

Memoirs of Survival:

Reading the Past and Writing it Down

Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club* and Barbara Robinette Moss' *Change Me Into Zeus' Daughter*

The literary memoir has become popular in the last several years. Almost everybody who makes it to adulthood has a story to tell about negotiating the perils of growing up in a dangerous culture. Some, especially those written for a pre-teen audience, recount happy memories, playing stickball in the vacant lot and bubblegum-blowing contests. Most, though, are stories of survival recounting how the teller overcame obstacles to snatch at a more satisfying adulthood. The overt message of these memoirs is the same as many young adult novels, i.e., “You can do it.” “You are not alone.” “Determination and persistence can take you as far as you want to go in America.” The implicit message, though, is that through writing, you can reclaim a childhood, where you were once an impotent victim, and through the power of authorship, make it your own, reconcile yourself with your past, and—ultimately—heal. Both the explicit and implicit themes make such memoirs valuable tools in the junior high or high school English classroom although they differ from young adult fiction in that the voice is usually that of a grownup recalling the perils of childhood with the message that the path to manhood or womanhood is negotiable and adolescents need to be aware that life continues beyond high school.

Two memoirs of growing up female in the South, Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club*, and Barbara Robinette Moss' *Change Me Into Zeus' Daughter*, demonstrate how writing both frames and heals the scars from growing up. Both authors were impoverished, their childhoods marked by parental substance abuse, male

violence, distant mothers, chaos, and social marginalization. Because they were children, both girls were helpless in the face of parental whimsicality, no matter how much each may have raged against circumstance. Yet, during the course of their brutal childhoods, each girl was given the gift of literacy by their mothers and a vision of somewhere away from the homes they were planted in as a place to grab for the American Dream.

Male violence perpetrated by a hair-trigger temper is a feature of southern culture. The two fathers in these memoirs are both violent and proud of it. Significantly, both books begin with the death of the father and the family gathered around the casket, each girl now a grown woman trying to reconcile the past over the body of the dead father with their living mothers and siblings. Beginning each memoir with the fathers' deaths suggests the end of the dominating father figure and signals the freedom for the authors to finally write their own stories and reveal the subversive, almost hidden influence of the mothers.

The maternal influence was subversive and hidden because both mothers were unable to give their daughters the love and emotional support they needed because of the dysfunctional relationships with their husbands. Each mother was emotionally distant. Karr's mother was deemed by the neighbors as “nervous” and was at times sent away to an institution to recover. This “nervousness” is not only a euphemism for insanity but was hereditary. Karr says, “when Mother could be brought to talk about her own childhood, she told stories about how peculiar her

mother's habits had been" (44). Although her mother wasn't physically abusive, Karr was always wary of her emotional outbursts because it seemed as if "some kind of serious fury must have been roiling around inside her. Sometimes . . . she would stand in the kitchen with her fists all white-knuckled and scream up at the light fixture that she wasn't whipping us, because she knew if she got started, she'd kill us" (71). Karr's mother spent months at a time in an alcoholic or pill-induced haze. At those times, Karr would count her drinks, pour bottles of liquor down the sink, listen to her parents' violent fights, and worry. She says, "Mother had always been a binge drinker, not touching a thimbleful for weeks or months when she'd gotten her gullet full. But once she took that first drink, she was off" (126-127). At other times, her mother lay in bed for days, not bothering to get dressed, reading from a stack of books piled on her bedside table (142). Karr remarks that she called these episodes "Her Empress Days [. . .] for she spent them doing nothing more than ministering to herself in small ways" (230). This, of course, led to many incidents of parental neglect and even allowed the opportunity for sexual abuse from unsavory babysitters. But, even worse were the times her mother became addicted to uppers. "[S]he never slept. I don't mean that she didn't sleep much, or slept less. I mean all those months, we never saw her asleep. Ever" (230). On many occasions, especially when drunk and mournful, Karr's mother talked "in a misty-eyed way about suicide. She would gaze up [. . .] and say that for some folks killing yourself was the sanest thing to do" (230). As Karr notes, such threats "will flat dampen down your spirits" (71). And, in fact, on at least three occasions, with the family in the same car, Karr's mother seemed intent on committing suicide and taking the rest of the family with her. As a result, Karr learned early that "things in my house were Not Right [. . .]." (9). This perception then quickly "metastasized into the notion that I myself was somehow Not Right, or that my survival in the world depended on my constant vigilance against various forms of 'Not-Rightness'" (10).

