

# **Up Close and Universal: The Balance of Big and Small in Memoir Writing By Ellen Cassedy**

Summary: The best memoirs offer an intimate perch from which to learn about a larger world. Authors of successful memoirs balance the big and the small – the personal and the universal – to create works that readers will care about. Memoir’s essential vibration – an individual life rubbing up against the sweep of history – is more than just a pleasure. It’s also a political and a moral matter. When family stories are told in a larger context, we learn a fundamental truth: that human history is made not only by generals and kings, but by each and every one of us. This talk examines how writers of memoir work in two opposite directions – both coming closer and stepping back – and then combine the big and the small to create a compelling narrative.

This essay is based on a lecture delivered at the Grub Street “Muse and the Marketplace” Conference, May 3-5, 2013, in Boston, MA, by Ellen Cassedy, winner of the 2013 Grub Street National Prize for [“We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust”](#) (University of Nebraska Press, 2012). To reach Ellen Cassedy, visit [www.ellencassedy.com](http://www.ellencassedy.com).

## Introduction

Today we’ll explore my contention that compelling family stories or memoirs are those that offer an intimate perch from which to discover a wider world – a culture, an era. They’re big, and they’re small. They’re personal, and they’re universal. They show us an individual life, or a family’s life, rubbing up against the sweep of history.

For me as a reader, if a memoir seems to be about only one person or one family, it runs the risk of feeling like a waste of my time. But if it’s only about the grand sweep of things, often I can’t get a foothold.

Needless to say, we all have our own taste regarding the balance of large and small. But the art, I believe, lies in blending the two in just the right way. Books that achieve this magical balance are both a satisfying read and an important contribution to our culture. As Patricia Hampl – an important analyst of memoir – writes: “A memoir reaches deep within the personality as it seeks its narrative form. It also grasps the life of the times as no political analysis can.”

For me, the vibration between the sweep of history and the ordinariness of everyday life is not only a pleasure – a good read – but also a political and a moral matter. Writers who show us what happens from the standpoint of unfamous people tell us that history is not just about generals and presidents. They show us that every one of us makes history. What we do matters, each one of us.

## Poem #1:

We're going to begin with a few lines from a beautiful work by Myra Sklarew – her long poem called “Lithuania.” It's an account of her visit to her ancestral town in the same Baltic country where my book takes place, once home to a large and illustrious Jewish population that was killed in the Holocaust. To me, the poem speaks to what we do as memoir writers – how we enter a literary terrain and move around there:

At first  
I just walked in the Jew's town  
without anyone helping me, without anyone  
telling me. I walked until I remembered.

But how could I? I had not been here  
before. Who could show me  
the way?

I wanted to go there  
by feel, to see if Lithuania would tell me  
its secrets, to see if I would  
recognize myself in Lithuania, to marry the myth  
of who I am with the myth of place.

## The Rise of the Memoir

As we know, memoir as a genre is on the rise today. I've noticed that as a reader I've increasingly migrated over from fiction to memoir. I've heard this described as a symptom of aging, which it may be. But it's also a cultural phenomenon, an emblem of our times, a trend. I point to three factors that have contributed to that trend over the past generation or two.

First, migration. The ongoing massive displacement of ordinary people. We're a nation of immigrants, a nation of rapid change. We have a constant stream of people who feel themselves to be arriving in a new land, a new world, where everything is strange, noteworthy, worthy of being noted, written down. And then, two or three generations later, for the descendants of those people, the old world has become strange and wondrous. They – we – want to go back and discover that lost world.

A second factor in the rise of memoir is the Holocaust, a cataclysm that divided our world into before and after, and created a new class of people, survivors, who had an urgent tale to tell the rest of us.

The diary of Anne Frank comes up again and again in discussions of memoir. As Patricia Hampl writes: “When a little girl's diary stands as the greatest testamentary document to the worst recorded events of the twentieth century, we know that post-modern readers, and postmodern writers, have narrowed the space between private and public. Authority has shifted.”

The third factor is what you might call the Sixties.

