ORGANIZATION IN MEMOIR:
A Look at Form Choices in Memoir, along with a Focused Look at Certain Authors and the Structural and Form Choices They Made

You know that song, “50 Ways to Leave Your Lover”? The one Paul Simon wrote as a humorous ode to divorce after his first one? It’s the song where you might hear this question shouted out amid a drinking game with your middle-aged friends:

> *To what song from the late 1970s can we attribute this line:*
> *“Drop off the key Lee, and set yourself free.”*

It’s a clever song, a foot-tapping singalong that’s earned its place in the annals of pop culture history. In many respects it’s a song beyond compare. It’s original. It’s funny. It’s got a great beat.

We all want to create art that has a great beat. We want to create melodious songs that engage the listener, rapturous paintings that engage the onlooker, and spellbinding books that engage the reader.

In writing memoir I’ve had many discussions with advisors regarding engagement of my reader. At almost every turn I’ve learned that technique can be learned somewhat, but really, technique is about practice. Spellbinding prose that grips the reader in a voice that is yours alone; that’s the ultimate goal, and it takes practice. One needs to get in the chair and write. And write and write and write.

But then there is the issue of form. Does one decide before they sit in the chair what the structure of their book will be? Or does one let their words dictate the form? Here I’m talking about physical structure. About chapter-by-chapter form, versus essay form, versus long-form meditation. I’m talking about white space that’s consciously chosen. About numbered sections, or no numbers at all.

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With my own memoir, I decided on its form first, but now that's proving to be a problem. My advisors so far have agreed. Writing one essay after another has been suggested. Dividing the whole book into two different sections has been suggested. And after a quarter, half, or full day of writing (that is, practicing my technique) my thoughts invariably drift back to questions of overall form.

How will I eventually lay all of this out?

What form should it take?

How do I figure out what structure will best compliment the words I invoke?

Here I was back to Paul Simon, who came on the radio the other day as I was traveling down I-95. He was trying to convince me that he wanted to help me in my *struggle to be free.* And that's when it hit me. The choice was mine if I chose to make it: divorce myself from the preordained chapter by chapter mold I was trying to force my words into.

So, I thought, shackles be gone, *I need a new plan, Stan!*

When I got home I went from room to room, pulling every memoir down from every shelf. I piled them high on my dining room table—sixty-eight in all—then sifted through, first pulling out the ones whose structure I recalled. I know Alexandra Fuller is a memoirist who's consistent with chapter-by-chapter form. All six of her memoirs have taken that shape, and the allure and depth of her words, her stories, didn't let me forget it.

Then I picked up Kiese Laymon's *Heavy*. I doubt I'll ever be able to forget the structure here. Some works of literature get cemented inside us—the insightful prose along with the form it takes—and with *Heavy*, I didn't have to open the book to recall various sections, each one containing multiple essays within.

I pulled Dani Shapiro's *Hourglass* from the pile next. Another one I didn't have to open to be reminded of its form: no chapters, no sections, no essays. *Hourglass* is one eloquently laid out, long-form meditation. Form and prose working wonderfully together, again.

I hadn't opened a book yet, only held a few in my hands, and already I was reminded of the importance of proper form, structure, whatever you want to call it.

I marveled at the variety in the pile, from the wide range of color and design on the covers, to the myriad sizes of the books themselves. The smallest sat atop the pile, one of those Picador Modern Classics: Hilary Mantel's *Giving Up the Ghost.* I remembered fitting it in the back pocket of my jeans a few years ago when I read it, and as I opened it was reminded that although it's Mantel's story of her childhood growing up in England and then succumbing to a terrible illness, her sharp wit seeped onto those early pages as she talked about her anxiety in writing memoir, which was new for her. It seemed she hadn't previously respected the genre, and now over a short page and a half was questioning whether she could do it successfully. She coached herself to "trust the reader, plain words on plain paper*."* The form is plain too: no sections, no chapters, just two headings, the first entitled *A Second Home* and at the end: *Afterlife.* Small, swirled designs appear at intervals to separate parts of the story and that completes the form. And the words, anything but plain, complete the work.

