

Memoir and Truth: How the Genre Re-Frames Reality

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between memoir and truth, and the implications of that relationship for the rhetorical work that memoirs do. It uses the grounding example of Tara Westover's 2018 memoir *Educated* and looks at how the recreation of events within her life works both in conjunction with the way she portrays them in the text and juxtaposed against other competing narratives, such as her mother's 2020 memoir *Educating*. This essay continues the work done by literary theorists such as Phillippe LeJeune, applies the critical framework developed by Katherine Mack and Johnathan Alexander in their article "The Ethic of Memoir," and encourages the reader to consider the ways in which memoirs are rhetorically acting upon the culture at large through their narrative and emotional aspects.

General Audience Abstract

This paper looks at the relationship between memoir and truth in memoirs. Using rhetoric as its basis, it examines memoirs in their contexts using Tara Westover's 2020 memoir *Educated* as a case study. It looks at the way that memory is used to build narratives, and more specifically, the way that lived personal experiences are represented in the form of the memoir genre. In considering these ideas, this paper explores questions of objective "truth" and how lived experiences can be affected by internal emotional narrative, and by extension, how that emotional narrative is depicted in memoir.

Dedication:

To my grandfather, who always told me stories that were definitely, 100% remembered correctly.

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Introduction

The following passage, which inspired this thesis, is found in the final notes of Tara Westover's *Educated*. It is reflective, and at points, self-doubting, even bordering on condemnation of Tara's own memory:

The discrepancies between accounts are many and varied. Take Luke's burn. Everyone who was there that day either saw someone who wasn't there, or failed to see someone who was. Dad saw Luke, and Luke saw Dad. Luke saw me, but I did not see Dad and Dad did not see me. I saw Richard and Richard saw me, but Richard did not see Dad, and neither Dad nor Luke saw Richard. What is one to make of such a carousel of contradiction? After all the turning round and round, when the music finally stops, the only person everyone can agree was actually present that day, is Luke.

Shawn's fall from the pallet is even more bewildering. I was not there. I heard my account from others, but was confident it was true because I'd heard it told that way for years, by many people, and because Tyler had heard the same story. He remembered it the way I did, fifteen years later. So I put it in writing. Then this other story appeared. *There was no waiting, it insists. The chopper was called right away.*

I'd be lying if I said these details are unimportant, that the "big picture" is the same no matter which version you believe. These details matter. Either my father sent Luke down the mountain alone, or he did not; either he left Shawn in the sun with a serious head injury, or he did not. A different father, a different man, is born from those details.

I don't know which account of Shawn's fall to believe. More remarkably, I don't know which account of Luke's burn to believe, and *I was there*. I can return to that moment. Luke is on the grass. There is no one else, no shadow of my father, not even the idea of him pushing in on the periphery of my memory. He is not there. But in Luke's memory he *is* there, laying him gently in the bathtub, administering a homeopathic for shock.¹

A passage like this one is a rare one in a memoir; to call into doubt the events having occurred stands against the expectations of the genre. Nevertheless, it calls up some interesting questions: How important *are* the details, really? Is anything at stake, if some details are remembered incorrectly? Perhaps most importantly, what compels one to depict their own experience in a particular way, if not reality? If memory is fallible, and stories conflict, then what agenda does the memoir have?

¹ Westover, Tara. *Educated*. London: Windmill Books, 2018. 333-334.

To explore these questions, I use Tara Westover's *Educated*. *Educated* is a 2018 memoir that explores her life as a homeschooled child in a seclusionist family. According to Tara, she persevered in spite of her parents' skepticism of "the outside world" and eventually received a PhD in history from Trinity College in Cambridge. The memoir explores themes of abuse, familial obligation, higher education, and religious ideology through Tara's own experiences growing up as the youngest child of this family. Tara recounts events from her childhood, traumatic events, and moments that highlight the relationship with her family, such as injuries, conversations, and other pivotal moments relating to her life-story. It is very much a story that champions the process of education, and self-improvement in the face of adversity. These elements have resonated with readers, as *Educated's* broad reach is staggering. For example, in 2019, TIME Magazine placed Westover on their list of "100 Most Influential people."² Further, in 2021, Westover won the National Humanities Medal, given by President Biden, with the National Endowment for the Humanities describing the memoir as "turning American life into literature" and having "moved millions of readers and served as a powerful example of how the humanities can set people—and a Nation—free."³ Further scholarship on *Educated*, given its impact, is sure to emerge. However, this thesis also looks at a secondary memoir: *Educating*, by Tara's mother, LaRee Westover. *Educating* (2020) is LaRee's memoir in its own right, covering her experiences growing up, meeting her husband, Val, and raising her eight children. However, it is also a response to *Educated*—much of the book concentrates on Tara, and LaRee's perception of raising her children and meeting her husband is contrasted against Tara's perceptions of them.

² TIME. "Tara Westover: The 100 Most Influential People of 2019." <https://time.com/collection/100-most-influential-people-2019/5567699/tara-westover/>.

³ The National Endowment for the Humanities. "Tara Westover." <https://www.neh.gov/award/tara-westover>.

Applying a framework combining rhetorical terminology and structures with literary analysis is not always a common approach, but for the arguments made in this paper, it is a mandatory one. In this thesis, I continue the work done by Katherine Mack and Jonathan Alexander in their article “The Ethics of Memoir,” in which they apply rhetorical analysis to JD Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* and Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me*, putting these memoirs in conversation with their rhetorical contexts. This thesis utilizes that same integration of rhetorical theory with deeper textual analysis, and uses their proposed analytical method for memoir, in which they “aim to expand the theoretical vocabulary with which we can analyze the rhetoric of memoir and also to carve out for memoir a more central place in rhetorical studies than it has yet occupied.”⁴ Mack and Alexander argue that rhetorical approaches to memoir are a necessary way of reading them due to how they function in public culture, and claim that this sort of feature is unique to the memoir, among other forms of life writing, saying that “For better or for worse, memoir participates in distinctive and rhetorically powerful ways in twenty-first-century public culture. As a function of the genre, memoir foregrounds the meeting of the personal and political in ways that other public genres of life writing—or of public writing broadly—do not.”⁵

When I use the term *memoir* in this thesis, I am referring exclusively to the genre that gained great popularity in the early 1990’s, as defined by Thomas Couser,⁶ Mary Karr,⁷ and Julie Rak.⁸ When this thesis makes claims in regards to the memoir genre, those claims only refer to the genre that’s part of these contemporary conversations, which has more implications for

⁴ Mack, Katherine & Alexander, Jonathan. “The Ethics of Memoir: Ethos in Uptake.” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2019): 51.

⁵ Couser, G. Thomas. *Memoir : An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011., 67.

⁶ Couser, 142-147.

⁷ Karr, Mary. *The Art of Memoir*. New York, NY: Harper, 2015.

