

Writing Memoir: Memoirs as Instruments of Healing, Advocacy and Resistance

DEBBIE LEE:

So I'm going to start out with this quote. And my portion of this talk is going to be about writing memoir. So those of you who want to write your memoir, we all want to write our memoir secretly. And you guys, you are the social media generation. You write memoir, in a way, all the time. So I'm just going to give you a couple of tips, and a couple of things that I've learned along the way.

"The problem with confessional writing is that people don't confess enough." This is a quote from the great American memoirist and creative nonfiction writer Philip Lopate. And he says that in response to this idea that some people complain about memoir.

And they're like, it's too confessional. We don't want to hear that you were beat by your father or that you stabbed your sister in the arm when you were 10. We don't want to hear that stuff.

Well Lopate says actually, we're complaining about the wrong things, that memoir writing needs to go really, really deep. And that is what makes it powerful. And hopefully by the end of my little section on this, you will understand.

There's Philip in Brooklyn. He lives in Brooklyn. And he's been writing all of his life. And here are some of his books. So you can see, he's written over 20 books. And most of them are memoir, some of them are criticism. But you can see by some of the titles. *Portrait of My Body*-- he writes about portions of his body that are not normally written about in public. Getting personal, even the titles of his book, *Bachelorhood*, are about going deep personally.

OK, so as Karen said, I started out here as a professor of 19th century British literature. And about 10 years ago, I decided I wanted to branch out. I still like writing scholarly, very objective stuff. But I wanted to write about myself. I wanted to use my own experience, my own feelings to explore some topics that I was exploring in a scholarly way. But I realized I did not know how to do that.

So I enrolled in courses with Philip Lopate, since he was one of the premier memoirists of the United States right now. And so I'm going to just go through a couple of things that I learned while I was working with Philip, and a couple of things that I learned just on my own as I was writing. I'm on my second memoir, and I've written about 12 shorter memoir pieces that have been published.

So number one, Philip says you cannot be the hero of your own story. This is a common mistake that beginning memoirists do. And we've all seen people's Facebook pages where their life is perfect. And we're like no, that's not real.

Readers can smell when you're not being honest. And so in order to be a memoirist, you have to be willing to give voice to the things that many of us experience-- doubt, pain, even shades of joy and happiness, like kind of getting into the crevices of what those mean. But most of us are too humiliated, too self-conscious, too cowardly to say them out loud. That's why we like to read other people's stories, who are honest about these things. They give voice to what we feel.

I love this quote by Susan Shapiro. "The qualities that make you like likeable and popular in real life-- good looks, wild success, happy marriage, lovely home, healthy confidence-- will make the reader despise you. The more of a wreck you are from the start, the more the audience is hooked." And as I was reading *The Common Reader*, I was kind of looking at some places where Malala does that.

And right at the beginning, if you remember, she talks about being born a girl, a female in her culture, and how that's a bad thing. It brings shame on the family. And so she's not saying oh, I was so great, I was born this beautiful baby. Girls were the sign of strength and hope in a family. She starts out at the bottom. So already as readers, we're going to sympathize with her. We're not going to sympathize with someone who has it all together and has it all. That's just not what we as humans do.

OK, so next. And this kind of jumps off the last point. When you're writing your memoirs, or your memoir, or a memoir piece, usually focused on one aspect of your experience, don't be too easy on your child self or your adult self. And Philip would emphasize again and again that childhood isn't innocent.

Many, many writers like to protect their child self. We like to see ourselves as innocent, vulnerable, maybe a victim. We forget about that time that we put gum in a girl's hair who was sitting in front of us in third grade because we were jealous of her long blond hair.

That was me. So get into those places in your childhood where you weren't so innocent, and explore those. Those are great topics for memoir.

And then another way to get past this common pitfall is to make yourself complicated. And this

is just something that I've picked up over the years. How do you do that?

We're all complicated, right? We're humans. We're complicated.

