

Everywhere and Nowhere

Three Writers Explore the Challenges of Writing about Family, Near or Far

ALTHOUGH MOST OF US have at least a few oft-told family stories, most families also contain some mysteries, and getting to the “real” story can be a daunting task. Sometimes, there’s simply no record of the past; some families (or family members) guard their secrets carefully. In this issue, we explore the challenges of researching and writing about family from three very different angles.

MAGGIE MESSITT recounts her search for a lost aunt and reflects on the books and documentary films that helped her understand how to write with an absent co-author. **SEJAL H. PATEL** travels to the rural Indian village where her father grew up and applies skills she’s honed as a trial lawyer to build a complete picture of her father’s undocumented past. And **MAGGIE MERTENS**, struggling to fit her very large family into a memoir, is surprised to learn how many well-regarded memoirists also come from large families, though you wouldn’t necessarily know it from their stories.

Collectively, these writers’ experiences show that although every family’s circumstances are unique, the urge to find ourselves through our families’ stories—even when it requires surmounting significant obstacles—may be universal. As the psychologist and writer Mary Pipher has written, “[H]istory is inextricably linked to identity. If you don’t know your history, if you don’t know your family, who are you?”

MAGGIE MESSITT

The Case of the Missing Co-Author

MAGGIE MESSITT is an independent narrative and immersion journalist, who has spent the last decade reporting from inside underserved communities in southern Africa and Middle America. Messitt currently resides in southeast Ohio, where she's completing her doctorate and writing her aunt's story. *The Rainy Season: Three Lives in the New South Africa*, forthcoming from the University of Iowa Press in April 2015, is her first book.

IN 2009, my mother's youngest sister went missing. She was in Maui. I was in South Africa. My mother, in Chicago, stopped receiving her sister's Saturday e-mails. The process that followed lasted a year: my sister and I—the two youngest of six—searched for my aunt from afar; my sister flew from Seattle to Maui to search in person; and then we hired a private investigator. The final step was a formal grid search; when that turned up nothing, investigators concluded she was gone. They said we'd likely never find her remains.

Her name was Deborah—Aunt Debbie. She was a writer, an artist, an actress, a long-time waitress. She was not famous. She hadn't been published, but she had sold artwork and spent her twenties on stage. She was the black sheep of the family, the relative many people didn't (and still don't) understand.

And yet, I always thought I understood her, even at a great distance. I'd grown up being told I looked or acted like her. We were both the youngest, with older sisters who were more like mothers, and we often felt different from everyone else. More intimately, we both longed to find our respective places in this world and to live lives sustained by art. But then she disappeared.

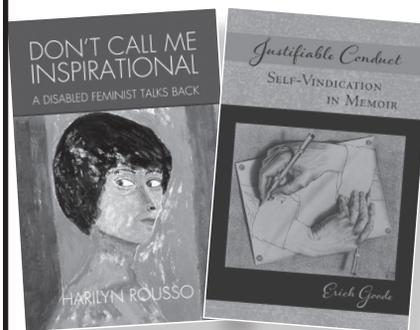
In the summer of 2013, I started a new search—this time for life. Using two hundred handwritten letters as my map, I became an explorer, a detective, a collector of quotidian details. I surfed couches across Illinois, New York, Washington, Oregon, Louisiana, and Virginia, all more than once. Eventually, I traveled to Hawaii. I had an idea of what I was doing, but I also had no clue. I traveled light: my computer, an audio recorder, camera gear, a stack of notebooks, a few days of clothing, and a copy of *Into the Wild*.

Jon Krakauer's book was, of course, a deliberate choice. *Into the Wild* tells the story of Chris McCandless, a young man who shed his material possessions and slid off the grid, eventually dying of starvation in Alaska as a result of a foraging mistake. Although Krakauer never met McCandless, he saw himself in the young man, whose body was discovered inside an old bus on Alaska's Stampede Trail in 1992. I had first read the book a decade before I set off in search of my aunt's story. I remembered it as a book of narrative reconstruction. Reading it again, I realized that wasn't the case at all. Krakauer re-traces McCandless's travels and constructs a book of evidence: interview transcriptions and excerpts from McCandless's correspondence, diary, and other writings. From these loose and fraying threads, Krakauer weaves the wanderer's story together with memories from his own life.