⁸ Rak, Julie. *Boom!: Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*. Life Writing Series. Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013.

marketing and its craft than for the literary history that precedes it. The question of what exactly the term memoir entails is under contention, even though its common usage is more-or-less known. Various scholars have differentiated it from or equated it to autobiography, placed it as a subgenre of autobiography, or vice versa.⁹ That being said, although the definitional work of what is meant by memoir is not fully agreed upon in the field at large, for the purposes of this thesis, I use the term memoir to refer to the following type of work:

- Novel-length narrative
- Designed for mass market sales
- Written since the genre's popularization in the 1990s
- Concerning the events of the author's own life
- Which follows the conventions and structures of novels

In much of the scholarship around memoir, such as Couser's *Memoir: An Introduction*, Karr's *The Art of Memoir*, Yagoda's *Memoir: A History*, these are the texts in question that contemporary scholars are referring to when they use the term "memoir." While the memoir has taken up many different meanings in its many centuries of existence, these critical works, as well as this particular thesis, only deal with the type of text that is listed above. This particular thesis is only concerned with the contemporary memoir genre that is currently being, as Julie Rak puts it, manufactured for the popular market.¹⁰ The focus is on the craft and construction of texts which are marketed as memoir to be purchased and consumed as popular print cultural objects.

There are many terms for the larger genre to which memoir belongs. These include "life writing," "creative nonfiction," "literary nonfiction," and "personal writing," and encompass genres ranging from blogs to personal essays to diaries.¹¹ Here, I usually refer to that category as "life writing," as this term typically has the widest scale, and has largely been taken up by studies

⁹ Root, Robert L., Jr. "Naming Nonfiction (a Polyptych)." *College English* 65, no. 3 (2003): 242–56.

¹⁰ Rak, Julie. *Boom!*

¹¹ For a full discussion on the history and terminology of life writing, see Robert Root, *Naming Nonfiction (A Polyptych)*

within the humanities.¹² In her article “Not Just Another Pretty Classroom Genre,” Celest Martin speaks to the neglect of life writing texts in scholarship, even going so far as to declare the genre an “orphan” in the academy.¹³ However, through this piece, she explores the different places that university writing teachers have situated the genre, eventually deciding that ultimately, she believes that it could have a potential home in creative writing departments.¹⁴ Furthermore, she makes the case that above all the rest, it is the “most rhetorical” genre of all, as it must do the work of reconciling facts with matters of form, combining the journalistic and the literary.¹⁵

In this thesis, I claim that the relationship between memoir and truth is a complicated one, and rhetorically approaching the way that memoir is constructed enables a deeper reading of a text in the context of its larger uptake in public discourse. To make this point, I discuss the relationship between memoir and truth in Tara Westover’s *Educated* and LaRee Westover’s *Educating*. Chapter 1 deals with representation of the past and claims that memory is unreliable, and that the memoirist reconstructs the truth as they experienced the past, rather than trying to accurately provide a record of events as they occurred. Chapter 2 is concerned with the reframing of truth, and claims that memoirs construct a public story about private lives, affairs, and events, which nevertheless does powerful rhetorical work. Tara Westover’s writing is an excellent subject for this study; her status as both author and historical theorist leads her to provide a meta-commentary about the history she is knowingly constructing and the narrative she is creating. This intersection of rhetorical history and literary elements is what makes the memoir so vital for exploring these questions of narrative, construction of experience, and the emotional resonance therein.

¹² Martin, Celest. “Not Just Another Pretty Classroom Genre: The Uses of Creative Nonfiction in the Writing Major,” in *What We Are Becoming: Developments in Undergraduate Writing Majors*, (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press. 2010), 225.

¹³ Martin. 225.

¹⁴ Martin. 228-232.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Introduction | Recollection

Memoir is closely tied to memory. The word itself comes from the French word for “memory.”¹⁶ With that in mind, the connection between memoir and memory may not be as straightforward as it initially appears. This chapter will explore the ways in which the memoir’s narrative is built by utilizing memory, especially in regard to recounting events that have happened to the self of the past, what the memoir claims to be representing, and how the remembered self prevails.

It is not controversial to state that memory is a difficult, fickle thing to rely upon when writing about one’s own experiences. Claudia Rankine calls memory “a tough place” that is neither entirely comprised of truth nor consisting entirely of lies.¹⁷ Paul John Eakin notes that even classical autobiographers such as Nabokov, Proust, and Sarraute have all acknowledged that there’s no possibility of re-experiencing earlier states of selfhood, that all memory is filtered through the present self.¹⁸ Nabokov mentions that his memory only has a “slippery hold” on his childhood experiences as he recounts them.¹⁹ William Gass, in his influential article “The Art of Self, Autobiography in the Age of Narcissism,” writes that memory itself is “constantly fleeting,” and is slowly losing itself to “the distortions of time.”²⁰ Mary Karr likens memory to a “pinball in a machine” with the way it uncontrollably ricochets between ideas and images.²¹

¹⁶ Merriam-Webster, “Memoir.”

¹⁷ Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2014. 64.

¹⁸ Eakin, Paul John. *Living Autobiographically : How We Create Identity in Narrative*. Cornell Paperbacks. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008. 11

¹⁹ Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich. *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. Vintage International. New York, N.Y.: Vintage International, 1989. 21

²⁰ Gass, William H. “The Art of Self: Autobiography in an Age of Narcissism” *Harper’s Magazine*, December 7, 2017.

²¹ Karr, *Art of Memoir*: 1.

And yet, memory is always central to the memoir and to conversations about it. In spite of his condemnation of its accuracy, Gass also writes that all autobiography still begins with memory.²² In his structuralist approach to how personal experiences take the shape of narratives, Hayden White claims that it is memory more than anything else that determines the shape of a narrative, that it is events as they are remembered that will bring about the sequence of the story.²³ Regardless of how accurate or reliable memory is, it's the primary tool that memoirists rely upon for recounting the events that make up their lives.

In this chapter, I first explore a consideration of memory within the context of personal narratives. Then, I apply the Aristotelian concept of *mimesis* to the memoir genre, arguing that when writing a memoir, the author tends to lean upon their own internal emotional and narrative experience, rather than represent an accurate picture of the events as they occurred. To exemplify this, I critically look at the way that Tara Westover constructs her college-aged self in retrospect—how she constructs the past as she experienced it, rather than recounting from the perspective of it having already occurred. The final section of this chapter builds off of this idea, considering what the memoir is aiming to do in its narratives, if not represent the “real.”

Memory | Recounting, More-or-Less

Memoirists are given significant leeway in terms of recounting the facts of their lives accurately. They tend to operate on a “remember-to-the-best-of-their-ability” basis when it comes to reconstructing the past. Consumers of memoir are far more concerned with being entertained, with being told (and sold) an interesting narrative, than they are in fact-checking the details. As Eakin writes, “Readers cut memoirists plenty of slack when they are having fun.”²⁴ Despite

²² Gass, *Autobiography*.

