Also by Judith Barrington

Poetry
TRYING TO BE AN HONEST WOMAN
HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY
HORSES AND THE HUMAN SOUL

Nonfiction
LIFESAVING: A MEMOIR

WRITING the MEMOIR

Second Edition

JUDITH BARRINGTON

The Eighth Mountain Press
Portland, Oregon • 2002

An excerpt from Chapter 9, "Writing about Living People," was first published in the July 1996 special issue of *The Women's Review of Books*, "The Memoir Boom." Permissions acknowledgments begin on page 177.

Cover design by Marcia Barrentine
Book design by Marcia Barrentine and Ruth Gundle

Manufactured in the United States of America
This book is printed on acid-free paper.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Barrington, Judith.
Writing the memoir : from truth to art / Judith Barrington. — 2nd ed.
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 978-0-933377-50-9

1. Autobiography—Authorship. 2. Biography as a literary form.
3. Report writing. I. Title.
CT25.B285 2002
808'.06692—dc21

2002022121

THE EIGHTH MOUNTAIN PRESS
624 Southeast Twenty-ninth Avenue
Portland, Oregon 97214
phone: (503) 233-3936
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For Will,
who wanted to hear the true stories

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Scene, Summary, and Musing

When you write memoirs, you find yourself telling stories. Sometimes the whole memoir is one story interspersed with the narrator's commentary; sometimes the memoir focuses on a theme, illustrated by many different stories. However you structure the memoir, you will need to employ certain fiction-writing skills in order to make the most of the story element. Scene and summary are two important ways of moving through a story. What I call "musing" is an added element, sometimes present in fiction, but always essential to memoir. I have noticed that many beginning writers use summary to the exclusion of scene and dialogue, while writers who are experienced in other literary genres are often leery of musing, since they have been well drilled in the "show, don't tell" school.

One way of understanding scene and summary is to think of them in cinematic terms: the summary is the long shot—the one that pulls back to a great distance, embracing first the whole house, then the street, then the neighborhood, and then, becoming an aerial shot, it takes in the whole city and maybe the surrounding mountains too. This view can include a huge

number of details, but all seen from a distance, none apparently more important than another.

The scene, on the other hand, is more like the close-up, the camera zooming in through the kitchen window, picking out the two figures talking at the table and going up really close to the face of first one speaker then the other while the audience hears each one speak. Many details of the kitchen are lost with this shot: maybe a blurry blue pitcher on a sideboard behind one of the speakers can just be discerned; perhaps there is a vague impression of yellow walls and an open door. But in this scene it is the speakers and what they say that matters. Only selected details are in sharp focus.

Translated into literary time, these two approaches represent different paces. We use the summary when we want to cover a lot of time in a few paragraphs; it gets us from the end of one scene to another scene a year later, and on the way there it fills in information that is important to the continuity of the story.

Scene, on the other hand, deals with a much shorter span of time; we slow down the narrative to something more like the actual time it takes for the scene to unravel in life. Because the writer is going in close and because there is no need to crunch a lot of time into a small space, she can give the exact dialogue, note the expressions, reactions, and movements of the speakers, as well as sounds, sights, smells, etc., in the immediate environment. She may go inside a character's head and give us thoughts that aren't expressed in the dialogue. She may describe in some detail the facial expression of one character. She selects which details to render in close-up.

As you begin to intersperse your summary with scenes, beware of relying too heavily on the scenes to provide all the interesting writing. Summary, too, can offer rich, sensory detail and is certainly not merely a way of moving time along between scenes. This excerpt from Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican* shows just how engaging summary can be:

I started school in the middle of hurricane season, and the world grew suddenly bigger, a vast place of other adults and children whose lives were similar, but whose shadings I couldn't really explore out of respect and dignidad. Dignidad *was something you conferred on other people, and they, in turn, gave back to you. It meant you never swore at people, never showed anger in front of strangers, never stared, never stood too close to people you'd just met, never addressed people by the familiar* tú *until they gave you permission....*

In school I volunteered to wipe down the blackboard, to sharpen pencils, to help distribute lined paper in which we could write our tortured alphabets with the mysterious tilde over the n *to make* ñ*, the* ü*, the double consonants* ll *and* rr *with their strong sounds. I loved the neat rows of desks lined up one after the other, the pockmarked tops shiny in spots where the surface hadn't blistered, the thrill when I raised my desktop to find a large box underneath in which I kept my primer, sheets of paper, and the pencil stubs I guarded as if they were the finest writing instruments.*

I walked home from school full of importance in my green and yellow uniform. It was my most prized possession, the only thing in our house that belonged to me alone, because neither Delsa nor Norma were old enough to go to school.