Elaine Tyler May, a historian of women's history and a memoirist, writes this: "I dove into history in the 1960's and 1970's, when historians were turning away from the study of leaders and other elites, and discovering ordinary people as agents of history. Those who had been buried in earlier renditions of history suddenly surfaced."

We had the new phrase "history from the bottom up." We began to have African-American history, labor history, immigrant history, gay and lesbian history, Chicano history, Native American history, Asian-American history.

I remember the day I asked my mother to draw me a family tree of the Jewish side of my family, her side, which came from *shtetlekh* or small towns in Lithuania and Belarus. She was shocked. When she was growing up, her parents had referred to the extended family members as *pitseles* – little people, little nothings – and she couldn't believe I wanted to have anything to do with them.

But I did. I was fascinated by these ordinary people. I wanted to honor the humble and the everyday. I was eager to connect myself with these little people, to imagine myself into their lives and their times.

And this represents a major shift in our culture. As Hampl says, with the rise of memoir the question is posed: "Where does documentary authority reside – in the footnote or the footprint?" More and more, we're making room for the footprint.

A memoirist named Alice Kobak says something I find very interesting. She notes the explosion of memoir in the wake of great migrations, the Holocaust, and the Cold War, and she says: "Perhaps memoir flourishes best in newly unfettered times, as it did in Enlightenment France, memoir's other heyday....The misery memoirs of our own time may perhaps in their turn be challenging idealized notions of families."

So the tales of abuse within families, the books about awful childhoods, she's saying, may reflect the liberation of previously suppressed secrets about the family, an opening up of an idealized stereotype about domestic life.

All of these factors leading to the rise of memoir, to my mind, are intensely political.

### Three Types of Memoirs

Having looked at some reasons why memoirs have come to be increasingly important in our culture, let's look briefly at three *types* of memoirs. (If you notice that a disproportionate number of the examples I give come from the world of Holocaust, World War II, and Jewish family history, that's because this is the world I'm immersed in in my writing life.)

As we look at some brief passages, let's notice how they mix the big and the small, how they. They evoke a small world by using very specific details, and how they use a delicate and subtle touch, sometimes just a word or two, to evoke a wider world.

First type of memoir: "I was there"

These are works that tell in the first person about the writer's own experience.

Natalia Ginzburg's "Family Sayings" is a memoir of her Jewish family living in Italy before, during, and after World War II. This passage that takes place in May of 1940:

That spring, Pavese [a family friend] would arrive at our house eating cherries. He liked the first cherries, the small watery ones, which he said 'tasted of sky'. We used to see his tall figure from the window as he reappeared at the end of the street, walking rapidly while he ate cherries and flicked the stones at the walls. The fall of France is linked forever in my mind with his cherries, which he gave me to taste when he arrived, pulling them out of his pocket one by one with his surly, parsimonious hand.

Andre Aciman's "Out of Africa," again, is about a Jewish family, this one living in Alexandria, Egypt, in the 1950's and 1960's, a time when the position of Jews had become precarious, leading up to the family's emigration in 1965. The story is told through the eyes of Aciman as a young boy, and much of the action takes place in the family's apartment – rooms filled with members of the extended family and their friends who come and go, eating, worrying, and arguing.

Here they are in the dining room as usual, a room full of people.

We went on speaking about the most recent turn of events. Someone was confirming rumors that the British were already pulling out of Port Said. The doorbell rang. We heard Abdou's slippers trail on the marble floor all the way from the kitchen to the entrance. Was it going to be the police again....

I would miss these nights, I thought, not the war itself but the blackout, not my uncles or my aunts but the velvety hush of their voices when we turned off the lights and drew closer to the radio, almost whispering our thoughts in the dark, as though the enemy were listening in on us as well. It was the blackout that spelled our evenings together, lengthening our dinners because it was so dark in the dining room we could hardly see what we were eating and were forced to eat slowly.

Donald Hall's "String Too Short to be Saved" is a slim volume, written in a gorgeously spare New England style, about spending his boyhood summers on his grandparents' farm in New Hampshire.

For me, the whole book is summed up in the epigraph, the quotation at the beginning of the book:

A man was cleaning the attic of an old house in New England and he found a box which was full of tiny pieces of string. On the lid of the box there was an inscription in an old hand: 'String too short to be saved.'

