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Theories of Writing

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A Champion's Memoir:

The Unwavering Saliency of Character

This is a memoir ironically about a memoir. When brainstorming what to write, I toyed with a creative work about travel, flirted with a small experience in the kitchen, but I reached the dreaded point of writer's-block, stalling out within a few minutes after a demoralized effort to put pen to paper. So I took a step back: I started to think, what were my favorite memories where I interacted with the idea of memoir writing? This thought took me back to August of 2015.

We lay out on the hot, sandy and arguably trashy beaches of Jersey Shore; the prejudice and preconceptions that taint that previous sentence is a socialized and almost instinctive response, ingrained into my speech by my proudly Manhannanite father. He raised me on the mantra, "New York is the best place on earth," and, "Just saying, there's a toll that we have to pay when we enter this fantastic city but it's free to head back to New Jersey. They want more New Yorkers!"

His discriminatory prejudice to New Jersey was thematic and consistent with one exception: my dad maintained a love for any access to the Atlantic Ocean even if New Jersey was the catalyst. He treasured the harsh rays of the sun beating down on his leathery face, one that hadn't been introduced to the concept of sunscreen and he prized these days for the moments when he could douse his hair with lemon juice. This was my dad's happy place that appealed to

his shallow and old fashioned ideals and brought our family together. Because it was his happy place it was mine.

These beach days I would relax on my wet towel, building small sand castles, burying my dad's Marlboro cigarette-pack underneath the granular rocks in a fruitless effort to change his bad habit. My dad would read to me, his melancholy and melodic voice washing over me just as the waves painted the shore. It was my happy place because of the feeling, the conversation, and the company.

"If you could write a book about yourself, a memoir, what would be the title? What would be the eye-catching way you would synthesize a chronicle about your life?," I asked the crowd.

Today, the Foley family had flocked to Jersey Shore. My sister, a handful of my aunts and uncles, my cousins and my dad and me, lay out, drying off from the cold Atlantic Ocean water. My sisters took the first shot, entitling her grand memoir as, "The Journey of Gillie," an unquestionably rudimentary template that, we all agreed, could've used more spark. Several others in the crowd spitballed some ideas; words such a *reflection*, *experience*, *path* were all thrown around, and there's even a border-line attempt at plagiarism, when my aunt proposes, *Dreams from my Mother*, attempting to pit herself amongst the ranks of former President Barack Obama.

My dad finally spoke up, quashing the debate when the superficial chatter died down. "I'd call my memoir something simple, telling, and determined. I'd entitle the piece something

that reflects my character,” He declared, bulldozing over the mockery with an unwavering confidence, but with a sparkle of sarcasm as he winked at all of us.

“Okay, now what could that be?” I chided him.

“*Champion*,” he said with steady assuredness. The beach is filled with a cacophony of Foley family laughter as we cackled at the absurdity and arrogance of such a title.

I am now 21 and my dad is 65. He still holds himself with the same level of conviction and charisma that he did when he entitled what he would continue to reference as his “inevitably commissioned memoir”, *Champion*.

It has been six years since this glowing addition to the memoir genre has been presented. My dad has lost 30 pounds, since that bright day; his hair has completely fallen out and he can no longer speak with the charm and glimmer that he did six years ago. The tumor in his throat, and the relentless chemotherapy and radiation have changed his character and altered the trajectory of his narrative.

In October of 2020 I was with my dad. He smoked his cigarette on the fire escape outside of his apartment and I slipped through the open window to join him with my morning coffee; this had quickly become our daily ritual.

“Remember how you used to hide my cigarettes from me?,” he asked one morning, a chuckle ringing through his accusation.

I proudly responded, “Of course, I stand by all of those brilliant and creative hiding places.”

“My favorite was behind the picture frames, or maybe in the closet in the living room. I also liked the halfhearted attempt at burying them in the sand on days at the beach. Hidden in plain sight,” he laughed. “This, right here, is my last cigarette. I have cancer, Katy.”

The crisp New York City fall air and the news that my dad had delivered had taken us far from the feeling laying on the beach in New Jersey. Fall came and went and Winter began and my dad started to feel the effects of chemotherapy and radiation, treatment options that he arrogantly told me, wouldn't change him. I responded, "Nothing can take down a champion."

The cancer required the fight of a champion and it took every ounce of his energy, his voice, his confidence doing so. Over the past few months I have seen my fathers narrative shift. He has felt that since he began this battle he lost who he was, he'd probably even rename his memoir. That is not how I see it: His pending memoir is aptly named. To fight like hell, to sacrifice your voice and to struggle for life are the actions of a champion. This is a memoir ironically about a memoir because my dad's character is the thread that sews the stories of days at the beach to those in hospital rooms. His memoir can't tell all of his stories, nor should it try to, but it can capture the unwavering saliency of his character.

Writer's Commentary

The introduction of my piece might feel a bit out of place and strike some consumers as an irrelevant addition when reading the rest of my creative work. It is not often that you read a creative work that's starting point is a reflective note from the author explaining how they approached their craft. I thought about moving the introduction here, to the Writer's Commentary section, however I opted to keep it in my work for the simple fact that I think it underscores how memoirs should be as dynamic as the person that they are immortalizing through creative exploration. I struggled with choosing what to write about initially because I

held a misconception that a memoir needed to investigate an important event or experience of a person's life; I thought the typical memoir tackled a pivotal event that defines a person. Here, I wanted to challenge this idea, underscoring that a person's character can equally shape their experiences and I wanted to do so by underscoring salient traits of a person's identity. My focus was on two diametrically opposite experiences that my father's salient identity challenged; focusing on his experiences in his happy place, on the beach with family, and his battle with cancer. With these two explorations, I highlighted how my dad's character was the driving force to the outcomes of these interactions. For me character is the thread and the central narrative of a memoir rather than the typical focus of events.

I haven't had many opportunities to write creatively. Most of my writing is for academic or career purposes and therefore, I have only written one other creative piece before. Writing creatively was engaging and came easily to me after the initial struggles with choosing a focus; when I sat down to write this piece and when I had a concrete idea in mind, it felt similar to reading a "page-turner," and I couldn't seem to pause or take breaks. I did revise and add more colorful language after I was done with my first draft, however this was different than my typical approach to writing. Normally, I edit as I write. I comb over each sentence throughout the initial drafting stage, double and triple-checking that my point has come across. Writing creatively was like painting, where I could only see and appreciate the complete image once everything was complete.

I was inspired by the Brevity short-stories that we read for class. The succinct texts were engaging and I especially enjoyed how the focus on minute details created such grabbing themes. I would like to engage in the practice of creative writing more which I think would be a tangible personal project if I were to continue to write in shorter forms, similar to the Brevity works. The

process was fun, reflective and gave me a shrewd appreciation for the focus of my work, my father, and his enigmatic personality.