

## Writing Back:

### Rereading Adolescent Girlhoods through Women's Memoir

**M**ental illness, sexual abuse, genocide, and war provide the backdrop for several contemporary coming-of-age memoirs written by women and marketed to or read by adolescents. These charged topics will come as no surprise to seasoned readers of young adult literature. However, memoir provides a unique mode for telling and invites readers to approach these difficult issues from another vantage point. In the memoirs we introduce below, women politicize their girlhoods in ways that bring our attention to often under-represented and complex experiences of feminine coming-of-age.

Women's coming-of-age memoirs offer representations of young women that disrupt common assumptions about gender, genre, and narrative. Memoirs, a sub-genre of autobiography, are hybrid texts in which history, personal narrative, and cultural critique converge. While autobiographies tend to be chronological and focus on the author's entire life, memoirs often center on certain periods in time, or themes from the author's experiences. Women's retrospective reconstructions of adolescent girlhood provide alternative scripts about gender.

Below we analyze four recent memoirs written by adult women.<sup>1</sup> In each, the author crafts a story of the self against a specific social, political, and historical backdrop that provides a context for and a commentary about feminine coming-of-age. These accounts by a diverse sample of women differ significantly from

American popular cultural storylines in which adolescent girls are often constructed as wounded. Specifically, these memoirists suggest that race, ethnicity, and sexuality disrupt the idea of a singular coming-of-age experience for *all* girls. Women define the move from little girlhood to womanhood in ways that overshadow the physical markers of feminine coming-of-age. For instance, traumatic experiences such as war or rape often disrupt childhood, requiring young girls to take on adult responsibilities, and to confront hard truths in ways that reorganize any recognizable period called adolescence. However, even as women memoirists tell these disturbing stories of sexual abuse, confinement, and/or war, they refuse to be labeled as victims.

The subjects of women's memoirs included here are often controversial and thus rely on unconventional narrative strategies. Leigh Gilmore writes that, "Texts perform a complex kind of cultural work—never more so than when they seek to represent the 'self'" (22-23). This cultural work involves reconciling a mass of competing materials. Writing a memoir offers an occasion to confront and organize these materials, to provide a social context for them from the author's perspective. Memoirs are self-reflective and highly constructed representations of the self that engage with and draw on conventions of fiction and often incorporate other cultural materials. The texts below rely on a variety of strategies, including allusions to familiar literary or cultural narratives, the use of poetry or illustration, and the inclusion of cultural documents such as clinical files or photographs. In this way, women highlight how individual stories

<sup>1</sup> Adolescent girls have written their own memoirs including, Hunter's *The Diary of Latoya Hunter* and Trope's *Please Don't Kill the Freshman*.

about feminine coming-of-age are also tied to the social.

## Girlhood Memoirs

### Girl, Interrupted

In 2000 a reporter from the *Boston Globe* suggested that Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted* threatened to replace Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* as the "must-read for young women in high school and college" (Bass 7). Like other memoirs written by adults, the audience for these texts blurs the distinction between adult and adolescent literature. As Bass points out, "Many teenagers read the book long before they encounter it in class, just as a previous generation of young women were drawn to *The Bell Jar*" (7).

Kaysen's memoir chronicles her stay in a mental hospital at the age of eighteen. Her retrospective account of her confinement at McLean mental hospital provides a personal and a social commentary about young women and madness. Throughout her memoir, Kaysen resists the psychiatric diagnosis that defined her as a pathological teenager.

One of Kaysen's strategies includes the insertion of official documents from her stay at McLean. For instance, she begins her memoir with a facsimile of the first page of her case record. It reads, "Established diagnosis, mental disorder: Borderline personality" (3). She devotes one chapter to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual's* (*DSM III*) definition of "Borderline Personality of Mental Disorders," which she quotes verbatim. She then juxtaposes the *DSM III's* definitions with her own explanations. She writes:

My self-image was not unstable. I saw myself, quite correctly, as unfit for the educational and social systems.

