



Weathered Girl
An Exploration of Scribing The Indescribable And
Healing Through First Person Childhood Trauma Narratives

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April 2016

This project was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Graduate Liberal Studies Program in the Graduate School of Duke University.

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Abstract

This project examines autobiographical writing and the ways in which some authors use memoir as a vehicle to convey and communicate childhood trauma. Mary Anna King's *Bastards*, Dorothy Allison's *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure* and Wendy Lawless' *Chanel Bonfire* are the texts I use to explore how writers, through the particular alchemy of truth and literature, transform heartrending stories into something meaningful for the rest of us.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Introduction	1
The Power of Memoir	6
The Stories of Others	15
<i>Two Or Three Things I Know/Allison</i>	16
<i>Chanel Bonfire/Lawless</i>	20
<i>Bastards/King</i>	26
My Stories	30
<i>Storm Damage</i>	32
<i>In The Clouds</i>	34
<i>Downburst Squall</i>	37
Conclusion	41
Works Cited	46

"No one can write a man's life except himself."

- Rousseau

Introduction

My elementary school years were spent living in a portion of the United States that could experience sudden violent and noisy thunderstorms with terrifying lightning and thunderous claps. At other times there were storms that, although far more dangerous in their outcome, were marked more by what they did not look or sound like than what was evident to eye or ear. When the wind became still and the sky turned green you knew to get your behind down into the basement and to wait until the citywide tornado sirens screeched the all-clear. In retrospect, it seems fitting that many of my earliest childhood memories should have this deceptive and unpredictable weather pattern as their background.

Because I grew up in a home where the atmosphere was as capricious as a Midwestern summer storm, my *modus operandi* from a very young age was one of constant vigilance for signs, even deceptive and quiet indications, of turbulence in the atmosphere. I desperately sought to cultivate a sense of how to behave that would best ensure my survival, trying to become a human barometer so as to predict which way the winds were blowing on any given day. As a result I became adept at ameliorating my actions to reflect or deflect the actions of my parents.

Lacking a secure connection with the adults in my home, I became less and less able to maintain an opinion. I did not want to make myself stand out in any way. While this was a reasonably successful survival mechanism, the consequence was that I became a virtual clean slate on a near daily basis. Consequently, I grew to adulthood with very few personal notes in my long-term mental storage and a resulting fundamental disconnect with the concept of The Self. This disengagement was so strong that looking in a mirror for the majority of my life has been an inconceivable task. I saw the mirror as an unreliable reflection, an arbiter of false information. I was convinced that if I peered into a looking glass I would either, like a vampire, discover that I wasn't there; or see someone that I could not recognize without another person shaping the image. And so it was with wonderment that, in recent years, I began reading memoirs written by adult women who could not only recall scenes of their childhood vividly, but were also brave enough to stare deeply in the mirror and to put the stories of their fractured homes and families out there into the greater world.

Having transitioned into a bill-paying, home-owning, child-having adult after living through a childhood that didn't always contain bill-paying, home-owning, or intentional child-having adults, I have found great solace in reading first person narrative accounts by women who had similarly woolly journeys. When I first read about Andrea Ashworth's early life in her memoir, *Once in a House on Fire*, I felt as if I was reading a description of the gummy residue of my own trauma-laced childhood. Having survived a childhood that was immersed in poverty and domestic violence she recalls,

As I grew up, I began to realize that what went on in my family was not normal but quite horrific. Seeing this, I was struck dumb by a deep sense of shame. Domestic abuse was not, in the 70s and 80s, something to be discussed in public. I had never even heard of terms such as neglect or abuse...my mother and sisters and I suffered a sense of guilt about what was done to us, as if we deserved it. Like many victims, we were caught in a web of silence, woven from sticky strands of guilt and fear (Ashworth quoted in Douglas 81).

As someone whose earliest childhood memories still, at age 39, produce small, hot drops of sweat on top of my lips, I know the power of the stories that we tell ourselves, the stories that persist in silence well past their tell-by dates. It began to feel imperative to me, emboldened by these works I admired and connected with so deeply, to attempt the telling of my own. It was time to try and write. And when I became aware that the only way to write a memoir was to tolerate and practice sitting within a long-ago moment, a memory, a scent, a feeling, and letting it wash over me, I was, to put it mildly, puzzled as to how these women did this. Grasping for insight into the process of good memoir-craft, I had to wonder why those who lived through trauma would willingly marinate in those painful moments? Curiously then, I began to collect lines of first person narrative prose that I found exceptionally moving. I intended to try and dissect how it is that these noteworthy works of reality-based first person storytelling manage to tell complex and thorny tales while remaining relatable and immensely readable -- and frankly, tolerable for the author. Specifically, I wanted to look at how the writing worked on me, not just as a survivor of childhood trauma but as

a critical reader and an aspiring writer who has found that remembering my own story, putting the past onto paper, allows for a calmer version of the present. I have learned that do deal with my trauma, the trauma that still clings from an unstable and unsafe home environment and the verbal and physical abuse that followed this, I needed to try and revisit the past.

For a long time I was a middle school teacher, and it was in that capacity that I came across a concept that comes into play when working with young people to help find or identify the types of books they might enjoy. A book that sparks a reader's love of reading for the first time is a Home Run Book. It was the right pitch and the right time with the right preparations and it knocks reading out of the park, "not one's first reading experience, but one's first positive reading experience, the love that sets you on the reading path (Sprecken, Kim, and Krashen 9). The nice thing about the Home Run Book concept is that it works for adults too; when an author's words engage and excite enough to lead to a new path, it is a Home Run Book. I mention this because while I have had the benefit of wonderful talk-based counseling over the years, it wasn't until I started reading the memoirs of other women who suffered unstable and often dangerous childhoods that I could begin to feel something akin to a healing scab forming over the wounds of my heart. These were my new Home Run Books.

The first in this category, for me, was Dorothy Allison's *Two Or Three Things I Know For Sure*. It was while reading this book that I suddenly found myself back in 1982 feeling the shag of the beige carpet in my bedroom where I sat unnoticed on the

morning I first learned to tie my own shoes; recalling in vivid detail the deep emerald green of the living room wall paper in the house I lived in when my parents got divorced. Without a doubt, it wasn't until my immersion into the memoirs by other childhood trauma survivors that I was able to summon up my own stories, such as just how small I felt when I stood outside the blood-red brick hospital where my mom was admitted for depression or how the ping and the pop of a small white golf ball I'd found in the parking lot kept me company during visits to her. Suddenly I was recalling that my reward for going with my little sister to visit our Catholic nun-child therapist, Sister Michaelleene, had been a bag of Andy Capp's Hot Fries; the yellow and red dye stained my fingers the same colors as the crayons I had used the night before to draw pictures of our home life. Reading these new Home Run Books, I suddenly was able to again taste the dripping cone of stale pink bubble gum ice cream I would order when I was told by my parents to take my sister (across five lanes of fast and heavy traffic) to go get ice cream so they could fight and then nakedly make up. It was as if reading these memoirs helped me to fashion a key to unlock my personal memory cupboard, locked up tight so very long ago.

