



Writing Hard Stories: Celebrated Memoirists Who Shaped Art from Trauma

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Acclaimed memoirists describe the process of writing their most painful memories

In her attempt to write a memoir about her father's death from a secret AIDS infection in 1985, Melanie Brooks was left with some painful questions: What does it take to write an honest memoir? And what happens to us when we embark on that journey? Would she manage it? Brooks sought guidance from the memoirists who most moved her including Andre Dubus III, Joan Wickersham, Mark Doty, Marianne Leone, Richard Hoffman, Edwidge Danticat, Michael Patrick MacDonald, Richard Blanco, Abigail Thomas, Sue Silverman, Kate Bornstein, Jerald Walker, and Kyoko Mori to answer these questions.

"Writing Hard Stories" encourages all writers as they work through their challenging stories. It features some of the country's most admired writers discussing their treks through dark memories and breakthrough moments, and it demonstrates the healing power of putting words to experience. A unique compilation of authentic stories about the death of a partner, parent, or child; about violence and shunning; and about the process of writing, the book will serve as a tool for teachers of writing and give readers an intimate look into the lives of the authors they love."

Writing Hard Stories: Celebrated Memoirists Who Shaped Art from Trauma Details

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Sarah says

Bravo! This book does so many things: it invites us to spend time with authors whose works we've admired, it gives us an inside look at their processes, and it engages with some of the most difficult questions that memoirists face when confronting difficult material. I recommend it to everyone who writes, and really, anyone who reads, memoir.

Beth says

In this collection of interviews with writers who have written memoirs about trauma or loss, author Melanie Brooks attempts to better understand her own struggles with writing about her father's death from AIDS. Each chapter highlights an interview with a single author, and includes not only details about the business of writing hard stories but also personal details. (I was particularly interested in the pets of the writers whose homes she was invited into!) Authors address not only why they needed to tell their stories and what they got out of the telling, but also issues of how they attacked the writing, what they believed their responsibilities were to both the living and the dead were, and what family reactions were to reading the books. Though some of the interviews were more interesting than others--primarily because of my own interest in or knowledge of the writer in question--there is good advice and good company throughout the book. Brooks handles the subject matter as a student (a clever one) who wants to know more, and this makes the subject matter all the more engaging. Writers interviewed: Andre Dubus III, Edwidge Danticat, Monica Wood, Mark Doty, Michael Patrick MacDonald, Richard Blanco, Abigail Thomas, Sue William Silverman, Kyoko Mori, Richard Hoffman, Suzanne Strempek Shea, Joan Wickersham, Marianne Leone, Jerald Walker, Kate Bornstein, Jessica Handler, Alycia Abbott, and Kim Stafford. This book will appeal to: writers of memoir (particularly about stories of loss or trauma), teachers of writing who want to better understand struggles their students might be having and offer sage advice, fans of any of the authors interviewed, and anyone who is interested in how people weave the tragedies of their lives into their own story.

Sam Sattler says

As a literary genre, the memoir has seldom received the respect that it deserves. It has not helped, of course, that several memoirists in the relatively recent past have been exposed for deliberately falsifying parts of their stories to make them sensational enough to earn publication and/or higher sales numbers than would have otherwise been the case. That memoirs are sometimes referred to by the easily misconstrued term of "creative nonfiction" may also be part of the respect problem that memoir writers still sometimes suffer. While, as Melanie Brooks puts it, memoirists "venture to shape hard life into beautiful art," it is the word "creative" that some readers might find misleading.

In Writing Hard Stories: Celebrated Memoirists Who Shaped Art from Trauma is the result of Brooks's interviews with eighteen memoir writers over a two-year period who dared to share their personal "hard stories" with the world. Some of their memoirs, like the one Brooks herself is working on, explore the traumatic loss of a parent, some the loss of a child or sibling, and others tell of the impact of surviving

difficult childhoods, parents, or environments. Brooks came to each of the interviews wanting to know how the writers handled the emotional impact of writing their books, how they dealt with family and others who might disagree with the revealed "facts" or feel slighted by how they are portrayed in the book, and how the writers felt when they finally (sometimes after more than a decade of work) held the published work in their hands. She was not interested in the craft of memoir writing as such; *In Writing Hard Stories* is not a writing manual for would-be memoirists.

