

Auburn University of Montgomery

Cat Shit in the Attic: A Memoir

Prospectus

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I am a compulsive liar. Birthplace, age, name, career goals, favorite colors, objectives, habits—for all these and more, I have made up ridiculous and innumerable falsities. I lie to seem mysterious, to confuse people, to have fun, to be a smart ass, to avoid prolonging conversations, and I lie because I am damn good at it. I lie because I have lied too long to come clean, and I lie to make living easier. I lie to hide the truth and to hide from the truth. I lie about lying, and I lie about lying about lying. I wear mittens in tricky situations just in case I need to lie about having my fingers crossed.

But like a genetically predetermined alcoholic, I swear that I will give up lying forever so that I can actually give up lying for a dozen months to write a thesis that is the antithesis of my personality. For my MLA thesis, I intend to tell the truth, cold turkey, about all lies I have fed concerned friends and small-talking strangers; I intend to confess and analyze the mental illnesses, deaths, and absurdities in my family that I have been bald-faced lying, white lying, and lying-by-omission about for two decades.

I even told a stranger my real name today for practice.

In his introduction to the book *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, William Zinsser defines a memoir as “some portion of a life,” an explanation just vague enough to mean almost nothing and just philosophical enough to mean nearly everything (11). A memoir is an account of a part of a life, an examination of a time, event, or theme that has meaning to an individual and, hopefully, a reader. Zinsser’s metaphor of the memoir as a “window into a life” perhaps allows the best picture of what a memoir does at its most basic level; the reader gets a rectangular, glassy glimpse into one room of a house that is a life (11). Of course, the memoirs most worthy of reading contain many elements and often illuminate “a distinctive moment in the

life of both a person and a society” (Zinsser 12). In this definition, a purpose of memoirs and, by extension, a purpose of art really emerges. Memoirs are not simply recollections of events but the reconstruction and communication of life with such style and perspective that the reader is captivated, interested, and willing to read the entirety of a work rather than Googling pictures of cats in fedoras. This artistic genre makes readers feel and learn and, hopefully, makes readers *want* to feel and learn.

When I first toyed with the idea of writing a memoir as my thesis, I was concerned that the genre was not academic enough. What contribution, I asked myself, was a memoir to the larger community? The question occurred to me as I listened to another student’s thesis defense. Phrases like “idiosyncratic colloquialisms” and “flagrant, obsequious pandering” rolled out of her mouth with no effort, as if she had been born dismissing authors as politically obsequious and no amount of gum popping in the overcrowded classroom could derail her intellectual bullet train. I listened, understood, and marveled. How, I thought, was I ever going to be able to stand up in front of a crowd of my peers and talk to them about the most horrifyingly memorable events of my life? How could they possibly take my memoir seriously after hearing the cerebral carnival of this student in front of us? How could my retellings of generational addicts and redneck washing machine waterfalls and genius-level carpenters become academic?

In the chair beside me, the most oppressively smart English major I have ever encountered turned her wide, bright eyes on me. I could see questions lurking in those orbs—questions about the thesis she knew I was working on. This smarty-pants hoped to leap into a scholarly discussion about the thematic social issues of Tolstoy or Woolf’s subtle but remarkable critiques of war while I quoted relevant research articles and offered well-reasoned arguments.

“So, what topic have you chosen for your thesis?” she asked, polite and smiling and probably deducing the square root of pi in her head.

Instantly, a combination of truth and falsities invaded my thoughts. “Well, err, it started as one thing, but I’ve sort of branched into another, more informal—I mean, I was thinking about writing on the social, political, and economic implications of Dr. Seuss’s children’s books—”

A disapproving frown shadowed my companion’s face.

“—but I realized that people probably wouldn’t take that seriously,” I continued, my hands flying through the air as they hurried to explain what my mouth hesitated to verbalize, “so I started—I mean, it branched into—that is, I branched it into a sort of...memoir.”

One of her eyebrows took the high ground while the other sat flat and disdainfully close to her eyelashes. “Oh? Interesting. And how does that fit into the MLA program?”

