Creative Writing September 12, 2018 2-4 pm Back at Calvert Library, Prince Frederick MD.

By coincidence three very strong pieces on returning to the lands of their (inevitably more then challenging) childhoods, the universal challenge of an exile/émigré/returnee exploring the land they had been relieved to leave behind…I have given you long articles here, but I hope you will save and savour them, and write your own pieces of whatever length

Meanwhile a number of poetry/fiction readings (some of which are in fact memoirs with the names changed) in the area: see *Bay Weekly* and *Calvert Recorder*. (both the print versions and the online editions)

About writers as introverts:
We introverts tend to be shy in social situations with people who aren't close friends, so we write the things we don't say in real life, because real life doesn't have a backspace key.

Also, we have many people living in our heads, so adding too many real people is overwhelming.

#IntrovertWriters #AmWriting #WritingCommunity #WritersLife #AuthorLife#AuthorsLife

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Richard Krawiec
August 15 at 7:45 AM

Kyle Beloit writing in AutoCrit:

Pacing in literature is all about getting your reader from one plot development to another, making sure you don't either overwhelm them with action or bore them with description or exposition along the way. Pacing is an essential skill every writer must add to his toolkit to keep readers compulsively turning pages.

But there's no one-size-fits-all when it comes to pacing—the need for moving the narrative along varies depending on the demands of the story. Thrillers tend to drive along at a clip, with scene after scene taking the reader on a wild ride as she moves from "What happened" to "Who done it?" A character-driven literary novel might take its time exploring description and theme…

Pacing in writing is nuanced. The ability to recognize pacing problems is something you'll discover the more you pay attention to it. Here are some ways to get a better understanding of the pacing of your novel.

- **Get feedback from beta readers. Everyone has different tastes. Some people like fast-paced fiction, while others like authors who take their time developing scenes and characters. Ask your readers for input, but make sure to take their individual preferences into account.**

- **Read your novel as a reader. Sometimes, when we put our editing hats on, we're so busy paying attention to language and grammar that we miss the subtleties of the narrative. Curl up in your favorite reading spot and read your manuscript as though it's a novel you just picked up. Make note of the times you set your novel aside to go do other things or times when you felt distracted. It's possible you have some pacing issues there.**

- **Keep pacing in mind as you read other writers' work. Try reading critically. Pick up a couple of books—one that you know is fast-paced (like a thriller or mystery) and another you expect to take its time (like an epic saga or literary work.) Read them both with pacing in mind. Ask yourself how the author drove the story along so quickly in the fast-paced book. What narrative elements did he use? Ask yourself how the author held your attention as she took her time in the slower-paced book. What kept you from getting bored?**

Sentence structure can determine pacing in writing. Too many short sentences can make a story seem clipped and abrupt, which exhausts the reader. Too many long, complex sentences and your fiction becomes boring. AutoCrit helps you identify pacing problems on the sentence level.

Tackling pacing issues begins with recognizing them. Once you've identified some problems, how do you go about fixing them? Here are seven ways to keep your story interesting and hold your reader's attention with careful pacing.

Consider the narrative arc scene by scene…Your story should have a typical arc, with rising action, a climax, and a resolution. Similarly, your individual scenes should also go somewhere, just on a smaller scale. Scenes that lead nowhere slow your story down. Cut them, or revise so they become an integral part of the story.

- **Make a list of plot points and analyze it. Every scene should move the story forward somehow. List each event in your story, and then look for events that don't advance the plot. Problems with pacing are easily revealed this way.**

- **Slow down a breakneck pace with a description. Slow pacing is a more common problem for most writers, but occasionally we find ourselves racing at top speed. Readers need a break from constant action, so slow things down by adding some vibrant description.**

- **Control your pacing on the sentence level. Too many short sentences in a row will sound stilted. Too many long sentences will confuse the reader and disrupt the flow of the story...Vary your sentence lengths for the best effect.**

- **Check the density of your text. If you look at your manuscript page and see a wall of text with little white space, you can be almost certain you're looking at a slow scene. If that's by design, great. Otherwise, it's time to edit. Are your descriptions too long? Could your scene use some dialog? Maybe even a few deftly placed paragraph breaks would help.**

- **Beware stage direction. You don't have to describe your character's every move. Do we care that Claire walked over and stood in front of the television while she questioned her husband about the unexpected hotel receipt she found in his wallet? Only if he's always glued to the TV at the expense of spending time with her and that detail is crucial to the plot. Otherwise, it's the conversation that matters, not the stage directions.**

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BEAUTIFUL GENIUS: A REVIEW OF CORNELIUS EADY'S THE WAR AGAINST THE OBVIOUS

"Is it jazz? Is it blues? Is it poetry?" The answer to all three is a resounding yes.

Using the artful anaphora and rhythmic refrains common to musical innovators like John Coltrane and Miles Davis, Eady weaves words into meter reminiscent of Langston Hughes. In other places, he allows his diction to parallel the beats and melodic play of jazz master Thelonious Monk, with scats of phrases punctuated by drum-beat white space. Line and stanza breaks equally reinforce sometimes-staccato prosody. The overall effect is at once enlivening and enlightening."

Excellent, informed review of Cornelius Eady's The War Against the Obvious, a

chapbook and album download from Jacar Press.

And congrats to Cornelius for being asked to teach in the summer program at the New School. Previous instructors have included Teju Cole, Zadie Smith, Russell Banks, Colson Whitehead, Lydia Davis, Nathan Englander, Lucille Clifton, Mark Doty, Louise Gluck, Tracy K. Smith, Major Jackson, Jhumpa Lahiri, Fanny Howe, Kevin Young, and Frank Bidart.
BEAUTIFUL GENIUS: A REVIEW OF CORNELIUS EADY'S THE WAR AGAINST THE OBVIOUS

"Is it jazz? Is it bl...

Advice from writing professor and *Byline Bible* author Susan Shapiro on the Rumpus site:

Rumpus: You encourage writers to find the extraordinary within the ordinariness of their lives. How do we go about this?
Shapiro: Well, I don't embrace "ordinariness" as some writers do. I don't like or use the word "ordinary." Too many day-to-day domestic details bore me—in writing, life, and social media. Just because something really happened is never enough reason to share it. (Unless you're journaling and I'm not interested in seeing anyone else's journal or stream of consciousness regurgitations.) I encourage students to write about their obsessions, to dig deeper, to explore their darkest, most dramatic moments. Someone once told me, "You could get blood from a door nail."
I'd say: study the kind of writing you want to emulate. Read your work aloud. Take classes with tough critics who'll tell you the truth so your pages improve. Keep revising. If you don't have time or money for a whole semester of study, I recommend a one-shot seminar or panel. Or hire a ghost editor who'll line edit and direct you….

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"**Trawling the Silences" Trawling the Silences** is the title poem from the late Kathryn Stripling Byer's final manuscript, which JACAR plans to publish in early 2019. The book was originally scheduled to be published by a well-known press, but they were not enthusiastic about publishing it after she died. Jacar, which had previously published two chapbooks of Kay's, one in a hand-letter press fine arts edition, believes the book is arguably her best work and we are honored to be chosen to publish it. This poem was finished a few months before she died from lymphoma on June 5, 2017, and, clearly, she knew what was on her horizon.

Trawling the Silences

This end-of-March day, I'd rather watch hawks surf
the thermals than contemplate what lies ahead.
Or behind in its wake. In the few hours left, let me keep
my doubts shut, my windows wide open, their sheer curtains
billowing. It's March, after all, having come in
a lamb and departing a lioness, stalking my back yard,

leaving her paw prints alongside the patient ephemerals
rising again out of leaf litter. Squirrel corn. Spring beauty.
The first rue anemone. Today I would rather
read field guides, repeating the whimsical names
of our niche-dwelling mussels about to be wiped out by backhoes
and bulldozers. Pimpleback, Snuffbucket. Monkeyface
Pearlymussel. Don't let their names be forgotten,I'd pray
if I prayed, though just naming a thing is a prayer,
wrote Simone Weil, turning her face to the almighty
silences. The silences. Where would we be
without them, what were we, what will we be, oh to be,
and again be, that damn linking verb. I'd rather be tracking
my lioness up to the rim of that mountain top,
I'd rather let be and let go. Let the anemone
cling, the hawks soar, the lioness squander another day
trying to find what she's looking for. Give her another day,
I ask the Almighty. Give the birds one more day
scolding the rapscallion squirrels stealing birdseed.
I rest my case, carapace, my own little voice trawling
the silences, the bully wind boasting its presence in present-tense,
no linking verb to shut down the show. Let
my lioness lounge in the sally grass. Licking her paws.

"*Beauty Is a Verb: The New Poetry of Disability*," Editors Jennifer Bartlett, Michael Northen and Sheila Black, is "funded by the League Education and Treatment Center), which nurtures the artistic talents of people with developmental disabilities. The sampling in this collection is very small, and for practical reasons excludes many gifted poets, but it is a start and will hopefully open the door to a better understanding of the significant role people with disabilities play in the literary and visual arts in this country.

V.S. Naipaul, Who Explored Colonialism Through Unsparing Books, Dies at 85

Image

The author V. S. Naipaul in 1991. He was compared to Conrad, Dickens and Tolstoy, but was also a lightning rod for criticism.CreditNeal Boenzi/The New York Times

By Rachel Donadio

- **Aug. 11, 2018**

V.S. Naipaul, the Nobel laureate who documented the migrations of peoples, the unraveling of the British Empire, the ironies of exile and the clash between belief and unbelief in more than a dozen unsparing novels and as many works of nonfiction, died on Saturday at his home in London. He was 85. His family confirmed the death in a statement, The Associated Press reported.