As I followed in Debbie's footsteps, I turned to Krakauer for guidance, seeking the confidence to write about a missing woman in whom I saw myself. By mid-summer, my copy of *Into the Wild* grew dog-eared, margin-marked, and color-coded, much like the books by Tolstoy, London, and Thoreau found in McCandless's pack. It seemed the only model I would need.

That is, until I watched the genre-bending documentary *Stories We Tell*.

Recommended Reading...



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The film transformed how I understood my project and purpose.

Stories We Tell follows actress and director Sarah Polley's search to know her deceased mother. The film explores family secrets and questions our ability to tell the difference between fact and fiction. Polley uses formal interviews, integrates voiceover of her father's memoir, and breaks the convention of the fourth wall. The camera toggles between interviewees and interviewer,

scrapbook of one letter, a few postcards, and recalled telephone conversations—the entirety of their interaction after he disappeared—bound together by an ancient Greek poem and her memoiristic annotations. Her investigation was intellectual over factual, not really an effort to discover specific answers about Michael's life. Carson handed her publisher this cut-and-paste book, and, incredibly, cut-and-paste is how it remained. The result: a color-printed,

1960s. Lichtenstein's story starts with Rodinsky's untouched apartment in a London synagogue. Chapters alternate between the authors; Lichtenstein recounts her efforts to "find" Rodinsky; Sinclair critiques Lichtenstein's search and provides a historical analysis of London's East End. Between these threads, a third author is implied: Rodinsky himself.

These works all explore the ways in which point of view affects our idea of "truth," but no one experiments with this like noir crime novelist James Ellroy. In *My Dark Places: An L.A. Crime Memoir*, Ellroy tells the story of his mother's murder in four sequences: the reconstruction of his mother's death, based on her case file, and the historical narrative of Orange County crime in 1958 (written in third person); the memoir of a boy losing his mother (first person); the profile of a detective in the Unsolved Cases Unit (third person); and Ellroy's present-day search for answers (first person). As Ellroy shifts between the factual and the personal, the reader is left to ponder the distortions that arise from the simplest change in perspective and, ultimately, to question the nature of truth.

Each of these stories inverts itself to illuminate the process by which the story is being pieced together. Cinematically, the camera isn't exclusively aimed at Michael or Jane or Chris; rather it follows Carson and Nelson and Krakauer on a journey of discovery. Each storyteller is showing readers the seams, exposing the process and the unspoken questions: What is a fact? How do we know something is true? And what is truth, anyhow?

Each of these works has taught me to accept ambiguities rather than digging endlessly for a certainty that doesn't exist; to stretch the limits of form; and to embrace the possibilities of co-authorship, even with the missing.

What is a fact? How do we know something is true? And what is truth, anyhow?

capturing Polley's process of discovery. Although Polley allows us to see how point of view affects each telling of her mother's story, she also allows her mother to represent herself through home movies. At first, this footage registers as an artifact of the past; by the end, however, careful viewers realize it is actually a reconstruction of the past—fictionalized memories.

Stories We Tell pushed me to go beyond Krakauer and further explore family stories and epitaphs using experimental form. With help from essayist Eric Lemaire, I created a shortlist of storytellers who could help me question my process and approach: poet and classicist Anne Carson, the poet and essayist Maggie Nelson, visual artist and author Rachel Lichtenstein, writer and filmmaker Iain Sinclair, and noir crime novelist James Ellroy.

Nox, by Anne Carson, is the least traditional—an elegy for her brother, who'd dealt drugs and eventually fled the country to avoid jail time. Decades later, after his death, Carson created a

cardstock accordion (in a hard case), replete with images of staples and tape.