But school was also where I compared my family to others in the barrio. *I learned there were children whose fathers were drunks, whose mothers were "bad," whose sisters had run away with travelling salesmen, whose brothers had landed in prison. I met children whose mothers walked the distance from their house to church on their knees in gratitude for prayers answered. Children whose fathers came home every day and played catch in the dusty front yard. Girls whose sisters taught them to embroider flowers on linen handkerchiefs. Boys whose brothers took them by the hand and helped them climb a tree. There were families in the* barrio *with running water inside their houses, electric bulbs shining down from every room, curtains on the windows, and printed linoleum on the floors.*

This section, which goes on for another page or so, summarizes a large chunk of time, specified only as the time when the narrator "started school." When we read the verbs in the phrases "I walked home from school" or "I met children," we know that the speaker doesn't mean that she walked home from school on any one particular day, or that she met children only on the first day of school. Because this is summary rather than scene, the verbs refer to an ongoing set of actions that took place over time. Although this summary gives many interesting details and employs vivid images such as "the pockmarked tops shiny in spots," it never moves into a scene, which would require the writer to fix on one particular day within that period.

A scene will often begin with a specific time location such as "one day in spring," "Thursday afternoon," "three weeks' later," or "at five o'clock." Here is the beginning of another piece from Santiago's memoir. You can compare the specific time location, and the close-up style of the scene, with the summary in the previous example.

Sunday morning before breakfast Abuela handed me my piqué dress, washed and ironed.

"We're going to Mass," she said, pulling out a small white mantilla, *which I was to wear during the service.*

"Can we have breakfast first, Abuela. I'm hungry."

"No. We have to fast before church. Don't ask why. It's too complicated to explain."

I dressed and combed my hair, and she helped me pin the mantilla *to the top of my head.*

"All the way there and back," she said, "you should have nothing but good thoughts, because we're going to the house of God."

I'd never been to church and had never stopped to classify my thoughts into good ones and bad ones. But when she said that, I knew what she meant and also knew bad thoughts would be the only things on my mind all the way there and back.

Unlike the previous example, in this excerpt, because it is a scene, verbs such as "I dressed "and "combed my hair" refer to actions performed *on one particular day.*

You will notice, too, that this scene, unlike the earlier summary, contains dialogue—that, in fact, the conversation between the narrator and Abuela plays a major role in pulling the reader up close to the action and bringing the two characters into focus. To write good scenes you must grapple with dialogue, which requires not just that you listen carefully to how people actually speak, but that you select judiciously among all the things they say. Sometimes a student will protest, when her dialogue is criticized, "but that is exactly what they said," and I have no doubt that it's true. However, a transcript of real life does not make for an engaging story any more than a photograph taken from your window necessarily makes for a striking picture of your environment. In both cases, there are choices to be made: how close up the observer will stand; who or what will be in sharp focus; what will be left out; and many more questions of aesthetic significance, the answers to which will determine how pleasing or affecting the scene turns out to be.

As for making your dialogue realistic, there is no better test than to read it aloud as you write it and as you revise it again and again. Do not be tempted to add spice by way of the attributions. These are the "he saids" and "she saids," which you will sometimes need in order to make it clear who is saying what. Since the usual practice is to use a new line each time you switch speakers, attributions are likely to be needed less often than you think; use them only when the conversation would be unclear without them. Don't shore up the dialogue with descriptions such as "he snapped" or "she mused," or phrases such as, "he said in an endearing tone," or "she replied with a sarcastic edge to her voice." In the best writing, that kind of information is revealed in the dialogue itself and the reader gets to know the speakers through their own words.