In many ways embodying the contradictions of the postcolonial world, Mr. Naipaul was born of Indian ancestry in Trinidad, went to Oxford University on a scholarship and lived the rest of his life in England, where he forged

one of the most illustrious literary careers of the last half-century. He was knighted in 1990.

Compared in his lifetime to Conrad, Dickens and Tolstoy, he was also a lightning rod for criticism, particularly by those who read his portrayals of third-world disarray as apologies for colonialism.

Yet Mr. Naipaul exempted neither colonizer nor colonized from his scrutiny. He wrote of the arrogance and self-aggrandizement of the colonizers, yet exposed the self-deception and ethical ambiguities of the liberation movements that swept across Africa and the Caribbean in their wake. He brought to his work moral urgency and a novelist's attentiveness to individual lives and triumphs.

Mr. Naipaul personified a sense of displacement. Having left behind the circumscribed world of Trinidad, he was never entirely rooted in England. In awarding him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2001, the Swedish Academy described him as "a literary circumnavigator, only ever really at home in himself, in his inimitable voice."

Yet his existential homelessness was as much willed as fated. Although he spent his literary career mining his origins, Mr. Naipaul fiercely resisted the idea of being tethered to a hyphen, or to a particular ethnic or religious identity. He once left a publisher when he saw himself listed in the catalog as a "West Indian novelist." A Hindu, though not observant, Mr. Naipaul was a staunch defender of Western civilization. His guiding philosophy was universalism.

"What do they call it? Multi-culti? It's all absurd, you know," he said in 2004. "I think if a man picks himself up and comes to another country he must meet it halfway." It was the kind of provocative statement that won him both enemies and admirers over the years.

[*Read Dwight Garner's appraisal of V.S. Naipaul's work*]

An often difficult man with a fierce temper who dressed sedately in tweed jackets, Mr. Naipaul had a face of hawklike severity. "After one look from him, I could skip Yom Kippur," Saul Bellow once joked. If displeased by questions, Mr. Naipaul would sometimes walk out on public appearances and hang up on journalists. Although he could be mischievous and had a deep sense of humor, he was prone to melancholy.

Mr. Naipaul practiced yoga until his back grew too weak, and often lamented that writing took a physical toll. He would spend months cogitating at home in London or more often in his book-filled cottage in the Wiltshire countryside, outside Salisbury, which he shared with his first wife and later his second, and with a black-and-white cat named Augustus.

He continued to write novels even after declaring the form a 19th-century relic, no longer able to capture the complexities of the contemporary world. Yet his fiction was always in conversation with his nonfiction; each new book built on the ones that came before. Mr. Naipaul wrote relatively slowly, sometimes only a paragraph a day, and was intensely protective of his work. Diana Athill, who edited 19 of his books at the London publisher Andre Deutsch between the 1950s and the '70s, said editing Mr. Naipaul involved providing him with much reassurance.

"You didn't actually ever have to do a single thing to any of his books," Ms. Athill told The New Yorker in 1994. "But you did have to do a lot of attempting to cheer him up, because he would deliver a book and he would be happy when he delivered it, and then really soon he would go into a pit: 'What is the point? What is the point of writing books? I'm never going to write another book.'"

An Ancestry in India

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul was born on Aug. 17, 1932, in Chaguanas, Trinidad, where his paternal grandfather had emigrated from India in the 1880s as an indentured servant to work on the sugar plantations. His father, Seepersad, was a newspaper reporter for The Trinidad Guardian and an aspiring fiction writer who as a child was luckily allowed to go to school; his older brother was sent to work in the cane fields for eight cents a day and his sister remained illiterate. His mother, Droapatie Capildeo, was from a large, prosperous family, and when Mr. Naipaul was 6 the family moved in with them in a big house in Port of Spain.

The second of seven children, he was particularly close to his older sister, Kamla. His younger and only brother, Shiva, who was also a novelist, died in 1985.

Educated in English schools in Trinidad, Mr. Naipaul said he owed his writing ambitions to his father, who read to him, among other things, from Booker T. Washington's "Up From Slavery."

His first years in England in the 1950s were full of panic and anxiety. In 1952, while at University College, Oxford, he had a mental breakdown. "Before I became secure as a writer, it was a long, unbroken period of melancholy," he told *The New Yorker* in 1994.

From 1954 to 1956, he edited a radio program on literature for the British Broadcasting Corporation's Caribbean Service. His voice was perfect for the airwaves — rich and mellowed by tobacco. His crisp English accent had a slight Caribbean twist, and he often repeated phrases for emphasis. "I speak 130 words a minute," he told *The New York Times* in 2005. "I know this precisely from my radio days."

It was in 1954, while toiling in the old Edwardian-Victorian hotel that housed the BBC freelancer's office, that Mr. Naipaul began writing fiction, conjuring up memories of his childhood in Port of Spain "on an old BBC typewriter, and on smooth, 'non-rustle' BBC script paper," as he recounted nearly 30 years later in an essay, "Prologue to an Autobiography."

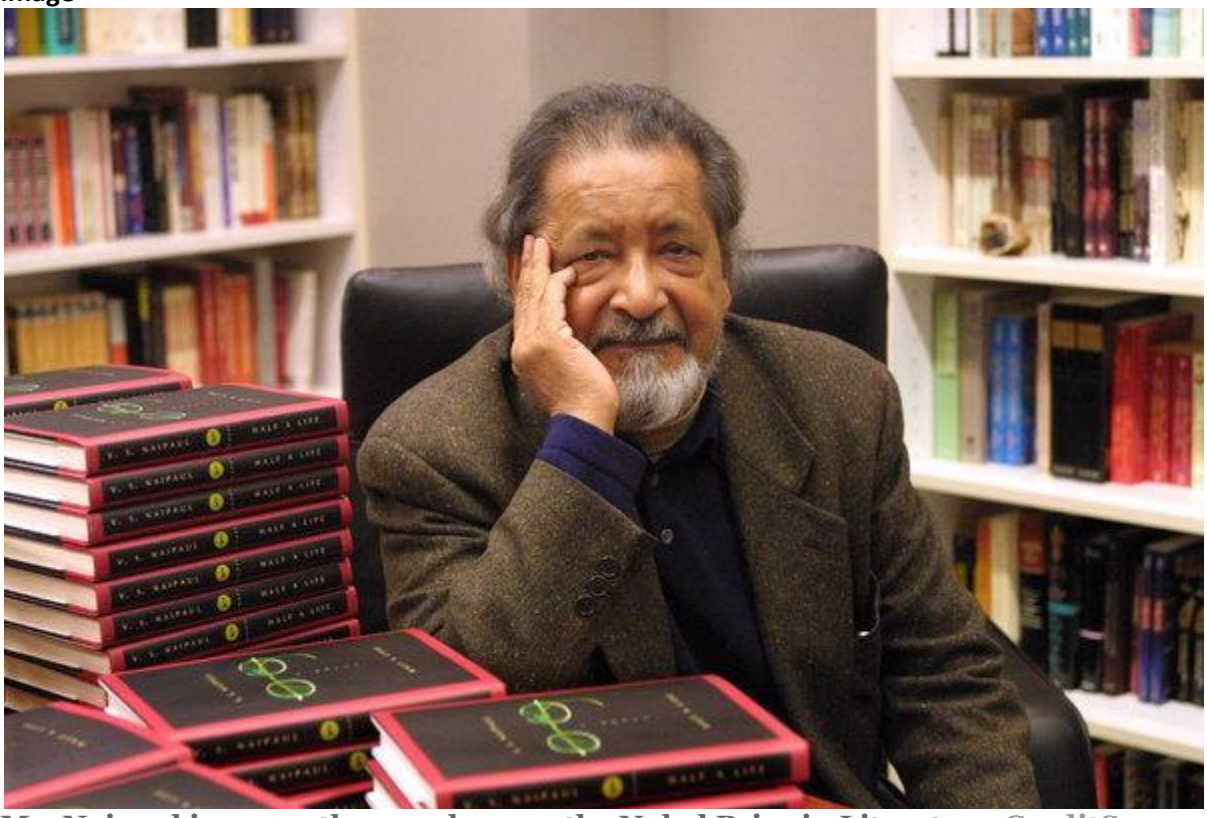
"To become a writer, that noble thing, I had thought it necessary to leave," he wrote elsewhere. "Actually to write, it was necessary to go back. It was the beginning of self-knowledge."

His first novel, "The Mystic Masseur" (1957), about Ganesh Ramsumair, a failed schoolteacher who becomes a masseur and later guru and politician in Trinidad, was well received.

Ferociously prolific, Mr. Naipaul published a book every year or two for much of his career. His breakthrough was his joyous, deeply autobiographical fourth novel, "A House for Mr. Biswas" (1961). Set in Trinidad, it is the story of a middle-aged journalist's efforts to free himself of his dependence on his wife's wealthier, domineering family and lay claim to his own corner of the world.

Written when he was not yet 30, the book cemented Mr. Naipaul's standing among the most important writers of his generation; writing in The Times in 1971, Nadine Gordimer, the South African novelist and later a fellow Nobel laureate, called it "magnificent." It was eventually published by the Modern Library of 20th-century classics.

Image



Mr. Naipaul in 2001, the year he won the Nobel Prize in Literature.CreditSara Krulwich/The New York Times

In 1955 Mr. Naipaul married Patricia Hale, an Englishwoman he had met at Oxford. The two were extremely close — she read all his work in progress — but their relationship was puzzling to outsiders, many of whom saw her as self-effacing and subservient. Although she often traveled with Mr. Naipaul, Ms. Hale is mentioned only once in his books, and not by name. The couple never had children.

His childlessness, he told *The New Yorker* in 1994, "really comes from a detestation of the squalling background of children that I grew up with in my extended family." He also confessed that he had been "a great prostitute man" in the early years of his marriage and acknowledged that in the 1970s he had fallen in love with an Anglo-Argentine woman who became his longtime mistress. After Ms. Hale died of cancer in 1996, Mr. Naipaul dedicated a new edition of "A House for Mr. Biswas" to her memory.

