

# A STUDY OF MEMOIR

It was spring, and my fifth graders were meeting with their third-grade writing buddies. We had spent the year traveling on a rigorous journey through memoir, and they were anxious to share with their apprentices all they had learned.

"It's a snippet of a memory," Marin explained.

"No, it's more than just that," Jason called out. "It is a snippet of a memory that a writer tells about after they have had time to think about it."

"Yeah," Karina chimed in. "Like in my piece about my sisters being born. I couldn't have written that a day or even a month after they were born. I needed the time to let it sink in. I needed the time to be able to reflect back on it."

"But wait," Rachel added. "We need to tell them that a snippet could mean a lot of different things. Like my piece about when my Aunt Rosie died—it looked back on a time that lasted only a few minutes . . . but Joseph's piece, about when he got stitches in his eye, focused on the whole day. And remember Daniel's piece? He wrote about the entire summer before his brother left for college."

"OK," Jennifer added, "so the snippet could last different amounts of time, depending on the piece . . ."

## Summer Journey through Memoir

The year of study that led my students to these sophisticated understandings had begun the summer before. I had spent that summer working on my own writing and planning for what I hoped would be a year-long study of memoir. Because doing a

yearlong writing study of any nature was a new endeavor for me, I knew I had to immerse myself in the genre.

I began my quest by reading Frank McCourt's memoir *Angela's Ashes* (1996), Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993), and James McBride's *The Color of Water* (1996). I read books about the writing of memoir, such as William Zinsser's *Inventing the Truth* (1998), which later became my bible. I devoured the delicacies of Judith Barrington's handbook *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art* (1997). I sat on the floors of children's sections in bookstores and libraries, searching for memoirs written for children. I asked colleagues to recommend titles and authors. I filled the already stuffed boxes of books in my classroom with the great works of Cynthia Rylant, Patricia MacLachlan, Sandra Cisneros, Eloise Greenfield, and others.

For my own writing, I found my summer of study a success because, finally, after months of trying, I had written a vignette about a recent visit to my grandmother who is suffering from Alzheimer's. I was excited about how it turned out and, after sharing it at a writing conference at Teachers College, I was enthusiastic to share it with my incoming students. I was looking forward to the new ideas that would fill my notebook pages about my life with my grandmother. I returned to my classroom with a new energy as a teacher and a writer.

## September Arrives: A Community Built on Reading and Writing

When the children arrived on the first day of school, I dove right in, feeling the need

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to get drenched in their life-stories right away. Before launching writers' notebooks or even thinking about them, we spent the first few weeks reading great pieces of literature and talking. Just that—reading and talking. We read *What You Know First* (1995) by Patricia MacLachlan, and Karina spoke of her baby sisters Gracie and Sammy. After reading Mem Fox's *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* (1985), Rachel introduced us, through her memories, to her Aunt Rosie, her guardian angel. We also got to know author Patricia Polacco's *My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother* (1994), and, in turn, Richie (Daniel's older brother who had just left home for Indiana), and Jillian's grandfather, who had passed away years before. And the children met my grandma, Grandma Nathlie. Through the stories told by our favorite authors and through our own stories, we got a first peek into the characters of one another's lives, characters that were soon to become as well known to us as Charlotte and Wilbur.

After about six weeks of launching our notebooks and publishing our first projects, I finally decided to bring the idea of studying memoir to the kids. We talked of it as a study that would sustain us as writers throughout the school year.

We had an official kickoff of our memoir study during the first week of November. My first mini-lesson that week introduced the class to the study and began with a seemingly simple question: What is memoir? Before allowing any space or opportunity for students to answer, I sent them off on a gathering. I asked them to search the bookshelves in their homes, in the public library, in the school library, and in our classroom library to find memoirs.

### A Classroom Gathering of Memoir

Over the course of the rest of that week, the children filled the empty bins in our

classroom library with books that they had decided might be memoirs. During those days, I eavesdropped on their conversations. I had never heard them engage in such heated discussions around writing. One such conversation between Daniel and Eytan went like this:

EYTAN: Danny, what did you bring in for the memoir study?

DANIEL: *Out of the Dust* [Karen Hesse, 1997].

EYTAN: I don't think that's a memoir.

DANIEL: Yes it is. I looked up the definition for memoir, and it is. Look, it is. [He opens the book for Eytan.] It is about her life.

EYTAN: Oh, I thought it was fiction or maybe historical fiction.

Conversations like this were happening all around. The room was abuzz, and the baskets were becoming stuffed. Although many of the books and other pieces the students had gathered probably would not fit the criteria that we would eventually develop for memoir, the students were out there, digging and discovering. During those beginning days of our memoir study, I used read-aloud time to immerse them in a wide variety of great memoirs. I even shared my summer vignette about my visit with my grandma, "Grandma's Sparkle." While my mini-lessons for the rest of that week looked at the craft within the writing of these works, I did not, at that time, define the genre for them.

