

Writing about Others

A (CONTINUED) CONVERSATION

DAWN DAVIES, MARIBETH FISCHER, VINCE GRANATA, EJ LEVY,
KATHLEEN LIVINGSTON, KERRY REILLY, SHERYL ST. GERMAIN,
MARIN SARDY, AND MELISSA STEPHENSON

After I'd accepted "She and I" by Maribeth Fischer for publication in the August 2018 issue of *Fourth Genre*, I asked her if she'd be willing to write a companion essay in which she explored the question—one that was salient for me and for reviewers of her essay when we first received it—of the qualms and considerations of writing about her sister, her nephews, and their illness.

In the back-and-forth between Maribeth and me as she composed and polished "Writing about My Sister," the companion essay, I found myself reaching out to other *Fourth Genre* contributors and editors to ask how they had handled these matters and what kinds of conversations I'd had with them at the time of publication. My editor's essay in that issue focused on some of this, some parts of the conversations we had.

It's a matter that I believe is vital to nonfiction writers—or should be—and a matter that cannot be revisited often enough: what is our responsibility in writing about other people, and how do we handle it? The question is especially difficult and vital when those others are people close to us, or minors, or unable (for any of a number of reasons) to have any say about it.

And so I invited several of these nonfiction writers to engage in an online conversation about how they've negotiated these questions in the writing and publishing that they've done, as well as what the feedback or consequences have been for them after publication. What follows are their remarks; each of them edited their own words and consented to have them made public.

—*Laura Julier, editor*

MELISSA STEPHENSON

I've written about my children many times. I run it by their father. I often run it by them, but they're minors, so it's more to gauge their response. I do think, as an adult, one has the power to get a child to sign off on content that might feel like a violation once they grow older. For me, the bottom line is, do I think my children, as adults, will feel embarrassed or exposed by the material? Small things: I never use their actual names; we do not have the same last name. Instead I might use an initial (H or S), or, in my memoir, when my son appears in the epilogue at age seven, I simply call him "the boy." Ultimately, I write about them less as they get older. And always, in every piece I write, self-awareness is the ultimate goal. This Dinty Moore line comes to mind: "Calling bullshit on yourself is one of the most essential skills of a memoirist."

I do believe that pain and injury are common experiences that drive us to write. Sometimes people behave badly. They abandon their children, or are addicts, or abusive, or whatever. And I believe we have the right to write about these situations (though self-awareness should still be the root of the story). I've been asked to talk about this over the past few months while touring to promote my memoir. In it I write about a semi-famous character who was married to my brother at the time of his suicide. In my experience she was a toxic addict who introduced him to hard drugs, cheated on him, and abandoned him. Soon after, he killed himself. I didn't want to write about her, but she had to be in the book in order to tell the full story. I chose to only show her in-scene, the few times I encountered her, and to stick to the facts. Ann Hood says in her "How to Write a Kickass Essay" podcast that showing people in detail, without judgment, allows the reader to draw their own conclusions. This worked mostly, though I never told her I was writing about her. Based on who I knew her to be, I feared she might legally try to stop me from telling a story that belongs to my brother and me. The book came out in late July, and I still have no idea if she knows. She's a small part of the book, I say nothing about her drug use, and only present the cheating as something my brother believed but was never verified. The abandonment is made clear only to be her absence in his final days. It was cleared by my publisher's legal department, yet it's still weird to have written about someone without their knowledge.

It's also worth noting that my book is very much about a dead person. While my brother was my muse and loved it when I wrote about him in fiction, when he was alive, I felt a huge obligation to dig for the deepest truth and show him from all angles, since I was using my one voice to tell our story, when he had none.

The point that Maribeth makes that writing about others is something we should think about more, and not just in nonfiction, is important to me. My kids' dad is a fairly well-known novelist. He left us after 16 years when the kids were two and five. He'd just finished his first novel the month he left, and in that novel the main character is a case worker who abandons his 14-year-old daughter. The daughter ends up becoming a street kid and prostitute on the streets of Seattle in the 1980s. The sex scenes are graphic. I can't imagine being my daughter, someday in her twenties, reading that novel and patching together the timeline, realizing that her father knew the wreckage absent parents leave behind, and he left anyway. Maybe her brain will never go there, but I worry about the impact of his fiction far more than I worry about the essay of mine in *Fourth Genre* about her tantrums and attachment therapy at age six.

This brings me to one book I will likely never write: a memoir about a failed marriage in which I gave up my own goals as a writer to support another writer and was finally left with two young children to raise on my own, and find my way back to writing (and to my self). I now realize why I see so few memoirs about failed marriages—because of the kids, I'd guess, which is my main issue, and the privacy of the spouse. So I'll never write that book. But I wish those books existed, as a reader. The stories we can't or don't write are often experiences that would be valuable to others, and I feel torn about that.

VINCE GRANATA

While I thought about first speaking more generally about the responsibilities we might or might not have when sharing others' stories, I quickly realized that—as is certainly the case with all of us—my individual circumstances color how I approach the question. So I'm going to respond with some thoughts about how I've struggled with writing about one of my siblings.

I write about how my family has experienced serious mental illness. Much of my writing—including the essay published in *Fourth Genre*—concerns my brother Tim, whose schizophrenia festered largely untreated for a number of years while he was in his late teens and early twenties, and had tragic consequences.

After being forced to withdraw from school for an involuntary hospitalization, Tim retreated to his room in the house where we had grown up. Our mother looked after him. He was 22. At home, his untreated disease overwhelmed him, swallowing the loving boy I had grown up with. His accelerating delusions bent his world in such a way that he came to believe that our mother, the one who had sacrificed to take care of him, had abused him when he was a child. Four years ago, during a psychotic episode, he killed our mother.

