

# On how to write a memoir



Writer Paul Lisicky discusses what led him from writing fiction to memoir, what it means to apply a size, shape, and structure to your own memories, the creative upside to being a teacher, and why it's still so important (and so hard) to write about AIDS.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3128 words.

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**You started out writing fiction, but your last two books have been memoirs. How did it feel to transition from fiction into writing specifically about your own life?**

Hmm. Did it feel fundamentally different from writing fiction? I think the only way that I can write nonfiction is to imagine myself as building a "speaker" in the work. So even though the work is connected to autobiography, I'm always aware of the speaker as a constructed thing. And if I didn't hold that mask up, I think I'd be terrified. And that mask helps me decide what to put on the page and what to leave off the page. So, as I'm writing a memoir, I'm always aware of each little module having a kind of meaning or purpose or some kind of organizing principle holding it together. So, who knows? Maybe one day I'll go back to fiction, but in my mind, they don't seem as separate as they once did.

In grad school, if anyone had told me that, "In 20 years, you're going to be writing memoir," I would have been horrified because the idea of writing fiction was the promise of so much freedom. It promised an escape from my life. I didn't want to pin myself down and write about myself. That seemed terrifically boring, while the idea of transforming or alchemizing whatever feeling I had into a fictional narrator seemed liberating. But yeah, I think those two impulses have coalesced over the years.

**I don't think people realize how much, even when writing about your own life, you still are creating a narrative framework. You still have to decide where the story begins and ends. It is still essentially crafting a story.**

Absolutely. Even though one might want it to look artless, it isn't. I don't want my work to seem labored or engineered. I want the reader to experience it as if the speaker is talking to them. But there's a lot of work involved in that. There's a lot of craft going on in every sentence.

**Both *Later* and your previous book, *The Narrow Door*, each have a very specific form. How difficult was it to come up with a stylistic conceit that felt right for telling these stories?**

Words and repeated images—that was the fuel that kept the books going. When I started this book, it was actually in past tense and it was fairly linear. I think I must have written about 80 pages, and I thought, "Man, this feels too neat, it feels too measured, it already feels like it's on the way to resolution." That form didn't seem to mirror my experience of those times. So, I put the book aside. I thought, "No one's going to want to read this" and I just let it rest for some time. When I eventually came back to it, I decided to fracture it a bit, to convert it into the present tense, and to give it more immediacy. I felt pretty strongly that I wanted it to seem artful, but I wanted it to have some associated flexibility. So I could tell a straightforward narrative, a linear

narrative, but I could also step aside and write something that had the form and impulse of a poem.

**There is definitely a poetic quality to it, but there is also a remarkable specificity to it as well. I'm curious, during the time you are writing about, did you keep a journal?**

No, I was terrible journaler. I didn't actually start journaling until the internet days, when one could set up a blog. There was something about that particular period, those particular years covered in *Later*, that still feels alive to me. And I think a lot of it simply has to do with having lived in proximity to so much death every day. It just felt like the string of each day was really taut. That feeling stays imprinted on your mind. There's certainly a lot that I don't remember, but there are iconic moments in my memory that feel super indelible to me and I just trusted them to give shape to the work. If you asked me what happened in Provincetown from, you know, 1995 or 1996 on, it would all seem amorphous. My theory now is that once people stopped dying of AIDS with the same regularity, daily life didn't feel the same, survival didn't feel as acute.

**So how did you approach the writing of it?**

I was at an artist's colony for the writing of the first draft. It was at the end of a sabbatical. My father had just died and I thought, "I need to amass some pages to work with because I'm about to go back to work teaching and my creative life is going to be a lot different." And essentially writing this book was sort of also about deconstructing it. It went from something that was much neater and much more conventional to something that felt a little more flexible.

And then, after a couple of years, I had a draft that seemed relatively satisfying to me, but on a certain level it still felt a little bit undernourished. Luckily my editor was terrific for this book and she gave me permission to fill in certain gaps. She'd simply ask questions about certain experiences. At first I was annoyed. *Can't you see? Can't you infer that from x?* But she did a terrific job of letting me know what felt absent or what didn't feel fully realized to her as a reader.

**It's amazing how helpful that is, just having someone ask some really simple questions.**

Right. And I felt like she was really in sync with this book and gave me a kind of permission that I'd never had in any other editorial experiences.

