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THE ART OF MEMOIR

By Mary Karr

256 pp. Harper Perennial. Reprint ed. 2016, first published in 2015.

Mary Karr applies her experience and wisdom as a literature professor and an award-winning memoirist to *The Art of Memoir*. In 24 classes, er, chapters, Karr explains voice by its constituent parts: syntax, diction, and tone, and its goal: "to speak not with objective authority but with subjective curiosity" (49). She further distills the polemics surrounding veracity and the genre as "reaching for the truth of memory . . . not of unbiased history" (11). In other words, memory is fallible and malleable, individuals are complex and inconsistent, and memoir *is* nonfiction. That said, Karr lists a dozen liberties she has taken, such as telescoping time, "using one episode to stand for all of seventh grade" (25). Karr deconstructs line-by-line an opening scene in Vietnam by war correspondent Michael Herr (*Dispatches*, 1977), and analyzes snippets by Vladimir Nabokov, Maxine Hong Kingston, Hilary Mantel, and many others. The appendix is a required-reading list of over 200 memoirs. Karr playfully discourages the budding writer: "don't write about people you hate" (29). And about plot? To Karr, the plot engine is the author's psychic struggle (91). Memoirists, Karr muses, often seem broken in some way, perhaps "lied to more" (163) than others were, or no longer willing to collude through silence with the perpetrator. If memoirists are seeking Sense and Clarity, then their readers are finding Hope. Someone survived this. —Lisa Thaler, author of *Look Up: The Life and Art of Sacha Kolin*, 18 November 2020