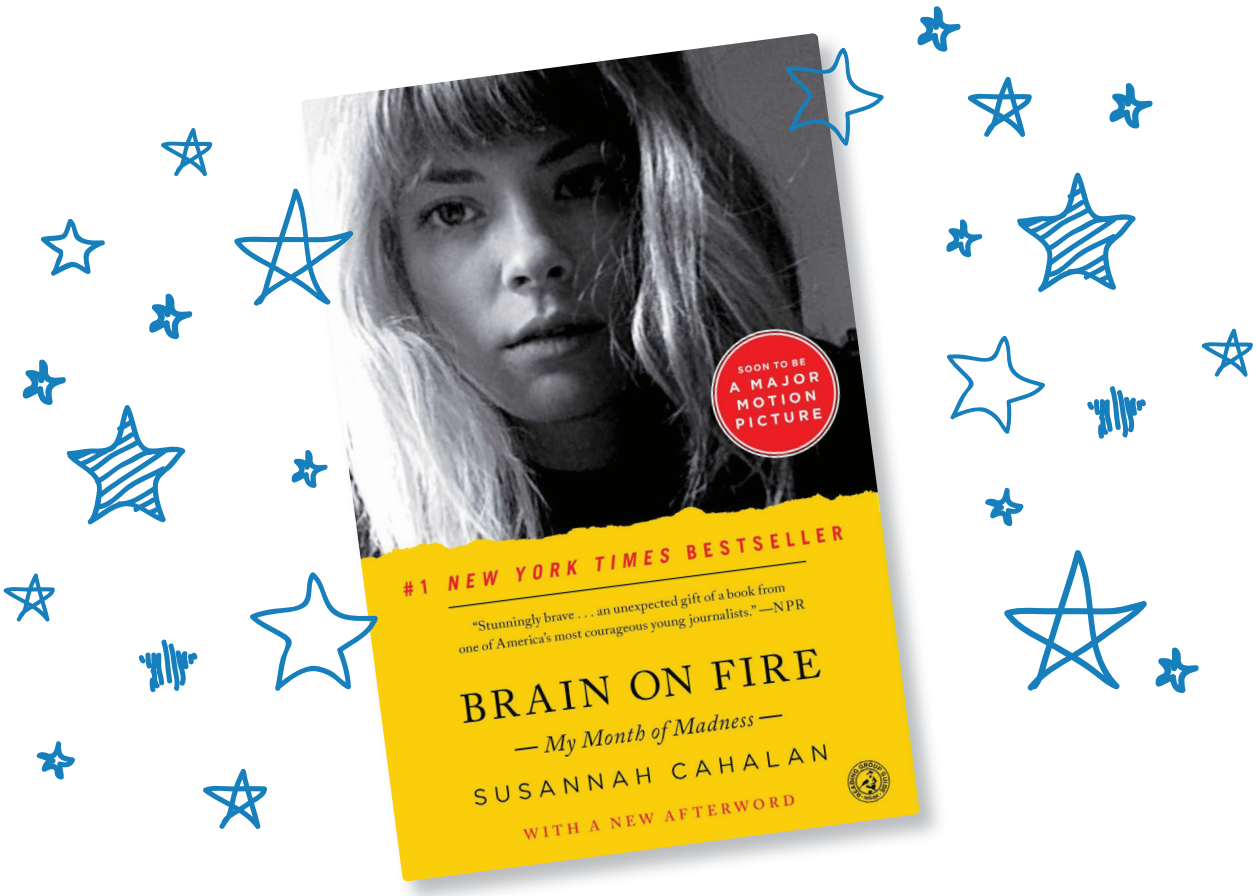

what made *Brain on Fire* a best-selling memoir?*

by Susannah Cahalan

National Association of Memoir Writers

Write Your Memoir in Six Months
AN EXCLUSIVE AUTHOR MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

WHAT MADE *BRAIN ON FIRE* A BEST-SELLING MEMOIR?

Week One: Writing What You Don't Remember

Brooke Warner: Hi everybody. This is Brooke Warner and hi, Linda Joy.

Linda Joy Myers: Hi, Linda Joy here. Welcome everybody.

BW: We're very much looking forward to class tonight and want to start out by saying A) this is a fantastic topic, *Writing What You Don't Remember,* and I think it really resonates for people.

And B) We received a lot of emails ahead of time with many questions, and I would say also frustration and confusion about how Susannah wrote her book, and why she did what she did and I think that's great. I sort of loved that there's controversy here. Someone even signed up for the class who said she didn't like the book at all. I think that's great too, because there's a lot to be learned from what you don't like and so we are attempting to weave in some of your concerns and questions into the teaching tonight, but then we have a full twenty minutes at the end of the conversation. We want to hear from you so don't hesitate to put your questions into the question pane as we're talking and if we need to stop we will. Otherwise, we'll put those questions in the parking lot for the end of class. Anything you want to address, Linda Joy, before we start here?

LJM: I just echo what you said about how interesting memory and truth are, and what these challenges bring up. This is what memoirists struggle with. It makes sense that there's a lot of questions, so we look forward to exploring them.

BW: The first slide tonight: the first topic is *How To Free Yourself From The Burden of Needing to Remember Everything.* I am going to start by talking about ways to free yourself from the burden. I think the number one thing we see in our students, and this particularly comes up in our six-month class, and it also comes up for both of us with our coaching clients, is that you can't and do not remember everything. And if you're writing in scene, you may have a very gauzy memory of something that happened, and the need to recreate it is undeniable.

I like to say you didn't walk around with a tape recorder strapped to your body all through your life. To write your memoir, you certainly have to pay attention to what you think is true or what you interpret from the events. Now, more and more memoirists these days are using disclaimers that will say something like *this is the best of the author's recollection* or *these are the events as interpreted by the author,* which give you some sort of cushion there for people who might accuse you. I think it's hugely important that you allow yourself to understand that no memoirist on the face of the planet remembers everything, even memoirists like Augusten Burroughs who claims to have a photographic memory.

I want to read something from Mary Karr in her book, *The Art of Memoir,* because she addresses truth right up front.

"No writer can impose his own standards onto any other nor claim to speak for the whole genre. I would defend anybody's right to move the line for veracity in a memoir, though I argue the reader has the right to know." So, what she's essentially saying is that you can move that line of veracity but you need to let the reader know what you're doing.

Susannah does this in *Brain on Fire* quite a lot. She tells us straight out, *I don't remember the events that proceed from this point forward* and so she's not duping you. You don't feel like *oh, well, this doesn't make sense because she couldn't possibly remember this stuff.* She's telling you she doesn't remember it. The other thing—a few of you had questions or feelings like *there's just no way that she would have remembered what that felt like.* I want to caution you guys a little bit on the degree to which you impose your own experiences onto other people's experiences. Certainly, that happened with James Frey. A lot of people who had had dental surgeries said there's just no way that you can have the kind of dental work that he had without Novocain, and I think that that was absolutely true. That led to doubting his claims.

Some of you may have experienced certain kinds of similarities to what Susannah went through, and I think this is always the danger. I personally felt this way about *The Glass Castle*. I felt that, for Jeannette Walls, there were certain parts of her early memory from ages three or four. I just simply didn't believe that she could remember as much as she claimed when she was that age. Then I spoke to other people who said yes, absolutely I remember when I was three, and I remember this, that, or the other, so I was imposing myself onto Jeannette Walls saying, *look, I don't remember when I'm three so she can't*. We

need to be careful about that kind of judgment that we impose onto other people's memoirs. It's okay not to believe people by all means, but I just want to put it out there to ask what the measure is of truth.

I want to read one more thing from Mary Karr.

She says, "Truth may have become a foggy, fuzzy nother area, but untruth is simple; making up events with the intention to deceive. You know the difference between a vague memory and a clear one, and the vague ones either get left out or labeled dubious. It's the clear ones that matter most anyway because they're the ones you've nursed and worried over and talked through and wondered about your whole life, and you're seeking the truth of memory, your memory and character, not of unbiased history."

What I like about what she says here is that there are going to be vague memories and there are going to be dubious memories, and you can leave them out or you can label them dubious. You can say, *This was a time in my life that frankly I have shut out due to post-traumatic stress, but here's what I know and here's what I've pieced together. Here's what I understand about someone who goes through these kinds of experiences and come out the other side.*

So we want to encourage you to explore creative truths. Use your imagination to fill in the blanks. This is not the same as lying. Lying, as Mary Karr says, "is simple, it's making up events with the intention to deceive."

You're not doing that. You're not making up events. You're saying these things happened. *I don't remember the exact parameters of my emotional experience,* but you can fill in the blanks, and emotional truth is what we're after here. Susannah went way beyond that. She went way beyond filling in the blanks. She went into other people's points of view. She went into research. She went into hypothesizing and supposing, but I want to be very clear here that she told the reader that she was going to do that. And for that I absolutely give her carte blanche to be able to explore the truth of her experience in that way.

I want to ask you all to address your fears and concerns on this point and think about what's coming up for you. Here are a few. Perhaps if you feel so inclined you can put into the question window other things that are true for you that I didn't put on this list—not doing it right, being afraid of the fallout, the memoir police, perfectionism. What if your memory of an event is different than someone else's, and

then this other one where you don't feel anything. I listed that on the slide because one of you emailed tonight saying *I don't remember, I don't remember how I felt during that time so how I can I write about it with any authenticity?* These are concerns, they're fears, they're real, but they are also judgments you have about yourself.

Who am I to write this story if I don't feel it? Who am I to write this story if my memory of an event is different from someone else's? Who am I to write this story if I don't get it perfect, if I don't remember exactly what happened, if I am going to hurt someone's feelings, if I'm not going to get the story right? But again, let's go back to what Mary Karr says, "You're seeking the truth of memory, your memory and character, not of unbiased history."

So this is hugely important. You write through the lens of your experience. And, creativity and creative nonfiction do play a role in memoir. So what we always want to do is give our memoir students permission—permission to explore and dive deep and get messy with your emotional truth without compromising and moving into crossing the line into deceit. These are two very, very different things, but it's absolutely something that every single memoirist struggles with. Any personal reactions on this, Linda Joy? You've done it yourself.

LJM: Yes, and I think that there is this part of the fear: *am I really doing it right?* And the other thing that comes up is *how will people judge me*? We all know that, as memoirists, we already have a huge list of what we think people might say to judge us, whether it's family members or our own selves. It's really too easy to get embroiled in so many doubts, self-doubt, and worry that we don't write anything. What we're trying to do in our classes is to get you to keep writing, for one thing, but the other is to show you that there are many stages to writing a memoir.

The early stages are just *what the heck am I writing, what do I remember, how can I even get anything down* and it's a very insecure stage. We want to really support you that you just go ahead and get messy in the first draft. Things get worked out over time. I think some people hope or think that *well, okay, I've got to figure all this out right now and then that's what's going to be published* even though it's not true. I still think that we get into that kind of tangle.

Let's look at some of these ways to help with these issues, and many of them are things that Susannah did. We've been teaching for a long time, and I've been doing some of these exercises with people for

many years. I'm a therapist also—a therapist to help people with what they're trying to articulate about their story in sessions with me, and also for memoirists who sometimes have to back into the story they are trying to sort out.

One technique is to free write what you remember. Free write things that you've been thinking about all of your life like Brooke talked about earlier, and that Mary Karr also talked about. Start with the easier end of getting things sorted out, which is freewriting what you do remember and getting some words on the page. A lot of people think they have to figure it all out first. I used to think that I had to figure everything out before I wrote anything at all, and I was really surprised to find out in one of my classes that it wasn't true. I'd come from academia so I had training to write short and know ahead of time. The other thing I discovered was that I found out that I didn't really know what I was going to write until I started writing. No matter how much I wrote in my head, it was always different when I started actually writing, and that's true for pretty much everybody. I realized that I was just wasting my time and spinning my wheels by pre-thinking and overthinking it.

Let the writing happen, just let it happen, receive it. You may not know where it came from. Sometimes it's going to be messy, but it's part of the creative process to be messy and not be sure. I don't know anybody who painted a picture, wrote a symphony, or wrote a book who was completely clear about everything about the process. The process is for us as writers is getting words on the page, putting ideas, images, and moments down on the page.

Sometimes it can be overwhelming to draw from journals, but it can help with the memory piece. Depending on what's in those journals, you can decide how much you want to read from your past. It's not a matter of putting your journal into your memoir—we're not saying to do that. We're just talking about journals as a way of remembering and it's just amazing. I recently did this. I read journals from forty years ago, and I have a good memory, but there were some things I'd forgotten. I was surprised, and it worked well for me to be reminded of who I was and who I was trying to be, and what some of the challenges were. I'd sort of forgotten how deeply emotional that period was, so I found it very helpful.

When we draw from journals—let's say they are quite a few years ago when we wrote them—I think it develops a compassion for who we were. Then judgments may keep coming up about who we were, but

if we read our words and remember we were much younger and vulnerable, and perhaps had post-traumatic stress, we can have compassion for that person, and I think that eases the judgmental part.

Writing prompts: There are some great exercises out in the world. Do a free write for the writing prompt, which means you don't pause, you write "I remember" and throw down immediate moments of memory that show up or whatever comes up. Whatever it is just write it down. Do it for ten minutes and see what comes out.

Another way to back into this is to write "I don't want to remember." There are things we do not want to remember and things that we don't actually quite remember, but they're on the edge of our consciousness and so some of this free writing stuff can really help us dig below cognitive memory. Some there's theory that we have an unconscious mind or a pre-conscious mind and in there resides dream fragments and other clues to what we might be remembering. Again, you don't have to sign off on this and say "Okay, this is the truth and this is the only truth." These are just parts of your process and we encourage you to feel freer to do that.

The other technique that Susannah did is interviewing others. It's up to you if you want to interview other people in your story. You might feel it will just confuse you, but on the other hand if you just want to get a a new angle of the story, you want to find out that this person said this and this person thought that and this person had this data. Until we explore it we don't know where we are with that. Maybe some of it you go *no, that did not happen that way* and with others you think *oh my gosh, wow, now I do remember this other thing. I had forgotten and it stimulates my memory.* I think it's fun to get creative about how to do this interviewing and I'm going to talk about that later on.

BW: There is a kind of unconventional storytelling possible for the memory challenged. *There are other ways to access your memory when you're feeling compromised,* is how I would frame it. I do think that's what happens. Writers can feel paralyzed around their process. The memoirists I've worked with who have the least number of qualms about this stuff, about exploring their emotional truths, end up having the best time with their memoirs.

In our long course, we started talking about the value of having fun and playing and getting messy, the things we've been talking about tonight. A writer in that course had a big "aha" and she emailed me about it later and said, *you know what I realize is that I allow my fiction to be fun and I don't allow my*

memoir writing to be fun. The reason is because there's so much more "freedom" in her novel writing and that she felt like she could bring some of that "freedom" into her memoir writing. It did create a major breakthrough for her for the rest of the course, and hopefully afterwards too.

When you write about what something would or might have been like, this is a technique that you sometimes see in memoir. You want to be careful because you need to be able to write about what it would have been like or what it might have been like for yourself in free writing, but if you do that too much in your memoir you will exhaust your reader. The reader doesn't want to hear over and over what something *might have been* like. You can preface it with some context leading into a scene if you really feel that you're not being authentic unless you admit *I don't actually remember what happened here.* I honestly think that that can be handled in a disclaimer.

That's my feeling and I've worked on countless memoirs. When I think about my own upbringing and I had these next door neighbors, and Linda Joy has talked about this with her mother as well, but I had these next door neighbors who I had countless interactions with over and over through the course of my youth. They were like my grandparents. If I were to write a scene about what happened with them it would absolutely be a composite, and that would be perfectly fine because things that would have happened in their house on any given night, or that I would have gone over to borrow eggs or flour or sugar or anything, I don't think I could pinpoint those events exactly to October 1984, but I can absolutely say that these things happened over and over again, and I know exactly how my neighbor would have reacted, what she looked like, and what she would have been wearing. Those are the truths and it's a reconstruction of a scene that would have happened.

We talked about entering into the point of view of another. This is definitely unconventional but we're seeing it more and more, so much so that Linda Joy is doing it for her own second memoir. When we started teaching four years ago we would say *no, you don't get to do that*. It was only done in the rarest of circumstances but now as we've been reading and teaching, we're seeing that more and more people are going into other people's points of view. You have to be very skilled when you do this because you can head jump to the point of disorienting your reader, but if you handle this the right way, it can work. In Susannah's case she handled it by telling you *I don't remember what happened* and then all of a sudden she's in someone's point of view and you get it. You understand what happened there that she

was interviewing people and she knows that her parents must have felt certain things. As soon as you say that someone feels something or knows something, if you have an innate sense of who they are or what they're feeling or knowing, and you're no longer in your point of view. You're saying something that you can't know about them unless you enter into their thoughts or their emotions, and that's why it's not allowed in memoir because you're doing a first-person account.

