Noble. We are witnessing a fascination with Islamic life stories, not so surprising in the century of September 11, and

with the longer United States history with Iran. Whitlock's *Soft Weapons* studies contemporary life writing about the Middle East, analyzing in particular the ways in which the lives of women behind the veil, recorded in memoirs like Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Teheran*, seem to fascinate huge numbers of Western readers, most of whom probably have never read Nabokov themselves (161–85). Memoirs from sites of danger provide a safe space for readers to ponder the nightmare of contemporary global relations, even as the pages display the extreme difficulty of living in times of traumatic history. The story of the other citizen, preferably female—the exotic, foreign self in translation (like us after all)—is also a valuable template in the marketplace of contemporary autobiographical production and consumption.

Readers need guides to the territory—foreign or domestic. If Americans learn that foreigners are like us (we read the same books), they are also urged to recognize themselves in their fellow sinners. As the Frey flap and Oprah's power demonstrate, the recovery narrative has become the best-selling form of autobiography. Should we be surprised when redemption and confession steal the limelight in a tradition whose origins are copyrighted by Augustine and Rousseau? Taking the long view, one might say that Frey et al. have merely upped the ante on Augustine's sinner-to-saint trajectory, just changing the form of transgression from irresistible fornication to crack and alcohol addiction. Frey manages his redemption without Augustine's God, however; nor does he bother to complete the twelve-step program. When the therapist at the rehab center tells him that the chances of staying sober without the program are "a million to one," Frey responds, "Those odds don't scare me" (410). Like Jean-Jacques before him, James is unique. "Whether Nature did well or ill in breaking the mould in which she formed me, is a question that can only be resolved after the reading of my book"

(Rousseau 17). How would Augustine fare in the truthiness department? As the biographer Nancy Milford wonders, "What fact-checker on earth would dare try to validate St. Augustine as he confesses and confesses?"

The question of truth and autobiography in millennial times intersects with another salient concern, in the United States and in France: the question of genealogy.⁹ Patricia Williams links genealogy, family history, and truth:

In the past week there has been an interesting convergence of inquiries into the nature of truth. James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* triggered deep epistemological soul-searching about whether simple lies can constitute "emotional truth." After a swirl of media confusion, a sound tongue-lashing from Oprah Winfrey seemed to seal up the answer as a resounding Not On My Dime.

Williams begins here, immediately segues into a discussion of DNA—research on Joan of Arc in France—then returns to the American scene, to Henry Louis Gates's "exploration," on public television, "of his roots and those of other prominent African American figures, including . . . , of course, Oprah Winfrey." She takes a somewhat skeptical view of DNA research, of what it can teach us beyond certain clearly marked biological information. Thus, Gates learns that the white man he and his kin had always thought was his great-great-grandfather was not, could not have been.¹⁰ In one of the more endearing moments of the program, Gates confronts his cousin with the new evidence. The DNA contradicts the story the boys grew up with. The cousin can't take it in. So there must be two truths. "Somewhere in between what the DNA says and what shaped the family account," Williams observes, "is a gap that is something like a lie."

Williams seems tempted but reluctant to connect the kind of family story that is not strictly true to "James Frey's addled manipulations." She admits to seeing a continuum of

self-mythification—instances of “emotional truth” as people reinvent themselves—but finally moves away from the Frey media saga to reflect more broadly on our romance with DNA and the fantasies of roots, with who we might have been. “If we biologize our history, we will forever be less than we could be.”

Are we our roots? In *Hors de moi*, the philosopher François Noudelmann inveighs against the national mania in France for genealogical research.¹¹ “Sending everyone to a place in the genealogical tree depends on an injunction to assume one’s ancestral memory, and on a reduction of personal memory to the family narrative” (15). Noudelmann’s anti-identitarian position is well argued and important to the fiery debates about current French-style identity politics, but in literature the genealogical tree and the family narrative are crucial, often structural, components of autobiography as a genre. The arc of becoming through self-knowledge is rooted in but never entirely bound to the stories of our familial past. The challenge that faces autobiographers is to invent themselves despite the weight of their family history, and autobiographical singularity emerges in negotiation with this legacy. As Francine du Plessix Gray observes at the end of *Them: A Memoir of Parents*, “We may have to learn their life narratives before we can truly begin to be ourselves” (499). The instruction is vivifying. “I will always look after you, I want to say,” Hilary Mantel writes in the last lines of *Giving Up the Ghost*, “however long you have been gone. I will always feed you, and try to keep you entertained; and you must do the same for me. This is your daughter Hilary speaking, and this is her book” (223).

