What Made Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club* a Best-selling Memoir?

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National Association of Memoir Writers

Write Your Memoir in Six Months
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Class 1. Creating Unforgettable Characters

Brooke Warner: Welcome to **class one** of **Mary Karr's *The Lars' Club* and what made *The Liars' Club* a bestselling memoir.** Thank you so much for joining us and good evening

Linda Joy Myers: Hi, Brooke. I love this book.

BW: Welcome, everyone, and thank you for joining us. Please pose your questions in the questions panel. Linda, please give your quick bio.

LJM: I'm the president of the National Association of Memoir Writers and I'm also the author of my own memoir, *Don't Call Me Mother: A Daughter's Journey from Abandonment to Forgiveness*, and two books on memoir writing: *The Power of Memoir* and *Journey of Memoir*. As you can see at the bottom, Brooke and I have written a book together, *Breaking Ground on Your Memoir: Craft and Motivation for Memoir Writers*.

BW: Yes, a book we're very proud of. I'm Brooke Warner, the publisher of She Writes Press and the president of Warner Coaching where I coach writers to publication. I have a book called *What's Your Book?* and an e-book called *How to Sell Your Memoir*.

Diving into Mary Karr. I'm opening tonight talking about relaying your character's behavior in your memoir writing. The reason that Linda Joy and I feel that this is really important is we teach a lot of classes together and we both are coaches and have our own coaching clients, so we both read tons and tons of memoir. With all of that stuff combined, we're doing a lot of reading.

One of the things that we're seeing happen is that writers aren't diving deep enough into what motivates their characters. They're not getting into the nitty gritty of how a character behaves and why. Linda is going to be talking about psychology tonight and we often talk about psychology, but in memoir writing you not only have to be your own therapist, but you have to be the therapist of other people in the sense that you've got to wear that hat and have some psychological savvy and understanding, or at least

interpretation of why you think people do the things they do. Then you're trying to put that onto the page.

So we're going to show tonight how Karr does some of these things, and also talk about it more broadly. In every class we're trying to think about ways that we can encourage you all to consider these skills in your own writing. In your own writing, I would say that I cannot emphasize enough the importance of character development. Sometimes the characters—inadvertently, of course—fall flat on the page. And memoir writers are focused on the characters but not on deepening them. In the second part of what I'm teaching tonight I'll be talking about deepening characters. But in terms of how to relay characters' behavior, it's kind of a nuanced conversation and yet a really important one. Karr does this really well.

So we'll open with how she portrays her mother as the first example. What I write here in the slide says, "Karr's depiction of her mother over time, from nervous in Karr's childhood to miserable in her early adulthood." So right off the bat with Mary Karr, in the early pages, we see that her mother is uppercase TAKEN AWAY. She uses these uppercases—from a child's perspective, the use of the uppercase, I think, is to obviously to emphasize something and also to depict it as almost something larger than life—something really big and important. So she's TAKEN AWAY and then she's also Nervous—capital N Nervous. In pages six and seven and eight, this opening scene is talking about this incident that happened that was this very important cornerstone memory of her childhood. It's because her mother is taken away that night. We later learn that it's the night her mother threatens to kill her two daughters, but early on in the book we don't know what has happened because Mary Karr explicitly wants to withhold that information from us and she doesn't relay it until midway through the book.

At this early point, on page six and seven and eight, you can see the use of the word "nervous" right in the middle paragraph here. It says, on page six, "I knew that neither of my parents was coming. Daddy was working the graveyard shift and the sheriff said that his deputy had driven out to the plant to try to track him down. Mother had been taken away, he further told us, for being Nervous." And then she goes on into her narrative voice—she does a lot of this, a lot of asides: "I should explain here that in East Texas parlance, the term 'nervous' is applied with

equal accuracy to anything from chronic nail-biting to full-blown psychosis." Which is hilarious if it weren't so grave, right? She has a lot of that—very funny sort of oh my gosh, seriously? But yes, indeed. Those of you, I'm sure, who grew up in East Texas probably know that. If you go to page seven, there's more nervousness. Mr. Thibideaux was Nervous and he killed his family. And then there is—this is also on page seven—"On the night the sheriff came to our house and Mother was judged more or less permanently Nervous, I didn't yet understand the word."

What I love about that is that she's showing you **her younger self** and that this term applied to her mom but she outright tells you right here, "I didn't understand the word." She just kept hearing it—your mother is Nervous, she's been taken away. That is how a child interprets things, right? You're taking the language but you don't really metabolize it. I think it's a really interesting way that this young Karr is relaying her mother's behavior by what she's hearing. She's not fully understanding it yet, but she's just telling you what the adults are saying that night.

And then if you go to the following page, page eight, again smack in the middle of this very long paragraph, it says, "Our house was perceived as Dangerous,"—again, a capital D—"a consequence of Mother's being Nervous." So she goes on and on and in these early scenes, there are other things that are capitalized—the words "Not Right" on page nine. "I did not know from that night forward that things in my house were Not Right. This, despite the fact that the events I have described so far had few outward results." It's really fascinating to look at how she's doing this. She's showing this household—this chaotic household that she grew up in and explaining how her parents were, but particularly this depiction of her mother, I think, is quite powerful in the way that she does this through the child's point of view. Then later, there's the mother's misery. In essence, she's an adult in this last scene—actually, the scene that I'm reading is going to be before she is an adult.

This is in 1963 in Colorado, page 231. The middle of the page, again, says, "Mother's misery was also sneaking up inside me somehow." I won't read the whole paragraph here, but she's talking with her mother about the myth of Sisyphus and she says, "Sisyphus had it worse than all of us, it seemed to me, being doomed to sweat and grunt, pushing a boulder up a mountain all

day and night without rest." And then when she basically brings this up with her mother, her mother says to her at the end of this page—page 231—"She told me there was no more point to Sisyphus' task than there was to washing dishes or making beds. You just did those things endlessly until your body wore out, and then you died." Again, it is kind of funny in its sort of tortured way. This goes on—the mother is sort of tortured and has a lot of interesting characterization as the book goes along.

Now I'm going to shift gears and talk about the **grandma who is the focus of chapter four**. I think the grandma's character development is very interesting. If you read chapter five specifically looking to gain information about the grandmother, you will see how she unfolds this chapter and it's quite interesting. Basically what she does in this chapter is just go into deepening and deepening of how horrible her grandmother is. She spends quite a bit of time talking about how awful she smells on page 76. It's basically two full paragraphs, if not more, about how she smells like a snake—specifically a water moccasin—on page 76. It's fascinating, actually, the degree and amount of attention that she gives to this horrible, horrible smell of her grandmother. And then later on page 79, the snake thing continues after these two long paragraphs. She gives this aside on page 79: "The closest I had ever come to that smell before Grandma's room was the closest I'd come to a snake bite."

And then she goes on to this total almost random story about getting a snake bite. But she does this as part of her narrative and it's interesting for its individuality and uniqueness. I think what you guys can learn from it is just the way that she goes into layered depths and how she's specifically doing character development. If you take tonight as a homework assignment and you have the book and you're reading chapter four, just look at what she does to layer upon layer upon layer with her grandmother. But in essence, by the end of it when the grandmother is dead, you're almost happy for Mary because the woman was just so God-awful. This is one other way in which she's doing character development.

And then, finally, **her dad** who gets a lot of attention. Her dad's voice, his mannerisms, his personality—and what I specifically want to draw your attention to is how the dad tells stories. When they're hanging out with the Liars' Club—his group of buddies—she really gets into the

way in which he tells stories and you can almost feel like you're with him, watching him. An example of this is on page 163. It's right in the middle of the page. It says, "Shug then says with a straight face that he can't imagine Daddy ever lying. He's quartering the ducks and wrapping the pieces in white freezer paper for us to divvy up when we're back in town. Daddy tilts his head at Shug," and he says a little dialogue in here, and then the next paragraph says, "When he's sure everybody is listening, he backs up to set the scene."

And then you get into quite a bit of dialogue, but you see that he's just this expert storyteller—that he really thrives on having everyone hang on his every word. This is something that is recurring. We see this over and over with the dad and how much his storytelling made an impact on Mary and, I would argue, probably why Mary herself is such a darn good storyteller is because of her dad. This is just another way—if you watch and look and read for how she treats her dad and specifically how she treats his storytelling, you can learn a lot about character development.

LJM: It's amazing, and it's throughout the entire book so we're just chopping it up into different examples here. We're talking about unique voice and dialogue. I noticed some things about the dialogue as I began to analyze it more, which I'm going to talk about today. But first, a couple of principles about dialogue, because people that we teach and who are in our classes and who we're coaching, many of them are very Nervous with a capital N—well, not that bad—they feel insecure about using dialogue. Of course, we understand why, because it's kind of a technique all its own. It's one way to show who someone is. So when I'm teaching sometimes, I say, dialogue is part of character development because it's showing. Anytime somebody opens their mouth, they are showing who they are. Often, this is kind of a new concept to people—they hadn't really been thinking about how their showing is going to include at least some dialogue.

On the other end of things, you don't want to just have page after page of what we call "talking heads," where everybody is just sort of blabbing away. Maybe some people who are play writers are going to be really better at doing that—maybe if you just want to do dialogue, you should write a play. The dialogue is everything in a play—it carries the weight of everything. But of course, in a play, you have people moving and you do see people in action. Clearly, how

everybody speaks shows who they are, but I'm going to say again—more than once we're going to say it throughout this course—that all aspects of how this book is woven together does a lot of showing. I think many of you have heard the whole thing about "show, don't tell."

In memoir, **it's show *and* tell**, but showing is specific details in a scene. And of course a dialogue occurs in a specific scene. By that we mean a particular moment in time. You'll see if you keep an eye out for it how Mary Karr moves us around in time. In later classes, we're going to be talking about the narration and the plot and how that works, so stay tuned for that. It's really interesting. All that goes to say that as I was looking for examples, I really felt like—I've read this book several times by now—I could just hear the father talking. I could certainly hear the mother talking. There's plenty of action with the mother in there, but then I discovered something very interesting that I'll tell you about in a minute. I'm going to start with the father, because he's actually talking more and we get some of his language.

On page 22 is one of the first times she has him talking, and it's in the context of her remembering him after he died. They dig out an old trunk and they're unpacking the things that are in this trunk and the unpacking shows a lot about who he is, speaking of showing. So I think that's really interesting on page 19, 20, and 21. And then she shares a scene when he is actually talking when she's older and she says, "His favorite subjects, scabs, were the cornerstone of one of Daddy's favorite lectures. For some reason, I remember him delivering it one particular morning when I was just old enough to drive." And then he talks about how good he is at math and what he did in his job, and then he says, "Maybe Daddy thumbed his cigarette butt out the triangular side window at this point to buy a minute of thought," after talking about money and work and bosses. 'See, Pokey, there was more job there than there was man, and you don't believe me. His wife's a widow today. More money, my rosy red ass. That ignorant scab son of a bitch.' When he said the word 'scab,' his knuckles would get white where he gripped the wheel. 'Pokey, anybody cross a picket line—and not just there, I mean any picket line, I don't care if it's the drugstore or the carpenters or whatever.'"

And then she says, "What followed would be a grisly portrayal of people prying open children's mouths to steal the bread from them." What you have is some dialogue and then you have showing his body language and then you have an indirect dialogue following direct dialogue:

“What followed would be a grisly portrayal of people prying open children’s mouths.” On page 22, you’ll see several things happening at once that you can learn from: how she weaves what somebody is doing with what they’re saying and with indirect dialogue. And by indirect, it’s just not a direct quote. We say, oh, they told me that such and such happened. And sometimes that’s a really good way to say what is going on and vary up dialogue. That’s another thing. Dialogue needs to be varied from—you usually say “said,” where you guide people to see who is talking -- part of how you do that is you show what their body language is. You’ll notice that a lot in here and in a lot of other books.

We have Daddy, who is part of the Liars’ Club. There are quite a few stories in here that are her father telling stories as part of the Liars’ Club. You hear him talking a lot. So then I began to look for the mother’s dialogue and I found hardly any. I found her saying almost nothing. I was stunned by this—I thought she was talking. There is a lot of action, but she doesn’t talk much. I tracked how much she talked and when she talked throughout the entire book, so I want to talk about this. On page 53, there’s a scene with the grandmother where the grandmother’s leg is cut off and the mother freaks out. The mother does say to the hospital people, “Don’t you go Hail Mary-ing over my mother.” They were offering to say a rosary for her. And then the mother is in some kind of odd state—she’s sort of dissociated, although we’re not sure. Mary says when they bought things, they went shopping, they went to ride on the Ferris wheel, and so on. Then she said—"she still didn’t say anything." And then on page 55, she says, “Looking back from this distance,” meaning the now narrator—we’re going to talk more about the now narrator in another class. “Looking back from this distance, I can also see Mother trapped in some way and stranded in her own silence. How small she seems in her silk dress, drinking stale coffee.” And then they’re at the zoo and there’s a panther pacing back and forth.

One thing—Brooke, you mentioned how she goes into these parenthetical stories, but they are **metaphorical**. To see the mother silent and stranded in her silk dress, but they’re at the zoo and the panther is pacing back and forth is a really interesting image. It says something about what is going on with these people emotionally. We’ll talk later about metaphor and poetry, so stick with us and you’re going to hear more about that. Then there is indirect dialogue with her and then there’s an important moment where the very beginning trauma that Brooke has referred to and

I'm going to refer to too in a moment. In the very beginning, it swoops around to page to 157 and you reconnect there with what's happening at the very beginning of the book. It's a very circular structure. The mother has flipped out and everything is crazy—you've probably read it already. And then she says the mother dials the phone—she dials the doctor—I guess it's Dr. Boudreau who answers on the other end, because she says, "Forrest, it's Charlie Marie. Get over here. I just killed them both—both of them. I stabbed them both to death."

So now we know what she actually said to the doctor that got him so concerned about looking at Mary and her sister at the very beginning—the very first page of the book—to see if they're injured. So we see her speak—it's very powerful. She hadn't killed them, clearly, but she thought she had and it was a sign of her psychotic break and a sign of this capital-N Nervous and why she was "taken away." The very end of the book, on page 312, finally Mary is able to speak with her mother and ask her about that night. She interviews her mother and she has questions to ask, because they found wedding rings in this trunk and there are pictures of other children. "'You're not going to give up on this wedding ring business, are you?' Mother finally said. I said, 'No, ma'am.' We set out to get drunk." So they get drunk and then she narrates her mother's history. That's another narrative technique. I was surprised—what Brooke and I touched on before the class started is that Mary Karr did not show her mother talking on purpose. She didn't talk much. There was a lot of action. She used a lot of indirect dialogue. So you're not experiencing directly the experience of the mother actually speaking in a way that we feel it when somebody is speaking in a book, and that was one of her stylistic choices. I just thought that was really interesting. Anything to add, Brooke?

BW: I just want to give a very specific example of **the indirect dialogue**, because I think it helps to hear it. I had marked this one on page 73, and it's the grandmother at the very bottom of the page is calling Lisa "Belinda," which is her mother's other child. The very last paragraph says, "Lisa tried to make the peace by saying that she wouldn't mind so much getting whipped with a horse quirt. It was no worse than Daddy's belt or the limber chinaberry switches Mae Brown has been known to cut from the backyard." It's just important to note that that second sentence—"It was no worse than—" is Mary telling us what her sister is saying. It's very much indirect dialogue, and then she follows up to say—this is the top of page 74—"I said that I

wasn't some old barnyard mule and didn't want to get whipped like one. Grandma pointed out to mother how I thought I was in charge of my punishments." This is just an example of how to do indirect dialogue, and obviously you wouldn't want to do this a lot, but it's basically saying what everyone in the circle is saying without doing dialogue. It can be effective in varying up your dialogue technique.

LJM: Thanks for that example. There's a lot of indirect dialogue in this book, so keep an eye out for it. It's something we kind of don't notice sometimes, but I think when we're learning how to write we need to take another angle and a glance at how it's done.

BW: Exactly. Let's move to talk about techniques to **deepen character development**. The one thing—I was struck by Karr's use of the parenthetical asides from the beginning. She uses them to inform the reader and to Linda Joy's point, she clearly uses them for metaphors. Mostly, the ones that I saw felt like they were basically telling the reader things that she wanted you to know about. One example of this is on page 101 at the bottom, and she is talking about her family. The paragraph starts midway down at the bottom last paragraph—the middle of the page. "Anyway, while Lisa was trying to spit in my eye, Mother was driving across the Texas desert in Grandma's old Impala, heading from the hospital to Houston." She's talking about what she was wearing: "She also wore pearl earrings and a light pillbox hat of the type Jackie Kennedy had on when her husband was shot." Then here she goes, parenthetical: "It is a sad commentary of the women of my family that we can recite the whole wardrobe assemblages from the most minor event in detail, but often forget almost everything else."

It's interesting, because she does this quite a lot and so she says "it's a sad commentary on the women in my family," but what she is noting here for us to pay attention to is that they care about their wardrobe and what people wear. And then on the following page, page 102, again right in the middle, there is another parenthetical aside: "I guess it wasn't until I read William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* where the kids are dragging their dead mother across Mississippi and the stink is so bad and the flies and the maggots get at her that I began to figure that some ambulance had probably carted the body back. Mother had small tolerance for odors." In this place she's sort of telling us later she realizes that her grandma's body must have been taken by

ambulance and that her mother couldn't have tolerated it. These places—I have to tell you all, frankly, at times the parenthetical asides really annoyed me because I thought that they bumped us out of what was happening. If a student were to do the kind of parenthetical asides that Mary does, I probably would have called her or him out on it, which is sort of interesting.

