



Hugvísindasvið

# **Is Truth Stranger Than Fiction?**

*The question of veracity and reliability in the memoir  
Running with Scissors.*

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Elísabet Björnsdóttir

Maí 2009

**Háskóli Íslands**

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**Enska**

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## Summary

In this dissertation I demonstrate what makes a memoir seem untruthful following guidelines by Paul John Eakin. In recent years memoirs have increasingly been proven guilty of being untruthful, some partly inaccurate and others completely untrue. Because of this critics are apt to declare their opinion if they feel that a memoir is not entirely true. *Running with Scissors* is one of them and has been debated over since it was published. By applying guideline from Paul John Eakin to the genre, step by step, we come to realize what makes readers as well as critics read a memoir like *Running with Scissors* in disbelief.

Eakin discusses several aspects of the memoir, i.e. truth telling and how fiction is not only fabrication but can also be an effect of narrative. Eakin also discusses memory, and the problems involved in recalling in the past, as well as the part trauma plays in memory formation. He also points out the importance of privacy and how the memoir necessarily reveals the lives not only of the author, but his family and friends as well.

By using Augusten Burroughs's memoir as an example of a contested work but which has not been proven to be a fabrication in any way, we get a better idea of the issues. The work caused controversy, and its reliability was called into question. He was sued by some of the people portrayed in the work, but he emerged from the crises relatively unscathed. I will examine this controversy in light of Eakin's guidelines on the subject.

## **Table of Contents**

Table of Contents.....	5
Introduction.....	6
Chapter 1: The Trouble with Memoir.....	8
Chapter 2: The Importance of Truth-Telling.....	13
Chapter 3: The Way Memory Works.....	20
Chapter 4: Why Memoir Effects Privacy.....	25
Conclusion.....	30
Works Cited.....	32

## Introduction

Every author has his or her own reason for writing, some people write memoirs to look for answers, some to reach conclusion, others feel compelled to tell their adventurous or shocking story. Whatever the reason is the outcome is not only beneficial for the author but the readers as well. However memoirs are not a straight-forward genre and the genre's complications need to be addressed such as the rules and ethics that pertain to it which need careful consideration.

The foundation of a memoir is trust, between the author and the reader, and the reader is going to experience the memoir as a personal account; believing what the author is writing to be true. If the reader starts to doubt what he or she is reading then the problem might be that the author has not considered the rules and ethics carefully enough. Another possibility is that the author intentionally lied or deceived the reader which he could have done for various reasons. It could be fame and fortune or personal reasons, only the author knows, but these memoirs have blackened the genre of memoirs and put other authors in a difficult position.

Augusten Burroughs, an American author born in 1965, published his first book, *Sellelevision*, in 2000 which was a fiction but it was not until he released his first memoir a couple of years later called *Running with Scissors* that he became recognized (Burroughs). Augusten Burroughs is one of the writers who have been debated over since his second book, *Running with Scissors*, became a success in the ever-growing popular genre of memoirs. In the memoir he writes about his dysfunctional family and how he ends up living with his psychiatrist's family. His life was eventful enough living with his mother, who had psychological problems and his father, who was an alcoholic, that however was only a preparation for a life with the Finches. Their lives were different from anyone else's with Dr. Finch, who was the head of the family, and his unconventional take on life. Burroughs wrote one remarkable story of the Finches after another from his childhood until he turned seventeen and moved out.

He does not hold anything back in his writings, neither sparing himself nor his family when he gives detailed descriptions of actions and events that he claims took place in his childhood. He writes about his mother's psychotic episodes, explains how his mother and Dr. Finch decide to fake his suicide attempt so he would not have to attend school and he shares his relationship with Dr. Finch's adopted son Neil with all its complications. This is only a few of the strange things that happen in the memoir which has led some people to believe that the memoir is too eventful to be true and therefore debated with those who are on Burroughs's side.

After the memoir became a best-seller the people who had doubted its authenticity became even more convinced when the Finches (the 'real' Turcottes) sued him. Some readers believed that the Turcottes were after Burroughs's money and others saw *Running with Scissors* as a fictionalized memoir. It was not the first memoir that has been an argument and plenty of memoirs have been revealed as an untruthful memoir therefore people tend to jump to assumptions when they feel as if a memoir is unbelievable in any way. Authors however try their hardest to stay true to their writings and to their audience so their memoirs are prevented from losing credibility.

It is difficult for an author with an outlandish story like *Running with Scissors*, which readers have a hard time connecting with, to avoid being debated over. By taking a close look at memory, privacy and truth-telling we realize that these factors contribute to the author's difficulty to write as honestly as possible and that a memoir can never be completely truthful.