I pushed more books around. I felt a chill when I spotted this trinity of great writing that had fallen off to one side: *This Boy's Life, Lucky, The Wet Engine.*

Then I noticed another trio, whose exact structures I recalled: Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking,* Lulu Miller's *Why Fish Don't Exist.* All of them, I knew, were devastatingly beautiful, in traditional chapter-by-chapter form.

I saw Louise Erdrich's *The Blue Jay's Dance*; I picked it up and already knew there were no chapters within. Four sections is what I recalled, a story of early parenthood structured magnificently around the four seasons of a year.

I saw two other of Kiese Laymon's books, recalling that both copies in front of me of *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America* are in essay form, the first release in 2015 and the second, just this year. The fact that the original publication of *How to Slowly Kill Yourself* and the re-release are *both* structured as a collection of essays tells me Laymon was pleased with his initial choice of form.

I continued, opening the remaining memoirs and looking inside. I created piles based on the various choices of form I found:

-chapter-by-chapter,
-collection of essays,
-long form meditation,
-series of vignettes,
-sections only (this included I, II, III, IV or V)

Then there was a sixth category, off the beaten path: books whose form I felt was likely laid out before the writing even began (a whole other story!): *Between Panic & Desire, Bluets, Dear Mr. You, Fun Home, Heating & Cooling.*

Variety abounds in Dinty W. Moore's *Between Panic and Desire*, all of them essays but within the essays, unique forms. *Bluets* by Maggie Nelson is a memoir in a series of 240 numbered micro memoirs. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic,* is Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir of her relationship with her late father. *Heating & Cooling* by Beth Ann Fennelly has the subtitle *52 Micro-Memoirs*, the shortest being only ten words. And *Dear Mr. You* is Mary-Louise Parker's epistolary memoir—her debut—in the form of letters penned to the men in her life who'd had the most influence, good or bad.

The lone soldier after I categorized everything as best I could was *Book of Mutter.* I almost included it in the *Bluets* group above, until I remembered reading that Kate Zambreno labored over that work for quite some time, which would indicate a struggle, wouldn't it? Perhaps angst surrounding form?

There's a lot on the worldwide web about Zambreno's thirteen-year struggle to write *Book of Mutter*. It was a labor of love, a book written to examine the grief she was experiencing surrounding the death of her mother. When I read it I viewed it as a memoir-of-a-different-kind, but on Zambreno's website it's described as a *book-length essay*. Then elsewhere on her website it's called a *meditation*. I can see the reasoning for all these names. I can even see calling it a work of prose poetry interspersed with art interpretation, or maybe memoir that spans art mediums. No matter its description, I think Zambreno must have faced the same dilemma I'm facing with my own book, which happens to be—partially, anyway—about my mother. Here I am asking, *Just what do I want to do with all of this?*

So I went in search of whether Zambreno had asked herself the same question.

What I found out is that she was patient. Ah, patience. It really is a virtue. We learn on the web that *Book of Mutter* was written and rewritten many, many times over the course of the thirteen years it took her to write it. At times she shelved it and worked on other projects. Then, when finally she felt she was getting close, she also came to the realization that because of the heaviness of the subject matter—the death of her mother and her grief around it—she wanted the form of the book to include a lot of white space. During an interview published on February 28, 2017 with T. Cole Rachel of *The Creative Independent*, Zambreno said,

> Admittedly it's very heavy in terms of subject matter, but that's why I wanted a sort of lightness to it in terms of form—it's not a very long book, there isn't a lot of text

> on each page. My hope is that there's a pleasure in reading it and a pleasure in terms of going through it. I think of people actually reading it now, which is terrifying, and you wonder: What is it like to read this book? That seems like an important question for any writer to ask about their work. This book is not plot heavy or super narrative. Even though it's heavy, there's hopefully some beauty to the heaviness.

So Zambreno wanted lightness of form alongside her heavy subject matter. A very good, and very thoughtful, choice. And it's after reading about Zambreno's thoughtful choices, including white space, I find white space mentioned several times by other authors. More on that later.

Many books are heavy alongside being light. I'm thinking of Kelly Corrigan's *The Middle Place,* a chapter-by-chapter memoir that tells the story of cancer, her own and her father's, but is also interspersed with a good dose of humor. There is no white space here, but the chapter-bychapter form serves Corrigan's book well, likely because it follows the traditional story arc that writer Gustav Freytag laid out in the nineteenth century. Freytag's arc involves a play and counterplay, it involves two halves. So although Corrigan may have considered writing her book in essay form, it's possible that with this—her first memoir—she felt safe with Freytag's model. Two halves of a whole. I think of Corrigan and her father, I think of her cancer, and his.