The Power of Memoirs

There are those who will argue that the current literary atmosphere is saturated with navel-gazing memoirs. While this may be true, there are also a number of autobiographical first person narratives that have been a literary gift to all and a tool to some of us to help combat pain. Reading these books that featured unconscionable parenting, I realized I finally had a frame through which I could peer at my past without fearing the repercussions of the *Then* creeping into the *Now*.

For many reasons I had little to no interest in or access to most of my childhood memories prior to reading Dorothy Allison's *Two Or Three Things I Know For Sure*. Something about reading her starkly matter-of-fact recollections of being raped as a child let loose something inside of me. Long suppressed memories of my upbringing, a time when I often felt very, very small, suddenly came flooding back. The particular way this book hit my solar plexus reminded me of the way Anne Lamott discussed the first time she read *Catcher in the Rye* and "knew what it was like to have someone speak for me, one lonely isolated social animal finally making contact" (Lamott xix).

Reading these remarkable — and factually dreadful — works of autobiographical writing infected me. I suddenly found a desire to see if sloughing off

memories onto the page would also help me to find a kind of victory over a powerless time that still clung to my psyche. And to my surprise, putting my version of traumatic times during my childhood down on paper did feel healing. It was as if the writing helped me to recall scenes I hadn't seen for thirty years, conjuring up long lost memories. Remembering how I felt then (and at times now) has been empowering. The lens of memoir writing allowed me to meditate on thoughts I dared not peek at previously. I have found that by putting the stories down on paper, I am more in a mindset to reform and calm old and distracting habits of hyper-vigilance, to quell the relentless watching for storm clouds on any and all horizons.

As a child my panacea for the pain at home was to immerse myself into the picture-perfect lives of children on television. I loved nothing more than to lie on the floor with my chin in my palms, face upturned to watch Jerry Mathers as "The Beaver". I was enchanted by the everyday normalcy of his routine, the way he would just pick up his after school snack from the Formica-flecked table on which June had carefully cut off the crusts from his white bread sandwiches. This peephole into another way of life enraptured me; I would marvel at how, when "The Beave" got into trouble, Ward would patiently sit and discuss the wrongs and the rights of his choices and how he should face the inevitable consequences. I would soak up a father's wisdom as if I was that piece of Wonder Bread onto which The Beaver had spilled his whole milk. The perspective, the patience and the presence of parents in this household were enchanting to me; I lapped it up like a feral kitten finding a saucer of milk. As a child

born in the late 1970s I was watching the Cleaver family's interactions in reruns, which only served to make them more impactful in my mind as I assumed that if something was worth reshowing, it must be just as important to others as it felt to me.

Advancing into adulthood with the itchy and easily picked off scabs of childhood still on your knees can make you feel powerless at times. Writing life stories helps to create self-justification, providing, as it does, "some sort of primal verification: you are in print, therefore you exist" (Lamott xiv). What appeals to me about the texts I have chosen to analyze is that each of the women could have easily crumbled under the weight of the stress of their childhoods, but instead chose to craft real stories that reflect their individual worth.

Making sense of our world, finding out who we are, and reflecting upon who we once were, all require a willingness to be vulnerable, to risk pain. Allowing the *Past* to overlap with the *Now* can be exceptionally terrifying when the past was unstable. In order to tell stories that people will be willing to read, one must first seek to understand what still hurts. Memoir imaginatively renders our evolving selves and critically evaluates how memory, time, history, culture, and myth are expressed within our individual lives (Larson xii), allowing for a mind-on-mind communication of intimate and painful moments in a space that mitigates the possibility of personal interaction. Events that caused pain long ago can be transmitted from the author to the reader in a way that allows each participant to inhabit the author's long-ago world without having to stand side by side. Exploring, within the confines of one's own writing, what still niggles at

you allows a memoirist to understand something as amorphous but universal as fluidity within a family. The grace of harnessing the pain of your childhood and wrestling it into comprehensible prose allows for a shift inside of yourself. Writing down your story helps to put the trauma you endured as a child into the rear view mirror. In my attempts to find just the right metaphor to describe the process of creating narrative cohesion out of childhood chaos, I trip and stumble all over the image I'm trying to scribe.

The meeting of one's own past self with the author's present self is the connection that Patricia Hempel speaks of when she states, "Here memory impulsively reaches out its arm and embraces imagination, as the innate urge to locate personal truth always [does]" (265). Attempting recollection as resolution happens in the act of writing one's own version of lived experience. To do this well, you must work to transfer onto the page the emotions that these memories still hold. Ownership over one's own self and one's story helps to cultivate pride where there hadn't been any before.

Dorothy Allison notes, "Not until I began to fashion stories on the page did I sort it all out, see where the lie ended and a broken life remained. Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is that change when it comes cracks everything open" (Allison 48, 39). It also cultivates liberty. Memoirist and survivor of a traumatic childhood

Andrea Ashworth describes the urgency and necessity of writing her story as nothing less than critical in her ability to be free to proceed in life.

I had to capture that spooky stuff, give it a good home on paper, in order to keep it from overshadowing my life...Looking back was the only way for me to move

truly, freely, forward...I discovered a new freedom from all the old fears of my childhood. (Ashworth quoted in Douglas 78)

At least one academic has classified memoirs of traumatic childhoods as writing against their trauma (Douglas 78). I disagree. In my case it was more of writing *into* the memories, leaning as heavily into memories of often being told to “fuck off!” when I sought my father’s attention as I did into more pleasant memories of my childhood. And it was puzzling; how could I, as I marinated in this mess of memories, simultaneously feel like crouching with my hands over my ears *and* have a memory of an early summer evening when my bike coasted down a hill, feeling the air on my skin, the wind in my hair and the new-found self-importance of turning ten, of becoming “double digits” old? I was thoroughly confused by the presence of such a sweet memory popping into my head when I had forced myself to sit with the painful memories that surrounded it. Why was my ten-year-old-self trying to ride alongside my nearly forty-year-old self? And then, I found clarity in Dorothy Allison’s words, “I am one woman but I carry in my body all the stories I have ever been told” (Allison 38). She illuminated for me what was obscured before: that although we are individuals with our own perceptions of events, we hold also a concatenation our own experiences and of all that we have borne witness to, and of all of the tales we have been told.

