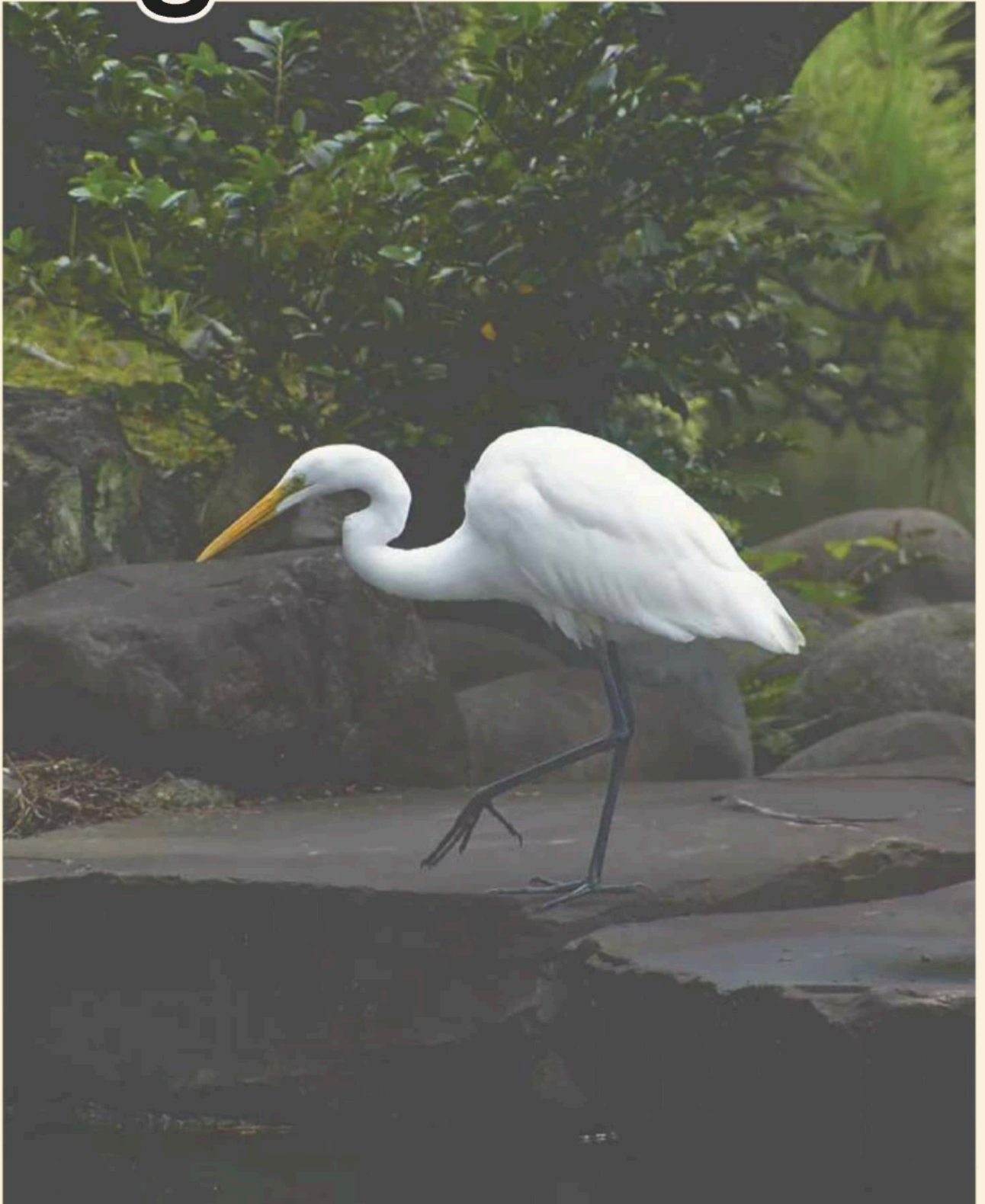




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Memory and Anticipation Can Sustain Us

by Diana Raab, PhD

As a memoir writer and poet who often uses personal experiences to inspire my writing, I spend a great deal of time contemplating the merging of memory and imagination. I wonder how accurate are our memories and how they affect our anticipation about the future.

The writing of a memoir can become a competition between imagination and memory. The memoirist finds themselves somewhere between the domain of a historian and that of a novelist. To some extent, every memoir writer who chronicles a life in search of truths is frustrated by the lack of complete memories and has to flesh out the gaps with dramatic and emotional details.

For the most part, memoirists write not only to share what they know about their past, but also to discover what they do not know or understand. Sometimes revisiting the past can reveal issues that for years have been simmering beneath the surface. Often the writer finds that some memories from childhood becomes blurry. When these images are blurry, there is a temptation to embroider memory with fictive details. The memoir writer's dilemma involves the balancing of memory and imagination.

