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My Memoir **by Michael Milburn** **followed by Q&A**

Memory, the whole lying opera of it, is killing me now.

Barry Hannah

A little more than a year ago I was informed that I was a character in a soon-to-be-completed, contracted-to-be-published, and based on reliable forecasts, widely-to-be-read memoir. Not the main character, but judging from the period covered, which included my ten-year marriage to the author, more than a walk-on. The reason for the advance notice was to invite me to inspect the manuscript for—well, for what was not specified. Accuracy? Probably. But the events in question were more than twenty years old, so I wasn't sure how accuracy could be arbitrated other than by comparing memories. Injury? Possibly, though I couldn't remember doing or saying anything that merited mistreatment. In fact, I recalled little of what I had said or done at that time.

Nor was I interested in being reminded. As far as accuracy was concerned, I had no intention of assembling a sheaf of notes quibbling with facts or interpretations. I knew that to object to my portrayal or, worse, my inclusion in the book so close to its publication date would cause the author serious

difficulties. Also, it hadn't escaped me that the invitation to read the manuscript came unaccompanied by any sort of legal waiver, so I concluded that the portrait must not be too harsh. I declined the offer to preview the book, citing my discomfort with reading about myself. As a result, I remain as ignorant of what was written about that time as I am vague about what actually happened.

Some people might welcome the prospect of appearing in a memoir, but I found nothing to celebrate in the news. Leading the list of drawbacks was the intrusion on my privacy, not to mention that readers would encounter a version of me that is neither the present me nor my own memory of myself. I would feel self-conscious wondering who had met this literary imposter and what they thought of him. It also felt strange being drafted into someone else's writing. As a poet who often writes autobiographically, I have worried about the effect of my disclosures on my family and friends. Now my voluntary self-exposure would be replaced by involuntary exposure, with my life affecting someone else's art and the reaction to it. The author Rafael Yglesias, whose parents used him as a basis for characters in their novels, said, "It's odd to be a minor character in someone else's life since we're always the major character in our lives...it offends the natural narcissism of every individual."

A year after learning of the memoir's existence, I received word of its imminent publication. Once again I passed on the offer of an advance copy. I didn't so much choose to do this as the decision seemed to come pre-installed in me. Reading a book in which I was a character was simply out of the question. I didn't feel any resentment or competitiveness; the whole thing was just unnerving, and involving me further would only make it more unnerving.

Was I overreacting? Politicians and celebrities get written about all the time and must learn early on to desensitize themselves to publicity. Joan Kennedy claimed to check every book on the Kennedys to see if her children were treated fairly. My instinct was the opposite, whether from neurotic self-consciousness or a healthy sense of privacy.

To one friend who e-mailed that he had read a review of the book, knew that I must feel ambivalent about it, and wondered if I wanted to talk, I answered that my plan was to keep my head down and let the wave of attention pass over. Afterward, whenever people asked me about it I changed the subject. The only problem was that by discouraging any mention of the book I couldn't tell who

had read it. For the most part, though, my strategy proved effective. Since I wasn't reading or hearing about the book, I often forgot it was out there. Long periods of ignorance were interrupted by flickers of awareness such as when my sister asked how I was handling all the hype. I admit her question made me slightly paranoid (all *what* hype?), but I'm still glad I wasn't out trying to navigate whatever she meant by that.

A few things people said gave me an idea of what was in the book, or at least in the part that involved me. I asked myself how I would have written about those experiences. As I said, I remember little of that time, its ample drama notwithstanding: the broad plot, a few events and actions, hardly any detail, definitely no quotes. I remember periods of unhappiness, and in terms of specifics that might color a literary portrait, I have a vivid memory of a hand trying to open a locked door—that image, packed with emotion, has stayed with me through the years. Actually, the door was in a hospital, a detail that gives the image more memoirish potential, but even now my first impulse was to omit it here because it seemed like a step outside the privacy zone that I'm eager to protect. There are two other adjectives I could add, but they carry the image so far out of that zone, and beyond my purpose here, that I'll keep them to myself. For all I know, this is all fleshed out in the book anyway.

It may seem curious that in a personal essay about how I coped with my inclusion in a memoir I would ration the information revealed in one detail: a locked door. Maybe it's because details are what trigger writing for me; I'll be walking around and a remembered image will suddenly explode into the subject or even the whole plan for a poem and I'll rush to write it down. I suspect that memoirists aren't prompted to write by details so much as by periods of time, such as their adolescence or the span of a relationship, journey, addiction, or illness. Which would mean that the spark for the memoir I appear in had less to do with me or an image than with the period the author wanted to write about, in which I played a part.

Neither that period nor the locked door has ever ignited any creative tinder in me, though the door has all the characteristics of images that I have turned into poems. Maybe I have steered clear because the subject is too grim or too closely involves other people. This is not to say that the memoirist should feel the same way; those experiences are common ingredients of our two very different and subsequently very separate lives. In this sense I accept my role as a supporting character, while cringing at the idea of my words and actions

being rendered by another writer. Memoirists don't just recreate their own pasts, but those of people whose lives have overlapped with theirs. My unease with my portrayal is compounded by the fact that the period is so indistinct to me.