Robinette Moss's mother was a teetotaler and the family provider in the face of her husband's alcoholism and the needs of her seven children. Nevertheless, she would not leave her husband, even when her daughters begged her to do so. Her mother's addic-

tion, it seemed, centered on her father as if in the face of his presence, she had no will of her own. The images Robinette Moss creates suggest a sexual bond between them that defied logic. Once, for example, her father reappears after an unexplained absence of several months, which left his family destitute. Her mother's reaction was to lean "against the doorframe, her eyes round and lips slightly parted, her fingers caressing the buttons on the front of her cotton dress. She straightened as Dad approached, like a puppet whose strings were drawn tight [. . .]. Her hand moved to her mouth as she sucked in a jagged breath, but her liquid blue eyes did not spill a single tear" (73). Another example of her mother's sexual fixation comes with a lengthy description of how her mother shaved her father's face every morning he was home. In the final step of the process, her mother "stood back and, with the discerning look of an artist at work, admired the handsome lean face, the wide shoulders and muscular chest. He opened his eyes and she looked away and handed him a starched, long-sleeve blue shirt" (162). Robinette Moss suggests that her mother "craved" her father "as much as he craved alcohol," and she excluded friends from her life because "she didn't want her time to be taken up by anything other than Dad" (110). All this, in spite of his frequent physical and emotional abuse. Robinette Moss remembers, "There was never any real reason for Dad to get mad at Mother; he was mad at her because there was nothing to get mad at—mad because she was so good and he was so terrible" (82). Her mother's coping mechanism was to simply pretend "it didn't happen: [she] cleaned up the broken dishes and furniture, hid bruises, took him aspirin and breakfast in bed and kept us quiet and out of the way" (82). In consequence, Robinette Moss describes her as being much of the time "benumbed" (142). Robinette Moss says, "Mother often stared into space, but she never cried. Tears had become an emotion she denied herself and, consequently, her children" (115).

Because of her mother's emotional absence, Robinette Moss craved her mother's undivided attention, a rare occurrence, and an opportunity often taken without her mother's awareness. For example, Robinette Moss got an extra treat every morning because she helped prepare the school lunches for the entire family. She says, her mother "thought I didn't mind because of the extra Little Debbie cake. But I

really liked it because I had my mother all to myself for forty-five minutes every day [. . .]. Sometimes we talked” (197). More often, though, Robinette Moss’s special needs were ignored. She suffered through scarlet fever without seeing a doctor. For a time her mother nurtured her, but when it became apparent her daughter was going to survive, “as if in conspiracy with Dad [she] went blindly through the days, pretending I wasn’t sick. She became irritated if I vomited or collapsed dizzily into a chair. Both of them looked through me as if I weren’t there at all” (172). Robinette Moss suffered the results of abuse and neglect. She became a head rocker, afflicted with nervous tics. She also says, “I grew thin and pale. Protruding, crooked teeth parted cracked, bitten lips. Mouth breather. Tongue-thruster. The epitome of a guttersnipe. My hazel eyes made only the briefest contact with other eyes before darting back to the floor” (103).

Both authors of these memoirs then seemed destined for lives similar to their mothers or even worse. Yet, in spite of their massive failures as parents, both mothers gave their daughters a way out of the sordid circumstances of their homes, namely, the gift of literacy and a vision that horizons stretched far beyond their immediate surroundings. Both mothers were educated. Karr’s mother had lived and worked in New York City and was an artist. Her husband and his friends had built her a studio in the garage. When Karr first entered the studio and saw her mother’s painting, she says she felt “like a thief in church [. . .]. The whole idea of erecting a person—from tinted oil and from whatever swirled inside my mother’s skull—filled me with a slack-jawed wonder” (59). Her mother’s bedtime stories were about artists her mother loved: “Van Gogh’s lopped-off ear; Gauguin’s native girls; the humpbacked Degas mad for love of his dancers; how Pollock once paid a fortune for a Picasso drawing, then erased it in order to see how it was made” (59). Karr’s mother also carried battered art books with her wherever they went in their travels. Karr makes constant references to how images in her daily life reminded her of images she’d seen in “mother’s art books” (117). When drunk, or lonely, or suicidal, her mother played opera, or Bessie Smith songs, and told stories of her life in New York, which made it sound, in contrast to Leechfield, Texas, where Karr grew up, like a haven for the finer senses. Her