## 1. Chapter: The Trouble with Memoirs

The autobiography and the memoir are two different ways for a person to write about their life. At first glance, the two seem very much alike but on closer examination the emphases are very different. Writing an autobiography or a memoir might sound easy, there is no need to create characters or plot; all the writer needs to do is start reminiscing. The writer soon realizes that it is not that easy and is unable to write as he or she pleases, there is much more to the genre to consider. For example if one looks up the word *autobiography* in a dictionary there is a good chance that the answer will sound something like “the story of your life written by yourself” (Longman). This answer is a simple definition of what an autobiography is but clear enough for a person looking for a basic explanation. The definition of the form of autobiography, however, has through the course of time puzzled academics and critics for as long as people have been writing their life story. Defining the genre is considerably more complex and controversial than the simplified version; one of the reasons being the many forms that autobiographical texts can take. Autobiographies are likely to consist of an attempt to cover everything in the author’s life worth mentioning. Memoirs usually focus on a specific part of the author’s life. Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir notes in her book *Borderlines* that autobiography has been termed by critics as “inherently the genre of memory” (11) and in that way autobiography shows obvious connection to the memoir and it is not surprising as the two forms are closely related. Autobiographies are usually written by those who have lived an interesting life and keep to a timeline but a memoir revolves around a certain story, theme or age in the author’s life. Memoirs usually do not contain the author’s daily rituals or ordinary environment instead it describes something that stands out as unconventional and intriguing for others to read. It only takes a few dissimilarities to see that even though the two are related they have their own features which distinguish them from one another.

There are a few reasons why academics and critics have trouble defining autobiographical texts and the problem lies in the genre being extremely diverse. A writer is free to write about his or her own life in all manner of ways, the text can be anything from a conventional text to an informal one and subjects vary from being tragic to comic



and everything in between. This variety however causes complication within the genre since the guideline is neither clear nor detailed. Since there are so many ways to write about oneself it becomes difficult to point out what defines autobiographies and memoirs. It is not obvious to the reader what it is that makes the text an autobiographical one and what can be pointed out as the reason for it being autobiographical (Guðmundsdóttir, “Blekking” 42). What connects one autobiographical text to another is that the authors are writing about themselves, besides that, there is not much else that can connect the two genres. Another complication with the genre is that the author has to be as truthful as he possibly can which is not that feasible since the truth is not always as straight forward as we would like it to be. The unreliability of truth is a part of the gray area that the author needs to be aware of as he or she writes a memoir. Our memory, for example, can have an affect on what we believe to be true, so an author could be writing what he or she believes is true but might be incorrect in some way. Fiction is another word that belongs to this gray area because there are two types of fiction, the one that is complete fabrication and there is the literary convention which is a part of the way we write about ourselves. So even though the author honestly endeavors to be as truthful as possible that might not be enough and can cause problems.

Even though there is uncertainty within the genre and the use of truth not always clear, every once in a while there is a memoir that critics do not believe is true. Some of them have been proved to have deliberate lies in them and authors faced consequences because of that. The fact that authors deliberately lie about themselves or invent events in their memoir is what readers tend to find displeasing or unacceptable. As the genre has grown, this problem has been increasing and the fabrication exaggerated, notably in recent years and one of the most recent incidents of this, which can be considered rather large on the scale of deception in the genre, is James Frey’s, *A Million Little Pieces*, published in 2003. The book was immensely popular and especially after Oprah Winfrey recommended it on her TV-show where “more than two million copies were sold, making it the fastest-selling book in the club’s 10-year history” (Wyatt). Frey’s glory did not last long because in 2006 a website, that features information gathered from authorities, called “The Smoking Gun”, investigated numerous occurrences in the book and

published a detailed article on its website beginning with the words “The man who conned Oprah”. Their conclusion was that:

Police reports, court records, interviews with law enforcement personnel, and other sources have put the lie to many key sections of Frey’s book. The 36-year-old author, these documents and interviews show, wholly fabricated or wildly embellished details of his purported criminal career, jail terms, and status as an outlaw “wanted in three states.” (A Million Little Lies)

Paradoxical as it may seem, the rise of the fake memoir coincides with ever increasing access to information making it more likely the hoax will be revealed. What made it possible in this case to reveal the book’s lies are the dates and records that were made, and kept, as well as accounts from other people. Solid evidence as such is essential to back up accusations but not available in all cases. Proving a memoir to be untruthful is not possible unless there is tangible evidence to the contrary as speculations alone do not qualify as a reliable source. Writers who have been proven guilty of fraudulence need to deal with the consequences but the ones that are under suspicion are innocent unless the memoir is proved to be inaccurate.

Writers often exaggerate, improvise or invent some parts of their memoirs, sometimes the entire work, but for various reasons. Since memoirs have become such a popular genre of late an obvious reason for an author to lie is the chance of a bigger success, consequently making more money than with other forms of writing. Anybody with an interesting story to tell can write a memoir and if the memories are not eventful enough some people have the nerve to exaggerate or lie, therefore making the work more appealing to publishers and readers. The reasons for people to embellish their memoirs are endless, for example, commonly politicians and celebrities attempt to polish their careers in autobiographies (Glover) and at times books do not get published unless they can be categorized as memoirs, since the genre is so desirable. For example, the website *The Smoking Gun*, which revealed *A Million Little Pieces*, note in their article on Frey’s hoax that “Frey originally tried to sell the book as a fictional work, but the Talese imprint “declined to publish it as such”” (A Million Little Lies). After writing an entire book and not being able to get it published, the author might have taken desperate measures so that the work

would not go to waste. Another example is the controversy, some might want their cover to be blown and therefore attract massive publicity, a publicity that they might never have gotten if their book was published as a novel.