In memoir, of course, you are writing true stories, and the re-creation of dialogue that actually occurred in your past raises again that sticky question of truth. You probably won't recall the exact words, except here and there when certain moments made a profound and lasting impact on you. Even if you can remember or if you have a record of a conversation, the faithful transcription of what was said is unlikely to work well on the page. You must select the best words, arrange the telling phrases, and move your story along with dialogue that adds to your depiction of the characters.

In most cases, you will not have a record and will have to improvise, always keeping in mind that you are not writing fiction. By all means, leave things out; by all means, make someone's speech clear, where it might have been so convoluted as to lose the reader; but work consistently toward the truth. For me, this again means looking hard for the heart of what actually happened, rather than for the good story that may have its seeds in experience but which takes off on a trajectory all its own.

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The "musing" element of memoir appears in two different forms. Sometimes it takes place right there on the page, visibly separated from the experience it is reflecting on; at other times the author lets us see that she has done her musing out of our sight but displays the resulting wisdom. What is always recognizable, though, is the presence of the retrospective voice.

An example of a memoir with a very clear-cut separation between the story and the retrospective wisdom is the poet James Merrill's *A Different Person*. Merrill tells the story of a thirty-month sojourn in Europe he took at the age of twenty-four. In each chapter, he tells stories from that time and then, at the end of the chapter, switches to a different voice, indicated by italics, to give the reader his current understanding of that

chapter's events. He explains this at the end of the first chapter, when the italics first appear: "A different typeface for that person I became? He will break in at chapter's end with glimpses beyond my time frame."

This is a rather extreme example of a story in which the author's musings are separated out. Other writers may switch back and forth more frequently between story and musing with a less predictable separation, yet the separate elements will be apparent to the reader.

On the first page of *Lifesaving*, I begin narrating a story but in the second paragraph interject some musing on what the story will be about before resuming the narration in the third paragraph:

> *I must have been twelve when my father, my mother, and I participated in the Shoreham to Littlehampton yacht race. Actually, I did that race more than once, but I'm talking about the only time my mother came along—the time that turned into full-blown family story.*
>
> *The way I see it, the story is about my mother's lifelong terror of the sea and my father's pigheadedness. Or perhaps it is about the absurd pretenses of the British middle class, particularly the male of that species, whose dignity must be preserved at all costs. It might be in part about those costs—about the price some of us paid for keeping up that pretense. It might, too, be about a child's lifelong yearning to save her mother. Inevitably, though, as I set out to tell what happened on the day of the race, the telling is also about the creation of myth and the fallibility of memory. Memory lurking in the shadow of myth, waiting to be lost in the dark.*
>
> *It should have been an easy day's sail...*

Sometimes, however, the retrospective voice is well buried within the narrative, as in Vivian Gornick's *Fierce Attachments*:

I lived in that tenement between the ages of six and twenty-one. There were twenty apartments, four to a floor, and all I remember is a building full of women. I hardly remember the men at all. They were everywhere, of course—husbands, fathers, brothers—but I remember only the women. And I remember them all crude like Mrs. Drucker or fierce like my mother. They never spoke as though they knew who they were, understood the bargain they had struck with life, but they often acted as though they knew. Shrewd, volatile, unlettered, they performed on a Dreiserian scale. There would be years of apparent calm, then suddenly an outbreak of panic and wildness: two or three lives scarred (perhaps ruined), and the turmoil would subside. Once again: sullen quiet, erotic torpor, the ordinariness of daily denial. And I—the girl growing in their midst, being made in their image—I absorbed them as I would chloroform on a cloth laid against my face. It has taken me thirty years to understand how much of them I understood.

In this passage, the musing is woven into a summary section. The adult looks back at her childhood through the distance between now and then, and her current understanding is conveyed in phrases like "all I remember is..." and "It has taken me thirty years to understand...." She conveys what she has come to understand in quite subtle ways. For example, readers would know that this author has seriously speculated about the situation when they encounter the phrase "the ordinariness of daily denial." Here is the memoirist making a judgment (or expressing an opinion if you prefer) about how the people in her story maintained "apparent calm." Similarly, her description of the women reveals not only the women themselves but also her acquired insight into their lives and characters: "They never spoke as though they knew who they were, understood the bargain they had struck with life, but they often acted as though they knew."