I still have a relationship with Tim. For most of the last four years, I've visited him at the facility where he will spend the next decades of his life. Slowly, treatment lifted the haze of his illness, and in our conversations we've found ways to wade through the aftermath of what his disease wrought.

I don't hold Tim responsible for our mother's death. I don't hold him responsible for how we fail to treat serious mental illness, for how our misperceptions about psychotic disorders allow terrifying diseases to metastasize in the dark.

Yes, it took time for me to find my way back to Tim, for me to recognize him as victim and not perpetrator, to see him as my brother again. Largely, this process is what I write about.

So, know that I don't believe Tim has forfeited his right to his story. Schizophrenia has already co-opted his narrative, imposed a story that he never would have chosen, and I'm terrified that my writing might make him feel less in control of his life than he already does.

A number of factors surrounding his illness and its treatment made early conversations about my writing—work I started roughly three years ago—difficult if not impossible. I'm not certain if Tim could fully comprehend our early conversations about my writing. Though he gave me his “permission”—and yes, I agree that this concept is slippery—in the months before my first essays were published, I don't know to what extent he fully understood what he was agreeing to. When I offered, he said he didn't need to read those essays, though during that period—nearly two years ago—I'm not certain if he would fully have been able to engage with my writing about our family.

This has changed. Over the last 18 months, Tim has grown quite stable

on medication and is beginning to gain insight into an illness that was, for quite some time, impossible for him to see. Now, Tim and I are having much more involved discussions about my writing, and I'm quite close to giving Tim a copy of the book manuscript I've been working on—one that is (*knocks on wood, crosses all fingers and toes*) in the final stages of revision.

I try to be as specific as possible with Tim when we talk about my writing. But when I tell him, *I've written about the day Mom died*, or *I've written about the month when you sealed yourself behind your bedroom door*, or *I've written about how you tried to communicate with your delusions using the Google search bar*, he'll tell me that he doesn't need to see the writing, that he trusts me.

He's said, "Tell the story as you see fit."

He's said, "Write whatever you need to write."

But he's also said, once, "Just don't make me look worse than I already look." I don't know if I can explain how crushing this felt—*Just don't make me look worse than I already look*. Hadn't I explained to him that this—*making him look worse*—is the opposite of my intent, the last thing I would want someone to take from this writing?

During my first read of Maribeth Fischer's "Writing about My Sister," I nearly fell out of my chair when I arrived at the Andre Dubus III quote about "good intentions." His belief about what pure intentions permit in writing about his family seemed to me—at first—like an easy way out.

But I'm sure that I reacted this strongly because I had, quite recently, believed that my own "good intentions" had also been enough to convince Tim that I wasn't going to misrepresent his story, that he could retain some type of control.

I had told Tim that I was trying to tell a story that didn't reduce him to headlines, to sensational reporting, to bulleted newspaper articles about the day our mother died. I had told Tim that I was trying to start a conversation about serious mental illness that we rarely have, or have without nuance, without understanding, without awareness of what suffering serious psychotic disorders can incur. I had told Tim that in order to illustrate the terror of his disease, I had to write about the horror it spawned.

And yes, these intentions matter, are a crucial piece of why I write, but my intentions alone will not—should not, cannot—dictate how Tim will feel when his story is in the world.

Only recently have I shifted my conversations with Tim from saying *here's*

what this can mean for a greater good, here's what this can mean for you, to here's what this has meant for me.

So I tell Tim now about what writing has meant for me. I tell him how I don't think I truly began grieving our mother until I started thinking in sentences about what happened. I tell him that all my memories from before, from childhood, before illness, had seemed impossibly tainted, inaccessible, grayed out by trauma, until writing forced me to interrogate our past. I try to explain this to Tim, how writing lets me hold loss and pain, lets me look at all the pieces of our family's story, pieces I felt that I could never understand. I tell him that this process—recognizing the pieces, struggling to put them in order—is painful, sometimes unbearably so. But I tell Tim that through this process, through writing, the past is losing its power over me.

Ultimately, though I want him to believe all my other intentions, the only person whose thoughts, hopes, feelings, and fears about this writing I can control and convey are my own.

So I hope, soon, when he reads my manuscript—I've offered and he's said he will—he'll have some sense of why I've had to go to such painful places: memories painful for him, memories painful for me. And maybe—though I know this might too be naive—our conversations will lead to some understanding, some real trust, because he'll know that while this process almost overwhelmed me, writing is also what allowed me to live again.

DAWN DAVIES

I've been moved by what I've read here. I feel as if I am not alone in my dirty-little-secret vacuum, so thank you all for that. I'll be taking what you all share to heart, because I struggle with what we are talking about.

I wrote a book titled *Mothers of Sparta* that features family members as characters. The title essay is about my experience as a mother of a child with frontal lobe brain damage who is also on the autism spectrum. The brain damage has presented itself in seizure activity, inability to feel empathy, and significant lack of impulse control. His primary issues have been with lying, animal killing, and compulsive, unstoppable viewing of pornography.

My son was diagnosed with Conduct Disorder when he was 11. That's the diagnosis they give you when you are too young to be labeled "psychopath"

or “sociopath.” When I disclosed his issues, people blacklisted us. When I didn’t disclose, I feared I was potentially putting children in harm’s way, especially when my son was in school. A Broward County (the same county as Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School) school employee once called my son a “future school shooter.” Psychologists have called my son a “future psychopath.” Lawyers have told us to save all our extra money for legal fees for when he gets caught. Many professionals we consulted said they had never seen anyone like my son before. The judgment we received was far greater than the effort anyone went through to consider comorbid diagnoses and how we might come up with a plan to help him live within the bumpers of what society requires for both safety and freedom. We got so little help, especially from services that were supposed to be in place for people with serious needs.