*Because it’s a thesis, I thought dully. What the hell does she mean? Academically? Academically! How is this academic? Tell her something, quickly! Just start talking or she’ll move onto someone less dumb.*

“Well, I was inspired by a thesis Dr. Sterling showed me. Another MLA student wrote about her curious family members and her experiences growing up with them, and I realized how valuable her work was. It was insightful, funny, and thoughtful, and it illuminated often-overlooked aspects of southern culture and the human condition. My thesis would be a study of the mental illnesses and deaths in my family, especially commenting on the consequences of living with mental illnesses and the humor present in almost all sad situations. Really, it would be a culmination of all the work I’ve done over my undergraduate and graduate degree...”

As I drove home later, mentally high-fiving myself for using a phrase like “the human condition,” I realized that I hadn’t been lying at all. Smartypants had only made me coherently

articulate what I had been attempting to organize in my head—especially the reality that this thesis really would be a culmination of all my work at AUM. Written when I was seventeen, my first collegiate paper detailed my experiences as a ten-year-old forced into a deposition during my parents' divorce. The event sparked my realization that egomania and an unquenchable thirst for power had mutated my father's personality, effectively killing the parts of him I once loved. After examining the effects of my father's mental deterioration in an essay format, I became deliberately analytical of my family members, unintentionally paving the road to my current work. Constructing this memoir, this window into my life, will illuminate the powerful place that creative nonfiction has in academia. By allowing the evidence of reality to harmonize with the captivation of art, memoirs propel the passion of emotions to fuel deep intellectual thought and discussion.

In order to better understand and mirror the memoir genre, I have read several outstanding contemporary examples, such as Jeanette Walls's *The Glass Castle* and Mary Karr's *The Liar's Club*. These memoirs particularly struck me. Walls and Karr utilize some of the techniques suggested by *Inventing the Truth* and David Starkey's instructive text *Creative Writing: Four Genres in Brief*, and both works share subtle features that make them memorable and worthwhile.

*The Glass Castle* begins with a short section about the adult Jeanette Walls—the mature and fully-formed personality writing the book—ashamedly hiding in a taxi from her homeless mother. As encouraged in Starkey's text, Walls creates a captivating introduction, intriguing because of the interesting nature of her unusual circumstances and the stark examination of her mother. Because readers are introduced initially to the dirty, wandering shell of Rose Mary Walls and the invisible but still highly characterized father, Rex, they ponder for nearly the rest of the

book how the parents end up on the streets of New York; Walls ingeniously sets a trap for readers that can only be escaped by reading the rest of her memoir. Entrancing and enlightening, Walls's introduction is a perfect example of how to entice and inform readers immediately; it was also a valuable tool for me in understanding how to combine elements of character, plot, and intrigue into a short opening section.

Another especially interesting feature of *The Glass Castle* is its formal breakdown. Walls separates her memoir into five broad sections. Within those sections, no other markers (such as chapters) exist; Walls begins and ends accounts with either a break between paragraphs or a naked page bottom. She never gives titles or numbers to her anecdotes. The feature initially seems insignificant, but upon encountering the end of a section, the beauty of Walls's flowing chapters becomes apparent. The reader is not jarred from one story to the next—not pummeled with a violent recount of her father's drunken rage and then abruptly slammed into one of her family's instantaneously decided cross-country moves. The reader, instead, skates along beside Jeanette Walls, not given time or pause to reflect fully on whatever has just happened; the reader becomes a pair of eyes alongside the observant and rarely commenting Jeanette. After appreciating Walls's technique, a realization came upon me; I *do* want people to reflect. My readers do not have to give each of my chapters a day-long settling period of consideration, but I would like to allow the mental disturbance of a chapter name to break them out of their reading current to bob thoughtfully at the surface before diving in again.

Walls's main function as a character in the story is as a pair of non-judgmental eyes. Her lack of critical commentary is a remarkable trait in her genre, as noted by author Jessica Hockett: "Unlike many memoirists, [Walls] chooses not to weave commentary, reflection, or psychoanalysis into her account, instead relating each episode from the vantage point she

experienced it. This technique allows Walls to avoid judging how her parents chose to live or dwelling on their negligence” (269). Readers can easily jump to decisions about Walls’s parents, condemning them as negligent or dangerous, and because readers make this choice on their own—with little to no direction from Walls—the force of those character beliefs is much more powerful. Only the fact that Walls recognized the events she writes about as worthy of recognition suggests how aware of her parents’ failings she is. Her tone is quite direct and rarely hyperbolizing, and as her stories build up a dog pile of horror, she, “by sheer accretion of evidence,” as critic Lucy Farris says, illuminates her points. Because her stories speak so loudly for themselves, Walls does not need to speak for them. She doesn’t have to say a word.