### Sifting through: Defining Memoir

A week after we began our search, I gathered the class for another mini-lesson. I asked the students to work with a buddy and referred them to the bins full of books. Their task for workshop that day was to decide which books were truly memoir and to develop criteria for the genre that they would record in their notebooks.

As I listened to the students' conversations, I realized that in their research and

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gathering during the previous week, they had learned a great deal about the genre. Many of them had looked up *memoir* in the dictionary or on the Internet, or asked their older siblings and parents. Furthermore, many of them had a beginning knowledge of the characteristics of memoir and used these criteria to select texts. When I brought the class back together, we compiled a list of definitions of memoir. The students were energetic and engaged in such thoughtful ways. I believe a great deal of this energy was generated by all the memoir I had been sharing with them—memoir in many different forms and genres. This is some of what the children had to say:

JESSE: I think that a memoir is about a person in your life that you remember and all the good times you had together.

DANIEL: A memoir is a memory, which you write in beautiful language and remember with details.

BRIDIE: I think a memoir is a memory about someone you care about.

EYTAN: I think a memoir is something that happened in the author's life that he or she remembers. It is a memory. It doesn't have to be all the exact details: just the main details and those have to be true.

The following day, during workshop time, we went back through the list and refined it, bringing the definitions into a single statement: A memoir is a memory from an author's life that is crafted into a piece of writing that can exist in different forms and genres.

## How My Students' Questions Led Our Inquiry

Next, the students sifted through their piles of books to make sure everything they had in the memoir pile fit the criteria we had developed. Many books were tossed out, such as Hesse's *Out of the Dust* (1997) and Jerry Spinelli's *Crash* (1996). The students

decided that these two titles are fiction. The kids realized the difference between most fiction and memoir but were very confused about the difference between memoir and autobiography. Using their confusion as a springboard, I planned a mini-lesson that would help them see the difference. I shared with them the jacket flaps of some autobiographies and also the flaps from some examples of memoir. When I asked them if they noticed a difference, their answers were exact. They saw that most autobiographies covered a person's life while a memoir was only a piece of the author's life. "How much of the author's life needs to be in a memoir?" Jennifer asked. "Well," I said, "I guess that's something we need to explore." With this question, our inquiry moved forward.

We continued to research the genre, becoming more directed in what we were looking for. We combed through the works of some of the most powerful memoirists who write for children, such as Cynthia Rylant, Eloise Greenfield, and Libba Moore Gray. We dug through their texts searching for insight into how much of her story each writer included and how she decided to put it all together. We asked ourselves questions such as:

- How did Eloise Greenfield remember all those little details from her childhood in her book *Childtimes* (1979)?
- Why did Cynthia Rylant choose to write about the different things she loved about being young in the mountains instead of choosing just one?
- Was it on purpose that Libba Moore Gray wrote of spending the seasons of her childhood with her mother and then reflected on how that affected her life as an adult?

As researchers, we were trying to imagine decisions that other memoirists had made. The students held these texts

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beside their notebooks and used these writers as mentors in their memoir writing.

### A Big Decision: How to Deal with Time in a Memoir

In my mini-lessons, I helped the children see the different time frames a memoir can use. I chose this topic because we decided that dealing with time is one of the biggest challenges memoirists must negotiate. We studied how Cynthia Rylant's *When I Was Young in the Mountains* (1982) is different from an autobiography because it focuses on only a part of her life—her childhood. We also found that it contains many different memories that together make it a memoir. We called this a “many-moment piece,” and the kids worked on finding a place in their writers' notebooks or drafts to try a many-moment piece.

Next, we moved forward to naming other ways to show time within memoir. We dug into the picture books *Shortcut* (1992) and *Bigmama's* (1991), both by Donald Crews. The kids noticed that *Bigmama's* was, like *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, a many-moment piece. However, they also saw that *Shortcut* was different because it is a memory of events that lasted only a few hours. We named this type of memoir a “moment-in-time piece.” As before, the students tried a moment-in-time piece in their own writing. These three texts became our touchstone texts, and Rylant and Crews became our mentors.

We dug deeper into these texts. What else made them examples of memoir? Using *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, I posed the following question to the children: What did Cynthia Rylant include in this work other than the memories of her childhood in the mountains? Dayna knew right away: “She added her feelings into the piece.” I asked, “Is this true of all memoirs, and, if so, is it a criterion of memoir to have a combination of thinking and story?”

### Thinking versus Story: A Combination

We looked closely at our touchstones, highlighting the authors' thinking in one color and their stories in another. We inevitably found the answer to be yes: a memoir needs to have a combination of the memory and the author's thinking and feelings about the memory. We called this defining characteristic “thinking versus story.” Our chart titled What Makes a Memoir was slowly beginning to grow. We set our publishing date for late December.

