

The Art of Memoir - Mary Karr (2015)

Chapter 24. Against Vanity: In Praise of Revision

The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug. ~ Mark Twain

Every writer I know who's worth a damn spends way more time "losing" than "winning"—if success means typing a polished page that lands in print as is. Scriveners tend to arrive at good work through revision. Look at Yeats's chopped-up fixes in facsimile form, or Ezra Pound's swashbuckling edits of Eliot's *Waste Land*. Without radical overhaul, those works might have sunk like stones.

In fact, after a lifetime of hounding authors for advice, I've heard three truths from every mouth: (1) Writing is painful—it's "fun" only for novices, the very young, and hacks; (2) other than a few instances of luck, good work *only* comes through revision; (3) the best revisers often have reading habits that stretch back before the current age, which lends them a sense of history and raises their standards for quality.

Reading stuff in an antique-sounding idiom is hard for many readers. Young, I hated the oldsters and often swallowed them with my nose pinched, as for a stank spoonful of cod-liver oil. They were rich and white and male. So I started off very slowly, reading closest to my time period and feeling my way back. Frank Conroy mentioned Robert Graves, who was just one generation back; Graves mentioned Samuel Johnson, whose biography I read first. T. S. Eliot mentioned Mallarmé and Valéry and Baudelaire. I started with existing heroes and read back through time.

Since I was always interested in how to be a writer, I also gobbled up literary biographies—Walter Jackson Bate on Keats and Coleridge; Enid Starkie on Baudelaire and Rimbaud; Diane Middlebrook on Anne Sexton; Ian Hamilton on Robert Lowell; Paul Mariani on William Carlos Williams. Getting a sense of the person's time in history often helped me to understand their styles in that context—what literary pressures and fashions and values of the day were forging their pages.

Reading through history cultivates in a writer a standard of quality higher than the marketplace. You can be a slave to current magazines or a slave to history. History's harder, but also more stable—and the books are better because they've been culled over time. Yes, the canon remains deeply flawed and has only begun to open up, but it's invariably true that work that's lasted for centuries has been sifted through over that time. Compare this to current work written to express a current trend or fashion—writing about 9/11, say. Writing to try to endure forever also lifts your eyes from the fickle vicissitudes of the wickedly unfair (and often way-dumber-than-you-are) marketplace, which is populated by loads of frauds and charlatans.

Before you can work consciously, though, you go through a phase of developing a critical self, which makes a writer wicked self-conscious. Some students in our three-year MFA program come in defending every word; by mid-term second year, the more determined ones find themselves in despair at their own pages. Through reading and

thinking, they've raised their taste beyond their skill levels. So when they stare down at their pages, they can no longer superimpose what's in their heads onto the work.

These students can't go back to their old tricks—they can see through those now. But the self-consciousness that hits them weighs them down. It's like trying to dance with armor strapped on, bulky and awkward. By third year, though, most seem to grow muscles to maneuver in that armor. The self-consciousness becomes simple awareness. Others can't stand to revise; instead they decide they're avant-garde, so everybody who doesn't like their work is unenlightened. (Note: being avant-garde is now . . . well, garde.)

Revision is the secret to their troubles—and yours. That, and a sense of quality that exceeds what you can do—that gives you something to strive for. Actually, every writer needs two selves—the generative self and the editor self.

In the early draft, the generative self shakes pom-poms at every pen stroke and cheers every crossed *t*. In a month or so, this diligent and optimistic creature gins out, say, two hundred pages.

The editor self then shows up to heft the pages, give a sniff, and say: *Yeah, but . . .* The editor condenses two hundred pages down to about thirty. I don't mean she cuts the rest; she may well boil the whole thing down so the same amount of stuff happens more economically.

The editor self thinks only of saving the reader time and shaping a powerful emotional experience. She can't turn her complaints and suspicions and doubts off.

I find generative me harder to get going. But through sheer hardheadedness, even I can grant myself permission to run buck-wild down the page with sentences dumb as stumps and few glimpses of anything pretty. The idea is to get some scenes down. Let your mind roam down some alleys that may land in dead ends—that's the nature of the process.

For *Lit*, I spent maybe two years writing about short stints in California and Mexico and the UK and some old boyfriends before I realized that those stories—by then hundreds of pages—lacked emotional gravitas. They were youthful years of drinking and frittering time away—shallow, easy, sparkly, rather than the more tormented phases in my life, which were less glisteny on the surface and, ergo, harder to rout out. Plus they had zip to do with my mother, whom I'd vowed not to write about anymore. But—surprise!—that was exactly what I needed to write about—how making peace with her legacy was something I had to do to become a mother myself.

Still, those early pages I threw away were somehow necessary, even if I wrote past them. They were way stations I needed to visit to eliminate them from the final itinerary.

In the beginning, when there are zero pages, you have to cheer yourself into cranking stuff out, even if it later lands on the cutting room floor. Each page takes you somewhere you need to travel before you can land in the next spot. You zigzag, and in the low moments, you just have to keep plodding on—saying the next small thing about which you feel strongly, trying to nestle down into that single instant of clear memory you know without shadow of doubt is both true and important to who you've become.

