

Garrard Conley on how to write about your real life

January 26, 2017 - Gerrard Conley is the author of *Boy Erased*, a memoir that recounts his experience attending a religious conversion therapy program that promised to "cure" him of homosexuality. He currently lives in Brooklyn and teaches writing in NYC.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3452 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Inspiration](#), [Identity](#), [Process](#).

What were the first attempts in trying to figure out how to tell your story? How did you approach it initially?

I feel like there were five failed novels that I wrote that were basically attempts to tell the same story, all of them somehow about control and abuse. One of them was a fantasy novel and with the other I tried to do this very serious, small-town story because I thought that was what you were supposed to do. Each of them collapsed in on themselves because there was no heart to the story I was trying to tell—or I couldn't yet locate where the heart was supposed to be. After a while I was just trying to clinically approach what had happened to me, which also didn't really work. Then I was in this nonfiction workshop and my instructor said said to the whole class, "I want you to tell me what your story is in two or three sentences."

Everyone was going around the room speaking and they already had a story, and I had just gone into this class because I wanted to be a fiction writer. I wasn't prepared at all. When it came time for me to speak, I said, "I want to write a story about conversion therapy, but also how my father is this really incredibly complex man, and I want people to understand the south." When I said that I knew it was true. Certain parameters were drawn around that goal.

Your book tells about your experience with "ex-gay" conversion therapy in a way that I've never seen before. It's deeply sad, but also very empathetic towards your family. It really views the experience from all sides.

One of the things that I encountered in pop culture was that conversion therapy was always a joke. South Park had an episode about it, SNL did something with Ben Affleck. They were funny, I actually laughed at them, but the fiction writer in me wondered, how do you tell this story in a new way that's actually engaging? I had to take out a lot of the humorous cheap shots that would have been easy. It's easy to do that kind of humor in memoirs, but I don't like easy things. (laughs)

I think I wrote the first 20 pages of *Boy Erased* in that same class and they were the backbone of the overall story. Very tightly controlled prose structured around the idea of a family history with all the sin symbols next to everyone's name, which was a real thing that happened to me during my "treatment." You made a family tree and assigned "sin" to the various branches. It almost got published in a magazine that way. I loved the idea of this really unique structure, taking the rules that the camp had created for me and using them against the camp itself, I loved that idea initially.

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actually looks like. You think you understand how love is, here's how love actually is.

When it became a book I had to stretch out the story and show more of the nuances of the characters. It was harder to do one of those interesting avant-garde stories visually, I couldn't really do that with the book. But I did keep the basic idea of it as a kind of guiding principle. There is this Foucault quote that says something along the lines of, "Rules are empty and in themselves violent and un-finalized. The success of history belongs to those who are capable of absorbing the rules and using them against those who are initially opposed to them." That's what I wanted to do.

You think you understand compassion, *this* is what compassion actually looks like. You think you understand how love is, here's how love actually is. Those are the things I was trying to uncover when writing my book. I end *Boy Erased* with the image of my father holding on to my grandfather's hands, even though my grandfather abused him. There's a mystery in that, and I think that mystery is love. I don't understand why people continue to love monsters or people who've done wrong things to them, but I think it's incredibly important to try and understand. Of course there's a fine line between having Stockholm syndrome and actually loving someone. That mystery interests me. That was the spirit that I thought about when I wrote.

Everyone seems to think they have an amazing story to tell—and maybe most people actually do—but memoirists must also answer the question, what is the point? What is to be learned by the telling of this thing that happened to me? I would imagine that sometimes that can be a hard question to answer.

You really have to step outside of the ego for a second and ask, *do I have anything to say?* Because you can have extraordinary events happen to you and still have no insight whatsoever about it. I've had some students who were like that. This is why I always say to my students when I'm teaching memoir—you have to read *so much*. You have to be engaged in literature and philosophy in order to really approach your own memoir from a unique perspective. You can feel when something's dead in the water. There is a lot of bad copycat stuff where people people rely on humor and are maybe trying to emulate someone like Augusten Burroughs. There will be this gay voice telling you a story and it's going to be catty and sort of funny and "oh my god, look how crazy everything is!" No slight to Augusten—he does that really well—but that's generally how a lot of things sell in the publishing industry. Bad emulations. It's not, however, how a good memoir is created. We can't rest the genre on these very old tropes, it just doesn't work. You have to approach it from a new perspective. As long as you can do that and you have a pretty compelling story, you can write almost anything. It's the questions behind the work that are the most important. *What is driving this?* That often takes a long time to figure out.

Does writing the book become a kind of vehicle for understanding what happened?