During my MFA in Writing, I studied two well-known literary memoirs, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* by Mary McCarthy and *One Writer's Beginnings* by Eudora Welty, both and illustrate this balancing act. Much of the literary criticism relating to these memoirs focuses on

McCarthy's and Welty's use of imagination to flesh out events which they had difficulty recalling. As fiction writers, Eudora Welty and Mary McCarthy have the skills necessary to dramatize elements of their past, and experienced memoir writers also develop these skills.

In discussing the interplay of memory and imagination, it's important to first consider how we remember. For the most part, memories are stored in the form of images. As time goes on, these images may become distorted or blurred. Some memories dissipate, while others become magnified.

In her essay, "Memory and Imagination," memoirist Patricia Hampl speaks of how our personal history becomes logged in our memory. She uses the metaphor of flashing images projected onto a wall to illustrate how memory images appear in our minds. Hampl states that when we "see" these images, they may not make sense, or may be confusing. She believes that is why first drafts of memoirs are often inaccurate. The memoirist's job, says Hampl, is to organize these jumbled images by weaving them into a story.

Both McCarthy and Welty admit to having forgotten certain events from their childhoods, and both women, but particularly McCarthy, write about what they remember and do not remember. What sets these two writers apart is their upbringings, personalities, intent, and how they handle not remembering during the process of writing their memoir.

In comparing the tone of both memoirs, it would be fair to say that Welty's is more reflective and meditative, while McCarthy's is more intimate and confessional, in that she is more revelatory of negative and embarrassing events or feelings which are usually kept private.

Like Welty, McCarthy also reflects on certain events in her life and how they impacted her emotionally. Unlike Welty, however, McCarthy reflects upon the scars of her past and their negative effect on her adulthood. Most of McCarthy's reflecting is done in her last chapter, "Ask Me No Questions." During her Grandmother Preston's illness and subsequent death in this chapter, McCarthy begins to contemplate the circumstances of her orphanhood and her family, in context of her entire life.

Even though Welty had parents with whom to validate her memories, she admits forgetting certain events. This may also have to do with her writing the memoir much later in life, which is a common occurrence with memoir writers. Some events, however, Welty may have chosen to omit because she did not want to complicate the story with irrelevant or unrelated issues or happenings.

For the most part, writers set out to write truthful memoirs, but often, such as in McCarthy's case, it does not take long before they realize the unreliability of their own memories. McCarthy gets lost in a labyrinth of confusing images from her past. She is unsure about the demarcations between her memory, her imagination, and her habitual childhood lying. She is not even sure if there is a clear boundary.

Memoir writers often alternate between the voice of the child and the voice of the adult narrator. Tristine Rainer in her book *Your Life as Story*, calls this “the composite voice of autobiographic writing” (129). This voice is a combination of the younger self as the protagonist from the past, and the older self, as narrator in the present. Rainer explains that it is this combination that gives the memoir its dramatic tension.

While reading a narrative with both these voices, one may get the notion that the writer is being torn between the two worlds—the child and the adult. The use of this composite voice further contributes to the dilemma of how to balance fact and imagination, since the adult narrator often revises the memories of the child protagonist. The conflict between a naïve and uncomplicated view of history and an adult tendency to revise or interpret a memory adds another element of complexity to the imagination-versus-fact dilemma.

The time in life when a memoir is written may affect what the writer remembers. McCarthy published her memoir at the age of forty-five. She makes it clear that her research was gathered slowly and compiled from her various articles in magazines. Her motive in writing the commentaries before each chapter is to set the record straight, because many people took the original articles to be fiction. Welty, on the other hand, was quite a bit older when she wrote her memoir.

How the reader perceives fictionalization and the interplay between memory and imagination, depends upon her definition of memoir and what it sets out to do. If a memoir is supposed to be a historical chronology of a writer’s life, then making up details or incorporating fiction techniques

is considered unacceptable. However, if a memoirist claims a poetic license and the memoir is presented as an interpretation of her life, or acts as a revision of history, then fabrication is no longer lying, but rather it is viewed as creative non-fiction.

This poses the question about where the line is drawn between fiction and non-fiction, between memory and imagination, and if there is even a line. For the most part, readers expect certain truths from a memoir. Some readers accept what they read, while others may question the reliability of certain events. Often, the memoir is braided with fiction and non-fiction in such a way that the reader gets wrapped up in the story and cares not to question what is true and what is fictionalized. “

When the memoirist sets out to write a memoir she quickly realizes that memoir writing is not merely a transcription of her life, but, is a fictionalized version, sprinkled with reflection and perspective, fleshing out the gaps. In essence, the memoirist must be seen as an interpreter and creator, as well as a preserver of history.

In studying the interplay of memory and imagination, this writer believes that in order to write a compelling memoir, a balance must be struck between fiction and non-fiction. Nowhere is it written that memoirs are fact; memoirs ought to be about truth, which is often the by-product of memory mixed with imagination.