Fortunately there is only a small percentage of authors who have been caught intentionally lying but there are some books that the public debates over and is unable to reach a satisfactory conclusion. Augusten Burroughs, the author of *Running with Scissors*, has been caught in the middle of this debate. His greatest problem is that the memoir is incredibly eventful with strange stories which are certainly one of a kind. That is something that people have a hard time relating to and therefore are not eager to believe it to be true. It is paradoxical to tell the truth and then not being credited for telling the truth but treated with the exact opposite. Another reason for people to argue whether his memoir is believable or not, is because a family who appeared in his book has contested the veracity of various accounts in the book. The Turcottes, or The Finches as they are called in the book, are a family that adopted Burroughs for a few years. With their word against his and no tangible evidence, this sort of argument becomes impossible to solve to the satisfaction of both parties. The Turcottes are understandably upset by some of the shocking stories of their alleged behavior that Burroughs revealed, in his account of his past. However, it is not only the Turcottes who have attacked Burroughs's credibility; many readers have also found the book beyond belief. Sometimes books are deliberately out of line and sometimes it is hard to believe that truth can be stranger than fiction. The only thing that the reader can do is rely on his own judgment.

Paul John Eakin clarifies the genre's difficulty by using guidelines to explain what it is that makes the reader become skeptical of a memoir. In one of his many articles on the subject; *Breaking rules: The consequences of self-narration* he points out a few guidelines to show where writers stray off the autobiographical path. When a writer loses his way, whether it is intentional or not, the reader is unimpressed and instead of becoming attached to the story, he distances himself from the book and second guesses its accounts. Eakin describes three ways to understand how writers manage to break the connection with the readers as well as looking at the reason why people question the

authenticity of an autobiographical text. The first one is “misrepresentation of biographical and historical truth” (113-4) or truth-telling which is the most natural connection for readers to the genre. The second one is “infringement of the right to privacy” (114) which goes hand in hand with writing autobiographically because there are always people closest to the author who become involved, with or without their consent. The last one is “failure to display normative models of personhood” (114) or the way the author represents himself, whether or not he is able to show that he could be considered normal. With the assistance of these guidelines and emphases on the first two in particular, it becomes clearer to the reader what it is that makes him or her skeptical of a text.

## 2. Chapter: The Importance of Truth-Telling

The first part of Eakin's guideline is the importance of a writer's integrity in truth-telling and if that is neglected the memoirs credibility is at risk. In *Breaking rules*, Eakin adds that "Definitions of autobiography as a literary genre inevitably feature truth-telling as a criterion" (115) and underlines the importance of it. When it comes to memoirs it is more likely that truth-telling is transgressed rather than the other two of Eakin's guidelines because there are more ways for an author to neglect to tell the truth. The aspects of truth-telling that first come to mind are for example the thin line between fact and fiction which is problematic to define, the narration needs a close look, the way our memory works and the consequences of rule-breaking are worth noticing. The first part of call in our discussion of truth-telling is the role of narrator in a memoir.

In autobiographical texts there are two ways to look at fiction, for fiction is not always the enemy and sometimes it is inevitable. Within truth-telling the author has the difficult task of assembling truth and fiction in a memoir. This sort of fiction is a part of the process of telling a story of oneself and it is equally important for the reader to be aware of this as the author. When a person buys a book with the word *Memoir* on the cover, that person trusts that the author is telling his or her own story as honestly as possible. Some writers have admitted to the possibility that some things are not completely accurate and inform the reader beforehand which is a good and valid approach. If the author feels like his or her story is too embellished to be a memoir then there are other genres that base on truthful characters or events and allow fiction. That type of book can be classified as a roman á clef for example, so there is always an option for those who are not exclusively depending on the truth. Even though the author sticks to writing a memoir, it is impossible to write autobiographically without any fiction, it is a part of the reminiscing process and the way the author writes, whether we like it or not (Guðmundsdóttir, Borderlines 6). That type of fiction is a literary convention which can be found in a few aspects of autobiographical writing. In that sense fiction does not have to be the enemy,

what matters is what sort of fiction is used, the quantity and application which are the key to satisfactory combination.

One of the ways that the author uses fiction in a literary tradition is through the narration in the memoir. The writer of a memoir is supposed to be the same person as the narrator and the protagonist. Sometimes that does not always happen and at times it could be other characters that are fictionalized but for now we will focus on the connection between the author and the way that he or she writes. There is more than one way to narrate a memoir and some authors choose to look back at their past and write from the perspective of the present. The author explains his childhood from his or her perspective as a grown-up. Others, like Burroughs did in *Running with Scissors*, write as if they have traveled back in time and use the point of view of themselves as a child or adolescent. Since it is impossible for the reader to be there, experiencing the memories with the author, Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir explains in *Borderlines* the latter one as though authors “create the illusion that we are present to something that happened earlier” (6). She goes on to mention that “This method implies fictionality, as we can never speak authoritatively from the past” (Guðmundsdóttir 6). This way we can say that it is inconceivable to write with complete reliability for there is always some fictional aspect.