Like Carson, Maggie Nelson sought to tell a story with limited artifacts. *Jane: A Murder* explores the life and death of her aunt, killed in the late 1960s, years before Nelson's birth. It was assumed, both publicly and within the family, that Jane was a victim of serial killer John Collins. Driven to understand Jane, to whom she was oft compared, Nelson pairs passages from her aunt's diary alongside her own poetry—edging toward a kind of co-authorship that tells both stories as one. (Just as *Jane* was released, a DNA match led to the arrest of a new suspect and the reopening of Jane's case. As a result, Nelson wrote *The Red Parts: A Memoir*, a hybrid of investigation, courtroom reportage, and memoir.)

Like Krakauer and Polley, Rachel Lichtenstein and Iain Sinclair pull back the curtain to show process. They co-wrote *Rodinsky's Room*, a journey to understand a reclusive Jewish autodidact who disappeared in the late

As I interview my aunt's friends, co-workers, and family members, I now realize I am crowd-sourcing a portrait of her that no one person would recognize—from a rural childhood, to the stage in New York, to the days she was married to the lamp repairman, to the year she squatted in New Orleans warehouses, to her years of work in an arts theater, to a decade of seesawing off and on the grid.

I have boxes of collected items, hours of interviews, hundreds of images, and a dozen filled notebooks. But there are too many holes in my aunt's story for a traditional narrative. These are the spaces in which we let Carson compare the myth of her brother Michael to the parable of Lazarus; where we're willing to sit with Lichtenstein as she questions her Judaism; when we accept the fine, almost blurry, line between Nelson and her aunt as characters. In accepting the holes of my aunt's story, I allow her to lead me down a path of exploration rather than fact.

Today, my writing room is wallpapered with maps and letters and images. Like the writers before me, I am floating through the visual, visceral process of my search. All the artifacts I've collected, all of the conflicting details, all of these torn and jagged edges of memory are—I remind myself—the only understanding I will have of my aunt. In the final telling, I am not a judge; I am a curator of her story, through my story, and the people, places, and things she left behind.

SEJAL H. PATEL

Visiting the Past

SEJAL H. PATEL is a San Francisco-based writer and criminal defense lawyer. A former federal prosecutor, she is a graduate of

Northwestern Law School and Harvard Divinity School. Her essays have been published in the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, *The Champion* magazine, and other publications. She is currently working on a memoir entitled *Seven Almonds*.

“COWS ARE VERY SMART,” my mom bragged. “You know, they can find their way home.”

She paused. “It’s true.”

I didn’t believe her at first. And then, walking through my father’s birth village in western India last December, I witnessed it. At exactly 4 PM, a herd of some fifteen cows walked down the main village road, which branched out into side streets lined with residences and stables. The cows trotted through cool mud patches on the road, their tails dancing from side to side. One by one, they turned onto their respective streets to go home.

“Cow never forgets home,” my mom sang.

We hadn’t forgotten our home either, even though my father had not been there for more than fifty years.

The trip to India almost didn’t happen. Six months earlier, I had pleaded with my dad over the phone. “We *have* to go to India. I can’t write a book about your life without seeing it with you and mom.”

“But why?” he asked. “There is nothing to see there.” My father couldn’t understand what I could possibly gain by seeing where he grew up, except maybe a stomach bug from eating tempting street food. I responded, apologetically, that I see the world through the eyes of a lawyer. To reconstruct a past event, I need to visit a scene, interview people, and gather evidence.

“Even if everything has changed all these years later?” he asked.

“Even then.”

I had realized that to understand my father—and myself—I had to learn

more about my family’s past. I was a year into divinity school studies then and kept seeing Simone Weil quoted in my readings: “To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.”

At that point in my life, my soul needed rooting.

A year earlier, I was a member of a four-person trial team, defending a man charged with federal terrorism crimes. We believed that our client was innocent, but the jury came back with seven guilty verdicts. He would serve most of his seventeen-and-a-half-year sentence in solitary confinement. After the trial, I desperately needed a break. I suspended my law practice of twelve years to bury myself in books in divinity school.