The tangled relation of self to family stories and settings is illustrated with extraordinary complexity in Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, the graphic memoir whose panels introduce this essay. Compared on its dust jacket with Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, *Fun Home* is a coming-of-age story set in Beech Creek, Pennsylvania. “Fun Home” is the family designation for the tiny

town’s funeral home, of which the author’s father, Bruce Bechdel, is the director. The memoir is also a coming-out story, complicated by the father’s ambiguous (ultimately not so ambiguous) sexuality.

The father-daughter bond is at the heart of this family memoir, and from the beginning their relationship is tracked through reading and writing. The father gives his daughter her first diary, a wall calendar. “Just write down what’s happening,” he instructs, and he writes the first three words in it to get her started (140). Soon the girl confronts her first autobiographical crisis: “How did I know that the things I was writing were absolutely, objectively true?” (141).

Father also guides daughter’s reading, selecting books from his well-stocked personal library (he’s a part-time twelfth-grade English teacher), first giving her Joyce and then, with no explanation, Colette’s “Autobiography.”¹² Subsequently, the daughter returns the favor, leaving her father her copy of Kate Millett’s *Flying*. Not long after Alison comes out to her parents, Bruce Bechdel is killed in an accident, or perhaps he commits suicide, inspired by reading Camus. Did the daughter’s coming out kill her father? The question remains unanswered, but it haunts the entirety of the memoir. From beginning to end, the father-daughter bond takes the form of a knot that cannot be untied—in life or in autobiography: “And in a way, you could say that my father’s end was my beginning. Or more precisely, that the end of his lie coincided with the beginning of my truth” (117). This entanglement of life stories is further layered by the active presence of literary texts whose narratives provide clues, both true and false, to the mysteries of family relations.

In the opening panels of the memoir, Alison’s father reluctantly abandons his reading of *Anna Karenina* to play a game of airplane with his little daughter. The memoir ends with Alison’s grown-up meditation on the unhappy fate of Joyce’s children (as compared to

his books) and on the childhood game: “But in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt” (232). As Bechdel draws these strands together, she re-creates memories in which the force of attachment generates the structure of the memoir itself.

The power of attachment, particularly in the face of loss, also characterizes Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking*, which won the National Book Award for nonfiction in 2005. Didion’s memoir exemplifies the notion, argued persuasively by feminist theorists, that the female autobiographical self comes into writing, goes public with private feelings, through a significant relation to another. Feminist critics have been making the case for the model of a relational self at the heart of the autobiographical project for over two decades. Most famously, Mary Mason challenged the standard of the autonomous self in her groundbreaking essay “The Other Voice,” beginning with early-period examples of women’s life writing, in which the other provides the authorizing conditions for self production. As Susan Stanford Friedman put it in her critique of autobiography’s shibboleths, “Isolate individualism is an illusion. It is also the privilege of power.” Autobiographers who are women and members of minorities, Friedman further argued, can’t help knowing that they also intimately share in a “collective identity” (39). More recently, Leigh Gilmore described the “task of autobiography” as sorting out precisely “how selves and milieus ought to be understood *in relation to each other*” (12).

While *The Year of Magical Thinking* offers a striking, contemporary instance of that relational structure, I’d like to consider the degree to which what’s true for women writers is also true to the form.¹³ Eggers’s *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, the story of two brothers (and a few other family members), certainly demonstrates these qualities—as do Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s*

Ashes and, earlier, Michael Ondaatje’s return to Sri Lanka in *Running in the Family*. The quest to understand the self in relation to family and place is exemplified most recently by Daniel Mendelsohn’s extraordinary accomplishment in *The Lost*, a book of hybrid structure in which the history of one’s bonds with others drives the narrative. Perhaps it is time to understand the question of relation to the other—to others—as being as important, foundational, to the genre as the truth conditions of the “autobiographical pact.” Not the exception but the rule. Put another way, in autobiography the relational is not optional. Autobiography’s story is about the web of entanglement in which we find ourselves, one that we sometimes choose.