**I tell my poetry students, who are often writing very personal work about their own lives, that the work has to feel true, but it also has to speak to some larger truth that's not just about your life. That also seems true of memoirs.**

Exactly. Yeah. You are giving the reader an opportunity, you are giving the reader a skin to step into. So the reader isn't necessarily looking at you or the speaker, but inhabiting a role you've created for them.

***Later* is very interesting in that it's a kind of self-portrait, but even moreso it's a portrait of a place (Provincetown), a time (the height of the AIDS crisis), and of this very specific feeling around what was happening culturally in that moment. In a way, it's a lot more about those things than it is about you specifically.**

That makes me so happy to hear. One thing that I think was lacking in the early drafts was that there was very little of me in it. I had felt, in light of the extremity of the situation, certain qualms about characterizing myself. But my editor convinced me that the book needed that rudder, because primarily I was interested in evoking the community life of that place, and how that particular community functioned when death intermingled with daily life. Death wasn't a theory, it was around the corner, down the street. You saw it in someone's face when you went to the supermarket or you saw it when someone didn't show up to the gym one day. There was no getting away from it.

**It's kind of shocking how easy it is to forget about how much AIDS infiltrated every part of how we thought about**

ourselves and how we thought about sex, obviously. One of the most resonant things for me was how you describe the ways in which any kind of intimacy became this complicated mental negotiation regarding what was safe, what wasn't, how much you should or shouldn't worry... it was exhausting. I've never seen anyone else capture that feeling in quite the same way.

I'm so glad to hear you say that. I felt such urgency to represent that because I don't think that's been talked about or represented all that much. I don't think that kind of negotiation or anxiety or inquiry was specific to people of my generation or my age. I've talked to other students of mine and I know plenty of people much younger than I am who have experienced that uncertainty too. I'm fascinated by the implications of those kinds of feelings. Like how does that negotiation around intimacy play out in terms of how we think of attachment? I can only ask questions about it, but I know its effects are profound.

Despite there now being so much music and art and general documentation around the AIDS epidemic, it's still such an intensely complicated thing to write about. I've heard lots of debate, even now, around how we talk about AIDS and who gets to tell this story.

Well, for decades it felt like there were these concretized narratives around the subject, and if you didn't stay within a certain channel, a certain way of talking about it, it was a sacrilege. AIDS was often the story of the caregiver or the activist, and there were all sorts of stories that weren't represented at all.

And it seemed like certain people, certain writers, already sort of owned the narrative.

Yes, like "This person has written the definitive thing to say about this." I think for years that inhibited anyone from writing about those early years of the epidemic, because there was still this notion that there was already the definitive movie, the great AIDS novel, the great AIDS play... and now I think we have a keener sense that to think of any such project in that way is doomed, because it leaves out so many voices. People of color, women, people of multiple social classes...

There are so many internal censors that can get in our way when trying to write about our own lives, but how do you negotiate telling your story when it also involves so many actual people—both living and dead—who you want to try and respect/honor?

Well, I'd say it's an ongoing negotiation, honestly. There are a few people in the book who know about their presence in the book and I've been in conversation with them. They are people who are dear to me, and I know they're awaiting the book. But as I'm actually writing the book, it's sort of like I have to put at least some of that anxiety aside. It's like an ecosystem forms and there are a few patterns that help build the ecosystem. And so while you're writing, you have to be attentive to—and this is going to sound super corny—but you have to be attentive to feeding the animals, planting crops, et cetera. I could keep going with that metaphor. It's not always easy when I'm writing because I'm certainly thinking about, "Can I say this?" when it comes to specific observation. But in general, I gave myself more latitude in this book. It never feels easy to me though, even when the book has been out 10 years, I still think about it.

You are a teacher. Do you find that your teaching life has had interesting reverberations into your writing life as well?

Definitely. I don't think of my teaching life as so separate from my writing life. Maybe at an earlier point I did, but the work I teach is the work that I'm interested in finding out more about, it has some connection to my own artistic yearnings at any given point. As a result of that, I rarely teach the same work over and over. I'm curious about writers I've never read before, and I know that I wouldn't be reading that work so deeply if I were simply reading on my own casually. You learn so much about literature and so much about writing through the attempt to translate written work to a group of people and to engage them in the questions of the work. I learn as much from my students, I hope, as I think as they do from me.

I'm curious how teaching writing and literature evolves as our culture changes. Teaching poetry or memoir writing feels much different now than it did..

