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The Man Behind Memoir

by Jill Dearman

The memoir craze may have peaked, or it may be gathering momentum. But the history of memoir itself is a timeless tale, one that Ben Yagoda tells with style and grace in his new book, "Memoir: A History". Below, my interview with the author.



JD: Your book takes us through the history of memoir; is there a particular era in memoir-writing that you feel the strongest connection to?

BY: I would say the mid-twentieth century, mainly because it's been almost completely forgotten and is so different from the current period. From roughly the late 1920s to the mid-1960s, memoirs were almost uniformly cheerful and, when they dealt with the author's childhood, warm and fuzzily nostalgic. This included such works as Clarence Day's "Life with Father"; Kathryn Anderson McLean's "Mama's Bank Account"; Betty MacDonald's "The Egg and I"; Jean Kerr's "Please Don't Eat the Daisies"; and many, many others. I find these books fascinating, in part because they were so resolutely upbeat at a time when such grim things were happening in the country and the world.

JD: What do you think happened in the culture over the last decade or so to make memoir such a ubiquitous form?

BY: One factor was the huge success of Frank McCourt's "Angela's Ashes" and Mary Karr's "The Liars' Club": the publishing industry, like the movie industry and I guess every other industry, is not ashamed of being copycats. In addition, Oprah and other TV talkers heightened the move of our national discourse in a therapeutic, confessional direction. It began to be understood that telling one's own, intimate story in public was not only nothing to be ashamed of, it was actually a good thing for all concerned.

JD: Larry McMurtry just released another memoir, and at least one more is in the hopper I think. How many memoirs are too many?

BY: I think we've just about reached that point. Thanks to the many memoir scandals involving James Frey and others, and to the production of so many darned memoirs, it seems that the memoir boom is finally starting to subside. You can see a some of people's weariness with memoir-for-the-sake of memoir in the decidedly mixed reaction to Julie Powell's new book, "Cleaving." The one subgenre that against all reason seems strong as ever is the (minor) celebrity memoir: in just the past couple of weeks, Meredith Baxter, Rick Springfield, and R. Kelly have all announced deals for their autobiographies. Go figure.

JD: Rick Springfield -- fantastic! You've written and edited some other wonderful books about the craft of writing. Do you forgive a memoirist for writing some slack sentences if he's got a compelling story to tell?

BY: Here's the deal: if someone has a compelling story to tell, has some decent storytelling skills, and puts the required thought and effort into the work, the chances are there will be precious few slack sentences. There's a reason that the number-one cliché of writing classes is "Write what you know"--it's excellent advice. Knowing your story means owning your story, which generally leads to strong, authoritative writing—which is yet another reason for the

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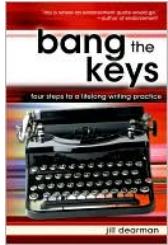
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memoir boom.

JD: What's your next writing project? And what are you reading right now?

BY: I'm narrowing down a couple of candidates for book ideas and working on some essays, including one on Bob Dylan's propensity for changing his lyrics in performance. I'm reading a wonderful Australian novel called "A Fraction of the Whole," by Steve Toltz. I've had my fill of memoirs for a good long while! Understood!

For more on the craft of writing from fiction to non, stop by the salon at <http://www.bangthekeys.com> or check out my new book, "Bang the Keys".



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