In *Writing Hard Stories* opens with the author's interview of celebrated writer Andres Dubus III, an interview in which Dubus offers the reader some of the fundamental truths about memoir-writing:

"...We can all create a time line for the chronology of events in our stories. It's the figuring out the meaning within that chronology and understanding its impact that make the writing part challenging." (Brooks paraphrasing Dubus)

"You've got to paint your story with a deeply subjective brush. The nature of truth is that it's largely subjective." (Dubus)

"In memoir, emotional truth can often diverge from the bare facts of what actually happened. [...] The voices of doubt in our heads sometimes makes us second-guess our own experiences, trying to sabotage our processes, but it's important to honor our memories." (Brooks paraphrasing Dubus)

"The past is not the past. We all bring every second of our lives to who we are today." (Dubus)

Brooks was able to connect with an outstanding group of memoir writers, including Mark Doty, Monica Wood, Edwidge Danticat, Kyoko Mori, Suzanne Strempek Shea, and Kim Stafford. Each of the writers, all eighteen of them, graciously opened their homes or offices to Brooks and seemed to be as interested in her own efforts to put the 1995 loss of her father to AIDS to paper as she was in their already-published work. Despite their varied backgrounds and experiences, Brooks found a common theme in what those writers who have already done "the hard work" had to say about writing memoirs. As Brooks puts it, "carrying around the terrible weight of hard stories without ever seeking a way to transform it into something lighter - even something beautiful - is a whole lot harder."

In the end, memoirs are a way for their writers to "come to terms" with the trauma they have experienced, to tear the experience apart and put it back together in a way that will mean something to others suffering similar trauma – even to allowing, or encouraging, their readers to find a way to deal with and understand their own past. *Writing Hard Stories* is a book that anyone contemplating writing a memoir of their own should read both for the encouragement it offers and for the insights to be gained from those who have already survived the process, those who have done "the hard work."

Robin says

"*Writing Hard Stories: Celebrated Memoirists Who Shaped Art from Trauma*" offers information gleaned from eighteen authors. Melanie Brooks conceived the concept for the book when she became increasingly compelled to write a memoir of a difficult time in her life. She wondered how memoirists experienced the writing itself. How did they withstand reliving heart-breaking events while writing about them? She brought that curiosity to a series of interviews. Each interview comprises a chapter in the book. They all serve the

dual purposes of sharing that author's perspective and answering Brooks question to herself, "Will I find the strength to write my own memoir?"

The authors share valuable insights for aspiring memoirists. Several suggest their memoir had to be written despite their best efforts to avoid writing it. It took Joan Wickersham a long time to come around to writing "The Suicide Index: Putting My Father's Death in Order." First, she tried to write a novel that encompassed some of the aspects of her story. She couldn't interest her publisher. When Wickersham finally began writing some of the story as memoir she uncovered a personal truth: "Even though it was incredibly painful, I was feeling this utter excitement. It was joyous. I knew that this writing was expressing what I need to express. I had been flailing and then I was in there."

The authors included in the book cover a wide spectrum of humanity. While grief and loss are shared themes in many of the memoirs, there are also memoirists who wrote about gender reassignment, childhood abuse, or overcoming a culture steeped in violence.

The chapters follow a similar pattern. They offer a description of the author's memoir or memoirs, a description of the setting of the interview, the ideas covered in the interview, and how Brooks applied another author's insights to her own quandary. About halfway through the book that pattern became tedious requiring me to take a lengthy break. However, I was curious about the remaining authors and returned to read about them all. The chapters are also largely discrete, with only a few minor references to material in other chapters. A reader could dip into the book at random intervals or by reading known authors first.