What Karr is doing, I think, is opening our horizons—certainly opening mine in the sense that I was like, OK, you can do this and it does work. And I also thought it was a little heavy-handed at points. I didn't really care that Lisa went on to have whatever job that she had or that later in high school she was a track runner. I just had these moments of like, oh my gosh, what is this for? I have no idea because I don't know what Mary Karr was thinking in needing to do all of these parenthetical asides. And yet later, in some places, they're relevant. On page 107, here is an example of one that was highly irrelevant to me. At the bottom of the page it says, "Lisa started rubbing Mother's feet, which were as twisted up as any dancer's, knotty and calloused from decades of high heels." And then it says, "Lisa became an adult devotee of such heels. Once, at a party in Boston, a loafer-wearing debutante suggested jokingly to her that if God had wanted women to wear heels, he wouldn't have designed our feet as he did." My own opinion on that was why are we hearing this story? But that's fine. I think it's good to have a critical eye to material as you're reading it. As long as you love most of it, having some critique around why things are done the way that they're done is good and I probably, if I had the chance to talk to Mary Karr, would ask that question. Why all these parenthetical asides and what exactly—is it just because your mind was on that? And yet I think in some instances they're quite powerful.

The second point that I want to bring to your attention—I think this is very interesting and a lot of memoirists do this. It's something you guys can do if you're looking back, is to actually show the reader what something looks like from a distance by adding memories to photographs that you're describing. This is on page 112 and it's the scene where Lisa gets stung by the jellyfish. If you go to page 112, we're talking about that afternoon and it's the top of the page. I want to start about five lines down where it says, "In the black and white picture from Bucky's Polaroid camera, Lisa is looking solemnly at the shark"—this is the shark that they were catching on the same trip to the water that summer—"which is blurred into a kind of swinging bludgeon in the fellow's gloved hand. Daddy is grinning a little bit too hard and I am studying my bloody fingers

like there's some code I'm about to crack. What was on my mind was Mother vanishing up those steps to drink, taking herself AWAY." Capital "AWAY" again. "There's no picture of that worry, of course. I can only guess it from the crease in my forehead." I think that this is very interesting—it's an interesting technique, again, to show yourself looking at a photograph or to say, in the picture from that day, this is what it looks like and this is what is behind the picture. Mary Karr is not the only author I've seen do this and I really like this technique as long as it's not overused. I simply wanted to bring it to your attention because she does it a few times and it's a very interesting way to show something about yourself and the other characters that you're writing about from a very unique and different kind of lens.

LJM: It's like a still in a movie, though, because before that there's action and after that there's action and I almost missed that it was a photograph that she was pausing to describe.

BW: That is interesting, and absolutely. It is good—you don't want to isolate it—and people will introduce it exactly in that way. You'll have a scene and then you'll say, in the photograph from that day. You can even describe the photograph and describe the still snapshot of it. Again, it's a technique and it's powerful. The final example that I wanted to show tonight was about race. Because I think, obviously, race is part of a character—is part of their physical self—and oftentimes what I find is that people are reluctant to write about race. Obviously it's a little bit of a hot topic thing or people feel like we should be color blind and therefore why would you want to say that a character is African-American or Mexican or whatever. And yet the problem with leaving it out is that it's a very fundamental way that we understand people and especially regionally and especially in certain eras and points in time. I just have this experience so many times with white writers writing about characters of color, but also with African-American and people of color writing about people of color. I think it's like people don't quite know what to do.

I wrote here why to be matter-of-fact about people's appearances is that for the reader, it actually really matters. It also can—what I'm talking about in this section is about character development and deepening character development. I wanted to point out how she talks about the character Shug on page 164 because it also shows how Mary understands race and what is going on with

the Liars' Club, who clearly are the sort of guys who are racists except that Shug is exempt because he's one of their group. It starts on page 164 toward the top: "'Hell, we all remember one like it,' Shug says. He's about fed up with Cooter, who's been bossing him all weekend because he's colored. 'Shug, get the outboard. Shug, you're shooting too thin. God dammit, Shug, I was saving them biscuits for later.' Cooter is also just walking the edges, telling colored jokes. He uses 'Polack' and 'Aggie,' but everybody, Shug included, knows that if there wasn't a black man holding down a chair in this room, they'd be 'N—'"—I won't say the word—"this and N— that." It says, "Daddy says, 'Cooter is just ignorant. Never knew anybody colored before, so it's not his fault.'" And then she goes on about Shug and his being black and what this means, and then at the end it's basically saying that's puzzling to her that people don't mention that Shug is colored. "It puzzles me, because Shug being colored strikes me as real obvious, and usually anybody's difference gets pounced on and picked at. This silence is a lie peculiar to a man's skin color, which makes it extra serious and extra puzzling."

I appreciated this. I appreciated it from her perspective; I appreciated the way that she tackled it head on. It's not the only person of color in this book—there is Hector, the mom's Mexican boyfriend and there is the housekeeper/nanny, May Brown, in the early part of the book. Obviously because she's growing up in the South, this is part of her experience. I wanted to bring this to your attention for any of you who are writing coming of age and particularly about particular areas of the country and your experiences, or if you are a person of color, to be overt about it. Don't try to couch it or be politically correct. It's not going to do you any favors with the memoir writing. You can always get it vetted later if you're concerned about the language or how you depict someone or something like that. I would just err on the side of being true to your experience.

LJM: And there really are some edgy things about how people do that and even the issue of—some people bring up the issue of whether you can do it at all.

BW: And that's why I'm saying you can. I think that's the problem, is that people bring up the issue of can you do it, because people are scared. People are scared to write about race and

heritage and all kinds of things, and yet if it plays a big role in your story, you don't want to sidestep it because the reader will feel the awkwardness.

LJM: That's true, they will, just like when you leave anything out. I think what we're talking about, about language, also applies to when people are **writing about abuse and trauma**. There is a societal silencing that has gone on—that still goes on—and we feel silenced ourselves—perhaps embarrassed or ashamed of certain things that are tougher to write about, not just happy days. But if they did happen and you're trying to write around it or cover over it or leave it out, actually the reader can tell that you're leaving something out. It's like a shadow. In Mary Karr's book here, *The Liars' Club*, it doesn't appear—she may have left things out, but it doesn't look like she has in that she's so very thorough in exploring all of these different elements of trauma—of what happened to them very specifically. I don't think she ever uses the word "trauma." When we teach people we say, don't use the word. Don't say "depression" or "I was depressed." What you want to do is show what is happening that is traumatic, that is difficult, that is challenging. You want to show it in a scene. You want to show it clearly enough that the reader understands it.

So where Mary starts—she starts, interestingly, and I'm sure she made choices to do this—she starts with this beginning trauma: "My sharpest memory is of a single instance surrounded by dark. I was seven, and our family doctor knelt before me where I sat on a mattress on the bare floor. He wore a yellow golf shirt, unbuttoned so that sprouts of hair showed in a V-shape on his chest. I had never seen him in anything but a white starched shirt and a gray tie. The change unnerved me." And then she talk about being curled up under her nightgown and he says, "Come on, I won't hurt you. Show me the marks. Please, just pull up your gown and show me where it hurts."

She weaves her own thoughts and reactions in there. She talks about—her imagery is the bedframe being tilted and furniture is a mess—the place is a mess. There's full chaos going on. And she writes about it very clearly in a scene so we are very grounded and we are in chaos immediately. Right away, as Brooke already has shared, she starts talking about Nervous with a capital N. By page nine, though, she breaks out of the scene at that time and says, "Because it

took me so long to piece together what happened, I will leave that part missing for a while. Then the truth would be unbearable; the mind just blanks. But some ghost of an event may stay in your head and then the ghost can call undue attention itself by its very vagueness." She's talking about basically PTSD. She's talking about—right here, again on page nine: "You keep setting the damn shape of it as if the original form will magically emerge. This blank spot in my past then spoke most loudly to me by being blank. It was a hole in my life that I feared and kept coming back to because I couldn't quite fill it in." She's basically saying, I suffered a trauma. I actually didn't remember this. There were missing pieces. So I'm going to tell you what I did know and then that is how she comes around to that part on page 157 that I've already read where she weaves all the way to the ending of that scene. We get chaos and she lays it out right away. The mother has gone crazy and the father is part of this Liars' Club, so she paints the pictures of the characters.

Within the first 15 pages we have the characters laid out, including grandma, her sister, the father, and the mother. We have Mary's unique voice telling this story and being in this particular place. The other thing that we want to mention is that part of characterization is also the place. We're not going into that right now—we're almost out of time today—but I do want to say that there are several places where she's really describing Texas. She's describing and talking about and commenting on the town that they are in—the town that they grow up in and the culture that that brings with them, which I think the part on race is very much a part of. There are places where—I'll just mention some of the places. There is sexual abuse in the book in two particular places. One, she's age seven—that's on page 65, and there's a very specific scene where a boy does something to her and she comments on it through her seven-year-old point of view as well as her point of view of later. And then there's a very serious and very long sexual abuse scene on page 241. If you've read the book you know about these scenes, that she does not hold back. She doesn't say somebody abused me.

We've seen people write like that, and of course it's really—I'm sure it was hard to write. I don't know what she went through writing it. But I do coach a lot of people where they say, "You mean I have to write this out?" Later you'll decide what gets published, but actually, there are some good reasons to write it out in the first place, which is to get it out of you. In other classes

we'll be talking about some of the benefits of doing that kind of writing and detail for the sake of healing, which happens when you're writing a memoir or you have a new perspective—you learn something from going into scene when you were nine years old or seven years old or 15 years old and embodying who you were at that time.

Mary's own character is developed all the way through here as you can see. She's always talking about what she's saying or doing or thinking. But even when they were spanked, she had comments on that. On page 71 there's a passage about the spankings and how her sister used to just look at her like, can't you just shut up? You wouldn't get spanked if you would just quit doing what you're doing. So you sort of get this in the round experience of herself and then it's almost like she's watching herself by talking about what her sister does. I want to say one more thing about a metaphor, just because it's so amazing if you haven't read it. On page 72, there's also woven in with the grandmother's story—which is a very dark story and very awful—is the fact of a hurricane coming. Hurricane Carla was a real hurricane—she didn't make it up. But she did figure out where to put that in the book. There will be more about these as we keep talking about the whole book throughout all the classes.

BW: Interesting stuff. We have some questions coming in, starting from early on when we were talking about dialogue. Marcia has just asked, "Why is there so little dialogue in the entire book?"

LJM: It's a stylistic choice. I think that—I don't know why Mary did that, but she writes in a parenthetical style. She writes in a "this is my voice and I'm telling the story" style. When people are telling a story, sometimes they put things in dialogue, but most of the time they say, and then she told me, and then we said, and then we did this, and then that happened. There's often indirect dialogue in a story that is told, so I don't know if she's in a way being part of a liars' club by doing her own telling in her own voice that way. I don't know why—we're just guessing.

BW: And she does use a lot of indirect dialogue, which could have been a choice as well. Clearly it is a stylistic choice. It would be very fascinating to know her reasons for that. I haven't

spent enough time with her other memoirs to opine on this or to talk about it, but sometimes what you'll see is a writer who does a memoir in a certain kind of way and then a later book might have a lot more dialogue. She's written two other memoirs.

LJM: She does have a lot more dialogue. But I will say in *Cherry*, she speaks to the reader a lot as the narrator. We might talk about that later when we're doing narration.

BW: That would actually be interesting to pull forward. So Frances is asking, "Why would Mary Karr make the stylistic choice or psychological choice to not relate the dialogue of the mother?" You spoke to that a little bit.

LJM: She's silenced. Her mother is silenced—her mother is in shock, particularly in that one scene that I was reading that she had just seen the grandmother with her leg cut off. She was traumatized. She doesn't use that word, but she was. We don't know why Mary Karr did it, but what we can really see is the effect of the style that she chose on the whole book. We're guessing.

BW: We are, but I think you do speak to that exactly. She's very aware of the way that her mother was silenced and traumatized and then how she raises the girls. It's basically part of the family's dysfunction. Emma asks, "Might it be that the mom's relative lack of direct dialogue conveys how inaccessible she was?" Yeah, absolutely. Good point, especially when compared to her father's direct dialogue and how much Mary relates to him. I think that's a beautiful observation, Emma, and it's interesting to analyze. Nancy says, "I was impressed with the loving compassion she shows for her parents without any reference to forgiveness, rather acceptance of the wholeness of their character. I'm having trouble portraying my own mother in her fullness. Others thought my mother was their savior while I show how she thwarted my drive to realize my dream."

We see this happening a lot in the books that we're teaching. It's not the first time that we're seeing this—what I call dispassion. We've taught about it before in Jeannette Walls with *The Glass Castle* and we saw it in *Angela's Ashes* with Frank McCourt, although he's pretty brutal to

his mother at a few different points, but it's that sort of angsty teenage boy thing that he gets into with his mom in condemning her at a certain point, but not in his younger years. Jeannette is the same with her parents. She has this compassion for them even though they let her down time and time again—painfully so, they let her down. I think it's a really good question, Nancy, and something to grapple with. Linda, maybe you have some thoughts on actually finding forgiveness in order to write through something like that.

LJM: It's a psychological process, obviously. You get to where you get to—in my earlier drafts about my mother and grandmother, particularly, I wasn't there yet. I was grappling with their good sides and their dark sides, but then something did happen at my mother's deathbed that allowed me to actually deepen into a feeling of compassion and forgiveness. But lots of people are writing memoirs that they are not having that experience but they still want to write about the parent in a fair and well-rounded way. I think one technique is I have people make a list of the positive characteristics and the negative characteristics about the person and look at the list and count the items. If there are a lot more negative, maybe you need to write about those negative scenes first to really get them out of your body and onto the page. See then if you feel a little freer to write more about the positive, because the writing and the claiming of the truth of what happens to us changes us. I don't know what work—

BW: Do you think that you have to find forgiveness or have forgiveness in your heart to be able to write with dispassion?

LJM: Not necessarily. Everybody defines forgiveness differently, so we could get into that conversation—what does it mean? What does it mean to you? I think that we really have to work toward being able to walk in their shoes. Maybe we're not at forgiveness yet, but we can do an exercise. What I did was I wrote some scenes through the point of view of my mother as a little girl and my grandmother as a little girl. I walked around in their shoes for a while. And that helped. I don't think I'd "forgiven" them yet, but I was trying to find out how to see the world through their eyes.

BW: I think that's a really great idea. I know how profound that was for you, and that is something you can do is have compassion for the person they were maybe before they were hurtful or before they were jaded or whatever the circumstances that brought them to become the people they later became. Valerie says, "I'd be really interested in what she left out about the characters. What do you think? Choices like that are the hardest in memoir." Who knows? Those are absolutely hard choices that I think have to be streamlined.

Using Linda Joy's turning point exercise that she has in her book *Journey of Memoir* is a good way to identify what are the most compelling scenes that you remember or the ones that you need to bring in. It can be something that you can do to streamline before you even get started, or if you're in the middle trying to figure out what pieces need to get cut. Sometimes you might just need to have a good editor or you might just need to write scenes that need to get written and then have someone else tell you we can sacrifice this one. I'm actually working with someone right now on a post-final draft of her memoir that she's going to shop to traditional publishers. She hired me to say I need help cutting. I need someone who has basically a brutal eye to this, because I know it has too much stuff and I have no idea what to get rid of. So that's what we're doing. I'm just saying, this whole scene can go. Sometimes you should just write it because you don't have the objectivity as the memoirist, sometimes, to know.

LJM: And it takes more than one draft. A lot of times, that first draft is the struggle. If people want to know more about Mary Karr, there are lots of interviews online. Slate and Salon and years ago—just Google her name and look up interviews. The other thing is read her other two memoirs, because between all three of them, you learn a lot about Mary Karr. Some of your questions might get answered.

BW: To follow up, just because Nancy has a comment, and then we'll go back to Chris' question—Nancy says, "It's the acceptance, not the forgiveness, that she so well seems to have incorporated into her character development." That's a great distinction, so thank you for saying it, Nancy.

LJM: I want to bring another word in, and that is compassion. Are they the same? These are philosophical concepts that you can write about in your journal, but if you have compassion, does that mean you have forgiven somebody? I don't know—not necessarily.

BW: Or acceptance, right?

LJM: Right. And compassion and acceptance, are they the same thing? These are things—they're very important in writing about trauma and wounds and what happened and how we feel now.