But how do you communicate that to a reader? One way that I like to do is to explore those emotions that are conflicting, that put you in a moral quandary where you feel two things very strongly at once. And if you can get another character in there that's very important to you, that makes it even more powerful.

So one of my memoirs, this first question comes from one of my smaller memoir pieces. What does it feel like to love your father for his quiriness, for his energy, but at that very same moment feel totally humiliated and embarrassed by him in public? Like that's an emotion that's complicated. And it's full of all kinds of stories of your past.

So exploring those ambiguities is a great place to go. And we have them all the time. You guys are probably experiencing them right now. Like I have to be here, but I want to be somewhere else, I want to get a good grade.

So we have these moral ambiguities all the time. So just notice those and jot them down. And if you're looking to write a memoir piece, you can go to one of those.

Memoirs usually have two selves, one who's telling the story and one who's acting in the story. And this double consciousness was something that took me a little while to learn, but it's a beautiful, beautiful thing, because as you're writing your memoir, you're narrating well, when I was 10 years old, I'm sitting in a classroom. And my best friend is sitting in front of me and she has this long blonde hair. And I just all of a sudden feel extremely jealous of it, because my hair's short and curly. When I was 10, straight hair was the thing and I had curly hair, so this was a bad thing.

So then as the person who's narrating that, I can stop. And I can say, I realize now, now that I'm 50 years old, I realize why I felt that way. And so that gap between me, the author, and me, the character in the story is a beautiful place to interpret, to reflect. And readers love that. Not too much of it, but they love those moments.

And then number four, and it links to the theme that Ray and I are talking about today, is find ways to link your story to larger issues. So no one's going to buy your memoir if it's just you going to a birthday party when you're 12, that's it. But if you were able to link it to larger

themes and issues, they're going to love it. They're going to love that you went to a birthday party the day that planes crashed into the World Trade Centers, because you bring this very personal, here is where I was when I heard about this, to this global issue. And I think that's one of the most exciting things about memoir, is that very personal being set against the global.

Like I said, Karen read the title of my last memoir. I've actually changed it to *Remote-- A Love Story*. And that's a story about my mother and I, who I had, have a very difficult relationship, and us and a wilderness area. So it's about land and environment, Mother Earth, mother, real mother, looking at those themes.

And then these smaller stories, most of them are about family. Family is always a great place to go for memoir. And the one that I'm working on now is called *Bear Watch*. And while I tell you about this one, I'm going to play a slide show because I don't really have time to tell you too much about the landscape. But in 2011, my daughter, who was 24 at the time, she got into an abusive relationship with a person who made her cut off all contact with her family and friends.

Three years, she disappeared from our lives. I only have one child, one daughter, we are very close. So I'm not going to start crying, but my throat's dry. So it was extremely difficult for me and my husband.

But I did not know what to do. I just was left with this huge void, this huge absence, all of these questions, no communication. And so of course I tried different things. I tried hanging out with friends, my husband and I went on a vacation to Florida. We've never been, we tried doing new things.

I went to counselors, I'd get up in the middle of the night and join grief chat rooms, people who are grieving. Nothing really worked, except I started traveling to the north. I started traveling every chance I could get, by myself or with family or whatever, to Alaska, to the Yukon and Northwest Territories and Canada, and finally ended up in Greenland, hiking along the Greenland ice cap, which you can kind of see in the distance there.

The Greenland ice cap is the fastest melting ice sheet in the world. I've seen it with my own eyes, I've walked on it. It is predicted to contribute to major sea rise and global climate temperature rising in the next 10 to 50 years. So finally, three years later, my daughter did

come back. And we're happy to reconcile again.

But still, I need to answer those questions for myself. Why did she disappear? What did I do?

What was the dynamic of our family? Or is it just the dynamic of the world? What happened to make that event occur?

And I also started to realize that the reason I was so drawn to the north was because it is this place of great loss. It's melting, it's a place of exile. It's a place of grief, really. And I did not really understand that and how she came back and I started writing about it.