Mary Karr is lauded by many as the queen of memoir. *The Liars Club,* published in 1995, was her first. It won the PEN/Martha Albrand Award for First Nonfiction, was a finalist for The National Book Critics Circle Award, and spent more than a year on the *New York Times* bestseller list. She followed it up with two more bestselling memoirs, *Cherry* and *Lit*, and has been teaching writing at Syracuse University for more than thirty years. In 2015 she published

The Art of Memoir, a self-help/how to/memoir in and of itself, but even still, when interviewers try to cajole her into owning the queen title, she responds with a line similar to the very first one in *The Art of Memoir*: "No one elected me the boss of memoir."

That line encapsulates not only her modesty but also the wit and savvy of Mary Karr. Her track record speaks for itself. She not only knows a lot about memoir, she writes a pretty good one. Despite this, she says little in *The Art of Memoir* about how to lay a memoir out, about form and structure in the way I talk about them here. What she does say is this: "In terms of basic book shape, I've used the same approach in all three of mine: I start with a flash forward that shows what's at stake emotionally for me over the course of a book, then tell the story in straightforward, linear time."

This doesn't speak to form specifically, but it does speak to the traditional story arc that Aristotle articulated in *Poetics* and Freytag made famous with the narrative arc structure I talked about above. It also speaks to the chapter-by-chapter form Karr utilized in each of her books, the one that's often thought of as the traditional form. But many people may not be aware that the fragmented form has also been around for millennia.

In his writing on the subject, Nigel Krauth fascinates with a history dating the fragmented form all the way back to Hippocrates' time in 400 BCE. He tells us Hippocrates' *Aphorisms* was a medical text, but with the idea of presenting details as fragments alongside gaps that provided space for the reader to interpret (think: white space). Then his idea was picked up by classical thinkers, where it carried on through medieval times. And on again from there. Krauth tells us:

> The conventional linear literary narrative became entrenched in the nineteenth century, but was challenged in the early twentieth century with writers like Gabriele D'Annunzio and Walter Benjamin seeking to replicate life experience

> as bitty and disconnected, and representing the mind's thinking as exploratory and fragmentary.

And then Krauth tells us of Walter Benjamin, whose post-doctoral thesis in 1928 talked of fragmented narrative that replicated the non-linear *modus operandi* of the working mind. Benjamin "perceived that we think in fragments consistently, and that we recall only disparate bits which we subsequently refashion together to form a mosaicked personal narrative."

This speaks to what so many of us do in memoir, this idea of mosaics of disparate pieces, an idea that has especially had a resurgence in the twenty-first century.

That's a great segue into Paul Hunter's *Clownery*. Published in 2017, it came on the heels of Hunter's many books of poetry. In *The New Yorker* that same year, Stephanie Burt described *Clownery* as a book that reinvents, or fractures, memoir's form. (I feel the form was already fractured by 2017, but still feel *Clownery* is a great example of unique form.) Burt goes on to tell us that not only does Hunter tell his story "as that of a nameless 'clown,'" he does it by way of continuous short paragraphs. As I read it I noticed nine chapters that house these short vignettes, the first five or six words in every vignette capitalized for effect. The book is haunting. And the book's fragmented form is very effective.

In *Memoir: A History*, Ben Yagoda tells us memoirs (plural) and autobiography are synonymous, with the latter first appearing in 1809, and soon after acquiring its current meaning: a biography of a person written *by* that person. Whereas memoir (singular) was thought to be a story by an author who is more of a supporting character in their own book rather than the star. Then the twenty-first-century memoir changed all that, as Yagoda explains: "Attention is [now]

resolutely focused on the self, and a certain leeway or looseness with the facts is expected." He clarifies this looseness by mentioning James Frey and others who were known to bend the truth beyond what's considered acceptable, but that is another thesis topic entirely.