The first week of December was invigorating! I explained to the students that they were each going to publish a series of three short memoirs, and each student could choose whether to connect the memoirs as a single many-moment piece or leave them as separate pieces. The children were looking forward to writing their memoirs. I explained that I wanted them to have a seed idea for their pieces of memoir by the middle of the week. Because of all the attention we had been paying to memoir, most of them had no trouble deciding upon a seed.

### Drafting Begins

We still had a lot to learn during drafting. Conferring became very important at this stage of the inquiry. I conferred with my students to help guide them as they chose which memories to write about. What story would they tell? How would they choose it? Why would it make sense to choose one story over another . . . or would it? I referred the students to ideas that other writers had offered about selection and focus. I read them a passage from Judith Barrington's *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art* (1997): “What things do you think about over and over? What stories haunt you? Which people from the past do you dream about? What makes you passionate when

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you think about it or talk about it? What do you argue about?” (p. 40).

In addition to conferring, I also planned a variety of mini-lessons that would help students with drafting. We studied the dialogue in our touchstone pieces and tried using it in our drafts. We examined how our mentors took a reflective stance and left messages in their pieces. For example, we went back to *When I Was Young in the Mountains* with a new lens, trying to understand why Cynthia Rylant chose to write about those particular memories. What reflective stance was she taking? What message was she sending to her readers? We decided that Rylant wanted to express how strongly she felt about growing up in the mountains and how important those particular memories are to her. Next, we tried to find the messages within our own pieces, working to make them visible to our readers.

### “Is It OK to Make Things Up?”: Embellishment and Voice

Next, we learned about embellishment. When in a memoir can you embellish? When do you have to keep to the integrity of the memory? We decided that if you were unable to recall a small detail from a larger important memory—such as what someone was wearing, or the *exact* dialogue from a conversation—then it would be OK to embellish. However, we decided that if the detail was a key piece of the memory, it would be important to keep to its integrity. This finding freed up the students’ writing.

Several students got a lot of writing help from a mini-lesson on voice. We studied how to write our memoirs in the typical first person and then tried writing them in the third person so they had the sound of fiction, like Tomie De Paola (1973) did in his book *Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs*. We talked about why an author would write a memory in the third person. My students thought writers might choose to write

in third person so they can have the chance to step away from the memory. The “try-it” work that followed sent a handful of students off in a new direction as they decided to stay with the third person voice and eventually publish their memoirs that way.

Jill was especially excited about how her piece sounded with a different voice and how that voice helped her say more about her loss. One section of her piece originally began as:

I still see the picture of his face in the coffin. I knew it was not my grandpa because there was no smile or laughter or love left in his body.

After the try-it in which Jill shifted the voice, her piece read as follows:

She can still see that picture of him lying there in the coffin. She knew it was not her grandpa because there was not any life, or laughter, or love left. This was not him, it could not have been him. She touched his face. It was cold. She understood then that she would never see him again . . .

### The Children Choose Their Own Mentors

I asked the children while they were drafting and studying to choose a mentor author of their own. Some children, like Danny, chose two mentors—one to help him structure his memoir and another, Jerry Spinelli, to help him craft. Once he began using Spinelli as his craft mentor, his writing reached a new level of sophistication. Specifically, Spinelli’s writing showed Danny different crafting techniques such as how to use a combination of short and long sentences to create a certain sound and feeling. This is a small piece of one of his vignettes in progress:

We won the tip. I got the ball and decided I would try to drive it and draw a foul, and that’s exactly what I did. The ref called, “FOUL” and I went to shoot my foul shots. The first shot went in, bonk, bonk, swish. The second shot went in . . . swish. I hustled back on defense.

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So as the children drafted alongside their mentors, we got ready for our publishing date by developing a rubric to hold against our work, first as a checklist and then as an evaluation tool (see the Classroom Connections). We used our study of memoir to make a rubric that matched what we had come to value about this genre. The students used the rubric to organize their drafts and their revisions before they moved on to publication and evaluation.

### My Heroes: The Kids

In the final stages of our memoir study, even Luke, my most reluctant writer, triumphed. When he came into my classroom in September, he let us all know how much he dreaded writing and said he just was not going to do it. Well, Luke became a hero. He was unable to live alongside the rest of us and not catch the memoir bug. He became our inhouse expert at beginnings. When I put his work in progress on the overhead projector, the other children were agape. He wrote:

Soccer. I've always been good at the sport. It's like I was born to be a superstar. It was about ten o'clock and the moon was shining down upon us. We were down by one in the fourth quarter with forty seconds remaining. I knew we had to win, I had to win. The ball was coming right at me. I jumped towards the ball and the player while preparing for pain.