The narrator is not the only connection to the different types of fiction because either way that the author writes the memoir, he experiences the events in a young age and children experience the world differently from adults. The reason children see things differently, is because they do not understand as much as adults and that makes the reader look at the story differently than if there was an adult experiencing the same event. It is not uncommon that if a child is telling an adult a story that the adult provisionally believes everything that is said because the child sees the world differently. The reader as well, should be aware that if there is something unusual in the memoir then that it is how the author, as a child, saw or experienced the events. It is only natural for the reader to give the child more space to use fictional effects to his or her story; it is indisputable that children tend to have a very creative imagination. In *Running with Scissors*, Burroughs is a child, reaching adolescence, but writes his story in his adult years and even though he is

writing at that age his memories are from a period when he does not fully comprehend everything around him. In his memoir he mentions, for example, an electroshock-machine that he and a few of the Turcottes family members play with (Burroughs, Running 42-3). In an interview with the Turcottes sisters in *Vanity Fair* they certify “that it was not an electroshock machine that was kept under the stairs but, rather, an old Electrolux vacuum cleaner that was missing a wheel” (Bissinger). Since this is their words against Burroughs’s words it is difficult to ascertain whose truth is the correct one, whether it was the young Augusten who misinterpreted or the Turcottes doing some damage control. It could be either way but without any evidence there is no chance for the reader to know for certain.

When an author publishes a memoir the readers are not the only ones who take a risk, the author has to take responsibility for the book that he or she has written. People perceive and understand the author through the memoir; his qualities, his faults and everything in between. It can be considered as not only the authors risk but the whole point of a memoir, revealing you and your life to the world. When people debate over a memoir, whether the memories are true or not, the author takes responsibility for everything that has been written in the memoir. The only way for authors to protect their story is to stand their ground and believe in what they are doing. Whatever the author adds to his life, lies or embellishment, desirable or not, he needs to live with it as a part of his past just like all the truthful events he has written. Embellished and made up memories become a part of the authors life unless or until the lies are discovered and make their way to the surface. Once the critics find a crack in the storytelling they start asking questions and it is very unlikely that the crack has anything to do with the literary genre. Eakin points out that a memoir is hardly ever criticized for literary reasons but rather the author himself and how truthful that person is to one self and others. In fact authors have rarely reached the front pages for breaking the literary rules of a memoir; it is rather violation of ethical rules or failure to tell the truth (Eakin, “Breaking” 115). So if the critics start attacking a memoir, the author needs to prepare for the consequences to be very personal, even more personal than in other genres as it is the author’s integrity that is at stake.

Memoirs that have been revealed or exposed as lies are responsible for readers becoming angry or upset for being misled but the way the memoir is written might have an effect on the reader's reaction. People might become upset over a memoir that has been revealed as lies but react differently towards another memoir's untruthfulness. The types of lies and embellishments can be different in types and amount which differs in impact on the reader. For example a woman named Margaret Seltzer wrote a memoir, called *Love and Consequences* under the name Margaret B. Jones, of a troubled young girl who grew up in a neighborhood ruled by gangs and the memoir deals with how she dramatically becomes involved in that lifestyle. This book has been admitted to be a deliberate lie by the author, from cover to cover (Pool), and is one of the memoirs that cast a shadow on the genre. There is no truth in the memoir so the point of its existence has vanished. In comparison James Frey's book is different because in his memoir the life he lived is embellished and his writings got out of hand but at least it is his life that he wrote about. It is certainly not excusable to put the word *memoir* on the front of the book for he knew what he was doing and that he lacked consistent truth throughout, it is however not as deliberate as Seltzer's book. What these books have in common is that they were both exposed with evidences to prove that their accounts were unreliable; Seltzer's sister told the world the real name of Margaret B. Jones and Frey was brought down by people who investigated his past. It was harder for Seltzer to keep up appearances because she invented a person but for Frey it was his own account that was under suspicion so if the evidence would not have been accessible he could have continued with his lie.

Not only do these two types of memoirs bring out different kind of reaction but they try to evoke sympathy from the reader. What both *Love and Consequence* and *A Million Little Pieces* have in common is that they seek the reader's sympathy and exaggerate events to move the readers. The readers are conscious that the book tells of the author's life and as they start to read the underlying thought is that this has actually happened and the author experienced what is being told in the memoir. Because of that the reader, after realizing that what he or she has just read is more of a fabricated story than a memoir, might feel upset and betrayed by the author. Oprah, as mentioned before, discussed



Frey's book in her TV-show and the episode was called *The Man Who Kept Oprah Awake at Night: A Million Little Pieces* (The Oprah Show). Understandably she was upset by the revelation because she was so caught up in the emotional distress which the book invites that she was unable to sleep. She and so many others might have experienced the same emotion that the author is trying to accomplish that it becomes a disappointment to find that it was not the truth that the reader trusted it to be. People do not like being tricked into reading a memoir for the wrong reasons. As these stories are likely to evoke harsh reaction, a memoir written in a comic style, like *Running with Scissors*, can have a different effect. Burroughs experienced awful things as a child but equally had unconventional as well as an eventful childhood and he writes in an amusing way, including both the good and the bad. If he were to be proven guilty he would let a lot of people down but the reaction would not evoke as harsh reactions as Seltzer and Frey because his memoir is not nearly as dramatic as the other two. Again, hypothetically, if the book was to be untrue a certain trust would be broken but instead of Burroughs's readers losing sleep they at least gained a good laugh at the time.