Yagoda also tells us U.K. memoirs spend more time than their U.S. counterparts on their respective bestseller lists, but that the U.S. memoir is so capacious there exist a *million little subgenres*. This is evidenced when you visit a local library or bookstore or scroll online. The subgenre categories seem endless: family, career, parenting, political. There's death, spiritual, travel, sports. There's coming out, divorce, celebrity, food. The list goes on and on. So just consider that for every one of the memoirs that pass under our gaze or through our hands, a choice regarding form and structure has been made. Even as I type, a new form is likely being created. That's exciting!

You'll find similar excitement sprinkled among the words of Jane Alison in *Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and Pattern in Narrative*. Here, Alison focuses mainly on ways fiction writers can leave the traditional dramatic arc of storytelling behind, the one Aristotle articulated in *Poetics*, with his talk of beginnings, middles and ends, and the one Freytag followed with two thousand years later in the creation of his pyramid: the narrative arc structure he set out in graphic form. Alison longs to see narrative structure move past the confines of these strictures. Throughout the book, she celebrates narrative styles that instead follow forms in nature, but not in the way you might think. There's a wave in the ocean that has a peak, but what about the symmetry on either side of the wave? A scene at the beginning of a story could reflect one that comes later, making clear what's changed. Occurrences in nature create motion, which then create patterns, and it's these patterns Alison believes show us a way beyond the causal arc, to create forward motion in narrative.

Her talk of narrative styles goes hand in hand with my discussion of narrative form, and at times even overlaps. Here she convinces us that what we're seeing is more than words following words on a page:

> Glancing at a page, we first see text as texture: marks in a white field leave enough space to feel airy or form dense blocks, even weighed with a sludge of footnotes. Looking closely, we see each word as a picture: the part of our brain that recognizes words has a twin that recognizes faces, and if we never learned to read, both parts would focus on faces. As we pass through the words' looks and their meanings, our way of "seeing" shifts, now absorbing a stream of visual images conjured by the language.

Alison describes what words can invoke and I believe a similar invocation happens through the use of form, sometimes patterns, that we enlist when we choose the physical structure of our narratives. *In the Dream House*, by Carmen Maria Machado, is a clear example of this and will be discussed in the coming pages.

All this is to say that the form laid out on the pages of your book, once all your words have been written, it's important. As Alison tells us, it's the aerial view from above. The view when we pull back. It influences the reader. It's affords space, or not, if the author has made that conscious choice, space that allows a reader's breath to flow, or conversely, to constrict. Form has an effect. As do the patterns that carry a reader along.

Narrative Design: Working with Imagination, Craft and Form by Madison Smartt Bell is another book written to aid the fiction writer in her craft, but the non-fiction writer can learn from it as well. In relation to the final design of a work's form, Bell puts it this way:

> Suppose that the elemental ingredients of fiction may be grouped in one or another of four major categories: plot, character, tone, and form. To define these terms quickly and simply: plot is what happens in a narrative, character is who it happens to (or who makes it happen); and tone is what it sounds like. Form is the pattern of its assembly, its arrangement, structure, and design.

I believe that last sentence applies as much to non-fiction narrative as it does to fiction narrative. Bell then goes on to further elaborate on form, only:

Form is the aspect of a story that can be abstracted from everything else and expressed in some other medium, for instance, a graph, or some other geometrical figure. Not that a recreational reader would be likely to need or want to undertake this procedure—no more than you'd want to get to know your pet cat by dissecting it. But for writers it is sometimes (not always) necessary to perform such a maneuver of abstraction so that form can be rendered in ways that yield to analysis. This maneuver of abstraction is precisely what I've had to enlist in regard to my memoir, and I'm certain that had I encountered Bell's *Narrative Design* before I began work on it, I'd have thought long and hard before I typed those very first words: *Chapter One*. When doing so I put myself into a box but I never even saw the four sides, let alone the lid. I was chaining myself to a foundation I'd have a hard time breaking free from. Bell's entire book aside, if only I'd read this one sentence of his before I began writing:

> For the writer, some sense of the final formal design of the work really ought to precede the first stages of composition.

Bell goes on to tell us the level of attention paid to this planning will vary from one writer to another but that almost always, the attention should be paid.

His book is craft-centered, broken into parts that analyze actual works by writers of two types of narrative design: linear and modular. In addition to that analyses, Bell also discusses what constitutes each type of narrative.

