

Structuring Your Memoir

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UNDERSTANDING MEMOIR

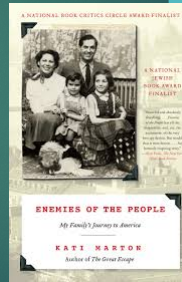
- ▶ Memoir is not autobiography
- ▶ Carol Oates Joyce thinks memoirs can be divided into:
 - ▶ Coming of age – how I came to be who I am. Can be leisurely developed. Amplitude.
 - ▶ Stories of individual crisis – a single season or dramatic event. Has a concentrated focus & suspense.
- ▶ Is that all?



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MEMOIR: OTHER TYPES

- ▶ Place (not just travel)
- ▶ Personal experience of history
- ▶ Family
- ▶ Relationship(s)
- ▶ Passion (e.g. food)
- ▶ Profession
- ▶ Bibliomemoir
- ▶ Ongoing affliction
- ▶ Sexuality
- ▶ Ageing
- ▶ Motherhood
- ▶ Immersion memoir
- ▶ Anything else?



FINDING FOCUS: YOUR SUBJECTS

- ▶ Major life events
- ▶ Your major activities (work, activism etc.)
- ▶ Identity
- ▶ Adversity
- ▶ Important people
- ▶ Skills, passions, interests
- ▶ Anything else?

NOW PICK WHAT IS MOST URGENT, OR MOST DIFFICULT TO TELL

WHAT STAYS & WHAT GOES? THE COOKIE CUTTER

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- ▶ The Question – often comes after you've already amassed some, or a lot of, material
- ▶ Sartre, about memoir Words: 'How does a man become someone who writes, who wants to speak of the imaginary?'
- ▶ Once you apply it to your material you may be clearer what your structure should be
- ▶ Don't discard leftovers
- ▶ Laurence Stern: 'digression is the sunshine of life & the soul of reading.' (Surprise, oasis, authenticity).



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HOW DO I SHAPE MY STORY?

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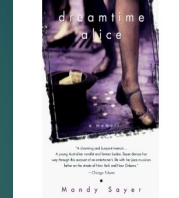
- ▶ Memoirists have the task of shaping a tale of private interest into a story that holds meaning for strangers.
- ▶ What's the difference between a story & an anecdote?
- ▶ Every memoir is a story of the main character's struggle (internal & external).
- ▶ Structure is ought to provide tension for readers.
- ▶ Chronological structure is just one of the many ways to tell your story
- ▶ Always ask yourself what are the questions of this story? What will the reader ask herself about what's happening?
- ▶ Classic plot structure (Aristotle)



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CHRONOLOGICAL NARRATIVE STRUCTURE, OR – TIMEFRAME

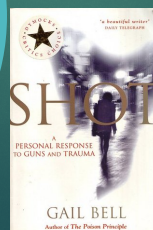
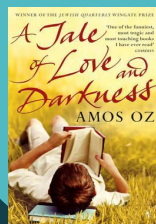
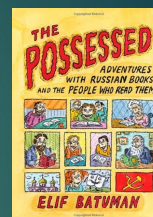
- ▶ The main tension is to see what happens | the end
- ▶ Can be
 - ▶ Traditional, detailed narrative
 - ▶ Series of loosely connected vignettes
 - ▶ Focus on several central events – each told in detail & in combination with reflection



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SOME OTHER OPTIONS

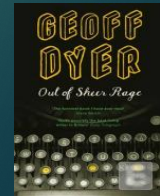
- ▶ Start at the end
- ▶ Start in the middle & write around
- ▶ Forward & backward
- ▶ Structure thematically
- ▶ Interconnected personal essays



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IF NOT STRAIGHTFORWARD NARRATIVE, THEN WHAT WILL CREATE TENSION?

- Gradual understanding of self/other facts:
 - Why did the author's character act the way he did?
 - Will the author's character change in some ways?
 - Are the author's memories authentic?
 - My favourite – how to live/understand yourself better?
 - What else?
- It's not that the narrative is discarded, but it doesn't occupy as important terrain



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FINDING YOUR STRUCTURE

- ▶ Structure needs to suit author's personality & the topic she deals with; to be emotionally driven.
- ▶ Do not impose structure. Often it'll arise organically out of the chaos of sentences & ideas
- ▶ When structure finally emerges, be open to the possibility of change
- ▶ Often when you already have the structure, you'll still be writing bits & pieces that will be place-less until later

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CHECKLIST

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- ▶ Choose one of the themes on your list. What do you want, no, need to know about it?
- ▶ Describe your main internal struggle & your main external struggle in relation to this topic.
- ▶ How does your story fit the classic plot structure?
- ▶ As your readers will be reading your story, what questions will you like them to be asking?