A note: since the essay was first published four years ago, I have spoken with a few big names in psychopathic research who have suggested that my son may have a form of OCD, which does make sense, since it runs in the family (guilty). We are now treating him with CBT therapy and he is making progress. He has also defied all professional predictions. At almost 21, he is stable, living on his own in a distant city, attending school, and working a job that he has held for several months. I think the dire predictions and lack of help allowed us to double down on parenting efforts and skill building, and my son is not the statistic they all said he would be. He’s working hard, is staying on the right side of the law, and has found meaning in his life.

Despite people considering the essay titled “Mothers of Sparta” to be a tell-all about a child, I maintain that it is not. It is about my hopelessness as a parent. The lack of treatment resources and compassion created a ridiculous family situation that was nearly impossible to live with day to day, which is what I responded to.

The essay talks about another impossible situation I found myself in as a mother: loving my son, while also being afraid of my son, while also watching my daughters live in fear of him, while also considering my duty to protect society from him, while also considering my duty to protect him from society, while he was also consistently getting kicked out of schools, programs, treatment centers, and released from therapists and medical care that were put in place to help him. All while losing the support and trust of some family and friends, though I don’t talk about that last part in the essay.

I thought writing the essay would bury my son. We have had our house “tossed” by cops for illegal pornography, and if they had taken my computer, they would have seen proof of his behavior in my Word documents and could have potentially used it against him. When the essay was in process, I felt terrible guilt. After I finished the essay, though, I believed it was important to share. Dark secrets fester when not brought into the light. I felt that I needed to share our family’s experience, because we couldn’t be the only ones on the planet going through what we did.

When I first thought about sharing the essay, I did not send it to Laura. I was afraid she would want to publish it, and besides, I was afraid of scrutiny from other writers who care so much for the nuances of our genre. I knew I could find thoughtful writers like that hanging around *Fourth Genre*, and I really thought I was defiling the genre in the way tell-all sensationalist memoirists can do. I worried about my place in the nonfiction community and of dishonoring the genre.

So I sent it to *Joyland*, a journal that got about 90 percent of its action in fiction at the time. The editor told me he loved it, that he would love to publish it, but it deserved a bigger audience, that their readers read for the fiction, and the essay might be buried in their journal. I said, “Exactly,” but he advised me to go bigger. I entered the essay in the *Arts & Letters* contest for the Susan Atefat Nonfiction Prize, thinking there was no way anyone would touch it with a ten-foot pole, and our secret would be safe. But it won the contest. I almost declined the prize and publication, because I was afraid to publish this story.

When my book was picked up by Amy Einhorn at Flatiron Books, and I got the contract in the mail, I almost didn’t sign. I was still afraid. *I’m still afraid*, and the book has been out for a year and has just come out in paperback.

I still don’t feel like I did an ethical thing. I still feel like I betrayed my son, but I believe the horrors—and I’m not using that word lightly—that we went through are important enough to be considered for public discourse, mostly because we needed so much help and couldn’t get it, and things shouldn’t be that way for people who come after us. Interestingly, my son also said something along the lines of what Vince’s brother said: “Just don’t make me look worse than I already look.” Pretty heartbreaking. Mental illness is heartbreaking because no one asks for it. It just happens.

In our case, consent was slippery. My son was 18 by the time the essay

was ready to go out, and he wanted me to publish it, but I worried that his deficits might not allow him to make a sound decision. I shared my son's latest neuropsych evaluations with a psychologist who noted that my son was not deficient across the board—he had high average IQ areas averaged with some that were in the pit of despair, so his overall score was low. But the areas where he is intellectually strong allowed the doctor to believe my son was capable of making sound decisions. So we proceeded.

By the way, Paul Austin, who wrote *Something for the Pain*, writes beautifully about the implications of writing about special-needs children in the anthology *Family Trouble* (University of Nebraska Press, 2013).

When my son read the essay, it hurt him. The essay is so frank, strangers have told me it was painful for them to read. At the same time, my son is a guy who appreciates—and needs—things to be as concrete and as frank as possible. The essay allowed us to speak honestly about things we hadn't been able to until that point, and it was helpful for both of us. Bottom line: I'm glad the essay is out in the world. We have helped bring awareness to Conduct Disorder on national television. An organization for parents who have children with CD has come together because of this essay, though I am not part of it. Still, I shake my head and occasionally squirm at what I have done, as a mother, to one of my children. It still feels like a betrayal.

MARIN SARDY

My first book, *The Edge of Every Day: Sketches of Schizophrenia*, came out in May. Like Vince, I write about the schizophrenia in my family. For me, this involves writing about not only my brother but also my mother. My book began as a series of essays that were published separately, including in *Fourth Genre*, before I sold the book as a “highly fragmented, wide-ranging memoir.” This is all to establish that the people who would potentially be upset by my book included both parents, all three siblings, and several aunts and uncles. As a result, I tried to be extremely careful about what I said and how I said it. Thankfully, as a rule, people in my family tend to not care so much about what others think of them. This helps.

Much of my book is about my brother, who developed schizophrenia in his early twenties and spent several years homeless in Anchorage before

dying by suicide in the state psychiatric hospital there nearly five years ago. I never intended to write most of what I've included about him in the book, partly because I had the hope that someday he would reenter society, and I didn't want him to discover that I had been publishing work about his worst moments. I did write one essay about him, however—"The Dragon at the Bottom of the Sea"—which Laura published in *Fourth Genre*. It just fell out of me one day and it felt vital and important, and I wanted to put it out into the world. I couldn't ask my brother's permission because I couldn't find him without flying home and searching for him at soup kitchens and homeless shelters, and even if I did there was no way to get an answer from him that felt like true consent, because in his intense psychosis he could likely not have absorbed or understood what was actually happening and what it meant for him.