This is a good example of a book written in the first person that turns the spotlight on someone else. The author is on stage, but what he's doing is drawing a portrait of his grandfather and of the end of a way of life and a way of being – being a man – that he senses is on its way out and will never be his.

In this, it's similar to the next type of memoir I want to look at:

### Second type of memoir: memoir by proxy

Two examples:

Irena Praitis's book is called "One Woman's Life." She interviewed an ordinary, unfamous woman named Ona Kartanas, who experienced a great sweep of history encompassing much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The author presents this material in a series of prose vignettes. She uses first person narration, but she makes no attempt to reproduce the real woman's real voice. Instead, she creates a new voice, sort of an iconic voice, a Sojourner Truth voice. ("Ain't I a woman?") Listen to how the book begins.

"I have tilled the soil by hand. I have woven cloth from wool and flax threads. I have milked cows, wrung the necks of chickens, and butchered pigs. I have a third grade education; I speak six languages. I gave birth to five children, held their hands while the world exploded around them.... I have lived on three continents. I have loved. I have laughed. I have wept. Perhaps I stand behind you in the supermarket line. Perhaps I live next door to you. Here is my life."

In "Who She Was," Samuel G. Freedman set out to tell the story of his mother's life. I'm not going to read from the book itself but from what he says about writing it. He talks about watching Stella Adler teaching an acting class about how to portray royalty. She tells the students that there's no way that as members of a modern capitalist democracy they could reach inside themselves (as Method Acting asks actors to do) and intuit the manner of a king or queen. So she shows the students slides of thrones, slides of bejeweled crowns, slides of sumptuous gardens at Versailles.

Watching her, Freedman realizes, as he puts it, that "You could study your way, research your way, learn your way into the role." So he decides to immerse himself in the details of his mother's life and times, and thereby "make the imaginative, dare I say artistic, leap into her soul."

As he researched, at the same time he worked – like an actor – on accessing his own visceral

response to the facts he was learning. He says, “I needed to *make* memory from stubborn, recalcitrant reality.”

I think that’s a good way of expressing what we all do as memoirists.

### Third type of memoir: the quest story

The quest story, or family story or “family story plus,” is the category my book falls into.

My book began as a personal roots journey into my Jewish family past, and then expanded into an exploration of how a *nation* is engaging with its Jewish history – *its* Jewish family past.

Today we’re seeing increasing numbers of these quest stories. They’re often quite complex, and I say in all humility that they’re not always successful. I think we’re feeling our way with this genre, and it’s hard to know sometimes what the rules are. The genre is evolving. And in the coming years I think we’ll continue to see some exciting new ideas coming forward. For this reason, it’s an exciting moment to be writing this kind of work.

This type of story requires the interweaving of many strands of narration. Often there’s the self, the author, as individual witness, and the revelation of that person as a character. Often there’s also the narrator’s back story. Then there’s the story of the narrator’s interaction with other characters during the quest. And the past history of these characters. Sometimes we also meet the forebears of those characters. There’s often the unspooling of a mystery. All of which must be braided, woven, patched together – and in fact the fragmentation itself is often a key element in the work.

A groundbreaking example of this genre is Helen Epstein’s “Where She Came From: A daughter’s search for her mother’s history,” which deals with three generations of women in her family. She describes her work like this:

When my mother told her past, the parts never fit. They remained separate and discrete....Those disjunctures fascinated me...I began to feel like an archaeologist who, instead of collecting shards of broken pottery, was picking up pieces of narrative.

Patricia Hampl says something similar:

I conscripted myself not only as the narrator...but as the searching self, the need-to-know protagonist. ... an inquiring mind moving over the field of [my grandmother’s] existence. ...even the very lacunae of my knowledge and of the public record of history... were not problems but the lifeblood of the whole enterprise.