BW: And how much do they have to be metabolized, as I say, right? How much does she have to have really absorbed it into her or how much is she just able—some people can compartmentalize. We're all different. I have some authors I work with who I describe as "porous." They have this—they're like a sponge and they just have so much emotional intensity and they absorb it all and they have a really hard time maintaining distance. And others just don't have that going on. We're all unique human beings and our DNA is different. Some of the stuff that you might be grappling with is going to be personality-driven. But anyway, Linda's exercises sound like they would be a good exercise, Nancy, if you're interested in what she had to say about that. Chris asks, "How accurate do we think these dialogues are? In my memoir, sometimes I have difficulty remembering and I get worried about telling the true dialogue." We get asked this all the time. I just think that they—I've said this a million times, that people don't walk through their lives with a tape recorder strapped to their hip. So you don't remember verbatim what people said. Maybe Mary remembers some of these conversations or snippets of these conversations. What she does very well, clearly, is she remembers how her dad spoke. I think the way that she weaves his character and how she tells stories about him and how she takes on his dialogue is like she has him on a cellular level. She has him pinned.
But for the most part we say, write the emotional truth. If you were in the scene, write what you believed would have been said with emotional integrity. You know how these people sound. You know who they are. You know the things that they were thinking. You were there. So yeah, it's not going to be verbatim, and 99 percent of memoir dialogue is not verbatim, but what's important is the emotional truth in that it happened more or less like that. You have a sense of it.

And then you can have a disclaimer at the front of your book that says something to the effect of, these are my memories to the best I remember them, blah, blah, blah. And more and more memoirists are having those kinds of disclaimers to protect them.

LJM: I think the other exercise is right from the body—kind of do some free writes to kind of feel into how it felt to be around that person when they were talking to you. I remember the time that my great-grandmother's dialogue clicked in, I was thinking about a scene in the garden, and it is in my book. It was the first scene I wrote, and she's talking to me in the garden. I did a visualization—I got us into the garden. I wasn't sure what she was going to say, but I knew that her voice was somewhere in me. I just took everything else out in the world and just visualized into that moment and all of a sudden I could hear her. I don't know exactly what she said, although some things I did remember. We feel it—I could feel it, so I wrote from the feeling. And then later I edited it, but it was how she sounded as far as I remember.

Class 2. How Voice Shapes Memoir

Brooke Warner: Hello, everyone. Welcome to **class number two**, **How Voice Shapes Memoir.**
Thank you so much for being here.

Mary Karr's storytelling voice and how her voice drives the story is the subject of this first portion of the teaching. Mary Karr is interesting. In our first bullet point we note that she writes prose that is literary and also makes use of the vernacular. I thought the most powerful way, of course, to show that would be through a particular example. The one that I chose is early on in the book, on pages 24 and 25. Mary does a lot of this kind of storytelling where she basically tells her parents' stories through what she knows or through what she pieces together, and why I think this is a really good place to dig down and to focus on is because a lot of you want to do this. A lot of people want to understand, "how do I tell the story of my parent?" Especially if this was something that happened before you were born. So it comes up a lot, and we see people grappling with exactly how to do the storytelling piece.

This is five paragraphs, and I'm not going to read all of it, but I'll guide you through it. It starts at the top end of page 24 where it says, "I owned just one picture from her childhood. She's alone on what looks like a wide, whitewashed porch, wearing a stiff little wool coat and staring dead level at you from under Dutch-boy bangs that are blonde and military cut across her forehead. Her parents named her Charlie—not Charlotte or Charlene, but Charlie like a boy, a name that's required no end of explanation over the decades."

She enters into talking about her mother—I mentioned this last time—using a photograph. She does this—not all the time, but she certainly uses it a lot—to describe the moment. "I owned just one picture from her childhood. She's alone." She starts to describe the photograph, and so she enters us into this description of her mother from a young age. This is a story of her mom and how her mom almost died when she was a little girl, aged two. And why I like this selection of five paragraphs or so is because it does intertwine literary and vernacular, by which I mean it's

quite beautiful writing—even that little character description of what her mother looks like is quite beautiful.

But then here in this same paragraph, the bottom of the paragraph says, "There was so much hand-wringing on the part of my grandmother Moore. She had injured her female parts somehow during Mother's birth and couldn't bear any other children." There's something kind of—I don't think that's crass, necessarily, but "she had injured her female parts" has a vernacular kind of tone. She does easily flow between this higher level kind of sophisticated writing and writing just like you're talking to Mary and she's got this Southern accent. I felt that so much, that the Southern accent came alive while I was reading her book. You almost want to do it in your head while you're reading her stuff. But **she does have this unique way of weaving words,** and for some of you that's going to come easily and you'll find that that is something you have access to, and for others of you it might require a little more digging or it might just not come at all.

There are people who write very straightforward prose; it's just on the page, this is what happened, and it's a deeper level of sophistication to dive in and to try to weave something that is—I use this word, more sophisticated—that uses more elements of craft. On page 25, I like that she then pulls us out of the story. She talks about this story of how her mom almost died when she was a kid and what happened with her mother when she was so sick and almost didn't make it, and then right smack dab in the middle of page 25 it says,
"What made this story endure in our family is that it ends in a miracle. When the preacher arrived the next morning, dressed in his freshly brushed black coat and ready to give comfort, Mother was sitting upright in bed, rolling up ragdolls from old quilt scraps and still sucking whiskey off the rock candy her daddy had gone into town to buy her at the crack of dawn. Grandma liked to say later that it was the fresh air that healed her."

You can see that this whole story is encapsulated. She enters with the photograph, leads us through her mother, her mother's name, this thing that happened to her—we learn that her grandmother couldn't have any other children. She packs a lot—it's quite dense, actually. And then she pulls out by saying, "what makes this story endure." It's kind of bookended, and it's an interesting little exercise in reading how to enter into a story and then how to come back out.

And then the next piece here—the next paragraph—is a segue: "Our only visit to Grandmother's house in Lubbock is seared into memory for me by Mother's first serious threat to divorce Daddy."
So we're in a totally different place at that point. It is a segue because she's talking about her grandmother—the grandma is the connection from one paragraph to the next—but we've been talking about Mother's childhood and almost dying when she was two years old and a miracle, and then suddenly we're talking about the only visit that Mary remembers to visit her grandmother which is years and years later. What I like about what Mary does, too, is there's a lot of fluidity. **She is paying attention to segues and connections**, like I said, because the grandmother in this moment is the connector. It's obvious that Karr has a strong Southern voice—you really can't read even a page of this without sensing her voice.

This next piece I'm talking about is how to capitalize on what you have and when to write how you talk. I think that sometimes a memoir asks for that. It wants vernacular; it wants slang. We want to hear you. I know a lot of students that we work with get a little formal, like they revert to English 101. All of a sudden they're writing a paper for their English teacher and it's so devoid of personality or it has some quirky kind of language style to it that feels very staid or forced. I think that that's sometimes because people learn how to write or they used to be academic writers and they don't quite know how to translate that into memoir. There are all kinds of weird writing quirks that people bring to writing memoir that's either from training or from how they think they're supposed to write.

One of the things that I would love to encourage all of you to do is just to let go of any training you might have had—to **let yourself experiment**, to play, not to worry about the confines of grammar. That's another thing that is just completely a misperception. Not that you shouldn't write grammatically when you're writing or write all over the place or have it not sound good, but that you can do things like fragments of sentences or that you can experiment with how you might put something on a page in terms of dialoguing between two people. There's a lot of wiggle room for you, and part of that is going to be very stylistic and is going to help you find your voice if you can let go of this notion that you're supposed to be writing like you wrote an English term paper when you were in high school. I think some people are doing that

inadvertently—they don't even realize that they're doing it. And it really can help you loosen up, too, if you can let go of some of those feelings that you might have that could conceivably be holding you back.

LJM: I just want to second that, because I was trained in academia as many people are, and I found it difficult to let that go. It took a lot of writing to be able to give myself permission. I'm really glad you're talking about that.

BW: Like I said, people don't realize they're doing it. Sometimes I call it out to my students and I'm just like, do you realize that you're doing this? Interestingly, we had a student in our class who was describing the men in kind of an odd way—it was like, "the male approached the sidewalk," and "the male did this and did that," and it just struck me as odd. I was like, can you call him "the guy," or—and it turns out she is a parole officer, so she was inadvertently calling the men "males" and the women "females." She just didn't see it. It was just so ingrained in how she saw the world. But it's slightly odd in the context of a memoir, so that's where it can be helpful to have other people read your work and to see some tendencies that you might loosen up on. Writing groups can help with that, certainly.

How much storytelling does memoir require? I just want to make a little plug here that storytelling is something that resonates with people. Storytelling helps us to remember, and so Mary does a lot of storytelling about her parents specifically—about her grandmother.

These stories are things that you remember, like little nuggets along the way. It's a technique of memoir—partly they are scenes. **Scenes are little encapsulated stories**, sometimes. But some memoir has real storytelling in it and other memoir just sort of tells the arc of the story and doesn't get into these little side pockets of story. My argument for how much storytelling is actually necessarily is simply around remembering that people connect through story and that there are a lot of memories that are evoked and a lot of moments for connection. I know that when I think about memoir, after I'm done and I put the memoir down and I'm thinking about what do I remember and what resonated, it's always the stories. That's probably true when you go to the movies and other things, so consider that as you're going along and look for

opportunities—where can I craft a story? This example that I gave on 24 and 25 is so perfect because it's five paragraphs, but it is a story about her mother and how her mother almost died when she was two and that it was later thought of as a miracle that she survived and what happened and it's a memorable moment that you associate to her mother as you continue through the book.

LJM: I'd like to add something to that, too. I know some people who don't know the story exactly of their parents, but they can imagine it from photographs. So don't be limited by what you know. You can imagine a story and we talk a lot about this in class—you're not making it up. You're just talking about what you imagine happened based on what the photograph looks like or the child. So that's another way to handle it.

Poeticism in language. Mary Karr was a poet before she was a memoirist and that may seem off-putting, maybe you're not a poet already and she was. So how can you bring poetic language in? What I tried to do as I drilled down into thinking about what does poetic language mean and how can this be accessible to any writer—I was looking at what she does exactly that then gives this essence or this feeling of either beautiful writing or clear writing or some unique way that Mary brings stories to the page, as Brooke was saying. I found it interesting with Mary Karr to read some interviews about her. In one of the interviews, she talks about how she got into writing *The Liars' Club*. Her buddy Tobias Wolff was with her, they were hanging out together—they taught at the same place, I think—and she would entertain everyone by telling these stories that are now in *The Liars' Club*, or many of them. She was always getting laughs and she had this great storytelling skill, and he kept trying to get her to write a memoir. She finally knuckled down and did it, but she didn't feel that comfortable—she was used to writing much shorter things. I've seen her poems and they do have these striking images or kind of a moment encapsulated. So I think that's what you see here in Mary Karr's writing.

You can do it too. If we really look at what she's doing and examine it, there are some skills she's using that everyone can use. At the very beginning, I feel like she sets us off in that early scene which we've discussed a little bit before, but I'm just going to go over some points about this early scene. It's chapter one and it is "My sharpest memory is of a single instance

surrounded by dark." I read some of this before, I believe, and we talked about a slice of this, but what happens is that she uses detailed descriptions—color and really goes into detail about what things look like. That is a poetic style and technique. You write a poem—I was a poet before I was a prose writer, also, so what it had to do with was like a snapshot or a flash of a moment that you try to translate into imagery. Imagery is sort of like the picture here that we have on the slide. There are various colors, there are various shapes—it's translating something that doesn't have words into words. Of course, that's what we do when we're writing a memory.

I want to use an example from this on page 4, at the bottom, after the introduction of this very first scene with the sheriff and something has happened and it's very dramatic. "It was only over time that this panorama became animate, like a scene in some movie crystal ball that whirled from a foggy blur into focus. People developed little distinct motions, then the whole scene jerked to smooth and sudden life."

In a way, we get this sense of a movie that we're watching with Mary Karr and she brings this scene to life, talking about her blonde, cherubic-acting sister, firemen wearing canary-colored slickers, the details of the nightgown, the ambulance with triangles of red light flashing across the room. And then she uses sound. Again, these are very good techniques to write beautifully and write well and bring a scene alive. "And the volume on the night began to rise. People with heavy boots stomped through the house. Somebody turned off the ambulance siren. The back screen opened and slammed. My daddy's dog Nipper was growling low."

And then she goes on and tells a little story about the dog, which is what Mary does. She does this sort of very circular thing. This kind of storytelling and language is used throughout the book, as you all know if you've read the book and looked at the book. These detailed moments are all the way through the book. I want to point out another one, shortly after the part that Brooke was talking about. There is a section on page 30 where it's the history of the grandmother—so notice how she goes into the history of all of these other people that are in the story. I just wanted to read a description that is, again, very detailed and brings something to life. "The sepia portrait of all five sisters in Grandma's parlor shows five wispy blondes. Their seeming frailty made it nearly impossible to believe that the two youngest sisters had been rented

out to sharecroppers. They wore eyelet-laced necklines and had those loose-blown Victorian roses pinned to their slouchy Gibson girl hairdos. They were pale, translucent, and somebody had tinted the picture slightly so their cheeks and the roses were a faint peach color."
This is half a paragraph, but we get a lot of information in there. It's beautifully written. It's highly detailed, and again, it's the mixture of something very beautiful set against something horrible—these girls have been rented out—sold for prostitution. Another technique in dramatic writing and in poetry is using contrasts. When you can use contrast, then you are able to show a world at angles to itself. It's better than just a straight line narrative.

I'm looking on page 188 and 189, and I sometimes just find these little scenes—I just open the book and see what we have. There's a scene where the father is fishing and it talks about how he handles the fish and what the fishing experience is like for her. She uses specifics and then she takes like a little snapshot of her father: "We squatted on our haunches and played Indian. I can still make out the loose, limp shape of Daddy as it came to me through the smoke of the green kindling. He moved between the trees, toting the iron skillet up the mountain. He was long-legged and sure-footed and made no sound."

Then she talks about how he fries each little fish, dipping them in cornmeal and then frying them in Crisco. "The fire kept popping to send whole handfuls of sparks skittering up into the air." This is very simple. It's just a scene about the father cooking fish, but she doesn't say "and then my daddy got out the skillet and began to cook the fish." That would be telling and it's also not that interesting—so what.

She makes this experience a strong memory that even we will remember, and then she talks about the night air and what it tasted like and the father is painted as this man doing a manly thing and doing a thing that takes care of his family. Her writing is a little bit like—I think we've talked about this—like nested Russian dolls. You have a scene within a scene and a moment within a moment. She does it through these interesting details.

BW: I love her **specificity**. It's one of these things that we've talked about in our 6 month class, how valuable it is to slow down and to let people really experience the moment. We know from

writers that we've worked with that people often feel worried they're going to be boring their readers and how much of a misperception that is, because you can see these moments where Mary Karr and anyone who writes memoir like this, they get you into such levels of detail. For me, unless I'm annoyed with the scene for some reason, I usually find myself instead getting lost in it. It's that level of detail that paints a picture and allows you to see it. That's the part that's like you're writing a movie and you have to create all the details. It's a skill set, but it also means that you have to let go of your fear that such a level of detail and slowing down that much is going to somehow be dragging or boring. We're going to go into some of these pros and cons of fragmented narrative, and the things that I saw happening with Mary's book that were a little bit unusual: jumping timelines, circular plotlines, parenthetical asides. There are also things that she does that are unusual like popping out of the timeline, which I think is somewhat problematic at times. You're with her and she's a young girl—it was like the example that we talked about last week, where she literally stops the narrative and tells the reader, "I'm going to stop here."

She uses devices—especially early on when she's setting the stage, like on page 15 where she writes, "My father comes into focus for me on a Liars' Club afternoon." She uses this kind of language a fair amount, almost **like she's behind a camera looking at her life** and retelling this story. Partly, I think it's effective, and partly I think it's a little bit dangerous. It worked for Mary Karr. At times I found myself a bit frustrated with her writing style. She's a gorgeous writer, so it's not a critique of her poeticism or her language, per se, but her storytelling choices were oftentimes hard to follow. I found myself with the fragmented narrative and trying to make sense of all the different things that she had going on—the jumping timelines, the circular plotlines—if she had been one of my students, I probably would have suggested to her to have better transitions and line breaks to separate things off more than she did. I think it's obviously a stylistic choice and she probably would have said, screw you, forget it.

But I think for the reader, it can be difficult to follow and the reason that I like **line breaks and very clear transitions** is because I also think that like a piece of music where you have a pause, it gives the reader an opportunity to just digest something before we're thrown back into the next thing. Her pacing is actually quite fast, which I think makes sense because of the kind of spitfire girl that she's portraying herself to be in this memoir, but at times I felt myself kind of going,

wait a second, whoa, whoa, whoa, what just happened? That, again, could be a choice that the writer leads you on.

I can think of memoirs—we're teaching a master memoir class right now, so we're teaching a whole bunch of books, and one of the books that I chose was James Frey. Whether or not that's a controversial choice since a lot of the things turned out to not be true is beside the point, because the issue is about the pacing. It's a very, very fast-paced book, but it's linear. It takes place in rehab and he doesn't go anywhere—he's not jumping around to all these different years and circling back around and doing the thing that Mary is doing—all of a sudden you're with her when she's recalling a story of her mother when her mother is a child and then the next thing we know, she's seven, and then the next thing you know, she's nine. There's a fair amount of movement.

For me, the pace, at times, was a little bit dizzying. Some readers might really like that experience. It was an interesting thing, because the pace is fast but the writing is dense, so it's a little bit of a paradoxical experience. She's leading you on something that feels almost like a goose chase. There's lots going on and it's kind of wild and crazy and chaotic, but then because the writing is so poetic and multi-layered, you have to read slowly if you want to really pick up the nuance of what's happening.

