



The Art of Memoir

Mary Karr

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Credited with sparking the current memoir explosion, Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club* spent more than a year at the top of the New York Times list. She followed with two other smash bestsellers: *Cherry* and *Lit*, which were critical hits as well.

For thirty years Karr has also taught the form, winning graduate teaching prizes for her highly selective seminar at Syracuse, where she mentored such future hit authors as Cheryl Strayed, Keith Gessen, and Karen Zailckas. In *The Art of Memoir*, she synthesizes her expertise as professor and therapy patient, writer and spiritual seeker, recovered alcoholic and "black belt sinner," providing a unique window into the mechanics and art of the form that is as irreverent, insightful, and entertaining as her own work in the genre.

Anchored by excerpts from her favorite memoirs and anecdotes from fellow writers' experience, *The Art of Memoir* lays bare Karr's own process. (Plus all those inside stories about how she dealt with family and friends get told—and the dark spaces in her own skull probed in depth.) As she breaks down the key elements of great literary memoir, she breaks open our concepts of memory and identity, and illuminates the cathartic power of reflecting on the past; anybody with an inner life or complicated history, whether writer or reader, will relate.

Joining such classics as Stephen King's *On Writing* and Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, *The Art of Memoir* is an elegant and accessible exploration of one of today's most popular literary forms—a tour de force from an accomplished master pulling back the curtain on her craft.

The Art of Memoir Details

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From Reader Review The Art of Memoir for online ebook

K.M. Weiland says

Another reviewer said she wanted to underline every word. I felt the same—except I was listening on audio, so I promptly bought a copy, so I could do just that. Even if you're a novelist and not a memoirist, as I am, this is a brilliant book, full of spot-on advice and one of the best and most applicable challenges to story integrity I've ever heard.

Tiffany Reisz says

Not going to write a memoir
Or am I...

If I did write a memoir I'd either call it "Holy Fuck" Or "The Story of Ø."

Thomas says

As someone who aspires to write a memoir of his own one day, I found *The Art of Memoir* both engaging and encouraging. Writing a memoir requires more than just journaling memories onto a page. The practice forces you to punch yourself in the gut multiple times as you uncover the ugliest and most personal truths about yourself. Mary Karr offers several sage pieces of advice on how to do just that, ranging from the importance of remaining truthful to the skill of always addressing your target audience. She uses a gamut of memoirs, including her own, to use as case studies for her arguments.

On a deeper level, I enjoyed Karr's emphasis on voice. Therapy and memoir-writing differ in that the latter pushes you to scrutinize yourself with unrelenting, often-painful precision, all so you can cultivate a style to call your own - the compassion can come later. Memoir may appear simple because it originates from the self. But the amount and intensity of self-exploration required to pen a solid memoir highlights the genre's complexity: you must search yourself, over and over again, for the truth. Then you must meld it into its most honest, readable form. One quote from Karr's book that captures this process:

"Carnality may determine whether a memoir's any good, but interiority - that kingdom the camera never captures - makes a book rereadable. By rereadable, translate: great. Your connection to most authors usually rests in how you identify with them. Mainly, the better memoirist organizes a life story around that aforementioned inner enemy - a psychic struggle against herself that works like a thread or plot engine."

Overall, a wonderful book I would recommend to anyone who likes reading memoirs or may want to write one of their own some day. Though some parts dragged a bit, Karr does an excellent job of dispensing advice while honoring her own unique voice.

Julie Ehlers says

One of my favorite anecdotes Mary Karr tells in this book:

In a private workshop with Etheridge Knight--an ex-con from Mississippi and elsewhere, ashy of knee and with hands rusty enough to strike a match on--he scolded me about the pretentious pages I turned in. Way before poetry slams, he used to take us into bars or onto crowded buses to read out loud. Facing a listing drunk or a footsore commuter, you figure out pretty quick how irrelevant much of your drivel is.