So do I have a couple of minutes to read? So yeah, I thought what I would do is read just a little bit from the memoir, just like a page, not very much. But you can see in this section, it's from this trip to Greenland. And we had to do these bear watches, because polar bears, now that there's not much ice, polar bears can't eat seals, which float down on the ice. They're lacking food, you've seen those pictures of emaciated polar bears.

So while we were hiking, I was hiking with this group of people I didn't know, seven other people I didn't know. We had to take shifts all night with our rifle to watch out for polar bears, to guard the camp against the polar bears who could attack us and eat us. We did not want to kill a polar bear, but we still had to take caution. So we had to be up in the middle of the night, even though it was light, because it's the North Pole in the summer.

And it was during those polar bear watches that I started writing about my daughter. So you'll see in just in this little excerpt, how I talk about the camp, and then how I moved to my daughter, just one little story. And then you'll hear some of that interpretive language that's between me telling this story and and interpreting our own experience.

"Bear watch is a subtle time. The wind picks up, something moves and then it doesn't. The moment between the twitching grass and the quiet can be unnerving. I think of the polar bear jaw on the Inuit hut. I will animate that jaw tonight and for many nights to come.

Later, when I'm back home, I'll watch a YouTube video of a polar bear stalking a seal, swimming underwater a great distance, only to rise out of the water with unimaginable strength. Watch the seal hemorrhage onto the pure white of the iceberg, and the bear tear its flesh apart. I'll study how the bear became a symbol, and then a hollowed-out symbol of global climate change. But even now, I can sense the power of an animal able to thrive in such extreme ranges of light and dark, heat and cold.

I glance at the camp, at my companions sleeping in thin nylon tents, at the wild grace of the shimmering water under the pinking sky. Steph"-- that's my daughter-- "Steph loved the water. It was a place, I often thought, where she felt most at home, most fluid.

The summer she was seven, I brought her to a swim meet in Yakima. I was sitting in the bleachers watching her red and black speedo rise and fall in the water, the flick of her heels, her hands slapping the surface, her shoulders pulling her body up to the gasp at the top of the butterfly stroke, moving water as she moved herself. When she stopped, halfway down the lane, she just stopped and stood up, hopped on to the cement, rang out her long yellow ponytail while her other companions kept swimming. I can forgive myself, a young mother then, for grabbing her hand, drawing her into the dressing room with empty wet cement and metal lockers ajar and saying, why did you quit? You were ahead!

And after a few minutes of explaining what it meant to be in a race, holding her well she cried, I don't want to be a quitter! I don't want to be a quitter! She had stopped for no reason, or because she didn't really understand what competition was. She didn't care to win.

I can forgive myself because it seemed like I was teaching her about swimming and about life. Years later when she was in middle school and she and I were living in Pullman, I taught her through example not to quit the very thing she should have quit, that we both should have quit." Then I go into another story. So I'm going to hand it over to my colleague Ray, thank you very much.

[APPLAUSE]

RAY SUN:

OK. Well again, thank you for coming out after 4 o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon. So Debbie said we don't confess enough. So I will start with a confession. I feel extremely humbled after what you've just presented. So a tough bar to reach.

You will get a very different presentation. I haven't written a memoir, so I have nothing to share on that line with you. But I will talk to you about how I've used memoirs as one very valuable instrument in teaching about some very difficult topics. And I think that this goes very, very well with this year's *Common Reading*, which *I Am Malala* is of course, a survivor's testimony. I'm sure you've read the book at this point.

You know that the Taliban in Pakistan tried to silence Malala. Obviously she survived, and she

is not only not silent, she is speaking out very, very strongly on a global stage. Let's take her example in mind as I look at what from my perspective as a teacher about issues of war and genocide, what memoirs can especially do, what they are especially well-suited to do, and how I attempt to use them to convey some various central issues and truths.

So as Karen Weathermon already introduced, I teach a lot about wars-- not exclusively, but I teach a lot about wars, the two world wars. My training is in German history. When you study German history, you have to teach about War I and World War II, which inevitably brings you to teaching about Nazis, which brings you to the Holocaust.