So I asked myself if and how the essay could ever harm him. I concluded that a single essay in a small literary print journal was obscure enough that its ripple effects would never reach him. I still think this is true, though I will add that at the time I don't believe I thought it through as carefully as I should have. All of that ended up being moot, because he was dead before the thing ever appeared in print, allowing me to sidestep a lot of second-guessing. But what I've realized since he died is that at the time, I wasn't able to step inside Tom's experience fully enough to really consider what it would mean to him for his illness to be written about. I felt deeply that I had lost him to his illness, but I didn't realize I had also lost *sight* of him, in his illness. This is a key point. After he died, I wrote much more about him than I had ever thought I would—his resistance to treatment, his life on the streets, his efforts to help himself, and his death. In doing so, over the six months in which I did little more than remember him and record my memories, I found him again, inside his own story.

So I realized that in thinking about the ethics of publishing that essay, I never fully considered my brother, and yet I could never have gotten to this realization if I hadn't written about him, and I never would have written so much about him if he were still alive. A Catch-22. I think this whole debate is to some degree a Catch-22. How do we write about illnesses that render people irrational if to do so requires their rational consent? Self-silencing is often inadequate when the stakes are so high. But getting consent in the traditional sense can be impossible. Most notions of consent assume consulting a reasonable, rational adult, but what do we do when a person's illness precludes

reason and rationality? Anthropologist Tanya Lurhmann points out that (in the context of doctors and patients) the result is an ongoing negotiation between perspectives, between interpretations of events, between models of the mind and the self, and evidence about how illness reshapes these.

Then there are my sisters, both of whom have struggled along with me to deal with my mother's and brother's schizophrenia, and both of whom appear in my book. I definitely felt more free to say whatever I wanted about one sister to whom I have always been close. I once published an essay that significantly exposed her, with her permission. With the other sister, I have often self-censored in order to avoid potential conflicts. I have shown both sisters the places in the book where they appear, and both have given full permission. But I can tell there is some ambivalence there.

I had a long hash-it-out conversation with the sister I'm less close with early in the process, in which she sort of grilled me about why I tell the stories I tell, why I decided to write this book, what I would include, and why. I explained myself as openly and honestly as possible, and that seemed to satisfy her. Ultimately she seemed to realize that her resistance was less about what I was doing than that I was the one doing it and not her—that as the writer, I got to tell the story as I saw it, as I had lived it. That her own version was not the one that would reach the world. I was careful to acknowledge and address my subjectivity, explaining that I felt this was the only responsible approach to writing a memoir. I wanted to own that and let others' differing opinions be known on the page as well. The published book is my story and not her story. There is no way around this. Yet that alone made my sister feel that this was somehow unfair. And I do think that's a big part of what happens with writing about family members: part of the tension has nothing to do with whether or how the story is told; it's about who's *not* telling it. So for me it came down to whether I felt my version of the story needed to be told, and my answer was and continues to be yes, given the stakes involved with schizophrenia and the need for a larger, truer public conversation about it. But it has also taught me how important it is to understand the viewpoints of the others involved in the story as much as possible, so that those can be taken into account and can temper one's own perspective when necessary.

The sister with whom I'm closer has never objected to being written about, but I discovered the hard way that this doesn't mean it couldn't hurt her feelings. In my writing I have made use of her as a proxy for me—showing

her reactions to schizophrenia as a way of displaying how I myself felt. My sister's behavior is often more dramatic than mine, and because it works well on the page, I have at times exposed her more than she would have preferred. I was careful to talk about this with her. She responded that she would never tell me to not write something—on a philosophical level, she does not believe in that—but then she sighed. I asked if she felt exposed. She said: “Exposed in my dysfunction.” Those words stung then and they do now. In fact, in the book, I did not include the essay that especially exposes her, precisely because it felt unkind to do that. But I have included some other things, and think I'll always feel a little bad about that, though I know my sister well enough to know that in the final analysis she would rather potentially help others than keep her secrets.

This goes back to what I said about an ongoing negotiation. As the writer, I have the power to shut down the negotiations at any time. This is where I have an advantage, always, over the people I write about. This is where it's always a little unfair—that I, as the one who is actually telling the stories, have a prerogative that they can't claim. That's why I owe them the conversations. Maybe what matters most is my willingness to engage in those negotiations and to let them be ongoing.

Then there is my mother, and in my situation with her, I find all of the ethical and moral questions that are most important for me. My mom has an undiagnosed mental illness that is pretty clearly a form of schizophrenia, and she figures prominently in my forthcoming book as well as in several essays I've published in literary journals. Because I have a close relationship with my mom, it would be hard to disregard her feelings about my writing, but because we fundamentally disagree about the fact of her illness, it's hard for me to share with her what I write. She has known for years that I write about her and is in general very blasé about it, which is part of why I've felt comfortable enough to write about her at all. And she has also known for some time that I write about schizophrenia, so I knew she wouldn't be surprised when I gave her the book to read. After skimming a few chapters, she told me that she didn't feel that anything in the book needed to be different but that she wanted to tell me her own version of events, which she did. Then she returned the book to me and said she didn't need to read any further.

Let me explain more fully: My mother has a strong sense that we each have our own perspectives and feels that whatever I write “gets fictionalized”

in the process. But I have realized more recently that some of this is protective—not only of herself but of our relationship. I have a feeling that it makes her uncomfortable to read what I write, so she avoids the topic, brushing it off whenever it comes up.