I’ll cite just one example, a passage from Peter Balakian’s “Black Dog of Fate,” about his journey to discover how his family history intersects with the Armenian genocide in the early

20<sup>th</sup> century. He's a poet, and right after his grandmother dies, he finds himself writing a poem that surprises him:

Out of my head came things I didn't know I remembered. Images that located forgotten scenes. The poem was a tremor from the unconscious, the historical unconscious, the deep, shared place of ancestral pain, the place in the soul where we commune with those who have come before us. I had no historical awareness, no political ideas, but somehow out of the collision of language with personal memory came something larger. It was the first time for me that poetic language became a mode of historical exploration, the first time a poem became an act of commemoration.

My poem brought my grandmother back to me. She was my friend and nurturer again, now in my adult life. I had placed her at last: in the old world, the arid Turkish plain, lost Armenia. Now I would have to go and find out what that lost place was.

### Poem #2:

We've looked at three types of memoirs. Now for a poetic interlude: lines from Walt Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." He describes the ferry boats crossing the East River in New York between Manhattan and Brooklyn, but the poem is really about the connections among human beings, how we communicate through the written word over the generations, the crossing from life to death.

Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt;  
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd;  
Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh'd;  
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood, yet was hurried;

\*

What is it, then, between us?  
What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?  
Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not.

\*

It is not you alone, nor I alone;  
Everything indicates – the smallest does, and the largest does.

### The Craft of Big and Small

Now for the techniques I believe are important in creating a compelling narrative – or, in other words, who cares? And how do we make our readers care?

To divide these techniques into the “up-close” on the one hand and the “universal” on the other is somewhat arbitrary. Many of them fall into both categories. As Brenda Ueland, a wonderful writer about writing, said: “The more you wish to describe a universal, the more minutely and truthfully you must describe a particular.”

But I’ll begin with some techniques I think of as falling into the “universal” category.

### 1) Detachment: stepping back.

When my mother died, I found my family past threatening to disappear. All those *pitseles* were slipping out of reach. In an attempt to connect myself to my past, I set off for Lithuania, the heartland of the old Jewish world. And here was the first sentence of my manuscript in its first incarnation:

When I heard that my friend Susan was going to Lithuania on a "Jewish roots" trip with her mother and brother, I thought, I'd like to go with them.

In that first incarnation, I wrote about my feelings. How visiting an old Jewish cemetery in my ancestral town made me feel overwhelmed by the tininess of my own life. How walking through the market square made me feel sad.

I was writing about what made *me* care. But that, simply that, was not a story, and it was certainly not a book. I would describe my writing at that point as precious. Too much freight on too little foundation. Too thin. Too little material to support the weight of the emotion I was hoping to evoke in my readers.

So, fortified by several rejections, I stepped back. I widened the lens. I placed my family story and my feelings in a broader context. My book became not only a personal journey but also an inquiry into how people in a country scarred by genocide were seeking to build a more tolerant future.

My book acquired a kind of mission. Now, my goal was not only to share how I felt, but to shine a spotlight on the fragile efforts toward mutual understanding that I saw and was inspired by in Lithuania.

My particular, small family story came to illuminate something large, and to embody a – well, god forbid I should use the word “message,” but something I passionately needed to say, about how in even so fearsome a terrain as the Holocaust, we can seek to move forward from the fears and hatreds of the past. And that became my book.

When the book was published, the opening was not about me and my friend Susan. It was this:

A soft summer rain was falling as a white-haired woman made her way to the microphone. Through the pattering of drops on my umbrella, I leaned forward to catch her words.



I'm still there, but you're not looking at me, you're leaning forward with me to catch someone else's words.

It was my deep engagement with my subject that got the project off the ground. And that engagement only grew deeper as the project unfolded. Without caring, I could never have written the book. But what enabled me to create a narrative that *readers* would care about was detachment, stepping back.

Another way of putting it is that I came to be driven not by my own concerns, but by my responsibilities to my readers.

## 2) Focus: carving away the unneeded.

I found that in writing a true story, a story that included my own experience, I needed to be less a builder than a sculptor. Michaelangelo is quoted as saying "Every block of stone has a statue inside it, and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it" – to *uncover* it, you might say, by removing everything that isn't the statue.

When you're writing non-fiction, writing about a life you know, this can be especially hard. Unlike a fiction writer who builds a story by adding one detail after another, you already know everything. The question is what to leave out.