'To Explore the World'

Mr. Naipaul began writing nonfiction in the 1960s. "I thought nonfiction gave one a sense to explore the world, the other world, the world one didn't know fully," he said in 2005. "I thought if I didn't have this resource of nonfiction I would have dried up perhaps. I'd have come to the end of my material."

For his first nonfiction book, "*The Middle Passage*" (1962), Mr. Naipaul returned to the West Indies. He charted inter-island racial tensions in Trinidad; analyzed the cultural "mimicry" he saw as central to colonial identity; questioned how the region, then on the brink of self-rule, would govern itself; and observed that the smaller Caribbean islands "in the name of tourism, are selling themselves into a new slavery."

Some found his portrayal distasteful. Derek Walcott, the Caribbean-born poet and winner of the 1992 Nobel Prize in Literature, called him "V. S. Nightfall" in a poem, and said his prose was scarred by his "repulsion towards Negroes" and the "self-disfiguring sneer that is praised for its probity." Yet Walcott was pleased when Mr. Naipaul won the Nobel Prize. "It will mean something for the region," he told *The Guardian*.

In 1964 Mr. Naipaul published the first of three travelogues about India, "An Area of Darkness." He found that in spite of his Indian origins, he did not belong there at all.

"No other country was more fitted to welcome a conqueror; no other conqueror was more welcome than the British," he wrote. "While dominating India they expressed their contempt for it, and projected England; and Indians were forced into a nationalism which in the beginning was like a mimicry of the British."

Mr. Naipaul began to travel in Africa in the 1970s. His collection "*In a Free State,*" from 1971, about a gay English civil servant and a "compound wife" who take a road trip through an unnamed African country that closely resembles Idi Amin's Uganda, won the Booker Prize that year.

"No one else around today, not even Nabokov, seems able to employ prose fiction so deeply as the very voice of exile," the critic Alfred Kazin wrote in *The New York Review of Books*.

Mr. Naipaul's novel "*A Bend in the River*" (1979) centers on an Indian from East Africa in an unnamed, newly independent African nation that resembles Zaire under the dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. Mr. Naipaul had written about Mobutu in his 1975 essay "A New King for the Congo," in which he compared the contemporary place to the one Conrad had described in *Heart of Darkness*.

"Seventy years later, at this bend in the river, something like Conrad's fantasy came to pass," Mr. Naipaul wrote. "But the man with 'the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith and no fear' was black, and not white; and he had been maddened not by contact with wilderness and primitivism, but with the civilization established by those pioneers."

In a 1974 essay that marked a breakthrough in his own understanding of himself as a writer, Mr. Naipaul wrote of his debt to the Ukrainian-born Conrad, who had also willed himself to be an artist in England and also traveled to the far corners of the colonized world. "I found that Conrad — 60 years before, in a time of a great peace — had been everywhere before me," he wrote. But in an interview with The Times in 2005, Mr. Naipaul revised this judgment. While conceding that Conrad was "great," he insisted that he "had no influence on me."

"Actually, I think '*A Bend in the River*' is much, much better than Conrad," Mr. Naipaul said.

Mr. Naipaul's writing about Africa drew criticism from many who were unsettled by his portraits of Africans. The Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe called him "a new purveyor of the old comforting myths" of the white West.

He was also criticized for his unflattering portrayals of women. In "*A Bend in the River*," the protagonist spits on the naked body of his Belgian lover. In his 1975 novel *Guerrillas*, the English girlfriend of an exiled South African resistance hero acts on her fantasies of native sexual power to disastrous effect.

Always attuned to the tides of history, Mr. Naipaul began to travel in non-Arab Islamic countries around the time of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. He visited Iran, Pakistan and Malaysia in the late 1970s, when they were witnessing a rise in political power and Islamic fundamentalism. His first travelogue, "Among the Believers," was published in 1981. A sequel, "Beyond Belief," followed in 1998.

He started his inquiry, he later explained, by asking simple questions: To what extent had "people who lock themselves away in belief shut themselves away from the active, busy world?" "To what extent without knowing it" were they "parasitic on that world"? And why did they have "no thinkers to point out to them where their thoughts and their passion had led them?"

The books are grounded in Mr. Naipaul's belief that Islamic societies lead to tyranny, which he essentially attributed to a flaw in Islam, that it "offered no political or practical solution…It offered only the faith," he wrote.

These books were harshly criticized. The critic and Palestinian rights advocate Edward Said argued that Mr. Naipaul had interviewed only those who would confirm his pre-established thesis about flaws in Islam while playing down local political situations that might better explain the rise in Islamic fundamentalism.

Observing America

Mr. Naipaul also wrote perceptively about America. "A Turn in the South" (1989) is a travelogue about the Deep South, and in an essay on the 1984 Republican National Convention in Dallas, "The Air-Conditioned Bubble," he dissected American political pieties. "The fundamentalism that the Republicans had embraced went beyond religion," he wrote. "It simplified the world in general; it rolled together many different kinds of anxieties — schools, drugs, race, buggery, Russia, to give just a few; and it offered the simplest, the vaguest solution: Americanism, the assertion of the American self."

Mr. Naipaul increasingly lamented the limitations of fiction. The novel had reached its peak in the 19th century, he said, and Modernism was dead. Instead, he thought nonfiction better captured the complexities of the world. He said he wrote his novel *Half a Life* (2001) only to fulfill a publisher's contract.

In 1996, two months after the death of his first wife, Mr. Naipaul married Nadira Khannum Alvi, a divorced Pakistani journalist more than 20 years his junior. She survives him. He had met her at the home of the American consul-general in Lahore. In 2003 Mr. Naipaul adopted Nadira's daughter, Maleeha, who was then 25. A complete list of survivors was not immediately available.

The writer Paul Theroux, who was one of Mr. Naipaul's closest friends, had a falling out with Mr. Naipaul not long after the marriage to Ms. Alvi. In his book "Sir Vidia's Shadow" (1998), Mr. Theroux documented the arc of their complicated literary friendship, which began in Uganda in 1966 and ended abruptly in 1997 after Mr. Theroux saw books he had written and inscribed to his mentor listed for sale in an auction catalog. He depicts Mr. Naipaul as a great inspiration as a writer, but also petty, cruel and needy. The two men later reconciled.

For all his pessimism, Mr. Naipaul was confident that what he called "Our Universal Civilization" would prevail. In a 1990 lecture, he said his optimism derived from his belief in the idea of the pursuit of happiness, which lay "at the heart of the attractiveness of the civilization to so many outside it or on its periphery."

"It is an elastic idea; it fits all men," he said. "It implies a certain kind of society, a certain kind of awakened spirit. I don't imagine my parents would have been able to understand the idea. So much is contained in it: the idea of the individual, responsibility, choice, the life of the intellect, the idea of vocation and perfectibility and achievement. It is an immense human idea. It cannot be reduced to a fixed system. It cannot generate fanaticism. But it is known to exist; and because of that, other more rigid systems in the end blow away."

Correction: August 12, 2018 *An earlier version of this obituary misstated the year of a lecture in which Mr. Naipaul said his optimism derived from his belief in the idea of the pursuit of happiness. It was 1990, not 1992.*A version of this article appears in print on Aug. 12, 2018, on Page A21 of the New York edition with the headline: V.S. Naipaul, 85, Author Who Mined Colonialism's Ruins, Dies.

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In the memoir below, "Shura" is a diminutive of Aleksandr/Alexander

Searching for a Lost Odessa — and a Deaf Childhood

A poet returns to the city of his birth.
By Ilya Kaminsky

- **Aug. 9, 2018**

What I remember most of all is washing Leo Tolstoy's ears. The year is 1989, the mornings of revolution, the year when my birth country begins to fall apart. His ears are larger than my head; I am standing on the shoulders of a boy who is standing on the shoulders of another boy. I am scrubbing the enormous bearded head on a pedestal — in the center of Leo Tolstoy Square, one block from our first apartment. This is childhood: Once a year, my classmates and I are sent to the center of the square. Our assignment is to wash the head of a dead writer. We climb on top of one another's bodies and scrub Tolstoy's nostrils, ears.

In the distance, my parents laugh, watching. Their deaf boy climbs and scrubs the enormous ears. Behind them, a band of sailors marches along — Odessa is a seaport, with a large navy school. The young captain shouts, though I can't hear him: left, right, left, right. The sailors' legs go up and down, up and down. Aware I see her from my Tolstoy post, my middle-aged, slightly heavy mother begins to march at the end of their column, her legs high, mimicking their legs, her skirt flying up, as my father salutes.

□

I had no hearing aids until I came to America. The Odessa I know is a silent city, where the language is invisibly linked to my father's lips moving as I watch his mouth repeat stories again and again. He turns away. The story stops. He looks at me again, but the story has already moved on.

Decades later, when I come back to this city, I don't feel I have quite returned until I turn my hearing aids off.

Click — and people's lips move again, but no sound.

No footsteps of grandmothers running after their grandchildren. No announcements by tram-conductors as the tram stops at a station and, finally, I jump off.

A cab whooshes by me and abruptly parks at the curb. I do not hear the screech of its brakes.

This is the Odessa of my childhood: my father's lips open, in Proviantskaya Street. I see a story. He bends to pick up a coin. The story stops. Then, as he straightens up and smiles at me, it is a story again.

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A soldier drags a Jewish child out of the house. His adopted mother, a Russian woman, is running behind the soldiers, half naked, wailing. Another soldier blocks her. Another soldier slaps her and laughs. The street empties, child's toys lying in the snow. The neighbors shut windows. Doors slam. A woman kneels on an empty sidewalk as two soldiers shove her child into the van.

