

## EMBRACING EMOTIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY OVER FACTUAL REPRESENTATION IN FICTION

by Eric Wasserman

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Every semester I find myself in a similar situation with several students in my fiction-writing workshop when they say, "This story I'm working on is about something very personal that happened to me when (fill in the blank)."

One of the most important lessons a beginning writer can learn is that emotional autobiography should always take precedence over factual representation. This took me years of trial and error to grasp when I was first hungry to become a writer. It's difficult to convey to a young writer that events that are deeply personal are usually not going to be engaging to readers. For instance, all of the salacious details of your own sexual history may be riveting to you, but I guarantee they will not be to 95% of the reading world. However, if one has something fresh to say about the universal nature of sex, that's a different story, and where emotional autobiography becomes crucial.

The most emotionally autobiographical story in my first collection of short fiction is about a divorced couple in their forties with a dying son. At the time I wrote that story I was not married and had no children. But the emotional content of the story was deeply personal to me. I had come a long way since when I was twenty and wanted to write a novel about siblings since I am the third of four brothers. I got a hundred pages and realized I was basically rewriting David James Duncan's *The*

*Brothers K*, but with my own family life. There were no wholly realized characters; they were simply my family with fictional names.

I recently completed my first novel. The book has four brothers in it. Only this time, thirteen years after my first attempt at writing about siblings, the only thing that remains autobiographical is the emotional spirit. When I finished the final edit two weeks ago, I realized that I was not thinking about myself or my brothers any longer. Yet, the book is absolutely emotionally true. Nothing remains of the real events I originally wanted to write about because those events are unnecessary. The emotional autobiography now drives my story.

Here is an exercise I did quite often when I was trying to tap into the emotional complexity of my characters while writing my novel. It's something that I've done with my students, especially the ones who are writing deeply personal fiction and don't know how to move beyond their own histories. Take a character from your story and write a letter in that character's voice to another character. You have two ground rules. First, you must express something that you do not personally believe or would never say as the author. Second, your character has to mention something they have done that you would never do. These do not have to be enormous alterations. All of your characters will have your spirit in them in some way. But the little touches will go a long way to making sure they are not stand-ins for real people, but are living on the page autonomously. It can be as simple as the way they speak or their personal tastes. However, the emotions they express in the letter should be from your own experience. Your reader may not be able to relate to you sleeping with your best friend's boyfriend, but your reader has undoubtedly experienced regret in life, and if you place your characters in a situation that hinges on regret, your emotional autobiography will serve your characters better than any factual details. Take all of those real feelings and transfer them into a newly developed character and fictional plot, and you have something to work with that readers can universally connect to.

The most common defense from beginning writers when I point out situations that don't logically flow with their stories is, "But that's how it really happened." If it's how it really happened, the majority of the time you are going to need to create a fictional situation, because what really happened might make sense to you, but will most likely not in a fictional narrative. Emotional autobiography is what is going to bring your story to life, and what will make your reader connect with your characters.

I bring this idea back to Tim O'Brien's brilliant *The Things They Carried*. I've never been a soldier, but I intrinsically identify with all of the emotions those characters are feeling. The author's emotional autobiography replaces factual accuracy and becomes my own emotional history. And that is what we should all strive for when we take the seeds of our own experiences and transfer the spirit of what is meaningful from our lives to the page. ■