I love this quote not just because I love picturing writing students reading aloud on buses, but also because it sums up Mary Karr so well. Etheridge Knight must have succeeded in draining all the pretentiousness out of her, because for all her obvious, copious talent, she comes across as very real, honest, and unfussy in *The Art of Memoir*.

The things I appreciated about this book were many. I loved her focus on emotion and on being brutally honest with yourself in your writing--questioning your own interpretation of events and being willing to build your questioning into the story you're telling (really the only way to write a successful memoir, no?). Karr further encourages truthfulness by reminding the aspiring memoir writer that "what happened to you is enough"--in other words, there's simply no need to embellish, James Frey-style. In fact, if you do, you not only risk losing the reader's trust, you also miss the opportunity to explore and do justice to what actually did happen to you.

Another valuable bit of advice I'd never heard expressed quite this way before: Present information in the way you received it. If your father was an alcoholic, chances are no one came up to you and announced this in plain English. You received this information gradually and in various ways that all added up. The challenge is to convey this to the reader in similar fashion--difficult, maybe, but it's easy to see how this leads to a better piece of writing in just about every circumstance.

Mary Karr teaches memoir writing at Syracuse, and *The Art of Memoir* is clearly that class(es) winnowed into book form. As such, there are a few chapters that discuss specific memoirs Karr clearly finds superior and that are probably on her syllabus. The first of these chapters was about Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*. I've never read *Speak, Memory*, and I'll admit that this chapter didn't make me want to, so I worried I'd find similar chapters deadly. Fortunately, that turned out not to be the case--the chapter discussing Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* was fascinating, and I couldn't turn the pages fast enough when she started talking about Michael Herr's *Dispatches*--a book I'd never heard of before but now want to read as soon as possible. Karr quotes from the book at length and unpacks exactly how and why it works so well, an invaluable explication for any sort of writer.

The front flap of my ARC compares this book to Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, but I don't really agree with this comparison. I think *Bird by Bird* can be of value to just about anyone, even people who don't write at all or even read very much. Mary Karr's book, on the other hand, is really just for writers and for people who love good writing and want to know how it's done. But this isn't a limitation--it's the very thing that makes *The Art of Memoir* such a fantastic read.

I won this ARC in a First Reads giveaway here on Goodreads.

Paige says

(I received this as an ARC)

This book is advertised as a book about the art of memoir writing. But it's about so much more; the art of beautiful words, the art of truth, and the art of living an examined life. While I initially thought this book would be an interesting read, but ultimately not relevant to me as a fiction writer, I came away with lots of insights that I believe will help any writer of any genre hone their craft, as well as inspire readers with the wonder of a really well-told story.

I'll say up front, Mary Karr is wildly talented; I've never read a book on writing with such a blatant voice. While I haven't read any of Karr's (3!) critically acclaimed memoirs, I immediately went out and bought *Lit* and *Liar's Club*.

Really wonderful read.

Rebecca Renner says

This is one of the best books on writing I've ever read. I strongly recommend it for any writers, not just writers of memoir.

Heidi says

An enormously helpful book, in sputters and spurts, for aspiring memoirists. It is written in the ribald tone I remember enjoying so much in Mary Karr's memoir, *Liars' Club*.

Some sections weren't so helpful, and others a little dry. Pages go by without any penciled underlining. Also, I found the way Karr uses the word "carnal" to be jarring, and would consciously substitute "sensuous" every time I encountered it. Indeed I feel a little like a hypocrite giving four stars to this book when there have been other books that have provoked a mixed reaction, but to which I assigned just two stars, or three.

Ultimately it's how you feel when you turn the last page. I finished the book elated by the lessons and tips Karr shares, and the way she exposes the machinery within the memoirs she reveres. She addresses truth telling, family faultfinding, memoir as quest, memoirist as protagonist who must change over time, the ever-morphing nature of the past, the necessity of having both a beautiful and beastly voice, the deeper psychological truths revealed in revisions, the perfect detail that argues for its truth, and insights into how families tick.

Happy this book sits within reach in my library.

