INVENTING THE TRUTH

The Art and Craft of Memoir

Russell Baker • Jill Ker Conway • Annie Dillard

Ian Frazier • Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Alfred Kazin • Toni Morrison • Eileen Simpson

REVISED & EXPANDED • EDITED BY

William Zinsser

Inventing the Truth

THE ART AND CRAFT OF MEMOIR

REVISED AND EXPANDED SECOND EDITION

RUSSELL BAKER / JILL KER CONWAY
ANNIE DILLARD / IAN FRAZIER
HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR. / ALFRED KAZIN
TONI MORRISON / EILEEN SIMPSON

Edited with an Introduction by
WILLIAM ZINSSER

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
BOSTON NEW YORK

Copyright © 1995 by William K. Zinsser.
All rights reserved.

Introduction, copyright © 1987 and 1995 by William K. Zinsser. *Life With Mother*, copyright © 1987 by Russell Baker. *To Fashion a Text*, copyright © 1987 by Annie Dillard. *The Past Breaks Out*, copyright © 1987 by Alfred Kazin. *The Site of Memory*, copyright © 1987 by Toni Morrison. *Poets in My Youth*, copyright © 1995 by Eileen Simpson. *Looking for My Family*, copyright © 1995 by Ian Frazier. *Lifting the Veil*, copyright © 1995 by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *Points of Departure*, copyright © 1995 by Jill Ker Conway.

For information about permission to reproduce selections from this book, write to Permissions, Houghton Mifflin Company, 215 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10003.

For information about this and other Houghton Mifflin trade and reference books and multimedia products, visit The Bookstore at Houghton Mifflin on the World Wide Web at http://www.hmco.com.trade/.

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
Inventing the truth : the art and craft of memoir / Russell Baker . . . [et al.] ; edited by William Zinsser. — Rev. and expanded.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.).
ISBN 0-395-73101-1
1. Autobiography. 2. United States — Biography — History and criticism. 3. Authors, American — 20th century — Biography — History and criticism. I. Baker, Russell, 1925– . II. Zinsser, William Knowlton.
CT25.158 1995 95-17169
920.073 — dc20 CIP

Printed in the United States of America
QUM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Contents

此为试读,需要完整PDF请访问: www.ertongbook.com

WILLIAM ZINSSER

Introduction

In the early 1960s I was invited to write one-fifth of a book. It was called *Five Boyhoods*, and it consisted of memoirs written by five men who grew up in successive decades of the twentieth century. The first chapter, by Howard Lindsay, described his turn-of-the-century boyhood in Atlantic City, a sunny Victorian world not much different from the one he would inhabit many years later as coauthor and star of one of Broadway's longest-running plays, *Life with Father*. The second chapter ("1910s"), by Harry Golden, evoked a world as cramped as Lindsay's was spacious: the dark ghetto of immigrant Jews on New York's Lower East Side. Chapter 3, on the 1920s, was by Walt Kelly, who belonged to an Irish clan that seemed to be in perpetual migration between Bridgeport and Philadelphia — hardly the twenties of F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Jazz Age," but could Fitzgerald have created Pogo? My chapter ("1930s") was about a boyhood spent in a vale of prosperous WASPs on the

north shore of Long Island, and the fifth chapter, by John Updike, recalled what it was like to grow up in the 1940s as the only child of schoolteachers in a small town in Pennsylvania. Updike's father, haunted by the fear of poverty, was glad the family lived next to a poorhouse; if necessary he could walk there.

Five boyhoods, as unalike as American boyhoods could be. Yet what struck me about the five accounts was how many themes they had in common. One was loneliness, the universal plight. Another was humor, the universal solvent. I also saw that memory, that powerful writer's tool, can be highly unreliable: The boy's remembered truth was often different from his parents' remembered truth. My mother, after reading my chapter, cried because my memory of my boyhood was less golden than *her* memory of my boyhood. Had I subconsciously reinvented it to make it more lonely than it really was? Had she subconsciously never noticed?

Mine was the most privileged of the five boyhoods. In 1920 my parents had built a large and agreeable house — one of those summery, white-shingled houses with many screened porches — on four acres of hilly land near the end of King's Point, overlooking Manhasset Bay and Long Island Sound. Boats and water were my view; I thought it was as beautiful a location for a home as any boy could ask for. My father's business in New York withstood the Depression, so my three sisters and I were sheltered from its cold winds, and we grew up in a happy family, well loved and well provided for.

But the beautiful house was two miles from the nearest

town and not near any other house. I wanted to live on a block, like everybody else, doing block things. I was also the only boy for miles around. By some Mendelian fluke, no boys had been born to any of the nearby families. It was a neighborhood of girls, and that's what our house was full of: my sisters and their friends, giggling over girlish secrets, talking a language laden with mysteries. One of the first words I can remember hearing was "organdy." What did it mean? I never knew and never dared to ask.