That's what I mean by dense writing. Some people have very light writing—there are those books that all of you have read that you can read in one sitting. Interestingly, again, because I was reading last week a whole bunch of stuff in prep for our other class, and I was reading Jaycee Dugard's book, which is called *A Stolen Life*. That book is about her capture, being in captivity, and having been basically kidnapped and it's a horrible story and probably was written by a ghost writer. But it's not at all poetic. It's the most straightforward thing you've ever read in your life and I probably read 100 pages in 45 minutes. It has that sense of you're almost like, just taking it in. It doesn't have any level of craft; it's just about telling the story. That's a very different kind of memoir, and I think that the reason a book like that would get published, of course, is because people want to know what happened to Jaycee Dugard. It was a national media story.

What is going on with someone who is writing with real craft and telling the story of their childhood—as much as Mary Karr's childhood was crazy and chaotic, it's not something that we're just dying to read just because. The reason that it's so interesting and profound is partly in the way that she tells it. And yes, she has some things going on that are deep and moving and she has abuse and trauma and really messed up parents, to a certain extent, but a lot of people have that. So it's how the story is told and then ultimately, it's about the transformation.

When I say that ***The Liars' Club*** **has a complicated structure**, it's this circular narrative that we have mentioned a couple of times, by which it means that she starts out seeding the idea of something that is going to come later and then she circles back around on this idea over time and she keeps the movement moving forward, but she keeps coming back and keeps coming back to the past and building the story of her family through what is a linear timeline, but like a wave—an undulating wave. She keeps bringing up stuff from the past, and in that sense, it almost has a journalistic sensibility to it because she's telling the story in a forward progressing movement, but then mining from the past in a way that is not at all formulaic. In fact, it's the very opposite of formulaic. For any of you who took our previous classes, we've said that *Eat, Pray, Love* is like the most formulaic memoir that ever existed—it has eat, pray, love, and there are X number of sections and they're all parallel and they're super thematic.

But then you have *Wild* with Cheryl Strayed which we called a **framed memoir,** which is still highly structured. What it was was from point A to point B, beginning to end of the memoir, took place on the Pacific Crest Trail and she uses flashback and memory to leave the trail to fill in her story. But Mary does not do that. There is no "there" there. You're on this journey with her and whenever she flipping feels like it, she's going to depart from the narrative and use all kinds of parentheticals and hey reader, now I'm here and I'm an adult and whoa, when I was 12, this. It has an associative feel to it and it's definitely a different style. Personally, for me, I found it challenging. I liked it and I'm happy to teach it and I learned a lot from reading it, but I found it challenging to read at times. It's just interesting because she made a conscious choice and you guys are going to make conscious choices about what your structures are, but I wanted to bring this up today to say that her voice is a piece of this.

Her voice drives the structure. I think there's probably no way that she could have been regimented enough to do something that was more linear than this for this book. I haven't read her second and her third books, but my guess is that there's different kinds of structures in there and what you can do as a memoirist is say, I'm going to do a linear structure or I'm going to try the framed memoir or I'm going to do these different kinds of structures. And in our new book that Linda Joy and I wrote called *Breaking Ground on Your Memoir*, we have a whole subsection about the different kinds of structures that exist. If you're at the front end of your book or are looking to restructure and are wondering, well, what can I do out there, that can be a good thing to recap, because structure is the foundation of your book. Mary's structure is unique, but not unprecedented. There are definitely other kinds of memoirists who do this kind of flowy—and I think it is kind of associative too, don't you, Linda Joy? She kind of just follows the thread of what's happening, in a sense.

LJM: We feel like we're inside her memory, and she probably did that on purpose or maybe she's so flowy that's all she could do was to write it that way. No doubt it was edited—I know it was edited a lot to look at the structure and all that. But her other books are way more structured. She goes back and forth in time, but they're different. This is the only one that's as much this way with the poetry. She plays with language in all of them. In the second one, *Cherry*—speaking of voice, I'm going to give an example in *The Liars' Club* of a certain voice also. In *Cherry*, she addresses you. She has many chapters, most of them written "you, you," talking to you. You this, you that. This is your experience. When this is your experience, then you feel blah, blah, blah, instead of "I." It's strange, but it was good. I really read it quickly and I found it fascinating. In *Lit*, she wrote—it's about her becoming sober eventually. It's the story of her being older and having an older child. The first chapter is written to her son in a letter, which is pretty intense. That voice writes the beginning and then the storytelling voice picks up how to get through what happened to her. I think it's really something—I recommend people read all three. We'll talk more about them in our later discussions, because we're going to talk more about what it was like for her to actually write these books.

BW: We're going to talk about that in class four, and it's interesting in that use of the second person is definitely a stylistic choice. Other writers that we've taught have done that as well, like

Frank McCourt does that a fair amount. It has this crazy immediacy. To be spoken to in that way and to enter into their experience through that second person "you" narrative is quite fascinating. If you guys like that, I recommend experimenting with it.

That does lead into **this fourth point** here, and then maybe I'll circle back around to fragmented. The experimenting with the narrative voice—to do these things, to speak directly to your reader, to try it out to see what that feels like, I have encouraged people to try a whole scene doing something different—to read someone whose work you love and to attempt to write in their style. It might not be Mary Karr because her voice is so distinct and if you're not Southern it might be hard to try on her voice, but there are lots of other memoirists out there whose voices you might try to emulate. It's not copying; it's not cheating. It's learning. It's the same as a child tries to pick up the voice and intonation of a parent—it's very similar to what you're doing when you're learning how to write is just to figure out, wow, how do the masters do what they do and what can I learn?

Cheryl Strayed, who spoke in a keynote I saw a couple of years ago, said that she learned to write by literally keyboarding—typing—the work of others. So she would get books that she admired and she would prop it up and then literally write their words. I thought that was so fascinating and it really helped her, she said, to develop her style and to develop her own voice and to feel it on a totally different level—on a more cellular level because you're typing with your fingers—than just reading would have done. And then about fragmented narrative—when I say what does this mean, there is such fragmented style to the way that Mary Karr tells the story. This is kind of the association that I'm talking about. There's nothing wrong with it, because like this image that I show here with the puzzle pieces, you know what the pieces are. It's not chaotic and completely random; it's chaotic and planned. So that is fragmentation. It's kind of taking the reader from one thing to the next and it is intentional, but it has this sense of things don't necessarily have to be ordered. They can be told in, like I said, a nonlinear way. They can circulate back. The transitions can be kind of surprising in terms of what they bring up, and that's fine. The way that I think of that, actually, is if I were to describe the experience of it is like if you're walking out on rocks and you kind of have to figure out what is your next step going to be. Instead of having it totally mapped out like a staircase going up that is very clean, it has a much more jagged feel. As a writer, you're kind of going, OK, well there are four different

steps I could take here. Which one am I going to take? Whereas someone who is writing a much more linear and much more planned like Liz Gilbert, who I'm sure had to really plan out her book, that would have been like that very precise "I know exactly what my next step is going to be; it's going to be this next step up the stairs." And so it's a different kind of writing experience.

LJM: Absolutely. **Direct and reflective voices**—I'm going back to this fishing scene again. There was a lot going on in there. The one example I was giving was the poetic language, but here we are again and I have another place I want to read to you about reflective. What she's doing, technically, is we're looking at narration woven in with reflection. We do this so naturally we may not even think about separating it out and analyzing it, but on page 188 at the very top, she's just writing about how Daddy is catching the fish and what happens. The straight narration is, "I managed to get the net under it. We dragged it, flopping, to the—" blah, blah, blah, she said ick, Daddy grabbed its tail, and so on. And then she goes into a poetic reflection. "It was not like the old fish that poet Elizabeth Bishop once wrote about, battered and venerable and homely with the long mustache of a Mandarin. Nor did it have the bulb that thrilled Hemingway in a tuna. But as fish go, it was close to perfect. It beamed clean and silver in the sun with a rainbow stripe and pink and blue and yellow-green." And she goes on to describe it. So she's bringing in literary references into what could seem like an ordinary "Daddy caught the fish" moment. And again, she adds depth by doing this. She adds depth to the story. It's not just, well, we caught a fish and then we cooked it. As I described before, later on when he's cooking it, the way she describes it makes us feel like we are there. And then she moves forward: "I can still see Daddy scraping at the potatoes," and then "he stoked the fire again"—I'm just reading the beginnings of paragraphs.

Then there's a reflection at the bottom of page 190: "I can only guess what Mother was up to that night. Reading, maybe. That was her Russian history summer. The jacket photo on her Rasputin biography showed him wild-haired and googly-eyed. But she could have also bellied up to the cowboy bar in town, ordering shots of tequila." So she's not with her mother; she's writing what I was talking about earlier, an imagining of what her mother was doing the night that they're camping with Daddy. "She did that a lot, drinking and staring down the mountain. If I'd had a

penny's worth of sense, her sitting in that deep, downward-sloping chair wrapped up in a serape and sucking down vodka would have struck me as a bad sight." Again, it's speculative.

She uses the verb "would have." It wasn't actually happening, nor was she there. Then she goes—again, this is a huge jump—"The night my parents announced their divorce, Lisa and I hadn't even been home for the buildup." So she goes on directly into leading to this very poignant and life-changing moment about the divorce. She goes into it and she backs off. She goes into and she backs off. Then on page 192 and 193—again, it would be interesting to just even outline one chapter and look at what she was doing both with the way she used language to transition—to bring something close in with the lens close in and then moving away from it so that you have more of a blurred image of what is happening and what is going on in her memory as she tells the story. I want to give an example of the reflective voice with the "you" that she uses in *The Liars' Club*, and that's on page 76.

She also speaks to the reader—I think you mentioned that, Brooke. She says, "Let me take a minute to tell you about the smell in that room. It stank of snakes, specifically water moccasins. If you are walking in waders through a marsh, say, on a warm winter morning, scanning the sky for mallards, riding their jagged air overhead, you can smell a moccasin slithering alongside you long before you see it." She goes on to describe what it smells like. She talks about, "I could never smell one swimming in a bayou, but it gives up a musk that's easily strong as skunk." Then she goes into a parenthetical that Brooke just referred to, talking about a drug dealer who'd collected these kinds of snakes and so on and so forth.

BW: I thought that whole scene was hilarious, by the way. She got a little OCD about the snakes, but it really worked. You're reading it and you're almost incredulous, but then at the end it's kind of satisfying.

LJM: Yeah, it's another one of her little stories in a story—little nested stories. She does this thing with using "you" briefly, then "I," and then goes to the third person about Grandma and so on. I think the point that we're making is that you can experiment. You need to experiment, because a straight ahead "this happened, that happened, this happened, that happened," really

isn't going to be that interesting. To experiment with voice means you leave behind the way you've been writing and just give yourself permission to write an experimental moment or experimental piece. Maybe you don't type Mary Karr into your computer, but maybe you say hey, I'm going to take a snapshot and I'm going to address the reader. I'm going to say "you." I'm just going to do that. I'm going to write like 250 words like that and see what that's like. Or you're going to take an image of something you remember and you're going to write down what was it shaped like, what were the colors, what does it remind you of, and you're going to come up with your own associations and your own language and your own imagery. Even though you're trying to write forward and get the plot going and get all of what happens out—which we do need to do, absolutely—take time to play with voice, because that's the way that you'll deepen your voice and even find your voice in ways that are exciting to you as a writer.

BW: Great advice and important for all of you—you can do that not in the context of your memoir, necessarily. I think it's very important to give yourself permission to do that just by writing one single scene or a writing prompt. We talk about that a lot. If it's been awhile since you've been with your memoir or if you haven't started yet or you're not sure what you want to do—lots of different reasons—if you're stuck, those are all good reasons to do something from a writing prompt. I'm friendly with Laura Davis, if any of you know who she is. She's an amazing writer. She co-wrote *The Courage to Heal*. On her website, she has writing prompts, so if you sign up for her website you can get a writing prompt a day, which I think is a pretty cool little offering. Lots of people have writing prompts, so that might be something that you look into if you're feeling like, oh, I could use something like that. You can just Google her—Laura Davis. She's easy to find.

Next, a question from the audience: "How do you decide which scenes to slow down and what can we learn from the ones she slows down?" You had just really talked about that, that idea of kind of being blurred versus focused in.

LJM: I think you can stand back and say, what kind of experience do I want my reader to have right now? How do I want them to feel? I know that when I was writing my memoir, there are some poetic parts to it and I wanted to create—they came in later; they didn't come in my first

draft, by any means. But they came in later when I said, OK, everybody knows what's happening here. How do I want them to feel? So then I would give a few lines of a poetic landscape or something where I was trying to enlarge the story also and say, this isn't just about me. This is about the Great Plains. This is about people in general. And Mary, I think, does that. When she brings in Elizabeth Bishop and Hemingway, she's saying, this isn't just about me. This is about other people who have had experience with fish in that particular moment. Just keep your eye open for the permission to do this kind of thing.

BW: It's great. And the other thing that I'll say to that point is there's a way in which you can and do choose to go downward, and so I just want to explain this idea really quickly because it's a concept. If you're moving along linearly in your memoir, it's like you're walking. You're walking in a straight line and you're getting from point A to point B. This might be in any given scene with a story that you're telling, because it has a forward motion and therefore it has momentum. Another way to write is down, which is like stopping and dropping in. You really, really focus—another image might be like you're looking in a microscope—and this is a way to think about how to slow down. Some people are like, wait, how do I slow down? So if you're telling a story—like, for instance, I think of this scene that one of my students wrote recently where the scene is about driving from Texas to California in the car, which obviously has momentum—it's forward motion. You're going in a car and you're going from point A to point B, and that is the scene and that's what's happening.

And then there's this moment where she stops and she describes what it feels like to be in the car. That's timeless, in a sense. It doesn't have any sense of forward motion, and so the roof is down—it's a convertible—and she stops and she starts examining her toes. She has her leg up on the rolled down window and her toenails are painted purple and she's really taking us into this scene of what does it feel like to be in her seat in this car driving across the country. You can think of it—and this is why I say it's like two separate things going on. The car moving forward is on a linear trajectory and is horizontal, and the moment in her seat of her looking at her purple nail polish with her foot up on the window is vertical. So those are two different techniques and it's those vertical moments that I think people often forget, don't know how to write, don't think are important, and they are. Mary has tons of vertical moments. So you guys want to just

consider—and those are the places where you slow down. The slowing down is dropping down. It's like moving down, down, down, instead of forward, forward, or out, out. Hopefully that can help you when you think about how to categorize these different kinds of writing.

LJM: Good advice. I like that.

BW: The second question here: "On structure, what do you suggest is the best approach to a second draft working off a linear first draft?" I just want to say that that very much depends on if you have a problem with it being linear. If it is linear and you want to keep it linear, then a second draft may be about just polishing. It might just be you having more elements of craft—you might want to have a stronger voice, you might want to have more takeaway, you might want to have more metaphor, you might want to experiment with language. But in essence, the structure is intact. But if you're questioning your structure, which many people do—I have a client right now who wrote her memoir—we did a draft and now she feels like she's not happy with the structure because it's totally linear and she just thinks it's kind of boring. I personally didn't agree with her. I don't think it's boring—I think it's fine. I thought she could choose to implement more craft elements. But she's sensing that she maybe wants to do something like a braided memoir, because she wants to bring in more elements from her past to enhance the memoir, which I'm not opposed to. You kind of have to figure out what you want to do and what you're going to work on and how you're going to go about that, and if you're objecting to the way that the memoir is currently written and if you are, why?

LJM: I know some people go, oh gosh, my memoir is linear and that's not good. Sometimes it really needs to be, so don't feel like you have to change it just because it's going to be more interesting. It might not be more interesting.

BW: And as an example of that, we had someone in our class a couple of times ago who just needed her book not to be linear. It was stuck in her head. She was an MFA student—she had an MFA and it just was this thing. I could tell that the book was dying to be told linearly and it was a huge conflict for her, because she was just like, this can't be. It was not creative enough for her, and I was like, if you could just do it linearly I think you're going to get over a lot of this

angst you have. And she was like, no, no, no, it can't be that. She's still working on that thing. It's just going to haunt her for the rest of her life. I feel like sometimes it's trying to put a square peg in a round hole. Sometimes you want it to be something else because you have an idea around it rather than because this idea that Linda Joy and I have that the memoir knows what it wants to be. You have to listen.

LJM: Listen to the whispers.

BW: Another comment from the audience: "I think the style reflects the release of information, as in trauma counseling. It takes time to overcome shame, as if she's becoming comfortable with the reader, trusting to share the darkest parts."

LJM: That seems true.

BW: Great insight. I also love the way you write that. I really agree with that and I hadn't thought of it exactly in those terms, but thank you for that, Susan.

LJM: She warms up into her true, full confession of a big molest scene. It's way toward the end of the book.

BW: And I think she's spot on with this idea that she's unpacking it and certainly for people who have been traumatized at a young age, it takes a lifetime to unpack. I really do like that. Emma is asking, "Can you address the beautiful run-on sentences, i.e. page 155." Do you want to read it? I don't see it.

