

Selected quotes from *Why We Write About Ourselves: Twenty Memoirists on Why They Expose Themselves (and Others) in the Name of Literature*

Edited by Meredith Maran

On the dangers of revenge writing, from Dani Shapiro:

“Know your reasons for embarking on this memoir. If one of your reasons is revenge, stop. Wait. Writing from rage, or from the sting of betrayal, or whatever it might be that is motivating you, will produce an incoherent story. Be sure you have enough distance from your material so that you are able to think of yourself as a character.”

On truth in memoir, from Dani Shapiro:

“Remembering the best you can is okay, as long as you’re not lying. A memoir is not a history book. It’s a record of your life as you remember it. You could write the same story every ten years, and each book might be less accurate than the last—but the accuracy won’t necessarily determine which is a better book. We don’t judge memoirs by that criterion.

What makes a memoir isn’t just what you remember; it’s your insights about what you remember. Again, a twenty-year old’s memoir might be more accurate in terms of the details, but it won’t be better than a sixty-year-old’s memoir, because the older author will likely have more insights that put the story in a larger context.”

On writing vs. publishing, from Anne Lamott:

“Everything that’s happened to you is all yours. Just write it. You can worry about the legal issues and the next bad holiday dinner later. Tell the story that’s in you to tell.”

On why we write personal stories, from Cheryl Strayed:

“Pretty early on I learned that for better or worse I was going to use my life in my writing, whether in fiction or nonfiction. Not because I think my life is more interesting than anyone else’s, but rather I was going to use the self as a means to write stories that feel universal.”

On why we write personal stories, from Edwidge Danticat:

“. . . I write memoir because there are people in my family who no longer can. I write memoir to honor their lives and share their stories.” George Meredith said, ‘Memoirs are the backstairs of history.’ I want to find those backstairs over and over and keep a map of them for future generations. I write memoir for the next generation of my family and others yet unborn. I also write memoir for the same reason I read memoirs; with the hope that my story might connect me with others. I write memoir to feel less alone.”

And from Nick Flynn:

“I try to come to the edge of what I know and push a little further over that edge. I think any topic or scene or action that elicits any of the “lesser” emotions—shame, guilt, humiliation, etc.—is likely where the good stuff is lurking. I try to go there . . .”

And from Pat Conroy:

“This year I turned sixty-five,” he writes in *The Death of Santini*. “I’ve come to realize that I will carry the bruised freight of that childhood every day . . . It weighs me down and fills me with dread . . . I’ve got to try to make sense of it one last time, a final circling of the block, a reckoning.”

On universality in memoir, from Sue Monk Kidd:

“I realized that writing memoir and fiction has the ability to offer readers a portal into the common heart. It gives them a way to take another’s experience and make it their own.”

And from Anaïs Nin:

As Anaïs Nin said, “One life, deeply examined, ripples out to touch all lives.”