Linear narratives typically bear a relationship to Freitag's triangle, with its exposition, climax, and resolution. Bell describes linear narrative arising when the writer approaches the piece as if it's an "integrated whole", as if the "writer of linear narratives are first concerned with the form of the work in its entirety." Here I think of memoirs that tell a story that stem from a single event, maybe two. I think of the chapter by chapter works of Joan Didion and Kelly Corrigan.

Bell associates this type of writing with a sculptor who begins with marble and then subtracts in order to arrive at their finished piece. They start with stone then chisel it away, just as a writer would begin with their story, with page upon page, then begin the process of revision, of whittling away. Of shaping the work, as Bell says, by subtraction.

Bell describes modular narrative the opposite way: as additive. He likens it not to a sculptor chipping away but to a mosaicist, assembling fragments of glass and tile to form what can be understood. This is how I see so many of the other memoir forms I encountered. I viewed those authors as having assembled the works, as Bell says, out of small component parts.

I feel that is Emily Bernard's *Black is the Body: Stories from my Grandmother's Time, My Mother's Time, and Mine*. The crafting of words, sentences, and paragraphs to form a story, then the assembling of those stories—captivating tiles moved around to form what can be understood.

With these stories, or essays, or whatever the author chooses to call these parts of the whole, I know the best we can hope for is to be able to step back and from a distance see a satisfying, coherent whole. Here's Bell:

> The writer adds and arranges more and more modular units which may be attractive in themselves for all sorts of different reasons, but which also must serve the purpose of clarifying the overall design of the text as a whole. In linear design, the integrity of the finished work is obviously the first concern, since the writer is thinking of the work holistically to begin with. In the case of modular design, the writer will, at the outset, approach the raw material in a more fragmentary way.

After reading Bell's book, I uncovered an interview between the late Michael Steinberg and Faye Rapaport DesPres, where Steinberg talks of the structure of his memoir in terms of time frame (he began *Still Pitching* with a span of forty years and with the help of his editor, reduced it down to ten) but more than that, he talks as Bell does of final form: If a memoir is crafted with careful attention to language, detail, and form, it's striving to become a literary work rather than a direct confession or retelling of one's own personal story. Whether a piece of creative nonfiction succeeds or fails has a great deal to do with the writer's skill and ability to shape his or her experience into a satisfying artistic whole.

I combed through nearly seventy memoirs. I noted typeface, white space, Alison's aforementioned sludge of footnotes. I compared and contrasted every form I found and then I went in search of why several of the authors made the choices they did. Or perhaps it was the publisher who made the choice? Or editor? Perhaps they weighed in on the final form a work

should take, but the bottom line: I wondered whether the form of the book I held in my hand was the original form all along, or was metamorphosis its middle name for a while?

Was Shapiro's *Hourglass* written as a long-form meditation from the start?

Why *was* Emily Bernard's *Black is the Body* written in essay form?

And *Between the World and Me*. I wondered if Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote that beautiful book—penned as a letter to his son—that same way from the start?

Jeannine Ouellette's *The Part that Burns* was next. I'd read her breathtaking memoir, which is set out in essay form, the previous semester, and because of the mission I was now on, found myself wondering whether that form was the original one?

And then there's *In the Dream House* by Carmen Maria Machado, a book so profoundly unique that traces of it remain in the cracks and crevices of my mind. Machado's story, her words, *and* her form. All mesmerizing, and the best example I found of how form can serve to elevate a story. Once I'd finished reading the book and closed it, I sat looking at the woman in the dream house peering back at me, wondering how, and why, is this form so successful?

I learned in *Interview Magazine* that Dani Shapiro's *Hourglass: Time, Memory, Marriage* actually began as an essay entitled *The Virtual Dementia Tour*. It was an essay about time and the items Shapiro had inherited from her mother when her mother died. Shapiro was about to hand the essay over to her agent when she suddenly realized, after being subjected to a terrible infestation of carpenter bees at the artist's colony where she was staying, that the work was not in fact an essay, but instead, a book, and that it was not about time and inheritance, but instead, time and marriage. Upon realizing this she began deconstructing the essay, all twenty-five pages, intuiting it should be a short book, "able to be read in one breath," as Shapiro told Stephanie

LaCava in *Interview*. So the desire to have it read in one breath was the genesis of the long form meditation that is *Hourglass*. A very clear example of one initial choice of form turning, sublimely, into another.