Many people are doing family histories, now. They're moving into the points of view of their close relatives. I believe that it's more okay than I used to think it was and today I think it's okay to do as long as you know exactly what you're doing, and as long as you give really clear indicators to the reader that you're going to do it or that you're departing from your own experience.

With regards to fictionalizing your own story, I would say to explore it, try it on. To my point earlier about this woman who ended up having fun who was struggling through her memoir, it was awful that she wasn't writing, and she wasn't doing it because every time she sat down it was just this burden on her. The fiction was fun and so, of course, she was being drawn to it and she was having a lot better time with it.

So what does it feel like if you fictionalize your own story? There can be a line in the sand: *this stuff would have, could have, probably happened, maybe not exactly in this way* or *this I know did not happen*. That's the difference between okay and not okay in memoir. When I talk about fictionalizing here, you can make up an outfit that someone was wearing; make up dialogue. You remember what things looked like, but maybe you need to fictionalize a certain element of the scene around you to add more sensory detail. That is not the same as this didn't exist and I know it didn't exist. To Mary Karr's point, *I'm making this up out of whole cloth*. They're very different experiences and you guys know the difference between what we're talking about, but memoirists tend to compartmentalize themselves into a tiny little hole/corner as if *over here I can only tell the absolute truth*. Well guess what, you will not finish your book because there is no absolute truth. No one has a perfect memory.

The final point here, emotional truth is what matters so set yourself free. I really, really want to encourage you guys to do that. It is about freeing yourself. Linda Joy has some inquiries to end class tonight that's going to get into this even more deeply—it's a hugely important thing. It's letting go of what some of those earlier concerns and fears are that I addressed so you can look at that stuff and say

okay, yes, I feel scared that I'm not going to get it right. Yes, I feel scared that someone is going to ding me, that I'm going to hurt someone's feelings, that I'm not going to tell it the way that someone else remembers it, the way my sister remembers it, the way my best friend remembers it. All that stuff is insidious and it's very creativity killing. You may need to meditate through this or whatever you need to do. These are some of the points Linda Joy is going to go into so I'll segue, but whatever you can do to set yourself free, you're going to have a much more pleasurable experience as a result.

LJM: Right. I do want to say that I'm always impressed with how hard memoirists that we work with try to get things right. Their effort is to be as accurate as possible and be honest, but what we're also noticing is that there tends to be a superego attack where you know they're very, very worried about it and it does create a kind of a constipation where it's really hard to write anything if we're so constricted. So we hope that this whole discussion will help you. I want to make a few more points here about how you can continue to explore your memory.

We're noting on the slide a couple of wonderful techniques, several here actually, photos and movies—maybe your family or you have photo albums. One thing I did back years ago I was trying to get stories out of older people who weren't very keen on it—they were very close-mouthed. They would make certain comments, and I could tell there was a story behind their judgmental comments. I wanted to know what it was, but I couldn't ask them directly. I remember the one time I was in Iowa and all my relatives were in their sixties and seventies, and I got out a tape recorder and put it on the table. They all just sat there and stared at it and nobody said a word. I mean, they wouldn't talk at all. So that was the wrong technique.

Then I realized an informal discussion over the photo album would be a good idea, with me just being curious—who was in this photo? What happened to them? Where was my grandmother then? There were lots of times I didn't know where she was. Those questions got stories coming out or at least a speculation and it was very, very helpful. I did forty years of research, whether it was direct or indirect research, and the photos really helped.

They didn't have movies but many families do have home movies and so then that's another way of reconnecting if you're lucky enough to have that. The other thing to consider is movies of the era—and music and images from the era that you grew up in. There's an amazing amount of a sort of semi-

remembered feeling about certain decades, certain songs that bring up a memory for you. They say fragrance is the strongest thing that stimulates memory but so does music. I recently got back from London and there was an exhibit about the sixties. You could just almost see the memories flowing out as people hooked into the music. You remember where you were and what you were doing when some of these songs were popular. Some writers I know write to music from the era. You can also go online and Google anything really, but the music and the images from the era and the movies from that time are all there. Immerse yourself in that, it's not like you'll get factual truth out of it, but you're going to get a feeling and you can free write. I suggest you do these things and free write your impressions. Again, it's just getting words on the page.

Part of retrieving memory is to visualize certain scenes where you think you remember, or you know something happened and you try to get it from your body. There's a lot of evidence that our bodies are remembering more than our focused memory is remembering, which I believe is true. You want to see if you can dig into what these subtleties are. I talk about it in some other writing that I've done as listening into the body. How you listen to what your body remembers? You can ask questions directly and free write. There are writing exercises. We're going to do one in a minute, but another one is to dialogue with different parts of your body. This all can happen in the sense of a kind of meditation or freewriting again.

Self-hypnosis. These other techniques, self-hypnosis and meditation, they are ways of listening. They are ways of tuning in. We are all so focused on the forward part of the brain, the frontal lobe, the cognitive part, which is very important, but we need to tune into the subtleties of things that are half remembered or dreamlike. There are movies that explore the dreamlike aspects of our minds. See if you can find some of those. You can Google these things.

And then of course, meditation. I know people who always find a quiet time and a quiet place before they start writing, and they get centered in their body. It can be extremely informal. You can just be sitting on the floor or on the couch. You can light a candle if you like that kind of thing, but if you don't want to get all fancy about it you don't have to do anything special. You just close your eyes and you can set your intentionality to do your free writes or do your research. Then do it in just a five minute meditation. It does not have to be a big huge deal. You don't have to read a book on meditation first and

learn about it. Just close your eyes and breathe and ask yourself *what do I need to express now*? *What do I need to express in this moment?* A few moments after that just pick up your pen or your computer and just start writing. These kinds of practices, whether it's for your memoir or just your journal writing, can be really, really helpful. You want to get that pressured feeling away from you, and you want to have the invitation and the inquiry which is what we're going to look at next. You want to have the writing coming from curiosity and inquiry and not some kind of pressure to be right, to be correct, and to come up with exactitudes. So let's go to the next points and the writing exercise.

We want to invite you into this inquiry. You can choose either one of these.

Start with *what if I remembered this, what would it be like*. Whatever is on your mind. It can be about a certain vague memory or vague sense of something. Something you don't quite remember, but you wish you could remember better, or maybe it's about context or around a certain memory. What else was going on. Whatever fits for you and I'm going to time. It. Let's do three minutes. When the timer goes off then we'll go to the next one, which is: *if I never remember does that mean I don't have a story*?

This is just a free write. This is what people are worried about a lot and this is why they get all caught up. So, however this is relevant for you, whatever your worries are, whatever you're concerned about not remembering, you can ask *does it mean I don't have a story*. You can say *what else is my story? Maybe I don't remember this, but where else can my story go? Where else can I go with this?* Just be creative about how you enter into that. So I'm going to start the timer for the first exercise.

…We hope these writing exercises will help you. We're not going to be sharing today. We're going to move to questions, but you might play with some of these ways to back into memory and see what happens. I really wish you the best with doing some freewriting exercise. We find it can be so helpful.

BW: All right, thank you all. So let's go to some of the questions that are coming up for people. If you want to you can raise your hand in this webinar and I can unmute you, or you can put a note in the question box.

Question: Through some extreme experiences I lived in PTSD for many years. My struggle around my memoir is how to express being in PTSD while the truth is I didn't feel much. This is not a fear of

feeling much, but it's that the experience itself is not feeling; therefore, the reader does not feel enough. Do you have any suggestions or solutions or tricks for this?

BW: This is very similar to the question that Cora sent over by email about not remembering the feelings around losing her daughter, which is certainly a form of trauma. Yes, I think absolutely the reader needs to feel, that's true, but it's also important, and we covered this in our *Glass Castle* course. We talked about the value of being dispassionate. That doesn't mean not going into the feelings, but what's very hard is there's a fine line between being kind of messy in your feelings so the reader feels like they have to take care of you, or that they're worried that you're not going to be okay.

On the other side, which I think you're addressing Charlene, is maybe you've gotten feedback that people aren't feeling enough and so you're not getting deep enough into that messy feeling, but the truth is that you don't have access to it. I think, again, this is a good exercise for the "would -- might" you know what "might" it had felt like, what "would" it have felt like and if you can read other peoples accounts and/or you can talk about what it's like to be in PTSD. You can talk about the gauzy lack of access and then you can also reference what other people feel. You can say that *people have told me this is what it feels like. When I've been in conversation with people who have had this experience, this is what they have access to.* Maybe you can even say something like *I feel jealous or I feel grateful that I haven't had those experiences*. So there's a realm of access that we have as writers that I think sometimes we feel is off limits to us because it's not our direct experience, and so those are some solutions that I have for that kind of thing. Hopefully that helps.

I do want to address—we have lot of people feeling like Susannah was not possibly remembering things that she wrote about. I just want to bring this up by way of example from someone who sent an email because it shows exactly what she does and what Mary Karr says about informing the reader.

The email that came was specifically pointing to page forty at the bottom of the page when she talks about her seizure and she says,

"Finally, he jumped into action though he'd never seen a seizure before, he knew what to do. He had laid me down moving my head to the side so that I wouldn't choke and reached for his phone to dial 911." And so the point that you were making with this question, Catherine, is that she would not have remembered that experience then but she says so on page 41.

This is the act of enrolling your reader where she says very next page, "I would never regain any memories of this seizure or the ones to come. This moment, my first serious black out, marks the line between sanity and insanity."

So there absolutely is a place where she's reporting on her own experience through the memories of others, and then informing you that *I don't remember that experience* and so it's awkward. You know for some of you that might have felt uncomfortable but for me I did feel that she was pretty honest about where she was conscious and not conscious. I don't know if you felt that way too, Linda Joy?

LJM: Oh yes. I did not feel like there was a problem. Actually, for me as a reader she was very clear about it and was also very clear she had done the research and she had pieced it all together—because if she would have said *I don't know what happened here and I don't know what happened there and I don't know what happened there and I have no memory of this* she wouldn't be able to offer anything here. So she's piecing together and there are many investigative memoirs, not just about a medical condition, but about what happened in the family where we don't remember everything. But we're left with the results of the things we don't remember for the rest of our lives. So part of psychotherapy, part of investigative memoir writing, is to try to piece together some kind of narrative that makes sense. What's interesting to me is that the research has shown that piecing together a narrative helps to heal. That's part of what helps heal us physically and emotionally, so there is a lot to be said for trying to find ways to do it.

BW: The other book that goes into this quite a bit is called *The Memory Palace* because she also has a brain injury and she literally doesn't remember certain things. Her mother is either schizophrenic, or I can't exactly remember what mental condition her mother has, but she also has this unreliable mother. Between the unreliable mother and her own literal memory loss, she doesn't really know what's true. That's a very interesting book to explore for how do you piece together just feeling upended in your life in a lot of ways. She has some really great techniques that some of you might want to look into if you're interested in piecing together what you don't know.

Question: Bill is sharing that he has a chapter on his parents meeting. This reminds me of you, Linda Joy, so this is kind of perfect for you to address. He says obviously I was not there but my research has given me a pretty good idea of how a naval academy tea dance works so he wants to go into the third

person path to recreate this event. How do you let the reader know that they're entering into a scene like that in which you were not there?

LJM: Oh, I love that. Yes, I do it quite a bit in my second memoir too, and a lot of people are doing that these days. So what you do is you can say almost what you said. *I don't know exactly what it was like, but I've learned about what the tea dance was like and blah, blah, blah* and *I can imagine it was like this,* and you can either use the "would have" or you can just say she wore such and such. *I can just see her in the such and such dress and he bowed to her.*

You can write it with active verbs rather than conditional because we know you're imagining it. *And I can just see the look on my mother's face. I know how much she loved to dance.* You can inform the scene with what you do know about these people and what you have observed, and then however you heard the story of this dance, let's say somebody told you about it and so you know it's such an important moment and a valuable moment. There's some emotion attached to that storyteller and you can weave that in. *All these years later I realized that such and such…* So you weave in your own reaction with what happened, and what you imagined. If there's a photo before or after, that's helpful. I don't know if you have that, if you're lucky enough, but it's absolutely doable.

BW: And some people will say things like in the photograph they are you know young and full of promise and she's wearing this and he's wearing that. You can do quite a lot of fluidity and you can move into the present tense. There's a lot of ways to indicate that you're taking this leap into another person's story and Susannah does it in her book. In another book that Linda Joy and I are both friends with this author, Judy Mandel, who wrote *Replacement Child*. Almost her entire book takes place before she was born and it's quite fascinating how she pieced that together. One way if you want to know *how do I do this just from a pure execution point of view* you can look to some of these books that we're recommending tonight. I can put together a little list when I put together the slides and recordings for tomorrow so that you guys can have those in your back pocket.

LJM: Yes, I forgot about Judy's book. That's really a good one because it's an investigative memoir and it's developed by piecing together what happened in her family before she was born and the effect of a very traumatic event on everyone that then affected her whole life. It's got different points of view and newspaper clippings and all kinds of interesting ways of piecing the story together.

BW: Yes, it's super interesting. This is the thing, it's a very creative exercise and I think my earlier point when I was saying people have backed themselves into a corner or compartmentalized their experience so much. There's a lot of things that you can do that's very freeing and exciting and you may get feedback from editors and readers like this isn't really working. If it's not working you need to figure out why. A lot of times it has to do with the context or how you're making a leap or a particularly rough transition and so you need to learn how to do these transitions and these entry points so that the reader is really hanging with you the whole time and then you can do some of these more creative things.

Question: Okay. So Paula's question is what if I have too much of a story and it's scary to make it public? Can I perhaps have a pseudonym for myself and characters or does that exclude me from the memoir genre?

BW: So Paula, absolutely you can have a pseudonym and I'm in the midst of an author that she writes (inaudible) who completely pulled her project because of her family basically is threatening to cut her off. She was writing about her son's drug addiction and initially the son was okay with it and then he decided that he wasn't. He brought his father into it and then the father threatened to sue. It's been a mess, a huge, huge mess. She took a year off and now she's trying to publish it under a pseudonym rather than not publish it so it's not ideal, but in her case it's basically lose my connection to my son or not publish my book, and so the pseudonym in her case makes sense and that's what we're doing. So if you are afraid of fallout in a legitimate way you have to know what the consequence is for writing under a pseudonym, which is like any personal platform that you may have attached to your name is basically completely meaningless. You're kind of a no one in a sense because your name doesn't mean anything, it's a pseudonym. There absolutely is precedence for it, you just have to understand the consequences and in the traditional world is who is this person? She didn't exist before a year ago and that can have some problems just from a publishing point of view, but for self-publishing or hybrid publishing like what I do it doesn't really matter.

Question: Elaine says I very recently learned a shocking and devastating secret about my father that he never revealed. Both he and my mother died in the past three years. The question is, what's the role of conjecture and how his dark knowledge impacts all of my memories?

LJM: So it impacts the memories now that she knows, right?

BW: That's what I'm thinking. Is that what you're saying Elaine, in essence? Maybe I'll unmute you and you can tell us. I mean it sounds like what you're saying is that it's almost altering your current memories, is that accurate?

Elaine: Yes.

LJM: Oh my gosh.

Elaine: Yes, that's exactly it. It just colors everything learning this.

LJM: It would. Were you already working on a version of your story and now you go oh my gosh this turned it upside down what is happening?

Elaine: Yes.

LJM: Oh geez.

Elaine: That's exactly what happened.

LJM: So sorry. In a way what you're talking about is the devastation of what secrets do.

Elaine: Yes. It was a revelation and it just has me stopped.

LJM: Well, don't stop. I don't know how much you've done and we can get into more detail in some other context, but I think that what you're writing about has now shifted the angle a little bit. This is what I thought I knew and this is who I thought I was to oh my gosh now there's this and what does this do to you now. This is such a universal thing about the power of dark secrets. I don't know if that's the direction you want to go in.

BW: Yeah, it's interesting because that's what I was thinking too is perhaps there could be, I mean if it literally is coloring everything between the before and the after, you could consider framing certain scenes like this is what I knew before, and this is how it shifted afterwards. You have to be careful because that can get tiring for your reader, but I do think there's something incredibly interesting about perception. It goes back to Charlene's question that we addressed earlier about how do I deal with that if

I didn't feel it or if I don't remember the feeling? You can play with these different perceptions like this is what I know to be true, and this is what other people feel, and this is how this rocked my world. It could become a theme of sorts. I mean of course it changes your book, but sometimes that's what happens.

Question: Michelle is asking about how to get approval that's legally binding.

