

MEMOIR VS. AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION(ABF)

*While both employ drama, conflict, scenes, dialogue and focus and characters; can be formal/informal, short or long, didactic or non-didactic, experimental or traditional, linear/nonlinear, humorous or serious, the characteristics below strike me as important differences between the two forms.

Memoir

1. True to facts, mostly
2. Uses entire incident/story
3. Real names of participants
4. Uses all actual participants
5. Protagonist is self, first person
6. Point of view is self
7. Story may or may not be resolved
8. May be anticlimactic, episodic
9. More exposition, essay-like
10. Self-disclosing
11. Insight/theme often clarified
12. Discloses truth
13. More concerned w/ exploration of identity

Autobiographical Fiction

1. Alters facts significantly
2. Uses only pieces of story
3. Makes up new names, alters gender
4. Creates composites from real life as well as entirely fictional people
5. Protagonist not self—1st, 3rd person
6. Point of view wide open
7. Resolution achieved by ending
8. Cause/effect arc builds to a climax
9. Less exposition; dramatic action
10. Self-disguising
11. Insight implied, never stated
12. Uses truth to arrive at Truth
13. More concerned w/ story

EXERCISE:

MEMOIR OR AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION?

*It's not unusual for a writer to be torn between writing a nonfictional memoir, trying hard to stick to the truth of what really happened, versus autobiographical fiction, basing a short story on true incidents but making up whatever is necessary to arrive at a story's larger, though not literal, truth. According to Robin Hemley, in *Turning Life Into Fiction*, it's more a matter of attitude than anything else. The exercise below might help you decide whether you're temperamentally or artistically more suited to memoir or autobiographical fiction, at least for a particular subject.

- I. Briefly summarize an intense, interesting (traumatic, etc.) incident from childhood, only using the bare-bone facts (for example, "When I'd barely learned to walk, I drank a cup-full of Clorox and my dad saved me. Though I don't remember it, my mom said it was a sweltering August day, and, while doing laundry in the basement, she had her back turned. I must've thought the glass held water and drank it before she could stop me. When she screamed at my dad, sleeping upstairs, he flew down, picked me up and rushed me to the hospital where my stomach was pumped.")
- II. Write a brief scene in which the incident you described above (or an important part of it) happens in real time. Make it vivid and dramatic, using lots of sensory details and action, maybe even dialogue. Conclude with an insight, explaining the significance of the event to you today. Do your best to avoid sentimentality and/or cliché.
- III. Write the same scene as in II, but introduce one important fictional event/detail that will dramatically alter the insight. This time, don't state the insight or theme. Let the story's events speak for themselves. (For instance, if I used my example from I above, I could omit the dad, instead dramatizing what the mom did or did not do to save the child from poisoning.)