Over my years here at Washington State, I've sort of expanded my range of interests in this field. So it went from teaching about Nazis to teaching about the Holocaust to realizing that the Holocaust is one example of many, unfortunately, of genocides or ethnic cleansings or other great crimes against humanity in even just modern history, which is my area. And so I don't teach exclusively about this, but I teach a lot about it, I think a lot about it, and I think hard about how we can actually make the unimaginable, imaginable.

And this is sort of taking a riff off of what the Japanese Emperor Hirohito said when he had to announce to the Japanese people in August 1945 that Japan was surrendering at the end of World War II. And he told the Japanese people that they must endure the unendurable. So this sort of seeming contradiction, this paradox.

And so when I teach about war, and I'm going to be focusing mostly on genocide today, and genocide, it's how do we imagine the unimaginable? And when I say unimaginable, on one hand I think when we say genocide yeah, so OK, we can all imagine this. We're talking about large body counts, some gruesome pictures. But genocide is so much more than that.

And we start to wrap our heads around the phenomenon of genocide, the questions of why, of motivation. Why do perpetrators do what they do? And what is the link between how they do what they do and their intent? And what are the layers of meaning of genocide? This is where the topic starts to get very, very difficult to really grasp.

And so I've found that memoirs are actually a very useful tool behind this challenge, making the unimaginable imaginable. And at their essence, and I'm going to try to unpack this a little bit. But at their essence, I really like to use memoirs because when you say 800,000 people died in Rwanda, or approximately 6 million Jews died in the Holocaust, these numbers just

leave you numb. I cannot imagine what that means, literally.

But memoirs like the Manala book give you an individual voice. They give you a life. They give you a history. They give you a humanity with which you can identify.

I can identify with one person very easily, very readily, along the lines that Professor Lee's already indicated. If they've shown the complexities of being human, if they've shown the variety of their life, of their culture, of their history. So you get a voice and a face and a story.

And history can be a very complex topic. But at its root, we need to tell good stories. If we cannot tell good stories, no one's listening, we've lost the audience, why are we bothering to do this? And so memoirs provide a human point of connection for the reader to a vast and unimaginable event.

So what do memoirs offer? And I'm sure this list that I came up with is not exhaustive, but I think it's a good start. They offer a personal view-- Malala's memoir is extremely personal-- of immense trauma.

She was shot in the head. That is traumatic. She experienced war. She experienced the attempt of the Taliban to try and silence an entire gender. That is traumatic.

A personal view of trauma. And what does it do? Again, I'm coming back to the issue of telling a story. Humans love a good story. I would say across time and space, across culture, give us a story we can follow. We will follow with this.

It's very descriptive. From my historical perspective, history textbooks are usually not very interesting, I'm sorry. I've read my share of history textbooks. And I don't particularly care for them myself.

We need interest. We need details. We need to see the humanity in the experience.

So a good memoir is very descriptive. It brings the past to life. The Malala memoir brings you the food, the smells, the colors, the temperature, the atmosphere, the voices, the religious practices. All of this creates a very rich world in which the reader can immerse themselves. And that is bringing the past to life.

And that is what I as a historian want to do. I strive to bring the past to light. As a historian, someone who thinks about history all the time, of course it's always alive to me. But this is not

the usual condition of most of us. So how do we see the past not as a black and white photograph, or even something on a small screen on YouTube, but how do we see it as shared life, common humanity?

Ideally what I think a memoir does is it crosses-- I'm going to read this because it's a little long, and I think it captures it-- crosses divisions of time, space, and culture. This is the beauty of memoirs, that Malala is from Pakistan, she's Muslim, she's a teenage girl. But we can relate to her. And like the other memoirs I'm going to introduce in talking about the Holocaust or the Rwandan genocide or the Cambodian genocide, we can relate. So memoirs cross time and space and culture.

And what we see in them, because my interest in genocide is to try and get at the common humanity. I have to learn about perpetrators, I have to know about the bad guys who do these things. But my real interest is in those whom they target, and those who survive.