That's when it happened, my father's lips pause —

Out of the snow of Odessa, a fat Ukrainian man appears. What are you doing? You bastards! Why are you taking away my child? Give me your names! You bastards. I will go to the authorities. Your names! His spit flies in the angry air. I want to see your documents! He can't stop spitting.

Soldiers pause, bewildered. This is a child of a Jew — can't you see?

You morons! Do I look like a Jew? The fat Ukrainian stomps his foot, he shakes his large body around the young woman on the pavement.

The windows begin to open. Who speaks to German soldiers like this in the occupied city? People stare. The soldiers steal a look at the windows. Now they walk quickly to the van. The child is left in the snow.

The fat man gathers the boy in his hands, wraps him in an overcoat. I will complain to the authorities! To the woman: a lingering, frenzied kiss. The van with soldiers disappears into the streets.

Without adding a single word, the fat man walks away, with the child and the woman. He makes sure they step in front of him. The neighbors never see him again. But this story lives on, and my father, the child he saved, the child who never again sees this fat man, keeps repeating this story to his own deaf son.

□

If my cousins and uncles met me in the street, it would be scandalous. I send holiday emails and occasional gifts. The man in his 40s who comes back to this city is not me, not the American relative they know of. Why am I back

here in this country that betrayed my family? For years, everyone I know will ask me why I came back here to these streets. What is it I am trying to recall?

I turn off my hearing aids and walk up to walls, touch them with my fingers. This is the act of a fool who touches the skin of time and walks through it, toward childhood — touches the sidewalks of the streets he once touched as a 15-year-old deaf boy. How much the present moment means to those who have nothing more.

When trams pass, the walls vibrate, as do remembered scraps of stories. Naïve to think this. Naïve to think that Odessa, which is a part of my father's consciousness, is mine again. I turn off my hearing aids and am again in the silence around which people's lips move.

□

My father is a foundling. The year he is born his own father, Ilya, is arrested and shot as "an enemy of the people." The year he is born his mother, Julianna, is "sent away" to Siberia. He remembers none of this. His memory starts four years later.

It is 1941, the war begins and Shura, the man who adopted my father, volunteers to go to the front. It is 1941, and his adopted mother, Natalia, takes a tram to the outskirts to dig trenches around the city. It is 1941 when a 4-year-old boy has his first memory: a fat Ukrainian man saving him from foreign soldiers. Neighbors open the windows and watch Natalia weep in the snow.

1941 is the first year my father remembers. Axis planes are bombing the vodka factory. The neighbors are running out with teakettles, pans. They drink vodka from cobblestones. I am the deaf boy watching my father's lips.

He bends to tie his shoes and the story stops.

He straightens up and the people are running with teakettles dripping with vodka — everyone is happy, if only for a moment.

In my father's story, it is always 1941. Old women drink shots of vodka from their little pill bottles. They turn away, as if trying to hide something. What do they hide in 1941? The silence of their men who do not write from war-torn territories? It is 1941, father's lips say. The vodka factory is bombed. The women clink glasses. The spit flies like a tiny bird.

□

My father is long dead. In the Odessa streets, there are new cars, new noises. People shout in a different language now, new buildings are erected and quickly slip into ruin.

I take off my American-made hearing aids. Now I am the deaf boy who tries to walk faster in the snow of the Odessa streets. Lips open but no sound comes out. No footsteps of my father as he drags our grocery bags. No pigeons clacking on the sill. No screams of passing sirens.

I am a man who comes back after 20 years and finds everyone dead. I am an aging man who takes off his jacket on a bench, sees dogs' teeth bared, a click of tongue, a hiss. He does not know why he is here — why he is happy, free. He doesn't know why he bought his ticket to Odessa. If his parents are dead, what is here for him, in this empty city?

□

Father has no stories. Over and over, the same memory of the occupied city is repeated. German and Romanian soldiers march in 1941. There are no letters from Shura in 1941 because no one writes letters from the bombed-out regiments in 1941. Natalia sews dresses because even in the occupied city people buy dresses. She buys apples because boys in 1941 eat apples. And there are still no letters from Shura. No one knows he was sent on a horse, to attack German tanks.

It is 1941 and Odessa is a city emptied of its Jews. Germans march in the streets of the city where life goes on, people buy dresses. My father has no stories. He is a young boy shaved bald so his dark hair doesn't call attention to him. There are no stories from 1941.

Each morning is the smell of fresh bread. It isn't for the boy. Natalia is baking bread for the neighbors each week so they won't report the family. Slap. Don't eat the bread, boy. Slap.

That year, 1941, in the occupied city, Shura appears on their apartment steps. There are no stories, only this image. A runaway soldier always knocks on the door. It is always 1941 in the occupied city, and Shura always appears on the apartment steps. That, and the smell of bread the boy isn't allowed to put in his mouth.

□

There are no stories. The man they thought dead stands in front of them in the living room. There was bombardment? There were horses? Tanks? He gives no details. He was captured by German soldiers. Loaded into a train. He jumped in the middle of the night.

I am a deaf boy who asks his father for a story. Only about half of spoken Russian is visible on the lips.

Two dozen years later, I am back in this city. I have walked up and down boulevards, trying to remember my father's stories. I open windows, see dogs pee under the monument to a politician, his arrogant chest leaning into history.

There are no stories, just every second word on my father's lips, just us. A runaway Russian soldier sneaks back into the occupied city to see his son. All I have is this image of him opening the door.

□

My father has no stories. Only lips that keep moving in front of his deaf boy who has no hearing aids. Sound heading up the winding caverns of my ears, then conducted through slender bones, making the membranes vibrate and these tiny hairs dance. My father dies right after we come to the United States of America.

There are no stories. Back now in the Odessa streets, I take the aids out again. Then, put them in. What is it that I keep trying to recall? Hearing is not a reflex. A deaf man when given hearing aids must be taught to hear:

This is a truck rumbling.

This is a phone ringing.

This is a drunk on the second floor coughing like a chicken being skinned alive.

Shura walks to Odessa in snow for a month. I see it all in fragments. Fragments are my wholes.

It is 1941. He doesn't have food. Having jumped the German train while the convoy slept, he limps. He avoids main roads. He eats the snow. He is walking to Odessa through 30 days of snow. He steals food from neighboring villages. Otherwise, he eats snow.

How many of the villagers choose not to report this man, running away from the backyard with a headless chicken? Otherwise, he eats snow.

Having escaped Germans, Shura stops in villages at night. He avoids main roads. He is a handsome man. Women give him food. There aren't any husbands left in the villages. In the middle of the night, he steals clothes from the laundry line, runs. For days, snow.

He avoids main roads. But nearing the city, the checkpoints pop up at every entrance. Guards. Dogs.

Here, my father's lips stop.

□

Shura, his belly full of snow, meets two women on the road. He is a fugitive. They are locals in the occupied territory. He is seen. They can report the runaway man — and why not? Soldiers know of food stolen from farmers along the road.

He kneels. In front of them, in snow, he kneels. Why is he here? He says he wants to see his 4-year-old boy in Odessa. Please.

I heard only fragments of this story. A man kneels in the snow. One of the women kneels next to him. A fragment, nothing else. I type it on the empty page. I stop and walk around. Erase it. Type it again. Why is she kneeling next to a man she doesn't know? This man perhaps reminds her of her own man shot in the war? Belly full of snow.

Shura and the woman pass through checkpoint after checkpoint. He smiles at the soldiers, the woman leans against him. A long kiss. He coos to the child in her arms.

Father's lips stop moving. Too much snow.

After they pass the gates the woman says goodbye. Shura never sees her again.

□

There are many versions of the story of the runaway soldier. In one, the boy kisses his father and behind him sees the Romanian police enter the building. Quickly, the boy's mother takes out her largest dress and her big white hat. Quickly, the boy's father fills a bra with newspapers. The boy watches Shura and Natalia, all dressed up like two girls, waltz into the courtyard, past this soldier, past other soldiers, into the street.

There is no story to remember. Just a fragment in which Shura and Natalia, dressed like two girls, are escaping into the street. A drunken Romanian policeman wants to stop them. He is propositioning Shura. He is complimenting Shura's curves in a summer dress. The drunken Romanian is trying to grab Shura by the hem of the dress, shoving money into the dress pockets. Come with me, Beautiful!

What a sight it must have been. Kissing in snow, they were, Natalia and her husband. The snow falls into their hair, into their taffeta blouses.

□

Or perhaps there is no man in a dress. No vodka drops falling from the sky. Just a son who is afraid to admit to himself what really happened. So he makes up many stories. I am a deaf boy who watches the silence inside his father, as the father tries to fill it up with stories. The boy sees it but doesn't understand.

From all these stories, one thing stayed with me. In every version, my father is always the child who kisses Shura and behind him sees the Romanian police enter the building.

□

Here is something my father never speaks about: The war ends in 1945 and Shura comes back. Natalia gives a party that is interrupted by Soviet military police, who come in without knocking and take her husband away. The Soviets suspect him of treason. Hundreds of veterans are being sent to Siberia. Not killing yourself when taken captive is a crime punished by the State.

Here is something my father never speaks about: What saves Shura from prison is the fact that when he returns from the war, he is nearly deaf. Once, under bombardment, he dragged his wounded army sergeant to cover. The bombardment continued. The sergeant survived. Shura became deaf.

The Soviet military policemen ask questions: He doesn't hear. They are shouting. He doesn't hear. They slap him. He doesn't hear. Slap. He doesn't hear. Slap. Deaf and dumb, the officers say. They let him go.

Why did I buy my ticket to Odessa?