Outflanked, I escaped into baseball. Once I entered that world of flanneled heroes I thought about little else. Sometimes during the long summers I tried to dragoon the girls into playing ball. I was a proto–Charlie Brown, ever optimistic that they would catch a fly hit in their direction or throw a runner out. But no runner got thrown out. I learned very early the fact that girls "throw funny." They explained that it was because their arms are "set different." Was that an anatomical fact, or just another strand in the folklore of growing up, like saltpeter in the school food and poison at the center of the golf ball? Whatever the truth, I was stuck with the result.

So began the solitary ballgames that were to occupy much of my youth. Every day I threw a tennis ball for hours against the side of our house, adroitly fielding with a glove the line drives and grounders that sprang out of the quivering shingles, impersonating whole major league teams and keeping elaborate box scores. Little did my parents, trapped inside their booming home, realize that the person out there on the grass wasn't me. That impeccable stylist at second base was Charlie Gehringer of the

Detroit Tigers; that gazelle in the outfield was Joe DiMaggio. If my family had only looked out the window they could have seen greatness.

Being a baseball addict in those days was harder work than it is today. Television hadn't been born, and games weren't even broadcast on the radio. When I was nine my parents sent me to a summer camp on Cape Cod, hoping I might develop a fondness for canoeing or some other, less tyrannical sport. But one day at camp I made a great discovery: An announcer named Fred Hoey on a Boston radio station did play-by-play accounts of all the home games of the Red Sox and the Braves. How idyllic, I thought, to live near Boston; no wonder it was called the Athens of America. For years afterward I fiddled with my radio dial, trying to bring Hoey's voice through the atmosphere to my bedside Philco. Once I thought I heard him, very faintly.

In such a deprived climate I subsisted on the printed word. At breakfast I gorged myself on the baseball articles and box scores in the *New York Herald Tribune* and the *New York Times*. In the evening I waited for my father to come home so that I could grab his *New York Sun*, a paper as baseball-crazed as I was, and in between I would reread copies of *Baseball* magazine, to which I subscribed, or study with monkish dedication what was fast becoming the biggest Big League Gum collection in the East. It was from those wonderful baseball writers that I first glimpsed what it might mean to be a newspaperman; they were my first "influence," the mentors who nudged me down the path to my life's work.

But the memoir I wrote for *Five Boyhoods* was only indi-

此为试读,需要完整PDF请访问: www.ertongbook.com

rectly about my obsession with baseball. It was really the story of a boy contending with certain kinds of isolation. Size was another isolating factor. I was the smallest of boys, late to grow, living in a society of girls who shot up like mutants and were five-foot-nine by the age of twelve. Nowhere was the disparity sharper than at the dances I was made to attend throughout my youth. The tribal rules required every boy to bring a gardenia to the girl who had invited him, which she would pin to the bosom of her gown. Too young to appreciate the bosom, I was just tall enough for my nose to be pressed into the gardenia I had brought to adorn it. The sickly smell of that flower was like chloroform as I lurched round and round the dance floor. Talk was almost out of the question; my lofty partner was just as isolated and resentful. What I remember about those nights is the quality of time standing still. I thought they would never end.

In *Five Boyhoods* I cloaked these unhappy memories in humor — an old habit. Humor is the writer's armor against hard emotions — and therefore, in the case of memoir, one more distortion of the truth. Probably I also used humor as a kindness to my family. When I started writing that memoir I was half paralyzed by the awareness that my parents and my sisters were looking over my shoulder, if not actually perched there, and would read whatever version of their life came out of my typewriter. My first drafts were stiff, and though the style became warmer with each rewrite, I never really relaxed and enjoyed it. Since then, reading other memoirs, I've wondered how many passengers were along on the ride, subtly altering the past.

My grandmother, my father's mother, was a stern presence in our lives. A second-generation American, she hadn't lost the Germanic relish for telling people off, and she had many didactic maxims to reinforce her point. "Kalt Kaffee macht schön," she would declare, wagging her forefinger, leaving us to deconstruct the dreadful message. "Cold coffee makes beautiful," it said, as if hot coffee were some kind of self-indulgence, or perhaps a known cause of ugliness. "Morgen Stund hat Gold im Mund" ("The morning hour has gold in its mouth") she would say to grandchildren who slept late. Frida Zinsser was a woman of fierce pride, bent on cultural improvement for herself and her family — she hectored my father and his brother Rudolph to play the piano and the violin with her long after they had lost interest in those instruments — and in my memoir I duly noted her strength. But I also made it clear that she was no fun.

After *Five Boyhoods* came out my mother tried to set me straight. "Grandma really wasn't like that," she said, defending the mother-in-law who had made her own life far from easy. "She was unhappy and really quite shy, and she very much wanted to be liked." Maybe so; the truth is somewhere between my mother's version and mine. But she was like that to *me* — and that's the only truth that a memoir writer can work with.