And we see the common humanity that we have with those who are targeted, and even-- and here's the flip side-- of studying about genocide, because there are memoirs by perpetrators too. We can see our common humanity not only with the good guys, those who are targeted and somehow get through this, but also with the bad guys. And we can also put ourselves into their shoes, which is a very uncomfortable realization. Memoirs can put us, the reader, into the life of the narrator. And we see the world through their eyes.

I was seeing the world through Debbie's eyes when she was just reading that. Also my daughter used to swim, I could imagine myself in the swimming pool, so that helped. But I could see the world for a moment through your eyes. And that is what a great memoir does. And that is what connects us to this history. So that's in general terms.

Now I don't only use memoirs in teaching. That could also be a disservice. I want to very quickly tell you what I think memoirs can and cannot do. They're effective instruments, but they also have their limits. So this is kind of reiterating what I've been trying to explain.

So they give very detailed, very emotive, very personal perspectives. They create that one-in-one relationship with the student and with the reader and with the larger question. They make the unimaginable and the unthinkable somehow relatable.

We can perceive this. And it starts to become tangible. This is invaluable, this is fundamental.

What they cannot do, just sort of a disclaimer. What they cannot do is that no one memoir will

give you a comprehensive history of an event. So you read Elie Wiesel's memoir of his time in Auschwitz, it's a fantastic story, but that is not the history of the Holocaust. So if you really want to learn about something, you have to go beyond the memoir.

As a teacher, I need to surround it with more material. I need to interpret, I need to explain and contextualize. So don't take memoirs to give you more than they can. It's not going to give you the history. It's not going to give you the experience.

I'd actually be very interested to talk with Debbie afterwards about your perspectives on this as a writer. You're sharing a unique experience, and I imagine that there's sort of a choice between trying to make it as common as possible to reach your reader while protecting the uniqueness and distinctiveness of this. So it's an interesting friction there.

So using them in history, I take care to say that these memoirs can be representative. That's why I use them. They will give you a good flavor. But they are not exclusive. Not every person went through it in that way.

And so as a teacher, I have to take memoirs and testimonies and I weave them together. I tie them together with other materials, even those dreaded textbooks, hopefully my charismatic and riveting lectures to provide an overview, other visual materials and so on. So if you do this halfway competently though, you get a very nice mix of the personal and the big picture. And you'd absolutely need the memoirs in there, I think to get the connection. This is where my students over the years, I've seen my students really become fascinated with the topic when they dig into the personal experience, and they can relate with this.

Now, here's to the heart of what I have to say. Memoirs can be wonderful instruments of resistance. This is a very political action.

I don't know how the writers think about this. I don't know if you always think of your memoirs as particularly political. It can just be personal, confessional, whatever. In this perspective for this particular purpose in studying war, genocide, issues of trauma, social conflict, these are intensely political. They're trying to make a difference.

And the reason is that these are testimonies from individuals who belong to groups who have been targeted for elimination. This is the essence of genocide, to eliminate a group. And there's layers of elimination.

So we all understand the concept of killing lots and lots of people of a group, or maybe the entire group if possible, the physical annihilation. That's primitive and simple. We understand this. But the idea of elimination and annihilation goes so much deeper than this. That's just stage one of a genocide, to kill people.

The really deeper, substantive part of genocidal intent is to eliminate the culture and the history and the memory of a people so that if you can do that, they never existed. They never existed. Think about that.

Lives, cultures, cultural creativity, zero. It's as if it was just erased. You hit Delete.

To illustrate this point, I'm going to play you a two minute clip here. Those of you watching long distance-- for copyright reasons, you can't see what I'm showing here, but they are going to put up a slide with the URL on it. And you can even just look it up right now and play along if you want, or do it at your leisure. This is sort of a short montage from the film of a Holocaust rescuer called *Schindler's List*, which came out in 1990-- actually it's '93, I got that wrong, it's '93. It's the liquidation of the the Krakow ghetto.