Ken says

It's always hard to judge a book read in fits and starts. When you're busier than usual, you pick up your book-of-the-moment at odd times. And even if you end every day like I do -- reading in bed -- the busyness of your life often leads to an early date with Hypnos, the Greek god of sleep. Thus, another start ends, only now in a sleeping fit.

I rallied at the end of Mary Karr's book, however, taking the last 100 pp. by storm. It helped. My 3 stars began to lean four-ish. It's a short book, for one thing, and seemingly wears three hats. At times it wants to be a "how-to" book on writing, written by a professor (Karr) who teaches memoir writing at university (Syracuse, I believe). At times it wants to be literary criticism, going off on certain memoirs and their merits. It even ends with a long (and I do mean long) list of "must-read" memoirs.

And finally, at times it is straight-up biography or memoir of memoir-writing Mary. Here's me writing *Liar's Club*. And me waving as I write *Cherry*. Here I am again, this time *Lit* up. With it comes background information of the writer at work and at war (or peace) with the subjects of her memoir: Mom, Daddy, Sis, Hubby, lover, tinker, tailor, soldier, spy.

One thing Karr makes clear is the power of voice. If you can't establish voice in your writing, stick to your day job. Despite the identity crisis in this book's somewhat scattered approach (at times it feels like the syllabus of her course itself... "OK, class, where the hell was I when we last met? Whatever. Today I've decided to talk about..."), Karr's voice comes across in spades. One annoyance, however, is her decision to call sensory details "carnal." Maybe it's me. Maybe it's an old movie that I never saw but heard plenty about in my youth (*Carnal Knowledge*), but "carnal" seems all wrong in the list of requirements for good writers ("Class, you must think carnally!").

Oh, well. My problem, maybe. If you're writing a memoir or considering it, worth a look. If you're a Karr fan, why not? But me, I was left ambivalent.

P.S. Of all the memoirs she discussed at great or not-great-enough length, the most intriguing to me were Frank Conroy's *Stop Time* and Michael "Now a Buddhist" Herr's *Dispatches*. I plan to check both out at some point, thanks to Mary's quotes.

Diane Barnes says

I read this book not because I anticipate writing a memoir of my own, but because I love the form and was interested in how it's done. Some of the best books I've ever read have been memoirs, so it was fascinating to get a behind the scenes look at what a memoirist goes through to get the truth in the pages of a book. Mary Karr does this beautifully, but she does teach a much in demand graduate seminar at Syracuse University, besides having written three about her own life, so she knows what she's talking about.

I have to admit up front that I read her first book "Liar's Club" many years ago and didn't like it, because I felt it was a bit whiny and she was too sensitive about things that wouldn't have phased me at all as a child, but maybe I was hyper critical because dysfunctional family stuff makes me go "Oh for God's sake get over it and get on with your life!"

Anyway, I did enjoy this book, largely because she mentions and critiques a lot of other memoirs, some of which I've read, and others to add to my list. So, recommended to anyone who enjoys reading well-written memoirs.

Laurie Anderson says

Wonderful book about memoir writing, based largely on the classes that Karr teaches. She did a great job balancing a few of her own stories with many examples from the memoirs of others. Highly recommended.

fortuna.spinning says

"I can honestly say not one page I've ever published appears anywhere close to how it came out in first draft. A poem might take sixty versions. I am not much of a writer, but I am a stubborn little bulldog of a reviser."

Fantastic on audio! Here, Mary Karr discusses the memoir process — MUCH more complex than I ever dreamed. She sights several authors' works plus bits her own. My TBR is now several memoirs deeper and I'm elated. A must read for fans of the genre.

Rebecca Foster says

(4.5) I haven't read Mary Karr's memoirs, but I certainly will after reading her masterful survey of memoirs old and new. During her Texas upbringing full of alcoholism and abuse, "a first-person coming-of-age story, putatively true, never failed to give the child me hope that I could someday grow up and get out of the mess I was in ... Every memoirist had lived to tell the tale." Over the last decade memoirs have rapidly become one of my favorite genres. I read them for a cathartic effect similar to what Karr describes, but also out of sheer curiosity: how have other people found purpose in and made sense of their daily lives? No matter the outward differences between us, I can sense a deep parity between myself and almost any autobiographical writer.