As someone who has spent the majority of my life believing that the only “valuable” families are those that looked and acted like the Cleavers, it was with a large sigh of relief that I read the memoirs of Wendy Lawless, Dorothy Allison and Mary Anna

King. I would guess that any survivor of a similarly traumatic childhood would feel the same. Part of what makes this particular set of childhood trauma survivors great memoirists is how well they create dynamic tension between who they are now, as adult women writing these stories, and who they were when set afloat on the unstable raft of their parents' making.

Because memoir is the marriage of reflection, meditation and purging of one's lived experience, this work can be very challenging to read. Part of why we react with revulsion to these traumas being inflicted upon these children is the modern Western notion that families are meant to be a bastion of mutual support and community. It is important, therefore, to read memoirs written by women who recount their traumatic adolescence in order to combat the isomorphic Cleaver representation of family. It is necessary for all families to be represented in literature. In order to heal by reading and writing we must provide examples of all types of lived experience.

So, inspired by these three memoirs, I began allowing myself to sit within the memories that I had locked down so long ago. I started by peering ever so cautiously around the bend and eyeing the cupboard of memory tucked in the corner. While working to share the sentiment and spell out the details of a traumatic scene from my childhood, it was with bewilderment that I began to notice the dissipation of the emotional hold from long-ago events, a lessening of the tendrils' hold. It was in the act of turning these events over, focusing on the details in order to coherently share these trials, that I was able to relive them in a way. Possessing adult perspective creates the

space between then and now -- allowing the child version of me to finally walk out of the rooms where the trauma occurred.

Writing a memoir can provide authorship of a childhood and help to “frame and heal the scars from growing up” (Marler 86). This curative process of writing is supported by academic studies conducted by James Pennebaker of the University of Texas at Austin (van der Kolk 239), in which he had undergraduate students write about genuine experiences that felt either traumatic or stressful to them. His research studies the effect that expressing (and not expressing) one's reaction to trauma has on one's health subsequent to the trauma (Pennebaker). It was found that the writers in the study who wrote both the facts of the trauma and also how they felt about the distressing event(s) were the group that benefitted the most from the exercise. One advantage realized was a drop in doctors' visits by this group compared to those that wrote merely about the facts of the event or those that wrote simply about the most current event in their lives. Pennebaker discovered that those who described past traumatic events and their residual emotions surrounding these occurrences were more physically healthy than those who plainly stated recollected events in their writing. The participants in this study further bolstered these findings by asserting that by staying “focused on how it had increased their self-understanding” (van der Kolk 240) they found healing properties to their memoir writing. Many who wrote about their own traumas for this study recognized that thinking about these events with a focus on understanding rendered them more able to resolve past experiences. A result of the experiment was

peace of mind, with one participant summing up his experience, "To have to write about emotions and feelings helped me understand how I felt and why" (Pennebaker 35).

I want to make clear that I am not saying that authorship is necessarily ownership of the entire story. You have to remember that because you write a story doesn't mean it is *the* story. And because of this some critics portray autobiographical recollection as a lesser form of the written word. I contend that to see memoir as less significant is indeed falling for the fallacy that if anyone can do it, it must be easy. The fact that anyone who survives childhood can conceivably write a memoir does not mean that anyone can do it well. There is, in fact, a vast canyon that divides compulsively relatable personal non-fiction from a dry recitation of a life's events as if on a timeline. Not all memoirs of childhood trauma transcend the horror story that this topic is. Too often parents are presented in a manner that leaves little room for sympathy. I have found, in my attempts to recall and write authentic details of traumatic episodes that occurred during my childhood, that my sole job is to pull together my recollected details into narrated images. I have to trust that the reader receives what they need out of the work just as I have in the writing. How we tell the story, in short, may be just as important as the story we tell.

Nonfiction stories that chronicle trauma can act as a salve upon the writer and the reader. According to William Zinsser they "can elevate the pain of the past with forgiveness, arriving at a larger truth about families in various stages of brokenness.

Memoir is a wonderful tool to try and make sense of who we are, whom we once were, and what values and heritage shaped us" (6). When I think about why the memoirs of traumatic childhoods written by Dorothy Allison, Mary Anna King and Wendy Lawless hit home for me, I believe it is because they have offered me a mirror, ironically that mirror I have so feared all my life. Their words provide a reflection that more closely returns images of my childhood family than the Leave It To Beaver version that was peddled as the familial archetype during my formative years.

To really see into the heart of a good memoir is to view the marriage of storytelling with truth telling. The artful sharing of painful portions of our lives allows for the space to reflect that not all childhoods emulate what happens in the Cleaver family. Books like *Two Or Three Things I Know For Sure*, *Chanel Bonfire* and *Bastards* are testaments to an individual's ability to endure, to weather and bear the brunt of a hurricane of a mom or the muddled and confusing aftermath of a divorce tornado. Writing remembrances helps to expunge the memory onto the safety of the page. The key to real healing is to soak in a long-ago moment that still causes pain. Wrangling the description of that moment onto the page, looking for just the right word to convey a feeling, can heal. Writing *Now* provides power over *Then*. None of these girls deserved to be neglected, or abandoned, shipped off or raped. What they, we, do deserve is to share the story if it helps.

The Stories of Others

The memoirs I have chosen to analyze in this paper all have one thing in common – none of these women ought to have had to endure the childhoods they had. Yet they each managed to put into words that which is complex to articulate. In telling us their stories of painful times in a compelling manner they create works of literature that are worthy of exploration. These books pick and poke at the disturbingly adhesive traits in families. Each manuscript brings to light a dark story. In their willingness to be truly open and honest, these writers make us care about the difficulty they faced in their homes.

For some of us, simply knowing that others traipsed through the messy and painful labyrinth of their early lives into adulthood -- and lived to write about it -- is therapeutic. In the works I've chosen to discuss here, women recount childhood events from *their* point of view, taking ownership of *their* own story, exposing the shadowy corners of *their* homes. The frenetic energy of Wendy Lawless, the tenacity of Dorothy Allison and the quiet resolution of Mary Anna King offer voices very different from each other; and yet all three create narratives that ring true, not just to those with a similarly

traumatic past, but also to those who do not directly know about such truths. In introducing us to the influential characters who inhabit their memories and by sharing the conflicts, consequences, and implications of imbalances within the ecology of a troubled home, each woman successfully, powerfully scribes the indescribable.

***Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* by Dorothy Allison**

Dorothy Allison's was the first of the three memoirs of childhood trauma that got me to wondering why works of autobiographical self-reflection were restorative to my soul. How was it that these compilations of horrific memories could make me feel better? How was it that I could feel comforted in the midst of Allison's tale of childhood rape, abuse and poverty? How does she make this a tale that I didn't want to put down? How does she turn a story of her triumph over the pain of her past into tender words that prove that you can push past the trauma of childhood abuse? How is a thorough and honest investigation of how family gossip travels from generation to generation helpful in learning how another childhood trauma survivor learned to thrive?