All else being subjective, I probably got only one part of my memoir "right" — objectively accurate to all the principal players — and that was the part about the much-loved house and the site it occupied. I described the house, with its sunlit rooms and its pleasant porches that enabled

us to watch an endless armada of boats: sailboats, motorboats, excursion boats, launches, freighters, tankers, trawlers, tugs, barges, Navy destroyers, and, every night at six, one of the two night steamers of the Fall River Line — aging belles named the *Priscilla* and the *Commonwealth*. I described the sounds of the water that were threaded through our lives: the chime of a bell buoy, the mournful foghorn of Execution Light, the nighttime conversation of eelers fishing near the shore, the unsteady drone of an outboard motor, which, even more than the banging of a screen door, still means summer to me. I described the hill in front of our house that we sledded down on our Flexible Flyers. One winter Long Island Sound froze over and cars drove around on the ice.

A decade after World War II my parents began to find the house hard to manage, and they sold it and moved to Manhattan. By then quite a few of their grandchildren — my sisters' children — had played on those porches and watched those boats and listened to the foghorn at night. The house had become a homestead; another generation would remember it. I only went back to see it once, after my mother's funeral at the old family church. My own children were with me, and as I drove down the once-rural King's Point Road I could have been in any affluent suburb anywhere. The sloping fields that I remembered on both sides of the road were so dense with ranch houses and three-car garages and swimming pools that I had no sense of their topography. I only knew it in my bones.

At the end of the road, however, our house was still king of the hill. Someone had told me that it had changed

hands over the years, and on this day it happened to be between occupants again. Only a contractor was there. She invited us in and showed us how the new owner had torn out much of the interior and was preparing to reincarnate it in Beverly Hills modern. Terrazzo squares were piled on the old wooden floors that they would soon cover; unassembled parts for several Jacuzzis awaited the plumber. Fair enough — I had no claim on the house. Its integrity was gone, but at least it was still there. I could tell my children, "This is the house I grew up in."

But the Jacuzzi man must have tired of his new palace. A few years later the house was up for sale again; my sister Nancy saw it advertised in the section of the *New York Times Magazine* that features "luxury estates." Later I heard that it had been bought by an Iranian. I wondered how much more improving the old house could take. Then, one day, an unexpected errand took me out to the family church. My wife, Caroline, was with me. I had an uneasy feeling about the house and didn't want to face finding out what had happened to it. But Caroline urged me to put the past to rest, and once again I pointed the car down King's Point Road.

At the end of the road I saw the two familiar stone gateposts and turned into our driveway. Something was missing: It was the house. Without the crowning house, the hill hardly seemed to be a hill. Had our Flexible Flyers hurtled down that mere incline? We walked up the former hill and stared into an enormous hole where the house had been. The entire place was unkempt; it looked as if it had been abandoned for many months. I could only guess that

some Iranian holding company, having cleared the land, was holding it for development.

We walked around the big hole and went and sat on the seawall. It was a perfect July day. The waters of Manhasset Bay and Long Island Sound glittered in the summer sun, and there were boats as far as I could see: power boats and fishing boats and excursion boats, freighters and tugs and barges, and hundreds of sailboats strung out in a yacht club regatta. I heard a bell buoy and an outboard motor. I was at ease and only slightly sad. The beautiful view was intact: the unique configuration of sea and land I remember so well that I still dream about it.

But the house survived only as an act of writing.

This is a book by eight writers who have gone looking for their past with acts of writing. It originated in 1986 as a series of talks on "The Art and Craft of Memoir," conceived and sponsored by the Book-of-the-Month Club, where I was then working, and held at the New York Public Library. Memoir was defined as some portion of a life. Unlike autobiography, which moves in a dutiful line from birth to fame, omitting nothing, memoir assumes the life and ignores most of it. A memoir writer takes us back to a moment in his or her life that was unusually vivid, such as childhood, or that was framed by war or travel or some other exceptional event. By narrowing the lens, the writer achieves a focus that's not possible in autobiography. Memoir is a window into a life.

The original speakers were told that our interest was in "process." We didn't want authors lecturing about a genre;

we wanted writers talking about how they do what they do. That's what we got.

Russell Baker, the Pulitzer Prize–winning columnist of the *New York Times*, had recently written *Growing Up*, which was not only a superb memoir of his boyhood; it was a classic book about the Depression, perfectly demonstrating that a good memoir is also a work of history, catching a distinctive moment in the life of both a person and a society. Baker's story took tremendous strength from its national context of poverty and struggle.

Annie Dillard, author of *Pilgrim at Tinker's Creek*, was then completing a memoir called *An American Childhood*, in which she situated her lively Pittsburgh childhood in the larger framework of the American landscape, "the vast setting of our common history." Her memoir, she said, was about what it feels like to wake up and "notice that you've been set down in a going world."

Alfred Kazin, dean of American literary critics, had then written three memoirs about successive phases of his life, the richest being *A Walker in the City*, which dealt with his childhood as the son of immigrant Jews in Brooklyn. I still remember how sensual that memoir was. Kazin wrote with his nose, making me smell what his mother was cooking for the Sabbath dinner and how his father's overalls smelled of turpentine when he came home from his job as a housepainter.

Toni Morrison, a Nobel Prize–winning novelist, isn't usually identified with nonfiction writing. Yet her African-American heritage is a powerful current in her work. In books like *Song of Solomon* we hear voices far older than

此为试读,需要完整PDF请访问: www.ertongbook.com