I would recommend this book to anyone who reads and/or secretly wants to write memoirs; for the latter group, there is a wealth of practical advice here, on topics such as choosing the right carnal details (not sexual – or not *only* sexual – but physicality generally), correcting your facts and misconceptions, figuring out a structure, and settling on your voice. Along the way Karr discusses a number of favorite memoirs in detail, sometimes even line by line: *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed, *Stop-Time* by Frank Conroy, *A Childhood* by Harry Crews, Maya Angelou's books, *Speak*, *Memory* by Nabokov, and so on. Plus there's an appendix of recommended reading that looks like an incredible resource and will surely bloat my TBR even further.

This is a very readable and quotable book: Karr has been teaching memoirs at Syracuse University for years now, so she's thought deeply about what makes them work (or not), and sets her theories out clearly for readers at any level of familiarity. Here's one quote, from the very end of the book, in which she gives us an idea of how important memoirs can be:

I still feel awe for us ... for the great courage all of us show in trying to wring some truth from the godawful mess of a single life. To bring oneself to others makes the whole planet less

lonely. The nobility of everybody trying boggles the mind. ... None of us can ever know the value of our lives, or how our separate and silent scribbling may add to the amenity of the world, if only by how radically it changes us, one and by one.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I received a copy of this book from the publisher in exchange for an honest review. The book comes out September 15.

The queen of memoir, who also teaches classes in memoir writing, has published a book about writing memoir. It couldn't get better. I love how Mary Karr writes despite not yet finishing one of her memoirs. She is quite self-referential in this text, which even she seems uncertain about. Many of the references will only make sense if you have read the books she is referencing, so I leave this book feeling as if I need to go read the seven pages of suggested reading before I can really weigh in on the benefit of this one.

I loved her discussions of truth, of trust, of voice. I think anyone considering publishing any form of their own story is likely to benefit from the advice in this slim volume.

These quotes may not be in final copy:

"No matter how self-aware you are, memoir wrenches at your insides precisely because it makes you battle your very self - your neat analyses and tiny excuses.... So forget about holes in your memory or lawsuits or how those crazy suckers you share your DNA with are going to spaz out once you tell about what Uncle Bubba did during nighttime... You can do 'research,' i.e. postponing writing, till Jesus dons a nightie. But your memoir's real enemy is blinking back at you from the shaving glass when you floss at night - your ignorant ego and its myriad masks."

"The best revisers often have reading habits that stretch back before the current age, which lends them a sense of history and raises their standards for quality."

Leo Robertson says

Wonderful compact overview of the memoir format, useful to non-fiction/fiction writers and appreciators of literature alike :) I feel like my ability to understand big swathes of literature has levelled up, and this book also expands on Stephen King's "Read a lot, write a lot" maxim. While giving more pointers than read a lot, write a lot, Karr also confirms our suspicions: developing a voice takes time, effort, and ultimately your own rules or lack thereof- but you'd better know her rules before you think about breaking them!

Robert Case says

I spent a long time listening to the audio version of this book. It was time well spent. The author's passion for memoir and for writing as art, resonates throughout. The early chapters delve into how the writer uncovers

their story, and then finds their voice. Her discourse on perspective leads into a fascinating discussion of "Truth" and what a layered onion it becomes. She hammers home a lesson well learned in her childhood home: that truth is always subjective. There is always a context, which can later evolve into the scenes for the future memoir. She develops a memorable tag line that I thoroughly enjoyed: "A good lie, well told and often repeated, is better than the truth."

This book is a well organized piece of work and the author, a skillful teacher. She gets to her points, makes them well, and then moves on. For this writer, it's hugely instructive and just as motivational. She includes explorations of the works of other memoir writers, the ones she considers great. There is clarity and compassion in her explanations. And, it certainly has tweaked my interest in reading more of them, maybe even writing my own.
