

Maureen Murdock Interview with Ronit Plank on Let's Talk Memoir Podcast

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1. Can you share a bit about your newest book *Mythmaking*?

In this book I'm looking at how contemporary memoirs reflect mythic themes. It evolved from my teaching of memoir first at UCLA Extension Writers Program in the early 1990s and then at Pacifica Graduate Institute in the early 2000s and also from my book *The Heroine's Journey* in which I was looking at women's psycho-spiritual development through a mythic lens. I had been fascinated with the work of Joseph Campbell's work where he talked about the 4 domains of myth being Who Am I, Who Are My People, What is My Journey and What is my Purpose and I started to see student memoirs through a mythic lens.

Myths are made up of archetypes which are invisible primary patterns in the psyche common to all human beings. There are recurrent themes that we see in myths and to some degree fairy tales. Different cultures give them different names but the info is embedded in the psyche. For the ancients there was the Great Mother; the contemporary manifestation of the divine feminine is Mary, the Blessed Mother.

2. I love thinking about myths and archetypes. How do myths help writers excavate their stories? **The mythmaker creates a specific story that expresses the invisible pattern but she is inventing only the current manifestation of a mythic theme that already exists unconsciously in the collective.** For example, the archetype of the journey is demonstrated by the journey of the ancient Odysseus; in contemporary film, Rey in Star Wars; Death and Descent is seen in the myth of Orpheus/Euridice where Euridice is the dead spouse; Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* embodies the ancient archetype of dead spouse; Her husband, John embodies current persona.

Memoirs help us find meaning in our lives by showing us how our lives fit into a larger mythic pattern. When a writer recounts a memory about herself she is talking about all of us to some degree. When the writers recognizes that certain episodes in their life reflect a particular mythic pattern (stages of hero/heroine journey or parent/child relationship) they will appreciate their experience on a larger scale, reminding them they are part of a shared global community.

3. On p. 27 you write "By viewing the myth of Demeter and Persephone from Demeter's perspective, one comes to understand mothering not just biologically but as a way of being in the world. Both Demeter and Wayétu' Moore's mother, Mam, (in *The Dragons, the Giant, the Women*) embody the archetype of mother and how much of motherhood is loss—experiencing "the loss of a child as the loss of herself."⁴

Memoirs that focus on the mother-daughter relationship often reflect the archetypal theme of enmeshed relationships like that of Demeter and Persephone and the painful struggle for separation. J, a memoir student who gave me permission to quote her work about separating from her mother, writes, “All the stories I end up writing circle back somehow to me longing for her. Even when I wanted separation, I longed for her to help me separate, to initiate the separation, to mourn it, and then celebrate it with me like I imagined a normal mother would.”⁵ The memoirist Sven Birkerts writes, “The crisis of entanglement and the willful push for separation have to be seen as one of the central impulses in these narratives.”⁶

The purpose of a memoir is not merely to record the events of one’s life but to be conscious of how certain events in one’s life have shaped that life and continue to shape and expand it. Memoir is not only a recollection of the past but also a way of defining oneself in the present. Writing memoir shows the writer becoming aware of creating themselves.”

4. What would you say to the memoirist who feels it is slow going; that they’re having a hard time making meaning from their material or trouble locating their reflective voice? **Memoir writing takes time; you are excavating your life and trying to understand how past events have shaped you. Sarah Ruhl in *Smile: The Story of a Face* (10 years) ends with A woman slowly gets better**

5. In the introduction you write, “Memoir writing has the magic of not just telling a story about the individual who writes the memory but also touching some aspect of the universal. In that way, memoir has the power to be healing for both writer and reader.” And later you write, “Memoir writing is healing because it provides the potential to experience and transform emotions attached to past wounds that were never integrated.”

6. I was hoping you could read from p. 47 **Vulnerability is Authenticity**

“When you are writing about yourself, you are writing about all of us to a certain degree. The struggle for emotional truth is central to memoir. The reader must trust that you have done a fair amount of introspection and that you’re trying to give us your best understanding of a particular memory. If you stay at the same flat level of self-disclosure and understanding throughout, the piece may be smooth but will not awaken a sense of self- recognition from within the reader.

The reader cannot expect you, as writer, to remember every single detail or conversation accurately. But the reader has the right to expect that what you claim to be true will be accurate to the best of your recollection. Be careful not to describe yourself and the people in your memoir as fixed, one-dimensional characters. If you

write your truth, your reader will care about you and the people in your life as well. Your writing will appear authentic, which is much more important than making you look good.

The memoirists in this chapter, particularly Caroline Knapp (*Drinking: A Love Story*) and Chanel Miller (*Know My Name*), were willing to expose their vulnerability to show the reader what it takes to be authentic. There will always be a chance of memoirists being criticized for being too angry, too vulnerable, too revealing, too sad. Women, in particular, are told to stay small, not to take up too much space. Society expects people to be likable, nice, straight, white, able-bodied, and mentally sane. It's understandable that we'd be afraid of making people unhappy or angry at us. We're afraid that our life will be available for everyone to see and that people will judge our life rather than our writing. So we end up judging ourselves. But we can't escape judgment, because judgment is inherent in writing memoir. It takes courage to write your truth."

7. What kind of work can a memoirist do to help them with capturing and embracing vulnerability on the page? **Keep a journal of your feelings, your beliefs, your fears, a process journal just for you. What do you know now that you did not know before?**

8. on p. 95 you write, "When you start writing memoir, don't worry about structure. Let your memories and images lead you. You won't know what your structure is until you've written your memories. Too many writers stop writing because they think they have to know their structure as they begin to write. Memoir does not work that way. There are no set guidelines for structuring a book-length memoir."

-I find this advice freeing and reaffirming and I agree with you. How does allowing the structure to emerge strengthen the content of a memoir? **Your writing becomes more authentic and you take chances you might not take if you were worried about whether certain vignettes fit.**

9. You write on p. 114, "If you take the time to write about a particular memory, the reader wants to know what it means to you. Has it helped you examine the choices you have made in your life? Have you written it in such a way that your reader can identify with you? Without self-reflection, you do not connect on a deeper level with your reader. You might write a beautiful scene, but the reader wants to know how you felt and what you thought. What is your emotional truth? The memoirist and publisher of She Writes Press, Brooke Warner, teaches that "reflection is a moment of inner musing— thoughts and feelings written for the express purpose of making sense of the experience."

-Why is this important even if a memoirist is writing of childhood memories or a time before they understood their actions? **The memoirist gets to ask the child how she felt at the time. Did she feel that she had to be a “good girl” by the expectation placed on her?**

10. I appreciate your discussion in this book about writing vs. publishing. In particular how writing is not publishing. How does keeping that in mind help the memoirist? **She can put aside how her family/friends are going to respond to her book.**

11. Throughout this book you reference a multitude of memoirs. Though there are so many wonderful memoirs available to us, what are some you recommend over and over to your students? **Joan Didion’s The Year of Magical Thinking; James McBride’s The Color of Water; Sarah Ruhl’s Smile; Chanel Miller’s Know My Name; Jeanette Winterson’s Why Be Different When you Could be Normal?**