I treated my graduate studies as a blissful release from my lawyering life—a nerd spa. Reading, thinking, and writing about ethics, democracy, and philosophy were a salve that eased the stress of being a criminal defense lawyer. Slowly, events and emotions from my life started to take shape. Had I inherited my sense of duty and fairness from my father? I had been proud of these qualities, but after the trial, they felt like a burden. I believed that something in my father’s life echoed in mine, something that might help me heal. But to find this elusive “something,” I had to inhabit my father’s past, to walk it with him. Hearing about his life wasn’t enough.

Finding time for a trip to India was tough. My dad still saw more than a hundred patients a week in his Houston-based gastroenterology practice while I had a demanding graduate school workload and two daughters. Our calendars were full.

Then, in August, I visited Houston with my husband and daughters. I watched my mom wince in pain from her lower back. I saw my dad’s once black eyes glitter translucent. I knew

my window for taking them on a twenty-four-hour flight and across pockmarked Indian roads was shrinking. One evening, I cornered my dad as he entered the house and sat down to untie his orthopedic shoes. I insisted that we buy the tickets right then.

As I prepared for the trip, I looked to storytellers who had also retraced their ancestors' footsteps. Born in a refugee camp in Thailand and raised in Texas, filmmaker Socheata Poeuv did just that. She knew that her parents, two sisters, and brother had survived the horrific Khmer Rouge genocide that took nearly two million lives in Cambodia. But then Poeuv's mother revealed the truth: Poeuv's sisters were actually her cousins, her brother was her half-brother, and her mother had been married to a man who was killed in the genocide. Dubbed "the lucky one," as an adult Poeuv traveled to Cambodia with her parents to put the broken pieces of her family history back together, a journey

that resulted in the documentary film *New Year Baby*.

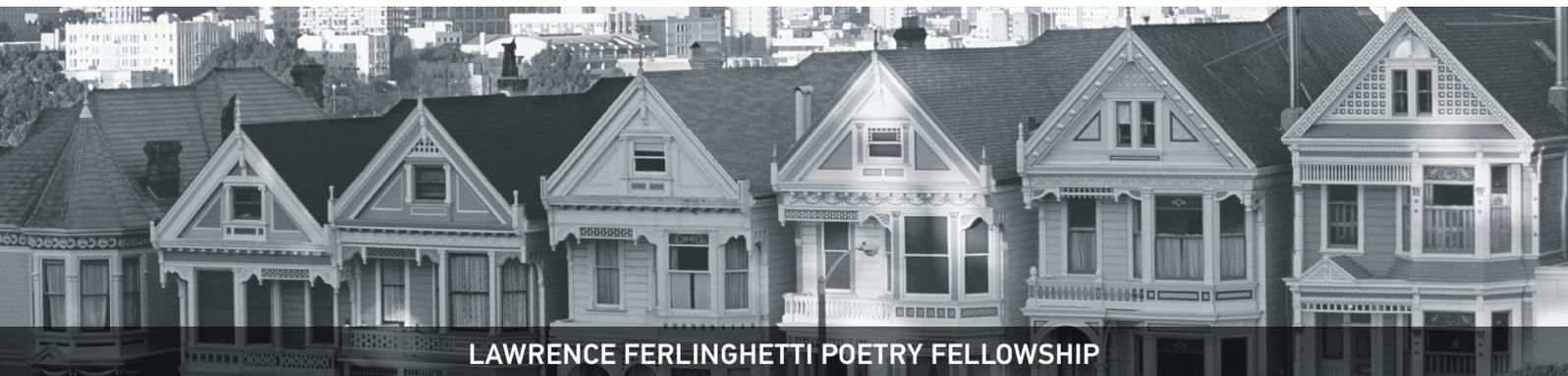
The Korean-American writer Helie Lee's memoir *Still Life with Rice* was also motivated by the author's feeling that she needed to walk through her family's past. Her tongue-clicking grandmother and her melodramatic mother commanded Lee to be proud of her Korean heritage and to marry soon lest she become "rotten fruit." While they clung to their Korean identities, Lee rebelled and ached to conceal her Koreanness. Confused as to who she really was, she traveled back to Korea and discovered how her grandmother and mother had survived the Japanese occupation of Korea and the brutal Korean civil war. She came back and asked them long-ignored questions about who they were and, by extension, who she was, too.