BW: A waiver, and I have one that I'm more than happy to send you guys—it's essentially a very basic template waiver statement. It is legally binding because it's saying *I agree to be published in this person's memoir in the state that they have characterized me,* which means that either they've read it or they agreed to be in your memoir without reading it. Some people do, shockingly, but most people want to read how you characterized them. A waiver is a legally binding document. I'll send it.

Vanessa just shares that Nick Flynn in *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* did this as well when he was telling of his father's life and so I think you're talking about just moving into someone else's point of view. I love that book. I thought that that was an incredibly experimental, fun, interesting book so yeah there's so many good examples out there that you guys can turn to. Thank you all and as we move into the rest of these classes next week, if you want to share, let's experiment with that.

Week Two: Characterization of the Self and the Narrative Arc

Brooke Warner: Hi, everybody. Thanks for being here on this important debate night. We're happy to have everyone here for Class Two before that gets started. We're going to be talking about characterization of the self and the narrative arc.

Hello, Linda Joy.

Linda Joy Myers: Hi there. Hi, everybody. Welcome to the class. Looking forward to today.

BW: Per usual, please feel free to put your questions into the question panel window, and we'll take them as they come if they're pertinent and/or we'll save them until the end. It's helpful to gather what's coming up for you guys, so we welcome that.

I'm going to start out tonight talking about tracking your narrative "I" and how you can learn from Susannah's many "I's". In the free call, I talked about just these different parts in the Table of Contents for those of you who were there. I mentioned—and if you look at the Table of Contents—you can see that Part One is called *Crazy*, Part Two is called *The Clock*, and Part Three is called *In Search of Lost Time*. In some ways, Part One is "Something is wrong with me," and I labelled them here, "not well or normal self. Am I sick?" Then, in Part Two is "the diagnosed self." Something is definitely wrong with her, but it's a number of different things that we touch upon before she is finally and absolutely diagnosed with what she actually has, which is a form of encephalitis. Finally, "the recovering self," where she moves into recovery. It takes a long time. She's not the person she was, but as the book evolves and towards the end, she's also advocating. She's making the point, if this could happen to me, it could happen to anyone. She's raising, I think, important questions just about the nature of medicine.

A couple of people who are in the medical field raised this as somewhat of a problem for them, that they felt that the way that Susannah characterized this is: well, we're human and we're fallible and things

happen. I simply want to address that because I think it's an important one. I think that no matter what, sometimes different memoirs are going to make you feel that you have to be on the offensive or the defensive. Sometimes memoirs are going to rub you the wrong way because they hit too close to home. I certainly have had that happen. So, it's just good to look at what is triggering you, what's bothering you. If this happens to be your field and you don't like the way she writes about medicine, that's fine. It's just looking at it for what's there and why and exploring that. You might come at something, of course, from a different perspective if you're a doctor or a nurse versus whether you've been a patient and had something like this happen yourself. I simply want to acknowledge that.

Let's look at the "I's". I'm going to talk through these different points, and I labelled them to make them easier for you to follow along with me. Before we even get to page thirteen, Linda Joy is going to be talking about the unreliable narrator tonight. But I think it's very important to note how she handled her Author's Note. It's only one page, and she essentially tells us, I am not a reliable source. I'm biased, I'm this, I'm that. Things are messy. I really feel that she qualifies up front that she's not really a reliable single "I" character. She's many "I's," and her whole book is actually structured around that. I think that it's super helpful and in some ways incredibly freeing for people who struggle with different narrative voices who don't really understand how to dive into things that feel uncertain. We spent a lot of time talking about that last week. I actually really liked this, and I think it can be a guidepost. Certainly, Susannah's experience is very different from most of yours. There may be one or two people who are taking the class who have a sort of similar experience, but many people don't have entire months that they're writing about or years, for that matter, that are just wiped clean of memory. Most people remember and/or are recreating, to some extent, what happened to them based on real memories.

Let's look at some of her different "I's," and how these sound. Let's start with page thirteen. She says, right off the top of the page:

> *"The pins and needles, which persisted unabated over many days, didn't concern me nearly as much as the guilt and bewilderment I felt over my behavior in Steven's room that Sunday morning."*

What she's admitting here is that she's not herself. She goes on about snooping on her boyfriend and felt really uncomfortable, and she is concerned, has guilt and bewilderment over her own behavior, so she knows she's not okay. Then, if we go to page 32, I want to point to you the italicized words here:

> *"There's something wrong with me. This is how a crazy person acts."*

Then, toward the bottom of this page, she says:

> *"No, no. I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm all fucked up. I'm crying for no reason. I sob."*

We're tracking her. Now she knows she's not okay. We've moved from concern to knowing. I talked about this turning point also on the free call, but on page 41 is a turning point in the narrative where she tells us at the top of the page:

> *"I would never regain any memories of this seizure or the ones to come. This moment, my first serious blackout, marked the line between sanity and insanity."*

Then, at the bottom of the paragraph:

> *"From this point on, I would increasingly be forced to rely on outside sources to piece together this lost time."*

Now we know, from this point forward, that a lot of this stuff is not going to be her own memory. It's going to be pieced together from other people's references. With that in mind, we are walking into something that she has very much prefaced, like now we're moving into a different "I." Now this is the "sick I," the "diagnosed I." And on page 52, she makes reference to the real Susannah, and I thought that was helpful. As I'm looking here I think I might have mispaginated that one. There is around here where she says:

> *"The real Susannah is still in there."*

I think that's an important aspect of this because she knows, and the people around her know that she's still, although buried deep, in there somewhere. It's page 54, second paragraph:

> *"My mother pleaded with me to take it anyway. Do it for me," she begged. "Just take the pill," so I did. Even during this time, when I hardly recognized myself, there are still shadows of the real Susannah, a person who cares what her family and friends think, who doesn't want to cause them pain. Looking back, I think that's why, despite the battles, I often caved at my family's insistences."*

This is an interesting point that she's still there, the real Susannah. There are still shadows of the real Susannah. I could have tracked the book a lot more than I did. I'm giving you some points along the way, but let's look at page 111, where she is paranoid. This is where she's talking about *Gawker* having said things about her. In the middle of the page, page 111, she says:

> "*I know that Gawker has been saying bad things about me. I insisted referring to the gossip blogs."*

Here she's paranoid. *Gawker* obviously is not talking about her. It's a huge gossip online website that doesn't care about Susannah. I think it's interesting that we move through these different diagnoses: paranoia, bipolar. Then, on page 159, she's talking about, right after the line break, now she is a patient:

> *"Over the weeks I had gone from being a notoriously difficult patient to a favorite, the ward's interesting consult for a host of attending doctors, interns, and residents hoping to capture a glimpse of the girl with the unknown disease."*

Linda Joy and I have been tracking this for you guys to look at how her voice changes. What is her own confidence like. Page 205, toward the bottom, the second to last paragraph:

> *"Who am I? Am I a person who cowers in fear at the back of a spin class avoiding everyone's gaze? This uncertainty about who I am is confusion over where I truly was, and the timeline of my illness was ultimately the deeper source of the shame."*

She tells us what it's like to be in recovery and that she's embarrassed and she doesn't know herself anymore. On page 211, this is when she goes back to work and she comes into comes into contact with her boss and he hugs her, at the top of the page, and she says:

> *"I'm good," I heard myself say. I was so nervous that I could only concentrate on the sweat trickling down my lower back, much like when I ran into Christie with my mom, but this time I didn't have the buffer of another person to keep the conversation going."*

In the beginning of the book she's very combative. She's paranoid, she has so much stuff going on, so this is a very different person that we're reading. She brings you into her mind as she's going through this stuff, and she's erratic at times, but this is more of who she really is. Then, my final entry here on page 238, at the very bottom of the page:

> *"So now you could add the grownup stuff of living with my boyfriend to the list of reasons showing that I was 'back,' but in reality it took me several more months to assuredly say that I felt comfortable in my own skin again."*

Again, this is a great exercise to track the different pivotal moments on the journey. You could do this with any memoir. I think it's incredibly interesting to look at how she changes and how her voice is different and what she cares about, and even just the tone. I'm going to be talking about pacing next, after Linda Joy's teaching, but these are valuable things to know, how to track a narrative character, and the reason why is to look at the range of what a single person can be and how they change over the course of a single memoir.

LJM: I agree. The thing that we're doing in a memoir is that we are the protagonist, all the way through, and we're the narrator, so we're in scene with people and in our own situation, and then we're also the narrator. Thanks for all this, Brooke.

I want to piggyback back onto the Author's Note at the beginning of the book because sometimes people don't read these introductory things, but she has a whole page, which is unusual. I want to quote a couple of things there. It's at the very beginning of the book. She says:

> *"I've changed some names and defining characteristics, but otherwise this is wholly a work of nonfiction, a blend of memoir and reportage."*

One of the things we've talked about is how she is a journalist throughout this and what techniques did she use. Then she says:

> *"Even still, I readily admit that I am an unreliable source. No matter how much research I've done, the consciousness that defines me as a person wasn't present then."*

Then she says she's biased and there's things she's gotten wrong, and so on. But the last line, I think is really interesting because I think it applies to all of us who are struggling to write memoir. She says:

> *"What is left is a journalist's inquiry into that deepest part of the self: personality, memory, identity, in an attempt to pick up and understand the pieces left behind."*

I think that's very powerful, and I think that in some form or another, that is what we're all trying to do. Now, we are talking about the way that she's standing on shiftier ground than most of us end up having to do. But another point of introducing this whole idea of an unreliable narrator—which I'm going to define in a minute—is that I think memoirists, as you were alluding to, Brooke, feel particularly defensive or scared or both about this whole issue of truth and accuracy, so we get a little reactive. I think it comes on the heels, still, all these years later, of the James Frey event that happened with Oprah that scared everybody to death, but they've all worked it out, folks, and memoir has moved on, actually

quite a lot since then. That doesn't mean you can just make things up, but needing to be afraid or overly defensive is also not necessary. You have to decide what your angle of presentation is for the self that you were exploring in the ways that she's talking about: the personality, memory, and identity of yourself as the protagonist. I want to put that on the front end of this discussion of how we can continue to call it the memoir and respect it as memoir genre and look at these unusual things that she's doing and seeing what applies to us.

First, I'm going to define what an unreliable narrator is. An unreliable narrator is anyone who doesn't have the full picture, and you can see how she doesn't, and she admittedly doesn't have that full picture here. We talked about another book called *The Memory Palace*, where the author has also had a brain injury, and she does a similar but different thing. She talks about what she can know and what she can't know and how she knows things, so there's this meta-exploration of knowing in itself, which is what Susannah is also doing. Anyone can do this. If we want to get philosophical about it, we can say, well, how do I know what I think I know? On what basis am I aware of who I am and who I was, and the angle of my vision through the lens of memory and the goal of my memoir?

The whole thing here is to think about what the goal of your story is. How much truth are you trying to convey? That may sound a little dicey for a moment. How much truth am I trying to convey? We all feel a need to say, well, I'm delivering up an unmitigated truth. This is my truth, which is true—it's your truth, but as you very well know, part of what causes people to clutch around writing memoirs is, gosh, maybe it isn't someone else's truth. But truly, all you can do is do your best—as Susannah puts very up front—to write the best story you can tell about how you view your life. Obviously, you're going to be writing about other people and characterizing other people, which we're talking about also.

Next slide.

I'm going to go into some other unreliable narrators—and, again, these are not value judgments. We're not saying children are bad people because they're unreliable narrators. Children don't have all the context of a story, for instance. They know what they know through the lens that they know it, especially if you're writing a coming-of-age story, and many of you have to grapple with this. How do I

write a story that an adult can relate to when, in fact, I have this very narrow angle of understanding as a child? We can't solve that whole thing for you now, but I will say that you use your narrator to help you, and that's another whole discussion that we can get into.

When you're looking through the lens of a child—and many of you have grappled with this—how do you expand the story so that there's more than just that small lens? There are definitely ways to do that. You can put it in quotes if it makes you feel more comfortable. Unreliable, so to speak, is first person trauma narrative or perhaps like when people admit to being severely mentally ill, they often are talking about—or having any kind of illness. Illness changes your lens. You're not seeing the world through "your regular self." Anyone who's been ill knows that. There's a certain lens no matter what the illness or the problem or the challenge that you're going to be seeing the world through, and you're going to be needing, really, if you're going to write an authentic story, to present how you did see it. How did you see what was happening? What did you think? How did you make sense of things?

We touched on this earlier. We don't want you to pepper every other sentence with, "I don't remember." You won't really have a story. Instead: *to the best of my ability, I think that this is how I can tell you this story.* You can even talk to the reader if you want to change it up a little bit, and I already touched on coming of age. The nice thing about coming of age is after about the age of 10 or 12, or the slightly older child, that child is fully thinking and reflecting and narrating, and has a much bigger lens; and depending on the maturity of the child or how young that child needs to "get it" about the way the world works—you may have even a younger child opening that larger view of understanding what is going on.

Next slide.

I want to talk about characterizing others. Again, there are some contextual issues here to address, and I think we need to do this all the time, not just in thinking of unreliable narrators. We always have a lens through which we're looking at other people. If we don't like them or we do like them, that shows through in how we present them. Are we presenting a biased view? Absolutely, of course we are. It's ridiculous to say, *oh, I'm completely objective about Uncle George who used to pull me up on his lap and touch my leg.* You're not objective about Uncle George, and it's better if you admit it. Maybe

you've forgiven Uncle George in the meantime, which is lovely and all that, but part of the story is *I had a problem with Uncle George and this is how I tried to work that story out.*

The other thing is how close or distant you are to the character you're describing. Again, if you're very close to someone, we're going to want to have more details about that person. We're going to want to see them in a more up-close lens, smell them, feel them, feel the texture of their world, their clothes. In a more distant character—again, you're looking through that lens—we don't want to be that close, or you don't want to be that close as the narrator or the character in the scene. That feeling of how close or how distant you are comes through. I encourage all of you to think about this as you're gathering the character sketches for your story of other people that are in your story.

BW: Speaking of pacing, the importance of pacing as it pertains to characterization and character development in the story line. We're getting into some pretty advanced stuff here, you guys. It's important to track, and some of you are far more advanced, but you hear a lot about pacing in memoir. You've heard a lot about it in fiction, too. Some readers and authors, for that matter, don't really understand what pacing means.

What it means is how things are unfolded in what order, and are you moving the story along. It's very interesting. I just spoke to someone today whose pacing was way too fast, and I was reflecting back to her whoa, *you really didn't even give me an opportunity to be in your story, and if I'm not in your story, I don't care about your character*. She was telling me that an editor had told her to take out everything that was fluff. I said, "Hon, I think you took out a lot more than just the fluff." It was really lost on me. I think it's important to pay attention to what's that balance because we sometimes see people that are just moving so fast that you don't get invested, you're not dropping your reader into a scene. That said, part of why Susannah's book is considered a fast-paced book is because it has a lot of chapters, because she moved along in a pretty intense way. A lot of stuff happened to her over the course of these very few months, and she was able to pinpoint particular scenes. There's a lot of drama in the scenes, so it does make for a fast-paced book, and not everybody has that.

When you think about other books that people love—*Glass Castle* was another book that we taught that had very short vignette-style chapters—there is something nice about short chapters, and there are plenty of memoirs that don't have short chapters, so I'm not by any means suggesting that this be a model for you. It's just something to look at when you're thinking about pacing and how you're structuring your book. Should your book have parts? I think that's another question that comes up with regard to pacing, and Susannah was obviously very conscientiously tracking these various "I" selves, because you can see from the Table of Contents that the first one is she thinks she's going crazy. The second one is that she's a patient, and the third one is that she's well and she's on the other side of it. She thought that through. When in the writing process did she think that through? I'm not sure.

But another person who has a highly formulated book that we also taught is Elizabeth Gilbert with *Eat, Pray, Love*. In that book there are 108 chapters. It was really designed off of a rosary, so there are 108 chapters and they're divided into whatever that is by three, so it was 36 chapters per part. She did it super intentionally, and she wanted it to be mirroring this prayer item that you would count on a rosary. So that's cool, too, but not everybody does that. I've seen books that have 10 long chapters, and that's fine as well, but you do have to think about how the length of your chapters impacts your pacing and how different parts impact the reader's experience, and when do you need "Part" titles, and when are they just arbitrary, because I've seen people have parts for no reason. Those can feel a little odd, like the reader doesn't totally understand why there's a Part One and a Part Two, so that plays into your pacing as well.