LJM: It's in the middle. "And then a dark shape comes to occupy that light, a figure in the shape of my mom with a wild corona of hair and no face, but a shadow. She has lifted her arms and broadened the stance of her feet so her shadow turns from a long line into a giant X, and swooping down from one hand is the 12-inch shine of a butcher knife." She goes on with some "and"s, and it's very long—

BW: I think she's speaking specifically to that sentence, though, where it says "and swooping down from one hand is the 12-inch shine of a butcher knife, not unlike the knife that crazy guy had in Psycho for the shower scene, a stretched-out triangle of a knife that Daddy sharpens by hand." The point is—yeah, exactly, it's a huge sentence. But it's nothing compared to Frank McCourt, I will say that. Frank McCourt would have entire paragraph-long sentences. But I think the question is, craft-wise, what do we think about it?

LJM: If it works, you can do it. And everybody has a different style, too. It's also a climactic moment that she is now unpacking from the beginning of the book—that's another thing that's going on there.

BW: And sometimes those kinds of run-on sentences, in my opinion, is one of the things that I certainly felt when reading Frank McCourt—what I mentioned earlier about pacing or the emotional impact that you want to have on your reader. Sometimes the run-on sentence has a little bit of an urgency to it, that you're not stopping to take a breath. You're going to tell a lot. And not always, but that's sometimes my sense of it, that there's something that the writer is trying to convey emotionally through sentences like that. So again, Emma, that's a great question just in terms of what is that and how does it work. With the earlier points that Linda Joy was making about experimenting—if you think it's beautiful and you like the way it's written, you might just want to experiment with that in your own writing. I think using run-on sentences like that in intense moments.

LJM: That's what she's doing there. I'm sure she chose to blur the—it's a nightmare moment. It's very interesting.

BW: It's all interesting stuff. Thank you, everyone. Another great class, and we appreciate your participation.

Class 3. How Much Is Too Much—Secrets, Confessions, and Writing Outside Your Comfort Zone

Brooke Warner: Welcome, everyone, **to class three: How Much is Too Much?** We're talking about **secrets, confessions, and writing outside your comfort zone**. It's going to be an interesting class; I'm looking forward to this conversation. And as always, we welcome your comments in the chat window. Good evening, Linda Joy.

BW: We're going to dive right in here. Hi, everybody. I'm starting tonight talking about how specific to get in memoir and how much to push from a reader's perspective. I think this is a really important question, because some people are really comfortable writing things that push up against the edge. Some people are exhibitionists, honestly. I've seen this a lot, that there's some equivalent of acting out a bit in the writing which I'll talk about when I talk about what I call the Trauma Olympics.

It's very important that you find a balance when you're writing stuff that is either difficult or disturbing or traumatic, which Linda Joy is going to talk about here today. What I'm talking about specifically is in the world of publishing and in the world of thinking about your reader, what can a reader really tolerate? And how do you find that balance in your own writing? What's complicated, of course, is that there is an expectation in our show-all culture that you show a lot and that you be very honest. Linda Joy and I spend 90 percent of our feedback to people saying, *you need to show more, you need to show more, you need to go deeper, you need to be more self-revealing*. It's the 10 percent of people who we go, whoa, that's too much, or even maybe two percent. Because mostly, people aren't going there. It's mostly the other way around. With that said, I just wanted to get very specific about how far to go, particularly for people who have trauma in their background and which people have told you perhaps to never say anything about this, don't share it.

It can bring up a lot of fear around sharing, so then you lock it in or don't share as much as you might. Other people feel embarrassed and/or like they're being too self-indulgent or the saboteur

pops up and says, who's going to care about that? Or you're being fill in the blank—inappropriate, gross—a number of things can come up for people when they're really writing about something that is difficult and hard. I wanted to specifically say that I've read a lot of memoirs where you have that feeling of like, oh jeez, this person is really going there. But that includes from some very mainstream memoirs that I've read, including *Eat, Pray, Love*. Elizabeth Gilbert has a masturbation scene that is pretty on the line. A lot of memoirs do have very self-revealing moments and they are confessionals in a sense, and yet it's also incredibly important that you keep and pay attention to balance and not overwhelming the reader.

In Mary Karr's book, obviously there are the two abuse scenes. I don't even want to read them out loud because they're pretty intense, but the second one in particular starts on page 243 and notably, the opening paragraph there at the bottom of the page says, "The man's dick springs forward fast to get out of those tight britches." You guys can read what follows. It's very revealing and it's very specific. In fact, I think in terms of her description of what happened to her, it's one of the more specific abuse scenes that I've read, and I've read a lot of work from my students that speaks in euphemisms, implying that something happened without saying that it happened. The problem with that is that we have no gauge for the degree of what you experienced if you're using euphemisms to describe what you went through or to kind of go, and… And this goes for sex that's not inappropriate as well. It doesn't have to be abuse scenes, by any means. I know a lot of people who just feel embarrassed about writing about their sex scenes with people who end up becoming their lovers or whatever the case might be—real passion in love between two adults, there's a lot of holding back that can happen.

So again, this is the question about specificity. It doesn't have to be something that makes people cringe; it could be things that people feel really good about. This is this larger question about how self-revealing to be. And the answer is pretty self-revealing. If you are uncomfortable with being self-revealing or you know that you need to push your envelope a little bit further, that's part of what I'm going to be talking about tonight in my second piece of what I'm getting into. I really recommend working on a scene that is not necessarily needing to be part of your memoir. Linda is going to be talking specifically about writing through trauma and troubling stuff, but again, what I'm talking about doesn't have to be about trauma or troubling per se. It could be. It

could be about really good, juicy, exciting stuff that's very self-revealing. And self-revealing can happen in a lot of different ways. You can be emotionally self-revealing by being vulnerable, and if you're a person who has grown up very guarded and protected and not allowed to show your feelings, then being very expressive on the page simply in an emotional context can feel incredibly vulnerable. What ends up happening for people like that who are not used to showing their emotions or who have been in kind of an emotional monotone much of their upbringing, then it feels very exhibitionist on the page and very—people can feel a little uncomfortable with it, like they're not quite sure what kind of emotional tone they're supposed to hit.

So this is a very, very complicated kind of thing to learn as well. If you're just simply not a person who's very emotional, memoir asks us to show our emotions. It asks us to put our emotions on the page. It was interesting, because I was listening to a CD over the weekend by a woman who is an actress. She was saying that in acting, emotions are gold because you're taught to really feel into the emotions because the more authentic access you have to your emotions, the more your experience on stage is going to be reflective of those emotions. So if sadness or happiness or whatever emotions are coming up as you're acting, you're supposed to really feel into them and capture those emotions and let them funnel through you. I would argue that the same is true in memoir. So even if you're writing and you're sitting at the keyboard or maybe you're writing longhand—whatever you're doing—to try to harness those emotions and see what's coming up for you and not be severed at the neck. Writing is an intellectual expression, but it's also a body expression. It's incredibly important not to separate it—to let it be whole, to let your words come from your body, and especially this experiential stuff. There is no way to intellectually describe the experience of something horrid like what Mary Karr went through with this guy. You feel it and you feel this visceral disgust and rage and ickiness and all of this stuff, because she's tapping into it. And yet she's not tapping into it in a way that is self-pitying. She's kind of stating the facts and that's another thing that I would say about specificity, that in part, stating the facts of what happened and then also allowing the experience to come through in the sensations that existed and not getting too much bogged down by anything—vendetta or whatever feelings you might have processed about it today. Like as an adult, you might feel that I feel this, that, and the other about it, and that's all great, but let the reader have their own experience of that. I think that's really important, that you don't bring in your judgments or

processes per Se in something that happened to you and that you just lay it out and let the specifics speak for itself and the experiential piece play a role.

With regard to Trauma Olympics, this is the flip side of what I'm talking about and I don't mean it to be a contradiction of what I just said, but sometimes what happens in memoir—and I've written about this and it's why I bring it up—is that people want to list all of these horrible things that they've gone through and it is overwhelming to the reader. And what I mean by list is—you know, this is going to be obviously a little bit overkill, but I feel like I've seen these proposals, especially when I was at Seal Press, where someone was like, prostitution and an alcoholic and had hep C and was abused as a child and on and on. It would just be like, whoa, and then they would be putting all of this stuff into a query letter and feeling like, OK, because I have all of this trauma and because I went through this horrible experience, somehow that makes the memoir—I don't even know what—good or interesting or salacious. And the issue, I think, is that—what I really like about what Mary Karr has done is that there is trauma in here, but it's just embedded into her story. It's not like blinking light, boom, boom, boom, look at me, look at me. It doesn't feel salacious. It's very much just a piece of her story and a component of her story. I believe for a good memoir that not drawing a huge amount of attention to it but letting it just be, like this is an experience that happened just like another experienced that happened. And yes, it shaped your life and it makes you who you are, but that you not do the kind of boom, boom, boom, look at me.

That's what I mean by the Trauma Olympics—like I'm going to trump someone else with all of my trauma. Because number one, it doesn't work. Number two, it overwhelms the reader, and number three, publishers—while they're looking for things that create interest and intrigue in the story, they actually don't want that like, here's everything that is hellish in my life. At the end of the day, the memoir has to show transformation and we don't want to feel, as the reader, like we're taking care of you or that we're worried about your mental health or that we feel like, oh my God, this person is not going to make it. So you have to just be careful not to put a burden on the reader, and yet at the same time to be specific and upfront enough that we really understand the nuance of what you went through.

LJM: It's a big order.

BW: Yes—that's the whole thing. Just go ahead and do that and have fun. It's a hugely tall order. And now you're going to give some strategies, which I think is great.

LJM: I love that picture on the screen. We do feel slightly shredded in the heart area when we're doing this. I'm coming from a place of reading a lot of memoirs, coaching a lot of people, and having written one memoir already in which I wrote about traumatic things from a child's point of view and I'm writing another one. I can say more about that later. But boy, do I feel connected to this topic right now. I think there should be stages to doing this—to writing troubling scenes. There's a continuum, too, of how we can think about it. The free write is the first way to pour it out. If you want to pour something out, get it on the page. See how it reads back, see what you have to say—you may end up writing something that you've never written before.

I've mentioned, I believe, in this class briefly the **studies by Dr. James Pennebaker** where he had people write about the most traumatic thing that ever happened to them and only write for 20 minutes. Amazing stories poured out, and these were things that they had never told anyone or written about or anything ever in their life. It hugely changed their immune system. The studies showed that the immune system was improved in all kinds of ways, stress levels were changed, and the people in the studies only wrote for a total of 60 minutes—20 minutes, three times. And yet all of these amazing changes happened. Asthma and arthritis, there were changes in that. It's healing and we also do need to take care of ourselves around how we do it and when we do it and how much we do it. Quite a few times, I've been coaching or teaching people and they tell me—I don't know what they're doing for a while and they finally say, you know, I'm just so depressed or I'm so traumatized by what I'm writing. I'll say, how long do you write for? How long have you been doing this? They'll say, oh, four, six hours—eight hours. And I say, you're writing these traumatic stories that many hours a day? And they'll say yeah and I'll say, you have to stop immediately. Don't do that.

It can kick people right into a depression or—it's just too much. The first point I want to make is to write briefly, 20 to 30 minutes, about something traumatic, and then stop. And then do one of two things after that. One is to write a positive story right after that—a happy memory, a lighter

story in which you are not a victim, where you're stronger or have a different point of view—something. Another is get up and stop writing and go play in the garden or play with your dog or pet your cat or take a walk. You will get back to the writing you need to do, but you need to titrate it a bit like taking an aspirin or something.

You need to plan it. You need to not just throw yourself into it. Free writing is one way to go at this and it isn't right for everyone because they get overwhelmed, perhaps. Another way is called containment. The more traumatic something is, the more contained it really needs to be so that you can keep your narrator—you, now—writing it and not fall completely into the victim position. Some people need to go back to the victim position because do. They just need to go back and be that younger person who is experiencing that in their body at the time.

But in therapy, for instance, we have all kinds of techniques—we say, OK, the adult you is there with you as the child telling you it will be OK. You know that you were OK finally, and so on and so forth. So the narrator, in a way, acts like this protective adult presence as you witness what the child went through. I teach this a lot in my writing as healing work, where you really think in terms of witness—who's the witness and who's the teller of the story? You want to have this sense of the witness—you as witness, witnessing you as a younger person with whatever you're dealing with. This is also—in therapy, it would be called the observing ego. There is a part of you observing, and therefore there is objectivity there. As you go forward, you may have—hopefully there won't be that many traumas, but some people have more than others and then they worry about this Trauma Olympics thing, because they're not really trying to write trauma, trauma, trauma, but gee, they had a lot of them and so what do they do with that? Usually there is a lot of shame that comes with that.

I teach a class on **writing as healing**, so this comes up a lot, where the person says, gee, I hope I'm not contaminating the space here by writing this really painful story, but I really needed to write it. Some of us have been together long enough that they kind of know what we're going to say, but they need to say that warning and we need to say back to them, that's OK. We're here to be your witness in this. It's a very particular kind of group and most writing groups aren't like that, but I created this one because I believe in offering that. Eventually, it's probably not your

first draft or your fifth one—maybe your tenth one—you can rewrite it to where you're thinking, OK, what is the reader getting out of this scene? What are they understanding besides the fact that I was wounded? How will it be more universal as well as my own experience? You start to ask yourself that I don't think you should ask yourself that right away, especially if you have trauma. You just need to write it out and get it out.

And another contained way, if you're not ready to write it, is to make a list of the dark stories in your life and make a list of the lighter stories, meaning they're either happier stories or stories where you're enlightened—literally kind of enlightened, where you have a perspective. And you make lists of these stories and you don't write them all at once; you choose to weave the dark and the light stories back and forth for a period of time in the book. These are all mechanisms that can help you contain and not fall completely into the darkness. I do have to say that I went away this weekend and I wrote a bunch of stories about a very bad time in my life, and I forgot my own instructions. So I ended up writing like four thousand words in one day about this very hard time where one thing after another happened that was really rough, and I just couldn't believe how terrible I felt. And then all of a sudden I had to laugh—I was like, oh my gosh, I forgot my own instructions. So then I took good care of myself and I was fine. But sometimes we can kind of get lost in it, so be careful. You need to have strategies where you can come back out and connect with the real world. My kitties helped a lot. I held them and they purred and we were all good.

BW: Find whatever soothes you. We're going to move on to two ways to write outside your comfort zone. The reason that I put this in there is that I think there are two different ways to think about writing discomfort and what comes up when there's discomfort. The first is the positive side of that, or the positive consequence or the positive result, which is that sometimes you have to go through in order to come out the other side, which is kind of the experience that Linda Joy was mentioning, that you have to have the strength and the inner resources to push through and to basically find a place of positivity again. But then the negative side of that is the people who push themselves too hard and who are not ready. They make themselves sick. There are lots of different ways to think about this and it's complex, because you might feel sick in the moment. You might feel like you're crying or having anything—nausea—and I think the biggest

question you need to ask yourself is how long will you stay in a place like that. Do you feel like you're being avoidant? Maybe you won't have the wherewithal to know, and so that's also a slightly difficult thing that I'm asking you guys to consider, but that's the point of what I'm talking about today, is how do you walk that radical edge and how far do you push yourself. And then there's the kind of pushing yourself in a good way and the pushing yourself in a bad way. It takes some discernment. The radical edge is a phrase that comes from David Whyte, who is a poet I love and if you don't know his work, you really must. He is amazing and he writes about the radical edge. **The radical edge** is that place that does push you up against your comfort zone. It's basically a place of thriving. It's a place that we should all hold ourselves to a standard.

It's not about a comfort zone; it's about feeling a little bit scared sometimes. It's feeling like you're taking a risk sometimes. But also in that place of thriving and risk-taking is beauty and growth and transformation, and all of you know that, I'm sure. So it's an interesting place to be, because sometimes in taking risks and feeling scared to the point of feeling a little bit nauseous, you might sometimes wonder, why am I here? What am I doing? Am I doing the wrong thing? Am I making a mistake? This comes up in publishing and it particularly comes up with publishing memoir because of the self-exposure. And so there's that question, am I going too far? Am I saying things I shouldn't say? Am I putting things out there that are going to embarrass me later? Am I going to regret what I'm doing? Honestly, this is one of the hardest parts of memoir writing because you are not always the most objective person to answer that question. I think it takes really a lot of self-awareness to walk the radical edge in the first place, and then to have the wherewithal to stick with it—to write things that might feel difficult. To have that inner compass that says, I am going to put this out there and I know that it's right.

I have worked with all kinds of writers over the years who have had these knee-jerk reactions like, oh my God, I'm not going to be able to put that in. I shouldn't put in—it mostly happens with things that are just real-life issues that people confront every day, but a woman who has had an abortion, a woman who has given up a child for adoption but has never told anyone in her life, people who have family secrets that they're not supposed to tell—so certainly there's stuff about abuse that comes up here. It could be the secrets that you're keeping for another person, that are not your own but you feel you would be betraying confidences to share that about someone else.