My book takes place over the course of a month in Lithuania, and you follow what happens day by day. But obviously, it was *not* a question of writing down exactly what happened in the order in which it occurred.

It turned out that my whole visit to Poland had to go. The unbelievably interesting yoga class in Vilnius had to go. Even the day when I discovered my great-grandfather's grave, which was so moving to me, didn't advance what had become the real story, so *it* had to go.

I had to move things around. To make this vibrate against that. This illuminate that. This set up that. It was not so much reeling out a spool of thread than cutting and rearranging and piecing together the squares of a quilt.

(But don't throw away those scraps that end up on the cutting-room floor. You may find a place for them in something else you write.)

## 3) Drawing the narrative thread tight.

The actual details of the research process are way less interesting to your readers than they are to you. ("I went to this archive, I got this phone call.") You can include those details, but you'd better have a really good reason for doing so.

Ursula Le Guin, the master of science fiction fantasy, says:

It doesn't matter whether you write fiction or nonfiction.... All storytellers work with the same box of tools...Narrative...goes. It moves. Story is change."

"Keep the story full, always full of what's happening in it; keep it moving, not slacking and wandering into irrelevancies; keep it interconnected with itself, rich with echoes forward and backward. Vivid, exact, concrete, accurate, dense, rich: these adjectives describe a prose that is crowded with sensations, meanings, and implications.

Le Guin calls that fullness "crowding." But *leaping*, she says, "is just as important. What you leap over is what you leave out. And what you leave out is infinitely more than what you leave in."

She recommends that in the first draft, you crowd, but "in revising, you cut and recombine till what's left is what counts. Leap boldly."

Now for some techniques that seem to me to fall into the "up-close" category.

I'm remembering a fascinating document someone once sent me. In the 1930's, a Jewish family in Philadelphia began publishing a little mimeographed newsletter, with news from extended family members all over the world. And in 1935, one member of the family goes back to Lithuania, which he had left 30 years earlier in 1905. He gets off the boat and travels by horse and wagon to the town where he was born, and in the doorway of his old home he greets his mother, and they fall into each other's arms.

Every day he writes home to Philadelphia, and the little newsletter publishes his words. On the first day, he writes, "I visited some of the poor homes here. It is impossible to picture many of the homes! One can hardly believe that people can live under such conditions."

Over the next two months, he describes the town and the daily activities, the people who live there, what they wear, how they make a living, what they think about their lives – a very vivid account.

Two months pass, and then he writes this:

I do not know what to write. Not because there is a dearth of daily events, but rather because I've accustomed myself to the life in the small town, and I don't "see" much anymore. Everything appears so naturally in place.

That passage has stayed with me. I think puts the spotlight on something very important: that writing depends on taking notice, on ramping up your powers of observation, on perceiving things to be strange, noteworthy, worthy of being written down.

So what are some ways of keeping your eyes in working order, enabling yourself to see, and to keep on seeing?

#### 4) Gathering sensuous images.

As I gathered material for my book, both in Lithuania and after I came back home, I kept a diary – a total of nine spiral notebooks, in which I scribbled down everything: observations, impressions, feelings – everything I could see, hear, and smell. I also took nine rolls of film (remember rolls of film?) So that later, at my desk, when I was conjuring up, for example, my encounter with the elderly Lithuanian man in the village who wanted to speak to a Jew before he died, I could refer to his green cap, his aluminum cane, the blood red gladioli beside the door of his cottage.

#### 5) Creating vivid scenes.

As we all know, a memoir, just like a work of fiction, needs scenes, places where the narrative slows down and draws the reader in close.

In fact, Maxine Hong Kingston, the author of the trailblazing memoirs “The Woman Warrior” and “China Man,” says “Write a series of scenes, connect them with transitions – voila! You have your book.”

Not that she’s cavalier about the process. She says, “After about 20 drafts, shape and form become clear.”

#### 6) Creating vivid characters.

Many memoirs are crowded with characters – whole family trees full of characters. It’s helpful to the reader to include the actual family tree at the beginning of the book. But beyond that, we must take special care to bring to life these crowds of characters, to distinguish one from the next – and I don’t think we do enough of this. How often do you lose track of who’s who in a memoir? Pretty often, I find. That rarely happens when I read a novel. I think we shouldn’t be afraid of merging a couple of people here and there, or eliminating people entirely.