On the very first page of *Two Or Three Things I Know For Sure*, Allison lets her readers in on her secret; a secret, it turns out, that she learned at a very young age. She states that in order to help transport her sisters away from the red-clay-soaked agony of their childhoods she would tell stories. "I could catch my sisters the way they caught butterflies, capture their attention and almost make them believe that what I said was

true" (Allison 1). The magnetic pull of this book is a result of the balancing act Allison is able to pull off: her poetic stories entwine with her stark prose to pull you in to a deeply disturbing childhood.

Allison's Aunt Dot responds to the grinding of her family into the South Carolina red clay by pontificating, "Lord, girl, there's only two or three things I know for sure"(5). The author uses her aunt's certainty about such few things in life as a scaffold onto which she can hang her stories -- stories grounded in reality but also beautiful and terrifying. She writes the story of how she grew into a woman on her own terms despite the level of trauma embedded within her family and her own life. "Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is what it means to have no loved version of your life but the one you make" (3), expressing the notion that, for Allison, feeling loved as an adult who has made a family of her own is proof enough. The repetition of the refrain of "Two or three things" works to lull you into a place where you almost think there is resolution to any of the torture Allison lived through. Literary redundancy helps the writer to state her fundamental truths, "Two or three things I know for sure, but none of them is why a man would rape a child, why a man would beat a child" (43) and to speak to the more universal, "Two or three things I know for sure and one of them is that telling the story all the way through is an act of love" (90). "I tell stories to prove I was meant to survive. What I am here for is to claim my life" (52).

In unfolding her approach to storytelling, Allison is forthright as to her process and her goal in writing, "I'll work to make you believe me. Throw in some real stuff,

change a few details, and add the certainty of outrage.” It is the certainty of her outrage that ultimately allows for her story to leap off the page. In these pages Allison has come to realize that she has a right to be angry at the lack of adult caution when dealing with her young body and soul. The level of intimacy that she creates with this aside not only works to allow the reader to feel as if they are in on the writer’s innermost secrets but also that we are seeing behind the curtain into the craftwork of memoir. “Two Or Three Things I Know For Sure” works well as refrain in a memoir: it reminds us how we can only truly be certain about a very few things in this life. If only one of them could be that June and Ward Cleaver were our parents and we lived in that house instead of being the scared detritus left in our parents’ narcissistic wake.

To be able to share first person stories in a way that can be meaningful to others you have to work to strip the anger and the bitterness, to eliminate all but the very core of the memories, to recall the most base elements and to allow yourself to feel, really feel what it felt like then. When Dorothy Allison writes about joining a Karate class she digs for the elemental, “the tears became sobs, heartbroken and angry, and I stumbled, almost falling down before I caught my footing in a different gait” (64). We root for Dorothy as she coats the soles of her running shoes with thick, South Carolina mud, cheering her along in her pain. We get to witness the shame she still bore from her childhood traumas being torn free and loosened (64). Pushing her limbs to their limits is for her an act of defiance against this pain in pursuit of clarity. In trying to get a sense of what it is like to own her own body she begins to run, in the process “unearthing the

tinest of trembles as to what your own worth is and can be "(66). Allison uses her body as a tool to acquire "perfect physical consciousness -- gain(ing) a sense of what I might do, could do if I worked at it, a sense of my body as my own. And that was miracle enough" (66). She ran, physically and mentally, into her future by the force of her own sheer will.

The reason, in short, that Dorothy Allison's *Two Or Three Things* became a Home Run Book for me was how directly she looks the reader in the eye. In speaking unambiguously about dark subjects, Allison is fighting back against the notion that the only stories worth telling aren't tales like hers. Using narrative to fight back against the trauma, she discovers how stories destroy and erase but also replenish and heal. The process of writing her story allowed Allison to become a person "who armed herself and fought back...the woman who learned to love without giving in to fear" (71) after a lifetime of fleeing from the next torment. We learn, along with Dorothy Allison, that you can only trust one or two things and one of them is that it is okay "to claim some clean and safe space" (82) in which to try and live your life -- that it is okay and normal to "trust nothing and want everything" (83) as a result of your formative years being hijacked by your parents' selfishness.

The writing in this book is done so well that, surprisingly, despite the immense pain you have read about, what you find yourself paying attention to in *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure* isn't necessarily the horrific. Instead, Dorothy Allison holds out against the torments of her tempestuous childhood through faith in the power of story –

using it to enchant her sister, explore the hidden sides of her extended family, look for a cohesive narrative in family photographs and -- ultimately -- to survive and save herself in part through her story writing. Allison's is a survivor's tale but it never feels that her intention is to amaze or repulse. Rather, Dorothy Allison shows that, if one can hold on to two or three things, just a few critical truths, then one might make it out of a really bad place.

***Chanel Bonfire* by Wendy Lawless**

In *Chanel Bonfire* Wendy Lawless takes the reader inside a house where the overbearing maternal character is often untrustworthy and habitually venomous. This is a house where the predominant storyline involves two young sisters trying to survive their mother. These bright, funny and worldly girls desperately need a tether in this world, and find none. I felt, in reading this book, as though I were talking to a bemused adult version of Wendy over drinks at a cocktail party, leaning in to hear her share detailed recollections of the more and more horrific manner in which her mother sought to make herself the center of any and all conversations. Just how did these young ladies successfully span the gap between the lack of the verb function of "mother" or "parent" in their life and *their* emotional or physical needs?

Georgann Lawless Rea, Wendy Lawless' "fabulously neglectful mother" (148) who distractedly toted her daughters around New York, London, Paris, Morocco and

Boston, is an uncontrolled alcoholic and narcissist. Lawless strives in this book to make sense of her and her sister's lives as neglected counterparts to their deranged Mommy Dearest of a mother. How did she live to tell the tale of Georgann and her kids? How does she put into words what it is like to have a mother who wielded her unpredictability as a bludgeon over their lives? While the power of *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* comes, in large part, from Dorothy Allison's adult frank delivery, much of the impact of Wendy Lawless's memoir, *Chanel Bonfire*, comes from her youthful familiar tone. Where Dorothy Allison's tone could be startlingly frank, Wendy Lawless invites her reader into her past and chats as if she is still that befuddled girl, astounded by just how feckless a mother she was dealt. Lawless puts her arm around you and invites you in to her Fifth Avenue apartment, which houses a bubble of glamour, money and parental neglect on a grand scale.