I was shocked by almost every chapter while I wrote it. As I was working my way through the book, each chapter was increasingly strange and more disturbing. Early on, after I had about 100 pages, my agent suggested that I write a proper proposal for the book, so I did. I had every chapter outlined. But I knew even when I wrote that outline that it was going to change drastically. The events themselves weren't going to change but the inside and the telling of it was going to change. I wrote short stories before I wrote memoir, so I approached each section as if it were a short story that could stand alone. When you added them all together it didn't feel like the same book as when I had first started.

The only way I could approach writing about my own life was to think, "Oh, today I'm going to learn something new about what I feel." That's a strange experience in memoir because sometimes you have to ask yourself whether or not you've been getting carried away with the fictional aspects. I'd have to ask myself, *is this actually true?* Or does it just seem to be thematically fitting together with what was placed at the beginning of the section? Sometimes it was really hard and I'd have to spend days thinking about it. I'd call my mom and say, "Do you

remember me saying this? does this feel like something I would have thought at the time?" So yes, I liked the discovery aspect of writing the book, but I'm very ready to start writing some fiction because it's just more freeing. You are not bound to the facts of your own life.

Being true to those facts is probably much harder than people would expect. I'm assuming there were many times when you had to ask yourself, Did it really happen that way or is that just how I'm remembering it? Our memories can be really subjective.

I'd written about 40 pages of the book and I couldn't go any further because I was so terrified that I was misremembering, so I wrote the disclaimer to the book, which appears at the beginning. It took about two days to write the disclaimer—to really think about what was shifting in terms of what was 100% true and what was being changed. In some instances the chronology was altered and I remember really debating it—things like, did this happen at Christmas or later on? It is OK to say that this happened at Christmas because that makes more sense?

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I finally talked to my mom about it and we both decided it was better thematically to do it that way. I made sure that the disclaimer in the book showed that. I really feel like it's a contract for me. The reader can choose to read the contract or not, but it's there, so my conscience is clear.

That's such a major issue for anybody writing a memoir. How much do you change in the interest of making the book better? How much gets changed in the interest of protecting people? Are you supposed to accept that this is the verbatim truth of exactly what happened? Those are complicated questions.

Today this is what I think, though it'll probably change tomorrow. As long as somebody is a reliable storyteller in that the truths that they're telling cohere—and they aren't fabricating their story in the larger sense—then I'm okay with the book. I'll sometimes think about it like this: this is an intelligent brain that's on the page, and even if the intelligent brain gets slightly muddy at certain points in terms of what day this was or whether or not there was a blue teakettle or a red one, that doesn't matter to me because what I'm really reading for is insight and story. I feel like there are worse sins than losing track of what day it was. We all are terrified of the James Frey stuff. Of being called out as a fraud or a liar. I never felt like I was lying, which was really important for me. I also never felt like I was forcing the reader to trudge through facts, which can happen a lot in memoir.

That's the "first I went here, then I did this, then I said this" sort of thing?

Yes, something that reads like a timeline and not a compelling story. I feel so deeply for students who are submitting drafts like that, because I think that's a good first draft. But I'm also like, "No you don't get it yet, you're not walking us through your life, you're walking us through a story, and that's very different." The process of writing is very artificial. I am suspicious of anyone who tells me, "Oh I just emoted and felt it and it all came flooding back to me." Either you did it wrong or you're lying to me, because it's a very artificial process that involves thinking about an audience, thinking about your family, and whether you admit it or not, thinking about how's everybody going to react.

One of the things I find most striking about your book, which I think is a thing a lot of people found unnerving about it, is that it is remarkably compassionate to people that it would be very easy to villainize. It avoids being vengeful. Being able to step outside of your own experience and understand the motivations of the other people involved—even if their behavior was really destructive—is really hard.

There are two issues at play for why I was able to write the book. One is that I did have love from my family and I could always feel that, even when it had conditions. It still felt like there was love there, which is very lucky because a lot of families, a lot of ex-gay students, don't have that. They are kicked out of their families when it doesn't work, they have to make their own life. I always felt like I had a bit more of a support system. I did the one year of on and off sessions and then just a two-week intensive period, which was significant but not as damaging as, say, five years, which is a lot of people's experience with conversion therapy. Those people don't ever recover, from what I've noticed. There's no bouncing back. There might be a slow, gradual recovery, but you've still lost so much time trying to convince yourself of this destructive way of thinking, you're brain is kind of messed up.

I had a bit of survivor's guilt from that. I sometimes thought, *who am I to tell this story?* But then I realized I could tell it in a unique way because I hadn't been as damaged as some of those other people. I was telling this story almost as a journalist looking at my own life, trying to figure out what motivations were involved. I think it's crazy-making to try to assume that those people were simply evil, especially with the parents that I have and the church that I grew up in. It just didn't make any sense to me to have that wall be there. It would be like cutting off 18 years of my life, which I didn't want to do. They weren't evil. They thought they were doing the right thing.