mother remembered New York as “the holy land of her youth and from which she felt exiled” (128) and told stories of seeing Maria Callas at the Metropolitan opera or watching Marlene Dietrich climb out of a cab, covered in a scarf that only revealed her lonely eyes (129-130). She watched Einstein lecture at Bell Labs. “She always told us about famous people . . . she described the Ink Spots swaying over a silver microphone in some Harlem nightclub, and how Bing Crosby once smoked marijuana on somebody’s penthouse terrace under a big, buttoned-up moon” (131-132). Further, her mother was an avid reader. “She toted *Das Kapital* around in her purse for years” (12). On days she was depressed, “She wouldn’t get out of bed, seemingly hypnotized with whatever book she had propped on her middle reading” (125). Karr remarks, “The bedtime stories she told were [about] Athens in the age of Socrates, [. . .] the Paris of the twenties; Vienna when a sick and sweaty Mozart was scribbling out the notes to his own requiem” (212). Karr’s grandmother had bought them a set of encyclopedias, and Karr learned about “how the Rockies were formed by glaciers sliding across the continent to rake up zillions of tons of rock” (189).

Thus, in spite of the domestic chaos that surrounded her, Karr grew up enamored of storytelling and the world of art, and she focused on reading and writing to take her away. She learned to read by the age of three, showing off her prowess by reading the front page of the daily newspaper and comic books aloud for acquaintances (62, 141). She read books she liked hundreds of times (240). She did well in school, even getting a 100 on her spelling test on the day her mother in a fit of “nervousness” burned up all the furniture and clothes in the house (145-147). A year later, as their family disintegrated and her mother married a new man, Karr still excelled in school, “I moved eighteen reading levels and twelve math levels the first week, a new school record, achieved as much from boredom as ambition” (219). She spent her spare time reading and writing poetry “in the cool comfort of the Christian Science Reading Room” (196). She kept a journal, poetry drafts, and rules for behavior in Big Chief tablets. At times, reading and writing filled her “with such light that I want to tell somebody about it” (241). In this way, through the flawed example of her mother, she was given, by the very association with her, the gift of story, a knowledge of

the power of words to take her away and shape her own experience, and a vision to dream which she eventually fulfilled.

Robinette Moss' mother gave her daughter the same gift through association and example. Her mother triggered her interest in art because she had taken art courses and had held on to the textbooks throughout every change in fortune. Robinette Moss recalls, "I loved every page." She traced the drawings of famous paintings and carried them in "a cardboard portfolio that held Mother's old pencil drawings [. . .]. (64-65). Her mother was also a singer. She had sung in the Marine Corps choir (97) and even made recordings. Her children were used to hearing her "sweet soprano as she did the dishes" and other household chores (29). But even more important, she gave her children the gift of language and story. Robinette Moss' mother had been famous in her circle as a young girl "because she could recite almost any poem on request" (110). And she taught all those poems to her children. Robinette Moss recounts, "Along with all the other books Mother owned and carried with her from place to place was an old tattered poetry book. It was our source of entertainment [. . .] before TV, radio and RC Cola." Their mother read to them while they ate meals, while they rested on the porch after dinner, when they sat through thunderstorms and feared tornadoes. "She had repeated the same poems so often that we had chimed in to help her through the lines" (111). The children even put on Christmas plays and recitals as gifts. They grew up knowing as many poems by heart as their mother, poems such as, "The Village Blacksmith," "The Rum Tum Tugger," "Hiawatha's Childhood," "Dream Fairy Dear," "Oh Captain! My Captain!," "The Charge of the Light Brigade," "The Donkey," "Little Willie," and "The Tale of the Custard Dragon" (112-113). The many books that her mother packed from place to place as the family traced a downward spiral into deeper poverty also included a store of much loved novels. Repeatedly, throughout the memoir, Robinette Moss refers to her mother reading while cooking, while rocking a baby, when resting from a long day, or any time she had a spare moment and a free hand to hold the book.