I found this scribble in my father's handwriting, on the back of Shura's photograph: ***A deaf man's scream, unheard by himself.*** **I cannot forget it. That scream. Uncensored by even his own ears. A human voice as it actually is.**

□

I can't hear through the walls. If you shout at me across the street, I won't turn my head. There is a kind of openness in deafness. My hearing aids whistle, my accent gives itself away, eagerly, too eagerly. I stare at people's lips. A deaf person, I find most people become intimate with me almost instantly. They see a large, awkward man in front of them. They might feel

slightly superior or slightly frustrated with my accent. They are bewildered by having to repeat themselves twice, three or four times. The theater is in how they say, I understand your accent, how they nod.

Decades later, I come back to Odessa and turn off my hearing aids. This, I know, is the silence Shura found himself in when he came back here in 1945. His deafness is something Father never shared with me.

□

We are at the beach. Father is telling Shura stories as my mother suddenly laughs seeing my friend and me run into water, swimming half a mile to the jetty, climbing on it and then walking on it, as if walking on water, waving back to my parents. They are so small, left there on the sand. We are blowing kisses to pretty girls sunbathing on the hotel's rooftop terrace.

There are no whole stories for a child who lip-reads. But there are fragments. Some are found at the tram station. Some are smelled at the street corner that allows itself to become a recollection. Some are bits of sand.

Sitting on the sand, my father is in the middle of his retelling, when my mother interrupts him, points at two boys walking on water.

If my parents are dead, what is here for me in this now empty city? When I say the word nothing, I name something that is there.

□

I am 8 years old in the snow watching my father step into an expensive restaurant. Inside is someone's wedding party.

Watch me, Father's lips say.

Through the large glass windows of a restaurant, his boy watches him from the snowed-in street.

Father enters the room, already dancing. He enters the room, elbowing his way straight to the bride. He is kissing the bride on both cheeks, then laughing, he lifts her up, puts her on his shoulders, and he swings into the middle of the room.

I am standing in snow, clinging to my mother's hand. Across the street, my father, with that large white cloud of a bride above his head. He is circling with the bride on his shoulders as the room gathers around him to applaud. Then he places the bride down right before the groom and kisses her hand.

I am not sure what is happening. Now he waltzes elbowing his way to the fattest grandmother in the room, picking up a bottle of champagne and pouring into her glass. He kneels before that fat woman, kissing her hand. Everyone is circling them, and clapping.

Outside, in snow, I am a bewildered boy watching his father circle the room at a stranger's wedding. My father who spends so many years repeating the same story is laughing and the room around him laughs. He comes back outside, smiling, bringing a large bottle of champagne and seven pieces of wedding cake.

At a large wedding no one knows one another, father whispers. The bride thinks the visitor is a relative of the groom. The groom tries to impress the bride's important guest.

Here is something my father never speaks about, something I will find out only many years later: This is a trick learned from Shura. A deaf man back from the war, unable to find a job to bring home food, Shura danced at strangers' weddings, surprising his child and wife at night with plates of wedding cake.

□

I wonder: In these streets I can still share with you, Father, streets where you watched your own deaf father in 1945, were you bewildered by his deafness? I come back so that I can see for you the Odessa streets your deaf father saw. Sounds are contagious even if no one notices. The sound of someone breathing heavily in line for groceries affects the breathing rate of others in the line. I am walking to the Hotel Krasnaya, to see a stranger's wedding.

You once stole for me seven pieces of wedding cake. Look, now I tell you seven things a deaf man sees at weddings:

One. When husbands smile at their wives, the corners of their mouths move toward their eyes. But when they smile at the notary signing the wedding certificate, I see the corners of their mouths move toward their ears.

Two. When businesspeople speak, they stand toe to toe. But if one person's foot begins to move away, this person wants to be someplace else.
Three. When couples eat cake and they are happy, their legs wiggle or bounce. But we don't need to look under the tables to see happy feet. See their shirts or shoulders. See how the wiggling feet make shoulders, too, vibrate.

Four. A crowd waiting at the wedding buffet. Notice how people whistle to calm themselves.

Five. A woman talks to the relative who makes her slightly uncomfortable. She touches her face, licks lips.

Six. Sometimes it is a man who is uncomfortable. See his unease by how he's stroking his beard.

Seven. If there is an orchestra at the wedding, there is silence in the conductor's fingers before the baton lifts, making music visible inside the bodies of others.

Deafness is a theater. Here the deaf person is the audience. Everyone else is an actor. No need to worry about the silent world to which the hearing people think we are exiled. The deaf do not believe in silence. Silence is the invention of the hearing.

□

Shura, goodbye, I am leaving. We were standing at the cemetery. I watch my father's lips circle the silence of his goodbye as he kneels before Shura's grave. Goodbye, my dear. I am leaving. I am going away to give my boy a future.

It is snowing. It is 1993. I watch my father's lips whisper to the gravestone: Our postman, Sasha, agreed to come look after your grave. Do you hear me?

I am in Odessa, Father. It is 2018, 25 years after we left this city. I come back here so that I can turn off my hearing aids and stop time. I put my hands to the wall — and hear the sound of taxis stopping at the lights, the whooshing of trolleys, the women arguing on the street corner. I take my hands off the wall — nothing. Hands to the wall — a dog barks, a siren rises in the avenue. Hands off the wall — nothing.

It is 1993 again. Silence doesn't subscribe to the concept of time.

□

Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet dictator, is giving a speech. His mouth moves, the crowd claps, I hear nothing. I am raising the TV volume, Brezhnev makes another pronouncement, I do not hear it, I raise the volume, the crowd is giving a standing ovation, I do not hear it.

I am 5 years old. The teacher comes to our class. Her voice trembling. I do not hear it. Children, Brezhnev died, her lips say. I am afraid the war will begin tomorrow at midday, her lips say.

My parents do not yet know I have lost my hearing, the aftermath of a case of mumps that a Soviet doctor mistook for a cold. At midday, the factory whistles continue for an hour. I do not hear them.

It is on the day Brezhnev dies that my mother learns of my deafness, and the odyssey of doctors and hospitals begins. My mother shouts at senior citizens in public transport to promptly get up please and give her sick child a seat; my father, embarrassed, hides on the other side of the trolley. I cannot hear a word. Mother is towering over me, guarding me with her body from the eyes of the trolley.

Brezhnev is dead. Strangers wear black clothes in public. Thus begins the history of my deafness.

□

My father dies of a heart attack barely a year after we arrive in Rochester, a few weeks before I begin to wear hearing aids. I will never hear his voice.

We came to America for the happiness of our children, Mother says at the funeral. She will survive my father by 24 years; each year she will remind me that I look more and more like him.

She will have a stroke, live paralyzed for over a decade; by the end she won't be able to walk and will only retain the use of one arm. She will be the most beautiful woman I know, she will be shouting at strangers, confusing her American neighbors and nurses for the Russians she knew decades ago, she will curse and laugh at them in a language they do not understand, as they smile polite frightened greetings at the strange woman in a wheelchair who shouts at them like a paralyzed Old Testament prophet with disheveled white hair. For a decade, I will be taking her for walks in a wheelchair and whisper to myself, This is the most beautiful woman I know.

Your father, he liked to travel, she says, to go away, because he wanted the happiness of coming home. That was the ultimate happiness, your father told me. Always remember, the ultimate happiness is coming home.

She tells me not to call her after 6 p.m. She calls me at 1 a.m. because she is lonely for a chat. She calls my cousin at 5 a.m. to invite her to a party that doesn't exist, wakes up the household of five. She loves long conversation, often punctuated by exclamations of how my father loved her. She calls at 9 a.m. to ask why I am not calling her all day long. She leaves 20 messages within an hour. Now, after she has died, these are the most prized of my possessions, her phone messages.

How much a person changes after she dies. This essay should be about my mother. But I cannot yet place her voice into mere prose. And, why should

I? Whenever I want to hear her I can check my messages. I love you, son. Why aren't you calling me?

Each morning, for decades, she calls and demands to know what I ate for breakfast. She calls and reports what she ate for dinner. This is our decade after the stroke. She is reading a book. For many months on end, she is reading the same book.

Don't ask me why I came to America. I came to America for the happiness of my children. She will repeat the same things over and over, each story punctuated by, Water, give me water, and Cover me, cover me, and ending the same story, always ending with, I love you so much, my boy.

No, she says: I don't want anything, I don't want anything, but give me a raspberry. Son, why are you asking me what I remember? Stop asking me. I am too old to have memories.

□

I refuse to explain this silence of an Odessa street to anyone — it is too intimate. I come here because my parents can never come back. I make it to this city so Mother can again march at the end of the column of sailors, as my father salutes.

Your ears aren't empty, Mother used to say, they are open.

I have no one to whom I can explain what happens when I finally turn my hearing aids on — now the tremble of the inner ear is relentless. The brain is taught: This is the shuffle of your own feet. This is the voice of your hotel neighbor speaking in the other room as it vibrates through the walls. When I turn the hearing aids on in these streets, my parents are dead again. So, I turn them off.

Here I see us: In the afternoon, we are walking down Pushkinskaya Street with our heavy suitcases, we are headed toward the train station. It is the 14th of January, 1993. It's snowing. The trolleys and cabs aren't functioning. We are dragging our suitcases across the city to the train, saying good morning to this city for one last time, Victor and Ella Kaminsky and their son.

Ilya Kaminsky is the author of "Dancing in Odesssa," which won the 2005 Whiting Award in poetry, and of ''Deaf Republic,'' a collection of poems forthcoming from Graywolf Press in March 2019. This is his first article for the magazine.

Tasmanian Indigenous artists to show off works at Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair

ABC Radio Hobart

By Georgie Burgess
Posted Wed at 7:00pm

PHOTO: For the first time, Tasmanian works will be on display at the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair. (Supplied: Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair)

Tasmanian Aboriginal educator Hank Horton doesn't see himself as an artist, but as a "bloke doing his culture". Mr Horton is among 20 Indigenous Tasmanians who will have works on display at the internationally renowned Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair next week.