Telling truth is not only an intricate task for an author, it is unpredictable to know how the readers will react to a memoir. If parts of a memoir are unfamiliar to the reader it might result in the reader believing it to be a lie. This is one of Burroughs's main problems and necessary to take a closer look at. Burroughs, for example, writes a story about Dr. Turcotte or Dr. Finch, as he is called in the book, and how he predicted that the family's financial problems would soon be solved because his turd was pointing upwards in the toilet bowl. That was supposed to be a message from God and in the book Dr. Finch claims "He is the funniest man in the universe. And this is His way of saying that things are going to turn around for us now" (Burroughs *Running* 167). Digging into Dr. Turcotte's life we find that he was no ordinary man. A friend of Dr. Rodolph Turcotte's was interviewed and she said "He believed that he was guided by God" (Asher) which advantages Burroughs's story. Susan Winters Smith, his friend, says that there were many who thought his ideals were strange to say the least but his biggest supporter was his daughter June or Hope as we know her from the book (Asher). Burroughs makes that clear several times and it can be seen when Dr. Finch gets the "message" from God

because she believes in everything that he says and he, delighted by her admiration, says “That’s exactly why Hope is my *best* daughter” ( Running 167). As Smith continues to describe him she points out that the doctor was eccentric, invited patients to stay at their house if they needed and that he was in favor of evincing anger (Asher). These statements are all in similarity to what Burroughs wrote in *Running with Scissors*. Smith on the other hand does not assent to the poorly maintained household as Burroughs mentions and points out that there were a lot of people living in their house at some points in their life and that “If the sink was piled with dirty dishes (as mine often is), it didn't last long. People pitched in and kept it quite acceptable. I never ever saw it as it was portrayed in the movie” (Asher). That however brings us back to the fact that Burroughs is a child in the story and a very tidy one as well. He is obsessive on clean things so he might see the house dirtier than it was for others, for example he had “nickels, dimes and quarters, each of which has been boiled and polished with silver polish” (Burroughs Running 8).

There are other parts of the story that indicate strange things of the book to be true. Burroughs’s brother, John Elder Robison, published a memoir himself and by comparing the two memoirs it shows similarities in stories. In *Running with Scissors*, Burroughs for example portrays his mother in a very detailed way which more or less includes her chain-smoking (10). Robison explains in his memoir, *Look Me in the Eye* how “... cigarette butts could be anywhere. In the dishes. In the glasses. Even in our food” (52). The only difference is that Burroughs remembers her smoking habits and Robison the cigarette butts. Burroughs mentions as well that “[s]he took another drag from her cigarette, then plopped it into what was left of a glass of milk” (Running 49). Robison, as well, writes about his mother’s mental state explaining that his mother was not only ill but became worse with every day (65). Burroughs seems to capture his mother fairly well in the book which shows credibility for the reader; if she is correctly portrayed then it actuates the reader to believe that other characters might be correctly shown as well. For example, he remembers her saying sentences like “It has taken me all my life to find myself as an artist ... and to find myself as a woman” (Burroughs, Running 82). In current interview when his mother was asked questions about the memoir she replied ““I've had to forgive myself for many things ... I have worked a long time with forgiveness”” and

goes on to say “I’m grateful for that book. I’m grateful for the opportunity that it gave me to grow spiritually” (Shapiro). After reading *Running with Scissors* these replies sound very familiar and it does not take long to see the comparison of Margaret Robison and Deirdre Burroughs.

### 3. Chapter: The Way Memory Works

Concerning the matters of truth-telling it is important to realize how our memory works and to understand that there is nothing guaranteed when it comes to memory. It is not difficult to believe that our memory is a complicated system which works differently for each and every one of us. To understand how memory functions as a part of telling the truth it is best to go back to basics. Martin Conway has compared the functions of memory to a library which depicts in an obvious way the foundation of memory and how it functions normally. He explains the metaphor by saying that “individual memories are the volumes on the shelves and an index helps a user (a rememberer) locate sought-for volumes (memories). When a book (memory) is located then it can be taken down from its shelf and read (remembering)” (2). With this basic knowledge it is possible to show how memory can fail to do what it is suppose to. The system is not devoid of defects and it can easily make mistakes that can be unfortunate for the person. Conway goes on by showing an example of what sort of mistakes the memory can make and explains that “from time to time volumes may be misplaced on the shelves, parts of the index corrupted, or a new volume incorrectly indexed. All of which would render specific volumes inaccessible or forgotten” (2). This metaphor helps us understand why memories tend to turn out differently or, in some cases, not turning up at all which makes the memory as a source an imperfect one.

The library metaphor shows that a memory is a difficult source of information to depend solely on since the memory can be incorrect or not recollected at all. Sometimes we try our hardest to remember the simplest thing that might matter to us, a phone number or an appointment but what happens is that in the end we were unable to recollect what we had memorized. However if something unpleasant passes our senses we seem to be unable to forget it. Memory for every person is very different, some people have a better memory than others and might have remembered the phone number, others would have known that they were unable to remember and written it down to assist the memory. This way it is impossible to say what one person can remember and another cannot. Maurice

Halbwachs points this out in his book *On Collective Memory*, “To be sure, everyone has a capacity for memory [mémoire] that is unlike that of anyone else, given the variety of temperaments and life circumstances” (53). Therefore it is not only the memory we were born with that is different from one another but both our life and character has influenced our memory as well.