"Writing Hard Stories" provides ample material for an aspiring memoirist to consider. It is also a good book for people looking for memoirs to read. I can attest to this last as I added numerous additional titles to an already lengthy want-to-read list. Writing Hard Stories: Celebrated Memoirists Who Shaped Art from Trauma

Pamela Barrett says

So you want to write that story—yes that story; the one you've carried inside for so long; the one true story about love, loss, grief, and the moment that changed your life. You've tried to put pen to paper and stopped. It hurt too much, your family wouldn't understand, and you don't want to cause anyone pain or embarrassment: there are so many reasons not to write it, but the memory won't go away and you know you need to write about it to set it free. Author Melanie Brooks understands those feelings, all the doubts, and unanswered what ifs; so she sought out and interviewed her favorite Memoirists and let them talk about the process of writing difficult to tell stories. The common experiences of taking this writing journey is a treasure, one I hope every writer of memoir will get a copy of and excavate the gems waiting to be discovered. Having written my own hard story I related to so many things these authors said they experienced and worried about. This is the book that needs to be on your shelf next to Ann Lamott's Bird by Bird. 5 stars.

Shawna says

This was not the book I was expecting. It was on display at the library, and there could have been a sign pointing to it, "Here! This one is definitely for you." I have been curious about the idea of what it feels like

emotionally to write a trauma memoir. Trauma memoir seems to be my genre of choice -- I am drawn to understanding how people survive hardship, process, and cope with what happens in their lives. The book definitely gave me plenty of leads on what to read next, and there were poets mentioned as well with good material to seek out that I would not have discovered otherwise.

In this book the author Brooks, an aspiring trauma memoirist herself, interviews well regarded memoirists about their experiences. What I thought I was getting was a series of essays edited or compiled by Brooks. So there were details felt superfluous. I didn't care to hear how well-apportioned the author's house was or how they settled into cozy chairs with mugs of warm tea before they began their talk. The author also makes a point to say how incredibly nice all the people are that consented to be interviewed by her. (Just show us, don't tell us.) We hear repeatedly, I didn't think X person would respond but they did!

I'm curious to read Melanie Brook's memoir when it is complete to see if the peccadillos from this are also present in her memoir.

Nanako Mizushima says

This 200 page paperback book will have a permanent home on my small bookshelf. In addition to introducing me to wonderful memoirs, this book is packed with useful advice from eighteen great writers -- including Andre Dubus III, Kyoko Mori and Richard Blanco. Each of the eighteen chapters is based on an interview with one writer. I'm sure I'll reread parts of this book as I shape my own story. Just when I felt discouraged after thinking about my book for so many years, scribbling many mediocre short stories and essays, and getting lost and confused writing a 300 page manuscript, this book has helped me realize my experience is typical for memoirists who are tackling large subjects. In my case, it's my relatives' experience in Japan during WWII, the internment of Japanese-American relatives, and their immigration to this country before and after the war. The memoirists interviewed in this book wrote about suicide, traumatic childhoods, alienation and personal tragedies almost too hard to bear. It was a relief to learn that many of these professional writers struggled for years to figure out how to tell their stories. Some experimented by writing fiction first. Others wrote poetry or essays. In all cases, the process took many years of writing, rewriting, thinking and rethinking. Creative non-fiction is a huge undertaking. Much more complicated than fiction writing. In a nutshell -- first comes the "child's story" -- this happened, then this happened, then this happened. Next is research and fact-checking. Then finally the "adult's story" must be written and woven into the child's story -- what is the arc of the story? What do all these events mean to me? How does my story relate to these events? Most importantly, all of the memoirists felt the process of writing not only helped them heal and come to terms with their experiences, but they were delighted to find the final draft of their stories, "the art shaped from trauma", helped many others deal with their own life challenges. Writing is a lonely occupation for the most part, but in the end, if the writer succeeds, makes the writer feel she is part of a much larger community, the human family. I'm looking forward to reading many of the memoirs mentioned in this book and taking the next steps in writing my story.