My mother did share that she believes schizophrenia to be an “obsolete diagnosis” that was applied incorrectly to both her and my brother, and that her own problems were resolved through a miracle some years ago. But she also seemed glad to be in the book, which I found deeply reassuring. I assured her that I made it clear in my book that my brother didn’t (and she doesn’t) agree with my interpretation of events. This helped a lot, and I suppose it gets at an aspect of writing about others that feels particularly important to me: that I am always clear within myself that I am sharing only my own perspectives and conclusions. I do make an effort to listen to others and to incorporate their perspectives if I feel that they reveal the limits of my own, as well as to show the complexity of the circumstances. I have always believed this makes for better writing, for a more reliable narrator, but as I get older I also have come to realize how much I gain—in understanding and in coming to terms with the events I write about—when I fully take my family members’ perspectives into account.

In the case of my mother, I am hyperaware of the long history of oppression of the mentally ill, which has deeply impacted my mother’s life. As a society we have not historically listened to them or taken them seriously, and my tricky task is to do just that with my mother, while also holding in myself the recognition that she says many wildly untrue and impossible things. I also hold firm to my belief that the impact of mental illness on family members is something our society needs to understand, and I can’t share what that experience has been like for me without sharing the nature of my mother’s illness. When it comes to my mother, I wish I could find a more comfortable place to land. But I don’t believe I ever will. I think I’ll always be balancing somewhere in the air, keeping the words flowing and the questions in play. I suppose that’s maybe where I feel most at home anyway. Isn’t the role of the artist to deal in questions for which we have no definitive answers? And isn’t this one of them? Thanks so much for the opportunity to wrestle with this in such good company.

MARIBETH FISCHER

I came home from a camping trip, saw these emails, and couldn't wait to write back. Because the overriding and overwhelming feeling I have is one of such gratitude, to hear the stories of others' struggles with this issue, the often wrenching admissions, and along with the gratitude, I feel such longing—if only I had had access to all these words years ago! I think of the despair I felt when Laura first asked me to dig into this topic again, the despair and the shame, and I think that had I only known all these voices and perspectives were out there, I would not have felt that—or not as much. I have read so much on this subject of writing about others, I have researched and researched, and it seems that almost everything I found was a version of the Andre Dubus III quote—*if your intentions are good*—which was no help at all, although I appreciate Vince's reminder that “yes, these intentions matter, are a crucial piece of why [we] write.” I need to remember this, to not throw the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak, and forget that while our intentions are not enough, they are not unimportant.

I also found in my own research, prior to writing my essay, a lot of variations of Faulkner's “The writer's only responsibility is to his art. He will be completely ruthless if he is a good one. . . . If a writer has to rob his mother, he will not hesitate; the ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ is worth any number of old ladies.” That didn't help either. At all. And it's clear from these responses that it wouldn't have been much help to any of us. We want to write about these people whose lives and stories are so entangled with our own lives and stories, and we want to write honestly, and we have no desire to hurt the people we love. And yet, we invariably do. How can that not be a huge struggle? Which is why I feel such gratitude. These meditations feel so nuanced and conflicted and honest in a way nothing else I've read has felt. I feel the struggle and maybe that is all we can ask—for the struggle, that honest reckoning with the issue. Not a solving of it.

There's no solving; there is just the specific choice we make at a specific point in time about a specific piece. I've been struck by Vince's comment that he doesn't believe his brother has forfeited his right to his story, that his brother's illness “has already co-opted his narrative, imposed a story that he never would have chosen, and I'm terrified that my writing might make him feel less in control of his life than he already does.” That's the tricky part for

me. This notion that we are writing about people who have already had a story *imposed on them*—by others, by circumstance or illness, and it’s not a story they would have chosen, not a story they deserve, not a story that is fair—and now, now, there is no way around it, we are imposing another story on them. I can’t get around this; it puts a knot in my gut, until, until, until . . . this again from Vince: “I tell him that . . . while this process almost overwhelmed me, writing is also what allowed me to live again.” And then from Marin: “After he died, I wrote much more about him than I had ever thought I would—his resistance to treatment, his life on the streets, his efforts to help himself, and his death. In doing so, over the six months in which I did little more than remember him and record my memories, I found him again, inside his own story.” And it occurs to me that writing about these things, these people, is not just a way to hopefully allow *others* to come to terms and to understand the issues—it’s actually how *we* ourselves understand and come to terms. I know my sister better because I have written about her. This is not my wish. This is a fact. *I know my sister better for having written about her.* That seems hugely important.

KERRY REILLY

I am reminded of why I started writing in the first place, though I may not have been aware enough to articulate it in my mid-twenties: to make sense of things and feel less alone, even in my own company. I know many writers have struggled with the issues we are discussing, but in much of what I have read (and heard at conferences), so many writers seem to come to some sort of resolution/resignation/peace about revealing family stories. Many seem to have figured out clear rules and boundaries that they carry from project to project. This whole dilemma is a huge part of why it has taken me so long to write a book-length memoir. I really look forward to reading all of yours.

I heard Cheryl Strayed on a podcast say that the only time she needed sleep medication was right before *Wild* was published. Years ago at AWP, I heard Honor Moore talk about the incredible pain she experienced after her siblings disowned her for writing what she thought was a compassionate and complex portrayal of her father in her memoir *The Bishop’s Daughter*. She said that she had to find a “new tribe,” and by that she meant writers

who would see the care she took on the page and the seriousness with which she approached what I might call her chosen responsibility of writing about others. But is it a choice? A responsibility? I ask these questions for myself, a hand-wringer who has spent a lot of time not writing because I am so knotted up about all of this. I am indebted, as a person and a writer, and incredibly grateful to others who have had the courage to write about such hard stuff.