Despite the page after page of unconscionable parenting, part of what makes this an appealing read is the manner in which the author is able to size up her mother. "She worked her smoke-and-mirrors magic, presenting a sleek image to the world, but the truth was that we were just... fake" (69). Lawless's constant bafflement is communicated in a confidential manner, as if she were telling her reader this story mid-way through a bottle of Chianti to her captivated audience -- as if spinning out jaw-dropping details of her mother's negligence will make everyone stay, as if she learned the art of story craft not only from living the story, but also by watching her mother make it up as she went along for all those years. Her story is so good though, that all I

wanted to do was lean in to hear more anyway; I wanted to get caught up in the whirlwind that is this glamorous mother and her neglected and abused young children.

Lawless powerfully understates her disenchantment with her mother in this memoir. When she watches her mother drunkenly screech off in the family car on the night her counterfeit therapy sessions were exposed, she says, "Of course, we knew she'd been missing for years"(161). As readers, we watch Georgann behave as though no such stressors as children or marital vows exist and so it isn't surprising when the emotionally drained teen Wendy exhaustedly admits "jail didn't seem so bad to me now. It even sounded kind of ... well, nice. I was sure there was a lot of structure there and three meals a day" (136). The truth for Wendy, as exposed in this aside, is that it isn't necessarily the daily emotional brutality or the outright neglect that creates trauma. In this case it is the indifference her mom displays towards her daughters that does the most damage.

The variety of abuse their mother heaps on these young people is astounding. Most often these girls would be left unsupervised to surf the waves of parental whimsicality (Marler 86). However, from time to time Georgann's unpredictable "warpath" would surface and would always include sudden and severe verbal attacks which included invectives such as "You've ruined my life!" and "I wish you'd been abortions!" (119). Often the inebriated hate speech would be hurled at her daughters as she went "screeching off like a banshee in her nightgown" (155), trying to make sure that the last word was always hers. Other times she was busy chopping down doors

with axes, burning stereos, catching houses on fire, or drunkenly driving her car directly into the stands during her younger daughter's high school graduation.

Wendy Lawless's words draw the picture of what it must have felt like to be a small child in a house where unpredictability was the leading weather pattern. Reading this memoir is like sitting down next to a large pot of water on the stove and waiting for the internal roil to boil over. The haze of alcohol and pills and men and bad choices will have to burn off, but you just can't set your watch by it. The depth of description is the primary means by which Lawless translates her appalling upbringing into literature in this book. She draws her readers in, allows them to climb down off the bunk bed with her and watch the emergency department deal with her mother's attempted suicide and the parade of aides flowing into their spooky and cavernous apartment, see the shards of glass from the transom above her mother's locked door "raining down on the men below and making a tinkling sound as they hit the polished parquet floor" (4).

It is painfully clear in *Chanel Bonfire* just how challenging it was for Wendy to know which way her mother was going to blow. Navigating the adults in her world meant that Wendy grew up with heightened prediction skills. We realize just how prescient this young lady is when, at the conclusion of their time in Europe, she flatly states, "The years of shopping, dancing, and glamour in London had somehow kept the pin in the grenade of Mother's psyche, but now it was out and she blew up, went nuts" (118). Living in a childhood home that rang with "the usual tension and fear of Mother's disapproval" (77) required Lawless to master traversing the high wire between her

mom's physical absence *and* the psychologically destabilizing effects of her "mothering." Young Wendy Lawless had to figure out how to survive "being on the wrong side of her angry rages" (86). Surrounded, as these young ladies were, by adults who were both too emotionally needy and at the same time absent any self-reflective qualities, their early years were worn down by the long erosion that occurs when the adults in your life drain rather than support. Watching for wind shifts, being ever vigilant, is monumentally exhausting.

For Wendy, being an adolescent in a highly unstable home environment meant growing up quickly. This velocity of maturity created experiences for Lawless that elicited reactions like, "Even half-dead, Mother was beautiful" (7). It also meant that while the rest of America was getting ready for the Summer of Love, her mother was "preparing to enter the Valley of the Dolls," taking an entire bottle of pills on a January evening in 1969 (3). As a result, the girls learned a skill necessary to any of us who grew up with bad parents: be flexible. "We were a little confused, but if she was happy, what the hell, we went with it" (87).

Georgann had a "warped and mirage-like version of herself" (148) that obscured her view as her two daughters floundered on both social and academic fronts, bobbing around in the volatile wreckage of their mother's latest liaison. Yet the craving for attention, like any other drug, had to be fed. In working to feed her addiction, Georgann's twisted fairytale version of her life would include conditional terms for loving the daughters she saw as mere extensions of herself. The eagerness, for

example, her mother displays when engaging in gamesmanship with her children's paternal relationship is breathtaking. Georgann's daughters would watch their mother "unpack our suitcases and, without skipping a beat, throw out all our play clothes...of course, by throwing the clothes away, she cast aside our summer, our time with our father, and our memories, as well as her own" (51). She would then discuss responsibility for the lack of paternal connection the girls felt in terms that offloaded the blame onto their father. With passive-aggressive aplomb Georgann would end her daughter's summer vacations with a welcome home that sounded like "He doesn't have time for you anymore. He does have a new family now, I guess. Accept the fact" (66, 59, 60, 61).

Children will forever hold out hope against hope that their parents will change, that things will finally feel secure. For Wendy Lawless the only constant she could count on as a child was being disappointed, "all I was sure of was that once again they had blown it -- dangled a shiny idea of some kind of stable life for Robbie and me and then smashed it and left it for the maid to clean up" (98). The pieces of this smashed and shattered dream tinkled like the glass that fell from the transom on the evening the paramedics came to resuscitate Georgann. She had taken a bottle of pills in order to keep the spotlight on herself. Regardless of which of the ten addresses the girls were dragged to in twelve years (131) these girls' lives were lived in a space where distress signals were regularly sent out but were lost due to indifference.

***Bastards* by Mary Anna King**

The pages of *Bastards* tell the story of Mary Anna King's quest to feel love. In these pages she searches for the answer to the trauma by filling that space with love. This is a book of how one woman dealt with the search for love her siblings and the love of parents, both biological and adoptive. Ultimately, though, it is the story of how one woman learns to begin the process of trying to love despite the trauma that is the foundation of her life. In this book she scribes the story of how she and her six biological siblings ended up living with six different families.

The memoir *Bastards*, by Mary Anna King, is important for the way it further diversifies the discussion of issues around just who is family, what a "family" looks like and how far these bonds can be stretched. The inside book jacket for King's memoir *Bastards* contains this sentence: "Because Mary was adopted by her grandparents, Mary's Mother, Patty, is legally her sister, while her brother, Jacob, is legally her nephew." This complicated sentence attempts to draw arrows between Mary and her five biological siblings who are eventually adopted by five different families.

Ultimately, *Bastards* is an exercise in reconciling the choices our parents make and the fallout that our lives can (and often do) take on as a result. Unlike Lawless's mother, who can't keep a man, King's mother returns again and again to her husband (and Mary's father) in a volatile, lustful, immature tangled knot of inter-dependence. The

fallout for Mary Anna King has largely to do with parents whose future is tenuous and tempestuous, and who fight in a manner that creates children neither parent is prepared to care for.

With this as the frame for her early life story, Mary Anna King invites us in to a world in which trauma occurs despite the presence of two parents that love her very much. King's parents' lack of skill and maturity are such that neither adult is able to face up to and fix the choices they have made. Mary Anna grows up in a home where a regular occurrence is her mother giving birth to and then giving away siblings. Some babies are given names that don't have any more thought behind them than the previous child's moniker with a number attached, such as Rebecca Number Two. By sharing this story, King is working to describe that which can't be put into words.

In this memoir, rather than framing her parents as villainous, selfish cretins, King writes about them with a lens that allows for a softer effect. Dissimilarly to the other two memoirs I have reviewed in this paper, at the core of *Bastards* is an understanding on the part of Mary Anna King that her mother loved her. "For all her shortfalls, my mother was a great mother, her love could cover any sin or shortcoming" (113). But "Nothing I did could change the facts that my mother loving me and my loving her were not enough." More than the other two writers I've discussed here, Mary Anna King's *Bastards* show both the persistence of hope and the habits that allow a child to survive a traumatic childhood. Her writing is less strident than Allison's and less confident than Lawless's, but this story is no less impactful in quiet observations of what it means to be

a person who has a shattered family and a resulting fractured sense of self. In fact, I find *Bastards* to be the saddest of the books I discuss here because of the persistence of this hope. The slow and painful peeling of her brothers and sisters away from King haunts these pages. Being an unwitting participant and observer of one's siblings being handed to other sets of parents, over and over and over again, can silently harm in ways that all the shouting in the world cannot.

Where Dorothy Allison's words hold power for their plain phrasing, and Wendy Lawless's voice is inviting, Mary Anna King's narrative structure pulls her readers in to the experience of being a child to parents who are puerile. Questions of trust, alienation of affection and just what a family can and does look like are grappled with by King in this heartbreaking work that dissects her early years as the eldest sibling amongst a clan that suffered a Diaspora. Her parents' inability to stay together or to stop having children wreaks havoc on the children that were kept *and* those that were let go. The quiet, almost shy voice, King uses to spin these stories makes you want to tiptoe with her around the edges of her tattered childhood.

Because her words gently entice the reader along, Mary Anna King's mastery of language facilitates a palatable way to read about family trauma. For example, Mary Anna describes her grandmother/mother/Mimi's tone of voice as sounding like: "a lean mixed with a whisper" (104). Reading it, I can just see the slight physical tilt King takes when thinking of this memory. She mellifluously writes about the human craving for connection and how working towards writing one's own story can bring grace. Rather

than being “flattened under the weight of everything [she] did not understand,” (238) she triumphs in tale. Attempting to pull her brothers and sisters back into a closer orbit completes the cycle of hope in this book. In being surrounded by a brother and sisters who were previously scattered to the wind, Mary Anna is partially able to control the dizzying fluidity and “the confusing garble of family labels” (17) that has been her life story thus far.

In spite of the particular pain within this family, the triumph of this memoir comes largely in how well Mary Anna portrays the vortices of a family, the universality of how we deal with moms and dads, brothers and sisters. King masterfully translates her rough childhood, demonstrating in the process that trauma doesn’t always have to be loud, overtly violent, or even externally witnessed. Babies and kids who were just silently handed off to a “better” parent didn’t make a lot of noise. The quiet erosion of her family wasn’t loud or dramatic; sometimes, it is *those* quiet moments when the calm feels the most ominous. It is this quiet attenuation of self and rendering of her family that was the most traumatic part of her life.

My Stories

To make the story of your life comprehensible to another requires finding a way to describe a journey so personal it feels nearly impossible. John Updike (2005) described writing as “the twin miracles of creation and consciousness.” Reading the beautiful words of other women who write about the lasting nature of traumatic childhoods is helping me to understand how to approach communicating something I have forever struggled to name. It feels nothing short of miraculous to begin to try to bridge consciousness and creation in this way.

Unlike the famous memoirist of childhood trauma Mary Karr, who states that some of what she remembers is what she has been told, I only have my memories: the modus operandi of my parents was to feign ignorance of any memorable aspects of my life I might wish to clarify. Being born in America during the year of the bicentennial, I have specific late twentieth-century memories from my childhood: the hot and sticky feel of a stranger’s sweaty palm as it gripped mine when we stood under a light grey concrete Midwest highway underpass in an effort to share our Hands Across America; Ronald Reagan’s dark, slick hair on top of his ebullient visage looking up at me from the front page of a newspaper declaring the ascendancy of the actor to the Presidency; my confusion and tears as I watched the bright explosion in the sky where the space shuttle

had been just a second before. It was a sharply brisk January morning. I was in fifth grade, but home sick from school, alone in an empty house, lying on the couch, and watching live TV. I was so confused there alone, trying to process the explosion and what its ramifications would be. Where was Ward Cleaver when I needed him?

These more generally shared events of the nineteen eighties intertwine in my memory as they feud with more personal and deeply imprinted ones: the concentrated snap and crack of a leather belt that has been folded in two and pulled tight in a preamble to a back-of-thigh-spanking. The look of the triangle of scar tissue hot iron burned into my Mammaw's downy, white skin by a husband displeased with how she'd pressed his shirts; the way it feels to ineffectually attempt to claw your father off of your mother to prevent more hospitalizations for bruises both seen and hidden.