²³ White, Hayden V. *The Content of the Form : Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987. 20.

²⁴ Eakin, 21.

ostensibly being an entire genre dedicated to the proliferation of factual accounts of personal lives, memoirs often are closer to artistic representation of facts than to records or testimonies. In *The Art of Fact*, Barbara Lounsberry writes that the facts, through the lens of the memoirist, gain “life, death, and subtle reverberation,” and that while not necessarily committed to accuracy, memoirs are regardless “consciously artful.”²⁵

To this artistic end, many memoirists rely heavily on their own imaginations, filling in the gaps as they can with what they believe occurred, or what would have most-logically happened to fit the structure or art of the narrative. Ben Yagoda writes that memory itself does not create enough events in solid enough detail to form a narrative, but since humans internally form narratives to remember events, they tend to fill in the details with their own imaginations, which end up translating into the written personal record.²⁶ Of two popular memoirs (*The Liars Club* and *Angela's Ashes*), Eakin writes that they “feature unusually vivid and hugely extended accounts of the authors' lives as quite young children—pages and pages reporting verbatim dialogue that young Frank would have overheard at ages three, four, and five; 170 pages describing Mary Karr's life at age seven. Call this fiction, call it imaginative reconstruction; these writers impress us by trying to tell the fundamental biographical truth of their lives.”²⁷ Karr herself notes that memory is “informed by imagination” which inherently distorts the “accuracy” of the narrative.²⁸

Memory, in general, is not a reliable source of information, and attempting to recount one's life accurately in the form of a narrative is not feasible. However, while the contemporary memoir genre does expect stories founded in truth, these truths are ultimately secondary to the

²⁵ Lounsberry, Barbara. *The Art of Fact: Contemporary Artists of Nonfiction*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1990. xv.

²⁶ Yagoda, Ben. *Memoir: A History*. New York, N.Y.: Riverhead Books, 2009. 106-111.

²⁷ Eakin. 21.

²⁸ Karr, “His So-Called Life.”

narrative being sold in them. Representing the emotional underpinnings that make up one's personal experiences, rather than the literal events upon which they are based, is the essence of ascribing narrative to autobiographical writing. Moreover, these emotional, narrative arcs allow the memoir to assume the structural aesthetic of a novel, despite the object being represented (one's life) not following these structures or aesthetics.

Mimesis | The Life Remembered, Not the Life Lived

It must be said that one's life does not resemble narrative. It is not shaped like a narrative; it does not have narrative elements. One can apply the structure of narrative to one's own life, and plot-related elements to it, but life does not inherently have these elements; their portrayal is wholly constructed by the author who creates a narrative out of experiences by selecting events and portraying them in a particular manner. Day-to-day life may not have a beginning, middle, and end, nor may it form any sort of semiotic meaning. A meeting with a colleague doesn't necessarily inherently signify anything in the "plot" of one's life, but it potentially could be a rising action in the overall internal narrative of reaching towards a tenure appointment, and even then, that narrative is not viewed in the moment, only in retrospect.

The Aristotelian concept of *mimesis* refers to a representation of reality through art due to a work of art's "mimicking" reality. It is impossible to recreate reality through art, which instead simply attempts to encapsulate particular elements of reality. Similarly, memory, as it appears in autobiographical narrative, is not a representation of the past, not quite a "mimesis" of the past, as Aristotle would have conceived it. Rather, it is a mimesis of a mimesis—a representation of the representation of the past that exists in the mind of the memoirist. Scenes are not constructed for the sake of accuracy, but rather, they exist as they would appear in the author's mind, colored by the author's own presuppositions. As Eakin postulates, the consciousness is not a neutral

medium—the facts of the past are invariably influenced by the attitudes of the present self.²⁹ Following both Aristotle and Eakin, then, the memoir is not a representation of the past; rather, it is the past as remembered by the memoirist. This is perhaps the greatest constraint of memoir: it has to occur in retrospect. Yagoda even goes as far as to call this element the “Original Sin” of autobiography: that one must remember the past as one lived it, rather than as one is now.³⁰ This creates a situation where the author must obscure information known to them in the present to better represent the past as they themselves experienced it. As James Phelan puts it, “A real-life narrator cannot tell a story of self-enlightenment and simultaneously be unaware of that enlightenment until it occurs in the action.”³¹

Events must occur as they are important, to better fit the internal narrative that the author had constructed in their head. Using the language of rhetoric offers up the suggestion that the events created in a nonfiction narrative don’t take place in linear, chronological time, but rather, take place in *kairotic* time: the narrative is framed according to the timeliness of a situation, rather than the pace at which the events actually happened.³² To that end, only the most important details are remembered and represented, and more mundane details are left out. Even Roland Barthes notes that the daily weather is something too mundane to include within the journals.³³ Gass flippantly ruminates on whether something as commonplace as the potatoes he ate for dinner should be included in autobiographical writing.³⁴ No, the day-to-day, ordinary things of daily life are often discarded in the memoir, further distorting the narrative away from memory.

²⁹ Eakin, 11.

³⁰ Yagoda, 110.

³¹ Phelan, James. *Narrative As Rhetoric : Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology. The Theory and Interpretation of Narrative Series*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996. 103.

³² White, 8.

³³ Barthes, Roland, and Richard Howard. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Translated by Richard Miller. First American ed. New York: Hill and Wang, 1975. 54.

³⁴ Gass, “Art of Self.”

It is only the most important pieces, those to which the memoirist has ascribed narrative meaning, that are retained.

Most narrative theorists recognize that while life certainly doesn't resemble a narrative structure, one's emotions certainly can.³⁵ Unlike the historical record of events, memoirists structure their narratives based upon their own emotional positioning of the events. In reality, follow a chronological sequence, and emotions are dealt with as they arrive. However, since memoirs are written in retrospect, the emotional weight of the events shift, and instead frame the plot. Mundane details may be discarded, but if they end up being important later, then they will appear in the narrative. This might not be something that a person experiencing the events may know at the time, but it is certainly something that the memoirist will consider when re-constructing the narrative.

For a grounding example of how mimesis and re-representation operate in contemporary memoir, we can look to a passage from *Educated*. In this passage, Tara explores the childlike hope that she felt when she believed that she was finally fostering a closer relationship with her mother and reconciling her childhood abuse with her current life as a scholar:

I fashioned a new history for myself. I became a popular dinner guest, with my stories of hunting and horses, of scrapping and fighting mountain fires. Of my brilliant mother, midwife and entrepreneur; of my eccentric father, junkman and zealot. I thought I was finally being honest about the life I'd had before. It wasn't the truth exactly, but it was true in a larger sense: true to what would be, in the future, now that everything had changed for the better. Now that Mother had found her strength.³⁶

In this moment, Tara is not talking about the way that things were to become but, rather, is re-representing the way that she felt in the moment, that she felt a sort of development of her mother's character towards her own personal strength. Tara's memory and perspective reconstructs the past in a way that reflects her own, internal narrative, one that may not be

³⁵ Gass, *Art of Self*.