The actor Alan Cumming wanted desperately to know what became of his maternal grandfather, who had served

in the Scottish Army during World War II and then died in Malaysia. Cumming didn't know how his grandfather had ended up so far away from home or why he never returned to his family in Scotland. He signed on to *Who Do You Think You Are?*—a popular BBC show that investigated celebrity genealogies—to find out what happened. The show became a catalyst for Cumming to confront his abusive father, who then claimed that Cumming's mother had had an affair and that Cumming was not his son. Cumming traveled to Scotland to confront his father and then made a pilgrimage to Malaysia to learn about his grandfather's heroism and suicide, a riveting story he tells in his memoir, *Not My Father's Son*.

Like Poeuv, Lee, and Cumming, I knew little about my family's past. Five words could sum up what I knew: *India, poor, farmer, doctor, America*. Before our trip, I tried to interview my dad, never succeeding for more than a few minutes.

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CHANGE THE WORLD FROM HERE

Smartphones, two cute granddaughters, a swimming pool, and work demands constantly interrupted us. And then one day, for reasons I can't remember, I handed him a digital recorder.

"Can you take this and dictate your life story for me?" I asked.

This, he did. From the comfort of his home office, my father dictated nearly eight hours of audio over five days. This feat, for my father, was astonishing. My dad speaks little, usually drifting quietly through the house. Phone calls with him last about thirty seconds, and he ends them by forgetting to say good-bye. Maybe because he is a physician and was used to dictation, or maybe because there was something freeing about telling a machine his story, the recorder enabled my father to tell me more about his life than he had ever shared before.

I transcribed his dictation into more than a hundred pages of notes—almost 34,000 words to add to those first five. I read the dictation notes clinically, mining for details as if I were reading a trial transcript. I had never before heard my father mention a village named Karmal. I plugged it into Google Maps and saw a vast beige space enclosed by three roads in western India. My father was born in Karmal, he told me, and he had not been back to visit since he was a child. I discovered that the life of a poor person was untraceable. With no aid from church or school records, no map, no photographs, no diaries or letters or any other historic information that a researcher might use to document a past, my dad and I worked together to create exhibits of his life. We created diagrams of rooms and homes, and drawings of mango trees and rivers. He sketched a family tree and drew maps of towns, marking sugar cane fields, shoe repair shops, and nearby temples, mosques, and churches. I illustrated places and events on a storyboard, with dainty cartoon doodles. My task ended up be-

ing as creative as trial preparation was, like solving a mystery step-by-step, with very few clues.

And then came the scary part: would the pieces I had assembled become a story, and would the story help me make sense of who I am? Or, more simply put,

And then came the scary part: would the pieces I had assembled become a story, and would the story help me make sense of who I am?

would others like what I had to say? Would I? Sucheata Poevv, Helie Lee, and Alan Cumming each told moving stories while also finding catharsis.

I looked to other great writers, like Cheryl Strayed and Aleksander Hemon, for help. Strayed wrote a beautiful memoir, *Wild*, about how she channeled her grief over losing her mother by hiking the grueling Pacific Crest Trail. "From lost to found" is how she describes both her hike and the writing of her memoir. Hemon, too, told a moving story and healed by telling it. In his *New Yorker* essay, "The Aquarium: A Child's Isolating Illness," he writes about the heartbreaking ordeal he and his wife endured when their nine-month-old daughter was diagnosed with a rare brain tumor that ultimately took her life. As one daughter was dying, their three-year-old was growing, creating imaginary friends to substitute for the baby sister who went missing from her life. Hemon's story was gripping and accessible, and narrative imagination helped him and his daughter survive the pain of loss.