On the last day before winter break we celebrated! The children each shared one of the three pieces they had published. Everyone who joined us was amazed. How had they done it? How did these ten-year-olds craft their writing so eloquently? The kids and I looked at one another and smiled, because we knew the answer. We had spent the last few months immersing ourselves in memoir. We had been reading and talking and living the lives of writers. How could we *not* have written great memoir?

As I mentioned, I had begun the year enthusiastically, both as a teacher and a writer. I had been excited to study memoir with my students and to work on my own writing. But ironically, while my students had found great success in our inquiry, I had spent those months suffering from writer's block. My writing was disjointed and desperately needed attention. I did not have a clue what to make of it.

And then . . . it hit me. I needed to be a student of my own teaching. I needed to go through the process I had just finished leading my students through. I needed to think about the mini-lessons I had taught and about the discussions we had generated from them. I needed to get my memories of my grandmother down on paper—the way she smelled of coriander, the way she spun her hair into her own version of a bun, the way she matched her navy low-heeled pumps to her alligator shirtwaist dress. I needed to write about my tenth birthday and how I insisted on spending it with her, in Chevy Chase, Washington, while the rest of my family traveled to Hawaii. I needed to tell about her visits up to New York and how my sister Marni and I would awake at six in the morning and lie with our afghans beside the couch where she slept, waiting for her to wake up and greet us with her smile. I needed to write about her kitchen, its faded, yellowed wallpaper, and the *Washington Post* that clothed the table on Sunday mornings. I needed to record these memories to help ease the pain of her Alzheimer's. Maybe then I would be able to fill my notebook pages, as my students had filled theirs. From this point on, I dedicated myself to learning as a writer, alongside my students.

As the year progressed, between open cycles of writing, I did just that. We journeyed through an intricate mix of approaches to memoir, including memoir as poetry, memoir as letter writing, and memoir as picture book. It was just incredible.

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By June, the kids had published pieces in each one of these forms, and I had a working draft of my picture book. When we first began in late September, neither the children nor I could have predicted what a yearlong study of just one genre would bring.

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## Classroom Connections/Amy Arnberg

### Memoir Rubric

#### Grading

**3. Meets all criteria**

**2. Meets most criteria**

**1. Meets some criteria**

<b>Elements We Are Looking For</b>	<b>Self</b>	<b>Peer</b>	<b>Teacher (Final Draft)</b>
<b>Voice/Narrator</b> Is your piece in first person or third person singular?			
<b>Dialogue</b> Have you used dialogue correctly?			
<b>Thinking vs. Story</b> Is there a combination of thinking and story? Can the readers see both?			
<b>Mentor Author</b> Have you used the techniques used by your mentor author? Is your mentor author recognizable?			
<b>Beginning</b> Is your beginning powerful? Does it pull the readers in?			
<b>Ending</b> Have you left the readers thinking about the piece? Is your ending powerful?			
<b>Embellishment</b> Have you added details to embellish your memoir in order to make it more interesting to your readers?			
<b>Message</b> Is your message clear? Can a reader get a feel for why you wrote this memoir?			
<b>Title</b> Does your piece give a catchy title that pulls the readers in?			
<b>Craft</b> Have you paid attention to crafting techniques such as circling, repeating line, and description?			
<b>Thread</b> Does this piece connect with your other two vignettes by a common thread?			
<b>Punctuation &amp; Mechanics</b> Have you used appropriate mechanics and punctuation, e.g., periods, commas, question marks, quotation marks, ellipses, exclamation marks?			
<b>Grammar</b> Have you used the appropriate language systems of the English language? Are your verb tenses consistent?			
<b>Structure</b> Does your piece have a beginning, middle, and end? Are the paragraph breaks in appropriate places?			

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# BRIDGING THE THEME

Carolyn Goldfarb began her study by facing her fear of the genre. Fear is an excellent motivation to study something, and Carolyn tackled her fear with a study. She began by finding out what her students knew. She wanted to have an exact picture of what they thought fiction was in order to use this understanding as a beginning definition from which the study might grow. When the students were deeply engaged in the study, Carolyn shared with them from her own reading life in fiction. Her touchstone text was a short story written for adults, but this didn't stop her from using it with her fifth graders. She knew that they would have lots of support in studying this piece of literature and other sophisticated quotes about writing fiction. Carolyn allowed lots of time for the study and she slowed her students down, allowing them to do the real work of fiction writers. Imagine saying, "We're creating a beautiful piece of fiction and we're going to spend the next two weeks just creating the character."

In the end, Carolyn realized what other teachers of genre studies often realize: one study isn't enough for students to truly learn to write well in a genre. Students need to return to the genre after they have had some time to step away, giving it a second, deeper look. She realized that, in a given year, she needed to choose at least one genre study that she and her students would repeat.