My father was once a successful attorney who was also a physically and psychologically abusive and sadistic alcoholic, though his alcoholism did not seem to be the dominant problem. By the end of his life at age 63, he had destroyed two marriages and alienated himself from all seven of his children and stepchildren. His cruelty contributed to my mother's death at age 54. Six months before my father's death, he moved to an island off the west coast of Ireland where he lived alone in poverty. I have written several pieces to try to understand him more and to try to understand the possible causes of his behaviors and untreated mental illness. I keep coming back to the fact that he was a toddler when his exuberant father was away at World War II, and he was left with my depressed grandmother who had a stillborn child and needed surgery and lived with her iron-fisted mother. I write to find compassion for him and also boundaries between what can be known and what cannot. I write to sift through the wreckage and hope to find some redemption. And to climb out of the dark shame in order to claim my own life. I also write to reclaim my family, which was shattered by the traumas we experienced. It is hard for us to be around each other. It's as if our unconscious minds scream, "Danger! Bad things will happen when we are together," because they so often did.

When he died right before Christmas in 2004, I went alone to Ireland to bury him. About a year before that, I had written an essay, again trying to understand something, this time the fact that while some people in our community knew about the abuse that was going on in our house, they did nothing. And they did nothing again when he used the same tactics with his second family. How I became part of that community when my mother, siblings, and I moved out of his house. My own powerlessness then.

I sat with the piece and did not submit it until after my father died. A friend suggested the *New York Times* "Modern Love" column. I was surprised when it was accepted, and in retrospect, I wish I hadn't sent it out so soon after his death, as going to bury him had been traumatic and my nervous system was still on high alert. Due to word-count issues and the stylistic constraints of

writing for a newspaper, I agreed to cut scenes where a pediatrician called social services, and my full siblings and I were interviewed by that agency, which did not end up helping my father's second family in any meaningful way. I came to understand the necessary "sculpting" of a story, how you can never tell the whole thing, as if "the whole thing" wasn't a problematic concept due to issues of perspective and memory.

When the essay was accepted, I sent it to my stepmother, siblings, and step-siblings, all of whom gave the go-ahead. I would not have published it if they hadn't, but I was grateful they had.

I have often been surprised by who is upset about a piece and have sometimes found it difficult to predict. My stepmother had the most to lose: she is the dominant character in the essay and she is drunk and unable/unwilling to protect her children and herself. The day the piece was published, she was the first to call to say congratulations. She had woken up early to walk to the newsstand. My older sister, who comes across as brave and even heroic, called to tell me she was glad we have different last names because she thought she could be fired from her job if people knew what went on in our home when we were children. While I did not think this was rational, my amygdala felt the same way—because I was breaking the code of secrecy and stoicism, and I did think that people would assume I was too messed up to hire/date/befriend. And that I had done something wrong. Thrown the man who gave me life (and nearly killed me) under the bus after he had died. Let this stand as a kind of obituary in his own hometown newspaper.

My younger sister, a teacher, had the opposite reaction and said she hoped her superintendent would read the piece because she "wanted him to know how strong [she] is." I wanted to feel this way, but I did not. My brother, who barely spoke to anyone in the family by this point, stopped speaking to me completely. And while my stepsister said she was proud and grateful that I had written the piece, she found it retraumatizing to read. As did Sandra, a close friend who, as a little girl, stayed at our home when her parents left town and knew all the family secrets. Reading the essay sent her into a full-blown mania. I felt I had opened a terrible can of worms for some of the people who mattered the most to me. My work triggered a dear friend's mental illness. I had been published in print literary journals, but the *New York Times* was so much more public.

I too had an essay that, as Marin says, "just fell out of [her]"; mine was

about Sandra's brother Jimmy, who died by suicide. Before I sent that one out, I asked Sandra for permission. She said "of course" and that she was so glad people were still thinking about Jimmy. She never asked to read the piece, and I have to admit I was somewhat relieved. I think she never thought my work would appear outside the scope of a literary journal. When the *Times* piece appeared, she called me late one night to ask if the essay about Jimmy would ever appear in a book. Again, I wondered what I was doing and at what cost. To publish what I once thought was a tribute to her brother might have been an insensitive choice.

Then there is this: in an essay about my mother's death, I mention that my grandmother was vain. In other ways, she comes across as incredibly strong. I was worried my grandfather would focus on the word "vain," that it would hurt him. I don't think it registered. I think what did register is that I was writing about "depressing things." He encouraged me to write fiction, "like Mary Higgins Clark."

EJ LEVY

The first short story that I ever wrote was based in fact and about my romantic friendship with a beautiful, glamorous, semi-famous actress whose day job at the time was acting on Broadway and whose vocation was to write. The piece I wrote was fiction, so I had changed many details and all the names and invented scenes, but I thought she'd be glad to see how much she meant to me, how she'd inspired me to write, as she did. I wanted to send it out for publication, but I sent it to her first, in case she wanted anything changed. At her family's dinners, which I'd attended, her brother and she would take turns saying wonderfully quotable things and then shouting, "copyright!" I assumed it was a joke. I was shocked when she sent me a curt reply, saying that her lawyer would be contacting me—for copyright infringement. She claimed to have copyright on her life. I was heartbroken that our friendship was over, and I was terrified. I consulted an intellectual property lawyer, who looked over the complaint and my story, heavily marked up by my ex-friend, and said, "There's no case. It's absurd." He told me that there was nothing to worry about, that the only legal danger would be if my ex-friend had a lot of money and a huge grudge, in which case she could hit me with a SLAPP-suit,

not winnable on merit, but impoverishing to fight. I thanked him and left, filled with dread: as it happened, my ex-friend had recently gotten involved with a man she described as “owning a third of New York.” This was not a great exaggeration. And she had once asked me to marry her, an offer that I had foolishly declined, so she was pissed.