While I looked to these memoirs, essays, and films, I also encountered

Joan Didion's words over and over again in my readings for school: "We tell ourselves stories in order to live."

In December, while my husband and in-laws watched the girls, my parents and I boarded the long flight together from Houston to Ahmedabad, India.

We navigated the bumpy two-hour drive from the big city of Vadodara to little Karmal by sticking our heads out the windows of the car every few minutes to ask a farmer if we were going the right way. A small hand-painted sign in Gujarati script finally marked the town entrance. I saw cows loitering around there, lots of them. We beep-beeped our way around the herd and exited the van, with my mother and father in stitches over how their too-American, delicate daughter reacted to the mooing and cow "surprises" on the dirt footpath.

"Welcome to your dad's India!" my dad laughed.

I felt utter serenity in my dad's birth village. I could hear my steps on the ground as I walked. I saw exotic birds of every color fly from shoddy windowsills to the two or three wires overhead that brought electricity to the village. Chickens, dogs, cows, and children shared the road, and my mom, dad, and I walked through sugar cane fields together. I had nothing to do but just be there, and I remembered that life could feel elegantly simple.

I also witnessed marks of my father's poverty, like the reed mats the villagers

still sleep on, the outdoor firepits where they prepare their food, and the walls of his school, which even now the children attend only sporadically and barefoot. I learned about the abuse he endured in his childhood. I understood why he was embarrassed to tell me these stories and why he was so loyal to those who had helped him move to America. It made sense to me why his duties as a physician were so important to him and why he gave his children access to whatever opportunities they sought, opportunities he never had growing up. He had never told me these things, and he didn't say them to me quite this way even on our trip.

But together, we walked through his lost and incomplete stories, and together, we finished them.

MAGGIE MERTENS

One of Many

MAGGIE MERTENS is a writer and journalist who lives in Seattle. Her work has appeared in *Glamour* and *The Awl* and on NPR, among other venues. She is working on a memoir about her family.

MY EIGHTH-GRADE BOYFRIEND had a joke he liked to make whenever I talked about one of my four brothers.

"Which one?" he'd ask before starting to list off random boys' names—"Robert? Frank? Jack? Billy? Jose? Nick?"—none of which were my brothers' names. He found this routine hilarious. I found it annoying.

Years later, however, while attempting to write a family-based memoir, I realized he had a point: my family stories are confusing. The cast of characters is simply too long: there's my four brothers (and nowadays add in their girlfriends and fiancées) and my parents (who are divorced and both in relationships with people who

have children of their own), plus, in my extended family (my father is one of twelve children), thirty-six first cousins, many of whom are now married, with their own children. I'm in Russian novel territory here—and there's a reason most people never actually pick up Tolstoy.

I'm lost was a common response to the family stories I turned in for critique during MFA workshops. "I just can't keep track of this many people," a classmate would complain while I sat in the corner, silently fuming. Our workshop rule was that you couldn't speak while being workshopped, only listen. If I could have said something, I would have burst out: "What would you like me to do? Ignore half of my family? Pretend I'm an only child? *Lie?*"

Eventually, I understood my well-meaning classmates were just being honest. It is my job, as a writer, to make my family tree as clear to readers as it is to me. But how?

Usually, when I'm stuck on a writing-related dilemma, I go to the experts. I read and read and read until I'm ready to write again. But my usual standbys failed me: Joan Didion's memoirs center on her tiny family of three—just herself, her husband, and her daughter. Mary Karr had just the one sister to deal with in *The Liars' Club*, and, in *Lit*, just the one son. Making my way through the canon, I thought I saw a pattern: the most successful memoirists and essayists come from small families. Tobias Wolff: one brother (and they were estranged as children). Richard Wright: one brother. Alexandra Fuller: one surviving sister. Augusten Burroughs: one brother.