It's the first time Tasmanian artists have participated in the fair, and there's hopes it will create a new precedent and grow the Aboriginal art scene in the state.

The Deloraine-based Mr Horton works with woods to create traditional tools, like spears and clubs."I've got some here at the moment that are made from Tasmanian Huon pine, some blackwood, myrtle, peppermint gum, tea tree, all sorts," he said. "All from the natural bushes of Tasmania, and all following traditional Aboriginal cultural practices."

PHOTO: Some of Hank Horton's wooden creations. (Supplied: Hank Horton)

Mr Horton will take about 25 selected pieces to Darwin.

"I'm nervous as buggery to be honest…I don't really class myself as an artist as such, I'm a bloke who does Aboriginal creations and to me it's just about doing my culture. "To go up there and pin that against Aboriginal artists who have been doing it for generations with their families, and seeing some of the artwork coming out of central Australia, I'm nervous ours won't be up to par."

The idea of the Tasmanian stall was to put emerging and lesser known artists on show.

"Aboriginal art in Tasmania is totally unique and different to any other art around Australia, and for us to now bring it out of the cupboard and share it with the rest of the nation and the world is a great opportunity," Mr Horton said. "It's nerve-wracking, but we get to showcase our Aboriginal artwork for its uniqueness to the Tasmanian island."

Tasmanian Aboriginal people created petroglyph symbols, mariner shell necklaces, baskets and kelp water carriers.

"For me, at the ripe old age of 67, the festival is an opportunity of a lifetime which I mean to maximise for my community, my family and myself," Vicky Green said.

"I was a late maturer in Tasmanian Aboriginal art but now my ancient DNA has taken control of my spirit." She said the invitation for the "palawa mob" to engage with the fair on the national stage was a major step in introducing the culture to a much wider audience.

The works of 2,000 Indigenous artists will be on show at the fair, coming from 60 art centres around Australia. Tasmania doesn't have an Aboriginal art centre, so former TMAG curator Tony Brown organised the group of 20 artists through Contemporary Art Tasmania.

"Because it's Tasmania's first time, we kept it to a Tasmanian Aboriginal theme," Mr Brown said. "We left out established artists because we wanted emerging artists to get a foot in the door. It took the artists quite a while to comprehend and imagine that we wanted them to exhibit their work in Darwin at this fair." Mr Brown said he believed Tasmania's presence at the fair would now become annual.

Mr Brown said Tasmania's lack of a dedicated Aboriginal art centre was hampering the growth of Aboriginal art in the state. He said one could be based in the North West, Launceston or Hobart. "It's really, really sorely missed in Tasmania. There's really nothing in Tasmania that focuses on Aboriginal art."

Mr Horton said he hoped this year was the beginning of a long connection to the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair. "We're at the very start of what we hope will be a really long experience," he said. "We certainly need a specific Tasmanian Aboriginal gallery to display art and get it out there on a bigger scale."

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‘A Terrible Country’ That’s Impossible Not to Love

By Boris Fishman

- Aug. 10, 2018

A TERRIBLE COUNTRY
By Keith Gessen
338 pp. Viking. $26

When I was an undergraduate, I took a poetry class with a well-known poet. We met during his office hours to discuss a poem I’d turned in about my grandmother. He peered down his glasses at me, and said: “This reads as if no one’s written a poem about grandmothers before.” He must have seen that I was ready to take this as a compliment, because he quickly added, as genially as he could, “I don’t mean in the good way.”

I recalled this experience at the outset of Keith Gessen’s second novel, “A Terrible Country,” about a young, literary, professionally thwarted and recently jilted Russian-American man who, in 2008, returns to his birth

city of Moscow to find himself. A grandmother serves as the proving ground here, too — the young man, Andrei Kaplan, comes to help take care of his. Quite a few have written a poem on this subject before, from Gary Shteyngart, more than 15 years ago, in "The Russian Debutante's Handbook," to the flurry of American writers who published books in the aughts about figuring themselves out in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism, to more recent novels by some of the many ex-Soviet writers publishing fiction today.

But Gessen has Andrei walk through Moscow as if he's treading terra incognita. America and Russia, he tells us, are "not the same." Americans earn more, and live in bigger apartments. People look and act differently in Russia; it has a different ethnic makeup, too. "Moscow," for its part, "was enormous"; we get a Lonely Planet-style entry on its subway system. Andrei even issues the self-flogging cry of every literary Russian-Jewish American male who has touched finger to keyboard, your reviewer included: "My parents had taken a great risk and undergone a great trial to bring me to a country where I could do, basically, anything I wanted. And what had I done? My friends from college and high school were now doctors, lawyers, bankers ... whereas I had chosen to read books."

When Andrei does tell us something we didn't know, sometimes it's hard to feel that we need to. "My grandmother's bathroom — separate from the toilet, which had its own, much smaller room, just off the front hall — was large for a Soviet bathroom," he reports. "It's possible that it had once been part of the kitchen. Along the wall was a ledge that was used for toiletries. I put mine there now." Elsewhere, Andrei wants us to know that "the time difference was mostly to blame" for his jet lag, "but so too, I thought, was my sudden lack of exercise." He tries to find an internet connection, searches for an affordable cafe, meets the neighbors and receives his first text. ("I'd never texted in Russian before," he apprises us later, "and I enjoyed it.") Andrei offers plenty of self-deprecation, but we aren't given much reason to assume this is parody.

As Andrei settles down, however, his story not only improves but gains significant distinction and shape. We get incisive observations about the country ("It was as if Russia were a drug addict who received every concoction only after it was perfectly crystallized, maximally potent. Nowhere were Western ideas, Western beliefs, taken more seriously"); the people (yes, Putin was a coldblooded killer, but "he was *our* coldblooded killer"); and Putin himself ("If you expected tough Putin, you'd get sensitive Putin"), as well as instances of good writing, period ("What else does one build a life out of if not people, and time? People multiplied by time"). There's also a laser-true and very funny set piece about Russian men and their dexterity at turning sexual profanities into verbs.

In a city where you can get pistol-whipped because there's a guy with a pistol who feels like it, where more powerful men feel free to take your property because they're more powerful and where darker-skinned men have their businesses set on fire, Andrei manages to look after his increasingly frail grandmother, find a week's worth of hockey games with people who very slowly — but very firmly — become friends, and join a community of well-meaning young communists. "No one I met in Russia had studied Western culture as deeply as they had and extracted so much that was so good in it, while staying true, as best they could, to the place where they were from," he astutely describes them. Even the guys at the local pirated-DVD stand start to recognize him. Survival in this place is enough to make you a hero.

In this section, Gessen's book feels like one of recent literature's most accurate portrayals of modern Russia, which is to say I was miserable for hours after reading it. But moved, too, for Andrei also sees the magic of the place: "Amid this freedom, this anarchy, people met and fell in love and tried to comfort one another." The openhearted charm that takes over the story here — the marvel and heartbreak of someone who can't quite believe he's so attached to a place that can be so dehumanizing and abusive — makes you forget every redundancy and frivolity of the early going.

Maybe this is why Russia's former sons can't stop writing about it — we can't bring ourselves to accept that one might have to walk through life in this way. The best part of these pages is that Gessen, in addition to some requisite self-laceration, allows Andrei to flail, mourn, fantasize and, sometimes, succeed without tipping him either into self-absorption or self-loathing. Gessen evokes not only convincingly, but indispensably, something exceedingly rare in modern American fiction: genuine male vulnerability. There's enough heart here to redeem every recent male novel that's aimed for it and found solipsism instead.

The poise, alas, falters in the book's final stretch. Prose that until now has felt tolerably colloquial — a friend emailing you about his crazy year in Moscow ("the distances were unbelievable") — goes fully slack ("It was great"), and what has felt disarmingly garrulous turns, once again, picayune: With great pride, Andrei relates a multi-page chronicle of unclogging a drain.

There's an unpronounceable Russian word that literally means "to choke," as on water while swimming, but metaphorically refers to being so excited about something that you're all but choking on the words. (For the masochists out there, it's "zakhlebyvatsya.") Occasionally, Andrei feels so caught up in the euphoria of finding fluency and belonging at last that the story resembles this type of undiscerning cascade.

Sometimes, as a reader, it feels O.K. — to use one of Andrei's favorite adjectives — to be forgotten in this way. Sometimes, not so much. The last 50 pages of the book read like a hasty after-action report, and Andrei should be pretty miffed with his author for imposing on him a denouement, and diminution, not only rushed but, in part, difficult to believe. Yet even here the novel manages to offer hard-won insight into an impossible place. I don't know if "A Terrible Country" is good fiction, but you won't read a more observant book about the country that has now been America's bedeviling foil for almost a century.

Boris Fishman is the author of "A Replacement Life" and "Don't Let My Baby Do Rodeo," and will publish "Savage Feast," a family history told through recipes, next spring.

Is the memoir market oversaturated?

We took a trip down memoir-y lane and asked: What makes a memoir truly great? What's the best way to sell one? And – gulp – is this megapopular market finally oversaturated? Memoirists, agents, and publishers speak out.
By Jack Smith | Published: August 6, 2018

Once upon a time, fiction ruled the market. Today, however, nonfiction is just as heavily competitive – and memoir is a key corner of that genre. Consider some famous best-selling memoirs from the recent past: Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking,* Jeannette Walls' *The Glass Castle*, Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love,* and, most recently, J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*. As three-time memoirist Mary Karr recounts in *The Art of Memoir*: "Memoir as a genre has entered its heyday, with a massive surge in readership the past 20 years or so." And luckily for would-be memoirists, the genre has a wide appeal among commercial publishers.

