



Autobiography, Memoir, or Lifestory— Beyond the Confusion

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When I first became interested in writing my own life history, I wanted to write the perfect story. After all, I was writing about the most intense and important topic I knew—myself! I was writing from and about my heart. A big part of writing the perfect story involved knowing what to call it. I wasn't sure whether I wanted to write my autobiography or memoirs, or just what the difference might be.

I headed for the library and book store in search of help on defining my writing form and learning how to go about it. Over the next few weeks I found and read several excellent volumes, but I became more confused about terminology. Some books referred to the type of writing I was attempting as autobiography, others as memoir, and still others as life story or lifestory writing. They all seemed to be talking about more or less the same thing, and none defined the term they chose. My next stop was **Webster's Unabridged**, which offered the following definition:

Autobiography: A biography written by the subject of it; memoirs of one's life written by oneself.

So, I thought, autobiography and memoir are two words for the same thing. Reading the full definitions for biography and memoir supported this conclusion. Perhaps lifestory writing was yet another word for the same thing. If so, why so many terms?

My search for clarity continued. Eventually I derived some intuitive definitions, based on my perception of common usage. It appeared to me that autobiography was primarily linear in nature, covering the full space of a life up to the time of writing, and was largely documentary. Memoir was a more

artistically developed literary form that could address limited periods of time and specific experiences. It left more room for creativity, interpretation and emotion. Lifestory writing seemed to me to be the most spontaneous, natural, cozy form, informally written from the heart, like a letter to a friend. This was the style I felt at home with. I settled into it and began writing stories.

I accepted the challenge of writing an article to explain the differences in form I had derived. Soon after I began writing, I became aware of a funny feeling in my tummy—a feeling I’ve learned to identify as a sign that the limb I’m creeping out on is beginning to dip precariously toward the ground. Rather than stay on that shaky limb, I returned to the research I thought I’d finished a couple of years ago. I pulled my collection of books off the shelf, and began flipping through them, one by one, wondering where my subconscious was leading me.

At first I found nothing new. Then, at the bottom of the stack, I found **Your Life as Story** by Tristine Rainer (Tarcher/Putnam, 1997). Glancing at the Table of Contents, I noticed Chapter Two, *The Evolution of a New Autobiography*. My pulse quickened. Would I finally find the answer to my question? Maybe what I was trying to write about was actually this—new autobiography! She apologized for including a historical treatise at the beginning of a highly personal instructional book. I didn’t recall reading this material before. I plunged in and read the history of autobiography, starting with the ancient Egyptians, who considered a copy of their memoirs essential to bargaining with the gods in the next life. I read about the early confessional writings of sinners-turned-saints and later ones of financially desperate fallen women. I learned about the exhortational works of religious early Americans and financially successful later ones.

Rainer explained that from colonial times, fiction reading was considered wanton, and little fiction was available. Aside from scripture and news, exhortational works and autobiography were the reading of choice. In the mid—1800s, adventures of escaped slaves and captivity narratives by women held hostage by Indians became enormously popular. In frenzied attempts to make material ever more compelling to readers, the boundary between fact and fiction blurred. Sensationalism blazed as brightly then as now.

Around the turn of the century, the novel emerged from this literary quagmire as a respectable and almost revered form of writing. Half the popu-

lation dreamed of writing the Great American Novel. By the middle of the 1900s, the situation once again reversed, and writing from a personal perspective became the rage, even among successful novelists. Today the list of forms this personalized writing takes seems endless: “faction” (fact-based fiction), docudrama, nonfiction novels, personal journalism, dramatic nonfiction, literature of fact, creative nonfiction, autobiographical novels, nonfiction narrative, personal essay, literary memoir and probably others. The plethora of terminology dazzled and befuddled me, yet I found it reassuring. Shackles of confusion shattered from terminology overload. Could insight be far away?

Heartened by the hope I gained from Trainer, I turned to the Internet for more information. As usual, I had no trouble finding over 12,000 listings for websites offering tips on writing autobiography, memoirs, life stories, or personal history, but I found no site that defined differences among these forms. Major sites are cross-listed on all terms, apparently considering them interchangeable. Finally I discovered the site for the journal Creative Nonfiction (<http://creativenonfiction.org/thejournal/whatisconf.htm>) and listened to a series of RealAudio interviews with Lee Gutkind, the editor and founder of the Journal. Like Rainer, Gutkind emphasizes the value of using literary techniques like story telling, scene setting, dialogue, and description to elevate the quality of nonfiction stories, generally told from a personal perspective. Suddenly I found what I’d been seeking. I caught the emphasis on the word story—as in lifestory. Everything fell into place.

All the dozen or more “new” forms I found listed, along with traditional autobiography and memoir, are ways of telling stories that come from the fiber of our lives. They have roots in tribal customs as old as mankind. They remind me of the ancient Hawaiian tradition of “talking story” as Auntie Jo, a Hawaiian elder, did with an Elderhostel group I attended on the Big Island. We sat spellbound one night as she spontaneously described life in early Kailua, her faith, being sold by her mother for a few dollars into a forced marriage of virtual slavery, her escape from that marriage, her return to Kailua from California and more. None of the passions of life were overlooked. This was not a rehearsed story. She told it in answer to a simple question. Did she recount her autobiography? I wouldn’t call it that. Did she recite a memoir? Hardly! She simply talked story.

Aunty Jo and the Islanders talk story. I write story. Now that I've become acquainted with all these new words describing so many more ways of writing stories, I realize that the attempt to define terms is meaningless. I've come to understand that writing stories from our experience, from our lives, is far too personal a matter and too complex a challenge to be bound by form. Our form will be as personal as the stories we write, and our reasons for writing them. The forms we evolve will be perfect for our unique stories.

The challenge as I see it today is not to master a specific form of writing, it is to master writing itself, and to master the discipline of persistence in writing. Our challenge is to become crystal clear about our personal message and to continually refine our skills so we can present that message in the most compelling way, whether. in an essay, an adventure story, a personal letter or some entirely new form. We may even choose to tell several stories, each in a different way. The more we develop our ability to separate the wheat from the chaff, refine the essence of the message, and master skills like dialogue, character development, or description, the more compelling our stories will become.

At the bottom line, if we write nothing, we leave no message. Anything at all that we write about our lives will be appreciated by at least some of our descendants later, no matter how humble the effort. No beginner should let ignorance of form or style delay the writing of a single word. Go beyond the confusion and simply write the story that is in your heart. Call it what you like and let it grow as it will. Learn as you go, and it will become your own perfect story.

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