

Chronology in Memoir: Sequencing Events

Introduction

Storytellers who wish to convey a series of events face the challenging decision of sequencing those events in a captivating way because, for an audience, a passive recitation will not do. The memoirist is no exception. The writer must decide when and how to tell what happened. The oral storyteller has the advantage of adjusting his sequence based on his listeners' reactions as the story unfolds. Writers, however, have no such luxury. Writers "are more deliberate because of the slowness of composition, because of the relative fixedness of it, and because we are aware in many cases that our audience is not necessarily present to receive the cues that presence offers" (Kafalas 105). Once the plan is in place, the blueprint set, there can be no deviating once the book goes to print. It is imperative, therefore, to get it right the first time in order to hold readers' interest and avoid confusion.

There are numerous strategies one can use when structuring the events of his memoir. Moving through time chronologically, relating events in the order they actually occurred, is the most common. Writers can mark the passage of that time by the progression of age or by change of voice from juvenile to mature. Others might use setting, migrating from place to place, to move the reader along through the narrative. Some writers choose to wander in and out of a time line according to the meandering of "episodic memory" (Kafalas 110)—what is prominent is told first, what is vaguer comes to the fore toward the end—this style mimics the mind's actual process. Verb conjugation becomes crucial in an effort not to disorient the reader through temporal moves forward and back. Discrepancies in the timing of a personal story can lose an audience, while marks on a cultural time line can help them relate . . .

Conclusion

Every story demands structure; it is a foundational facet of writing. Memoir is no exception. Because “the self emerges from remembering, it must be housed in a metaphorical architecture built of remembered space” (Kafalas 93); the personal events a memoirist wishes to convey are the building blocks, and they need to be artfully sequenced. The story being told is not necessarily what is appealing to the audience, but the way it is being told. An interesting story told haphazardly will lose a reader’s interest. “[C]lumsy, unintelligent memoirs are regarded as ‘no art at all’” (Toker 214). But even the most bland content can hold a reader to the page if that content is arranged in such a way that he wants to take the next step with the writer. An aesthetic experience for the reader must be created because, as Toker further points out, “In art the aesthetic function is the dominant function” (216). The reader relies on the intelligence and the imagination of the writer to reach deeper than the passive recitation of his memories, even if that means using literary license to bypass grammatical rules.

The memoirist has numerous . . .

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