But my parents and teachers did not share my self-image. Their image of me was unstable, since it was out of kilter with reality and based on their needs and wishes. They did not put much value on my capacities, which were admittedly few, but genuine. I read everything, I wrote constantly, and I had boyfriends by the barrelful. (155)

More specifically, Kaysen places pressure on the gendered terms of the label "Personality Disorder." The *DSM III* defines borderline personality disorder that is "more commonly diagnosed in women." Kaysen argues,

"Note the construction of that sentence. They did not write, 'the disorder is more common in women.' It would still be

suspect, but they didn't even bother trying to cover their tracks. Many disorders, judging by the hospital population, were more commonly diagnosed in women" (157).

Kaysen notes that,

"In the list of six 'potentially self-damaging' activities favored by the borderline personality, three are commonly associated with women (shopping sprees, shoplifting, and eating binges) and one with men (reckless driving). One is not 'gender-specific,' as they say these days (psychoactive substance abuse). And the definition of the other (casual sex) is in the eye of the beholder" (158). Kaysen points out how the gendered terms of her diagnosis link to the ways in which adolescent girls are often defined in terms of their sexuality.

Kaysen underscores the socially constructed link between a girl's sexual practices and her mental health. She asks:

How many girls do you think a seventeen-year-old boy would have to screw to earn the label 'compulsively promiscuous'? Three? No, not enough. Six? Doubtful. Ten? That sounds more likely. Probably in the fifteen-to-twenty range, would be my guess—if they ever put that label on boys, which I don't recall their doing.

And for seventeen-year-old-girls, how many boys? (158)

Kaysen highlights and critiques the ways in which the terms used to institutionalize her are not neutral but gendered. Kaysen's personal testimony challenges the "social truth" that young women are naturally susceptible to mental illness in adolescence.

### Learning to Swim

Like Kaysen, Ann Turner's is a tale of interrupted girlhood. Ann Turner writes her memoir of sexual abuse as a young child in poetic verse, capturing her recurring memories because "it keeps coming back/ like a skunk dog/ on the porch/whining to get in/and I'm afraid/if I don't let it in/it will never/go away" (1). By choosing a poetic form to tell this story she lightens the pain of the memories. Turner suggests that, "By taking something so painful and transforming it into words, rhythm, and images, the experience changed inside. Memories took on a cadence, almost a loveliness, so that it became a gift instead of a tragedy" ("About").

When she was just six years old and engaging in all of the usual summer activities of a child, such as learning to swim, playing with dolls, and picking berries with her brother, her life is suddenly inter-

rupted when a neighbor takes her into his room to “read” her a story. There he “jams his hands/inside of me/ and takes out his private parts/that I didn’t know could look so huge and strange” (27).

Turner’s language, like the other memoirs reviewed here, is often spare and direct, using a child’s voice to create the immediacy of the experiences. Coupled with the use of poetic vignettes, the narrative carries the reader along with Anne as she learns to navigate the social danger and seek safety nets. The use of the swimming metaphor, with sections entitled “sailing”, “sinking” and “swimming,” serves to anchor the narrative. The memoir begins as Anne attempts to swim without her “pink ring” to buoy her up, reminding us of the potential vulnerability of young girls. She struggles to hold herself up and for a moment she “sail[s] above/the drowned leaves!” (13).

After the abuse begins, she refuses to go in the pond and sits on the grass with her ring. She begins to draw angry pictures, obsessively brush her teeth, and withdraw from her body: “I am flying out/of my body/to the corner of the room/above the willowware plates./ I will stay here/until it is safe/to come down” (51).

When her mother finally asks what the “thick boy” reads to her, she is able to tell the truth. “Telling is what matters./ You have to catch/the words you’ve been hiding/inside . . . pulling the words up/and out . . . dropping them into someone’s/ surprised face that/ is what matters” (111). She can then begin to focus on going on with living and breathing, and learning to swim without the pink ring, rejecting the mantle of vulnerable girl.