The fact that they weren't evil is what makes the story so much more tragic.

And more terrifying. Because they do things out of love that are horrible.

Having had the experience of being a fiction writer and then doing this book, how did those processes differ in your mind?

I feel like fiction is pure exhilaration. When I'm writing it, I feel like I am in free-fall and when it comes together I'm just so excited. With memoir I felt pretty secure once I got the book contract. I was like "I can do this!" but only if every day I just sit down and chip away at it. It felt like I was playing—not with dolls, but with raw materials that were already available to me. It was just about finding a window into a scene or an insight that would make it unique in some way. You could do these extended metaphors that go on and on, or you could also be really cheesy and no one's going to say anything about it, which I love. I love being extra capital-R Romantic.

I also loved being able to use all this Biblical language and imagery. If you did that in fiction people would just roll their eyes at you. In this instance I was able to really draw on it because the contrast between what these people were saying and what was happening to me, which was super ugly, was always mixed with this high, rarefied Biblical language. It worked in nonfiction, I don't think it would work in fiction.

Do you think you'll have the compulsion to write about your own life again?

The fiction novel I'm working on now is dealing with a lot of the same issues, but for now I'm going to take a break from nonfiction and hopefully horrible things won't happen to compel me to write another memoir. (laughs) I think a collection of essays would be fun, but who knows.

I know you teach writing classes so maybe this is a problematic question but, can you actually teach someone how to write? To be a good writer?

Back when I taught high school I would have definitely said yes. I think I had to believe that, because kids are so malleable and talent is something you can develop very quickly. I think when I have students that are 30, 35,

or older than me, and they haven't read the staples in the genre that they are trying to work in, the books that are necessary in order to understand the genre—and they don't have other examples of things that I might not be aware of—that's when I begin to question whether or not they can do it. For example, I was teaching in Boston and I got really frustrated because I asked everyone to go around and say what was their perfect example of a memoir, something that they've read in the past three years, something that they could really aim for.

I thought that was a good way to start off a discussion, and two of the people couldn't name a book. They talked about fiction books, which is great, fiction is a great model for memoir, but it isn't the same thing. It was a six-hour workshop and I finally said to them at the end, "If you don't read obsessively in the genre you are actually trying to write, I don't think you can do this. You don't have to read everything, just choose some books that are compelling for you and find out *why* they're compelling. Read like a writer. Read Francine Prose's book on writing, figure it out. Do these steps and come back to me when you're done." I really felt strongly about that, which I think pissed off some people.

It seems like such a basic thing. Wanna learn how writing works? First, read lots of books.

People come to those workshops sometimes only to be validated. I think it's wrong to validate people when they shouldn't be validated. Teaching high school taught me that. It's not beneficial, and there are studies that have been done to show this. It's not helpful to say to someone, "This is great! Perfect work, it's wonderful!" when it isn't. It's more helpful to be like, "Wow, great start, let's look at what we can do to improve this. Let's see what kind of reading list we need to create in order to help you learn more about this genre". That's the way to do it. But if you just validate people, it's just going to perpetuate this commodification of the workshop experience. Workshops are wonderful and it's certainly one of the best things to ever happen to me when I was a young writer, but the proliferation of programs that are just selling affirmation to young writers without painting a truthful picture of the marketplace at all...I think that's just wrong. It's like selling them snake oil.

What are your current reading and writing practices? Or do you have one?

I have a reading practice, something I began when I very first started writing. Every morning I read for at least thirty minutes—fifteen minutes of fiction, fifteen minutes of poetry. Somehow the combination of the two things forces me out of a particular style and into a kind of inventiveness that works when I start doing my own writing.

I also try to read poetry before falling asleep because I think if you read it before sleep—and this may be silly and ritualistic—but I feel like it frees energy somehow. I like it because poetry is so much more obscure for me. Also, I can steal things and people don't know. I'm going to steal that image and just put it in my prose and people will think it's brilliant. Sometimes as a writer you need to warm yourself up and get your gears moving. You often have to work yourself up to reach this certain kind of pitch and I can't just do that naturally. As much as I'd like to sit here and just effortlessly create beautiful sentences, I can't usually do that. That's why reading, more than anything else, helps me get to that place. You read something really smart or very beautiful and it's suddenly like, "Oh, *that's* how you do it."

Recommended by Garrard Conley:

The short stories of N. Hawthorne

99% Invisible podcast

The film Black Narcissus

Reading great literature aloud

Leavesdropping (reading over people's shoulder in the subway)

Name

Garrard Conley

Vocation

Writer

Fact

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