I talked to her about seeding what's to come. Susannah does this all over the place, especially in the beginning. Interestingly, a couple of you found that irritating. That's totally fine. I love it that so many people have been emailing us to tell us what they don't like because it's really helpful, actually. But this is important because she does it well. On page 16, for instance, at the bottom, she's talking about this early doctor that she saw:

> *"He conducted a typical neurological exam. It would be the first of many hundreds to come."*

She's telling you, look, I'm about to go under something really serious, and this was the first of many. Or at the end of page 26, where she writes:

> *"I would soon learn firsthand that this kind of illness often ebbs and flows, leaving the sufferer convinced that the worst is over, even when it's only retreating for a moment before pouncing again."*

What she's doing is she's using the conditional, "would." *"I would soon learn."* Then on page 30, after she has this horrific interview with this guy because she acts really weird with John Walsh, she says:

> *"This would be the last interview I conducted for seven months."*

It goes on and on. I tracked at least 13 or 14 of these early instances of her saying what would happen. I like this personally because, for me, what it did is it's setting up that things are not going to be okay. You picked up this book and it says, *Brain on Fire: My Month of Madness*. Then you read the back cover copy and you see that she has this brain disorder, essentially. "Her descent into madness," it says, so you know that something is going to happen to her.

We always talk about in our class a) don't be cryptic; b) don't do cliffhangers. Readers don't need that stuff. You guys are not writing suspense novels. You're writing memoirs, and actually you're giving the story away on the back cover copy. People are picking it up because they want to read about this experience, so there's no reason for Susannah to be cagey in the first half of the book. She knows that everybody wants to get to the diagnosis, and so she's alluding to this is going to be happen and it's not going to be pretty, but these are the months leading up to it. She did all of the seeding of what's to come very intentionally in the first part using the conditional, and that actually adds a lot to her pacing.

Let me give you a few also that have to do with pacing, myriad elements of forms of pacing. Throughout the book she has these dream sequences. In fact, she opens with one. The preface is a dream sequence in which believes that she's wearing a wristband that says, "Flight Risk." That sort of sets the tone, even, for do we believe that this is real or not. Throughout the book she has these italicized places where it's

not really clear if they're hallucinations or dreams or lucid dreams, and she doesn't really tell you what they are. That's fine. That's part of her pacing.

She also includes all of these intake forms and different factual elements, all these things that are scientific, a cross-section of her brain. There are some visual elements in here. There are the little snippets from her journal. There's the transcription of her video sessions. All of that stuff she's using to pace. She's including all of these things that we could just call narrative elements. Some of them are visual elements. If you have stuff like this for your book, that's great.

I'm working with someone on this issue right now whose daughter committed suicide, and that is what the book is about. It's about mental health in teenagers and how can we prevent this. She's including a lot of her daughter's journals, and it's completely appropriate to the context of the book. I've had this for eating disorder memoirs, where the author includes exercises they did in rehab, doctor intake forms, and things like that, menu plans. If you have a book that is diagnostic in some way or that has things that you actually have evidence for, I think it can be pretty effective. That's what Linda Joy spent a while talking about earlier just with regard to journalistic elements and how to incorporate them into your book.

The fact that she's done this also impacts the pacing because sometimes you're immersed in this deep scientific exploration of the brain, and then all of a sudden you're talking about *The Exorcist*. Then you're intimate with her and her father. Then we're learning about Rose Kennedy and lobotomies. There are all these things that are going on, and it's part to do with the pacing. It really is this mosaic, and I like that mosaic a lot. It's a little bit like a prism of light. It reminds me of something like that, like a crystal that's hanging down and that Susannah really looked at her whole experience as if it were a crystal that she's observing from all these multiple facets. That's not 100 percent clear. It's opaque in some ways, and it really makes it a work of art in some ways. What I also love that she does is that Flight Risk thing is the preface, and you should reread it and then reread the second to last chapter that is actually called "Flight Risk?"

What I like about this—and I like it when memoirs do this in general—a lot of memoirs will plant a seed of something early on in the book, and then toward the end or at the very end, they resolve it. She

anchors us with this thing. Cheryl Strayed does this in *Wild* as well, except she throws her boot off the cliff and she loses the boot. She catches up to it much sooner than the end, but we circle back around to it. A lot of people think that that has to happen in memoir. It doesn't. It's just popular. And so if there is a particularly poignant scene you have that you want to do this with and pull it out into a preface because it's satisfying for your reader, it can make a lot of sense.

I have had two different potential clients in the last maybe six months who've said to me, "Oh, I know I have to have a preface that pulls out a scene from the middle of the book that I'm going to deliver on later." I said, "No, just because Cheryl Strayed does that does not mean that you have to." I do think the reason it's popular is because it throws you right into something where there's a lot at stake or where there's a high emotional value attached to it in some way. This notion that Susannah might have been a flight risk is really interesting, and it drops you right in. That's why I'm putting it under pacing. Then, in "Flight Risk?" she tells you in the second paragraph:

> "*To this day, I struggle with distinguishing fact from fiction."*

She asks if Alan actually called her a flit that day in the car and, of course, no. But she wrote it as if it happened, and that was very helpful. It's not easy to write in this way where you're making the reader believe what you believed. Then, when she tells us about the Flight Risk on page 244, she says:

> "*I vividly remember looking down at my right hand and seeing an orange band that read Flight Risk. My family and friends remember the same thing, so I took this for granted as truth. The Flight Risk band, to me, is a fact."*

I thought this was super interesting. How many of you have woken up from a dream remembering something as fact, and then having to really sort out, oh, no, that didn't happen. I didn't just totally alienate my boss. I don't actually hate my partner. Hold on a second. What just happened?

It's very interesting. I love that she plays with this stuff. Part of her memoir is to make us think about the line between truth and reality, and you're going to get into that, too, Linda Joy.

LJM: Yes, our favorite scary topic, to connect with what I said before about it.

What we want to look at is, like I mentioned earlier, what is the goal of your narrative? It depends on what kind of story you have partly, and that's hard as a context. Is your story one in which facts that can be validated, for instance; or are you coming mostly, or a lot of the time, through the lens of this *is my view of the world that I lived in, and it's a very internal view, and that is the story I'm going to tell.* It's not that you have to put it in your Author's Note, although you may want to. It depends. All of you listening and writing have your own context, your own actual reason for writing your memoir, and all of that matters. That's part of the goal of the narrative. Part of it is to tell our story. It's as simple as that. *That's my story, and I want to tell it. Sometimes this is the story that no one ever believed before, and now I'm going to enroll you, dear reader, in believing me now.*

Therefore, if you do that, we need to hear what is it that people didn't believe. What is it that you are saying in some way is unbelievable about your story, and how are you going to tell it to us? This whole contextual grounding and foundation is really very important, and I think it's universal. I'm not just talking about this particular book. I'm talking about every memoirist needs to think about this, and I think sometimes we're afraid to think about it. It's okay. We need to think about it. Some people are writing stories with tons of secrets in them, family secrets that nobody else knows about. One question that always comes up for me is not just that they're revealing it, but how do they find out about it and were they always curious or did they accidentally stumble upon a cache of secret letters.

Again, what's the connection between what we learn and find out and the story that is being told? Do you want to make real what is unremembered or fuzzy? This is a tricky ground to stand on. Of course, this is the area that Susannah dealt with and is coming from is this hard to pin down stuff. She uses her journalistic skills to do that and, again, it's about the lens. You can only make something that is unremembered or fuzzy so real. There's a limit to how real you can make it, but you can do things like, "This is the way I remember it," or "I know that no one else in my family agreed with me, but I always said that on that day everything changed when our father left." Maybe other people go, "Oh, that was a good thing."

Maybe you didn't think so and it ruined your life. I don't know. We all have these stories where no one else agrees with us in the family and everybody was there but, of course, they're all looking through their lens, and you can even write about that. You can take on other people's point of view. You can imagine what they would say in response to what you were delivering. You can say, "My sister Sarah never agrees, and I imagine when she reads this she's going to say X or she'll think dadadada. You can open those doors into what you're concerned about, how you imagine other people will react, and it's speculative, especially if you haven't asked them or you're trying to keep your memoir private. These are universal things that all memoirs are dealing with in one form or another.

The other thing I imagined is a technique that I'm using a lot in my new memoir is that I'm imagining some situations with my grandmother and with my mother where I do not have the story. It all happened long before I was born, but I know that things happened in their lives that actually created a series of lockstep tragedies and disconnections and anger and fights, which affected the end of both of their lives. I found this quite tragic and upsetting, but I wanted to try to understand it more, so I investigated to try to understand what happened with them. And I had to imagine a lot of things based on most the most skeletal facts, but it's all put out front. This is what my journey is, this is my context, and so on. Other authors do that, too.

I'm already talking about this next point, which is allowing the uncertainty to show through with this unreliable memory up front. I think that's the best way to handle it. Brooke, can we have the next slide?

We're thinking about the self that's speaking. Again, when you're narrating and when you're a character in the story, you need to ask yourself *which self is it?* We find our students often getting confused, and it's very easy to get confused. I just want to say that up front. It's very easy to get confused about which self is either narrating or being a character, and I want to redefine what that is. We might have talked about it sooner.

The narrator is the guide that guides people through the book, through the story, guides the reader through time, through context, through situation, through place. The narrator is also "I."

"I thought that when we drove up to the house, I would see so and so, but instead…" That can be the character in the scene or it could be the narrator. The character "I" in the scene is in a particular place at a particular time with a point of view and interacting with others quite often. You want to ask yourself which "I" is commenting, which "I" is narrating, and that means also making sure what time frame you're in.

Let's say you're in a flashback and you know that it was twenty years ago when you were thirty years old, and it is that self that is reflecting and that is going through the experience. You may chart some of this stuff out also, the time frame that you're in, which self is it, and that self has a certain lens. The things that we think when we're younger or broken or naïve are different than maybe later when we can integrate things better or we have a new perspective, which is often what happens towards the end, we hope, sometimes towards the end of the memoir.

I already talked about imagining when I was talking earlier. Who's the observer of others again? Is it the "now" narrator, for instance, that is wise and knows everything? Or is it the character in the scene that's observing someone else and how they feel about that person. Again, this is contextual, so it helps to know from what context am I reacting or responding or writing this particular part of the story. Anything to add, Brooke?

BW: No. We just know that this is complicated stuff, and it's a lot to take in. We just gave you a very advanced class. This is maybe an insight into what our master class looks like. As we were preparing the material, we could see that. It's important understanding the narrative arc. What's going to make you a sophisticated narrator is knowing how to track this stuff and how to do it well, because another thing that comes up for people is we'll say something. For instance, all the time I'm telling people, "Don't pull us out of the narrative," by which I mean don't pull us out of the present time because we're immersed in the scene, but then Susannah is doing it all the time. But the reason she's able to do it is because she's so tracking these different selves, and she's doing in it a way, like I said, she's feeding it, so she's doing it with some level of advanced care. You can, in fact, pull the reader out of the narrative into the past and into the future, but you have to do it within a certain context, and you also can't be gone too long. It's tough stuff, and we definitely want to acknowledge that.

Let's take some questions.

Charlene is saying, "Do we blend short and long chapters or keep to one or the other?"

I think both, Charlene. I'm a fan of chapters that are more or less the same length. For instance, let's say most of your chapters are 1,500 words, and then all of a sudden you throw in a 5,000-word chapter. I think for some readers you've trained them to be expecting short chapters, and then all of a sudden you throw in a long one. That said, I've also seen it done. The cool thing about memoir writing is that it's art, and there's not actually a totally right way to do it. We teach craft so that you guys have best practices and know that yes, there are some parameters, but rules are made to be broken, especially in memoir is absolutely evidenced by this. I think Linda Joy and I both have our minds expanded as a result of teaching memoir.

When I first came to this, I had edited tons of memoirs, tons, tons, tons, and then this last four years of intensely teaching memoir, my idea of what a memoir is, is very different than it was four years ago after I had edited tons of memoirs. That's one of the beauties, also sometimes frustrations.

LJM: Me, too. The more that we are reading and looking at different ways of doing things, which for me as a memoirist is different than how I would do them, but I learn so much still and adapt to this new learning into my own work, which I did in this new memoir. It's been very satisfying and exciting.

BW: Bonnie says, "You talked about books that have short chapters in parts. Can you name any memoirs that don't break it down into chapters since they're weaving the past into the writing?"

Well, there are books that don't have chapters, but in my mind, let's just say hypothetically you don't label a section break or page break a chapter. It doesn't matter; it's still a chapter. Trying to get out of this notion of having chapters is not particularly helpful to you from a structural point of view. Cheryl Strayed is a really good example of someone who she absolutely has chapters, but she moves very fluidly in her book *Wild* into the past and back to the present within her chapters a lot.

I've worked on lots of books that have all kinds of structures, but I want to make sure you're asking the right question, Bonnie, because you have to have some kind of structure. The book has to be broken up into something that feels like chapters or something that has line breaks, because if you just write a continuous narrative with no chapter breaks and no line breaks, your reader is going to feel like you just turned a power hose on them. The reason for those breaks is to give us a chance to stop and digest. We've talked about it like music. A musical score has pauses. It has moments where there's a transition into a different section in the symphony. Your book has to do the same thing, so that's the reason chapter breaks and line breaks exist are just for the reader experience, in my opinion.

Cheryl's saying, "I'm having a hard time with the voice of experience and the voice of innocence when I'm writing," which we may need to define for them, Linda Joy, because we haven't really taught this, and that's something that Sue William Silverman gets into.

Cheryl says, "When I get into it, sometimes the child is just uninhibited. Should I go back and write these scenes as the voice of experience or leave as is?"

LJM: The voice of innocence is the raw story or the raw version of what happened. There are many different ways to talk about it. We do teach it for a longer version than you're going to get tonight. The thing of it is, I want to say that the voice of experience is that narrator who knows what happened or has a perspective now, but I do want to say this: A child can also reflect, though, in the scene of being a younger person and something is happening. They can be thinking, reflecting and asking questions, so it isn't a completely firm line around these different consciousnesses. What you should specifically do, it would take reading it to know exactly. But a memoir takes several rounds, and you may want to write some things that you didn't think of writing when you were first doing a child point of view and just see how they turn out. You might learn some new things from experimenting. What would you like to add?

BW: It can be a great exercise to add them side by side. That's something to think about, Cheryl, to write the uninhibited, and then change it into the voice of experience, and then feel what they feel like side by side. At some point you're also going to want to have some beta readers, because one thing

about the uninhibited child voice is that it can be a lot. It can be a lot for a reader to feel like, oh, my God, I'm hanging out with this uninhibited child voice for a long period of time. What the voice of experience does is it comes in and it tempers that voice. That's the only thing I want to say is that a weaving is probably appropriate.

BW: Vanessa says, "Going back to folding in a poignant scene, my book shares my young self-doubting prayer. Later in the book, when my mom is released from jail, she gives me her rosary, almost like a proof that prayer works. Could I use this?

LJM: Oh, yes. You have an arc going on there that's a big thing and sounds very important. It sounds like maybe one of your themes—I don't know your book—but it could be one of your themes of doubt versus faith or giving up or feeling like nothing would ever work out to some other outcome. Of course, we all enjoy seeing things like that in a story.

BW: Absolutely. I love that. I think those kinds of things are really interesting to look at. If you have a particularly poignant moment that you know might work, then that's awesome. Michelle is saying, "Erma Bombeck was not known to be a memoirist, but she really was. She wrote on themes of her life with anecdotes. I found that's easy to adapt to. Of course, I'm a humorist. I don't write about the deep and dark aspects of my life."

For sure. There's tons of people. Even Joan Didion, I think of, or Anna Quindlen, who really are memoirists, but they have columns and they're essayists. But they're writing about personal stuff and, therefore, really, they're memoirists. Some of you know that I have a working relationship with Mark Nepo, and he's a poet, but I've interviewed him about memoir before because these were personal poems, and he has a lot to say about the genre. Absolutely. If that is something that resonates with you, that's fantastic, and I agree with you.

LJM: If you feel excited about something, go for it, all of you. Just give it a whirl. Try it. Try the voice. Try the experimental style. Don't let doubt stop you from writing and getting some rough drafts out there. You may end up with a book.

BW: Yes, and if Erma Bombeck is your inspiration, then hey, you're in good company. Sarah says, "You mentioned that Susannah was not creating suspense by giving us insight into the future, but I experienced that as creating suspense. I was dying to know why she would have so many more neurological tests, etc., etc.

I'm glad you brought that up, Sarah, because I didn't mean that she was not creating suspense. I think she was through foreshadowing. Even though I totally understand why you interpreted that I meant that, I didn't. What I meant is you guys are not writing suspense novels. That's what I said. That doesn't mean that you should not be creating some form of suspense, and suspense is very well-handled through foreshadowing. That's actually what foreshadowing is, so in all of those moments, when she was seeding these things, she was foreshadowing what's coming.