All of which is to say that I lost one of the great loves of my life over this question of drawing on the lives of others, and yet, I would not change the story that I wrote. It was, of course, fiction, but I think the lesson still applies to nonfiction. *Have your vision*. In art, as in life, nothing else matters.

I respect the thoughtful parsing of ethics in regard to the writing of nonfiction, and appreciate the invitation to weigh in, but I balk at this claim in Laura’s essay: “A writer is responsible for the life of what she writes.” I’m struck there that the pronoun is female. Would we *ever* say that a writer is responsible for the life of what *he* writes? I doubt it. There is a strong strain in the history of memoir-bashing that focuses on the confessional nature of memoir and personal essay as a peculiarly female failing, an unseemly exhibitionism, the literary equivalent of posting naked drunken pics on social media. But I note that Rousseau is rarely dismissed on account of oversharing or exhibitionism, nor is Mapplethorpe for his gorgeous BDSM-informed pics, nor is Kerouac or Ginsberg or Knausgaard, by and large. It’s a criticism that’s used against women, that is meant to shut us up, as it all too often has.

So while I admire the thoughtful answers here, I would offer a less thoughtful one. *Have your vision*, as Virginia Woolf exhorts us all to do via Lily in *To the Lighthouse*. That is what matters. Otherwise, really, what’s the point? How and whether you publish a piece, what details you alter to protect others (or avoid lawsuits), or whether you wait (as Frank McCourt did) to publish until those who might be hurt are dead, is worth considering, but only after you’ve had your vision. What else do you have?

You simply cannot know who will be offended or by what—in my experience people are equally likely to take offense if you *don’t* write about them, as if it might mean they don’t rank. And even when what you write is a blatant fiction—an outright lie, meant to show up the absurdity of lying in nonfiction, as my faux nonfiction piece “The Facts of the Matter” is—people will vilify you for things you have not done. You’re not responsible for people’s reactions to your work; you are responsible for making the best work you can.

Concern for others’ feelings is vitally important in *life*, but I think it’s

contrary to art, which is judged by a less personal standard. Lastingness, maybe, or honesty. I don't want a nice book; I want a good one. Vladimir Nabokov once told the *Paris Review* that "gossip is the *materia prima* of literature"; Toni Morrison told them that "It is perfectly all right to hate my work. It really is. I have close friends whose work I loathe." I think it's useful to accept loathing of our work, to not take it personally. Or to heart.

That said, when it comes to nonfiction, I have (in fact) often run work by those about whom I've written—not to ask their permission, but to give them a first look, as a courtesy. A chance to have their say, even though that say may not inform my work. I want to have a conversation with the world by means of written work, but I want that conversation with my loved ones as well. So when I can, I include them. (I like that Maggie Nelson writes about showing her partner a draft of *Argonauts* and then working from the criticism to make it a better book, by adding more about their love affair.)

Rarely have people complained about what I've written of them, at least to my face. My mother quite liked an essay that I wrote about her wonderful cooking and sad marriage and my coming out as a lesbian. When that essay, "Mastering the Art of French Cooking," came out in *Best American Essays*, I feared she'd be embarrassed by having family secrets exposed; instead she bought a dozen copies and sent them to family and friends, carefully explaining to everyone that I'd got her story wrong. Still she was proud.

When a man I dated briefly complained that I was taking notes on our love affair for essays, I said that's what artists do—take notes on life, try to pay attention to life as we live it. It was *my* experience after all, I said; he could write his own. He said it was a sign of bad faith, that the only other person he'd known who did that was the musician Laurie Anderson, whom he'd dated years before and still knew well. He meant this as condemnation; I took it as a benediction.

But there's an exception to my commitment to have my say, now that I have a young child. In the first two years of our daughter's life, I often wrote about her; I took obsessive late-night notes on my iPhone about her life and motherhood, but I'm loath to publish it now that she is four, and I recently cut out a section about her from a memoir. It's less that I am protective of her privacy, though I am, but more that I know that naming anything puts it at a distance, puts it to rest. Woolf wrote that her mother's spirit was with her daily and for years after her mother died, until she wrote the character of Mrs.

Ramsey in *To The Lighthouse*, a figure based on her mother, and put the spirit to rest in the book. Her mother was gone after that. I don't want to put my daughter's spirit to rest with my words or define or confine it by narrating her as a supporting character in my life. It's not ethics that stops me, but revulsion. It seems a lie against her life. So, I have the typed notes, which I may or may not ever publish. But more than the notes, I have *her*, unwritten, still to be imagined for herself, waiting to write her own story.

MELISSA STEPHENSON

What EJ said about putting someone truly to rest when you write about them—that's what I've been feeling about my brother since my book came out in late July, but not until now did I read words that capture the experience.

Another point she made, about memoir-bashing as a form of silencing women: I was on a panel last weekend with another memoirist (Sandy/Sandra Allen, who has a new book about her uncle's schizophrenia, *A Kind of Miraculous Paradise*). Someone asked about memoir being a suspicious genre, and I do think that (in general) women in the field of memoir are asked to earn trust as writers while that same trust is often granted automatically to male fiction writers. The ethics of writing about others, as we're discussing, transcend that. Still, it's been on my mind: am I holding myself to a social standard of being overly responsible for the feelings of others in a traditional female caregiver way? Often, I think.

I am moved by the stories here shared. I'm convinced that they are stories we need in the world, and I can't wait to read all these books. I am comforted to hear that I am not in this writing-about-others dilemma alone. I am actively reckoning with guilt over things I've published and am currently writing that involve others.