In *Black is the Body*, Emily Bernard tells us it was a writer friend who visited her in the hospital who convinced her to write her story. It was 2001 and Bernard was recovering from bowel surgery after being severely injured in a stabbing. It was that story, and others, that her friend encouraged her to write. Bernard also tells us that from the start, she knew the form would be essay:

> Insofar as the personal essay is, at heart, an attempt to grasp the mysteries of life, the form made sense to me on a visceral level. The need to understand, in fact, was what engendered the stabbing in the first place. …Each essay in this book was born in a struggle to find a language that would capture the totality of my experience, as a woman, a black American, a teacher, writer, mother, wife, and daughter.

Here, Bernard assembled the work in its totality out of smaller parts, focusing on striking or life-changing events, while questioning those events at every turn.

Some view the difference between personal memoir and the personal essay as length. Others, such as the *Purdue Online Writing Lab*, describe memoir as tending to focus on life-changing events, typically past events, the author analyzing and seeking deeper meaning beneath her experiences, whereas personal essays are light reflections that can be about anything. *The Owl* tell us personal essays explore; memoirs interpret and analyze.

Brandon Schrand differentiates between the two in a different way. In a conversation between him and Joe Wilkins on *Brevity*, they explored the possibilities and limitations of form in memoir. Here's Schrand:

> I do tend to differentiate between memoir and the personal essay, however. They are cousins to be sure, but not twins, exactly. I'm not sure I can really back this up, but there does seem to be a kind of mass-market demand for memoirs to "behave" like novels; that is, they read with a kind of forward momentum and tend to be conventional in form and execution with rising action, conflict, and some semblance of, or reach toward, resolution. But the memoirs I'm interested in are more akin to the essay, than to the machinery of the novel. The essay, it is good to remember, finds its roots in philosophy, not literature. …It's always tending toward questions (not answers) for meaning. It wanders, ruminates, considers.

That conversation happened in 2013 and since then, it appears Schrand has gotten his wish. What he describes is precisely the form (and philosophy of form) that has gained momentum in the past ten or so years: it wanders, it ruminates, it tends toward questions, and it considers.

That's what I found in Bernard's memoir, and in many others I've read and reread for this discussion.

It's hard to imagine Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* as anything but an epistolary memoir addressed to his son. I found it to be a transfixing meditation, one I really took to heart. And with it I wondered, was this powerful form the original form all along?

In an interview with Tim Adams in *The Guardian*, Coates tells us that at the time his son read a draft of the manuscript, it was not in letter form:

> He read a draft even before I turned it into a letter. And I asked him about doing that and he said sure. I would not have done it without his saying yes. I can't yet see what he will make of it or do with it. He's too young.

In the book we learn that Coates' son Samori is heard crying in his room after watching racial tensions and stories of the murders of black men by white police officers on the news. As Adams tells us, *Between the World and Me* is a response to that sense of powerlessness, and fear, that evokes in Coates. The manuscript's change in form (which form echoes James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, a letter addressed to his nephew) is extremely effective and an obvious use of great form.

The title of Jeannine Ouellette's *The Part that Burns: A Memoir in Fragments,* tells us that fragmentation is part of the form. This was a book I read and then right away, re-read. As I look back now, I likely felt the need to re-read it so quickly because of its form, which to me, felt part of the story.

Ouellette talked with Megan Vered of *The Rumpus*, who asked about the writing in vignettes rather than chapters. Ouellette explained her choice by talking of inspiration from other works she felt enlisted the quality of being created from disparate pieces that then formed a shape when together. This is how *The Part that Burns* is constructed, and in *The Rumpus* interview, we learn this was not its original form. It had a life for a while as a book with a clear narrative arc, but Ouellette felt strongly that the fragmented form served her words best because along with the white space it affords, it brings the reader in, engages them: "Fragmented work is similar to flash in treating the reader as an active collaborator, requiring a different form of attention." This made perfect sense to me

because I experienced that active collaboration. It's what had me immediately re-reading Ouellette's book.