What I was saying is that a lot of times people do these withholding of information, which is the opposite of foreshadowing because they think that they're going to deliver it later in the book as some big dum de dum dum. It drives me crazy. It drives Linda Joy crazy, too, because we've talked about it. We don't hold that stuff for some big reveal, by which I meant you're not writing a murder mystery, where, oh, my God, there's the body. The foreshadowing in memoirs is very different. Again, thank you for bringing it up because I think it absolutely merits a clarification that foreshadowing does help to build up some…

LJM: Turning the pages.

BW: Yes. That point was in the pacing section, exactly. It keeps you turning the pages. It makes you have something at stake for Susannah, and it's overt foreshadowing, so I definitely recommend it. Very good question. All right, thank you. Awesome questions. Thank you for coming tonight, and we'll see you next week.

LJM: Thank you all. Keep writing and keep reading. See you next time.

Week Three: The Power of Showing

Linda Joy Myers: Hi, everyone.

Brooke Warner: Hi, everybody. Welcome to class number three and The Power of Showing. This is going to be a great class tonight. I'm looking forward to it. How are you doing, Linda Joy?

LJM: I'm great. I love this, too. This is such great skill stuff for people to have.

BW: Yes, and this can be the difference, particularly for people who are shopping their books at traditional publishers, but I think this should be pertinent to anyone no matter how they publish. It's truly the difference between an agent or an editor really taking your work seriously, or a publisher wanting to publisher wanting to publish your work. I know a lot of people over the years who have gotten feedback from people essentially saying you're doing too much telling. We're going to get into this, the whole idea between showing versus telling and what the true balance really should be. Good memoir writing, just like good novel writing, is largely through the power of showing, so we're going to talk about *Brain on Fire*, but also some other broader stuff and other memoir examples tonight as well.

When we're talking about how to write descriptions that show, writers who are at the beginning of writing their memoirs don't totally understand what that means. Part of showing is dialogue and body language, but of course you can't write a whole memoir that is only in dialogue using body language. There's also other ways to show, and sometimes people tend to think that showing means that you are not writing narrative prose, but that is also not true. Showing really is quite simply using all of the senses: what you see, feel, taste, hear, smell, and I put intuit here, too, even though that's not technically one of the senses, but it should be because it's a big one— we're always, always asking our students, "How did you feel in reaction to that?"

And it's not that you need to always say how you feel in reaction to something or do too much reflecting, but the fact of the matter is that too many memoirs do too little reflecting. That's part of

showing the reader how you feel and dropping people in. When I say "drop in and slow down" here in the second point on the slide, slowing down is really critical. I would say half of the students that I work with when they're at the beginning stages of their memoirs, are writing too much too fast. They're trying to just get through it. I've speculated on this and talked to them about it. One thing I think happens is that sometimes writers are worried that they're being boring, and they're afraid that they're going to bore the reader if they slow down too much. The other things is that they're not recognizing the power of all of this visual, sensual imagery to bring the reader into a scene and create a real world. That has a term—what is that called?

LJM: Keeping people in what we call "the fictive dream," which also applies to memoir in that it's this whole world that, when you get the reader in there, you don't want to drop them out of it because then they leave your book behind. They leave your scene and your story.

BW: Exactly, perfect. I was thinking of verisimilitude or something like that, like there was an actual term for this. Verisimilitude, that's what it is. What that means is that you're really creating this other world, and when you create a world, you have to create the whole world, not just part of the world. When we're talking about the fictive dream, it doesn't mean that you're writing fiction, but your reader has never been in the scene you are writing before, so you have to show all of the environment. I tend to use metaphors and other imagery because that can help create that environment through good language.

Telling informs the reader what happened, while showing enrolls the reader and makes them feel like they're walking the journey alongside you. I think this is a really important piece of it. You can feel, or you can learn to feel it anyway. Perhaps in the beginning you don't, but over time, and if you read enough memoir, you can learn to feel what it feels like when you're informing. We used to say, when I worked at Seal Press, the story has an "and then, and then, and then, and then" quality to it, by which we mean the writer is going "and then this happened, and then this happened, and then this happened, and then this happened." That's the classic tell, and it has a cadence to it that the author is basically just dumping feelings and emotions and things that happened instead of really weaving everything into scene.

It is hugely important that you write in scene, that you include all of the sensory details, that you slow down, try to use metaphors and imagery and other figures of speech, and then think about really creating a world for your reader, and try to avoid informing. That said, I do want to make an important caveat here: sometimes you will inform, and Susannah does inform the reader, at lots of different points in her book, about all kinds of things: brain science, her disease statistics. It's not to say that you never inform, but when you're in scene you really are working to show the reader what it's all like rather than just saying, and then I did this, and then I did this, and then I did this. I'm going to give some examples so that we can see what we're talking about with *Brain on Fire.*

The first one is on page 28, at the bottom of the page. I thought this is a great example because she really just drops you in. This is what I mean by being dropped in:

> "*The pages were breathing visibly, inhaling and exhaling all around me. My perspective had narrowed as if I were looking down the hallway through a viewfinder. The fluorescent lights flickered and the walls tightened claustrophobically around me. As the walls caved in, the ceiling stretched sky high until I felt as if I were in a cathedral. I put my hand to my chest to quell my racing heart and told myself to breathe. I wasn't frightened. It felt more like the sterile rush of looking down from the window of a hundred-story skyscraper knowing you won't fall."*

That's a beautiful passage, and she doesn't say, My mind was in an altered state and therefore when I looked at these pages it seemed like they were breathing, and I know something was wrong with me but," blah, blah, blah. No. She just lets you be with her in this moment.

> *"The pages were breathing…"*

and look at all of her figures of speech. She uses multiple:

> *"as if I were looking through a viewfinder," "the walls caved in," "I felt as if I were in a cathedral."*

And then, finally:

> *"it felt like looking down the window of a hundred-story skyscraper…"*

She really puts you in there, and the metaphors are incredibly helpful to making you feel like you're in this scene with her, and it is visceral. You feel an emotion when you read writing like that.

I put the *Gawker* scene in here on page 111, in part to remind you all that dialogue actually does show. Again, it's not the only way to show, but it's a powerful way to show because what we get in the *Gawker* scene is that she is not of sound mind. The way she presents this, toward the top, says:

> *"Angela,* [her friend] *ever the reporter, immediately began asking questions. 'Susannah, what's going on here?' 'I don't remember,' I stuttered. A little while later, I interrupted a separate conversation, my voice suddenly clearer but still just as slow. 'What are people saying about me?' 'Don't worry about it. No one is saying anything about it. They're all just concerned,' Angela replied. 'No, tell me. I want to know.' 'Nothing bad, Susannah, nothing bad, I promise.' 'I know that Gawker has been saying bad things about me,' I insisted, referring to the gossip blog. Julia and Angela threw each other a strange look. 'What do you mean?' 'Gawker is saying bad things about me. They put my name in the headline of a piece,' I said, and sat up in my bed, deadly serious. Should I call them?"*

What's good here is you see the interaction between the friends and Susannah, and she is, again, not trying to tell us that she believed that *Gawker* was writing about her. Instead, she's fully in it, and you see, as the reader, you're privy to what her friends see, which is that she's not well. Of course *Gawker* is not writing about her. I like that scene a lot because, again, what we're talking about is the visceral moment when Susannah or any other writer is really just dropping you into a scene and making you feel the emotions of the moment. For her, in this moment, she is delusional. It's part of her brain illness, and we see through the eyes of her friends.

The final example here is toward the top half of page 211:

> *"So how the fuck are you?" Paul asked, hugging me. "I'm good," I heard myself say. I was so nervous that I could only concentrate on the sweat trickling down my lower back, much like when I ran into Christie with my mom, but this time I didn't have the buffer of another person to keep the conversation going."*

This is very reflective, but it's still showing because she's using sensory language, the sweat trickling down her back. Then she says:

> *"It was doubly difficult for me to even focus, let alone have to look him in the eye, let alone prove to him that I would be ready to return to work. He cracked some jokes and talked about the job, but I couldn't keep up. I noticed myself laughing at inappropriate times but then missing the cues to his punchline."*

And then she goes on and on. Then there's more dialogue. The reason I feel that this is showing is because she is slowing down. She's describing a conversation, letting you know that she's uncomfortable, she's awkward. We feel the awkwardness in it, and then it's interspersed with both dialogue and reflection and sensory details about how she's feeling inside her body. If you read the whole scene, there are even more details. We know where they are. There's a reference point in time, and we're getting the sense talking about, as we have in previous classes, these different "I's" or different selves that Susannah presents. This is the uncomfortable healing self, I'm not quite myself self, and she's been building that in all of Part Three, so that by the time we get to page 211, we have a real sense of the state of discomfort that she's in, and it's incredibly helpful, just in terms of her building of that as we drop into this example.

LJM: What I think is so good is that all your examples are really great because I think it's hard for people to understand what we mean by "showing," so it's really good to look at other memoirs, this one and other memoirs. I'm going to give some examples, too, of how you can particularize what you're writing and assemble these skills. We call them sensual details, but when you see them complete here,

you can feel that you, the reader, get into this scene, these moments. That's how you know it's really working.

BW: There is a place in which you get lost in the scenes and that's another way, that as a reader you know it's working, when you forget you're reading and you're just so engrossed, and that writer is doing a good enough job of creating a whole world so that you're not asking any questions—well, what about this, what about this? Your goal and your charge as the writer is to fill in those holes so that they're not dropped out of the fictive dream.

LJM: Right, exactly. I was thinking a lot about tenses because I think, in a way, we go, well, sure, there's a present tense, there's a past tense. We all know this, and we do talk with people who struggle with how to weave the tenses, help them with what they need to think about and how they need to think about it. The big thing is that tenses help create the structure of your story because tenses help you move back and forth in time. No matter, pretty much, what kind of memoir you're writing, whether you're writing a framed memoir where you start one place and drop into the past and end back where you started. There are different versions where you weave back and forth in time and flashback, which we're going to talk about today. But, basically, time is the thing that your reader is following, so you set up the time frame and the literal framing and structure. If your story is a house, your tenses are the framing and the structure of that house.

The other thing that people struggle with is they say, "well, should I write in present or past?" There just is not one answer to that. In fact, many authors—I'm one of them—I wrote my whole first memoir in past tense, and it was a problem. I just didn't think it really worked that well. Then I redid it in present tense, and then I changed it again. I think I changed it three times because I was struggling. I was new at writing memoir, and I just wasn't sure what to do. But what I finally sold as a coming-of-age story is that there was a certain intensity that the present tense gave, so that was my choice. However, as a child narrator, I also couldn't move back and forth in time for quite a while in that book.

In Susannah's book, the thing that she does is right away she sets up the tenses in her story. In the very first Author's Note that we referred to last week, she says:

> *"Because of the nature of my illness and its effect on my brain, I remember only flashes of actual events. I'm physically incapable of remembering that time."*

She is in the present there. That's when she admits she's an unreliable narrator, and so on. She starts her preface in the present tense in italics:

> *"At first, there's just darkness and silence. Are my eyes open? Hello? I can't tell if I'm moving my mouth or not. It's too dark to see."*

She's in the present tense, and in that present tense preface, set apart from the main part of the story as a preface, she doesn't know what is happening. It's very intense because we're in that with her immediately, so she draws us right in. Then, she starts telling the story of what happened as far as she could figure it out. In her case, in her book, part of it is "I need to figure out what happened," so the book has an element of figuring out a mystery in a way, in that we go with her. The chapters, like we've talked about, are short, which helps.

I want to give a couple of examples of how she moves through time, and this very short two pages on pages 40 and 41 are a really good example of Chapter 8, The Out-of-Body Experience. She starts the chapter saying:

> *"As Steven later described that nightmarish scene, I had woken him up with a strange series of low moans resonating among the sounds from the TV. At first he thought I was grinding my teeth, but when the grinding noises became a high-pitched squeak like sandpaper and then turned into deep grunts, he knew something was wrong."*

She is using—like we've said she does—what Steven later told her, and she starts that section with that. Then, on the top of page 41, she says:

"I would never regain any memories of this seizure or the ones to come. This moment, my first blackout, marked the line between sanity and insanity."

She does it all the way through the book. She moves us through time. We've touched on that before already, but she does it with her tenses. Then, in the middle of the page:

"As I later learned, this seizure was merely the most dramatic and recognizable."

Any of us can use these techniques. We don't have to be solving a medical mystery in our memoir. There are times when we want to pull forward and say, "Later I would find out that…"
People do it all the time. Now, sometimes when we're teaching people, and we're looking at every sentence in our Write Your Memoir in Six Months class, for instance, we might give feedback and say, "Don't go forward here." That is not meant to be a rule that you can never go forward. It just means that right there it didn't seem to work. It's one of those subtle things that over time we experiment with, and sometimes it seems to work and sometimes it might jerk the reader out of a moment that we actually need to stay in longer. Like Brooke was talking about, you may need to be slowing down.

I want to talk about flashbacks. We know that the "now" of that moment is very intense. We've been talking about that. I want to define a flashback, and then I'm going to show you one here in a second. A flashback is a full-on scene set in the past. Now, the way that Susannah wrote hers, because she's piecing together this quilt-like experience of her illness, I guess some of the paragraphs function as flashbacks because of the way she's narrating it, but I'd also give another couple of examples that are different like a lot of writers use.

A flashback is when you drop out of the present time. It doesn't matter what tense you're using. You will go into the past. You'll do a double-double space, or what we call a line break, to let the reader know, and through some kind of transition, like, *"As I sat in the chair, I couldn't help think about the time that we…"* Then you have your break, and then you go drop into the scene: *"I was nine-years-old the first time that I went to my grandfather's house and rode his tractor,"* or whatever it was. There are lots of ways to signal that flashback, but the reason to include one—and this is what you need to keep in

mind—is that a flashback is a full scene, which means the scene is important enough that the reader needs to be in it with you. You're creating a scene that they live in so that they can feel more profoundly what you felt, rather than in a summary where you give three or four lines about what something was like—though a lot of times a summary is all you need. But if you're choosing a flashback, you're basically saying, "I want you to feel this," and it's an important part of showing

The other thing about flash forward, and Susannah does this, is we use the conditional tense. *"From then on, I would always look forward to riding my grandfather's tractor."* I'm going to use that example. It's a flash forward, and it can be a useful summarizing of what is going to be continuous action. Those are some of the skill sets as to how you use that. Let's look at this flashback that we included here from Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*.

Basically, you're in the now, so in *Wild, s*he is on the trail, and someone's giving her a ride, these women she met.

> *"They got into the front and we drove. I looked out the window at the towering trees, looking past, thinking of Eddie."*

Eddie was her stepfather.

> *"I felt a bit guilty that I hadn't mentioned him when the women asked about my parents. He became like someone I used to know. I loved him still, and I loved him instantly from that first night I met him when I was ten."*

Here we transition. She just gives that one little signal into the flashback.

> *"He wasn't like any of the men my mother had dated,"*

and so on. And then she gives a description, so she's showing what he's like in various ways:

> *"He had soft blue eyes and a sharp German nose and brown hair that he kept in a pony tail that draped halfway down his back."*

Now we can see this guy.

> *"The first night I met him he came for dinner. He played with Karen, Leif and me out on a little patch of grass in front of our building."*

Notice she's very specific with action and what exactly happened.

> *"He chased us and caught us and held us upside down and shook us to see if any coins would fall. We would run after him…"*

There's the use of "would" ongoingly.

> *"…shrieking with a particular joy that had been denied us all of our lives because we had never been loved right by a man."*

That's an important moment right there.

> *"He took a look and watched us perform,"* and so on.
> *"By the time my mother called us into dinner, I was so besotted with him, I'd lost my appetite."*

In two paragraphs, basically, she paints this picture of a man she really came to love very intensely as a stepfather. And she goes on shortly after this and talks about what happened after her mother died. But what we want you to see is that I really felt the joy of these children playing with this man, and in that sentence where she grabs it all together and uses this reflection:

> *"…shrieking with a particular joy that had been denied us all of our lives because we'd never been loved right by a man."*

It's such a beautiful example of these moments that sink into your heart. She's being very specific with her own story, but one lovely gift of showing is that it ends up being a universal moment, too, those times that we ever met somebody that made us love them, and now we grieve losing them, however that happened. The flashback takes us into the heart of who Cheryl is and some of her memories.

BW: Yeah, it's great. All those connections are so interesting and important.

We're going to talk about how to make your readers feel what you feel by tracking individual experiences. This really tacking on to the first part of my teaching tonight in which the examples that I showed really were visceral. I write here that Susannah often writes from the heart, not the head, which is interesting because she's piecing together what happened. So, of course, the exercise of writing the book was probably quite intellectual and journalistic when you think about it, but her writing is often really heartfelt. It's these moments, in the beginning, concern for herself, and then moving into this person that she's really not, which is kind of a reconstructed identity because she doesn't even really remember that time, and then finally to this really insecure, different self.