What the Nazis did in occupied Poland is that they would first concentrate Jews in communities and cities to make them easy to manage, and then they would either kill them there or transport them to extermination camps. This is going to be a montage of scenes. Fair warning, some of these are violent. They show violent acts of killing.

So you do not need to watch if that's going to disturb you. But it has to be in there. And listen carefully to the German character, the officer who's talking about what he says about why he's doing this, because he's given a little pep talk to his men before they go out to do this.

OK, so you got what he said, right? Jews have been here for six centuries. After we clear this ghetto, after we kill them or send them off to the death camps, it never existed. That history doesn't exist. It's just a rumor.

So that is really the foundation, the fundamental level of genocide. And that is where these memoirs come in. So I would argue that the ultimate purpose of genocide is to eliminate the very memory of a group and individuals. And the group and everything associated with that-- its history, its culture, its religion, its art, whatever, all gone. So this is the second death.

This is Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor, Nobel Prize winner. He passed away not that long ago. "For the survivor who chooses to testify, it's clear: his duty is to bear witness for the dead and for the living. He has no right to deprive future generations of a past that belongs to our collective memory.

To forget would be not only dangerous, but offensive. To forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time." So this is where this famous concept of the second murder or the second death comes in.

And again, Wiesel-- "In the end, it is all about memory, its sources and its magnitude, and of course its consequences." So memoirs can testify to several things. So like *I Am Malala*, gives you in a very rich and textured account.

One of the problems with genocide is that we oftentimes only see the targeted group through the eyes of the perpetrators. So for the Holocaust for example, we're probably most familiar with pictures of European Jews from 1942 to '45 in black and white when they're terrorized, starved, being shot, behind barbed wire, and so on. This is a great disservice to this group or to any target group who've had a long history that is rich in culture, rich in creativity.

These are real people with rational thoughts and great creative aspirations. And to see them through the eyes of when they're at their worst and their weakest and the most humiliated is a crime. And memoirs like Malala's give you a much richer picture. You see them as real people.

Of course you may learn something about the motives and methods of the perpetrators. This is important. Holocaust or genocide memoirs we'll tell you about how at least that person understood the coming of the perpetrators, why they attacked their group, and how they attacked their group, and the consequences. If you read the sort of memoir, you're going to see a lot of issues of suffering. There are oftentimes very difficult descriptions of human behavior at its worst.

Humans can do unimaginable things to other humans, and it is really not limited by race, by class, by gender, or by history. Any human being can do this. But I think most importantly, at least what I'm most interested in right now, memoirs and testimonies also show you that the victims did not just meekly succumb to this. You will by the very nature of it being a memoir of a survivor, they had the inner resources, they had the social skills, they had the community, they had the strength to survive.

So how did they survive? We find that they maintained dignity, humanity, and we see them as full human beings. And this is using the concept of agency. You will see how in Malala's testament how she, how her family, how the international community worked together to save her and get her message out. These memoirs will show how target groups are not just the simple, two-dimensional cartoon figures that the perpetrators portray them as.

But they are fully human. They can use their minds, their hearts. They have very strong social relationships with their communities or family, among each other, friendships, loyalties. And you learn a lot about the human condition, that humans can not only do terrible things, but they are amazingly resilient and capable of withstanding quite a bit.

And this is why it's a political action. They are defying their perpetrators. They are saying no, I am human. They affirm the life, they affirm the identity, and they affirm the value of the targeted group. And above all by speaking, by giving testimony, they're denying the ultimate aim of genocide perpetrators, which is to deny the memory of those that they're trying to eliminate.

So I'm not saying it's a happy ending. Many of these memoirs are difficult. They show very conflicted people. They show people who have agonizing and unanswerable questions about why did I survive, or why did this happen to my people? Some of them later takes their lives after they write these memoirs. So it's not a cure-all. But nonetheless they do speak to memory, they transmit memory, and they are very powerful expressions of humanity.