Was that the secret? I wondered. *To be born into a tiny family?*

I racked my brain, trying to think of even one memoir about a big, rambunctious family like mine. I pulled David Sedaris's *Me Talk Pretty One Day* off the

shelf, thinking, *He only has one sibling, maybe two, right?* And then I remembered Sedaris is one of six children—an even larger immediate family than my own. But somehow, he manages to shape his crowded upbringing into a set of streamlined stories that never get bogged down in who said what or how many of his family members were in the room at the time.

Flipping back through the pages, I started to see how Sedaris pulls it off. He does not take on the gargantuan task, which I had been attempting in my own stories, of making sure every member of the clan has an equal voice and is as fully developed as the narrator. Sedaris actually ignores some of his siblings. Family members might provide colorful anecdotes or funny retorts, but ultimately, they are there only in supporting roles.

After seeing how Sedaris's writing had tricked me, I renewed my search, turning up several more successful memoirists and essayists from large families. Frank McCourt was the oldest of seven children, three of whom died in childhood, and in *Angela's Ashes*, he, like Sedaris, treats his siblings as minor characters. He acknowledges that they all exist, but their trajectories are never the point of narrative focus. The viewfinder the reader looks through is always firmly attached to McCourt.

Maxine Hong Kingston is one of eight children, though you wouldn't be blamed for not realizing it based on *The Woman Warrior*. Hong Kingston goes one step further than Sedaris and McCourt in portraying her large family, relegating her siblings to background roles so far in the shadows that none of them are even named. From time to time, she mentions "my brother" or "my sisters," but they exist without any defining features, as anonymous as a Greek chorus.

James Baldwin was the oldest of nine children—but they, too, are almost

invisible in his work. He touches on his large family in his seminal book, *Notes of a Native Son*, but even in the title essay, which centers around his father's death and his youngest sister's birth, Baldwin turns his attention outside of his home to tell a larger story about the world beyond.

Honestly, I was a bit dismayed when I realized how these successful writers had either diminished the voices of their family members or ignored them entirely. My instinct has always been to mine my family's experiences for material; I feel we are intrinsically linked. I even wrote an early draft of my memoir in the first-person plural: *we* did this, then *we* felt that way. This voice came naturally; our memories are often all mixed up. As a toddler, my younger brother, Teddy, swore he had already been to Disneyland, even though he was not born until years after our family's first trip there, because he heard the stories the rest of us told about it so often. There must be a way to honor this tribal mentality while still maintaining a personal narrative.

Maybe.

Jeannette Walls's *The Glass Castle* is undeniably a book about a family, and major parts of Walls's own story are glossed over in favor of the narrative of the group as a whole. Her three siblings and two parents are vivid enough to be fully realized characters, yet Walls's narrative never gets cloudy, thanks to the barely perceptible distance she keeps as narrator. From the beginning, Walls's voice is speaking from slightly outside of her family group. The first short chapter, set much farther into the future, features a scene in which the narrator views her mother from afar. This narrator stays with the reader when she goes back in time to tell the rest of the story, starting in chapter 2.

I once thought I had finally cracked the big-family code when I decided I

would give each of my family members his or her own chapter, allowing me to tell their stories one at a time so the reader could keep them all straight. But a literary agent who read it told

perspective invites the reader to be part of this group experience.

Nonfiction can amplify one story, helping it become something much larger than the story of one person or

Counterintuitive as it sounds, zooming in close is sometimes the best way to expand a narrative's reach.

me it felt forced—because, of course, it was forced. Walls does not need to introduce her characters one at a time. She places the reader so effectively in her own experience, the chaos and confusion included, that the cast of characters is just accepted. Her singular

even of one family. Counterintuitive as it sounds, zooming in close is sometimes the best way to expand a narrative's reach. Being from a big family, this was a lesson I should have realized sooner: one voice must rise above the cacophony if anyone is going to be heard. ■

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