The reason why unwanted occurrences remain imprinted in our mind is often caused by trauma (Bremner). Trauma can be physically or psychologically shocking experience for a person and trauma has been connected with memories in the way that “they appear highly durable and may be unusually detailed” (Conway 6). In that sense it is possible to say that children who have experienced trauma in their life are more likely to remember the traumatic events better and more vividly than let’s say children who have had pleasant childhoods. Burroughs for example experienced his share of trauma in his childhood and therefore he might be more capable of describing events from his past. His childhood was not an envious one and the first trauma that comes to mind is the sexual relationship he had with a man at least twice his age when he was only thirteen years old. He describes a scene of their relations in a very detailed manner. This is exactly how a child might experience a case of trauma which could explain how he remembers the event so vividly and this is only one of many traumatic episodes which Burroughs goes through. Through his childhood he is abandoned by his family members, one by one, starting with his brother who left when he was sixteen and Burroughs only eight years old, and at the age of thirteen his parents divorced. Burroughs’s father left after years of a miserable marriage and at this point Burroughs was in a way relieved because living with both parents was unfeasible. It was not long until his mother left him to live with the Turcottes and not only did she leave him there to stay but they adopted him as well. The fact that his mother deserted him was extremely traumatizing for Burroughs and instead of being able to cope with the abandonment, he immediately had to start getting used to the Turcottes unusual lifestyle. The traumas happened one by one and the worst part was that there was no one who was there for him; he had no security in his life. Only a person who has been through similar things can relate to what he had been through and with

these traumatic experiences it is difficult to decide whether he remembers what he does the way he does.

Even though people seem to be unable to forget memories that trauma has caused to persist in their mind, it can be difficult to determine exactly what the effects a trauma can have on the memory. The memory is very unpredictable and people have diverse opinions of the matter. Some say that trauma does not reveal accurate memories that they might even, in a way, be less accurate than other memories (Conway 230). Freud, for example, had different ideas about trauma but that won't be discussed here. However if we try to think about a traumatic event that has happened to ourselves it does not take long until we can see it in front of us or remember the feeling as it happened. Most people that have experienced an event that was traumatic remember it, usually more vividly because that memory is one of a kind, stands out and is clear to the person because of the shock that comes with a trauma. How accurate memories are, caused by trauma or not, cannot be predicted but in the end memories are made and again, it continues to be different in each memory.

Although there are two people present when a certain event happens that does not necessarily mean that their accounts are going to be the same. The two people can disagree or believe it to be different from the others, but ultimately they are both right because their experience becomes their memory and therefore their truth. It explains why there are always two sides to every story; no two persons experience the same thing in exactly the same way. So as the author writes what happened in his or her memoir we have to realize that this is one person's story and Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir mentions this as "there is no one true absolute version of the past, however much we would like to believe that there is" (Borderlines 53). Since there is no one way for an event to happen then all the reader can ask for is the author's truth.

If an author misrepresents a part in his book it does not necessarily mean that he has intentionally lied; there are other factors that might have caused it. On the other hand if the reader noticed that this was a continuous problem throughout the memoir then there is a reason to take a closer look and ascertain that the book was not represented disingenuously. If the situation comes up that a part in a memoir does not add up then it is difficult for the author to explain why this has happened and readers might start to wonder if there are other instances where this might have occurred. It certainly does not help the author's credibility, however, everybody should be able to relate to the fact that sometimes our memory plays a trick on us, for example if we were certain that our childhood dog was brown and then a friend shows us a picture of the dog and he is not, then we have experienced this lapse of memory. When this happens it is not very crucial in our everyday life but for an author who has written a memoir this is everything and his integrity is on the line. Here we come across the gray area, as mentioned earlier, some readers might write off the author's authenticity but others might not see it as such a great deception. Where a person believes that the line between a lie and a fallible memory is drawn is personal. However it is fairly reasonable to say that since everybody can be deceived by their own memory and an author's memory is no exception, then most readers would give the author benefit of the doubt, if there was an error to be found in a memoir.

Memory on the other hand never stops to amaze us despite its faults and sometimes we remember experiences that seem so far away and it feels like a treasure to have recollected it. This is yet another element that sets us apart from one another however it has been problematic for some people to accept that a memory can be different from one person to another. Patti Miller starts out her book by deliberating this idea and asks "What is it like for you to be in the world?" (1), for she cannot imagine what it is like for the next person to be the way that he or she is. Since every single memory is unique and we all experience the world around us differently it is virtually impossible for us to have an opinion on other people's memories. Through the years people have had opinions on how authors write their memoirs, saying that it is impossible to remember this and that, though it sounds unfair that they should be able to have an opinion on someone else's

memory at all. Burroughs's memory has been debated about, amongst other issues, and his recollections of accurate dialogues, specific surroundings or day to day activities have been called into question. Unconvinced readers have put the books authenticity into question with that as the underlying accusation. If some people, probably most of us, are unable to reminisce certain parts of our childhood it does not mean that nobody else can. If we do not run fast it goes without saying that somebody else is certainly capable of running faster than us, even twice as fast. It is just more difficult to prove that our memory is better than others. However it becomes difficult to comprehend this idea when we cannot experience it ourselves and that is why readers might start to doubt.