Peggy says

As a writer and someone who works with adults to tell their stories I found this to be one of the most helpful and educational books on writing I've read. A student forwarded me the Brevity interview. I promptly

requested the library acquire the book, and then like everyone else I've told had to go purchase it myself. At my local bookstore the owner had already heard I was on my way, and then just asked, "How many people do you think you'll be sending?" I've been practically evangelical about the book. I was engaged from the first words. The thread of what was Brooks' personal quest through the writers links them, creating a narrative arc rather than stand alone interviews. I work with people working on hard stories. I found every interview fascinating and something I wanted to underline/share with one student or another in each profile. Plus it made me want to call up Melanie and talk memoir. I recommend this book, not just for those trying to tell their stories but for those who want to learn about how anyone can process their experiences. Extremely valuable and will be "required" reading for all my students.

Gayle says

I had the pleasure of listening to a reading by the author at Hippocamp 2017, and was moved to purchase her book. I am so glad I did! It's an inspiration and a series of letters of encouragement all in one place. Melanie's writing is beautiful, her questions are brilliant, and her method of weaving her own process into the interviews is intriguing and interesting. She takes us on her journey, and we all learn on the way.

b says

I think this book changed my life — it might be too soon to tell, but it certainly feels like it did. I read it at the right time — during a super reflective period of my life, right when I had started going back to therapy, and after my creative side had come out to play for the year. It pushed me to write about possibly the hardest experience I've ever had. It helped me realize how deeply I had buried the lede in a story I wrote months ago and gave some tips as to how to dig what I really wanted to say out. Having finished this book, I am even more committed to using writing (journaling, essay writing, & whatever else) to explore myself for my own gain and growth.

Basically, this book is a bunch of short narrative interviews Brooks held with memoirists she loves. The memoirists all have books on trauma — from their childhood, families, neighborhoods, religions; due to death, loss, etc. Brooks asks them about what writing their stories was like and what it did for them. The authors are honest and authentic and I came away wanting to read all of their books. Their answers (and Brooks' questions) are brilliant and moving and thought-provoking.

This book makes one thing clear: you have a right to your story. It's yours and no one can take that away from you. You shouldn't worry about your perspective being only one of many, and you are in charge of how much weight other's opinions of your perspective have. Writing can set you free — don't let other people get in the way of that.

I'd recommend this book to anyone who likes to write or read memoirs, and to anyone who has been afraid, discouraged or not confident enough to write personal essays. It's short and very easy to read, though it took me a long time to get through because it gave me a lot to think and act on. I plan on writing a letter or email to Brooks thanking her for this book.

Ellie says

“It’s that shared knowledge that somehow helps us to survive.”

This sentence, spoken by poet and memoirist Richard Blanco towards the end of Melanie Brooks’ book about writing memoirs, in some ways sums up the message many of the writers Brooks interviews convey. Memoirs of difficult lives, or difficult parts of lives, help the writers both clarify their experiences for themselves and connect with others. Reading memoirs helps us as human beings to clarify our own “hard stories” and know that we are not alone with them.

Writing Hard Stories is a collection of interviews with writers of memoirs who generously share their process (or parts thereof) of writing their stories. It contains a range of writers, including Kate Bornstein, transgender performance artist who writes of her experiences on the road from being a male member of the Scientology Church, Marianne Leone, the actress who wrote of the loss of her son, Mark Doty, the poet who shared the story of his lover’s death from AIDS, and many more.

The interviews are fascinating. They provide a look at the stories told—many of losses to death, suicide, illness—as well as equally interesting glimpses of the process the writers used to tell these stories.

This book is of interest to all those struggling to tell their stories, if only to themselves, as well as understand them. Whether a story has political resonance, such as Edwidge Danticat’s memoir *Brother I’m Dying* which tells the story of the death of her uncle while in the custody of immigration or is simply the story of a woman who is the only survivor of three sisters (Jessica Handler), the writers in general are impressed with how the difficulty of writing through their pain found many different rewards. For many, it was a measure of peace with their pain, for some the satisfaction of giving voice to those without voice. At the very least, it helped their authors move to a different place in their life, often releasing them from being completely trapped within the trauma, providing a different relationship with it.

The authors share some of the tools they used in writing their stories. Many speak of using the tools of fiction to help them create the structure for their stories and the relief at seeing that these stories had a narrative arc, a beginning, middle, and an end. For others, the stories themselves created the structure. For all of them, writing the stories, despite the often intense emotional pain, seems to have been beneficial, if only in seeing how these stories connected with the people reading them, even when those people did not share the exact details of the story. Over and over, the authors speak of emotional connection, of feeling less alone, and of the gratification of knowing they have helped others.