The distance that Walls puts between herself and what happens around her is a technique that I both want to emulate and reject. Since the idea of perspective is a large theme in my work, I am necessarily working my tone into a voice that mirrors my optimistic, amused perspective; I cannot distance myself from the events so far that judgment is left up to the reader. However, Walls’s selection of events is so careful and fitting that she illuminates the importance of choosing both tales and order. Each event she relates has a reason for being what it is and where it is. I learned about the importance of careful structure from textbooks such as *Creative Writing: Four Genres in Brief*, but I learned the practice of careful structure and choice from Jeanette Walls.

Mary Karr’s memoir touched on some similar features, such as her grabbing introduction. As David Starkey advises, “Drawing the reader in immediately is probably the most important task of any essayist. Unless readers are intrigued enough to make a commitment to a piece of writing, whatever glories lie within will never be seen” (178). Karr seems to have used the advice as her motto when constructing her introductory material. Readers do not know the

context that surrounds Karr's disturbing tale of nightgowns, police, a doctor, and involuntarily silence, but her abrupt shove into the flurry of action is consuming; readers *must* know more about this *in medias res* story and, appetites whetted for more police lights and flames, are eager to wade through the less action-packed early scenes of Karr's life. A captivating opening—the foyer, the handshake, the appetizer of a book—can hardly be overestimated.

Another particularly valuable feature of Karr's writing is her tone. Unlike the quiet spectator Jeanette Walls, Mary Karr infuses her writing with perspective, color, and opinion. Critic Karen Schoemer comments that Karr's "narrative meanders and moseys through tangents and parenthetical remarks that are sometimes more entertaining than the point she's getting to," which is an accurate observation and the mark of a great storyteller (69). Nothing sterile or simple exists in *The Liar's Club*, and although Karr's stories would be intriguing even if related without bias or commentary, her Texas-infused tone really sets her life on fire. I found much relief in Karr's unforgiving and unflinching examination of her life and family members because manipulating tone is an extremely important part of my thesis goal. Watching Karr poke fun at herself, whirl drab circumstances into glittering literary gems, and chuckle at normally horrifying occurrences stressed the same point that I intend to make: how people perceive and decide to react to circumstances is just as important, if not more, than the actual circumstances.

However, a caveat about questionable accuracy arose in one review of *The Liar's Club*. The book's careful structure and artful nature "creates a faint sense of disunion between the tough, tormented child being described and the cool, prize-winning, poetry-writing academic pictured on the back cover," according to Elizabeth Young (39). While the critic does not call out Karr as a suitable member for the liar's club of memoir writers, her subtle suggestion that Karr's current personality does not jibe with her unstable youth establishes an issue about writing in this

genre. Memoirs must be accurate; *Four Genres in Brief* carefully echoes this warning, and writers who bastardize the rules of the genre give a bad name to the genuine memoirists. Furthermore, Elizabeth Young's words reveal an unpleasant truth of the memoir genre; despite how accurate and well-documented a memoir is, someone, somewhere will question its authenticity.

On a final note about the biggest effects these two books have had on me, I must parrot a simple statement that every creative writing instructor tells his or her students: Show, don't tell. The basis of both Karr's and Walls's works is a portion of a life story, but the lifeblood of each book is the manner of telling. Starkey advises his readers to "[t]hink first of keeping your readers interested before you worry too much about informing them" (164). Karr and Walls could have easily ignored this rule, made lists of all the important events in their lives, condensed their thoughts into bulleted lines, and sent them out in the world for readers; this method would have saved enormous amounts of time and paper, but, of course, the value of these memoirs is how they are conveyed and their ability to make readers care and feel. People can talk about maddened mothers burning down houses all day long, but until a person is thrown into the flames, running beside a desperate and panicked child, feeling the smoke and debris start to replace the oxygen in a room, the real weight and horror of the fire is unreachable.

In order to maintain the best clarity and coherence, this thesis will follow my life chronologically. Some events may bleed into others or require references to past or future occurrences, but an underlying linear structure will outline my work. Although I do not plan to distinguish the three areas with markers larger than chapters, my childhood, teenage years, and adult life will naturally separate my work since my attitudes and major life events give a distinct voice to each portion of my life.