#### 4. Chapter: Why Memoir Effects Privacy

An author needs to carefully consider the people included in a memoir because writing about other than him or her means that the author is interfering with the privacy of those included. Violating the privacy of others is not less of an offense in books as it is in real life. Writing a memoir, on the other hand, is impossible without mentioning the people surrounding the author. Most memoirs involve a description of relationships with parents or family members and friends, most of the time a memoir even revolves around the relationship with those closest to the author. Publishing memoirs tends to hurt others and this is one of the reasons people decide not to tell their stories. Others find the need to write greater and express in detail the combination of their past and their emotion. The way that each memoirist handles privacy is different and some memoirists have been criticized for transgressing privacy in their memoir. Critics have been harsh when they have felt that the author has stepped out of line. There is a difference in providing information about a person that is included in a memoir and then un-called for information. If information about a character is not only un-called for but harmful to that person as well then that might compromise the authenticity of the book. Revenge or defamation are issues that are not suitable for a memoir because then the fundamentals for the book are gone. Claudia Mills makes a good point when she explains that “Overly harsh judgment of others tends only to make those who judge seem unattractively self-righteous” (118) because we know that nobody is perfect. Memoirs are not a tool for people to get back at anyone but rather tell their story, in their own way. In the end, when writing a memoir, it is impossible to please family and friends with telling the truth and again, a part of their privacy will always be shared.

Memoirists would be unable to tell their story without writing about their family and friends because without mentioning them the authors would be untrue to the readers. All of us experience life with the people who are around us, our parents, siblings, nephews and nieces and friends, whether we like them or not. It is inconceivable to write a memoir without the major influences in our life, so when a writer sits down to write his or her

story it should be understood that people near are going to be involved. One person's truth can definitely be another person's inconvenience in a memoir and it can have dramatic consequences within the family because not only are the people involved that can be affected but others who are not included in the memoir as well. If the author realizes the risk that he or she is taking they need to make a decision whether to take that risk or not, whether it is worth it. In fact Patti Miller states that "The likelihood of hurting or upsetting family members is the strongest single argument against telling the truth" (113) which is a risk that not everybody is willing to take. When people who are included in a memoir feel violated, they might express their opinion or take the matters into their own hands. In Burroughs's case there is a hint of both, his mother does not seem to care much and does not comment on the memoir but the fact that the Turcottes sued him shows their dissatisfaction. A lawsuit is certainly not helping a memoirist in his defense of his credibility and that is usually the spark for readers to second guess.

Having a person that has been written about in a memoir, come out and indicate that he or she does not approve of what has been written is the most difficult argument for the author to dispute. It is understandable that the Turcottes felt like they needed to take actions or defend themselves against the book because their father was a distinctive character and easily recognized by people who knew him or his family. There were parts in the book that nobody would like to be associated with so since their family would be recognized by neighbors, they were at least fighting for the family's reputation which most of us would do in their situation. The discomfort that comes with another person coming out and writing about your family is certainly apprehensible. As outsiders, we might not feel like we are intruding in on someone's experience because Burroughs allows us in but if we were in their situation it might make us think differently. It is only natural for people to react in the way that the Turcottes did, that however does not necessarily mean that what has been written about them is untrue but rather the focus is on privacy and that privacy being invaded. Whether or not they were trying to save their reputation by suing or were actually lied upon is difficult to see through. In the interview by Vanity Fair with the Turcotte's they point out a story from the memoir about their cousin which was called Poo Bear. In *Running with Scissors* the boy was about six years

old when he was running around on his smelly feet and then defecates on the floor saying ““Poo can poo” as if he were still a toddler” (Bissinger). What is strange about it is that “Poo Bear” or John Turcotte, was so embarrassed by what Burroughs wrote about him that he could not talk about it “because of the pain it has caused him” (Bissinger) and admits to have “quit the [police] force for fear that members of the department would read it and make the link to him” (Bissinger). It is understandable that they are upset over the book but when a minor character in the book overreacts like this it makes you wonder whether or not he has something to hide. If Burroughs’s memoir is untrue, like they insist, and if they believe in what they say then this should not be such a big issue.

Though there was a lawsuit against Burroughs he managed to get out of it fairly undamaged however it is always difficult to solve a situation when privacy is the problem. Everybody is entitled to their privacy and that is what makes the genre difficult. If what is written in a memoir about a certain person is not to their satisfaction they have the option to oppose or sue the writer. Burroughs was sued by the Turcottes after the book came out and just before a motion picture was made after the book. According to the Washington Post which featured an article on the lawsuit the Turcottes claimed:

In addition to seeking damages for libel, defamation, fraud, invasion of privacy and emotional distress, it asks the court to order a public retraction and a public statement that the book is fictional, and requests that distinction be made in all future publications of the book. (Gerhart)

The case was settled and as it turned out, both parties felt like it was their victory. Burroughs felt like he had not compromised anything since he did not make any changes within the memoir, not even the word *memoir* on the cover so he claimed that it was “not only a personal victory but a victory for all memoirists” (Ngowi). However he had to add certain text at the end of the book in the acknowledgements basically admitting that there had been harm done to the family and “the word “memoir” in the author’s note will be changed to “book,”” (Mehegan) in the future. The Turcottes were pleased with the outcome and felt like it was what they were asking for in the beginning of the lawsuit (Mehegan). That sounds rather strange because what they asked for in the beginning does

not seem to be the same as the settlement. Even though both parties felt like the settlement was their victory it does not come down on the memoir itself. In the end a lawsuit cannot be used as an evidence to discredit a memoir unless the author had been proven guilty which did not happen in this case so the uncertainty persists.

