



Nonfiction Fest 2024
Write the Memoir You Want to Write
With Anna Qu

One of the most common trends I'm seeing in working with students on long form/ books, in particular memoir, is the misalignment of what they want to write vs the book they have on the page. As a human with a life, you're always growing, changing, and so will your memoir, especially if you walk away from it for a few months or a year. I created this lesson in hopes of guiding students and providing new energy and insight for your book project.

STORY:

"A good memoir requires two elements—one of art, the other of craft. The first element is integrity of intension. Memoir is how we try to make sense of who we are, who we once were, and what values and heritage shaped us" – *Inventing the Truth*, William Zinsser

CHARACTER:

"The Subject of Your Memoir Cannot be "You." Not you all alone, anyway. A memoir must be about you and something--and that something should usually be your relationship to something intrinsically interesting and bigger than you. With a memoir, until you have found a genuine subject, you will have nothing at all--because "you" are not a subject. Neither are "you" a story. You are a person. As you shape your story and subject, you'll find that "you"--the amorphous, endlessly multifaceted, imperfectly perceived, living, changing, real you--will start taking shape on the page as a recognizable yet quite distinct, even faintly alien persona: a "you" for the page, a "you" that you must both find and make up in exactly the same way you invented your subject and your story." -- *The Modern Library Writer's Workshop*, Stephen Koch

First, before we get too far into discussing conflict, I want to discuss the difference between **tension** and **conflict**. They are not to be used interchangeably. Conflict is not the same as tension or suspense. Tension rises to conflict. Think of a physical altercation or a bar fight. Before it becomes external, it's internal. There's something brewing under the surface. Maybe they have history. Then someone looks at someone the wrong way and that tension moves into conflict once words and fists

are exchanged. Once the tension becomes external, once someone takes action, we move into conflict

Seven (7) Types of Conflicts:

1. Narrator vs Another Character/s

This is the most common conflict, and you'll most likely see this in your work. Your narrator and their conflict with another person/s. For example, your narrator's relationship with their mother, father, other sibling, a best friend, etc.

- *Educated* by Tara Westover: narrator vs her father
- *Bastard Out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison: narrator vs her mother
- *Fierce Attachments* by Vivian Gornick: narrator vs her mother

2. Narrator vs Society

Society: a community, nation, or broad grouping of people having common traditions, institutions, and collective activities and interests. Institutional and social systems that may impact your narrator, including but not limited to identity, class, race, or culture.

What are you saying about these systems? What are you saying about existing in these systems? And more importantly, how have these systems affected your narrator? Consider education, community, corporate work, government related organizations, dealing with justice.

- *Educated* is another good example here: narrator vs education
- Jamaica Kincaid *Girl* or *A Small Place*: narrator vs colonialism.
- The essay the "Fourth State of Matter" by JoAnn Beard which is about one of the first college shootings. An event that is beyond the control of man.
- Thi Bui's graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do*, being a refugee from Vietnam and resettling in America: narrator vs war
- Carmen Maria Machado *In the Dreamhouse*: narrator vs LGBTQ+
- Erika Krouse' *Tell Me Everything*: narrator vs university's football program

3. Narrator vs Nature

Writing about the natural environment encompasses a wide variety of works, ranging from those that place primary emphasis on natural history facts (such as field guides) to those in which philosophical interpretation predominate. It includes natural history essays, poetry, essays of solitude or escape, as well as travel and adventure writing.

- Annie Dillard's essay "Living Like a Weasel."
- *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* by Cheryl Strayed, which opens with her tossing her sneakers on a six month hike. Immediately, the book opens with narrator vs nature.

- Other examples of modern authors: Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Burroughs and Mary Oliver

4. Narrator vs Technology

Currently, technology's only constant is its evolution. Technology includes computer science, AI, ChatGPT, as well as the traditional science fiction genre. This is perhaps one of the fastest growing types of conflicts.

- Vikram Chandra's *Geek Sublime: The Beauty of Code, The Code of Beauty*: character searches for the connection between art and technology, part memoir and part technology story
- Vauhini Vara's *The Immortal King Rao*
- Dave Egger's *The Circle*
- Short stories and fiction by Ted Chiang

5. Narrator vs Supernatural or the Speculative

Indigenous writing, writing by writers of color that focus on mythology, ghosts, female intuition/ Knowing.

- *Heart Berries* by Teresa Marie Mailhot
- *Spirit Run: A 6,000-Mile Marathon Through North America's Stolen Land* by Noé Alvarez
- *The Man Who Move Clouds* by Ingrid Rojas Contreras
- Genre books: science fiction, dystopian, fantasy. Ie. Octavia Butler's work

6. Narrator vs Fate

God, spirituality, religion, or journey of faith.

- Glennon Doyle's *Untamed*
- *Hurry Down Sunshine* by Michael Greenburg
- *Heart Radical: A Search for Language, Love, and Longing* by Anne Liu Kellor
- *The Man Who Move Clouds* by Ingrid Rojas Contreras

7. Narrator vs Self

The self can include body issues, mental illness, identity, and recovery.

- *Eat Pray Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert
- Grace Cho's memoir *Tastes Like War*
- *Heavy* by Kiese Laymon: narrator vs body image/ weight
- Leslie Heywood's *Pretty Good for a Girl*: narrator vs body limits/ sport memoir
- *Man Who Move Clouds* by Ingrid Rojas Contreras

- Nick Flynn's *Ticking Is the Bomb*: character vs addiction/self
- *Hurry Down Sunshine* by Michael Greenburg: character vs mental illness

Looking to the future/trends:

Narrator vs Collective Voice

- Writing into the collective “we” or “they.”
Ie. Lan Samantha Chang's *The Family Chao*

ROADMAPS:

What is a roadmap?

A visual way to communicate strategy or a project's goal. In this case, it's your memoir or book.

Why roadmapping is necessary?

- Know where you're going, “I've taken the road less traveled and now I'm lost.”
- Save yourself time in the book project
- Cohesion from start to finish: Reaching the goals you set instead of ending somewhere unexpected after years of writing
- Finding your target: what is this book really about?

There are many ways to roadmap your project:

- Outlining is the most common way
- Visually drawing graphs: story arc and character arcs:



