

On looking back in anger:
Writing about those who have hurt you

“I don’t know how to write about this person. I don’t know if I forgive them, and they basically ruined my career/relationship/life. I’m still angry.”

I hear this a lot from my memoir clients.

When you’re writing about betrayal, loss, pain, abuse, injustice — it’s messy and it’s hard. It’s especially messy if you’re considering publishing, that is, inviting others to read your very personal, emotional story.

So how do you handle it?

How do you write about people who harmed you?

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Some authors see memoir as a place to expose those people’s awfulness. They want to unleash all their rage and disbelief, even hatred, on the page.

It may feel vindicating at first. (Of course it does. We want to be seen and heard. That’s one of the appeals of writing a memoir at all.)

But blind anger doesn’t read well on the page.

Vengefulness doesn’t either.

What does read well:

Emotional complexity.

Honest reflection.

Allowing for the possibility that something other than anger and hurt can be real.

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Tristine Rainer, from whom I steal most of my memoir-writing process, says this:

Tell the truth with love.

YOUR truth. Not trying to explain or justify that person's choices. But your experience as you know it to be true.

With love.

This doesn't mean sugarcoating or pretending it's okay.

It doesn't mean a tidy "Now I'm fine, I forgive all."

It means working through some of that anger behind the scenes—out of self-love, and/or love of something greater—and writing about it from *that* place.

Because pure anger is usually not the end of the story.

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Is this hard? Yes.

Does this mean you have to do some internal work before and during the writing?

100%.

Readers are astute, and can spot inauthenticity from a mile away.

Plus, if you're still growing around the experience, you may regret publishing before processing.

You may look back and realize you published a memoir that captures an anger that has since transmuted into something more complex. Maybe even more powerful.

Let's turn to you.

These answers are for your eyes only—so write honestly, fearlessly, without censoring yourself. There are no wrong answers.

If you write about what happened from a place of anger, what would you write?

How has the pain you experienced influenced your behavior over time?

How has it shaped your beliefs?

How has it shaped your character or capacity for empathy? What has it taught you about yourself?

What do you want the reader to understand—not about this person, but about you?

What does the phrase “tell the truth with love” mean to you?

If you write about what happened from a place of love—love for yourself, for someone else, or for something greater—what would you write?