You feel what that must have felt like. I think that's what I most appreciate about this book, actually, is that as a person who hasn't gone through something like this, she truly pulls you into this is what it felt like to be on this journey. *It was scary in the beginning, and then I totally lost myself, and then in the end, I wasn't the person that I was before it all started.* I say here that the use of intensity, discomfort, and physical reaction to things all are part of this journey. I thought this was all a real page-turner. I felt very in the story and super drawn to oh, my gosh, the intensity of what was going on for her. It's a different kind of experience. In other books I've read, like Elizabeth Gilbert, for instance, in *Eat Pray Love* and Cheryl Strayed in *Wild*, I felt much more connected to the characters, to the women that those two women are. With Susannah, it wasn't so much about her. It was more about the experience she was going through, and I had more of that *oh, my God, what if that happened to me* kind of moment. You're feeling the fear of what that might be like, whereas with other memoirs, you're often drawn into more relating. It depends on the kind of memoir that you're writing. If you want your readers to relate, if you want to give them an experience of something that they may never experience themselves, which is the

case with books like armchair travel reads. Travel narrative is often about inviting people into a world they may not experience. You have all kinds of things. Then, finally, I said that she uses language that's descriptive, evocative, and moving.

Now, we're going to go through some examples here, and some of these things are things we've already talked about a bunch of times before. That pivotal seizure scene that we talked about almost every single class—and Linda Joy already referenced it tonight—I think is an example of a visceral kind of experience with intensity. She tells you at that moment:

> "*I would never gain any memories. This marked the line between sanity and insanity."*

Linda Joy already said this tonight. But it's such a pivotal, big moment in the book, and you go "wow." From here on forward, nothing is the same, and that's a big deal. On page 56, she has a similar kind of seizure, at the bottom. It says:

> *"By now they were staring at me, concern creasing their faces, but they still continued to nod accommodatingly. I left once more, cantering from the family room to the kitchen and back. This time I had it. This time I had figured it out. This time it all made sense. The Oriental rug scraped my cheek, oval droplets of blood marring the pattern. My mom's shrill scream. I had collapsed on the floor and bitten my tongue and was convulsing like a fish out of water, my body dancing in jerking motions."*

I think this is brilliant. She really brings you into this intensity of her experience.

> *"This time I had it. This time I had figured it out. This time it all made sense. The Oriental rug scraped my cheek."*

We see she's dropped to the floor. She doesn't have to say, "I fell to the floor and looked out, and there was the Oriental rug." These are helpful moments to say, could you incorporate this style of writing into your own memoir? Do you even want to? Maybe you don't like it, and that's fine, but I think there's

definitely something to be learned here about how to do visceral, intense writing. Susannah does it really well.

Page 55, I just popped this in because she uses a journal snippet, because her journal is super visceral, and I am not actually a fan of excerpting journals in general. I think a little bit is fine, but doing too much is overwhelming. But she just uses this little snippet. This is in the middle of page 55:

> *"The documents reveal my scattered and increasingly erratic thought processes. Basically, I'm bipolar, and that's what makes me me. I just have to get control of my life. I love working. I love it. I have to break up with Steven. I can read people really well, but I'm too jumbly. I let work take too much out of my life."*

This shows, as she says, her "erratic thought processes," and I think that's very helpful that she adds that in just in this context to show something really intense. Again, what I'm pointing to here per the previous slide is intensity, discomfort, and reactions to things. These is what these examples are for, and you as the reader, oftentimes are, oh, my gosh, a little worried for her, right, as we should be. This is a powerful scene on page 61, at the bottom, when she is driving in the car with her stepdad and her mom. It says:

> *"As we drove out of our driveway and onto the street, Alan began to speak. I could hear him distinctly, though he wasn't moving his lips. 'You're a slut. I think Steven should know.' My whole body shook with anger and I leaned threateningly toward the driver's seat. 'What did you say?' 'Nothing,' Alan said, sounding both surprised and exhausted."*

I like that, too. It's uncomfortable. You understand that she totally doesn't actually hear it, and she lets you know that.

> *"I could hear him distinctly, though he wasn't moving his lips."*

It's a construct. Some of you might find that irritating, but I personally think it's very effective because she tells us that she could hear him even though he wasn't moving his lips, which lets you know that he's not really talking, but in her chaotic mindset at the time, that totally makes sense. Or perhaps you believe or she believed that he was talking under his breath. It could have been any number of things. I actually really like that there's a bit of reading into that that could happen, and that there's some room for interpretation that we could conceivably talk about as well.

The bottom of page 68 and all of page 69 showcases a manic episode. It's all showing, it's all visceral. Again, she doesn't do this too much, and you don't want to do this too much, but it is very powerful, and when I read this I had anxiety coursing through me. I felt something, and that's what showing does, It does make your reader feel instead of just all in their head going, "Uh-huh, that makes sense. Okay, got it. Yeah, I know what she's talking about." Instead, it grips you in your chest region. It should make you feel in the heart center. It starts at the bottom and says:

> *"A few moments later, a sickening blast and a boom came from upstairs. Pow, pow, pow! I chose to ignore it. I walked into his war room, picked up the Revolutionary War sword, removed it from its sheath, entranced by the blade, and then returned it. Then I heard Giselle's voice. She was pleading with my father. 'Please don't hurt me,' she begged. 'Please don't hurt me.' Because of her, again, the imaginary pow, pow, pow."*

She says "imaginary." She repeats this. This is a construct. We know she's recreating this stuff and she's letting you in that this is not totally real. She's giving you cues all the time, and yet she's writing this stuff to show this was her experience, and I think it's actually quite skillful because she's enrolling you in the experience, which is what I talked about in the beginning—that's how you show—but then there are these little indicators:

> *"His lips weren't actually moving even though he was talking."*

This is an imaginary "pow, pow, pow." Basically, we don't know if this is true or not or what happened exactly. There's discomfort in the fact of not totally knowing that it's true, so it's powerful because she

is leading us through the contours of the mind and what was going on for her during this time when she wasn't one hundred percent here. There was absolutely something going on with her brain at the time. I think that's why this book was so widely read and got so many accolades, because there's a lot of stuff that she does that is skillful that makes it still a memoir because it's true. She's not lying or trying to say this thing absolutely happened. There's some room for doubt and interpretation, and she does a lot of showing and a lot of really powerful showing.

Linda Joy?

LJM: We know from the other discussions we've had that Susannah very much used the topic of the problem with her brain, the medical details and so on. She created information, and that was her intent, information that was larger than "this is just what happened to me," although obviously, what happened to her was very, very powerful. These constructs that she used helped to tell that story.

Let's talk about your memoir or what most of us have to do when we're on the ground trying to figure out and make our memoir take off. How do we even think about it as mortals here? We can look at authors and go well, they did a great job, but gosh, what am I going to do? We're going to talk about that now.

One of the first things is what is the topic or theme of your memoir? In her case, it was the problem with brain dysfunction. Usually the topic that you may hear the way other people talk about their book is in that one-sentence or two-sentence elevator pitch. Frank McCourt said *Angela's Ashes* is about his miserable Irish childhood, which it is, and it's a lot more than that too, but that's how he described it. We look at the book *Wild* and we talk about it's a story about this woman hike across the Pacific Crest Trail, during which time she reviews her life and tries to heal the pain of her mother's death and her own mistakes. Again, those are two sentences.

You want to think about the larger context of the story beyond "it happened to me." Brooke alluded to that earlier in talking about when she was at Seal Press and she would see these books and what had happened, had happened, had happened and… That is not to say whatever happened to you is not

important, but the book does need to reach out beyond "it happened to you" or "it happened to me" into what we call the "universal" or the "takeaways," which we have talked about, that other people can relate to. That's why you want to think about contextually where your book fits in.

Some of the common ones, the overview here is maybe it's about cooking and how you healed your family or appreciated your family through cooking, not just that you had a bunch of fun recipes. Travel could work very well. Where did you go, when did you go, and how it change you, not just that you went and it was cool, but the interior experience of that place and time? There are other themes like healing and recovery. Of what? What are you healing? What are you recovering from? We talked about some addiction memoirs last spring: Carolyn Knapp and another memoir, and the theme for both was recovery, certainly first actually being addicted and what that was really like. Then, toward the end of both of them, how they woke up to finding some recovery, and it's a big topic. There are many different books about that. How is yours showing something unique, that it will be unique because you lived it? This is where what are the other books that are similar to yours, where do they come in?

What do you call that in publishing, Brooke, comparative titles, right?

BW: Exactly.

LJM: Looking at comparative titles. That's a useful thing to do. Coming-of-age stories. There are many of those, from *Glass Castle, Liar's Club*, but those are very different stories in many ways. They're unique because of what happens specifically and the use of language and the details in both of those. In your coming-of-age story, what is it about you growing up that you want to share and that you connect with other readers on? It could be the experience of simply being in another era at a different time in the world, and that can be very interesting.

Can we see the next slide to continue this?

Then, there are other examples. In this case it was medicine. There are other physical healing or physical dysfunctional stories, and then the dysfunctional family thing. Very big topics but, just as Tolstoy said,

to angle in at that quote, people are happy in different ways and of course very unhappy in different ways, and what was it really like for you? You want to think about you're really going to get involved in creating characters, people that you know, people that you love and relate to in your dysfunctional family story. I think it's useful to ask yourself, *well, do I have any axe to grind or why do I need to write this story,* but sometimes we just need to write it and it get it out of us first. The issue of abuse can come in there, and there are a lot of stories like that being written, partly because people are healing and partly because other readers want to find out how other people dealt with such situations and find reading a memoir is really helpful.

Then, there's a history of a place, the history of an era, like I was starting to talk about. Now, quite a few more books around the '60s and '70s are coming out, either from the adults at that time or someone who grew up during that era and had to deal with their hippie parents and macrobiotic food and being naked all the time, whatever it was in the middle of that situation, the witness to an era. In other books it's World War II or the Vietnam War. It might be a war story, etc., so again, that's the universal connection.

There are skills that might be included, like playing the piano or learning photography. In *H Is for Hawk*, it's how Helen MacDonald dealt with grieving over the death of her father by training this hawk, and boy, do we learn a lot about hawks that you never knew you didn't know, and it's beautifully written and very well done.

You can use the lens of time. We were talking about tenses, how tenses connect with context. Again, I've been noticing that I've been getting feedback a lot from people around what is the context of their story, meaning at what time in history, at what time in the world, and where is it happening. So many of us write our stories as if we're suspended out of time and place, and you really do need to show that. You don't have to go on and on about it, but you do need to be very grounded in what is the context in which you're setting this story, and ask how does that context affect my story and myself—to actually ask yourself those kinds of questions. We could go on about this, but those are some of the basic things, Brooke, to think about and look at.

BW: Yes, that's true. This could be a whole class, and there are so many things that you can all do to be weaving in and just creating these broader, deeper, wider-ranging experiences for the readership that you're going after. It's hard. These are so many tools that you have at your disposal, and it's not necessarily the case that you're going to be using all of them in a first draft or as you're learning. These are some of the things to be looking out for as you're reading other women's memoirs or men's, too, of course. I just think that memoirs tend to be a little bit more of a female genre, but obviously there are many, many, many examples of great male memoirs as well. Checking that out, and great thoughts on that, Linda Joy.

We welcome your questions. Nobody has parked a question for us yet, so we have time to discuss, and I hope that people will. It can be anything. A lot of you have continued to write, after the fact that you struggled with this book a little bit, and we can talk about that. We can talk about some of the other pieces of showing tonight. Some of you have emailed to say you've come around a bit after listening to some of these sessions, and that is interesting as well. I think anytime you really dive into someone's work and start seeing the things they have done well, you can grow an appreciation for how things are handled. I've certainly had that experience myself.

LJM: I had that with *Glass Castle*, where at first I didn't care for it, but I was rereading it again and I was rereading *Wild* and going wow, the skill level of digging into these stories and even living through writing them really impressed me, really appreciating them all over again.

BW: Yes, it's so true, and I had that experience myself, actually with *Eat Pray Love*, so it's an interesting thing to go back and to read memoirs that you initially felt turned off by or didn't like and just to come at them from a new angle.

There's a question from Bonnie about comparative titles: Any suggestions for losing faith when bad things happen or spirituality? I'm not sure those two things are connected, Bonnie, if that has anything to do with comparative titles or if you're just asking for any suggestions for losing faith when bad things happen or spirituality.

BONNIE: Just comparative titles on something bad has happened and you've lost faith and so your path is to maybe find your faith again or you're finding it a different way through spirituality instead of through God. Any other books come to mind like that?

LJM: There are a lot of them out there. I just don't know the titles.

BW: One suggestion I have, because I'm not going to think of anything on top of my mind at this particular second, is when you're doing comparative title research, it's good to go on Amazon because what they do is they curate all those titles, basically, so that if you find one, then it can say, "Customers who bought this also bought this," and that's a really effective way to do title research, and I do it all the time. Anne Lamott comes to mind as someone who does spiritual writing, and maybe looking at some of her titles. Laurie Prim says *Breaking Up with God*. Thank you, Laurie, that's great.

LJM: Somebody Beck. What's her name, Martha Beck, about being a Mormon, I think she wrote?

BW: *The Spiral…*

LJM: And then Karen Armstrong.

BW: Yes, Karen Armstrong wrote *The Spiral Staircase*, exactly.

LJM: Going to Amazon and also googling those various key words will bring up titles like crazy, I think for you.

BONNIE: That's a great idea. Thank you.

BW: This is great. We could have a brainstorming session here and create tip sheets for publishers. I love it. I need your expertise in other capacities, people. That's great.

Is there anything that people feel like they struggle with, with regard to showing or any myths that need to be busted here, because one of the things we teach in our long course is about how it's a myth that you should show, not tell; that it's a big deal that some telling is appropriate, I guess is what I'm trying to say, because you can't really tell a story if you're never telling. But what I think they mean by that is not to fall into that "and then and then and then" kind of cadence to your writing, and really allow yourself to slow down and explore your own environment.

LJM: The whole idea of feeling free to reflect. I know that you were saying earlier that sometimes people felt like what they were saying was obvious or they didn't want to insult the reader by saying too much. I've heard that, too. When I say what were you thinking and what were you feeling, sometimes the writer says, "Well, I thought it was obvious," or "I don't want to say too much because it insults the reader." Actually, that can be true. We don't want to lecture the reader, but I think in a first draft, particularly, put it all in because if it's too much you can take it out. It's easier than trying to figure out well, what was I feeling at that moment? Sometimes we don't include it because we haven't thought about it. I had one student that said, "I don't know. I never thought about these things before." I said, "Well, you're writing a memoir. You have to think about them."

BW: Gayle brings up an interesting question. She says, "Is there a danger in coming off as a victim when descriptively evoking a painful experience?" The answer is yes, there's absolutely a danger, and partly, some of the people who are most effective at writing really painful experiences are those writers who know how to do it dispassionately. We actually spent a whole session on this in *The Glass Castle* course, the dispassionate writing as effective in showing, because you're talking about being a victim, or you don't want you reader to feel that you're being self-pitying, or that you're not going to be okay. So, you do need to find a way to write it with a certain amount of distance, and that's sometimes why people who are in the throes of their own experience who are still kind of living the memoir or haven't gained enough distance, sometimes it's too soon to write a memoir, I've found, although a first draft is fine, but maybe you need to live a little while longer or be writing drafts of the memoir just to gain a little bit of distance.

LJM: In my Writing and Healing class, a lot of the people are writing it to get it out of themselves, and there's a lot of value in that kind of healing, and there's a lot written about that. But it's too soon to think about it as a story, and it's too soon to think about it dispassionately at that point if it's still hurting, but it doesn't mean you can't write. You just need to know that you're writing your own healing draft first.

BW: Yes, it's helpful.

Cheryl has more of a comment: "Still surprised at the liberties she takes in her dialogue and the truth as she remembers it in her memoir, as I try to relate it to the writing of my memoir." Then she says, "Maybe it's not the best one to emulate in that regard."

Yes. If you didn't have an experience of completely losing your memory on something, you probably don't want or need to emulate her on that point. But the fact is the main part of the book, the entire middle part, is something that she doesn't remember, and so her entire Author's Note is basically a disclaimer. I think that's pretty interesting. So, more than anything, I think looking at all these different kinds of memoirs that exist and what kind of freedom you do have…

One of the things I like about this book, because Linda Joy and I, in our classes, are always talking about permission, the permission to do maybe what you think you're not allowed to do. It's very freeing, and the number one point here is also not to mislead the reader. I think that she's taken pains, great pains, actually, to make sure that she's not misleading and to be very clear about what she doesn't remember, and she sets that up and she does it all the way through. But you're right. In some ways, Cheryl, this is a little bit of an anomaly of a book, but I think there are so many good skill sets that any memoirist can adopt from her, and I think that's part of why we wanted to teach it.