A character in Tobias Wolff's memoir *This Boy's Life* found himself in a similar situation after that book's publication. In an interview Wolff recalls:

I had a call from a guy that I had lived with for a while when I was in high school....I'd lived with his family for about three months and I had written about my time there with him. And it was pretty gritty stuff. And he called me up from Fairbanks, Alaska, where he was a stock broker, and said he'd heard I'd written a book, and I said, "Yeah," and he said "I heard I'm in it," and I said "Yeah," and he said, "I'd like to see it," so I Fed Ex'd him a copy and waited with some dread for his reaction. And his reaction was of all the reactions I've had the strangest. He said, "Is this really what happened?" And I said, "Well, as near as I can remember," waiting for him to say, "that's not my memory of it." He started trying to get me to take him through it. He had been—he was now in AA—he had been just a stone alcoholic from the time he was fourteen, and when I knew him he was deeply alcoholic. He started drinking right after school let out and was drunk every night, drunk every week-end. And he had no memory of those years at all. It was a blank to him, an absolute blank.

Soon after the scenes from my own past appeared in print, I received an e-mail from a stranger saying how much she admired me in the book, citing in particular my eloquence. "All the best quotes are yours." My first reaction was that there was someone out there pretending to be me. I tried to remember anything I had said during the period covered in the book, eloquent or otherwise, and was unable to reconstruct even the gist of my words. The best I could do was to imagine what I generally might have said based on my vague recollection of what was happening.

In college I read that Jack Kerouac's friends nicknamed him "The Great Rememberer," and decided that if I had more astute friends they would say the same thing about me: I have always prided myself on the quality of my memory, especially in my writing. Yet my appearance as a character in someone's memoir has exposed a significant gap. I can't explain my amnesia for that period; many of the events affected me profoundly. The fact that I have never

written about them suggests that for me and perhaps for other autobiographical writers, memory and inspiration go hand in hand. Memoirists don't necessarily remember more or better than others; they just select their most indelible experiences to write about. If this is true, I feel more confident in the accuracy of how I am portrayed. Maybe the author really did recall my words verbatim, and I spoke as eloquently as my e-mail admirer claims.

Wolff likens the way his book restored his friend's past to the movie *Blade Runner* where the cyborgs are programmed with human memories. I'm not sure I want anyone else's memory to stand in for mine, accurate or not. As a writer I believe in the sanctity of forgetting, in the way the subconscious chooses which experiences to preserve and which to erode or erase. I also know—and my one fan letter confirms—that my memoir self would be subject to judgment by readers no matter how hard the author strove for objectivity. Having long since formed my own judgment about that period, I am loath to see the case reopened.

"It is infuriating for me to see my private experiences and feelings re-invented for me," Ted Hughes wrote in a letter to his friend A. Alvarez about the latter's 1963 memoir, which reported intimate details of Hughes's marriage to Sylvia Plath. Hughes contends that memoirs, as distinct from biographies or histories, compromise veracity for the sake of literature.

You didn't distinguish between two completely different kinds of writing...between a subjective work that was trying to reach an artistic form using a real event as its basis, and a documentary work that professes to present anything except errors—everything very purely told and impersonal—of some event that did really happen and is still an active part of some lives.

I, too, am troubled by the liberties a memoirist might take in "trying to reach an artistic form." My greatest pleasure in reading nonfiction comes from believing that what I am reading happened. Knowing that I am witnessing history, even personal history, gives me a pleasure that vanishes when I suspect the author of "rounding the corners," as John Berendt, the author of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, approvingly put it. For this reason, books like Berendt's and memoirs with abundant dialogue or implausibly precise descriptions put me off. I remember the disillusion I felt at Frank McCourt's liberal use of dialogue in *Angela's Ashes*. Asked how he could remember his childhood conversations,

McCourt hedged, saying, "You remember the essence of it." But in the case of my distant experiences, essence is all I have, and I'm reluctant to see it diluted through someone else's words. In her essay "Fashioning a Text," on the process of turning experience into autobiography, Annie Dillard writes: "At the end of the verbal description you've lost the dream but gained a verbal description."

The dispute over the veracity versus the verisimilitude of memoir is, I imagine, as old as the genre itself. In my case, the battle is fought on two fronts: by the writer trying to extract accuracy from memory and by the subject trying to protect his memory (or lack of it) from the author's words. "I hope each of us owns the facts of his or her own life," Hughes said as he watched his biography turn into myth in the wake of Plath's suicide. Having forgotten so much from the period covered in my memoir, I wonder if my ownership rights have lapsed. I still have no plans to read the book, but I can't deny being curious about the story it tells, fashioned as it was with an artistry that my real life lacked.

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Q&A

Q: So, has this experience changed how you approach your autobiographical poetry? If yes, how? If no, explain why not?

A: I was already pretty sensitive to how people might react to being written about, but this has made me more so. Increasingly, I keep back anything that might make anyone uncomfortable, but that's easier to do on a poem by poem basis than on a memoir by memoir basis.

Q: How much time has now elapsed between finding out you're a character in someone's memoir and the drafting of this essay?

A: About a year from finding out to starting the essay.

Q: Please share with our readers a little about your own writing process.

A: I tend to write first drafts very fast and without re-reading, then put them away for a while. Usually there are one or two more such put-aways during revision. It really helps to get a completely fresh look and some objectivity on the experience as well as the piece.

Q: What's on your summer reading list?

A: I teach high school English and always promise myself not to read for school, but end up sampling lots of books with an eye toward putting them on my syllabus to replace the ones I've gotten sick of teaching.