Turner speaks of writing the memoir as cathartic. For example, about crafting the autobiographical poems in *Learning to Swim*, Ann Turner writes that, “It was terribly painful, like eating ground glass. But at the same time, when they came pouring out of my heart and through my flying fingers, I felt washed, cleansed, and somehow renewed” (“About”). Her memoir serves as a personal recovery tool: a work of art that transforms the experience, a much needed re-crafting of her storyline, and as a political device. Turner works against the institutional and social practices that often silence girls’ and young women’s all-too common stories of sexual abuse. She not only gives advice for others who have experienced abuse, but also provides the phone numbers for help lines. In

this way *Learning to Swim* functions as both therapy and social critique.

### **No Pretty Pictures: A Child of War**

Anita Lobel, the well known picture book illustrator, opens her memoir of the holocaust, *No Pretty Pictures: A Child of War*, this way: “I was born in Krakow, Poland. In a wrong place at a wrong time.” The story begins when she is five years old and chronicles, with graphic descriptions, years of running and hiding with her eccentric and anti-Semitic nanny who was devoted to protecting her and her younger brother. Nonetheless, they are eventually caught while hiding in a convent, and spend time in a concentration camp they barely escape.

In this memoir, Lobel often captures the perspective of childhood as if she has physically returned to it, although it is written more than fifty years later: years mostly spent in the U.S. In this way she captures the rawness of the experiences and the inexplicability of what happened to her, and the failure of many grown-ups to keep children safe. But in doing so, she rejects the mantle of victim then or now. As she writes: “Childhoods are difficult even in the best of times. I look at children in happy time, and I see little people with wisdom in their eyes at the mercy of big people who don’t know what they are doing . . . It is wearisome as well as dangerous to cloak and sanctify oneself with the pride of victimhood” (Prologue).

The photographs of her family life before and after remind us how real the traumatic interruption in her life was, as do the passport documents photographed in the endpapers that chronicle her movements. Somewhat surprisingly, Lobel juxtaposes this reality by opening and closing her memoir with language reminiscent of fairy tales. She closes her story this way:

In the end, what is there to say? I was born far, far away, on a bloody continent at a terrible time. I lived there for a while. I live here now. My love for this country grows with my years. My life has been good. I want more.

Mine is only another story (Epilogue).

Lobel allows us to enter and witness her childhood—by removing layers of narrative representation and leaving us as close as possible to her chaotic experiences as she now remembers them. She provides limited attempts to explain it to us. There are

few justifications for her attachment to her odd Christian Nanny, yet the irony is not lost on readers. She also explains little about her lack of connection to her own parents when they are reunited. Having already come of age in Swedish sanatoriums, she is more concerned with her shame of being “an ugly, obvious Jewish girl” among the blond Swedes. As she says of this childhood perspective: “I was barely five years old when the war began. Only when I was much older did the horrors and terrible losses of fully conscious people during all those years of terror dawn on me” (Prologue).

In the Epilogue, Lobel recalls the “shame of being watched by a young man while standing naked” as she was bathed by her cousin at a concentration camp, and imagines how the women she knew fared, such as her grandmother. She writes,

I was ten years old when I climbed on to a boxcar transport. I think of my grandmother on one of those trains. Almost certainly separated from Grandfather, she had to have been crammed, sorted, pushed in to the barracks with hundreds of other women, shouted at, forced to take off her clothes. Somewhere the old woman who had made her daughters learn proper German had been stripped naked and shoved and humiliated by strapping young German soldiers. . . . I can picture it. I will never know. (190)

As in other memoirs by women Holocaust survivors, shame of the female body arises as a familiar theme. Lobel’s memoir allows young readers to witness her experiences in all their chaos and incomprehensibility through her crafting of a powerful and complex girlhood narrative against the backdrop of war, dislocation, and humiliation.<sup>2</sup>

### **Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood**

Like Anita Lobel, Marjane Satrapi deals with the horrors of political repression and war. Satrapi tells the story of her coming-of-age against the backdrop of revolution and war in her graphic memoir *Persepolis*. Influenced by other graphic author/artists such as Art Spiegelman, Satrapi states that, “Images are a way of writing. When you have the talent to be able to write and to draw it seems a shame to choose one. I think it’s better to do both” (“Writing”). Satrapi’s memoir is a three-pronged history of her girlhood, her family, and her country.

<sup>2</sup> For more on Lobel’s memoir and other Holocaust narratives, see Rogers 2002.