These are very difficult questions, and of course with betraying confidences, it might not be your story to tell. But if it's your family's story, it might pertain and make sense in the memoir. If it's someone else's story, it might not be appropriate. So of course there are things to consider on that front. But what I mostly find and why I think that the radical edge is an important conversation to have and why I put here on the slide how and why to push there is because the radical edge is really where we feel most alive. Sometimes it is in that moment of fear, of pushing yourself past a certain place, that you also—your heart quickens or your pulse is suddenly—and there's a moment of like, oh my gosh, I'm really doing this, and it's also a moment of aliveness. You can and may experience this in your writing when you're going out there on a limb, even if it's about scary stuff, because there is a truth that needs to be told. Again, we're framing a lot of today in trauma, but this is not only about trauma. This is about anything that you've done. It may have been a decision to leave your partner for someone else. I've definitely worked with a lot of people who—particularly for same-sex relationships—people who have left a marriage, left children, because they're following their heart because they are gay or lesbian. People who have experienced religious persecutions of some sort—certainly I've seen people who write about growing up Jewish, for instance, and feeling the pain of anti-Semitism and then processing that through their memoir and giving voice to that experience. These kinds of things, they show up in all kinds of situations and certainly are not limited to certain situations.

Writing the truth is what compels us to come to memoir in the first place. Sometimes just writing the truth of your experience and how you went through that and how much of a scary time it was and how you either did or didn't stand up for yourself is the radical edge. It's the place where you're giving voice to an experience that might have been really terrifying that has stayed with you in a way. Or it might be a memory that you've held and you might wonder to yourself, wow, did that really happen in the way that I think it happened? It's very scary sometimes. I want to encourage you all and also say a word of caution here—the caution is sometimes you can push too far. The caution is out there on the radical edge, it's an edge, and if you go too far you could potentially hurt yourself. And by hurt yourself, the things that can happen are that you can make yourself sick—we've seen it happen. You can burn out, you can get paralyzed and stop writing, and so you need to go out to the edge and then come back, like

Linda Joy was saying. You go out to the edge, you push yourself out there a bit, and you cry and you work through it and you struggle and maybe you need to sleep, and then you retreat. Then you come back to the safety of the now and maybe you have your kitties or whatever other comfort you have that is going to help you come back to a more safe place. You don't need or want to be out on the radical edge for the entirety of your experience. You can't be there always. Linda, do you want to share—it sounds like you experienced that a little bit.

LJM: It was interesting—I did a little more research on what it means to be re-traumatized. I know that there were therapists that I was talking to and I was talking about all of this with Dr. Pennebaker 10 or 15 years ago. They would say, gosh, you need to ask him if people were hospitalized around these exercises that he had people do. He said no, I figured that people wouldn't write what they couldn't bear to write. He was saying that people would monitor themselves. But the thing about re-traumatization that somebody clarified for me recently, which was really helpful—because I was asking about working with people and how did he see this. He said you are re-traumatized if you're stuck in it again where you can't get out. So if you're writing and you're going through it and you get to the other side—and you may be crying and you may be upset and you may be angry—but you go, wow, look at that, that happened, but that was then and this is me now and I'm writing it and the person writing it has power. The person experiencing many of these things didn't. So I just think we need to remember that. I wasn't re-traumatized, but I went through it and then I did suffer a bit, but then I knew what I was doing. I knew what was happening, I knew why it was happening, and I hadn't lost myself in the present. That was really good that you said that, Brooke, because I think that's what we also need to keep in mind.

BW: It's hard when you're in it to keep all of those things in mind, and when you get to a place of feeling despair, I think that's an interesting place. It's like are you going to move through it and can you deep breathe and get to the other side or are you lost in it, in which case you really might need to step away. You guys have to gauge for yourselves.

LJM: Yeah, so these are cautionary tales. The thing of it is, what we run into are people who are completely avoiding it and yet it's dripping between the sentences. You've talked about that,

Brooke, at least in other classes, where you can feel what people are leaving out. In our coaching and stuff we say, gosh, it feels like there's something else going on here. Oh yeah, I left out blah, blah, blah, and we're like, oh, that's what it is. And they're like, how do you know?

BW: Yeah, it's an interesting and common experience that we both have had. You can read between the lines and things don't make sense. I'm experiencing that now with one of my clients where a couple of times I've read something and I just say to her, this is not adding up. And she'll be like, well, the real story is—blah, blah, blah. And it's like, oh yeah, that of course does make sense. So you need to be careful of those things and it's why a good reader can be so helpful in moments like that and you need to listen to say, OK, something is not making sense or adding together because you're omitting something. What are you going to do about that? You probably have to omit more or tell everything.

LJM: There is the rub. I did a bunch of research on interviews I have with Mary Karr and they're quite entertaining. One I didn't find—I might be able to find a link, Brooke, that we could also send them for the Paris Review interview which I'll see if I can find. In any case, she has interviews in Slate and Salon and all kinds of interviews way back when, first when *The Liars' Club* came out, when *Cherry* came out, and when *Lit* came out. She is really a funny storyteller person in these interviews, too, but she has a lot of serious things to say and I really—two are here and I'm going to read you another couple of them because you know what this book is now and you know Mary Karr as much as she showed you in the book and you can certainly guess how hard some of this was to write. She's writing about her psychotic mother and having this experience where her mother thinks that she's—she did think she killed her daughters.

In the interview she talks much more about that. She and her mother stayed friends until her mother died, and she's an artistic person and a creative person and Mary loved her. And all these things happened at that time, but she gave everybody in the family and told everybody who's mentioned in the book what she was doing and they all read it and vetted her. She must have a bunch of really good people in her life—it doesn't always happen that way, but that is what happened with Mary. Her mother read everything. I think her father was already dead—yes, he was. Her sister read everything. So she talks a lot about that process in some of these interviews,

which is really interesting. And then she says this—I just think this is so important: "Memoir is a kind of survival testimony. The fact that the person lives past the book, that the character goes on, is a kind of hopeful thing. It's not the fact that it's true that makes it better; it's the sense that they went away and got away from their parents. They reconciled who they were after this struggle and were able to go forward. It's a survival tale, in a way."

When I teach, also, I do different angles of what memoir is and in some of them I talk about the fact that we are writing testimony. Testimony is this is what happened to me—this is my experience. Yes, it's memoir and some memoirs are more testimonial than others. I think when we go down into this sort of labyrinth of who we are, who we were, what happened, that you don't talk about rape in polite society. Yes, nowadays we hear more about rape on TV and we hear more about everything—body parts and everything else—than people did 40 years ago or 30 years ago or 20 years ago. There are layers of what is acceptable and what we are used to hearing spoken about. There are plenty of people who have never heard what you can see on reality TV in the past. We see those now, but there are layers of what people can bear, including yourself. I just want to read the next one. After saying this is permission that you need to have and you need to feel like you can have your testimony and have your voice and have your space to do what you need to do—particularly in the early draft. Again, we were talking earlier—you may need to do something different with what you decide to publish, and that is a separate exercise. She also—I'm going to read something that's not on the slide. She's talking about exposure—Brooke mentioned exposure.

Mary Karr says, "Writing about yourself as a kid is a much safer thing. In *Cherry*, I had a different kind of responsibility as a character. People hold you to a higher standard." And she talked about the same kind of thing in writing *Lit* in some of her interviews. She is a grown-up and in *Lit*, she has a child and she's drinking and she's hiding it and she's lying and she's carrying on with this secret life. So she has even more conflict with who she was, what she was doing, and how destructive it was, truly. It was very, very destructive to her and her family. She confesses a lot of things in Lit. I recommend you just keep reading all three books. There is so much to learn, both about her and how she handles these subjects. Even in *Cherry*, where it's about her being an adolescent and acting out and having sex and so on and drugs, she was older

and she says, well, I wasn't a kid anymore. I was choosing to do these things myself. And in *Lit*, it's very much—the burden on her is very strong. By the way, she threw out all but 80 pages of her first draft, which meant she threw out 800 or 900 thousand pages, and then she wrote a second draft and she threw out most of it. What she says she did about all of that—the reason—and she had a deadline and everything and the agent was all over her case. She said because in the first version, she was all victim and her husband was the bad guy. And in the second version, he was the good guy and she was the bad guy.

It took the third version for her to try to find—speaking of radical edge—to find the place to come from to write an authentic story where the roles weren't so completely divided. And then talking about the writing process here: "I would lie down on the floor and go to sleep." The interviewer is asking her—she says, "I heard you had a difficult time writing *The Liars' Club*." "I would lie down on the floor and go to sleep like I had been driving all night. I couldn't keep my eyes open; it's exhausting. I've talked to writers and they get to a difficult place in the book, emotionally, or something about it is hard and they are sitting there for an hour and a half and it's all they can do. It's very effortful." I had to laugh—I found these interviews after I came back from a weekend away where I was writing. This happened to me. I wrote Friday afternoon, Saturday morning, afternoon, and late afternoon, took walks in between, but got myself to a place about five o'clock on Saturday where I could not keep my eyes open and I just ended up conking out and falling asleep. I don't normally fall asleep at five in the afternoon.

That was exactly like what Mary was talking about. And I was fine—I was just tired. But my brain had been busy digging around in memory land looking for how to write scenes about difficult situations, so it was a challenge. The other thing you'll notice in the section about the rape—in this one part, she says, and if he's reading this right now, I bet he thinks such and such. She's talking directly about the rapist. So they're asking her about why she put that in. She said, "It cheered me up to think that he might read about himself in my book. I don't think he's quaking in his boots, but I wasn't sneaky about telling the truth. I'm just sort of out there." Which is what we're talking about today—she's out there. She writes about these situations. Mary Karr's style is to be out there. You may end up writing differently—I know some people who write about sexual abuse or sex—and especially sex, they might leave it at the bedroom

door. Sexual abuse, the thing that I notice—and I think Brooke and I have talked about it together—people will say, I was abused. Well, that is like saying the sky is blue or trees are green. That is really a very hugely abstract statement. For one thing, the word "abuse" is so used now we don't know what it is. We almost don't know what we were saying. It is real, that it's abuse, and what do we mean? What exactly happened? Did somebody give you a dirty look or did they hit you? Did somebody look at you or did they touch you? What happened? Do your best to say what that was.

BW: Thanks. I'd love to hear what you guys have to say about all of this, whether it's resonating or any strategies you guys might have had and/or questions you might have specifically. Nancy is asking about the difference between the first memoir's techniques and her other ones in terms of the style as circular or non-linear, which I have not read *Cherry* or *Lit* so Linda, do you have something to say about the structures of those books?

LJM: They're very straightforward—much more straightforward, thank God. Even if she puts a flashback in, you know exactly what she's doing and where she's going. Neither one is circular like they are in *The Liars' Club*.

BW: And I wanted to say something about a comment that you made earlier about what she was saying, that in the first draft she made her husband the bad guy and in the second draft she made herself the bad guy. It's a very interesting statement and actually so important, because it's another thing that I would tack on to the Trauma Olympics as a problematic approach to memoir, which is the vendetta. I have seen these manuscripts often in my career of the person who has not processed their anger and is writing a memoir that is really riddled with a lot of negative energy. There's judgment and seeping kinds of things going on. It can be difficult to see, and it's hard to call a person out on something like that, but it can come in big doses but it can also come in small doses.

You really want to be careful, if you have someone in your life who has wronged you, that you try to portray them with an even hand. The reader is not going to want to deal with a vendetta in any way, shape, or form. It just doesn't feel good and it has a sort of icky quality to it. So you really do have to—it's true that a lot of memoirists need to go back into therapy to just kind of

figure out the ins and outs of what happened and to get to the other side of it. There might be a process draft followed by the real draft.

LJM: Absolutely.

BW: Susan says, "I went to a reading by Phil Klay, who wrote *Redeployment*, fictional short stories from Iraq. Interesting when soldiers go through a firefight, they come back to base and feel the depletion of adrenaline and need to sleep right away." That sleeping situation, I think, just makes so much sense. Tell me what you think about this, Linda Joy, but I think it can also be a little bit of a form of dissociation if you're just totally exhausted by what you've experienced. You mentioned re-traumatization and so then to sleep is just like, I'm opting out.

LJM: Yeah. There is refreshing sleep and then there's who knows what people are going through. The people who want to sleep all the time—of course, you can't really do that when you're actually there, but maybe afterward. Or there are people who are just tired all the time, sleepy all the time, but really there's something they're trying to process. It's interesting.

BW: It is interesting. I'm curious—it sounds like Mary Karr, like you said, had a really unusual experience where her family was vetting/supportive of her work, and I feel like—we certainly had the exact opposite experience when teaching Frank McCourt, where his family kind of went after him and negated everything that he said. It's just one of these things that people often feel worried, so I wanted to just talk a second and maybe give people a little bit of guidelines about best practices for sharing stuff with family members—like when is the best time to do that, should you ever do it, do you need to get permission? What are your thoughts?

LJM: I really don't believe in bombing your family with a surprise book and then being surprised by how they react. That actually happened to an author I met a few years ago. She didn't tell her adoptive parents about her book. She figured they wouldn't know about it—I don't know how she could think that, but she was a very angry person. I think it was a revenge book, for sure. So the neighbor came over and brought the book to her adoptive mother and showed it to her, and all hell broke loose. I guess eventually the hell that broke loose worked out in the

sense that things were talked about that had never been talked about before, so who can say. We weren't there.

I recommend several things. There are families with whom you can talk things out and then there are people who have families where that is never going to happen. Then people say, OK, I'll never be able to talk to my family about it, but I don't want to get sued. Or they'll say, I know that they'll hate what I put in the book, but we don't talk anymore. Maybe they won't see it. Again, there are so many different possibilities and I've heard so many of them in different conferences and teaching situations. But let's just say this: if you are in touch with your family and you have any kind of relationship at all, let them know that you wrote about them, especially when you know you're going to publish the book. Some people show the pages to the people—the friends and the family that are in the book. But you need to decide, are you showing the pages to get permission or are you showing the pages to tell them this is what I am putting in the book? You need to decide. Maybe with some people it'll be one and some people it'll be another. There's no rigid rule or law or anything. If you're worried about being sued, then you need to consult a literary attorney and run it by them.

Big publishers have their own legal team, but if you're self-publishing or doing anything else like a lot of memoirists are, you need to vet your own work. You need to be clear. There are stories I've heard from people where really they might be in danger of libel or slander—libel I guess it's called, with writing—and other privacy issues. So nobody can help you with that but a legal person. I don't care what your friends say or your writing group says or what you read on the internet. If you don't follow through with how you need to follow through as a writer who's putting other people's lives out there in public, you will not be happy about the results. So caution is better—that doesn't mean you don't write it. It doesn't mean you silence yourself in the first five drafts at all. People often come to us going, oh, I don't want to write about that because the family will read it. Well, are they reading it now? No. Are you going to show it to them? Well, no. It sounds like you need to write it, however, because it's still very upsetting to you. Yes, it is. So I tell people to create a safe, sacred space, where they can get out the story they need to get out and they can feel safe there and their family isn't going to read it and they're

not slicing and dicing their truth every two seconds and covering up. Because the process invites you to go ahead and get it out and then figure out what to do with it.

BW: Very important points. Things we hear literally all the time—even people who work with memoir—I sometimes have colleagues of mine e-mailing me to consult about these kinds of issues because they come up so much for everyone. The other thing is just that that knee-jerk reaction that I mentioned—you might be fine. You might be swimming along and everything is good and then you just hit a wall and all of a sudden you are freaking out. You've got to really keep in mind that all of this stuff is really triggering and the triggers can happen at any time, so be conscious and be paying attention—mindfulness in all of the process is important. Marcia asks, "When the family member does not want something said, what do you do?" It depends. You can change their names and change identifying details—you can make that person your cousin instead of your brother. You can take creative license in that way to disguise the person to the extent that no one else would recognize who they were. They might recognize who they are, but their identifying characteristics are so different that you're not at risk.

But you might need to take them out completely—this did happen to me when I was working on a book at Seal Press. An author of mine wrote quite an extensive chapter about her spiritual guru and it wasn't super inflammatory or anything, but there was stuff that basically the woman ended up not wanting. It was already written and she then shared it with her—I think she just shared it with her as a courtesy, not expecting the woman to completely flip out, but she really did and she went through it and she basically Sharpied all of these parts that she wanted out. But it was so much that it destroyed the chapter. AT the end of the day, we chose to take the chapter out because she was a high profile person and we were legitimately worried that she could and would sue. She specifically said, you do not have my permission to share this. So back to Linda Joy's point about legal advice and having things vetted, you really do have to be careful with memoir in that capacity, but most people—the vast majority of people are overly concerned. It's mostly about your fears about what people are going to say and 97 percent of all memoir just doesn't have the risk of someone suing. It's more about hurt feelings.

LJM: Which is something you have to live with during the holidays.

BW: Yes, good point. Any other thoughts on all of this? You don't have to be limited to what we talked about today. If there was something pressing from another class that you had wished would have gotten answered, we can certainly talk about that. What are we covering next week? Maybe we'll seed that a little bit.

LJM: Next week is Journey from Trauma to Transformation in Memoir. We're going to be talking about bringing trauma forward.

BW: Great. And then transformation, which is a huge piece of this whole thing of today's class, which is for all of this tough stuff that you're writing and everything that you're getting into, you want to be able to show transformation on the other side. It's not just about staying in that place, so you actually do get to walk the journey and part of doing memoir is actually walking through and getting through some of this hard stuff. It doesn't have to be positive—it doesn't have to have the Hollywood ending—but you, the memoirist, you do have to change.