The Year of Magical Thinking is the story of a couple, a marriage, and describes the blow to its author, the wife—Joan Didion—when her husband suddenly keels over before her eyes: “*You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends*” (3). This is a book about grief, about loss, sudden loss, and about how what happened changed all Didion’s ideas “about life itself,” which is also to say about writing. “I have been a writer my entire life. As a writer, even as a child, long before what I wrote began to be published, I developed a sense that meaning itself was resident in the rhythms of words and sentences and paragraphs, a technique for withholding whatever it was I thought or believed behind an increasingly impenetrable polish” (7). The shock of her husband’s death leads Didion to wish for a mode of writing that violates her writer’s credo.

The way I write is who I am, or have become, yet this is a case in which I wish I had instead of words and their rhythms a cutting room, equipped with an Avid, a digital editing system on which I could touch a key and collapse the sequence of time, show you simultaneously all the frames of memory that come to me now, let you pick the takes, the marginally different expressions, the variant readings of the same lines. This is a case in which I need more than

words to find the meaning. This is a case in which I need whatever it is I think or believe to be penetrable, if only for myself. (8)

A form of writing that keeps less, gives more. This you, the reader, becomes the guest invited in, the unknown, self-selected other whose response matters. I wish I could show you what's going on inside me—an invitation to intimacy we do not associate with Didion. The longing to be “penetrable” may in the end pertain only to herself, but autobiographers need readers—particularly to share their loss. That invitation is what makes the reader want to take the autobiographer up on the pact.

The Year of Magical Thinking was the first book Didion wrote that John Gregory Dunne would not read. But writing about him, telling their story, brought the writer a world of passionate readers. The reader, finally, as Didion's metaphor suggests, is the autobiographer's most necessary other. In a way, this need and its limits are the burning core of autobiography—as much a matter of life and death as life itself. You conjure the reader to prove that you are alive. Life itself, Roland Barthes decided after the death of his mother, would not be worth living—it would be a life “absolutely and entirely *unqualifiable* (without quality)” (75). But, like Didion, faced with the loss of everything that mattered, he sat down to write a book.

Autobiography studies is a young and rapidly expanding field, which means that this essay could have been given distinctly different emphases. I've told only one story about autobiography, and certainly this one doesn't pretend to be a master narrative of the field or the genre. I would, however, venture that despite the beating the genre regularly takes from journalists and critics who seem to keep hoping that the age of memoir is over, autobiography may emerge as a master form in the twenty-first century.¹⁴

The expansion of autobiography studies includes dramatic developments in the equally

rich and interdisciplinary domains of memory studies, trauma and testimony, law and ethics, illness and disability, ethnography, performance, and visual culture—photography, video, graphic memoir. Life writing as a genre is also crucial in the understanding of ethnic literature, world literature, area studies, race theory, and social justice. The rubric remains open to new departures as critics and scholars respond to the proliferation of self-narration and self-portraiture in both popular and high culture modes. Academics have risen to the occasion with refreshing inventiveness.

Given the extraordinary elasticity of autobiographical experimentation, it's not surprising that the cadre of scholars devoted to the genre should prove to be vast and varied. My sense of the field is necessarily partial, however, and so what follows reflects my personal favorites and investments. I'd like to mention a small number of books that have enriched and shaped my thinking, some of which I cite in the essay. I would first single out the remarkable anthologies of the 1980s (in alphabetical order by their editors' names): *The Private Self* (Benstock), *Life/Lines* (Brodzki and Schenck), *Women's Autobiography* (Jelinek), *Autobiography* (Olney), *The Female Autograph* (Stanton). These collections—all feminist in inspiration except for James Olney's—staked out the territory with the excitement of pioneers and with an attention to form and genre that many of the editing scholars built on successfully in subsequent decades. In the 1990s, anthologies continued to push the geographic and literary boundaries of autobiographical texts. I'm thinking in particular of *Autobiography and Postmodernism* (Ashley, Gilmore, and Peters), *De/Colonizing the Subject* (Smith and Watson), and *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (Smith and Watson). These collections, along with a staggering number of major monographs, make teaching autobiography a singular pleasure.