All right, so to close up, there are a gazillion different memoirs out there about these genocides, if you're interested in the topic. I just thought I'd toss up one or two per major genocide just of the 20th century. I'd be happy to talk with you, or you can email me and continue the conversation. But if you want to pursue further, I picked a couple that I think are well-written and useful historical resources. So for Armenia 1915, *Black Dog of Fate*. If you look at this image at the top, this is a Little League baseball team. Peter Balakian grew up in America.

He grew up a New York Yankees fan. He knew nothing of his Armenian-- well, he knew of Armenian food and culture, he knew nothing of the genocide until he was a young adult-- until he went to college, actually. And then at this point, he's an award-winning poet, actually, and has become an ardent advocate to promote awareness and knowledge about the Armenian

Genocide. It's a beautifully written book, and very contemporary for an American audience, very relatable for an American audience.

For the Holocaust, there are libraries about this. I thought you might enjoy exploring a different format. These are graphic novels. And so the main characters have different animal characters.

So the Nazis are the cats. The Jews, of course, are the mice. And then different nationalities have different animal features.

But this is a story told by Art Spiegelman. His parents were both Holocaust survivors. His mother committed suicide. He had a very difficult relationship with his father. Art explores this.

The only connection they have, ironically, is when Art asks his father, tell me about your experience in the Holocaust. And through that, through that storytelling and memoir telling, he gradually starts to see his father as a full human being, not just this mean and strange eccentric old man whom he had seen him as before. So these are fascinating and very easy and fast to read.

For Cambodia, Chanrithy Him actually is a Northwest author. She lives in Portland, she's an award-winning author. These are photographs that the Khmer Rouge, sort of a rogue communist group, took of their victims before they killed them.

She survived the Cambodian genocide as a child. She's now a fully grown woman, obviously. She writes poetically, beautifully, and powerfully about her experience. How do you survive as a young adolescent an through this sort of experience.

And finally for Rwanda, Hatzfeld is a French journalist. The genocide in Rwanda, the memorials that they have there, this is a church where an entire community was killed, basically, and the Rwandans have left the remains there as sort of a memorial in place. Hatzfeld interviewed survivors to hear about their experiences. So you get their firsthand accounts. It's kind of rare for Rwanda.

He has a companion book if you want to learn about the perpetrators. So I think with that, I will wrap it up. And we have around seven or eight minutes if you would like to ask questions of either Professor Lee or myself.

[APPLAUSE]

AUDIENCE: [INAUDIBLE] because you wrote about your daughter.

DEBBIE LEE: Yeah.

AUDIENCE: What's the responsibility you feel of the writer to write about other people?

DEBBIE LEE: It's very, very tricky.

AUDIENCE: What is it like now to your daughter to know that you have written this memoir about this difficult period of her life?

DEBBIE LEE: Yeah, it's difficult to navigate. Different people have different ethics attached to it. Some people say, well, this is my story. I can write about my mother or my daughter the way I want, because it's my story too. It's not just her story.

And some people actually ruin relationships over memoir. I'm not one of those people. I want to keep my relationships. So I am in contact with her and fortunately right now she's a filmmaker, so she understands the whole idea of story, and that you have to include certain things in order to make people feel what you felt. But I do run everything through her when I'm finished-- not while I'm writing, because that process, you need your freedom. Yeah.

AUDIENCE: This is a question for both of you. But do you guys think that memoirs as an art form will kind of flourish in this time that we're coming into in this moment?

DEBBIE LEE: You mean the political moment? OK, yeah. Go ahead, Ray.

RAY SUN: Wow. Yes, I think so. You know The story's being written as we speak, so who knows what direction it's going to be taking. So this is a purely, very subjective personal view, that there has been so much politicization going on-- I'm just speaking of this country. There are so many key issues being brought to bear at once-- issues of identity.

Who's an American, who belongs, who doesn't belong? Who deserves to be taken care of? Global warming, the politics of the current administration. Will we remain a democracy?

There are so many voices that have entered into our public dialogue-- even just in the past year, let's keep it simple-- that I am certain that there's going to be some really good accounts of people who are maybe using memoirs to make sense of their own experiences. But I think

that the public's awareness of how our individual lives are connected to the big picture has increased. So I think it's a very good season to be a memoirist, myself.