Robinette Moss does not write much about her success in school, except to speak of the humiliations caused being poor and misshapen from malnutrition.

However, the fact that she graduated from high school under such conditions speaks for itself. She saw her way out because the gift of language and the concept of horizons beyond the immediate had shown her the importance of education. She does recount her huge sacrifices in attending college and graduate school, where she obtained degrees in art, while raising a child as a single mother. She accepted charity from her church, borrowed heavily on student loans, collected Coke cans and painted surfboards but received no help from her father and only a little from her mother.

Robinette Moss recalls that she would not have gotten through school without her son Jason. She says, "Through the years he and I had clung together, determined to create a different destiny for ourselves" (302). The determination to create that destiny could only have been born from the visions she received from her mother of horizons that stretched to include music, art, and literature.

A vision of broader horizons led to advanced education and artistic endeavor for both authors. Karr is a poet. Robinette Moss is an artist. Yet neither could leave their childhood behind until they had written about it, framed it in their own words, and thus, put it in a perspective they could deal with. Karr frequently admits that her memories are not the same as her older sister's, most particularly on the occasion when her grandmother died. Karr says, "She died, and I wasn't sorry" (99), mainly because of her memories of the grandmother's cruelty and insanity. She admits her sister Lecia, on the other hand, "would correct [her] memory. To this day, [Lecia] claims that she genuinely mourned for the old lady, who was a kindly soul, and that I was too little and mean-spirited then to remember things right" (47). Karr also admits that her memory fades in and out and that some of what she remembers is what she has been told (48-49). Likewise, Robinette Moss admits to holes in her memories and to differing memories from her sister Janet, who gets angry when Robinette Moss recalls the violence and misery, which she claimed not to have experienced. If Lecia Karr and Janet Robinette had written these memoirs, they would be very different accounts of the authors' childhoods, which casts doubt on the ultimate "truth" of the accounts that exist. Robinette Moss states in her "Acknowledgements" that she wrote "to go back in time—to heal old wounds and reclaim my family" (ii). The epigraph that begins

Karr's text is a quote from R. D. Laing in *The Divided Self* and reads in part, "We have our secrets and our needs to confess [. . .] and what an accomplishment it was when we, in fear and trembling, could tell our first lie, and make, for ourselves, the discovery that we are irredeemably alone in certain respects, and know that within the territory of ourselves, there can only be footprints" (n.p.). Thus, both suggest that their purpose in writing is not to proclaim some undeniable truth but to frame their stories and give them perspective. Patricia Hampl has spoken of this process, in "Memory and Imagination." She notes that the details the memoirist remembers, whether accurate or not, are symbols for the way the writers felt things were. She concludes:

We seek a means of exchange, a language which will renew these ancient concerns and make them wholly and pulsingly ours. Instinctively, we go to our store of private images and associations for our authority to speak of these weighty issues. We find in our details and broken and obscured images, the language of symbol. Here memory impulsively reaches out its arms and embraces imagination. That is the resort to invention. It isn't a lie, but an act of necessity, as the innate urge to locate personal truth always is. (265)

That is why writing heals and why memoirs are called "creative" non-fiction. Annie Dillard has remarked, "Don't hope in a memoir to preserve your memories. If you prize your memories as they are, by all means avoid—eschew—writing a memoir. Because it is a certain way to lose them [. . .]. The work

battens on your memories and replaces them" (242). Stated another way, the gift of literacy and an introduction to the magic of storytelling has given each author the power to own her own past and to reconcile themselves with it, indicated by the fact that both authors dedicate their work to their mothers. Recollection, reconciliation, and the resolution of past wounds was achieved through the power of storytelling.

Memoirs by men would recount different but essentially similar stories of finding language and personal truth in framing a narrative with words. Certainly such a theme would be welcome in any adolescent English classroom.

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