It would be hard to miss the contributions of Sidonie Smith and Paul John Eakin.

Over and above the numerous anthologies that Smith has edited with Julia Watson (and occasionally others) is the work of Smith herself. She continues to map the territory, always discovering new forms and domains of the autobiographical, always attentive to the particularities of women's life writing. The complexities of the genre could not have a more thorough or subtle guide than Eakin. Especially in his most recent work, which extends its literary meditations to neuroscience and philosophy, as well as law and ethics, he asks only questions that resist easy answers: "What is the good of life writing, and how, exactly, can it do harm?" ("Mapping" 1). In addition to his own immensely important and foundational work, Eakin is responsible for introducing Philippe Lejeune to the anglophone world. About Lejeune I have not said enough here. It would require an article in itself to do justice to the scope of his accomplishment beyond the pact, notably the practical application of his interests, which take him out of the academy and into the world, or at least the world that is France. In closing, I'd like to congratulate the editors of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, Rebecca and Joseph Hogan, for having had the energy and foresight in 1985 to create a journal devoted to autobiography that remains ever interesting and engaging.

NOTES

I'd like to express my gratitude to Gina Herrmann and Massimo Lollini for inviting me to speak at their graduate seminar in Romance languages at the University of Oregon, which gave me the opportunity to begin thinking about the field of autobiography for this essay. I also want to thank the wonderful students in my seminar *Experimental Selves* (Graduate Center, City University of New York, fall 2006) for their collaboration in reading autobiography and their excitement about its possibilities. Unattributed translations in this essay are mine.

1. On the stakes of Wiesel's "self-correction," see Suleiman.

2. Long before the challenges posed by the mix of image and text, we had the French taxonomic solution to the rela-

tion of fact to fiction in life writing: "autofiction" (a coinage approved by Lejeune [Eakin, *Fwd.* xii; Lejeune, *Signes* 25]). And we had Audre Lorde's "biomythography."

3. Wilsey observes, "It's odd that [Bechdel's] memoir, a work of meticulous personal reportage, is referred to as a 'graphic novel' in the accompanying letter from its publisher. . . . Depressingly, memoirists now seem compelled to pre-emptively defend the factuality of their works, under the assumption that it will be questioned. Memory is no longer entirely credible in the genre of memory." For details about Bechdel's archival process, see Hillary Chute's interview with Bechdel.

4. In their analysis of contemporary autobiographical performance and generic innovation, Smith and Watson observe that Lejeune's pact continues to offer a "kind of decorum" and to provide a "guarantee of the narrator's reliability." Experiments such as those of Dave Eggers and the installation artist Tracey Emin, they argue, "both maintain and breach these terms in order to renegotiate what is permissible in the name of public presentation of one's past" ("Rumpled Bed" 11). On Lejeune's preoccupation with "truth value" and the implications of his assumptions for women autobiographers, see Domna Stanton's early feminist critique in "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?" (10).

5. Indeed, following a settlement among Frey, his publisher, and readers "claiming they had been defrauded," dissatisfied buyers of *A Million Little Pieces* are now entitled to get their money back on the grounds that "they would not have bought the book if they knew that certain facts had been embroidered or changed" (M. Rich).

6. I learned from Bella Brodzki that the missing chapter had appeared in the French translation. I've also benefited from the insights and information available to Israeli readers of Oz thanks to the generosity of Tamar Hess. See her "The Confessions of a Bad Reader" for an analysis of the reception of *A Tale of Love and Darkness* in relation to the Modern Hebrew canon.

7. On the ethics of this delicate subject, see Eakin, "Mapping."

8. "The predilection for auto/biographical texts obviously does not concern only women," Cavarero writes, "and neither does it confine the pleasure of readers to a circle of writers or heroes of their own sex" (74). Gillian Whitlock too is attracted to what she calls "the bookshop metaphor" and notably what the display of books reveals about the status of minority writers. "Bookshops—real and virtual—are a reminder," she writes, explaining her theoretical position, "that critics of the contemporary must hold things together: books on the shelf, production and consumption, addressee and addressor, and our own imaginative work of self-identification" (15).