When it works, it's like a spell has been cast. For me, it's less the old world that comes in clear as the old me—how I felt, what I schemed about, who I lied to. But the writing's seldom pretty—the sentences are just banal.

The pushing comes when editor me comes back to comb over—and over and over—the pages, unpacking each moment. Mostly I take general ideas and try to show them carnally or in a dramatic story. I also interrogate a lot of what I believe: Are you sure that happened? How would he have told it differently? And because the carnal is where I write from, I write a lot of kinesthetic descriptions of my body in old spaces.

All the while, I question. Is this really crucial? Are you writing this part to pose as cool or smart?

For me, the last 20 percent of a book's improvement takes 95 percent of the effort—all in the editing. I can honestly say not one page I've ever published appears anywhere close to how it came out in first draft. A poem might take sixty versions. I am not much of a writer, but I am a stubborn little bulldog of a reviser.

In the long run, the revision process feels better if you approach it with curiosity. Each editorial mark can't register as a "mistake" that threatens the spider ego. Remind yourself that revising proves your care for the reader and the nature of your ambition. Writing, regardless of the end result—whether good or bad, published or not, well reviewed or slammed—means celebrating beauty in an often ugly world. And you do that by fighting for elegance and beauty, redoing or cutting the flabby, disordered parts.

There's a strange freedom in keeping the bar so high that—poor me—I'll never make it over. If Shakespeare's my standard, I'm at least free from worrying about the muddy, fickle sales market. Oddly, when I'm working well, the work ceases being about me, even in memoir.

Rewriting on the page is safer than revision in, say, painting, where you can paint past a good place and wreck a canvas. Performers can't revise at all. A writer can always go back to an earlier draft. The point is to have more curiosity about possible forms the work could take than sense of self-protection for your ego.

So try learning how to cut out the dull parts. Even the smallest towns have coffee shop bulletin boards or community centers with a writer's workshop now. Even the less good groups can help you by speaking for your potential reader—they're way better than the echo chamber of your own head.

One of the greatest memoirs of all time is G. H. Hardy's *A Mathematician's Apology*. Nearing the end of his life, Hardy felt his mathematical abilities wane and tried to kill himself. He was a nerdy guy with few deep emotional connections, a Sunday cricket-watching bachelor of the type the UK breeds. His friend from Cambridge, C. P. Snow, found him in the hospital, bleakly mocking what a mess he'd made of his near-fatal overdose. Snow's intro to Hardy's story is heart-rending:

As a touch of farce, he had a black eye. Vomiting from the drugs, he had hit his head on the lavatory basin. . . . I had to enter into the sarcastic game. I had never felt less like sarcasm, but I had to play. I talked about other distinguished failures at bringing it off. What about the German generals in the last war?

Hardy decided to go on living. Snow says, "His hard, intellectual stoicism came back." But he was infirm, and he waited for death as many of the infirm elderly do. As most of us someday will.

Hardy's survival is a profound act of courage, and often when I've been despondent about my own work, or when that ghoul, self-pity, has tempted me from the shadows—*Your work is aggressively minor, you poser!*—I've taken comfort in Hardy's slender book about a subject that bored me until his passion became contagious.

Hardy ends with one of the most brutal, yet somehow hopeful, credos for anybody trying to make anything.

I have never done anything "useful." No discovery of mine has made or is likely to make, directly or indirectly, for good or ill, the least difference to the amenity of the world. . . . Judged by all practical standards, the value of my mathematical life is nil, and outside mathematics it is trivial anyhow. . . . I have added something to knowledge and helped others to add more; and these somethings have a value that differs in degree only, and not in kind, from that of the creations of the great mathematicians, or any of the other artists, great or small, who have left some kind of memorial behind them.

I often hand this out to students as they graduate, to remind them that anybody struggling to make something—no matter how they succeed or don't in terms of the marketplace—has entered into conversation with giants. We're all in the same arena, and our efforts differ "in degree only, and not in kind."

Just picking up a pen makes you part of a tradition of writers that dates thousands of years back and includes Homer and Toni Morrison and cave artists sketching buffalo. It's a corny attitude to revere writers in this celebrity age, when even academics cry the author is dead. Go to any book award ceremony, and we're like America's Homeliest Video. We are the inward-looking goofballs who spill on our blouses and look befuddled in our selfies.

But I still feel awe for us—yes, for the masters who wrought lasting beauty from their hard lives, but for the rest of us, too, for the great courage all of us show in trying to wring some truth from the godawful mess of a single life. To bring oneself to others makes the whole planet less lonely. The nobility of everybody trying boggles the mind.

And I'd like to leave you thinking about diffident old Hardy, who—by his own yardstick—failed. He did no work as lastingly beautiful and relevant as, say, Einstein or Newton. I'm no judge of his mathematical work, which may or may not be as minor as he finds it, yet this book he thought so little of, still published by a small press, is the most widely read memoir by a mathematician I know. And every time I read it, it showers me with sparkles like a Disney fairy. None of us can ever know the value of our lives, or how our separate and silent scribbling may add to the amenity of the world, if only by how radically it changes us, one and by one.