Why such a recent interest in this form? Perhaps it has to do with the confessional nature of memoir, the reality-based aspect: Just consider the popularity of reality TV. A memoir is a chance to read something that really happened instead of what a fiction writer has imagined. Memoir can serve as a raw baring of the writer's soul. Yet it had better be more than this for the work to stand a chance of publication.

"Memoir done right is an art, a made thing. It's not just raw reportage flung splat on the page," writes Karr. To write it well, you must make judicious selections from your innumerable fund of personal experiences to create something more than the sum of your memory's parts. You must render scenes from memory, recreating dialogue, reimagining

yourself in the past, and recalling every sensory detail you experienced in any given moment. Finally, the work must, as Karr says, be *more* than "raw reportage:" It must be seen as an art form. What, after all, is a personal memoir that has no deeper meaning than a stark retelling of events in one's life? Perhaps it will appeal to one's family and friends, but its chances of publication are dismal at best.

As Natalie Goldberg, in *Old Friend from Far Away*, states: "Memoirs are not usually about your whole life, covering birth to the present moment. They are more an expression of your life through something." Generally, says Bill Roorbach in *Writing Life Stories,* only celebrities – heads of state, famous athletes, Nobel Prize winners, etc. – can get away with simply putting their life story on the page from birth to the present.
That *something* Goldberg mentions provides a much-needed focus that is essential in any work of literature.

Keep in mind that memoir doesn't necessarily need to be strictly autobiographical. It can also be about a person other than the writer, or about a given place, or it can be a "hybrid memoir" combining a personal story with other nonfiction subject areas. Two famous hybrids in recent years are Helen Macdonald's *H is for Hawk* and Kate Bolick's *Spinster,* which have autobiographical elements but cross several genres.

So what makes a great memoir, as memoirists themselves see it? What are some essentials in writing the form well? And what do those in the publishing world consider a salable memoir? We spoke to leading memoirists, agents, and publishers to find out.

Part one: Memoirists speak out

What are your best tips for beginning memoirists on selling a memoir?

Peter Selgin: My first tip is don't think how best to sell your memoir, but how best to write it. Write the best book you can, the book that you long to pull down from a shelf and read. Assuming you long to read it, others – including agents and editors – will feel likewise. Writing to the market is an artistic mistake, and probably a commercial one as well. Tell a story that only you can tell as only you can tell it. It may be a sensational story, or not. It may be happy or sad, or both. What will make it memorable is how you tell it, the level of clarity and precision and insights you bring to your memories, the quality of the reflections that they give rise to, the characters evoked through them. Once you've written the memoir you long to read, you'll figure out how to sell it. Then it will just be a matter of having it read by the right people.

Kate Braverman: I would think the question is 'how do I write a striking, original book,' rather than 'how do I sell it.' How do I find the ability, the focus, skill, and stamina, the conviction for this unnatural surgery? Without vulnerability and exposure, without daring and risk, there can be no revelation. All memoirs are acts of fiction in the sense of not seeking objective truth. Unless one is historically significant with achievements and pedigrees to legitimize us, our lives are ordinary. Memoirs are not acts of journalism,

either. The writer selects from the monumental possibilities, strategizes, omits, truncates, and then surprisingly expands. One examines and revises, denies and exaggerates, and in that active engagement with the page, the unexpected emerges. Memoir writing is about the illusion of truth. It's liberating to recognize that it's not about the actual events, people, era, and landscape. Writing is about stunning and triumphing over the innocent page, which prefers you not bother it.

Glennon Doyle Melton: Make time. I write first thing in the morning. I don't have a room of my own, but I do have an hour of my own – I get up first thing in the morning before the world wakes up and starts making demands of me. My early-morning writing hours are my pocket of time to be a soul instead of a role. I also believe we should choose carefully where we do our truth-telling. One thing I remind people is something my friend Nadia Bolz-Weber told me: "If you're going to share widely – make sure you're sharing from your scars, not your open wounds." *Love Warrior* is intensely personal, but it's not a diary. I started turning it into a memoir two years after it all happened, and I had enough distance to look at all of it somewhat objectively. So, in real time, we share with our tiny circle of trusted friends and maybe our therapist. Then, when we've found some meaning in it all and feel some peace about it, we can take it wider. At that point, if folks don't want to listen, no worries. But if you've got a story burning inside you, it's likely that somebody out there is burning to hear it. The more personal it is, the more universal it is, too

Shannon Leone Fowler: My advice would be to read and write as much as possible – read widely, <u>join</u> a book club, keep a journal, start a writing group. Write chapters and pass them around to friends and family. Don't make every change suggested, but consider each one. Rewrite, revise, repeat. I feel I'm done (for the moment) when I can't tell if the pages make sense anymore. But maybe that's just me! Decide if you want to try to sell your memoir before it's finished, or send a complete manuscript out. I found an agent in the early stages of writing *Traveling with Ghosts,* but it became increasingly clear the book she wanted to sell was not the book I wanted to write. In the end, I finished (with many revisions still to come) and found an agent who completely believed in the story *and* in the way I wanted to tell it.

What makes a memoir stand out? What makes one truly great?

Shannon Leone Fowler: Unflinching, uncomfortable, and unapologetic honesty is what makes a memoir stand out. I think of Sonali Deraniyagala's astounding memoir, *Wave*. It has got to be the most shocking, brutal, raw, brave, and truthful book I've read about grief. Because a reader can see through an author who is trying to paint herself or himself in the best possible light, when each and every one of us is capable of noble acts of generosity as well as terrible acts of unkindness. A truly great memoir reflects both of these qualities of the human experience, with moments of light and with moments of darkness.

Glennon Doyle Melton: Truth. I believe that the truth sets us free. I think how that works is this: We think we are bad. We think our feelings and urges and secrets are shameful, and so we hide who we really are. That hiding leaves us isolated and disconnected from others, and often causes us to feel afraid and sick. When we share our real selves, others are

inevitably emboldened to come forward, out of hiding, towards us and say those magic words, "*me too.*" When we hear "*me too,*" we realize that our feelings and urges and secrets aren't shameful at all, they're just human. And so we stop being so afraid of who we are. That realization empowers us to step out of hiding and take bigger steps towards others. Reading a great memoir makes you feel connected and brave and healthy.

Peter Selgin: There are as many answers to the question as there are different kinds of memoirs. For sure a sensational story can make for a sensational memoir. Not having survived a deadly disease or been a mob hit man or sailed solo around the world, I can't speak to the sorts of memoirs that describe such dramatic experiences, yet each of us has an interesting story to tell, if only we can learn, as Emerson urges himself in his journal, "…how to choose among what [we call our] experiences that which is really [our] experience, and how to record truth truly." Among the memoirist's greatest challenges is to rescue memory from imagination, and to do so with the understanding that the one can't survive without the other. The trick in writing memoir as faithfully as possible is to be aware of the role imagination plays in shaping our memories, in making them cohere into scenes. The next great challenge is to avoid sentimentality, which I define as emotions in excess of experience. What that boils down to, essentially, is the need to make sure that the reader has shared our experiences as fully and accurately as possible so that whatever emotions they end up with derive from the experience itself, rather than from anything added, like sweeteners or food coloring, to it

Kate Braverman: It's not the story. It's how you tell it. After all, *Ulysses* is about one day in Leopold Bloom's life. June 16. Garcia Lorca said art was a struggle, a process, ancient and unmistakable. It has a quality of the foreign, the eternal and the just born. You recognize it by its sincerity. Your book will be as grand as you make it. Master a writer's full repertoire – experiment with description, dialogue, characters, textures, scents, specific details you create, not actual details. Use the illusion of thought and memory. Language, language, language. Each word choice is the sum of your life's experience. Individual syllables are a music you can orchestrate. Sentences are intersections where you can go in any direction – you can fly, transform, predict the future, and time travel. Write for the wild pleasure of the process, give yourself vertigo and fever, and write what you didn't already know.

How can the writer make the memoir special for the readers instead of being "all about me?" What's the difference between memoir as art and memoir as a shallow, self-serving telling of one's own story?

Shannon Leone Fowler: I believe this is one of the trickiest parts of writing memoir, figuring out how to tell a story that is deeply personal yet also universal. My 25-year-old fiancé was killed by a box jellyfish – an incredibly unlucky and unlikely event. Part of my own journey after his death was searching for other stories of grief, which I found all over Eastern Europe. I was desperate to not feel alone, and I was able to lose myself in the histories in the haunted landscapes there and the stories of the people left behind. Some of the most fascinating memoirs are about extreme situations the average reader would never even come close to experiencing. Yet at the core of every story are emotions, hopes, and fears that anyone should be able relate to.

Glennon Doyle Melton: I wrote *Love Warrior* and rewrote it, and with every paragraph asked myself: How is this not just about me but about the reader? About all of us? How can I turn my personal story into something universal? I sifted through my own pain and mined it for gold to share with others. When we truth-tell widely in real time, it's alarming to people because it can feel more like a cry for help than an act of service. You must be still with your pain before you can offer it up and use it to serve and connect with people you don't know. When we get real, we and the people we're writing to relax because we realize that at our cores, we're all the same. Our details are different – looks, jobs, families, pasts, personalities – but our essentials – our deepest fears and joys – are the same. For that reason, we've got to share the truth somewhere, sometime, with someone because we have to learn that we're not alone. We realize that our feelings and urges and secrets aren't shameful at all, they're just human. So we stop being so afraid of who we are.

Peter Selgin: I think the key thing to understand is that – though based on our memories and experiences – unlike an autobiography, a memoir is never about us. Even when we're the main character of our memoirs, we're not the subject. The subject is something bigger than ourselves, a theme to which certain experiences we've had attach themselves. In my memoir *The Inventors,* the dramatis personae are my father (who was an inventor), my eighth-grade English teacher, and myself; but the theme is how *we are invented by those who influence us,* and more specifically *how each of us invents our selves.* My father "re-invented" himself by denying his past; the teacher did so by fabricating his. Through their profound influences they in turn shaped my character; they invented, or helped to invent, me. The story I'm telling is my story, but it's not *about* me; it's not even about those two men. It's about the reader, who, in reading my book, discovers that she, too, like all of us, is her own invention. The test of a great memoir is how much the story it tells us is, ultimately, our own.