9. France has had a long tradition of distinguished autobiographers, particularly in the modern period. The work of Annie Ernaux, who moved from novel to memoir and who has also published diaries, has become part of the

lycée curriculum—always a sign of cultural acceptance. At age seventy-six, the critic Gérard Genette published a long dictionary of the self, an alphabetical, intellectual repertoire set under the sign of Montaigne but more closely resembling Roland Barthes's *Roland Barthes*. The memoir genre is also extremely popular in Britain—almost as much as it is in the United States. The same is true of genealogical research (see the BBC Web site www.bbc.co.uk/history/familyhistory/, as well as ancestorsnboard.com, a microsite, powered by findmypast.com, that offers information about long-distance voyages leaving the British Isles from 1890 to 1960). However national in inflection and style, autobiographical forms seem to have a global reach and transnational appeal. For example, Fusami Ōgi draws connections between Nakazawa Keiji's *Barefoot Gen* and Spiegelman's *Maus*.

10. Gates tells the story more than a decade earlier in his memoir *Colored People*.

11. Typical of this preoccupation is the cover of a recent issue of *L'express*. Above a large, smiling family group—what appears to be a clan gathering—the headline announces in giant letters: “Genealogy and Genetics: Learn Everything about Our Origins.” Readers are encouraged to send in for a CD-ROM that will help them construct a family tree (Charles).

12. As Colette's readers will know, *Earthly Paradise* is an edited collection and not Colette's “Autobiography,” as it's presented in the memoir. No matter. Alison sits in bed smoking clove cigarettes and reading about “uneasy women haunted by their own solitude.” At this point, she has decided, from her reading, that she is lesbian but hasn't told her father about her “epiphany” (205). “Colette could write better than anyone about physical things,” she notes, setting aside Joyce's “divagations” in *Ulysses* (207).

13. See, e.g., Eakin, *How Our Lives* 43–98; Miller. Françoise Lionnet made this point early on in reverse direction, placing Augustine as the precursor to the styles of relationality common to women's writing.

14. Throughout this essay I have used the terms *autobiography*, *memoir*, and *life writing* more or less interchangeably. For a short history of the distinctions among them that many scholars wish to make today, see the introduction to Smith and Watson's *Reading Autobiography*.

WORKS CITED

- Ashley, Kathleen, Leigh Gilmore, and Gerald Peters, eds. *Autobiography and Postmodernism*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1994.
- Barry, Lynda. Interview with Lynn Neary. *Talk of the Nation*. Natl. Public Radio. 1 Oct. 2002. *NPR*. 6 Mar. 2007 <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1150937&sc=emaf>>.
- . *One Hundred Demons*. Seattle: Sasquatch, 2002.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Farrar, 1981.
- Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Boston: Houghton, 2006.
- . “An Interview with Alison Bechdel.” With Hillary Chute. *Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (2006): 1004–13.
- Benstock, Shari, ed. *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988.
- Brodzki, Bella. Personal communication. Aug. 2006.
- Brodzki, Bella, and Celeste Schenck, eds. *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988.
- Cavarero, Adriana. *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. Trans. Paul A. Kottman. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Charles, Gilbert. “Généalogie et génétique: Tout savoir sur nos origines.” *L'express* 15 June 2006. 30 Dec. 2006 <<http://www.lexpress.fr/info/sciences/dossier/origine/dossier.asp?ida=438845>>.
- Didion, Joan. *The Year of Magical Thinking*. New York: Knopf, 2005.
- Eakin, Paul John. Foreword. Lejeune, *On Autobiography* vii–xxvii.
- . *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999.
- . “Mapping the Ethics of Life Writing.” Introduction. *The Ethics of Life Writing*. Ed. Eakin. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004. 1–16.
- Eggers, Dave. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. New York: Vintage, 2001.
- Frey, James. *A Million Little Pieces*. New York: Anchor, 2003.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. “Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice.” Benstock 34–62.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *Colored People: A Memoir*. New York: Knopf, 1994.
- Genette, Gérard. *Bardadrac*. Paris: Seuil, 2006.
- Gilmore, Leigh. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001.
- Gray, Francine du Plessix. *Them: A Memoir of Parents*. New York: Penguin, 2005.
- Hess, Tamar Bat-Zion S. “Confessions of a Bad Reader: Embodied Selves, Narrative Strategies, and Subversion in Israeli Women's Autobiography.” *Prooftexts*, forthcoming.
- Jelinek, Estelle C., ed. *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980.
- Larry King Live. *CNN.com*. 14 Jan. 2006. Transcript. 6 May 2006 <<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/060114/lkl.01.html>>.
- Lejeune, Philippe. *On Autobiography*. Fwd. Paul John Eakin. Trans. Katherine Leary. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989.