Childhood, which will appear at the beginning of my work, will begin with my move to Alabama at age three and continue until my tenth birthday, an age marking my complete loss of faith and reassurance in my father, Chris. Though I will reference a few sketchy but relevant memories from my life in Massachusetts, this section will be devoted to the slow, impressive collapse of my family; my brother's early evidence of mental troubles; my first experiences of death via my well-endowed (and difficult to encase in a coffin) aunt; and my realization of Chris's multiple mental illnesses (including alcoholism, addiction, and mental abuse). A number of smaller events will contextualize and fill the gaps between the larger events, but the occurrences listed above mark the largest or most consuming goings-on.

Teen life, which will begin around age eleven and end before my high school graduation in 2006, will cover my brother's spectacular descent into mental illness and resulting run-ins with the law; the self-inflicted deaths of my uncle and cousin; the transformation of my aunt's family into white trash thieves; the discovery of my biologically predetermined craziness; and the overall full blossoming of my family's mental illnesses. As with my section dealing with childhood, the teen life section will be filled with many events of smaller brevity and interest that will make the memoir intelligible.

Finally, the last section will cover my adult life, which started in high school and continues up to the construction of this thesis. The major events in this section will deal with the unexpected death of my best friend's father; my mother's parents' deaths; my final break from religion; my brother's slow pseudo-recovery; and the convergence of my largest themes. As with the previous two sections, a plethora of smaller events will contextualize and fill out the large happenings.

My title, *Cat Shit in the Attic*, refers to a symbolic image that will appear throughout my work, and that image is actual cat shit in my actual attic. For almost my entire life, I have struggled in my decaying, century-old farmhouse—my parent’s divorce forever interrupted the modernization of the dwelling—which, despite looking like a house, has all the living conveniences of dirty tent. The house and its constantly-deteriorating state will be largely featured in the memoir, so enumerating its features here is pointless; the only necessary detail I must give is that regardless of what barriers we erect, our pet cats still manage to MacGyver their way into the attic so they can crap there. Why they must crap in the attic is a mystery, but perhaps this memoir will help me deduce the truth since the constant presence of this inescapable, undesirable substance functions as a perfect metaphor for the mental illnesses, embarrassing incidents, and inescapable familial troubles that are the focus of my work. I intend to use several symbolic images to aid my main themes, which are death, mental illnesses, and the effects of each; the role of fear in the modern southern life; and the importance of humor and perspective.

In *Four Genres in Brief*, Starkey warns, as many instructional memoir texts do, that “at some point, the *writing* of your memoir is going to supersede your own memories, and the life you have lived will become secondary to your expression of it” (178). I am perfectly willing to cannibalize my memories; they aren’t doing much good as they are right now, anyway. These recollections have been parading down the main street of my mind, throwing out disgusting candy no one eats and jamming up blocks of mental traffic for a long, long time. I have learned from my Catholic friends that confession is not just God’s way of wagging his finger at his followers; confession is good for the soul and the conscience. I rarely confess anything, even to those closest to me; as I expressed earlier, I generally lie, lie, lie, and put a big, fat, red lie-cherry

on top. Since I have never been adept at verbally communicating troubling events, writing offers me a glorious outlet. This idea may seem counterintuitive; after all, does writing this thesis not mean the truth hidden behind my closely kept falsehoods will be waiting on a shelf for anyone to discover? The question worried me initially, but I dispelled my concern because of airports.

In airports, thousands of strangers hurry past one another, bumping shoulder bags and apologizing in a cornucopia of languages, and—most importantly—never seeing one another again. People know this, and as a result, they associate airports with anonymity. It has been my great misfortune (or advantage, as perspective has allowed me to see it), to be that quiet, honest-looking person who people, desperately in need of a psychologist, sit down next to and pour out absolutely insane life stories because they know they'll never see me again. I cannot tell Susan's neighbor that she has an obsessive habit of pooping in their rosebushes because I don't know Susan's last name or address. I cannot tattle on Richard for his Slovakian-themed threesome with a senator and the senator's sister-in-law because I don't know what state Richard lives in. I cannot even suggest to Dave's mother that he desperately needs counseling for playing Warcraft twenty-two hours a day and eating nothing but Doritos and Dorito-sandwiches because I don't even know if Dave's mother is alive. Susan, Richard, Dave, and a hundred other people know that their secrets are protected in me simply by their anonymity, and through the lives of my airport confidants, I learned that under the surface of nearly every person in the world is layer of complete crazy, obtained from a crazy life. My life is not special or unusual; the only difference between myself and Susan Rosebushpooper is that I am willing to share on a moderately public level. I hope to allow other people the same power of realization; much like death, knee-scrapes, and taxes, everybody is and has to deal with crazy. It is time to get over it.