Even five years ago.

**In some ways it's great, since it feels like people are more in tune with their own stories and more invested in the idea of owning them, but in other ways it's even more complicated.**

Yeah. I think it might be the case that a certain generation of writers feel a responsibility to sync their story up to a narrative that's already out there in the culture and to support certain politics. I'm not really thinking about that myself, but I think that comes with a special intensity for my students in their twenties and early thirties.

**What do you think are some of the most common ways that young writers tend to get in their own way?**

That's a great question. I think it differs for everyone, really. I don't think I have been able to generalize about those obstacles, but they are certainly there. I do sense some of my current students are afraid of saying the wrong thing and then of being held somehow morally accountable in a workshop. I've had students who prefer to work one-on-one as opposed to sharing in a workshop because they need the space to be wrong, or they feel like they still have to learn how to be both expansive and accurate. There can be this feeling while working in a workshop template that the work gets treated as if it's already finished on a certain level, even though the point of a good workshop is to expand the work, pull it apart.

I'm not sure if this is a good answer to your question, but I think the culture of workshops can be useful to some writers and difficult for others. I didn't think as an MFA student that it helped me initially because there was something really energizing about seeing people become interested in my work. Over time I started writing to please various groups and the work started to feel obedient-obedient to more conventional forms—and then it became less my own. And that was the story of the first novel I wrote, which I never published. By the time it was done it was largely connective tissue and I'd sort of bandaged the life out of it.

**Do you have a habitual writing practice or a certain way of working? Or are you someone who can easily adapt to whatever the circumstances are?**

I love being in that place where I'm engaged with the work in a way where it's always on my mind, where I could stand online for coffee and think of a line and then thumb it into my phone. I'm not quite in that place right now because there's lots of distraction, responsibilities. Also, some of the work that I'm most fond of has arisen in situations when I haven't been trying. A lot of my creative life happens around the margins of teaching responsibilities or other daily responsibilities. And my hope is that I accumulate enough of those scraps that when I'm finally fully engaged I can sit down and work on the material in a sustained way and it will all make sense together.

I have mixed feelings about artist residencies. I think I might have worked well at at least one of those places, mostly because I was bored out of my mind. I don't sit still very well anymore. I don't think most of us do. We're all overstimulated creatures, living in the world of a new email or a new Instagram comment every five minutes. It's tough to just be in a room. It's tough not to walk around. It's tough to be tethered to the chair.

I don't feel so much angst about production anymore, because I just don't... also, production is such a capitalist term anyway and I've tried to extract all those metaphors out of my own creative process. I've sort of interrogated those terms in the workshop, too. So many of the phrases that are used in workshop culture come right out of capitalism. "Has this ending been earned?" We poke fun around those terms, but we still find ourselves using them. I think that's ongoing work.

**Are you someone who needs to know what the next thing is going to be? Do you always have a book in the works?**

I do have another book in the works. I've been working on a book about my father for about five years. For a while it was concurrent with *Later*, they were one project. Then I realized it was like the fourth wing of a building or something. And the fourth wing took the building down. So yeah, I like knowing that there's other

work out there. That particular book still hasn't found its shape yet, it's still percolating.

**In terms of writing about real people, both living and dead, I appreciate how thoughtful you are. It's possible to write about difficult things—death, the end of relationships—without burning every bridge to the ground or having some scorched earth mentality about it.**

That's an excellent metaphor, because I thought for a while that there *had* to be scorched earth, but it was exhausting. I was exhausted trying to keep it burned. It's just not necessary, and also our lives are really, really short. There are very few people you're going to meet in your life with whom you get to develop a history with, with whom you develop a deep connection. We're lucky to have those connections when they come, even if they sometimes come to an end.

**Paul Lisicky Recommends:**

– Leonard Cohen

– the beach at the Rockaways

– Joy Williams' 99 Stories of God – It's really amazing. I just taught it a couple of weeks ago and I felt so much life in the room. I think we were able to see, not exactly a through line, but deeper and deeper connection, a deeper conversation from piece to piece than I'd ever been able to articulate within a particular culture. And we were all in awe. It's great to be in a room where people are in awe together.

– Iced green tea

– the Everglades

– Saguaro cactus

– bears, manatees, dolphins, alligators, and mountain lions

Name

Paul Lisicky

Vocation

Writer

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Star Black