- . *Signes de vie: Le pacte autobiographique 2*. Paris: Seuil, 2005.
- Lionnet, Françoise. *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989.
- Lorde, Audre. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Trumansburg: Crossing, 1984.
- Mantel, Hilary. *Giving Up the Ghost*. New York: Henry Holt, 2003.
- Mason, Mary. "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers." Brodzki and Schenck 19–44.
- Mendelsohn, Daniel. *The Lost: A Search for Six Million*. New York: Harper, 2006.
- Milford, Nancy. "The False Memoir." *Washington Post*, 5 Feb. 2006: BW10. *Washingtonpost.com* 25 Dec. 2006 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/02/AR2006020201897.html>>.
- Miller, Nancy K. "Representing Others: Gender and the Subjects of Autobiography." *Differences* 6 (1994): 1–27.
- Noudelmann, François. *Hors de moi*. Paris: Sheer, 2006.
- Ögi, Fusami. "Barefoot Gen and Maus: Performing the Masculine, Reconstructing the Mother." *Reading Manga: Local and Global Perceptions of Japanese Comics*. Ed. Jaqueline Berndt and Steffi Richter. Berlin: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2006. 77–91.
- Olney, James, ed. *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980.
- Ondaatje, Michael. *Running in the Family*. New York: Vintage, 1982.
- Oz, Amos. *Une histoire d'amour et de ténèbres*. Trans. Sylvie Cohen. Paris: Gallimard, 2004.
- . *A Tale of Love and Darkness*. Trans. Nicholas de Lange. New York: Harvest, 2005.
- Remnick, David. "The Spirit Level." *New Yorker* 8 Nov. 2004. 1 Nov. 2004. 25 Dec. 2006 <http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fact/041108fa_fact>.
- Rich, Frank. "Truthiness 101: From Frey to Alito." *New York Times* 22 Jan. 2006, late ed., final, sec. 4: 16. 25 Dec. 2006 <<http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=FA0B12F7395B0C718EDDA80894DE404482>>.
- Rich, Motoko. "Publisher and Author Settle Suit over Lies." *New York Times* 7 Sept. 2006: E1.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Confessions*. Trans. J. M. Cohen. New York: Penguin, 1953.
- Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis*. 2 vols. New York: Pantheon, 2003–04.
- Scott, A. O. Rev. of *The Afterlife*, by Donald Antrim. *New York Times* 18 June 2006: 10.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson, eds. *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992.
- . *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001.
- . "The Rumpled Bed of Autobiography: Extravagant Lives, Extravagant Questions." *Biography* 24 (2001): 1–14.
- , eds. *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1998.
- Spiegelman, Art. "A Problem of Taxonomy." Letter to the editor, *New York Times* 29 Dec. 1991, late ed., final, sec. 7: 4.
- Stanley, Liz. *The Auto/biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995.
- Stanton, Domna C. "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?" Stanton, *Female Autograph* 3–20.
- , ed. *The Female Autograph*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987.
- Suleiman, Susan Rubin. "Do Facts Matter in Holocaust Memoirs?" *Crises of Memory and the Second World War*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2006. 159–77.
- "Truthiness." *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. 22 Dec. 2006 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truthiness>>.
- Whitlock, Gillian. *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007.
- Williams, Patricia. "Emotional Truth." *Nation* 6 Mar. 2006: 14.
- Wilsey, Sean. Rev. of *Fun Home*, by Alison Bechdel. *New York Times* 18 June 2006: 9.
- Wyatt, Edward. "The Translation of Wiesel's *Night* Is New, but Old Questions Are Raised." *New York Times* 19 Jan. 2006: E1+.