While I want to create this thesis in order to contribute to the academic community and to acquire my MLA degree, I have additional personal reasons. My mother and brother both live in Massachusetts now. There is something about that state that draws people with our chromosomes back again and again. I live in our old farmhouse alone, waiting for someone to finally, finally buy it—waiting for the market to flip, waiting for a house restoration expert to fall in love with it, waiting for a timely cigarette butt to burn the whole heap down. Whatever end waits for this brick-and-mortar tent, I stand impatiently on the battleship gray porch, waiting.

In moving away from this house, my family members have also moved away from the memories attached to it. They live in modern homes now—ones with central heat and air, insulation, and duct tape only in appropriate places, like tool boxes. But I wake up to memories every morning, confronting them in the dingy, peeling kitchen tiles; the thick, ill-concealed crack in the front door; the badly plastered fist marks in the walls—every inch of ceiling, wall, or floor that should have been fixed properly but instead barely sticks together from Elmer’s glue and chewed bubble gum. Every time I see a window we begged to stop cracking with scotch tape, I think, *There is no closure for me here. Hell, that window doesn’t even have closure from the wind.*

I realized how this thesis would help me when I taught a semester of English composition. One of my students wrote in a journal entry about how she was finding it so hard to forgive her father for all the troubles he had caused her, her siblings, and her mother. She said that she would probably never be able to forgive him. I almost wrote a lot of advice in the narrow margins of her notebook. I almost wrote about how people are terrible sometimes and do not deserve forgiveness—how she would probably never forgive him and would harbor bitterness against him for the rest of her life. I almost wrote “Suck it up” in big red letters. As my pen

traced the beginning letters of all the sentences in the air, I suddenly found myself writing, “Sometimes, life isn’t about forgiveness. It’s about acceptance.”

Acceptance: that is my catalyst behind writing my memoir. I do not want to relive my few decades of life in order to figure out why everyone acted as they did or made the bad decisions they made. I do not even want to feel better about the things that happened. I just want to make sure, once and for all, that I have accepted everything so I can move onward. I want to yank this pageant of memories from my head, dye a few hundred sheets of paper with their ink, and shut the book on them forever.

Just as much, though, I want other people to see what I did. I want to show people how to see the humor in terrible situations. I want them laughing at funerals, giggling as their houses burn, turning their suicidal family member’s screams into hilarious catch phrases. I want them to see the difference between fear and consequence, learn how to look past anxiety, change to a better perspective, and, if only for a minute, breathe easily. I want them to live as I have learned to live: perpetually stuck in the acceptance stage of grief.

As I write this prospectus in my kitchen, sitting at my brother’s wicker-and-glass patio table while, in the corner, the washing machine shakes violently beside the *thump-thump-thwumping* dryer, fighting a cat that demands to sit in my lap so she can rhythmically sink her claws into my legs over and over, and propping my heavily booted feet on the edge of the table in order to distance myself from both the ice sheet that is the yellowing linoleum floor and the dog that is determined to eat the entirety of my shoelaces, I realize my environment might be slightly distracting. In this same moment, I realize that my entire life has been distracting and that, much like the scientists who are trying to recreate the conditions of early Earth in order to figure out how life started, living in the same conditions that inspired the creation of my memoir

will only benefit my work. This is my final reason for wanting the memoir to be my thesis; I currently reside in the ideal circumstances for creating this work.

Since this memoir is a piece of creative nonfiction and not research heavy—outside of researching my mental files and timeline—I will not incorporate an abundance of external sources; however, since all writing is dialogical with all other writing, I must give particular credit to several authors and works that have affected me and my thesis. Additionally, in order to understand better the purpose of a memoir and creative nonfiction works, I have examined several relevant academic texts, as well as a number of published memoirs that will act as guides for my own writing. Below is a list of sources that will appear in my thesis or have already appeared in this prospectus.

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