³⁶ Westover, *Educated*, 273.

accurate to the way it was experienced or observed by others, but rather, mimetically (or perhaps, re-mimetically) demonstrating the narrative she was fashioning for herself. The narrative she writes in her memoir, though a farce in the present, reconstructs the past in such a way that it matches the narrative that Tara was feeling at the time. This is mimesis functioning within memoir: this extra affective element shapes the structure of the memoir in a way she intended. Tara, in the moment she describes, felt that everything had changed for the better and began to emphasize and notice the positive aspects of her life. But if we look more closely at the specific language of this paragraph, we can certainly see why this is not a representation of the past, but a re-representation, a “re-mimesis,” rather than a proper mimesis.

First, take specific note of the temporality here: Tara is speaking in the now; in the last portion of the paragraph, she declares “now that everything had changed for the better.” This signifies that this particular narrative element is situated in the moment being described, rather than in the moment that it is being written. This is also implied through the previous sentence, where she mentions that the current Tara, the one writing the story, knows that “it wasn't the truth exactly,” but instead chooses to bridge the gap between the present's representation of the past and the way the past experienced its own present with the phrase “But it was true in a larger sense.” To this very same point, Kerby writes on mimesis and self-portrayal that the human subject, especially when writing about itself, is not engaging in self-representation, but rather in *self-interpretation*.³⁷ Likewise, Tara is not only re-representing how she felt in the moment, but rather also *interpreting* herself through the lens of the present. The experience of the past is interpreted through the act of writing as she attempts to capture the emotional resonance of her former mentality.

³⁷ Kerby, Anthony Paul. *Narrative and the Self. Studies in Continental Thought*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991): 52.

This circularity leads back to the aforementioned constructedness of the memoir genre: the memoirist must obfuscate their self-growth and new understandings until the growth happens in the narrative, despite the narrator invariably writing from such a position of self-growth—writing it after the fact. In order for the story to function narratively, the knowledge acquired by the actual rhetor, the author, must be intentionally omitted. Tara, the memoirist, had to make Tara, the character’s relationship with LaRee far different from the perspective she was writing from, due to the narrative structure of the memoir. This is inherent to the conventions of the genre. As Phelan writes, “mimesis is always a matter of conventions, and one convention of mimetic narrative is that narration from the time of the action enhances the mimetic effect. Such narration creates the impression that the action is unfolding before us rather than being told after the fact.”³⁸

Those conventions are, of course, conventions of the memoir genre. The memoir genre, as it has developed since the 1990s, puts more of an emphasis on this storytelling, on being a “complete” narrative shaped like a novel than on attempting to represent the past accurately or serving as a record of the past. In short, though they deal with history, memoirists are *not historians*. They follow narrative conventions and work closely with editors (and often, ghostwriters) to ensure that their stories can be molded into narratives that an audience will be willing to consume. The memoir seeks to represent the past, not as a historian would, but rather, as a novelist might: in experiences as they experienced them, shared from author to reader.

The Representation of The Real | What Memoir Does

If representing the past accurately is an impossible task and the imagination of events as remembered by the authors is acceptable, then what *is* memoir trying to represent? If they are ultimately imagined fictions based on one's life, what do memoirs do, actually, to differentiate

³⁸ Phelan, 104.

themselves from similar genres? Ostensibly, a memoir attempts to capture one's lived experiences as one initially experienced them, and often to recount one's life. It is not claiming to be an objective, historical narrative in the way that a chronicle or an annal is.³⁹ It doesn't claim objectivity, only that it will offer a personal account of one's life, and will share that with the reader.

This ethos of truth-telling is compulsory: while a memoir does not intend to serve as an objective representation of the past, the reader nonetheless assumes that the text is a product of the author's lived experiences, recorded to the best of the memoirist's own abilities. This can be best encapsulated by what literary theorist Phillippe LeJeune calls "The Autobiographical Pact," the agreement that the author is claiming a real, factual story of events that have happened to them in the past, based on the author's own recollection.⁴⁰ Quite simply, the autobiographical pact can be understood as the idea that autobiographical writing: 1.) Represents the truth as the author has lived it, 2.) Does not intentionally mislead the reader by misrepresenting facts and 3.) Consists of a narrative in which the author is the same as the character.⁴¹ That pact forms the basis of all forms of life-writing, memoir or otherwise, and ensures that the reader is aware that they're being told a story by another person, asynchronously, in the medium of a first-person narrative. Karr, though she does not mention the autobiographical pact by name, calls this the "Cardinal Rule" of nonfiction—summarizing it succinctly as "you don't make stuff up."⁴² The memoirist has a commitment to the reader that they are relaying a story of fact, portraying a lived experience through the use of narrative elements.

³⁹ White, *Content of the Form*, 8.

⁴⁰ Lejeune, Philippe. *On Autobiography*. Edited by Paul John Eakin. Translated by Katherine Margaret Leary. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989. 170.

⁴¹ Lejeune, 170-172.

⁴² Karr, "His So-Called Life."

Lived experience is almost invariably shaped by imposition of narrative upon the work. When approaching fictional literature, critics can ask questions such as "what makes a particular character villainous?" "How do they antagonize the protagonist?" "What antagonizing elements has an author constructed together in the form of the character?" These characters are created for an express purpose: driving the narrative and creating conflict. But, while discussing real people, who aren't created, the question must change. We must instead ask, "how has she been villainized?" How has the memoirist rhetorically utilized narrative elements one would use when building a character?

For an example of how this imposition of narrative elements upon lived experiences can work, we return to *Educated*. During the latter half of the text, Tara begins to see a change within her mother, to see her as contrasted against the subservient portrayal of her earlier. During this transformative, changing period, the two exchange emails, and that is represented on the page thus:

I am stronger now, she said. I no longer run scared [...]
Emily is being bullied, I wrote.
She is, Mother said.
Like I was. "She is you," I said.
She is me. But I know better now. We can rewrite the story.⁴³

This is the plainest example of history without any sort of affective influence by the narrator—two individuals are having a conversation via electronic messaging and the conversation therein is presented without commentary. However, where I have placed ellipses, I have omitted a passage that performs the narrative work of the section as a whole:

When I read this, I imagined my mother as a young woman, brilliant and energetic, but also anxious and complying. Then the image changed, her body thinning, elongating, her hair flowering, long and silver.⁴⁴

⁴³ Westover, *Educated*, 271.

⁴⁴ Westover, *Educated*, 271.

Seeing these two passages independently, then together again, shows how this narrativization of the past demonstrates the ways that Tara's memoir not only reconstructs the events of the past, but also works to ascribe meaning to them via emotion, potentially emotion that no longer persists. A final observation in the subsequent paragraphs demonstrates another microcosm of this phenomenon:

"You were my child, I should have protected you"

I lived a lifetime in the moment I read those lines, a life that was not the one I had actually lived. I became a different person who remembered a different childhood. I didn't understand the magic of those words then, and I don't understand it now.⁴⁵

Throughout all of these lines, a marked disconnect exists between what's occurring—the actual messages being sent and received—and what Tara is choosing to interpret from the conversation. As will later be revealed, LaRee is not talking about having an epiphany related to the abuse that Tara has gone through. Rather, she is instead speaking about protecting her from this outside world, what she will call the "influence of the devil" in later chapters. Tara, writing the entire story in retrospect, knows this. She, of course, already knows that her mother is not truly undergoing a hopeful transition to empowerment, or beginning to share her own views. Nevertheless, the emotions she felt in that moment were genuine, and in order to transfer her own emotional narrative onto the reader, those emotions felt at the time need to be portrayed vividly if the reader is to feel the sting of betrayal that is to come.

In actuality, the emotions Tara felt in these moments and the commentary she provides could not possibly be less true, and the specific emphasis on clarity and reconciliation sets up the book's climax. In actuality, even in the moment, At the same time and unbeknownst to Tara, LaRee was writing an email to another family member that Tara would later find on the family computer:

⁴⁵ Westover, *Educated*, 272.

*The spirit has whispered to me the truth about my daughter; Mother wrote. My poor child has given herself over to fear, and that fear has made her desperate to validate her misperceptions. I do not know if she is a danger to our family, but I have reasons to think she might be.*⁴⁶

Reprinting this email, Tara performs complementary narrative work to contextualize it:

I had known, even before reading the message, that my mother shared my father's dark vision, that she believed the devil had a hold of me, that I was dangerous. But there was something in seeing the words on the page, in reading them and hearing her voice in them, the voice of my mother that turned my body cold.⁴⁷

Why then, with this in mind, did Tara earlier choose to recollect the future with the potential for improvement, and hope in such a way, if she knew it to be farcical? She states plainly in the text that she knew that her mother was speaking against her and siding with her father's ideals before she even read the message. Naturally, the answer lies in the core emotional structure of the book—these are the events as Tara herself experienced them.

In regards to life writing, Barthes compares this very same device to how a murder mystery functions. There is already a foregone conclusion, but through the power of obscuring the known truth via obfuscating portions of the narrative, tension is produced:

A detective story by Agatha Christie manages to keep the riddle alive only by cheating on the person of the narration: a character is described from within, even though he is already the murderer. Everything happens as if a witnessing consciousness, belonging to discourse, could be made to coincide within a single person, with a murderer's consciousness inherent in the referent. Only through this tricky juggling with the two systems can the riddle be kept alive.⁴⁸

Just as Barthes says, this conceit constructs an emotional arc within a novel; readers care about the riddle. Since the memoir is novelistic, it requires this same shape, this same obfuscation by the present memoirist. The events described by the memoirist have already occurred (memoir exclusively occurs in retrospect), so it is only by obfuscating details in the same way that a

⁴⁶ Westover, *Educated*, 309.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Barthes, Roland, and Lionel Duisit. "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative." *New Literary History* 6, no. 2 (1975): 237–72. <https://doi.org/10.2307/468419>.

mystery does that the memoir can transform lived events into a plot. When combined with one's internal story, the events of the plot produce the core emotional structure of the narrative.

Consider that while the events of one's life are immovable and unable to be wholly fabricated (in most cases) when re-representing them, it is instead that emotional, internal story which becomes the clearer, more structured narrative. The construction of an emotional narrative is one of the central elements not only of memoir, but of storytelling in general. A sense of satisfaction is key here, and the remembered emotions of the memoirist organically produce a satisfying narrative due to the narrative that they have imposed upon their own life.

Introduction | Memoir in the Wild

With memoirs having such a spotlight in the public sphere, it is critical to acknowledge the place that they have in the public discourse. Memoirs do social, rhetorical, and even political work. It is not enough to simply accept textual readings of contemporary memoir without also critically examining how they are serving as actors. Yagoda writes, “Memoirs have all kinds of agendas. Some are narrow (settling scores) and some large (glorifying God); some have to do with craft (telling a good story), some with commerce (selling a lot of copies), and some with politics (bringing about the end of slavery).”⁴⁹

This is not a new phenomenon. For centuries, those deemed external to or individuals unable to access dominant culture have used memoir as a tool of empowerment. As Mack and Alexander write, “some memoirs might consciously or not reiterate dominant, even hegemonic norms, while others mobilize the personal precisely to challenge those norms. Memoirs by queer folks, people of color, people with disabilities, and others differently positioned within a dominant culture might aim to question, interrogate, or overturn existing norms.”⁵⁰ Feminist theorist Carolyn Steedman mentions the way that memoirs have been used to overturn “canonical” writings:

There are many more writings of women, and plebeian men and women in print and in circulation than there were twenty years ago. In the same period, a vast and proliferating body of postcolonial criticism has directed attention away from the subject of Europe, towards the subaltern and marginalized subjects of the contact zones.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Yagoda, 268.

⁵⁰ Mack and Alexander, 54

⁵¹ Steedman, Carolyn. “Enforced Narratives: Stories of Another Self” In: Cosslett, Tess, Celia Lury, and Penny Summerfield. *Feminism and Autobiography* : Texts, Theories, Methods. Transformations. London: Routledge. 2000. 25.

However, in the previous three decades, the situation has shifted slightly: as the genre becomes increasingly, explosively popular, memoirs are instead framed by entities of power. Politicians, publishing companies, marketing departments—these all begin to have a stake in both the narratives produced, and how they’re produced. It begins with doing this work on a mass-market scale which calls into question issues of how the memoir is taken up in larger discourses. Uptake, in the context of memoirs and as defined by Mack and Alexander, is “how memoirs are taken up, affirmed, challenged, and refuted.”⁵² They go on to say that “[i]n the production and uptake of memoir, we see a powerful grappling with the status of the self and subjectivity as evidence in pressing social, cultural, and political arguments.”⁵³

With that in mind, I borrow this concept of uptake and apply it to the consideration of accuracy and issues of self-determination which was explored in the previous chapter. This chapter applies post-truth rhetorical theory to the memoir genre, and examines the ways in which memoirs are capable of enacting social change through their broad-reaching uptake, as Mack and Alexander suggest. When applied to *Educated*, post-truth rhetorical theory reveals how Tara’s larger truths, her emotional experiences, are both at odds with, but also in the spirit of, storytelling within memoir.⁵⁴

Memoir and Post-Truth through Pathos

Rhetorical theorist Bruce McComiskey, in his widely-circulated *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition*, writes about how *pathos* and *ethos* can convince readers of their argument, that what is being written is “truth,” at the expense of any sort of appeal to *logos*.⁵⁵ This idea that personality and emotion can determine “truth” in storytelling rather than logical thought is a

⁵² Mack and Alexander, 54.