Anthony Swofford, author of a Gulf War memoir called “Jarhead,” says: In “the battle between narrative life and real life, narrative life must always win. Your life is less important than your book.”

7) Creating yourself as a character. In a first person narrative, *you* must be just as vivid and carefully drawn a character as everyone else in the book. This involves careful craftsmanship. As Alice Kaplan, author of “French Lessons,” says, “Selves...are multiform creatures...you the author have to decide which part of yourself to narrate.”

Laura Fraser, author of a travel memoir called “An Italian Affair,” has an interesting idea: Pretend you’re writing about someone else. Pretend your memoir is not about you – instead, it’s a novel. Ellen Cassedy goes to Lithuania. Who is she, and what happens to her there?

#### 8) Touchstones.

Give your reader a home. Especially when you’re traveling to exotic places of whatever kind, the reader needs familiar characters, objects, or places, that recur and give your narrative a rhythm, like the refrain of a song.

As I went deeper and deeper into the dark center of 20<sup>th</sup> century history, I realized I had to create resting places for the reader. One place was my daily class at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute, the classroom with its rows of battered wooden desks and its fluffy-bearded instructor. Another was my kitchen table in Vilnius, with its knobby cucumbers and its loaf of black bread, where I sat down to eat and contemplate the multiplying truths I was discovering. In these recurring places, my readers and I could pause to catch our breath as we made our way through a difficult terrain.

#### 9) Walk with your reader.

Take care of her. Put yourself in her shoes. When you’re telling a true story – rather than making something up out of your imagination – it can be harder to see what you know that your reader doesn’t know.

I found that my notebooks, my diary, helped me to keep track of what I learned day by day, what was new to me at each stage of the journey. This way, as I built the narrative, I could look back and be aware of what the reader would be thinking and wondering at each point as the story unfolded.

#### 10) Blending big and small.

Finally, a few last words about blending big and small, personal and universal. Ursula Le Guin, again, tells us to break up what she calls the lumps in the oatmeal, “lumps of exposition.” Most readers find it difficult to swallow great big chunks of background information. We need to find ways to stir them in so they go down easy.

As Le Guin says:

This is a skill that science fiction and fantasy writers are keenly aware of, because they often have a great deal of information to convey that the reader has no way of knowing unless told. If my story is set on a distant planet in the year 3295, my readers have no idea what to expect....

It's our job to break up the information, grind it fine, and make it into bricks to build our stories with. Stories that tell us things without appearing to be telling us. We practice invisible exposition, telling by implication, by passing reference, by hint. Telling it so that readers don't realize they're learning anything.

### In conclusion

No matter if we're writing an "I was there" story, a memoir by proxy, or a quest story, we can – I would say we *must* – make use of these techniques of big and small. And in so doing, we do something very important.

In the words of Patricia Hampl, we "write history from the inside...we preserve our bit of truth, and we put it forward on the great heap of history."

In the words of the memoirist June Cross, "We all have our stories to tell, and that those stories are as individual as wildflowers. I ... believe that by writing our own lives, we join the beauty of the field."

### Poem #3

I'll finish with the last poem, May Sarton's "All Souls." It's a poem about grief – an uplifting one – but here I want to see it as a poem about the process of creation, the construction of a work based on memory:

Did someone say that there would be an end,  
An end, Oh, an end to love and mourning?  
What has been once so interwoven cannot be raveled,  
nor the gift ungiven  
Now the dead move through all of us still glowing,  
Mother and child, lover and lover mated,  
are wound and bound together and enflowing.  
What has been plaited cannot be unplaited  
- only the strands grow richer with each loss  
And memory makes kings and queens of us.

Dark into light; light into darkness, spin.  
When all the birds have flown to some real haven;  
We who find shelter in the warmth within,  
Listen, and feel new-cherished, new-forgiven,  
As the lost human voices speak through us  
and blend our complex love,  
our mourning without end.

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