If you have difficulty moving into a musing voice, consider

this excerpt from Mary Gordon's *Seeing Through Places: Reflections on Geography and Identity:*

Still, there must have been some place, some part of a room, a corner of a hallway, where light struck, where a yellowish patch, transected by striped shadows, came to rest on a wooden floor. Some moment of a day when the windows were let open that the house must have been not dark. But I do not remember such a place or time.

The phrase "there must have been" serves to lead the writer into speculation and, at the same time, tells the reader that this is musing on events that are beyond certainty. Other phrases that may work in this way are, "Why didn't he/she...?" "Surely we could have..." or "I always wondered why...."

You should watch out not to let the need for musing push you toward an earnest voice that appears to take itself altogether too seriously. While you must, in fact, take yourself very seriously in the memoir, the voice shouldn't be ponderous—it can be playful, ironic, humorous, or straightforwardly thoughtful. In *Stop-time*, Frank Conroy, for example, uses a tone that stops just short of poking fun at himself. There's a gentle humor about the voice he uses when he looks at the thirteen-year-old he once was:

Today nothing happens in a gas station. I'm eager to leave, to get where I'm going, and the station, like some huge paper cutout, or a Hollywood set, is simply a façade. But at thirteen, sitting with my back against the wall, it was a marvelous place to be. The delicious smell of gasoline, the cars coming and going, the free air hose, the half-heard voices buzzing in the background—these things hung musically in the air, filling me with a sense of well-being. In ten minutes my psyche would be topped up like the tanks of the automobiles.

As noted earlier, the essence of memoir is "the track of a person's thoughts struggling to achieve some understanding of a problem." But can you really find the meaning of your story in the process of putting it down on paper, just as some people figure out the plot of a novel while writing? Will you know more about your life after writing your memoir than you did before you began, or should you have done all that unraveling beforehand? For most of us, there is a new level of understanding that comes along with the writing, but it's also true that we need to have done plenty of thinking about our lives before we start.

Living a conscious and reflective life is a prerequisite for writing a memoir of substance. Dalton Conley's *Honky* tells the story of his childhood as a poor white boy growing up among black and Hispanic kids in the projects of New York. While the story itself is interesting, it is the author's understanding of his situation—no doubt enhanced by his training as a sociologist—that makes it more than simply a string of anecdotes. His ability to place his own experiences in a wider context and his constant reaching for truths that defy conventional or simplistic analysis, make this a substantial book.

This raises the question of how long it takes to be ready to write. As you read memoirs, you may notice that some people wait a very long time—twenty, thirty, fifty years—before they embark on the writing. Tove Ditlevsen's *Early Spring*, for example, was first published some forty years after some of the events it describes and demonstrates an extraordinary insight into childhood—one that clearly required many years of reflection before it could be written. Gretel Ehrlich's *A Match to the Heart*, however, deals with much more recent events, and focuses less on the layers of internal processing that happen over time than on the initial reaction to a traumatic event that is often externally focused. Each of these time frames works for the book concerned.

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As you practice writing memoirs, you should try to notice where your strengths and weaknesses lie. Do you write pages of scenes, or perhaps spend most of your time musing? Although you will probably enjoy one or two of these aspects of the memoir best—usually the ones you do well—your memoir will be stronger if you make yourself work on those you are least drawn to.

Remember it is scene and summary that make for a good story, while musing in some form makes it layered and thought-provoking. All are necessary components of the memoir. No matter how wise you are about the events of your life, you must be able to turn those events into an engaging story. On the other hand, story alone cannot convey your memoir's deepest message.

At first as you look at these three elements, you can separate them out, giving yourself assignments in scene or summary, or writing a page or two of musing on a story you have already drafted. Thinking of summary as the long shot and the scene as the close-up, remind yourself that you are not merely one camera operator here, but that you are the director. You must deploy several cameras. You must call the shots, using all the approaches available to you.

Later, as your skills develop, the different elements will fall into place more naturally. Soon you will be able to trust that you are telling your stories using more than one approach. Even then, however, it pays to check back through your drafts, looking specifically for scene, summary, and musing. You will be able to do this better with the more dispassionate eye of revision than in that first heady rush of creation.