⁵³ Mack and Alexander, 51.

⁵⁴ Throughout all of this, it is important also to note that Tara herself studied historiography, and therefore is very well-acquainted with these ideas of memory and history formations. *Educated* 238

⁵⁵ McComiskey, Bruce. *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition*. Boulder, Colorado: Utah State University Press, 2017. 27.

startling one, and one that increasingly becomes more pressing as we enter what rhetoricians call the “post-truth era.” Mack and Alexander, citing McComiskey, write that “at a time when the ‘personal’ and ethos are used to justify a variety of often contradictory positions, a revitalized study of the genres of the personal, such as memoir, and their rhetorical deployment, strikes us as more pressing than ever.”⁵⁶

And, while certainly true, this pathos ends up creating a situation in which the memoirist is in a relationship with the reader. The reader, once they’ve accepted the autobiographical pact, gives the author quite a bit of leeway with regard to the perceived accuracy of details within the story. They suspend their disbelief because the author has promised to reveal to the reader some of their innermost thoughts to the best of their ability. Katherine Bomer mentions that this connection is pivotal to writing a successful memoir, as it breaks down the barrier between author and reader and allows the reader into the memoirist’s innermost thoughts and experiences. She writes that “when we bear witness to her or his stories, we can no longer be enemies because we are in a relationship: I and Thou.”⁵⁷

Memoirists, naturally, are aware of this relationship and what it affords them. Claudia Rankine emphasizes feelings over facts, writing that “[n]o one should adhere to the facts that contribute to narrative, the facts that create lives. To your mind, feelings are what create a person.”⁵⁸ Karr similarly emphasizes the feelings of the author left on the page, saying that “In any good memoir, the writer tries to meet the reader where she is by offering information in the way it’s felt-to reflect the writer’s inner values.”⁵⁹ In an interview, Chris Kraus wrote that “as

⁵⁶ Mack and Alexander, 67.

⁵⁷ Bomer, Katherine. *Writing a Life : Teaching Memoir to Sharpen Insight, Shape Meaning and Triumph Over Tests*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005. 23.

⁵⁸ Rankine, 61.

⁵⁹ Karr, *Art of Memoir*, 127.

soon as something gets written down, it's no longer 'true,' because there are always 100 other things that are equally 'true'”⁶⁰

But of course, memoirs (and memoirists) have agendas. They make arguments, and a pathos-based relationship that wins readers over by appealing to their emotions invites criticism; to look uncritically at memoirs' relationships to truth is to be uncritical of the rhetorical work that they perform. As Mack and Alexander write, “Given their ubiquity, their popularity, and the scholarly questions they generate, memoirs must be taken seriously, and rhetoricians must ask about the rhetorical work they do.”⁶¹ Memoirists' emotional connections with audiences drive uptake of their stories, and convince readers of their histories through an emotional, narrative connection that appeals to pathos, rather than logos.

Yagoda compares the phenomenon of believing a memoirist to that of a rhetorical speaker, wherein the audience must decide whether or not they trust the speaker.⁶² Even Mack and Alexander say that “astute readers will be attentive to the various constructions and reconstructions of the 'truth' and 'reality' that a particular memoir constructs rather than concerned with its actual 'truth' value.”⁶³ Yagoda mentions that questioning this truth is vital. During his conversation about memoirs' “agendas” he writes that “When an action or quote or detail in a memoir is an obvious servant to its agenda, the standard of truth rises again, along with the reader's eyebrows. And if the fact turns out to be false, the book is deservedly discredited.”⁶⁴ Here, while I do not disagree with Yagoda, I do want to point out that regardless of the accuracy of the book, the power of the rhetoric (and more specifically, the pathos) that the memoirist employs in convincing their reader.

⁶⁰ The Brooklyn Rail. “Chris Kraus in Conversation with Denise Frimer,” April 10, 2006.

⁶¹ Mack and Alexander, 50.

⁶² Yagoda, 265-268.

⁶³ Mack and Alexander, 53.

⁶⁴ Yagoda, 268.

For a classic case, I point to James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, the story of Frey recovering from addiction, and the series of events leading him towards self-transformation.⁶⁵ This case has been spoken of at greater length by hosts of scholars, but most notably for this discussion is the point that the same story was not taken up by publishers until Frey began to claim that it was a recollection of his own life experiences rather than novel loosely based on them.⁶⁶ Even with the knowledge that the stories were entirely fabricated, several recovering addicts who were reading his book in treatment centers continued to defend Frey and claimed that his book was beneficial to their recovery process.⁶⁷ Despite lacking a firm basis in reality and directly breaking LeJeune's autobiographical pact, Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* still exists in the discourse community of recovering addicts and is still doing the work that the author originally intended it to do.

Why does this work? Is the story simply strong enough for the readers to suspend disbelief, or is there something more rhetorical at work here? If the work the memoir is doing is strong enough, and sends a strong enough message, the factual accuracy of the memoir is functionally irrelevant. In some cases, at least, the memoir is able to send a message that is stronger than the events upon which it is based, due to the sentiment of the author and the emotional connection between memoirist and reader. It seems that, ultimately, the accuracy of the truth in a memoir does not matter to the reader in its greater uptake and in that which readers take away from the narrative. Eakin argues that "in an age of spinning, the winners are those with the slickest stories."⁶⁸ The emotional, narrative aspects of the story, the reader being entertained and the story resonating with them, is powerfully persuasive.

⁶⁵ There are numerous articles, responses, etc. discussing James Frey's book, but for a full discussion of *A Million Little Pieces*, the *Smoking Gun* article that was written in response, and the interplay between Imposture and Autobiography, see Susanna Egan's *Burdens of Proof: Faith, Doubt, and Identity in Autobiography*.

⁶⁶ The Smoking Gun. "A Million Little Lies," July 23, 2010.

⁶⁷ Eakin, 19.

⁶⁸ Eakin, 19.