LJM: The protagonist is changed by the journey through this labyrinth of challenges. It's very mythical, in a sense, when we boil it down and stand back and look at it. So it will be fun to talk about that, and Mary Karr talks about this too. I'll look up some of the places where she talks about how she feels about the aftermath of writing these books.

BW: In the last minute Jody is saying here, I keep hearing the term "creative non-fiction" and what do we think that means? I always say, when people ask about creative non-fiction, that all memoir is creative non-fiction, but not creative non-fiction is memoir. That's the best definition for it. Creative non-fiction is an umbrella term and memoir falls under it. What does that mean? Memoir is very creative—you have to write like you would write a novel. You have to create scenes. That doesn't mean that they're made up, but it does require quite a bit of creativity. But underneath the umbrella of creative non-fiction are things like true life crime, lots of things—I would argue even, to some extent, things like Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* is kind of a classic creative non-fiction story. So for people who are doing journalism but then enhancing it, basically, are doing creative non-fiction.

LJM: And also, it was created by somebody where they needed a category to put all this personal writing in and it didn't exist. So it was a creation for university classes, originally, where they could put the people who were not writing fiction and not writing poetry. I think it's very amusing.

Class 4. The Journey from Trauma to Transformation in Memoir

Brooke Warner:. Welcome to **class number four**, **The Journey from Trauma to Transformation in Memoir**, and the final class in this series. Thank you for joining us during these four weeks. We're going to be diving in to talk about this transformation and this journey which is what memoir is really all about. I think you're going to kick it off here, Linda Joy, in talking about some of Mary Karr's associative techniques.

Linda Joy Myers: I looked at what I think she did and also what I and other writers do in this whole realm of memory and imagination that we delve into when we're writing associatively. There are some things to sort of tease out about that. One way that you can uncover the different layers of your consciousness or your thinking or your story is to just do some free writes. Do some free writings—I suggest that you hang your free writes on certain themes or certain topics that you're trying to explore. Just do this in your journal—write longhand if you're able to write longhand. It doesn't really matter how you do it. Type things into the computer, but in a very stream of consciousness way, you might say. There are many examples of writers who write this way.

Of course, one of the most famous ones is **Virginia Woolf**, who goes from idea to idea and links things associatively to different words and imagery, language, characters, themes, all kinds of different ways. And Mary Karr really does that too, particularly in *The Liars' Club* more than in the other two books. I'm going to talk about both of the other books too today. It's an investigative exercise. It's like investigating the mystery of your own thoughts, feelings, memories, and associations. We need to really be open to the right brain processing in order to do that and in touch with moments that pop up with an image or an idea or a thought or even a dream. I know a lot of people who get a lot out of writing down their dreams. I don't know if Mary Karr did that or not, but she really tuned in to many, many different layers of herself, both herself as a person and as a character in the story, her relationship to her memories—and we've talked a lot about that in this class, the different times that she's talking about remembering. We understand that she did a lot of research and did a lot of connecting with family and friends in order to be able to write this book and investigated where things happened. I think she has a term for it too—I call it filling the well. She put a lot of things inside of her conscious mind by doing this sort of research for her story.

Part of the research is internal and part is external—external meaning looking things up, looking things up on maps, looking things up in history books. She was able to use her family's memorabilia to a large extent and she even writes about that quite a bit, this trunk that they opened after her father died and all of the things that were in there. So there were clues to some of the pieces of the story that she needed to write. The other way that people do this is by going through the family scrapbooks, by going through your own memorabilia, looking at and recording the memories like we've talked about before—the main memories that you have. Mary Karr, according to Tobias Wolff, the reason he thought she should write a memoir is she'd been telling these stories—I think I said this last week—she'd been telling these stories for years and years and he thought she ought to just go ahead and write them down, all the stories of the Liars' Club but also her own life. What we can see—and Brooke and I have both already talked about this—is looking at how her thoughts led to other thoughts. Sometimes there were so many parenthetical expressions it could have been a little bit daunting to follow. On the other hand, that's associative writing. You can do it in other ways. Let's say you have the associative memories, you may put them in in a similar way that she did or you may have it a little more structured. But notice—follow the trail of the bread crumbs.

Follow the trail of your insights and your reflections. These reflections are how you make meaning of your life. I know that a lot of her—as far as I can tell, her whole process of writing these books was to understand and to make meaning of her life. We already mentioned looking at the links in imagery or themes. One way that that can be done is to read some poetry and look at how imagery and theme is handled in poetry. See if you can find some poetry that you relate to or that speaks to you or has meaning to you. I, for instance, really love Mary Oliver—many people love Mary Oliver. She has a lot of imagery that connects and circles around in her books and in a single poem itself. Notice these links in imagery and thematic length. Another thing Brooke and I—when we're teaching our long course and do our coaching—we talk about something called through threads. Brooke, that's your term, but I borrowed it here. Through threads are the themes that weave through in the imagery and the themes that weave all the way through the memoir. You don't want to drop the thread. It would be like doing a weaving and you have orange only a third of the way through, unless you intentionally only want it a third of the way through.

But let's say it's an important part of your color scheme—you don't want to drop orange partway through and leave things hanging. So think about what are the through threads of your memoir. Mary Karr—I'm going to talk in my next presentation later after Brooke speaks about how she pulls things together at the end of the book and a lot of the themes that were seeded in the first chapter show up throughout and at the end. Anything you want to add, Brooke?

BW: The only thing I was going to say earlier is just with Mary, it sounds like—I was listening to an interview about her—she just wrote pages and pages and pages and I don't think that that's necessarily a recommended process. I think for some people it is important and it's part of their process—I know people for whom this is true and they have to do it that way. I get the sense that she just kind of dumped everything that she could think of and wrote things in all kinds of different ways. It also speaks probably to how prolific she is. But my sense is that part of her associations had to do with that, that she was following different threads and she was talking about discovering truths and uncovering truths and making sense of things and she describes her writing as pulling and picking apart. I thought that that was quite interesting too in the sense that it reminded me of taffy or something, that she was just taking these scenes and pulling them every which way and excavating.
It is an interesting thing and made me realize just how curious you have to be about your own life, about the things that happened to you, and then trying to figure out what matters about what you're teasing apart and what is in there—what's the nugget for the reader. It did help me to watch her and understand a bit more about her and how her thought process is.

LJM: I forgot to mention something and I just want to add it really quick—another way that you can follow the trail of your associations is to **use a thesaurus**. As you're shaping your language, you can use a thesaurus to look at all of the 10 or 12 different verbs you can have for the word "walk," or imagery that you have—look up some of the most important words and images that you have in your book in a thesaurus and look at where that takes you. I love the thesaurus so I've done this many times. It can make you think of things that you wouldn't have thought of otherwise.

BW: That's good advice. Where to end your story is a hard question to answer when you're thinking about it, and the reason that we're including this is just thinking about endings and because Mary Karr has this three part memoir, basically. She has three memoirs. But what was clear was that this story wasn't over and that there was more to tell. When we're teaching in the long 6-month course about how to think about endings, lots of people don't know where their ending is. They don't have a sense of it—you're very much in the thick of it and maybe you feel like you have too much content in general. The true fact of book publishing is that memoir is not an autobiography; it's not the story of your life age five to age 65. It's supposed to be a slice of life. And lots of people come to our class and they're really writing an autobiography. That is OK. When you're writing an autobiography, I think—or we think, anyway—that it's important that it be thematic. If you have a thematic story and it's the arc of your whole life, then at

least it's through a particular lens. If it's not a slice of life, then it's a lens through which you're looking at something.

Mary Karr's book is clearly coming of age, but she decided to pull it forward to 17 years later and that is a structure that other memoirists have used, including Jeannette Walls, who wrote *The Glass Castle*. Who knows if she thought about that in advance—if she decided that she needed to have that 17 years later, in which case she would have been a young adult. But I'm guessing that it was important to her to bring us to this scene where she—two things happen, of course. There's the end of her father's life and then also some sort of resolution about what happened with her mother. I would guess that Mary Karr—it's a circular structure, as we've discussed, and she comes back around and she clearly seeded this idea up front, like I'm not going to tell you the whole story; I'm going to let it unfold because it took me so long to process it. And then we see that she comes back around to it at about the middle of the memoir.

But my sense is that she decided either in the beginning or at some point that she had to let the reader know what happened with her mother at the end of the book. It's a satisfying ending. In a sense, it's wrapped up very nicely—I think I mentioned this in the first class. It's not exactly tied with a bow, but a little bit. It's interesting to me now in having looked at that interview that Mary Karr is as religious as she is, because I think there is part of her sort of religious sensibility to the world that makes her believe in—well, we know the power of prayer, certainly, but I think also some sort of resolution and a power higher than us. I think that she is very forgiving of her mother in the end, but there's something really important for the reader, which is that it's not that she demonized her mom throughout the writing of this book, but you really see her mom as neglectful and having so many of her own problems and depression and alcoholism. At the end of the book, she just sees her mom as sort of sad. It's both pitiful, in a sense, but not pitying. There's a big difference. I feel like Mary has this moment of just being like, you know, I'm disappointed—we all have that in our parents. We're disappointed with them for varying degrees or reasons, right?

What I see happening at the end of Mary Karr's book is **forgiveness**, really. So if we could look to pages 318, 319, and 320, the very end, she tells Mary finally—her mother tells her what happened—that she had this psychotic episode and all of these things that happened to her, especially having her two kids basically be taken away from her. It's quite powerful. Sorry, I'm going to go back to 313 really quickly when she recounts what happened to her mom when she came home that day and her children were gone. At the bottom of page 313 it says, "Mother crossed the threshold into an empty house. The radiators were cold. She followed the pale plumes of her breath from room to room, throwing light switches to no avail.

Even the phone was dead. The neighbors had seen the moving truck pull away that day, the loading of it supervised all morning by the old woman. The young husband arrived by car after lunch to pick up the kids, toddler standing in the back, the infant girl in the old lady's arms." And she says, "I was crying by this time and so was Mother." And so then when she gets to page 318 she says, as to why she hadn't told us all this before about the marriages and the lost children—I read this earlier and I just think it's so powerful: "Her exact sentence is lodged in my head, for it's one of the more pathetic sentences a 60-year-old woman can be caught uttering. 'I thought you wouldn't like me anymore.'" And so we see her coming to terms with her mother's humanity and flaws and basically also the horrid thing that she went through and how this would maybe mess anyone up. Page 320 is a lot of sort of—I don't even know what I would call it. Maybe absolving herself and her mother of guilt or sort of whatever wrongdoings. She basically says, "All the black crimes we believed ourselves guilty of were myths, stories we'd cobbled together out of fear."

It is satisfying, and I want to just make a note about that because you don't have to have a satisfying ending, but it does help the reader when you have a satisfying ending. And people ask me a lot, I'm not done—I don't know what happens. There isn't resolution. I didn't forgive this person. I'm still grappling with it. I have a client who is still grappling with a problematic marriage and the book is about that relationship. And so I've said this lots of times to her: you need to figure out what the resolution is. Even if you're still living in the midst of something complicated, there needs to be resolution, and maybe that resolution is simply acceptance that things are not going to change. That would be OK, but at least there is resolution. The reader cannot be caught in a limbo with you trying to process what it is that you are trying to figure out in your life.

So lots of people who write memoir and they're doing slice of life, the cool thing about slice of life—especially if there's something that happened a while ago—is that it ended and you transformed and you can look back and it and go, wow, I went through that thing and this is what I learned and this is how I'm different. If you're still in the muck, it's much more difficult. That's where it's incumbent upon you to figure out what could the resolution be. If you are a person who is sort of living your memoir, which a lot of people are, it's just a little more difficult and it requires you to figure out what that perspective is going to be because you're still in it. It might be helpful to have a reading partner, or that's where therapy can sometimes be helpful. But you don't want to process all of your stuff that you would process in therapy in your memoir. That's another piece here. Perhaps there's a part two and a part three, and for people who have a lot—they keep going and there's this and that and there's all these different angles and themes—I

oftentimes will say to people, I think you have two memoirs in you. Why not three? Why not four? Because it's not coalescing—there's too much. So you want to make that determination.

I think it's very helpful when you're starting out to set your **goal**. Say this is what the end of my book is going to be, and it may change along the way. You don't have to have your ending etched in stone, and we're very emphatic about that in the long course too, that it's not helpful to put your stake in the ground and say this is what it's going to be. It doesn't have to be rigid, but you can have that flag in the ground that maybe you'll pull out later and sort of repost it somewhere else. At least if you have that, it serves as a compass and you kind of know which way you're going and it keeps your scope in check. I think a lot of people, where they get overwhelmed is when their scope is so huge and they don't know the ending and then the ending starts to feel like this nebulous place that they're never going to arrive at. And not only that, it's totally gray and I'm not sure and it could be anywhere. That can contribute to overwhelm, obviously, but secondly to just not finishing.

LJM: I want to add, because I think it goes here, that I saw a Facebook post a few days ago—I haven't had a chance to follow it through yet, but Abigail Thomas, who wrote several memoirs was critiqued by a critic—I don't know who; I didn't get to read the original post—but she accused her of being a serial memoirist.

BW: That's funny.

LJM: The whole post was quite amusing, because everyone was kind of riffing off the whole idea of a serial something sounds like a really bad thing to be. This idea of oh, you should just be able to write one and what's wrong with you—I've written a post that I haven't put up yet, but I'm going to get it into an article on the blog about confessions of the serial memoirist and all of the ways that artists through the years—like how many versions of "The Kiss" did Rodin sculpt and how many different versions of David by Michelangelo and how many versions of a sunflower did Van Gogh paint and haystacks by Monet. How dare they accuse us of being a serial anything?

BW: I think it's a really interesting subject, and it's just interesting all the different ways that people accuse people of all kinds of things. Betty has a note in the window that I'm going to read, because I know you're going to be talking about these next books. It says, "When you read *Lit*, you learn that her mother years later becomes active in a library book club and is excited to have Mary come in and speak

about them in *The Liars' Club*." So that's actually very funny. I know that you're going to talk about her other books.

LJM: I'm actually going to repeat a little bit of what you were saying in the sense that I noticed—I took notes as you did about where the arc of that very beginning story in the very first chapter and the first pages. It arcs all the way to—which is page 312 and 313—where her mother starts to talk about what happened and it is hooked up to that story about finding the wedding rings that were in the trunk and the story with that, which is losing those two children, which Brooke already talked about. But it's a big arc—it goes from beginning, we don't know what happened, and then we find all this stuff out at the extreme end of the book. The whole story is told there. But there's also the story told about that very night with Dr. Boudreau and the knife. She goes back and hooks up to that story as well.

What Mary tells the mother that the mother didn't remember and they together go over what happened. So it's really interesting, because we have seen the mother in all kinds of ways that aren't so complimentary, obviously, and in *The Liars' Club*—and yes, the mother goes on and lives again in a new relationship with her all the way to *Lit*. *Cherry* is mostly about—it also has the same people in it. It's about her coming of age and discovering sexuality and drugs. I read one reviewer that said—I guess it was an article or an interview where they talked about *Cherry* being a book where Mary wanted to write about adolescent female sexuality in a real way and not just have it be the subject of jokes or a kind of disrespectful toss-off of girls of that age. She wanted to talk about it as something that was a very real experience that young women go through and it's a stage of life that young women go through and wanted people to see it in a valid way through the eyes of a girl who ended up writing the book *Cherry*.

I thought that was very interesting that she was talking about that and really focused on doing that and that was the goal—I mean, there was probably more than one goal, but that was the theme and the goal of part of why she wrote *Cherry*. And then speaking the unspoken, which is implied and direct all the way through all the books, actually. All of the books are about silences. All of the books are about what you can't talk about—what it is not OK to talk about. She's grabbing words and imagery and trying to lay them down on the page to show her life, but I think there is a lot of universality to her books. I really liked the very, very end—the extreme last page. Brooke read part of it, where she's talking about driving with her mother and they're in this landscape that has fireflies. The metaphor of the fireflies—they've lived through all these horrible—the refinery air that's in that town and they've lived through a lot of things in the metaphors and so have we. We've lived through a lot of things. She uses some very beautiful, poetic

imagery there at the end to end the book. I think it's interesting to read both the very first pages of books and the very last pages of books. Just grab a few off the shelf and see what you discover there.

In *Lit*, she starts it off in the most amazing way, which is a letter to her son. She talks directly to him. I'm just going to read the very first paragraph: "Any way I tell this story is a lie, so I ask you to disconnect the device in your head that repeats at intervals how ancient and addled I am. It's true, that. At 50 to your 20, my brain is dimmer. Your engine of recall is way superior, as you've often pointed out." And then she goes on to talk about all the things he has reminded her of. But she ends up in this—it's almost like a prologue, but it's this letter to him where she talks about their relationship and why she's writing this book and it's like a testimony of her being lit on alcohol and how literature saves her, basically. She comes into the writing. She talks about how she starts to write *The Liars' Club* in *Lit*. So the subject of literature and the subject of alcohol and the subject of transformation—literally, she falls completely down like they say happens with people who are alcoholics. She describes what happens to her, which is all very—I'm sure that was hard to confront. And how she finds Jesus. She says, "Baby Jesus saved me." She says this in one of the interviews. After hearing all of this hard Texas swearing, it's a little surprising to hear her say that, but she means it. She did come to a religious conversion and she became a Catholic completely against anything she ever thought she could be.