Satrapi writes that she meant her memoir to be read by others unfamiliar with Iran so they would realize that she “grew up just like other children” (“Writing”). Satrapi juxtaposes her everyday coming-of-age experiences—playing with friends, fighting with her parents, smoking her first cigarette—with remembrances of the political turmoil around her. The book opens with a section entitled “The Veil.” Satrapi begins with a self-portrait of herself at age ten, one year after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. She argues that since 1979,

“This old and great civilization has been discussed mostly in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism. As an Iranian who has lived more than half of my life in Iran, I know that this image is far from the truth. This is why writing *Persepolis* was so important to me. I believe that an entire nation should not be judged by the wrongdoings of a few extremists” (*Persepolis* ii).

After The Revolution it became mandatory for girls to wear the veil at school. Satrapi uses the comic-book



format to make a commentary about the introduction of the veil into everyday life. The caption “We didn’t really like to wear the veil, especially since we didn’t understand why we had to” is accompanied by a graphic in which young girls invent new uses for it (3).

In this way, she teaches the reader about the shift in life in Iran from secular to religious. “We found ourselves veiled and separated from our friends” (4).

For Satrapi, coming-of-age includes a growing understanding of political repression and the realities of war. She learns about the tactics used to torture political prisoners (51) and experiences the execution of her Uncle Anoosh. Images allow Satrapi to capture these traumatic experiences. In one scene, Satrapi details the loss of her neighbor Neta, who dies in a bombing. Satrapi expresses her rage and grief by a black-filled frame and the caption, “No scream in the world could have relieved my suffering and my anger” (142).



Satrapi learns about the reality of this repression after she is expelled from school. She points out to her teacher that her uncle was imprisoned by the Shah's Regime but executed by the Islamic one. Her mother warns her of the gendered dangers she faces. While the Islamic regime was dangerous to both young men and women who rebelled, Satrapi's mother asks, "Do you know what they do to the young girls they arrest?" (145). She tells her daughter that since it is against the law to kill a virgin, a guardian of the revolution would marry the young girl, "take" her virginity, and then execute her.

Satrapi's family history is tied to "2500 years of tyranny and submission" (11), and most recently Western Imperialism. The story of her great-grandfather, one of the last Iranian emperors, her grandfather and her uncle as historical actors is included in the memoir. It is the telling of this history that gives perspective to her life story and to the contemporary events that she witnesses. Satrapi's first person narrative is tied to a larger political and historical

context. As she remembers and rewrites her girlhood, and her family's history, she also reorganizes common misconceptions about her country. In this way, hers is a story of the self and an unauthorized history of Iranians like her uncle, who died because of repressive politics. In her introduction she articulates the dual nature of her graphic memoir,

"I also don't want those Iranians who lost their lives in prisons defending freedom, who died in the war against Iraq, who suffered under various repressive regimes, or who were forced to leave their families and flee their homeland to be forgotten" (*Persepolis* ii).

## Conclusion

In distinct ways, memoirs by Susanna Kaysen, Ann Turner, Anita Lobel and Marjane Satrapi offer adult perspectives on feminine coming-of-age that might influence educators as well as young adults. They offer additional narratives about adolescent girlhood. Perhaps most importantly, these experimental autobiographical texts serve as counter narratives to books like Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia*, where adolescent girls are often defined as wounded. In women's memoir, authors suggest that the often-rocky transition from girlhood to womanhood is less about hormones or an inevitable "crash" and more about the ways in which feminine adolescence intersects with the social, the political, and the historical. In this way,

women's memoir surfaces as a genre of young adult literature that allows adolescent readers to explore the ways in which stories of the self can also challenge unjust, and often-gendered, social practices.



## Critical Questions for Analyzing Women's Memoir

- What documents does the memoirist choose to include and why?
- What social, historical and/or literary narratives does the author draw on and critique?
- How is memoir both a public and a private text?
- How does the author take up and challenge stereotypes about adolescent girls?
- What does telling a story retrospectively allow an author to do?
- How might you craft your own history into a narrative that challenges common assumptions about gender and/or coming-of-age?

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## Appendix

### Additional Memoirs

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