Kate Braverman: *I* is just a word, like she or Aunt Amy or my bridge partner, George. The *I* you create on the page is just another character. You make your *I* a multiple being. Find a voice you didn't know existed. Talk in tongues. Live your incarnations simultaneously. Revise your own history. When they go low, you go high.

Part two: Publishers speak out

Is the memoir market oversaturated?

Gail Hochman, Brandt & Hochman Literary Agents: I don't talk in terms of saturated or over-saturated. I do not hear specifically from editors, "The memoir market is saturated." What I hear is, "We tried a book similar to yours, and we loved it, we all were passionate about it, but it didn't work. Therefore we can't buy yours." So I would never say saturated or unsaturated.

Walter Cummins, co-publisher, Serving House Books: I believe the memoir market mirrors the fiction market. Certain subjects and approaches tend to become overdone in terms of saturation and redundancy. But even a very familiar subject can find an outlet if it offers original approaches and perspectives.

Raphael Kadushin, University of Wisconsin Press: Yes. We get a lot of memoirs, not only from agents and writers that we know, but also from people who aren't really writers. With their Twitter accounts and blogs, people are so used to telling their own life story that they think it's almost an obligation to write it. So a lot of the memoirs we receive are from people who never really thought of writing before. Most of the submissions we get are first-time books.

What are your best tips for selling a memoir? What are you looking for now?

Gail Hochman: I'm not looking for this, or that, or the other thing. But if I love the way something is written, then I may be interested enough to pursue it. What I do hear from editors is that they are not looking for the classic memoir about your drunken parents or drug-addicted spouse. I often find editors rolling their eyes at the classic abuse memoir type of thing. What I find is that if somebody writes something fresh – alive, new, creative, we haven't seen it before – it has a chance. In memoir, voice and story are everything. Even if we've seen the story once or twice, if the book creates characters who come alive in a way that glues us to our chairs, then that book has a chance. The problem is that every person who writes a memoir honestly thinks his book will glue readers to their chairs.

Walter Cummins: Because Serving House Books is a literary publisher, the strength of the writing matters most. The quality of the presentation is usually more important than, say, just the unusualness of the subject matter. We've turned down manuscripts about sensational subjects that might inspire TV specials because the bizarre isn't literature. In most cases, good writing is inseparable from deeper and fresher insights into oft-told tales. Consider how many great novels and stories explore love. Why can't a great memoir offer an original take on a common subject?

Raphael Kadushin: I'm not interested in memoirs that focus on identity politics. What I'm really looking for now are beautifully written memoirs that have some universal resonance. That's what I think is the problem with most memoirs – there is nothing universal there. It's rather just the writer's own story, which is ultimately boring. Unless there's some poetry or beauty to a memoir, it's really just another blog.

Are there any overdone or overpitched life stories?

Gail Hochman: The bottom-line is that the conventional stories – like my parents were abusive, or I was locked in a closet for the first 20 years of my life, or I didn't know my spouse was gay until so-and-so happened – we've seen all that before, so of course they're over-pitched. But when the text reads staggeringly well and makes you see the world that you thought you knew in a somewhat different way, then that's a different matter. I do a lot of memoirs. I love memoirs. I've had projects that I've worked on many times. I've sent them out in five different drafts. My advice would be to give the book more of a driving center, a premise which then has the arc of a truly dramatic story. I still often hear the same response from editors. And the response usually is not, "There's something wrong with this book," or "Here's a specific problem which needs to be fixed." The response usually is, "I really liked it. I think XYZ was done so well, but we don't think we can break

it out in a competitive memoir market." So for a good book, that's what I find is the most recurring reason for rejection: "We don't think we can make this a break-out book. So we cannot take it on." And it is heartbreaking, because some of these books are fabulous.

Walter Cummins: I've been arguing that quality of presentation can make any life story compelling and memorable. On the other hand, memoirs that fall into the category of stories for story's sake can wear a topic thin. Sad as they are, trauma of abused childhood or addiction can be interchangeable if they just present the details of what happened in a way that makes one memoir blur with those that preceded it.

Raphael Kadushin: Yes. The genre is packed with substance-abuse memoirs as well as memoirs of abusive childhoods, sexual abuse, sexual harassment – you know, all the tropes, usually beginning with a decline and fall and then some kind of road to recovery or rehab. Just way too many of these. It's not that I'm downplaying these problems – they're the real thing. It's just that you can tell these stories so many times, and then they lose their power. So in a way, all these stories are really in some ways mitigating against the power of these stories.

What makes a memoir stand out? What makes one truly great?

Gail Hochman: Editors want something fresh. They want something that does not seem derivative. They want something that does not seem like we've seen it a thousand times before. But what makes it stand out is usually the writing.

Walter Cummins: I've already emphasized the potential power of the words on the page for a good literary memoir that stands out. The great memoirs go beyond literary excellence to truly illuminate much more than an aspect of the life of the writer but lead readers to encounter something fundamental about all our lives, about what it means to be human and to live among others.

Raphael Kadushin: It just comes down to one thing: the quality of the writing. Writing should be left to writers. The sense these days that everyone is a writer is just insulting. I think the problem is that too many non-writers attempt a memoir because everyone can pitch their own life story, and then social media embraces the ideas that every life story is worth sharing. Everyone assumes you need talent to be a musician or an artist, but somehow people dismiss the fact that you actually need talent to write well.

Are hybrids (that blend personal truths with other nonfiction elements) easier to sell because they're "special," having more legs than a straight-up personal story?

Gail Hochman: The most important thing to know when looking at publishing these days is that it's a business. I'm not a business person. I'm a reader, an editor. But it's a business. Books are categorized – on paperbacks you'll find this on the back – as Literature, Self-Help, or History, or whatever, so that the bookstore can put it in the store in the right place. If a book is so much of a hybrid that you can't even figure out where it goes, then it won't go in the store very well, and no one will find it. So no, I do not usually represent or

embrace hybrids. What I find is that personal stories sometimes allow the writer to find his voice, and sometimes a writer will blend various elements. It's probably a matter of the context or the balance – let's say the balance. It should be clearly categorizable. If it's part memoir, part how-to, and part history book, you have set yourself up to fail.

Walter Cummins: Perhaps not easier to sell, but having the possibility of receiving more attention because they can embody original techniques for incorporating different or unique material. That attention may lead to sales.

Raphael Kadushin: They're more interesting in the sense that they aren't just personal. The memoirs we've done that are the more pertinent ones and that got more attention weren't just a personal memoir but were something that related to history. For instance, we published a memoir of a gay Jewish man who went through the Holocaust, and we've published some Latino memoirs that reflect Latino culture and the conundrum of living in two different cultures. Those books resonate in larger ways than just the personal story. In addition to the quality of the writing, that is something I always look for.

How can the writer make the memoir special for the readers instead of being "all about me?" What's the difference between memoir as art and memoir as a shallow, self-serving telling of one's own story?

Gail Hochman: The bottom line is that the guy who writes books has to remember this: Nobody on earth gives a damn about your life and your book, except for you, your friends, your family. Nobody cares – you have to make them care. Now if there were a formula for the writing, I could tell you, but there isn't. You have to somehow present your story in such a way that it has universal appeal and can put a wide range of people glued to their chairs. If you tell them things about the world we live in that they never really thought about that way – something that they wouldn't have gotten in a different book – you can make them care. Another thing, I would recommend that a writer make sure the premise of the book appears dramatically in the first 30 or 40 pages. You have to have something happen that gets the ball rolling: a challenge, a question that has to be answered, or a goal that the protagonist is trying to reach, so we say, "Yeah, I got it! Now, oh my god, what is she to do? How *would* you address that?" You have to tell us early in the book *why* we're reading the book. You've got to make us care by how you write it, by the story elements you put together, and in what way. In memoir, we have to fall hard for the character and feel swept up in the way the story is told. So when I say "fresh," I mean not necessarily a fresh story we've never heard, even though that's helpful, but the freshness of how it's told. That's the word I hear a lot from the editors that buy the most books from me.

Walter Cummins: I recall a conversation with an editor friend about a memoir draft written by someone I knew, too, though I hadn't read the draft. The editor said the writer had an interesting and eventful life and captured the drama and emotions of the central events. But the writer hadn't gone beyond that to identify the themes that unify her life story, a way of grasping the significance of what the facts of her life were all about. That is, about in a manner that would matter to a reader. For most people, what's happened in their lives matters to them, and they may tell certain personal stories to friends, lovers,

children, bartenders, or the person seated next to them on an airplane. That telling may even interest listeners. But a memoir that deserves publication should resonate in a way that's much deeper than the anecdotal.

Raphael Kadushin: I think if the writer has to ask themselves that question, they shouldn't be writing a memoir. Any writing as art always comes down to the quality of the writing, and that means actual talent. It's whether there is real talent, real writing, real voice, and there's a real story that's told in a larger, universal way. As to voice, it's something ineffable. How do you define voice? It's either there, or it isn't. An editor's job is to recognize that.

Some final thoughts

If you pen a memoir, drawing on your many life experiences, think beyond the autobiographical to the universal. How is this about others, not just me? This universalization principle applies to all memoir, regardless of subject. And keep in mind that memoir is not just story but an art form, calling for all the elements of great art in the service of great story-telling – and mainly, a voice that empowers the work, one that readers can't help but listen to. You're well on your way to publication if you can manage all that.

Jack Smith is the author of four novels, two books of nonfiction, and numerous articles and interviews.