The refusal to that call as well as the answering of the call to that conversion of transformation which was what she chose and which helped her goes through the last part of *Lit*. Having read all three books, actually we understand it. Whether we agree with it or not, it's really not our life to agree or disagree with. But does she make it something we can understand and be with, with her thought processes and what she reflects—there's a lot of reflection in *Lit*. There's a lot of confession in *Lit*. There's a lot of regret. Speaking of writing a lot of pages, Brooke—you already talked about this and I think I mentioned it last time too, so sorry if I'm repeating myself—but she threw out 800 pages here and 500 pages there. She kept throwing out chunks of it. She just had to keep writing her way to find a transformation and to find the end. That's how she had to do it. That's the way her process worked. So it seems to me that in each book, she had a different task and she had a different outcome. Anything you want to add?

BW: No, and I haven't read *Lit* and I need to. It's just so clear and I've heard people in reviews and talking about it that it's as if two different writers wrote these two books. What's interesting is that you can explore these different voices and the voice that you bring to one book might be very different than a voice that you bring to another book. So there's exploration and creativity in that.

LJM: Because you're different. And then in *Cherry*, most of it is written in the second person, which is unusual. It's done, but it's unusual. I do recommend all three of them.

BW: I'm going to just close tonight's webinar on the publishing world and Mary Karr's legacy and closing the class on this because it's an interesting time. It's an interesting time in publishing. I think that Mary Karr, along with a few others, really blew the door open on these kinds of memoirs and made them popular and made them possible. That really is the legacy, is that just the fact that a book like this could be published and that it would open up so much possibility for writers everywhere to explore and mine their personal truths and to give voice to the things that happen—to the ugly things that happen to us, things that are not OK and you talk about bearing witness and giving voice to things that need to be said and not keeping secrets. For so many memoirists—many memoirists that we work with—that is part of what compels them to do memoir in the first place, is that there's some sense of something not supposed to be told or not supposed to be said in a certain way.

The memoirist, of course, is the truth teller—is the one who has always wanted to explore something and who has been like, wait a second, this is not OK and I want to give voice to it and I want to share it and why isn't this OK? But of course then you're wracked with guilt and fear and all kinds of inner critics and demons that come up and try to sabotage you because of course you've been living with this angst your whole life, that it's not OK. So it's a complicated thing, but I also think that of course what's happened in these last 20-plus years is that there's been so much permission around it and so much of a culture of memoir, the phenomenon that allows people to do it. We are grateful for that and certainly think that it's very hopeful. And culturally, I think, also very, very healthy.

It is a lasting legacy and Linda Joy and I were written up in the *New York Times* in the fall of 2015 about this very topic—about the memoir phenomenon and about people wanting to write their legacies and the value of it. Linda Joy has spoken a lot to the healing impact of writing your personal story and that, like I said, is part of the legacy of people like Karr who have written these books that really forged new ground at the time. In the meantime, the publishing industry will publish a lot of these books and they have seen huge success. A lot of these coming of age memoirs in particular—there's this one, there's *The Glass Castle*—a lot of these books that we've taught, actually. Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*—these best-selling memoirs that came out in the 1990s, and I think they really rocked people's worlds. And why were they so impactful? I think people saw themselves in these books—saw other people maybe with different experiences but with similar kinds of tragedy. I think for someone like Mary Karr who wrote so openly about rape and about sexual molestation, for a lot of women it was huge that it gave voice to something

that's happening to women all the time and that is so silent. So all of these things were very groundbreaking.

In the meantime, the publishing industry has reacted a bit in the sense that it maybe has felt a little bit like too much of a flood of these kinds of memoirs coming out. There are a lot of people who write memoir who feel that they have the next *Glass Castle*, the next whatever—it's interesting, because *The Liars' Club* is so unique in how it's executed that I don't see very many people trying to compare their work to Mary Karr's whereas I see a lot of people trying to compare their work to Jeannette Walls' and I'm not sure why. Maybe it's just because the nature of how Jeannette Walls did vignettes and because of her story. Again, one of the things in the interview that I found really interesting was that someone had described Mary Karr's work as a great example of what it's like to grow up in America—something that simple. And Mary Karr was just like, yeah. That is a coming of age story—it's of growing up wherever you grow up. But it's interesting to look at what you're writing and to try to figure out where you belong on the shelf. I recommend this to memoirists everywhere—you belong on the memoir shelf, but beyond that, who are the people whose stories are like yours? You want to know the answer to that question. You don't want to be writing in a bubble; there are people who have come before you. Certainly Mary Karr has the story that she has, and if you're writing coming of age then maybe these kinds of stories really are the kinds of stories that are going to impact you. But Linda and I are teaching a mastering memoir course, and in that class we're using *A Million Little Pieces* and *Eat, Pray, Love* and *Autobiography of a Face* and *Devotion* by Dani Shapiro and *Drinking: A Love Story*, and it goes on and on and on. There are all kinds of memoirs and not all of them have trauma.

There are adventure memoirs and all kinds of things that happen, so you just need to figure out what your particular niche is. And then if you do have memoir that has abuse, trauma, and dysfunction, or all three, what I'm seeing lately—culturally—is that these things are weaving their way into memoirs in a way that is not front and center. I actually think that that's what Mary Karr did. I think that although those two abuse scenes are horrid and they're exquisitely detailed, they're not so much—they're actually not a through thread if you think about it. The through threads of her books—this book, in particular—are much more about growing up, much more about her parents and the dynamic of her parents. These two episodes, yes, they punctuate her childhood for sure, but they're not thematic. They're not something that informs who she is. I felt that way very strongly, actually. I think that she was informed by the experiences, for sure, but I don't think that the rape and the molestation inform who she is. She's said as much in the interview, which I found really interesting as well.

She just said, you know, these things happened to me, but they're not who I am. Not everybody gets off so easy. Some people are very much informed by an experience like that, and of course it depends on the nature of the experience. But I think that shows up in her book and I've seen it in other books as well, where abuse and trauma and dysfunction are touched upon lightly. I don't mean lightly in the sense—like, Mary Karr's is not light, but it's not the focal point of the book. At this point in time, I think that publishing has memoir fatigue and at the same time, they're looking to acquire memoir. So it's a very complicated terrain to navigate as a memoirist. But I also think they have trauma fatigue. And yet, I think if you have trauma in your book, it's sort of expected. But again, to touch it in little moments. If you're thinking about the tapestry of your memoir, if you have trauma as sort of the front and center thing, that's your story—it's your story to tell.

But you might consider—if trauma or abuse or whatever is the primary theme, that it is going to be difficult in the publishing industry. That's just a fact. And maybe there's a second memoir in you. I don't want to say don't write the abuse memoir, because for some people that is their story and that's the story they need to write. But maybe you write that story and then you get that out of you and maybe the second memoir has another kind of dimension. These kinds of memoirs, like Mary Karr's memoir and other memoirs like it, they're national bestsellers, I think, because they're more coming of age stories, not because they are abuse and trauma stories per Se. When I write here what's next, I caution memoirists. On the one hand, I'm the biggest memoir champion ever, along with Linda Joy.

We champion memoirists to finish, to write, to publish, and the publishing climate is really tough right now. So I think you want to write—I always say, what's going to happen if you don't get traditionally published? Are you going to publish anyway? Most of the clients who come to me these days say yes, and I say excellent, then I want to work with you. Because if all of your eggs are in the basket of traditional publishing, you're probably going to set yourself up for disappointment. It's very difficult to get a traditional publishing contract as a memoirist. That said, it happens—you never know. You could hit the right thing at the right time and that's great. And then I think it's incredibly important for your own journey to have a backup plan, and there are lots and lots of ways to get published today. Hybrid publishing is on the rise—obviously I have my publishing company, She Writes Press, which is hybrid, and then there's self-publishing and there are all kinds of other ways to get published. So Linda Joy and I are both big proponents of moving forward and of just considering that there's not just one way. So we wish you luck on that front if it's very far off or in the near future. On that note, I think I'm going to segue here, Linda Joy, unless you have something to add about the publishing climate from your experience.

LJM: I agree with everything you said. It's as simple as that. That's been what I've observed in all kinds of situations.

BW: And you never know. I mean, publishing I kind of think has become like the lottery. I don't think there's rhyme or reason, per Se, to what gets published or why, and that can be very frustrating. But even if you win the lottery, sometimes it comes at a cost. So it is complicated and for those of you who are closer to the publishing journey, I also recommend my proposal writing book, *How to Sell Your Memoir*. That will help you at least get your best foot forward for publishers if you're wanting to "sell" yourself, which is what you need to do these days. We want to invite you to our six month course. This is a tiny bit of a sell, but first of all, thank you for being in this course. We're hugely grateful and we're just going to take two seconds here to invite you to the six month-long course which is interactive—I think that's the most important thing to say. We've kind of been teaching more lecture-style here and taking questions at the end, but in the class there's a lot of sharing. You're assigned to one of us as your mentor. We read your homework, we comment on your homework, you are submitting about five thousand words a month and getting comments on that. It is a lot of fun and I feel like the classes are just getting tighter and tighter. We're pushing a lot of amazing people through this class. I'm so impressed by the caliber of work, but you don't have to be far along in your memoir. You could be at the very beginning—you could be anywhere, and that's totally great.

LJM: One of the things that I love about teaching the Write Your Memoir in Six Months course is the layers of depth that we can get into that you just can't get into when you're in a shorter class or without the ongoing—I think it's a pressure, but a good pressure—that a class brings. Because you need to turn in homework regularly and that pushes you to deal with your process—your writing process, which can only be dealt with by dealing with it. That sounds like circular talking, but I know because I'm writing a second memoir myself and as much as I think about it or even imagine outlining, and I've talked to other people who do this—they have an outline, they have a website, they have a this and they have a that, but they don't actually have much writing. So their ideas are so good, but when we get them contained into a coaching course or a workshop like this, then the ideas begin to blossom into fruition. It's a wonderful thing to be a part of as a teacher.

BW: And interesting just to look at accountability, too. For any of you who want and/or need that for pushing you to the next step—I know I need that very badly, actually. I need someone at my back just being like, this is happening, in more areas of my life than just writing. Let's take your questions, please.

Feel free to ask about the course, of course, but also any questions that are up about Mary Karr, and it doesn't have to only be tonight.

LJM: We've noticed that the inner critic starts to show up after people have signed up. That's part of when they freak out, like oh my gosh, what have I done? Is this really going to be a book that anybody cares about? All that inner critic stuff shows up, and this is why we talk about containment and accountability and support, because really, that all gets dealt with in the course. Your inner critic is part of what we talk about if you look at the syllabus on the website. What we help you with in the coaching piece as well as skill development. What's fun for us, I think, is that we have been teaching this now for two and a half years and our focus keeps changing. We're always changing the syllabus, so we realized that people need this more than they needed that. We've changed what our teaching is because we're tuning into what people are needing. I think that makes it really fun for us. We sit down and do creative sessions.

BW: It's great. Let me share Betty's comment here—we'll kind of toggle back and forth between Mary Karr and our course. She says, "I was lucky enough to be part of a two-week summer workshop with Mary Karr. To encourage your listeners, she could not believe the quality of writing and introspection that we adult students brought to our memoirs. She said the small group they accepted into the Syracuse MFA program are the best young writers, but we older folks just blew them out of the water." Well no question, Betty. It's so interesting to me, because I think a lot of young people go into these memoir programs—these very prestigious memoir programs, and they haven't lived enough of a life. I talk about this sometimes, because people ask me, have you written a memoir? I haven't, and I'm 38. I will someday, but I feel like I'm still in it. I'm writing a lot and sometimes I write personal stuff, and so my memoir expertise is really from having edited and acquired hundreds and hundreds of memoirs and just really developed an expertise in this area. I just so believe that. The richest material that I see is with my students who have lived to the other side of something. I think when you're trying to write and you're still in it, it's OK, but it's hard. It is hard, and that was what I was mentioning earlier—the client I mentioned earlier is 70 and she's still in the muck of her situation.

LJM: We can still be in it at any age.

BW: You can be in it forever. Sally is seeing another little ad—thank you, Sally—for our October course. We're doing a live weekend in Berkeley, so if you guys want to come to Berkeley in October—October 17th and 18th—it's me and Linda Joy, but we also have these incredible panelists, published memoirists,

the publisher from Seal Press, and literary agents. It's going to be pretty extraordinary. A memoir weekend—we're teaching craft, process, and publishing, and it's going to be up here. Linda Joy and I live here and it's $299 for the early bird special. We're pretty psyched about it. It's at magicofmemoir2015.com.

LJM: That's going to be really fun. Every time we teach, we learn new stuff, and then what we do is we turn around and try to share it with more people. We decided last year it was time to think about an in-person conference, because we want to see everybody's faces. We're looking forward to it.

BW: Marcia wants to know how old you are. Are you sharing?

LJM: Me? I'm 70.

BW: She just had her 70th birthday, but she's not the client I'm talking about.

LJM: Speaking of the wisdom part—and I'm writing a second memoir. It is interesting. I'm now a confessed serial memoirist.

BW: I think that's the perfect title for your blog post: Confessions of a Serial Memoirist. That's great. I really can't speak strongly enough about—this question of what you're waiting for, this is not just about our course. Our course is helpful no matter where you are in your writing process, for sure. A lot of people think that they need to be farther along in their writing in order to join us, but I think in fact it's probably the opposite. That really, if you have been sitting with your memoir for a year or more, you ought to find a structure whether it's our class or something else. It could be a writing group, it could be one-on-one coaching, but what I know to be true of memoirists is that I truly believe it's the hardest genre. Because it is so personal—you're writing about yourself, so forget is the writing good. That's just one layer of the demons that come up. Then it's like, oh, holy shit, I'm exposing everything about myself, I'm doing this, is anybody going to care? This is so self-indulging and blah, blah, blah.

The number of things that we hear coming from people just in terms of the inner critic alone is enough to paralyze anyone. And then you're trying to do good writing and then you're supposed to know all these craft points that we teach from takeaways to through threads to writing a good scene, and so it's like you're juggling 13 balls. You come and like you're supposed to start juggling by learning how to juggle two, and then three, and people kind of thrust themselves in there and then they're like, oh my God, I had

no idea what I was getting into. So then all of a sudden five years have passed and you're still with your memoir.

LJM: What happened to me years ago was that I didn't know Brooke and I didn't know how to really write when I first started my first memoir. I did take classes throughout the years and that was, of course, helpful, but it wasn't until I had both accountability and structure and enough craft under my belt that I could really get it all the way to a book. So what we're doing—or what I do—I was teaching in other areas before Brooke and I were teaching together—is to try to offer tools to help you get to the core of your story and your memoir and get to a book if you want to write a book sooner rather than later. So it is, I believe, objectively speaking—even though I'm one of the teachers—I do feel that it helps people get there faster.

BW In our classes, we're going to be talking about things that might be interesting for you guys to think about—some solutions and ways to think about finishing if it's on your bucket list and things that people—strategies for that. And then also just some of this mentality and mindset of people kind of tinkering away in a hobby-like way on their memoir. It's fine—that's totally legit, but how and why to get serious about it. It needs to be more than a hobby, and I find this actually with people who want to publish and who end up self-publishing. The people who succeed are the people who really take it on like it's a new business. Like I'm going to really immerse myself in this—I'm going to honor it like a business, get invested in it like a business, and not to make your memoir take on too much heaviness or something, but you want to really "slave away" at the craft of it. It's so important.

It is an honor to be able to write, execute, and publish a memoir. I just think that if you're going to honor it and really treat it how it's supposed to be and to write and publish the book you want to write and that you owe it to yourself to write, you need to become an expert. That's just how it is. And you can become an expert. Marcia, it doesn't matter if you're 71—it's a good time to become an expert in something new. So I think that's what's exciting to me, is just watching people have these huge leaps. It's awesome. We have a lot of emerging experts.

LJM: It's never too late, really.

BW: Exactly. Any other questions tonight? I will send the Mary Karr interview that I watched this week, and thank you—I'm sorry I'm not remembering who sent it to me. Maybe you'll remind me. Maybe it was Judy or Susan. I appreciate it, because it was excellent and I recommend that you guys watch it. It

was fascinating to watch her talk and just to get a sense of her personality after having read the book and taught the course.

LJM: It's fun to read these extra things and watch videos and read interviews and I think we learn a lot. It's very illuminating. People are having fun talking about different ages here. This is good.

BW: I'm noticing that. Everyone now is sharing their age in the chat window, so that's perfect.

LJM: I'm glad I did it. I don't feel funny about my age, though. I don't have any problem with it. I just feel that if we're alive and talking and creating and teaching and reading and engaged, it really doesn't matter how old anybody is, young or old. We're all doing life here, so more power to everybody, young and old. That's my opinion.

BW: You bring your wisdom. All right everyone, thank you. You guys have been great. We so appreciate you being in this course and we will be in touch, or be in touch with us if you have further questions.

LJM: Thank you all so much for joining us and being with us on this journey. It was really fun and of course I always learn—both of us do—always learn from doing the teaching, so it's a wonderful opportunity for us as well.

BW: Yeah, it is. Thank you. Take care, everyone. Goodnight. Write on.

LJM: Write on!