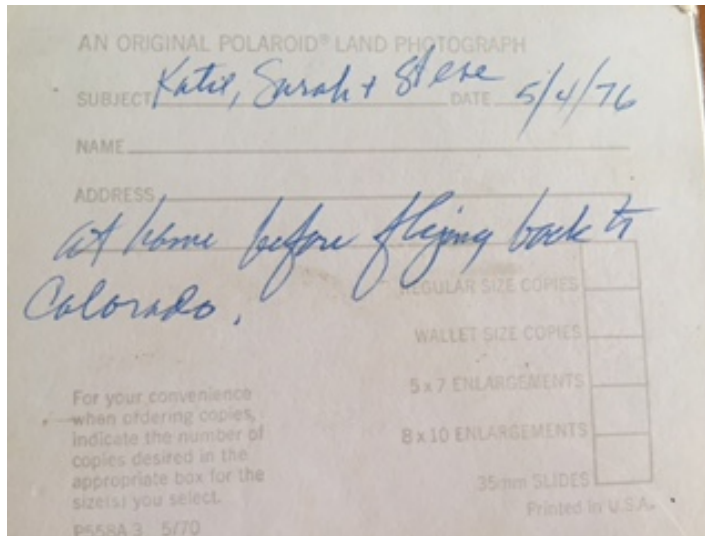
Storm damage

It was hard to find the right place to put my little hands on the lip of the sink. I would put both hands on the edge of the counter and work my wrists into a 90 degree angle so that my finger tips were touching and heft myself forward so that my legs began to dangle and bang against the cabinet doors that enclosed the pipes under the sink. I would then elephant walk my arms back and forth as I worked to hitch myself up onto the sink lip in order to gain a better vantage out onto the copse of trees at the end of our back yard, the movement of the branches in these trees being a barometer of the wind. Sudden death of wind can be a harbinger of a tornado. When it would get quiet in the midst of a storm I would look for the wind in the trees and wait to see if I could hear the deep whooshing that was unseen but sounded like a train that meant that the silence was about to break, the tenor of the storm was about to change. Such was the atmosphere in my house when my parents were going at it. For it wasn't the yelling, shouting, name calling and invective hurling that I worried about. Much in the same way that the silence outdoors was the precursor to the storm's real capacity for damage, so too was the silence in our home. Quiet in the midst of the argument told me it was time to duck and tuck for cover. When the wind momentarily stopped blowing in my home and it got quiet, I would find a small, dark, out of the way place, tuck my forehead into my knees, and pray for the storm to pass over, begging for as little damage to be bestowed as possible. My hands would clutch my shins and tug them towards my chest,

closer and closer and closer until it was hard to breathe. Closing my eyes tight, I would will my breath to take the place of the stormy sounds outside of my closet door.

In The Clouds

I recently came across a photograph that, if my grandfather's wispy, slanted handwritten note scrawled across the back is to be believed, is evidence of a tale that has been related in my family so often as to lose any felt sense of veracity. For you see, there are many conflicting stories that have been related about my birth -- a small portion of this story revolves around the fact that my mother has never once been able to tell me just how "premature" I was or even if she had much prenatal care during her pregnancy in order to date how far along she was at any time in the process. I had been told by family members whom I trust such disparate "truths" as that my father was gambling during my birth and therefore couldn't attend, that my paternal grandfather was the one who took my mom to the hospital when she went into premature labor, that it was my maternal grandfather that took her as he had been in cahoots with her to fly in from Colorado Springs so that she could be taken care of by her parents rather than on an army base. This list of optional truths goes on and on and on -- all containing contradictory information about the day I was born and why it was half of the country away from where we lived.



Regardless, there amongst a pile of discarded and dusty photos stashed in a box under my bed was my grandfather's handwriting on the back of An Original Polaroid Land Photograph where the subject is "Katie, Sarah + Steve", dated 5/4/76 and on the line where one could write the address it says "at home before flying back to Colorado." I would have been five days old. My 21-year-old mother looks at the camera with a smile full of teeth and clear eyes while my father is holding me in his right hand, supporting my neck; his left hand roughly covers my shoulders and toes simultaneously. My father is wearing a shirt that in any other time of my life would be considered too loud, and he has sleepy eyes in a face that looks like he is photographed through gauze. He wears the smirk that I would come to know as his trademark response to any situation that requires any depth of emotion.



What I do know for sure is that this first flight would set a migratory course that would become one of the few things I could depend upon for a while. Going on, as I did, to attend three elementary schools and three middle schools as my sister and I were dragged along like the baggage of my parents' restless journey through the chaos of their life. Encumbrances we were not as our parents proceeded to drag us into marriages, divorces, cross-country moves and messy family situations. Us, tagging along like luggage, getting scrapes and bruises as we were dragged behind her.

Downburst Squall

It is dark. I don't know if it is an-hour-past-bedtime dark or three a.m. dark, but it is inky dark; there is no light outside of my window or under my doorframe. Was I asleep before the loud voices and crashing furniture started? I don't know, I can't recall, the fluidity of time is something I didn't know how to capture then or now. I am sure that I didn't differentiate the angry, stinging words being hurled back and forth that night from any other night. As a six-year-old, I just knew that the dark of this house was once again reverberating with the threatening and familiar sounds of violence, the darkness vibrating with menace.

My room, with the white wicker bed and dresser, was the first one down the hallway from the living room and the kitchen. This house was the "show" house in a neighborhood of lower-end starter houses, which helps to explain why the tiny, three bedroom ranch came to us pre-loaded with some very severe green and white diamond-patterned wallpaper to match the deep green shag carpet of the living room. It also elucidates the reasoning behind the kitchen wallpaper with its primary red and yellow Dutch boys and girls smiling next to Delft blue windmills. After those two showpieces of interior decoration, was my room, which was on the left, across the hall from the faded orange bathroom that my two-year-old sister and I used to bathe in.

My bedroom had white walls but for the life of me I can't recall what color the carpet was in my room, only that there was carpet, wall-to-wall. I do know that this room

was where I successfully tied my shoes for the first time. I remember this because I was extremely proud of my accomplishment and how I had finished this task by myself prior to school one morning. I know that I called my mother in to look at what I had managed to do with my skinny, small fingers on the white Keds-knock-off tennis shoes that I had picked out for that day of school. And I know that she never came in. I can't recall what it was that she was doing, just that it wasn't something that felt important to me. She might have been making lunches (she wasn't, we always qualified for discounted state-sponsored hot meals) or she might have been getting my little sister ready to go to daycare. I don't know what she was doing, but I know paying me any mind wasn't part of her activity that day or most any other day.

But on this dark night I was in that room and listening to them yell, again. I gathered that they were screaming about how he had been out while she was stuck in. This wasn't the first night like this, and, I now know, not even close to being the last. I don't recall if I even gave this particular round of raised, nasty voices any of my attention. But suddenly, my mother burst into my room and grabbed me from under the covers and held my face to her nearly non-existent breasts and shouted toward the hallway that he would never separate her from me, ever. In a swift minute, my father was in my room, louder and much bigger than his small frame had ever before seemed. He managed to separate me from my mother and throw me down onto the bed, like I was the limp and ineffective Raggedy Ann doll I played with everyday, and not his older daughter. Just as swiftly as he'd tossed me, he had her bending backwards over my

bed with his hands surrounding and squeezing her neck. My mother was gasping for air and simultaneously holding herself up with the one hand that rested on my tiny thigh. If it weren't such a shocking and sickly sight, it would almost have been beautiful the way my mother's petite frame lithely curved into a backbend, like a willow branch or a dancer mid pose.

I'm sure I thought of Anna as I fought to separate the two struggling grownups cantilevered over my twin bed, twisting and crumpling the grid of tiny blue and white flowers that were supposed to look like quickly dabbed tulips. Honestly, I don't recall whatever gymnastic-like move I did to vault myself onto his back. What I do remember is grabbing and grasping and clawing, joining their fight in order to try and save my mom and also just rid myself of the feeling that I was powerless to do anything to make things right in that house. And so there I was, pounding on my father's back with tiny, ineffectual hands, yelling that he needed to stop hurting Mommy, screaming into the empty space that was their marriage and our house.