For an example from *Educated*, let us turn to a fabricated moment that opens the book, a moment that raises the emotional stakes but has no basis in reality:

My strongest memory is not a memory. It's something I imagined, then came to remember as if it had happened. The memory was formed when I was five, just before I turned six, from a story my father told in such detail that I and my brothers and sister each conjured our own cinematic version, with gunfire and shouts. Mine had crickets. That's the sound I hear as my family huddles in the kitchen, lights off, hiding from the Feds who've surrounded the house. A woman reaches for a glass of water and her silhouette is lighted by the moon. A shot echoes like the lash of a whip and she falls. In my memory it's always Mother who falls, and she has a baby in her arms.⁶⁹

Tara immediately dashes any sort of question that this could have happened, and notes the confusion of memory with the following line: “The baby doesn't make sense—I'm the youngest of my mother's seven children but like I said, none of this happened.”⁷⁰

This event did not occur at all; it is something that Tara imagines entirely and it cannot even be rationalized with further contemplation. In spite of the memory not occurring literally, the function of sharing this false memory still serves the narrative—this fear of home invasion and her mother's inaction are core principles of the book. By beginning on a detail that sets up this part of the narrative, the literal events that occur become secondary, and the narrative drama that is contained within the anecdote reveals itself as the more important function of the two, in this case. And yet, this “memory” is central to the pathos of the narrative, echoing the same emotional beats that will later show up in the narrative, bolstering its motifs of injury and maternal relationships. Though this passage does not draw upon memory or even reality (although it does so knowingly), it is entirely relevant to the narrative, the narrativization of life, rather than being relevant to or even based in the portrayal of the real. The emotional resonance is key here: the memory is false, and Tara acknowledges it as such immediately, but the emotions

⁶⁹ Westover, *Educated*, 8.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

are true, and inclusion of this outright fictional memory ironically lends itself to the “trueness” of the rest of the narrative, since the tenets it represents are at *Educated*’s core.

Memoir and The “Substantial Truth”

As explored in this paper’s first chapter, memory in memoir is a difficult tool. So, too, is any idea that the memoirist approaches the text with any semblance of objective truth. Even when relying on personal writings from the past or personal records, life writing is predominantly written in retrospect, and is still subject to the whims of human memory and record. In a notable example, in a later edition of *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov mentions that due to the conventions of the Russian calendar and a recording error, he had erroneously miscalculated his birth year by nearly four years.⁷¹ Accurate records of remembered events are nearly impossible to come by when it comes to the personal, particularly when it comes to the mundane events of daily life. Since memoir captures particular moments from one’s life, strewn throughout many seemingly-insignificant days, any tactic employed to remember the past short of keeping a personal stenographer on hand will result in most details being filtered through one’s own memory. As Karr puts it, “no one lives with a Handycam strapped to her head for research purposes.”⁷² Gass condemns this aspect of memoir, claiming that (auto)biography is an estranged branch of history, calling it a “broken branch, snapped perhaps heartlessly from the trunk.”⁷³ Karr muses on the idea that “objective truth” has lost its power, and that subjective narrative has begun to take hold of the public discourse.⁷⁴ She goes on to give the example of Michael Herr’s memoir of the Vietnam war, *Dispatches*, which she says “has become a truer

⁷¹ Nabokov, 13.

⁷² Karr, “His So-Called Life.”

⁷³ Gass, “Art of Self”.

⁷⁴ Karr, “His So Called Life.”

record of the war than the "official" reports, which are clotted with fabricated body counts and the White House's lies."⁷⁵

In such cases, the larger truth prevails over the minor truths; the details, memory-inflicted and confused, are ultimately secondary to the "substantial" truth of the memoir's larger message. The minor details and matters of accuracy do not affect the ethos of the piece, despite the tacit assumption of the autobiographical pact of the genre. The "minor" truths that make up a piece, the ones that serve the narrative and claim no objectivity, ultimately do not stand against this "substantial truth."⁷⁶

When talking about this "substantial truth," Paul Lauretzin compares the Guatemalan historical commission report to the memoir *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. While the memoir is riddled with errors, details which contradict other reports, and holes in the plot of what occurred (which Lauretzin spends much of the chapter exploring), these discrepancies are largely unimportant compared to the larger "truth" that the memoir is trying to convey:

The substantial truth is that the Guatemalan military did systematically kidnap, torture, and kill Mayan Indians; the truth is that land is concentrated in the hands of a few and that landowners force workers to labor in unsafe and oppressive conditions; the truth is that Mayan Indians were forcibly relocated by the government. These truths are not in doubt. The Historical Clarification Commission's report, "Guatemala, Memory of Silence," documents these truths, as does a study of land concentration by the U.S. Agency for International Development, as well as countless eyewitnesses, whether they are missionaries, anthropologists, journalists, refugees, or UN workers (Chinchilla 33). So whatever minor details Menchú got wrong, they pale in comparison to the larger truth to which *I, Rigoberta Menchú* calls our attention.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Lauretzin, Paul. "Arguing with life stories Eakin" In *Living Autobiographically : How We Create Identity in Narrative*. Edited by Paul John Eakin. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008. 29..

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Here, Lauritzen takes the stance that memoirists have believed all along: the substantial truth, the building of one's personal experiences with the intention of bringing the life as one experienced it to the audience to read, is far more important to readers than the accuracy of details.

Going further in the same passage, Lauritzen offers a commentary that distinguishes the memoir as having a unique power that even other forms of life writing may not have. Memoirs are, at their core, *literature that does rhetorical work on a mass scale*. Lauritzen says of Menchu's memoir, "it is a mistake to read Menchu's book as oral history or even as autobiography. Instead we must read it as a distinctive form of literature through which subalterns have found a voice in Latin America since the 1970s."⁷⁸ While Lauritzen was writing about memoirs that did this work prior to the memoir boom that occurred in the 1990s, modern memoirs still do this work, and arguably at a much greater scale.

Memoir, through mass-market appeal, gains notoriety in public discourse and adds personal voice to abstract social and political debate. It is a way to utilize capitalistic publishing values to provide social commentary and the "greater truth" about one's lived experiences that official reports and "objective truth" may not encapsulate. By existing as both literature and personal voice, memoir holds power. Rak goes so far as to call memoir itself "the way that rhetoric works in public spheres in capitalism."⁷⁹ In a similar vein, Mack and Alexander argue that "what memoirs do precisely and potentially productively is to complicate the meaning of truth. [...] Memoirs forward the subjective experiences of an individual as a powerful form of "truth" and "reality."⁸⁰

For an example of "substantial truth" in *Educated*, let us look at an example of a detail which Tara herself questions and meditates on her memory of. Throughout *Educated*, Tara

⁷⁸ Lauritzen, 26.

⁷⁹ Rak, *Boom!* 7.

⁸⁰ Mack and Alexander, 53.

frequently discusses accidents that occurred on her parents' property, one of which is a scenario in which her father was burned badly. She describes him following the burn as extremely disfigured by the event, calling his hands "knotted and twisted" and describing his face as "taut and plastic."⁸¹ The depiction is intended to invoke nothing short of horror, even going so far as to describe his hands as "like the claws of some mythical creature."⁸²

However, Tara preempts any sort of questioning of this rather intense description with a footnote that she affixes to this passage:

Exactly how noticeable Dad's burn is today is a topic of much debate. His right hand has remained twisted and paretic, but his face recovered remarkably well, so that if you hadn't known him before the burn, you might not perceive the changes right away. In photos taken more than ten years after the injury, it seems to me that even the taut, waxy quality of his cheeks has lessened. I don't have an explanation for this.

As Tara likely anticipated, in a conversation around this image of her father, LaRee includes a photograph of Val in her own memoir, showing off his burn.⁸³ While there is not any particular language of opposition, the presence of Tara's disclaimer and LaRee's inclusion of the photograph demonstrate an argument implicit between the two: just how bad were Val Westover's burns? If they weren't as bad as Tara portrayed them in the memoir, then was this deliberate deception? A narrative move to dehumanize her father by portraying him as disfigured? Perhaps not. Tara says shortly thereafter:

Perhaps the burns on his face were not actually as severe as they seemed to us when we perceived them through the trauma of those initial days. Or perhaps they were as dramatic as we remember them, only Mother's skill as a healer was more dramatic, and she achieved something astonishing by the standards of modern medicine. I can't say which is true, or gets us closer to the truth. I can only report the burns as I and others remember them, and what evidence remains.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Westover, *Educated*, 299.

⁸² Westover, *Educated*, 299.

⁸³ Westover, *Educating*, 189.

⁸⁴ Westover, *Educated*, 299.

Here, we return once again to memory, just as discussed in the first chapter of this thesis; Tara remembers the burns as being intense and her being shocked by the appearance of her father, outright describing them as being filtered through the “trauma.” Regardless of the actual appearance of the burn, the more substantial truth to Tara is that she perceived the burns in a particular way and that’s how she portrayed them on the page. Is that in service of the narrative? Absolutely. However, it remains readily apparent, given the inclusion of this note, that she did truly remember this experience in this particular way. Regardless of what her father actually looked like, Tara’s own truth was that her father was reckless and the sight of him being burned was shocking to her. Those beats are the plot elements conveyed via the way that she tells the story. The accuracy, in this case, is completely unimportant to the structure of the narrative; she crafted a narrative that mirrored her own emotional experience and thoughts on the event. The “substantial truth” has been imparted to the reader through the events described, the details unimportant to that emotional effect. Even if she were to include a photograph of her father, as LaRee does in her own memoir, that image taken from the past would not affect the narrative in the slightest.

The substantial truth, the re-framing, and the emotional resonance with which the memoir deals, these are all the sorts of acts of translation that the memoirist must do. In framing their own experiences, the memoirist selects, recollects, and reconstructs the past, in a sort of resurrection. They do not attempt to photograph the past, but rather, paint it, and create art using their experiences as the materials, and create something that will resonate with readers. The “truth” is, to that end, not as important as the author’s own, substantial truth.

Conclusion | What really matters with memoir?

Not long ago, following graduation, I was living in my grandfather's house in a small town in Appalachia. I have been there for three-hundred and thirty-five days (I had counted) without leaving the house. I had applied to every job in the tri-state area, but nothing happened due to the pandemic suffocating the already-struggling business. On that day, I received a notification that the top-borrowed memoir at the time, *Educated*, was finally able to be checked out from the library. Memoirs were, during the pandemic, the only way I interacted with the “real world.”

For me, I found that I could connect to another through the communion of memoir. At some point, though not intentionally, I had mostly abandoned fiction books for pleasure; their stories still interested me, but I felt the need for that emotional connection at a time when isolation was ruling many lives, including my own. Instead I lived through the stories of others: through Nic Sheff recovering from a heroin addiction in *Tweak*, through Malala taking a literal bullet for women's education in *I am Malala*, through Anthony Bourdain eating oysters in Europe in *Kitchen Confidential*, through Robin Kimmerer trudging through the swamp in *Braiding Sweetgrass*. But most of all, I lived through Tara Westover finding a way to improve her own life through education.

Tara tells a narrative of what higher education can do, and how it can liberate those from remote areas, and reading her memoir, I became encouraged to pursue higher education. In an interview, Tara remarks that “it turned out that readers found themselves in the story even when the particulars diverged from their own experiences, even when the setting was transformed, the climate altered, the faces a different shape and the voices a different pitch. What I learned from this is that my story exists in many forms, in many places; that my story was, in fact, the story of

others.”⁸⁵ I am not of the Mormon faith, nor is my experience similar to Tara’s, outside of the small-town origins, and yet, *Educated* still resonated with me enough to bring me to pursue a Master’s Degree. The stories, and messages, the substantial truths in memoir inspire action, and encourage a connection in a way that most genres of writing do not. In an almost ironic sense, just as memoirs are informed *by* reality, their work is reciprocal; they themselves begin to inform reality.

Memoirs serve a dual purpose; it not only exists as a narrative to be consumed and enjoyed, but also as a piece of discourse, history to be engaged with. They sit on the boundary of fantasy and reality. They are a phantasmagoria of lived events put together in a theatrical production that weds creativity with personal experience. is trying to tell a story. The story that Tara offers is one of perseverance, of overcoming abuse and succeeding in spite of overwhelming odds. It is a story that readers (particularly American readers) connect to, due to its ostensibly inspirational message and “truths” that can appeal to many readers, regardless of positionality. They are distillations of life and identity that demand an engaging story or an insight into some aspect of the human experience. But, at the same time, the generic constraints of the memoir are such that it presumes a semblance of historical accuracy, and yet, the memoir is not usually regarded as a formal record of the past. As history and truth become increasingly difficult to discern from curated fictions, more critical examination of the ways memoirs are uptaken is needed. By analyzing memoirs in the context they are based in, the public discourse that they are part of, and the memories on which they are based, scholars begin to more-clearly understand what work that memoirs do, and perhaps more-interestingly, how the memoirist uses their life experiences to do that work.

⁸⁵ The National Endowment for the Humanities. “Tara Westover.”

Addendums:

A Note and Table on Names:

Although general decorum is to refer to authors by their last names in critical work, as I often refer either to Tara or LaRee Westover, I've elected to call them by their first names instead, for sake of clarity. Additionally, due to speaking extratextually for much of this thesis, I often refer to "characters" with their given names, rather than the pseudonyms that Tara gives them, as *Educating* refers to them without pseudonyms, and referring to them as one or the other could create confusion. For ease of reference, I have included the following table:

Name in <i>Educated</i>	Real Name:	Relationship to Tara
Tara	Tara	
Faye	LaRee	Mother
Gene	Val	Father
Tyler	Tyler	Brother
Shawn	Travis	Brother
Richard	Richard	Brother
Luke	Luke	Brother
Tony	Tony	Brother
Audrey	Valaree	Tara's only sister.

Table 1: Names and Pseudonyms

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