When some people feel like privacy is violated others might think differently, a matter where everyone is entitled to have an opinion and therefore makes it hard for authors to please those involved in a memoir. Some people are more private than others and Patti Miller agrees as she says “each person has a different sense of what is private” (112). People handle these matters differently and Frank McCourt for example, who wrote *Angela’s Ashes*, waited until his mother died until writing about her relationship with a relative (Eakin, *Making* 152). Burroughs on the other hand did not hesitate to publish his account of his mother; she had always been up front, not only with him but in everything that she had done so it would be unnatural for him not to do the same. For example, in *Running with Scissors*, when his parents are in a fight, he is right there with them as they not only verbally attack each other but physically as well and it is not until after they are done fighting that she tells Burroughs to go to sleep (Burroughs 18-19). In the middle of the fight she tells her son that “it is between me and your father” (17) but really does not mean it; she only says it to avoid Burroughs’s questions. The way that McCourt and Burroughs write about their mothers is completely different but both of them have revealed stories that as sons they need to consider whether or not it is appropriate to write about and when the right time is to do so. Maybe it was not all that unfortunate for Burroughs’s mother to be as involved as she was in her son’s memoir because according to Burroughs she had strived all her life to become famous telling young Burroughs “I’ve been working on what I believe could be the poem that finally makes it into *The New Yorker*. I believe it could make me a very famous woman” (*Running* 11). Finally, in *Running with Scissors*, she was not only featured in a published book but a best-seller as well. She has refused to answer whether or not she agrees with the memoir but she is working on an autobiographical account herself (Neyfakh), which conveniently might be well received as another point of view on Burroughs’s childhood.

Memoirs tend to have names of the characters changed or altered for the sake of the person's privacy. Burroughs originally changed his name when he was eighteen years old from Chris to Augusten (Shapiro), however he uses that name for himself in the memoir but changes all the other characters name. Altering names has not been seen as an issue, a way for the author to keep the characters privacy hidden, but once again, people have a different opinion on where changes in a memoir are allowed and when they are not. That seems only natural to the reader because it is not necessary for the reader to know the real names, however if there are other things that the author alters, altering could be seen as an excuse for an event to be embellished. In the Turcottes case they felt that Burroughs did not change enough features about them and their surroundings in the memoir to prevent them from being known or recognized. This is the difficult part for an author because there is a thin line to change a few parts of a memoir for the sake of privacy and transform as the author pleases. James Frey for instance changed details about his characters in his memoir, instead of writing that his friend cut her wrists, which she did, he wrote that she hanged herself and explained the altering to keep his friend from being identified (Winfrey). The reader can only decide for himself what he or she feel is correct but in the end it is unrealistic to be able to please the persons included in the memoir and then readers. A good example of the difficult of pleasing is the lawsuit of the Turcottes. They feel as if they were not fictionalized enough to keep their identities hidden and then again there is too much fiction in the memoir for it to be called a memoir, according to them.

## Conclusion

When a memoir is too outlandish for readers or critics to understand, they begin to doubt the validity or credibility of what they are reading. Mark Twain once wrote “Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; truth isn't” (Railton) and according to him truth can be more unexpected than fiction. When readers cannot connect with what is happening in a memoir or have not experienced anything similar themselves then they turn to dubiety. That way, a memoir, which is difficult to relate to as *Running with Scissors* is, is likely to be debated over. Burroughs stood his ground and never allowed the criteria get to him for he kept publishing more memoirs.

Readers usually doubt the credibility of a memoir if they feel it has too much fiction but as we learned fiction is not always a taboo in a memoir because of the literary element. However we must understand that there is more to fiction than just fabrication. Though memoirs that have been verified as a fabrication put a dark cloud over other genre we have to be careful not to get too caught up in wondering whether a memoir is truthful or not. It is necessary that we, as readers, are alerted about the problem with fabricated memoirs but it should not affect our reading. When a reader becomes too occupied with defining what is correct and what is not the enjoyment of reading a book is gone. In the end it is impossible for an author like Augusten Burroughs to please all readers. He wrote about his childhood as he experienced it however that turned out to be too much truth for the reader. People began to disbelieve even though that is what the reader was expecting from the author, the truth.

We all understand that our memory can be a difficult tool to gather information but when it comes to memoirs it is what the author has to depend on. Not only is it unreliable but we have learned that we all have different capacity for memories so it is another reason for the reader to disbelieve what he is unable to understand himself. If a reader comes across something that he finds beyond belief then it is unfair to dismiss the memoir right away. That is not what reading is about, a memoir is not a case waiting to be cracked; it is the way that it is written that matters. Even though we expect the reader to be truthful we

have to realize that it is his or her truth that is told in a memoir, one side of a story that we are choosing to read.

Lastly we have privacy which is the author's difficult decision, whether or not exposing family and friends in a memoir is worth it. We have seen that authors handle that type of situation differently; in a way that they feel is right. An author who is in this position is unable to satisfy on one hand, those around him and then the readers as well. Either one has to suffer for the sake of the other, less information about the family and friends might result in the quality of a memoir and then more information might hurt those closest to the author. Burroughs wrote what he experienced as a child and even though the Turcottes did not agree with it, they did not go through with the lawsuit and agreed to a settlement which undermines their statement.

With these complications to the memoir the authors account becomes one side of a story or his truth. Whether he is trying to do privacy justice or counting on his memory to deliver, it is not always the intention to be untruthful even though a few prior memoirs have done so. Sometimes the reader has to go back to what Mark Twain said and believe that there is more to life than the readers own experience. As long as the author does his job then that is the only way for a memoir to become truthful and for a reader to believe that it is as truthful as the author believes it to be.

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