Melanie Brooks wrote this in response to her struggles writing about her own “hard story.” She reached out to these writers to understand how they moved through the emotional pain of facing their stories to actually completing their books. Her insight, emotional presence, and her writing skills, make me look forward to reading her own book when it appears.

I found this book compelling as a writer but also just as a human. Some of the memoirs I have already read, I now want to track down the others and read them all. Just reading these interviews made me feel more connected to the rest of humanity and the power of writing to create, connect, and heal, I strongly recommend this book.

I want to thank LibraryThing and Melanie Brooks for providing a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Andrea Blythe says

"The worst story we can tell ourselves is that we are alone."

Melanie Brooks is trying to write a memoir about her father, who died of HIV due to an infected blood transfusion. Finding it difficult to approach a subject that was so personal and so painful, she began to seek out the wisdom of memoirists who had written about their own painful stories and shared them with the world. These interviews comprise the heart of this book, which unveils the process of juggling hard memories with the craft of writing a good story, how to tell one's personal truth, how to deal with the reactions afterward, and how sharing one's own specific story can connect with reader remind them and the author that they are not alone in their experiences after all.

For those wishing to start or continue writing a memoir, then this book might be a balm, a reminder that it can be done, providing insight into the processes of some masters of the craft.

For fans of memoirs, the book provides a backdoor look into how many of these amazing stories were written and the impact it had on the author's lives.

For me, this provided both while also increasing my TBR list, because dang if there's not a bunch of these memoirs that I need to read.

Karen says

In this book, Melanie Brooks shares what she has learned from prominent memoirists who had painful stories to tell. She begins by explaining that she is trying to write a memoir about her father, who became infected with HIV from a blood transfusion during surgery in the mid-80s. He died 10 years later and Melanie has carried the pain of her loss ever since.

In order to get a better understanding of how writers are capable of writing their stories of personal pain and loss, Melanie interviews 18 writers, including Abigail Thomas, Andres Dubus III, Mark Doty, Richard Hoffman and Marianne Leone. Each writer offers encouragement and support with generosity and openness about their own grief and struggles. Some writers even invite Melanie into their homes.

This book gives us a glimpse into each author's heartbreak, guilt and fear they faced as they struggled to write what had to be written. Monica Wood wrote about her father's death in a small mill town in Maine. She offered her perspective on the universal appeal of a memoir - "What I've discovered about memoirs and the reason why people love them is that every family story in one way or another is everyone's family story."

I appreciate that Melanie has shared this deeply personal chapter of her own life story with us as she comes to terms with her fears. Anyone who reads memoirs, teaches writing or wants to write a memoir will find this book worth reading. Anyone who is dealing with trauma and loss may be able to find comfort in a common theme presented by each author - we are not alone.

Catherine ? says

Actual Rating: 3.5

I actually really liked this when I started it. It was eye-opening, and as a writer myself, I thought that the advice I learned was so important. It talked about allowing yourself to *feel*, and coming to terms with the truth - both for yourself and for everyone around you.

This book was insightful, but as I read on I felt like it started to become repetitive: every chapter was essentially saying the same thing. I feel like if I had a deeper understanding of each of the interviewed authors - maybe an excerpt depicting their writing and emotion, each chapter would've felt more personal and more different. We did get a glimpse - several paragraphs describing what each author's memoir was about, but by the time we got to the 'advice' portion, it was just too easy to forget.

Other than that, Brooks' writing style itself was engaging, and I actually really loved how she tied together the authors' writing with her own writing, with ours, the readers. It shows just how powerful books can be - how it encourages the sharing of stories, which, is what this book is really all about.

Deb (Readerbuzz) Nance says

It isn't hard to write a book about people who wrote hard stories. You just have to travel a bit and interview the authors. "Was it hard to write hard stories?" you ask them all. "Yes, it was hard," they all say. And that is your book. And that is this book.