DEBBIE LEE: Most of you in here are young. I see a few white-haired people. But if I were you, I would start keeping a journal. This is an extraordinary time that we're living in. People, old people who are older than us, who are like in their 80s have said, I have never seen a time like this in America. No matter what your political beliefs are, there's a big spectrum, and most of us are somewhere in between.

I would start keeping a journal about little things that happen to you in your life that maybe do bear on the larger political situation. But the more specific to your life, then that's what's going to make the larger situation come alive. So then maybe when you're finished with school-- this is an extraordinary time for you guys, too. You're in this very formative period of your life. You're in college.

And so this is just like a perfect storm of where you are developmentally and where our country is. And then maybe five years from now when you're working your job and you're saying ooh, I wish I was in college. I loved all that creative stuff. Then you have this journal. If you don't keep a journal with those things, they'll be lost. So that's a great question.

RAY SUN: One advantage is that I'm sure you're all on social media. And you're writing down your thoughts and expressions about your experience these days as you go, whether or not you're aware of this. You're creating a basis for a memoir right there. But if you're even mindful about this, think about what you can do with it.

DEBBIE LEE: Yeah. And stuff that you think may not even have any relevance to the larger political situation, if it's something that resonates with you, that say you think about a few days later, that's the key to a memoir, something that sticks with you, that kind of ooh, it got under my skin. That means it's important to you for some reason you may not know until 5 or 10 years from now. But write that down. And later you will be able to see, I get how it fits into my act of becoming, and then the larger world's act of becoming.

Oh, one more. And then we'll let you guys go. That guy in the back with the white hair? The older gentleman. He's a friend of mine.

AUDIENCE: Ray, you mentioned memoirs by the perpetrators.

DEBBIE LEE: Wow.

AUDIENCE: I was wondering if you could cite a couple good ones. Have there been memoirs?

RAY SUN: Yeah.

AUDIENCE: There must've been memoirs by former SS or--

RAY SUN: Yes. So there is a companion piece. It's not quite memoirs, I'm taking the term you know broadly, "testimonies." There's a companion piece to this from Rwanda where the same journalist interviewed perpetrators. I'd have to go back and get the title, it's blanking on that right now.

The commandant of Auschwitz wrote his own self-serving memoir. But you can filter this. You know what they're trying to do. But you still gain a lot from this.

Just off the top, if you want to go with the Holocaust, there is an interview, an extensive set of interviews with the [AUDIO OUT] of the [INAUDIBLE] death camp of Treblinka. His name is Franz Stangl. He was interviewed by a British journalist named Gitta Sereny. The book is called *Into That Darkness*. And she interviewed him for weeks and weeks on end.

And it's a fascinating process. Journalism students out here, I'm sure there's a journalism person here somewhere, is that over time as she built rapport with him, she didn't like him. But you build rapport with them. And at first he was giving his usual story-- I don't know anything, or I was just following orders. But over time, those walls come down.

Extraordinarily with him, he finally got to the point where in his last interview with her, he confessed that he actually was responsible. And that's the big thing. It's very difficult for a Nazi, to say I was responsible.

He said, I was responsible. I had choices in my life. He died the next day. It's almost like a divine act.

He confessed-- this is what happens when you confess, right? Then you die. So those are a few off the top my head. I'd be happy to talk with you about more.

AUDIENCE: The most obvious one I can think of is *Mein Kampf*, but it was before the act.

RAY SUN: Right, that's sort of more like a political visionary statement. But yeah, that could fall into in the

broad sense of a statement by a perpetrator.

AUDIENCE: What about the truth of reconciliation process in South Africa? Did that yield a memoir?

RAY SUN: I haven't looked at South Africa. But I'm sure the documents themselves would be fascinating. And I'm sure that someone has actually tried to assemble them, at least. It'd be great to explore.

DEBBIE LEE: Well thank you guys, very much. Go off and keep your memoir.

[APPLAUSE]