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### The art of memoir

Mary Karr

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Mary Karr has shared her world with us in three memoirs: her breakthrough, *The liars' club*, a childhood memoir published in 1995; 2001's *Cherry: A memoir*, and *Lit: A memoir*, of 2009. Her latest book, *The art of memoir*, explores the art of writing in a down-to-earth, quintessential Karr voice. It's part textbook, part motivational talk, part course syllabus from Syracuse University (where she is an English professor). And, as Karr weaves personal experience and epiphanies to illustrate the art and practice of writing about the self she explores the associated ethical questions.

In particular, Karr explores the crucial issues relating to 'truth' in memoir. She posits that no writer can impose her own standards of accuracy on to any other writer: 'Truth may have become a foggy, fuzzy nether area. But untruth is simple: making up events with the intention to deceive' (p. 11). Truth, then, is difficult and subjective but there is no excuse for the inclusion of deliberate untruth in memoir, passing it off as 'non-fiction', since the overarching reason is always to deceive.

Hand in hand with our relationship with truth is the fickle nature of memory. Karr writes of a class exercise in which she fakes a fight with a colleague and asks her students to recall the conflict. The truth is always either lost, damaged or distorted, and Karr's 'unscientific, decades-long study proves even the best minds warp and blur what they see' (p. 5). To support this view, she cites David Carr's attempt to uncover the truth about his 'most deranged coke-fiend years' (p. 6) for *The night of the gun* (2008):

The highlight concerns a faceoff with a gun-toting maniac in an alley. The big reveal? It turned out Carr was the maniac wagging the gun. When he recounted that discovery to me years later, the discrepancy still set him back (ibid).

Karr writes: 'Everybody I know who wades deep enough into memory's waters drowns a little' (p. 27) and throughout the book, the act of writing memoir is littered with a dread and pain of the process. It's just beneath the surface of every memoirist, it seems: The guilt, the worry, the dread and the fear of misrepresenting someone, or getting it all wrong, are all there. But we continue, and we persist, because 'only looking back at the past can permit it finally to become past' (p. 12).

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