LJM: We were teaching it partly because people say to us, "I don't have enough memories to write. "And then when we talk to them more, they actually do, but they just feel afraid about how they would approach what they do remember, what they don't remember, and also what the family would say. Usually, there's some inner critic going on in there, too, and we did want to encourage people to take a look at what's possible.

BW: Cheryl is just saying it has been very helpful in that regard. *I was afraid to write almost anything I couldn't document.*

LJM: Ah, great. Congratulations! Yes. We did notice a lot of people struggle with that, and so we thought well, can we help in some way? This book is pretty far out, in a way, but gosh, you can look at how careful she was, as well as the liberties she took, and then decide what you can do for yourself, what you feel comfortable doing.

BW: Yes. To me, that right there, Cheryl, might just be the biggest coup of the whole class. If other people feel that way, too, it's so great and it's so important because your memoir can only really be a fraction of its potential if you think that all you're allowed to write is what you remember because it's not enough. It's not enough to make it interesting, to make it full, to make it complete. There are all of these skills that you learn in recreating dialogue and using the conditional and saying it might have played out like this. That's really where you bring the creativity in.

For anyone else who is struggling on this particular point, I highly recommend reading *The Art of Memoir* by Mary Karr because she delves into this quite a bit, and I think she's another champion of good, creative nonfiction, and that she draws a really firm and distinct line between lying and emotional truth, which is so much of what Linda Joy and I teach in our longer classes, and that it's not okay to just make things up from whole cloth, but that you do absolutely have some freedom to recreate scenes as they would have been.

LJM: I do that in my new memoir, and I actually walked in the shoes of other people, close people to me, family, but I stood in their shoes and imagined their world, but I set it up so that the reader knew that that's what I was doing. I was imagining. You guys can imagine a lot more than you might think, so good luck with playing with that. Just play with it and see what happens.

BW: Yes, that's great. All right, thank you so much for another great class. We're on our final course a week from tonight and we'll see you all there. Have a great week!

Week Four: Takeaway

Brooke Warner: Hi, everybody! Welcome to our final class. We're excited to be here to talk somewhat about takeaway, but also just, in general, the reason we taught this book in the first place, the reason we chose it, which is how to write a memoir that changes lives. We do think that Susannah and this book have some really great lessons to impart on that point, so we're looking forward to diving in.

Linda Joy Myers: Yes, me, too.

BW: All right, good. I think I'm up first. I'm going to be talking tonight about takeaway, which, for any of you who have taken previous classes with us, we always talk about takeaway. We talk about takeaway in every single one-month course that we teach. We talk about takeaway in our long classes, both our Mastering Memoir class and our Write-Your-Memoir-in-Six-Months class, and the reason is because it's so critical to creating meaning, which is the topic of tonight's class.

People who are writing memoirs without any understanding of what takeaway is are really not quite there yet. That's what we've come to feel and understand through our teaching, and sometimes the takeaway needs to come at a later point. If you're just executing a first draft of your memoir and trying to figure out what your themes and messages are, then takeaway might be something that is an additional layer during a revision process, but it is really helpful to understand the different ways to impart takeaway to your reader because Linda Joy and I believe that takeaway is the heart of memoir writing, that it's the place where you mirror back to the reader something really fundamental that is not about you.

Ultimately the memoir is your story and you're the protagonist and you're the hero on the heroine's journey, but the reason memoir is meaningful is not because of what you went through. It's because your experience is relatable, and because the reader is connecting to or relating to something or learning something or gleaning something important about themselves in the process. That is really so key to

writing a memoir that changes lives, but we also think a memoir that moves people, a memoir that matters, a matter that has a broader purpose than just capturing what happened. A memoir is obviously so much bigger than just what happened, so tonight I'm going to be talking about these different kinds of takeaways:

1. Takeaways that connect for the purpose of connecting and relating
2. Takeaways to convey a message
3. Takeaways to express a universal truth or experience
4. Takeaways to make an impact, in which I say here using personal philosophies, specifics, or stories, and finally,
5. Takeaways to teach.

You may not be doing all of these, but you do need to do some of them, and I would say that number one is the most important, and number three might be the second most important.

Let's look first at the example that creates meaning. This is from page 206. All of these examples are coming from this book which, frankly, *Brain on Fire* does not have a whole lot of takeaways. I scoured the book looking for them, and I felt like there were some but it's not full of takeaways the way in which the book *Wild*, for instance, is. Let's look at page 206 together, and it's just the final sentence. It's here, so that's all there really is:

> *"Sometimes just when we need them, life wraps metaphors up in little bows for us. When you think all is lost, the things you need the most unexpectedly return."*

The reason this is a takeaway is because you can see it's not about her. It is written in the second person, so it is talking to the reader. *"When you think all is lost, the things you need the most unexpectedly return."* Certainly, takeaway is often done in the second person but not exclusively, and so, again, it's a way to mirror back to your reader.

Takeaway that expresses a universal truth or experiences. These are one of my favorite kinds of takeaways because what they are is a moment in the text where you stop and you go into the meaning of something that everybody understands. The one on page 175 is just that. She's talking about fear, and if this could be any emotion, sometimes I tell people to stop here and talk about the nature of this emotion. That's a takeaway. She says:

> *"Fear of this sort is not something we typically capture in photographs or videos of ourselves."*

She's talking about this video in which she is captured catatonic. She says:

> *"But there I am, staring into the camera, as I'm looking death in the face."*

She goes on to talk about herself, but what I want to point to here is, *"Fear of this sort is not something we typically capture in photographs or videos of ourselves."* What she's relating to the reader in saying this is an extreme kind of fear, and we know what this kind of fear feels like, or maybe some of us are so removed from it that we never have. The point is this universalizing, and that's the point that we're getting to here. She does the same thing with talking about her brother on page 179. Again, these are just little moments, but they are takeaways. She's talking about her brother in the second to the last paragraph, and it says:

> *"He looked at me with such a devastating mixture of surprise and sympathy that I almost fell to my knees. It wasn't until I saw the look on his face that I realized how sick I was. Perhaps it was the closeness between us as siblings that brought this realization to the fore, or maybe it was because I had always considered myself an older custodian to Baby James, and now the roles were clearly reversed."*

The reason that that's a takeaway, in my opinion, is that anyone who has a sibling understands this kind of connection, so there is an attempt here to relate by sharing the closeness of the sibling relationship and what that brought to her and what meaning it had, and there's something in it for the reader as well,

a point of connection. Similarly, the same thing with the relationship with her dad, at the very bottom of page 199:

> *"We didn't mean to exclude others. My dad and I had gone off to war, fought in the trenches and, against all odds, had come out of it alive and intact. There are few other experiences that can bring two people together than staring death in the face."*

That is also a takeaway, so I hope you're seeing the pattern here. She's talking about the nature of the experience of having a near-death experience that brought her and her dad closer, and the way she's talking about it is universal. It's not just about her experience; it's about any experience like this.

LJM: I just want to say what I think is so good about all this is that I like the way you selected out and named these different ways, because takeaway is so subtle that it's really hard for people to even identify what it is, let alone how to do it, so this is great. Thank you.

BW: Yes, yes. This is something I've been drilling into teaching takeaway. We're both constantly trying to make it easier to understand this stuff, and we know that takeaway is one of these things that really eludes writers, so you guys are actually the first to get exposed to this, like let's get in the trenches here and really tear takeaway into different pieces, and I think it's really helpful.

Takeaway to make an impact. This one is on page 179, and she's using rhetorical questions, in a sense, and that also can be a way to do takeaway because she's talking about how many other children throughout history and been exorcised and left to die when they did not improve. She's ruminating about her own situation and what it might have been like for her:

> *"How many people are currently in psychiatric wards and nursing homes and denied the relatively simply cure of steroids, plasma exchange, etc.? I couldn't forget how close I had come to such a dangerous edge."*

It's thought-provoking, but it's also a takeaway because it serves its purpose. What it does here —you guys can feel this—is it makes you think about yourself, or it makes you think about other people you might know, or other people in history or now who might have had this other experience, and therefore it's bigger than Susannah. I think that that's the thing about takeaway: it's bigger than the writer, and that's an important note.

LJM: To add to that, a lot of writers say, "Well, I showed my work to an editor or an agent and they said, 'Why should I care about this?'" Sometimes it's off-putting and a little bit, like what do they mean? Well, what I think what they mean is *what is the takeaway*? What is somebody else going to learn? It's not just what happened to you. That's another way I think writers hear about this, and I think it's good to know how to translate what that means.

BW: Yes, absolutely.

Takeaway to teach. As I said, this is my final example. This is teaching. It really is. Again, it's broader than Susannah. It gets into the weeds a little bit, but she does this and other writers do this. When we taught our addiction class, both Carolyn Knapp and Koren Zailckas did this. They were really talking about alcohol with statistics and how women succumb to this, so this is somewhat similar in terms of its specificity:

> *"My short-term memory has been obliterated, a problem usually rooted in the hippocampus, which is like a way station for new memories. The hippocampus briefly stores the patterns of neurons that make up the memory,"* etc., etc.

You guys can read along. She goes on to say:

> *"To understand how important the hippocampus is to the circuitry of the brain, all you have to do is consider what happens when it is removed."*

Then she explains what happens when it's removed, and that's another somewhat shocking part of the book. She's talking about the impact, and there is a takeaway here because you're learning in the teaching about the seriousness of what she's confronting and, to me, a lot of her teaching and science-based writing serve as a takeaway in this book.

LJM: Yes, I agree.

BW: All right. Take it away.

LJM: We talked about journalistic techniques before, as you all may remember and, of course, we talked about the fact that Susannah's a journalist and, of course, she's going to be thinking and examining her own experience through a journalistic eye. I think it makes her book really good, and most of us can do better at thinking about how to present our story so that it's just bigger than "this is what happened to me," which is part of what we're trying to get across now. I've had to wrestle a lot with that, too. I've been told, sometimes more rudely than others, *so what or who cares?* I'm, like, eh. In the early years I didn't know how to answer the question, and probably I wasn't thinking enough earlier, as I moved toward publication or editors or agents, of what else is somebody else going to get out of this book. It has to do with "what is the theme," which we've already taught about, but ways that you can truly nail down some very strong specifics, and I think it makes the story stronger.

You can do things like list some details, quotes, records. I will bring myself in here because in my new book I didn't think about it in terms of journalistic techniques, but it actually turned out that way, where I wanted to explore what happened in my grandmother's life and my mother's life before I was born, when they were young. I did a lot of genealogy research, both literal, in dusty courthouses, as well as on Ancestry.com. What happened is that a narrative began to knit itself together as I listed each date, what happened on that date, and when and where and who and why I was including that particular clip. Part of what I was showing is there is that I don't know the story from these people, but I do know the literal notations and records from what they were doing because I found this objective evidence.

As it says on the slide the journalist is objective and has this data that can support your subjective interpretation, so let's talk about that for a minute. I had data, but I didn't know exactly what happened, but I began to imagine and speculate. For instance, I would say I don't know where, when and how my grandmother met my grandfather, but I heard that he played in a band in town. And I can imagine her going down to the hotel and meeting him, and by 1911 they're married and they elope. I found a newspaper article about the elopement, but I also speculate about not only do I have information that they did elope, and it was kind of one of those secret family stories that I eventually found out about, but then I began to speculate on in 1911, when a girl eloped, what did people think? What was going on then in the family after she got back and so on? I talk about the theme of how people in the family did not tend to forgive mistakes and how this affected us through the generations. I had kind of a long tail of what I was bringing forward in both my facts and my speculation.

The other thing that you can do in your story—and probably most of you need to do this more than you think you do—is if you're writing about, let's say your childhood in the 1950s or '60s or '70s, whenever it was, maybe before that, the thing to know is that there is a whole world going on around everybody that's alive at that time, just like there is now. Like today, there's a whole lot of stuff going on. If we say, well, on this particular day in October I went and had a glass of wine at the café, and people were talking about the debates, for instance. There are a whole lot of things going on besides you having that glass of wine at the bar. Perhaps you're writing about your parents or your grandparents.

Perhaps you're gathering evidence, too, about how people lived. What was going on then? What was the furniture like? Pretend that you're doing a *Mad Men* movie of the '50s. Notice how accurate the details are about everything. What kind of telephones? What kind of radios? What kind of clothes? Did people actually make telephone calls? When I grew up in the '50s, unless somebody died, nobody made a long-distance phone call. It was expensive. I'm just doing an overview of the kind of detail, but it does connect with the larger world, and you can find out all this data on the Internet, basically. There are ways to find all this stuff out. It's much easier now.

When I first started writing about my great-grandmother and my grandmother, the Internet wasn't up and running yet, so I got, for instance, a Montgomery & Ward's catalog from 1896 because I wanted to

know what kind of household appliances they had then. What kind of clothes? What did the world look like then? There was everything in it. That was some of my research.

The other thing is reflection. Exploring delineates and reveals meaning. We've talked about reflection before, and it's part of takeaway, though all reflection isn't takeaway, but it is part of it. The reflection can be—I want to read this next slide. This is a way of using history in Peter Balakian's *Black Dog of Fate*, which, by the way, is an excellent memoir. He writes it somewhat backwards in time, so that's another thing to think about structurally is how he writes it if you choose to read the book. Part of his message is *what do I notice about my family when I'm a little boy that I don't understand, and what sense do I begin to make of all these expressions and all these things?* They were Armenian, and they had the food, they had the expressions, they had these gestures that he didn't understand as a little boy, but he gives scenes in which he does not yet understand these things and proceeds to unpack and learn about his family's history, which leads basically all the way back to the Armenian Holocaust in 1914. But here, he's using history. He does this with his father, so in this quote:

> *"My father was born in September of 1920 while his parents were vacationing on Prince Island,"* and so on.

Look at the beautiful language. He paints a picture of Constantinople. It was called originally Byzantium. He goes long beyond these two paragraphs into the history of Constantinople and Turkey. It all matters. It all becomes part of the story that he is leaving, but here he paints this beautiful picture that is also the history of his father, and many of us might just say this is where he was born, it was in Constantinople, and get on with the story. He takes time to paint that world, so that really the thing that you end up appreciating is how much you're learning about this alternative world.

I know you're going to go on and talk about narration, Brooke. The thing about the takeaway is you want to have the person kind of sink into the world that you're painting for them so that they are happy to be there, and I really did feel happy to go into this world with Peter Balakian.

Another thing to mention is you can use your own journals and diaries as evidence. We had mentioned that in the past, though, we do caution against huge chunks of quotes that are without reflection because you know so much more as the journal writer when you have a journal entry than the reader knows, so if you're going to use journal entries or letters, give the context of the journal entry, explain what it means to you.

And if you're going to use quotes from other people's letters—I did this in my new memoir, too—I quoted other people's letters, but I only took a tiny sliver. I'm very picky about letters. I know lots of people love that kind of stuff, but I'm usually lost if I'm reading somebody else's letter. I don't even understand what they're getting at because it's so contextual, so if you're going to use letters and journals and diaries, you're investigating the nature of things beyond what's written down. It's how you interpret it and what meaning you make of it.

Okay, Brooke.

BW: That's perfect, and what I want to tack onto this is this example is so detailed and slowed down and in depth. There are lots of moments in *Brain on Fire* like that as well. If there's one learning point for all of you it would be the value of slowing down and letting the reader take in these details and that fictive dream that you're creating in the process.

LJM: And the beautiful writing. The idea that you really can use facts, but you could make poetry out of them, because I think people get hung up on that.

BW: Yes.

The power of unconventional narrative techniques and how and why they create meaning. Some of this stuff we've already talked about in this class, so I'm not going to go into crazy detail, talking once again about third-person point of view, for instance, which we've amply covered in this class. But there are ways in which Susannah has thought outside the box in this book, and I found it to be really interesting, all the things that we've discussed before: the way that she used her journals, the video

excerpts, moments, the images, the drawings, the photographs. There are lots of things in here that basically are contributing to the journalism. You guys can do that as well. I've worked on a lot of books that used different elements, that weave in poetry and letters and outpatient forms, and there's all kinds of stuff that you can use that basically just creates and adds layers.

I would advise not using very much of that stuff, being judicious, basically, in the amount that you excerpt. The reader doesn't want to read three or four or five pages of a letter from someone, for instance. The best thing that you would do is to excerpt a really poignant part of the letter, and then to basically synthesize or summarize the rest of it and its impact on you. I know people that often want to excerpt entire long, huge things, but they're more meaningful to you than they are to the reader because they're your family letters, so just keep that in mind. What you need to do is extrapolate the meaning for the reader. Again, that's why I would say you just insert a little piece and then talk about the rest by way of summary. Then, I said at the end—this is an important point—don't be afraid to have fun with your own narrative and your narrative voice. This is a kind of hard one because what do I mean when I say don't be afraid to have fun?

