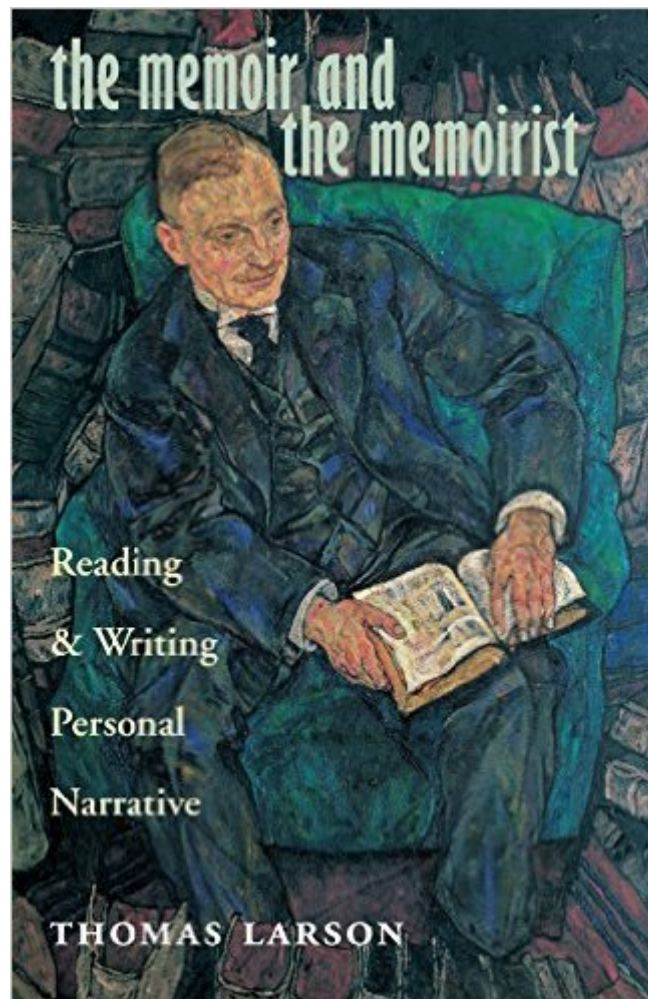


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# The Memoir And The Memoirist: Reading And Writing Personal Narrative



## Synopsis

The memoir is the most popular and expressive literary form of our time. Writers embrace the memoir and readers devour it, propelling many memoirs by relative unknowns to the top of the best-seller list. Writing programs challenge authors to disclose themselves in personal narrative. Memoir and personal narrative urge writers to face the intimacies of the self and ask what is true. In *The Memoir and the Memoirist*, critic and memoirist Thomas Larson explores the craft and purpose of writing this new form. Larson guides the reader from the autobiography and the personal essay to the memoir--a genre focused on a particularly emotional relationship in the author's past, an intimate story concerned more with who is remembering, and why, than with what is remembered. *The Memoir and the Memoirist* touches on the nuances of memory, of finding and telling the truth, and of disclosing one's deepest self. It explores the craft and purpose of personal narrative by looking in detail at more than a dozen examples by writers such as Mary Karr, Frank McCourt, Dave Eggers, Elizabeth Wurtzel, Mark Doty, Nuala O'Faolain, Rick Bragg, and Joseph Lelyveld to show what they reveal about themselves. Larson also opens up his own writing and that of his students to demonstrate the hidden mechanics of the writing process. For both the interested reader of memoir and the writer wrestling with the craft, *The Memoir and the Memoirist* provides guidance and insight into the many facets of this provocative and popular art form.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"The Memoir and the Memoirist" by Thomas Larson is truly a wolf in sheep's clothing. I had thought, given the author's role as a college writing teacher, it would be a mildly interesting manual on the creation and structure of the memoir. It is anything but that. It is a profound meditation on memory and the heroic efforts which our self concept makes to insure that our memories are congruent with whom we seem. Thus, just as the past changes the present, the present also changes the past. In this reciprocal, dynamic process, our authentic self can get diminished, lost or never created. The task of the memoirist is to swim against this enormous current and try to retrieve and enlarge the authentic self. While this book is not a "how to manual", it is rich in descriptions of memoirs and memoirists of the last 25 years. As expected, many memoirs concern relationships with parents, spouses and children, but not all. Some relate to occupations or roads not taken or roads that that should not have been taken. The author himself gives us at least three periods of his life, one of which is extremely poignant. Many of us are familiar with being rejected by our parents in favor of a more talented or attractive sibling. We know what that feels like. But what does it feel like to be the favored sib? To feel the sorrow and pain and guilt (even the occasional joy!) of being the one favored? Tom tells us this. I am particularly fascinated with the Eight Autobiographer's Lies of Andrew Hudgins (Chapter 9) and the dangers of lying to oneself in one's own memoir. Given long enough effort and strong desire, the truth will out. A splendid statement of the author is that the memoirist's own emotional, spiritual and intellectual progress will be mirrored in the aesthetic progress of the memoir.

When I reached the end of this book, without pausing I turned back to page one and began it again. That's because the author put far more thought and insight into this ambitious undertaking than I was able to absorb in one pass. The modern-day memoir--life stories written by ordinary folks--has vocal detractors. Some dismiss it as facile self-absorption. Others recoil from the lurid sensationalism found in certain examples and extrapolate from that to the whole genre. Thomas Larson, perhaps for the first time, explains here what is really going on in memoir and makes a case for its acceptance, along with the essay, the novel, and other forms, as serious literature. This book will not tell you how to write your own memoir. However, it WILL help you evaluate your work in terms of its honesty. If you have been penning a simple chronological account of your exploits and mishaps, this book will encourage a deeper analysis. According to Larson, a serious memoirist is disclosing the truth of events and motivations to himself at the same time he discloses it to the reader, is questioning his memory, assumptions, values, and--in the process of reconciling past drama with the present drama of grappling with it--transforming and liberating himself. This kind of

introspection is an entirely different thing from the self-justification found in autobiographies of famous people. Larson finds it healthier, so much so that he ends up recommending it not only for memoirists but for all of us. *The Memoir and The Memoirist* is both scholarly and personable. In part, that means it examines what works (and occasionally fails to work) in a number of well-known memoirs. But, as in a memoir, the author is present in the material as well.

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