When I compare my reading of Chanel Miller's *Know My Name* to that of Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Chronology of Water*, I see where active collaboration happens. With the former, I was lost in the story: a well-told, devastating one with its exposition, climax, and resolution. But with the latter (as with Ouellette's book) on the way to the resolution, I was also constantly checking my pulse. Checking myself in the mirror. Checking and re-checking my own decisions, my actions. I was the active collaborator I read about in Krauth's piece. I experienced what Krauth tells us the writer Walter Benjamin set out in his thesis: "This continual pausing for breath is the mode most proper to the process of contemplation." In those books I was pausing for breath, all right. I was pausing, period. From Ouellette's and Yuknavitch's beginnings, right down to their very last ending words.

Requiring a different form of attention, as Ouellette puts it, always has me feeling I'm somehow part of a book. Essays in fragmented form pull me in. And in *The Chronology of Water*, Yuknavitch talks about her essay entitled "The Chronology of Water," which spawned the book of the same name, in the same way: "Written entirely in random fragments—how I understood my entire life. In the language—image and fragment and non-linear lyric passages—that seemed most precise."

So while some may view traditional chapter by chapter form as most precise, perhaps because they're most familiar with that form, given that so many of us view our lives as "random fragments," a writer's decision to view the reader as an active collaborator can be a smart one.

I'm not alone in this thinking, when you consider the treasure trove of memoirs in recent years that have enlisted fragmented form: Melissa Febos' *Abandon Me*, Margaret Renkl's *Late Migrations*, Sophia Shalmiyev's *Mother Winter*, to name just a few.

I've mentioned I viewed Machado's *In the Dream House* as a striking example of how form can elevate a story. Of course, it would still have been a captivating book had Machado set it out in a different form, because she's a very talented writer whose words clearly speak for themselves. But there was something about the form. The way the stories sat on the page. The way there was oftentimes white space and sometimes none at all. I even forgot the book was set out in five parts until I paged through it just now. That's how taken I was by the otherwise form.

I can put it this way: *In the Dream House* was the perfect pairing of the structuring of a narrative with the structuring of form. The narrative choice of "Dream House As […] *",* which begins every title to every micro memoir in the book ("Dream House As Overture", "Dream House as Prologue", and on throughout), paired with the form choice of placing these individual micro memoirs on separate pages, some of them only one line, had me looking at this house—this book—differently than I do most. Surely that was Machado's intention. She was grappling with queer abuse, which is very often underreported, if reported at all. And as she built the form she built the house. One hundred forty-six memoirs. One hundred forty-six rooms. And with this form, and her words, she kept me running, from room to room, abuse to abuse. This instead of focusing on other things, namely, who the abuser was (at her core or otherwise). I almost didn't care. I cared about Machado. I cared about the form.

In the Dream House has my discussion of form in memoir nearing its end on a very high note, and I have Machado to thank for that. Along with every other memoirist whose book I held

in my hands during my exploration, so many of which I longed to discuss but was forced to set aside.

I agree with Zambreno that the most important question we can ask ourselves is: "What is it like to read this book?"

I also believe we can take it a few steps further by asking: Is the form I've chosen for my memoir the best possible form for the words I invoke, the stories I'm telling? Have I made certain the form elevates my work by taking it to the highest place it can go?

This deep dive into form in memoir had me coming out the other side with a whole new attitude toward it. For starters, I am no longer intimidated. We are all writers. We all have access to the same endless supply of words, and I see now how the form and structure those words take are only limited by our imagination.

The sea of books on my table held the keys, as if a ring full of dangling, shiny ones, in myriad sizes with no two etchings on the edges the same. In *Why Fish Don't Exist*, Miller recounts David Starr Jordan dredging up his first net filled with fish. He didn't name the fish he didn't yet know, "…at that moment they were still mysteries to him, the shimmering and scaly clues beckoning him to a puzzle he would spend the rest of his life trying to solve."

The books on my table were my school of fish. And through this exploration of form in memoir, I've not only amassed the pieces needed for the puzzle, I've also begun to put the pieces together. I see now what's best for my memoir: an essay form with an added dimension, one that has me emboldened to strike out with originality and an artistic flair.

That's what studying the works of these authors has done for me. It's helped me to see that the sky above and the deep waters where the Mariana snailfish roam are my only limitations.

Form is where I take it. And it's the book that'll end up in your hand.

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