There's something about breaking out of the way that you think you have to write. A lot of people, when they come to the page, all of a sudden it's like you're back in high school literature class or someone is grading your paper. People can tend to take on a very formal tone. You might also have been educated in a certain way of writing. Perhaps you come from academia, and that's the hardest one to shake off. You've really learned how to write a certain way or have been groomed to write a certain way. What I want to encourage you all around is write how you talk. Write how you speak to a friend. It's not necessarily truly the case for every book, but when you're in dialogue, absolutely, even the prose.

Today's memoirs are very accessible. The way that people speak is with intimacy, so you might just want to look at that and shake loose of some of the ways you think you're supposed to write, like good literature or whoever your favorite literary hero might be, especially if that person might have been a novelist or a certain kind of writer. If that suits you, and you're a very poetic writer or a very literary writer, then that's fine. I'm not trying to dissuade you from that, but a lot of people get into a very stiff

kind of telling voice, where they're "and then this happened and then this happened and then this happened."

I'm reading some of that stuff now as I'm going through various submissions that I read, and it's hard to get through sometimes because you're just like uh, who is this person? I don't feel any connection to them because the way they're portraying their voice on the page is just reading really flat and without any sense of dialect like where you're from in the world, or how you talk. Or if you're a big cusser, you might want to sometimes use some cuss words. It's okay. Many, many memoirs are full of that and, again, it just depends on who you are and the person you're trying to convey. But part of finding your voice and embodying your voice is really thinking, *okay, well, how do I talk to people? Who am I? What is my voice in the world, and then how does that translate onto the page?*

A couple of small moments I thought were showcasing examples of kind of different kinds of narrative styles, just to give you some examples. These are just little moments, but I thought they were different and worth pointing out. On page 103, where she's showcasing the diary entries from Clive Waring, the patient who had anterior grade amnesia. I just like how she did this. She crosses out his entries. She says on page 103:

> *"A prolific writer himself, Waring kept lengthy diaries, but instead of filling them with insider humor, he was constantly writing the following."*

Then she crosses out the notes, and it's just something different the way she decided to show his diary in her book. You guys can do stuff like that. This is definitely an unconventional thing to do, and yet she does it with no problem and it's effective. On page 161, the dream state in which she imagines an ultrasound being conducted for a child rather than what it's really for. This is the middle of the page:

> *"I'm awakened, even though I hadn't been asleep. I had imagined this moment, the time when I would find out the gender of my child. Momentarily, I think, I hope it's a boy, but the feeling passes. I would be happy with either a girl or a boy. I can feel the cool metal of the transducer*

against my belly. My chest wall leaps up into my throat in reaction to the cold. It was almost exactly how I imagined it to be, but then again, not at all."

Why is this powerful? Why does this create meaning? Because everybody knows what an ultrasound feels like if you're a woman, I should say, and even people who haven't gone through pregnancies, many of them have had ultrasounds for various reasons, so it's a common experience. She takes that into something she personally hasn't experienced. She's projecting it forward into this is what I imagined it would always be like because she doesn't have a child yet. I thought that was effective, instead of just oh, "I went in and had an ultrasound," which is what so many people do in their writing, so this is unconventional and it's very effective. It's a dream state and it adds a layer of meaning.

Page 192 is the next example. This is where Dr. Bertuch gives her a moment to think of as many "F-A" and "S" words as she can. Again, I just like how she did this. These are small things, but they're worth paying attention to in other people's memoirs:

"*Dr. Bertuch gave me a minute each to think of as many "F-A" and "S" words as I could,"*

and then she lists them, F-A-S, and says as many as she can think of:

"Fable, fact, fiction, finger, fat, fantastic, fan, fastidious."

Why is this unconventional? Because she stops the narrative and she actually tells you the things that she said, and a lot of writers just gloss over these things as if they don't matter, but they do matter. It actually is kind of cool to see what she thought of and the fact that she repeats after and even says so. She has these bits of evidence. I'm assuming after the fact she was able to pull her own test and has the actual words that she was able to think of. I found this compelling and I liked it, so there's lots of things that you guys can do that maybe you're not doing because you are not even necessarily consciously trying to write conventionally, but you are. Unconventional narrative ideas and test bubbles and how does this work and what does this feel like, there's absolutely not only a place in that for memoir, but I

think increasingly not expected either but just something that the reader really enjoys and that is different and kind of surprising in a good way.

LJM: Yes. So much to think about, but I think it's fun and creative, and we need to mix things up.

Getting to the heart of what matters, I think all we're trying to do as we're writing our story, and it's got a bit of a spiral form the way we go into some things, a little bit like this picture on the slide. We decide we want to write a book. I think we have to sometimes ask ourselves over and over again, "Why am I writing this book?" To journal about it, to write about it, I know I've done that. I know that other people have done that to explore what I'm passionate about, for writers to say, "You know, this is the message I really want to get across to people." In our teaching, when we're talking with people and helping them with their focus or their outline or their writing, we come back to this, especially when they hit what we call the "muddy middle," where things are more complicated or maybe even harder to figure out, it's this emotional place that gets to be deep and complex.

Continuing to free write is very helpful, and we've seen this really help people a lot. You can just do a few lines or a paragraph and continue to put into words what you want readers to get. What do you want them to understand? I know for my new memoir, I had to do this over and over and over again. In fact, at one point when I did the exercise, I realized that the version I was writing wasn't quite there yet. It wasn't quite right. I needed to start over and come at my message from a different angle, so I did. I put (sigh) away 85,000 words. It did help me write the next version, but I started over, and sometimes we have to do that, and I'm not the only one, the first or the last. If we're writers and we're really serious about our books, we just have to take that tough stance and say "Well, all right, I just need to…" This is what a journalist would do. They'd go, "Well, that was the wrong angle. I need to do this other thing and be really professional about it."

You're continuing to think, "What is the lens of the takeaway for my book," continuing to look at what might be the message. What is the largest lens, actually? In *Brain on Fire*, clearly the largest lens was this brain function and medical diagnosis. I was thinking about other memoirs, child neglect and mental illness in *Glass Castle*, as well as the voice that's saying *well, we're really trying to have a good time*

here and appreciate our parents and all their quirkiness, but this is how we were living. There are many angles to that story. Surviving the dysfunctional family is the theme of *Liar's Club*, but, of course, notice how differently that was written: different voice, obviously different stories than *Glass Castle*. But if you think of the overview, this is what is being shown and is the theme.

In *Wild*, it's the wilderness and the challenges of the wilderness and hiking while Cheryl Strayed is also escaping into healing, is the way I think of it. She just knows that her own life isn't working, and she just says, okay, I'm out of here, basically, very impulsively, and runs to the woods, where we learn about her life and what she's healing. And in *H is for Hawk*—I don't know how many of you've read it. We highly recommend it. We taught it last year and just loved this book, but it's about not only hawking, but it's about Britain and British traditions, and it's about healing grief, and it's an explorational going into the work of T. H. White, who wrote *The Once and Future King*. There are so many others.

Do you have any you want to mention, Brooke that have this larger lens on takeaway?

BW: So many books do have it. I think you have to just dig in and try to find them, I guess, but yes, I love the ones you're saying definitely are good ones.

LJM: We've explored them rather deeply. The next slide, continuing to get at the heart of what matters. You can make a list every week for four weeks about what your book is about and what matters. So, you make lists every week for four weeks, let's say, for instance, of what is at the heart of your memoir? What is the message you're trying to get across? What are the themes? What are some of the details that paint the larger picture, like Peter Balakian did? Maybe you want to include the history of a place or what's in a photo album or do newspaper research, whatever it might be. The important thing is when you're doing brainstorming is you don't shut things down. You just keep talking, keep writing, keep exploring. Don't toss things out when you're doing this exploration. Keep your mind open. You never know, when you're doing this, what later—it could be even a year later, you might go, "Oh, that's it. I was thinking about that. It wasn't quite formulated before, but here it is."

Keep all of your notes. Translate some of your entries—if you're not putting them in the computer, put some in the computer so you can actually find them later. Keep researching these topics of interest and, again, as you're continuing to say what's important to me and how can little old me change lives? How can I inspire other people? I find, you hear these people say, "Oh, memoir writers are narcissistic and all they can think about is themselves." Actually, I don't think we lift ourselves up enough quite often. I see too many writers keep themselves small and aren't able to say enough or believe in themselves enough. We could do a whole class on that, right, Brooke, but we're here to champion you in all kinds of different ways, how to believe in yourself and how to keep writing.

The last tier of this, I want to read you a little bit from *H is for Hawk* by Helen MacDonald. Did you want to add something, Brooke, about inspiration?

BW: No, I think you're covering it. All of this stuff matters so much in terms of thinking through for yourself how you're going to reach your readers. I guess the only thing I would add that there's not one right way to do it. It's all a tapestry. If there are one or two things that you take from all of this that you can integrate into your memoir, then that's a big coup.

LJM: I have a couple of things from *H is For Hawk*. I'm reading from the slide. You will get the slides. I'll read it to you now. This is from *H is For Hawk* by Helen Macdonald:

> *"To train a hawk you must watch it like a hawk, and so you come to understand its moods. Then you gain the ability to predict what it will do next. You seem to feel what it feels, notice what it notices. You are exercising what the poet Keats called "your chameleon quality," the ability to tolerate a loss of self and a loss of rationality by trusting in the capacity to create one's self in another character or another environment. Such a feat of imaginative recreation has always come easily to me, too easily. It's part of being a watcher, forgetting who you are, and putting yourself in the thing you are watching."*

One of the things she's exploring, by the way, is loss, but she starts writing *H is For Hawk* because he dies and she is delivered into complete disarray and breakdown by this. She was very, very close to him

and she weaves a lot of that through. And here's another takeaway where she uses "you." In the one I just read that you will get on a slide, she's quoting Keats, and she's putting herself in the mind and the point of view of the hawk. And so this brings me back to what I was saying earlier. In my story I got in a point of view of my grandmother, my great-grandmother, and my mother. She puts herself in the point of view of a hawk. You can do these things. You can be a baby if you want to. What you're trying to do is paint a picture and bring in this larger world and use your imagination and don't feel like you can only use facts. You can imagine, wonder, and enjoy this very much and still write a story that has meaning and takeaway.

I'm going to end by reading this last quote from *H is For Hawk.* Notice that in the stuff Brooke read and then this—this happens a lot in takeaway—the second person "you" is often used. Mary Karr does it. A lot of these authors do it. So does Cheryl Strayed. It's fun to experiment with, and you might experiment with it, too. Here's another brief takeaway:

> *"There is a time in life when you expect the world to be always full of new things, and then comes a day when you realize that is not how it will be at all. You see that life will become a thing made of holes, absences, losses, things that were there and are no longer. And you realize, too, that you have to grow around and between the gaps, though you can put your hand out to where things were and feel that tense, shining dullness of the space where memories are."*

I think that's so beautiful, and can't we all identify with this? It's her loss, it's her story, it's her memoir, but here she gives us a beautiful gift of something really special. Brooke?

BW: I love that as well. That's some very poetic writing and some really profound stuff there, and these moments are moments of connecting, depending on what your theme or your topic is, looking for opportunities to be with the reader in that way, to connect on a deeper, more profound level.

There was one question that came through email this week that I'll take on, and then we're going to also mention to you about our six-month class. Let me talk about the six-month class, Linda Joy, and then we'll answer this one question.

We want to encourage you to check out Write Your Book in Six Months on the Program Details page. Everything is there. We have the six-month program as one of the tabs. The situation with this class is it is a six-month intensive course. We start with an orientation, and it's every other week for six months. It is a really wonderful course to take, whether you're a beginner or whether you're in the throes of your memoir. If you had any kind of revelations in this class about craft, then it's a good course for you because we dive heavily both into craft and in-process, by which we mean just the process of writing a memoir being with other people who care about what you care about who are committing themselves to six months of a really intensive process to work on their memoir and try to finish a draft. We invite you to that and extend the discount.

Anything you want to add on that front, Linda Joy?

LJM: Yes, I do. The feedback we get from people who have taken the class—sometimes people even take it twice—is that they get feedback from us every class on your work, on exactly how you write, and I think all of us really do better when somebody who's a professional writer and somebody who understands memoir is giving that kind of feedback. So, to me, that's one of the things that's so special, and then we do two coaching calls as part of what you sign up for as part of the cost, and that often helps people talk through a lot of the things they need to figure out and plotting and planning and even feeling that they desire or permission to write their story. We're available for you if you want to join us and would love to help you get your story out in the world and change the world that way.

BW: Yes. We welcome any thoughts or questions on that front, and thank you.

There's a question that came in through email that says, "Could you address the importance of identifying your themes and how to hammer them home?" This is relevant in the sense that oftentimes the takeaways are related to theme as well, when you're thinking what does the reader really care about? What do they need to know? What are the things that you're articulating and getting into in more depth? You do need and want to identify what those things are, whether you're done with your memoir or whether you're just starting. One good way to do it is to try to identify how you would talk about your

book. What is your book about, and can you narrow that down into two, three, four sentences? If you can articulate that, then usually you can pull your themes out of that very concise, deliverable message that you're trying to convey to your reader.

LJM: Yes, it's very helpful.

BW: Another question. It's about takeaway. The question is, "How do you identify takeaways if you are already done with the draft?" Or how would you identify—I guess I would interpret that to be good places to insert takeaways if you're already done with a complete draft. Any thoughts on that one, Linda Joy?

LJM: I would go through and really pretend like you don't know yourself at all or the story, pretend that you are completely ignorant of what it means and your own involvement in it and say, "If I didn't know myself the way I do, what would I be getting out of this chapter? What would I be learning? Is it bigger than what happened? What is the message that each chapter is delivering?" I would really go in there. I've done that myself, where I've written a whole memoir, my first memoir and my second, really, and just really combed through and said, "Have I given the reader something beyond my own experience," which is also important to give and to include, of course. But what is the theme? Did I deliver it, and what might be missing? You can also ask your readers, if you have a friend reading or a beta reader, you can ask them. You can say, especially if you're lucky enough to get people who don't know you, you can say, "What are you getting out of this that you wouldn't otherwise know? And you can go after those kinds of takeaway questions.

BW: Yes, that's so good. And also to remember that takeaway can just be these little snippets, those little sentences, like the ones I shared tonight that are just moments, like if you feel an emotion or you have a connection with a friend or a sibling or a parent, what is the nature of the feeling or the relationship, that those kinds of things are moments for takeaways as well, even if they're just a simple, single sentence.

Sarah has a question about advocacy. "Could you talk more about how Susannah advocated for a cause?" That's a great question. I think that she wrote this book with a cause, that there was a really clear desire to, in fact, save people because I imagine she must have kept being somewhat bewildered by the fact that she could have gone to a mental institution, that she could have been diagnosed as schizophrenic or whatever, so I know that that's at the heart of the book. The advocacy piece, in my opinion—and Linda Joy, we'll hear what you have to say—I think the advocacy piece really comes strongly on towards the very end of the book. She starts to pose these very potent questions, like the one I talked about tonight, in which she says, "what if?" What if all these people who are in mental hospitals, what if they could be treated? I think that opens the door for her in the later part of the book, to be an advocate, and, in fact, she is an advocate because she wrote the piece—I forget what paper it was for—I guess it was the *New York Post* or something— that got a lot of attention and presumably was why she got the book deal. But in that role, she actually was publicly an advocate.

If you have a book where you are advocating for people for a particular situation, you might want to figure out how to go about doing that. Is it going to be something that is woven throughout, or is it going to be something that you hit really hard at the end? Because Koren Zailckas, whose book is *Smashed*—and we talked about it in our addiction class—I think she did advocacy, too. She was really advocating for young women in our sort of messed-up culture, like the ways in which women fall prey to alcoholic messaging, basically. She has a very strong thing at the end that I would also qualify as advocacy, so looking at other books that do that in terms of where to hit your own stride with it, but I think Susannah does a nice job.

LJM: Yes, she does. Each of us has our own task, but I think knowing that we need to think about the takeaway—and a lot of times—and we've said this before—sometimes you have to write what happened to you and your own experience first before you have enough room in your mind and your heart for okay, now what's everybody getting out of it? Doing it after a draft or two is not such a bad idea because you have more distance at that point. You're not just trying to grind out memories onto the page.

BW: Yes, definitely. It should be strong at the end, but you might find ways to weave it in throughout.

We've really enjoyed this class. It's fun to explore these memoirs in greater depth, and we hope if you have any questions about our longer courses, that you shoot us an email.

Thank you so much, Linda Joy, a pleasure.

LJM: Yes, it's a pleasure to teach with you, too, and be sure and let us know if you have any questions, all of you, and thank you so much for joining us. Bye-bye.

BW: Good night.

END