Right now, I can't even say how this night ended or if I was effective in my struggle to release my father's hands from my mother's fragile, young neck. Maybe he just gave up, maybe he took his hands off so he could pull me down from his back and fling me back onto the bed. Those details are unreachable inside my mind at this point. I just know that the next day, I tied my shoes before going to school.



Anna (2 ½ years) and Me (6 ½ years)

Conclusion

Confronting the pummeling and unpredictable forces from an indifferent natural world led man to build shelters. Much in the same way, people also build “conceptual structures to soften dissonances in social life and to reduce, for the individual, a sense of aloneness and anxiety”(Tuan 238). For an author, writing is the conceptual structure one builds as a means of clarifying personal understanding of the world. Writing is a way to facilitate thinking, helping one not to a single explanation but opening up the possibility of creating your own frame of reference, your own way of looking at your life. To accomplish the invocation of an inner world and to put it on paper, to conjure that which might make clear to another what I see in my mind’s eye, is really, really *hard*. To compound the challenge with the inner world of a traumatized child is harder still. It is a particular trick to communicate the inner chatter of a child and then to layer on top of this the act of interpreting and translating that voice into adult words. It is especially hard to navigate the space between then and now and also be able to find some new perspective in the process. So much feels indescribable, and so much begs to be scribed.

A real life accounting of shame, betrayal, frustration and pride is at the heart of the memoirs I have chosen to examine for the purposes of this paper. These works are

meaningful to me because of the manner in which they closely reflect my childhood experiences. I hope that they in no way strike moments of recollection deep within your marrow as they did in mine. If they do, however, welcome to the club. Sometimes it is just nice to read something that looks and feels more like the home you grew up in than the home that you used to gaze longingly into across an insurmountable abyss.

In my own stories I am beginning to face parts of my childhood that caused me pain and I would not have been able to do that if it wasn't for the bravery displayed in the works of Dorothy Allison, Mary Anna King and Wendy Lawless. These writers showed me that others have met their adult lives head on after a terrifically trouncing childhood. I am reminded of a scene in the television show "Mad Men" where the lead character, Don Draper, asks a woman who researches people's perceptions of themselves for a living, "Why does everybody need to talk about everything?" Without a tick of the clock she answers, "I don't know, but they do and they always feel better afterwards" (Levy). I am not so sure that we need to necessarily talk about everything, but I do think that Emily St. John Mandel was a lot closer to my truth when she wrote, "We need beauty because survival is insufficient" (Gavino 71). To be sure, my getting through my childhood was victory enough at the time, but as an adult who has more perspective on things, I keep feeling that it is time to create some beauty.

One astounding part of this process of turning my early life experiences into stories has been, paradoxically, marinating in remembered chaos allowed peace to appear. I found that allowing myself to tolerate past scenes, being hyper-aware of my

personal resilience as a child, allowed for recognition of my competence to begin seeping in, for a shift in perspective to happen. The guilt I still carry from traumatic encounters has started to dissipate, thanks to my memoir work. I was able to clearly see, for the first time, that there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell that I was responsible for my parents' lack of compassion. As a child surrounded by vehemence and terror, I cared only about my and my sister's survival, and was in no way capable of having the point of view that allowed me to step back and see the trauma I lived within as character-shaping. I just wanted the pain to end and for no one to notice. Children are prone to the magical thinking that everything happens because of them, but it is the adult who can look back and tell the story that allows for the hold of the past to ease. It is the adult who thereby truly experiences the making of magic.

V.S. Naipaul has stated, "Some writers can only deal with childhood experience, because it's complete"(Naipaul quoted by Gussow). For those of us who had traumatic childhoods, though, often that experience isn't at all complete, and hasn't really ended in some ways. In this paper I have looked at one way of bringing a sense of closure to a rocky childhood's potentially endless fallout is to write one's way into the present, to set that time down into a personal account from an adult perspective. Analyzing the memoirs of Mary Anna King (*Bastards*), Dorothy Allison (*Two Or Three Things*) and Wendy Lawless (*Chanel Bonfire*), I am struck by their masterful storytelling, their ability to turn a childhood marked by horrible neglect and pain into beautiful, moving works of literature, their magician's skill in rendering this time complete, after all.

The most poignant reminder I find in these books is the power of memoir to share *your* version of the story. Growing up in a traumatic household doesn't make a person a pessimist necessarily; just because one learned to fear didn't mean one had to abandon one's dreams. Our experiences matter and so does our connection to our pasts. How we feel about things then and now work with writing to combat the idea that all the pain was for naught.

I chose three works of memoir that appealed to me not just because the childhood recollections resonated so deeply for me with moments of vivid recognition, but also because these women all approach their stories from a position of strength. Each memoir, by its conclusion, offers a newly formed vantage point vis-à-vis the childhood it describes. Each author takes on abuse and neglect suffered at the hands of her caregivers, but with resiliency and strength. And none of these does so with any self-indulgence or self pity, despite the fact that each is, without a doubt, an autobiography of trauma. Each woman chooses to write about a time when she felt tiny, and to battle through the pain of the memories to deliver a tool of healing.

Finding the courage to voice *my* stories, vignettes from *my* childhood, told from *my* perspective, has empowered me. Communicating my worth, seeing my own thoughts, feelings and experiences on the page is enormously gratifying -- and almost miraculous if you consider that I was someone who hitherto was unable even to look in the mirror. I can say that by writing in this way, creating my own time machine and

climbing in for the ride, I learned something important. I learned that traveling back not only doesn't stop you from moving forward, it enables you to do so.

Looking this closely at these stories, studying traumatic childhood memoirs leaves me pondering the laws of physics, specifically the paradox of how physics seeks to understand both the seen and the unseen. While classical physics seeks to understand the observable world, atomic or quantum mechanical physics grapples with the interactions between particles that are so small we can't possibly hope to see them. And I am struck how both sides of the laws of physics rule our lives simultaneously. Family dynamics and the adhesive properties our childhoods bestow upon our entire lives can act in a similar manner – not necessarily easy to see, but impactful, *weathering*, nonetheless.

Having written a few stories from my own traumatic childhood, it is becoming possible to assure myself that what happened, though painful, occurred in the past and during a time when I couldn't have had much agency. There is power in description, in laying the words down onto paper and realizing that the sky won't fall; the Chicken Little inside can take a deep breath and a rest. Recording a version of the past doesn't necessarily bring brimstone and mortar down from a red sky, after all; while the writing can be extremely powerful, the letters themselves are just letters, powerless letters, scattered about on a page or a screen, and there is a distance between them and the truths they describe. You are safe. The storms don't roll through your house anymore.

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