Part of me resists the idea that getting permission from others, always, is the way to go. My conscience likes this as an answer. Then there's another part of me that resists catering to the denial and self-image of others. I guess this is where I come up with no clean, clear policy I can apply to all situations. Each piece, each person, each story is something I have to weigh individually (as so many here seem to have done), to listen to my gut. On some level I understand that writing about family trauma will always bring to mind Mary

Oliver's "The Journey." To ask for consensus, and to shine light on family shame, means subjecting ourselves again to that choir of old, hurt voices that will never fully let go, reckon, or agree. In light of that, we hold it all in our hands and do our best.

EJ LEVY

I agree with Melissa, thank her for her eloquence, and fear my own sleep-deprived notes were rather too polemical, but I mean to say simply, have your vision, then consider what might be owed to others. Only then. Certainly that's the mantra that I needed to write anything at all (the cost of writing about others having been made so terribly clear to me from that first attempt at story). As Robert Lowell wrote, "Why not say what happened?"

Certainly it's complicated, as all these thoughtful stories have made clear; I don't want to simplify, only to argue for one's right to see and write for oneself. I'd hate to have missed out on Maxine Hong Kingston's brilliant *Woman Warrior* on account of her mother's haunting prohibition that opens it: *You must never tell anyone . . .*

Having appeared in others' memoirs, I have flinched at what have seemed to me inaccurate portrayals of me and others, but then it's not my story. It's theirs. A story can be better or less-well told, but I want to stand up for the right to *tell* it, whomever we might offend. Those offensive stories often seem the stories we most need to hear.

The question of parenting has changed the calculus for me, as I said, but other than that, I agree with Robert Lowell.

I do wonder a bit how representative a group we are—in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, age, faith, class, education, geography—and how such things might inform all this. Certainly as a woman, a lesbian, and a Jew, my adamance is informed by years of being non-normative in communities where the stories I had to tell were not stories that others always wanted to hear. So my defense of the right to one's vision has been (of necessity) something of a *cri de coeur*—the literary equivalent of "we're queer, we're here, get used to it."

SHERYL ST. GERMAIN

I've written frequently about my family, in both poetry and prose, and I asked no one's permission. Most specifically, I wrote about family in a memoir that came out several years ago, trying to be both truthful and compassionate. I did not check with any of them ahead of publishing the memoir, but I did change all of their names. I wrote of my father's descent into and death from alcoholism and its effects on his children. One of my brothers died at 23 of a drug overdose, and the other later became a big cocaine dealer in New Orleans and sold drugs to our younger sister. I wrote of the one brother's substance abuse and of our doing drugs together. I also wrote of the second brother's miraculous recovery, of how he told me he finally decided he didn't want to "be like daddy." I saw his story as heroic, inspirational, although all my mother could see was that I revealed his drug use. I wrote of my own early use of drugs and my choice to have an abortion. I figured if I was telling some potentially embarrassing things about others in the family I should tell those things about myself as well. I didn't tell all the stories I could have told; I only told the stories that I thought would be useful to a reader, to someone struggling with the same kind of family and issues I was struggling with. If I thought the revelation in the writing would harm someone who was fragile, I did not write that story, no matter how useful I thought it might be, which is why there are no stories in any of my prose about my second sister. There were things I could have written about her, but I chose not to because I didn't see that writing about her difficult life would have brought insight or consolation to any reader.

Almost everyone who was still alive was angry when the memoir came out despite my attempts to prepare them for it. My mother was even upset about what I said about myself: "I can't believe you revealed that about yourself," she said when I tried to defend myself. She was concerned about what the children of my brother and sister would think. I countered that the children of my brother and sister shouldn't read the book now, but when they were grown they would need to know the dangers of substance abuse in the family.

I didn't ask permission of my family because I didn't think it would have been given, and I wouldn't have been able to tell the stories that I hope will have meaning for others. I wouldn't say this approach will work for all, but it is, mostly, my approach.

I have since reconciled with everyone alive in the family although the

second brother died a few years later at 41 of a heart attack most likely related to his abuse of steroids. My younger sister is still deeply troubled and an active user of dangerous drugs. She has at times asked me to write about her and at times threatened me if I did. It's complicated.

My feelings about this kind of writing are very much influenced by a poem I read some time ago by Miller Williams ("Let Me Tell You"). The relevant lines:

*When your father lies
in the last light
and your mother cries for him,
listen to the sound of her crying.
When your father dies
take notes
somewhere inside.*

*If there is a heaven
he will forgive you
if the line you found was a good one.
It does not have to be worth the dying.*

My son died December 9, 2014, at 30, of a heroin overdose. We had had an intense, loving, but fraught relationship that involved years of estrangement due to his drug and alcohol use. I had occasionally written poems about our struggles and shared them with him. I also wrote an essay about a particularly difficult time, "Unforgiven: How Not to Write an Essay." He read it and said to me that he appreciated the form of the essay. He also read an essay I wrote, "Do No Harm," about his early diagnosis of ADHD and his later abuse of the drugs used to treat the ADHD. He expressed gratefulness that I had made an effort to understand him and expressed hope that one day I might be able to write something more positive. Not long before he died he texted me that he had always been proud of me and my writing, even though, in an alcohol-fueled argument years earlier, he had charged that I "exploited" my family. My mother had also charged me with having exploited my father's and brother's deaths. I live with these accusations every day, but I'm not sorry that I wrote what I did. My hope is that what comes out of these stories is something larger than the suffering I might have caused

my family in writing them. I have no way, really, of knowing the amount of suffering my writing has caused.

My latest poetry book explores my son's life and death; I have a collection of essays coming out in 2020 that looks more deeply into my own recovery and my relationship with my son. As I wrote these essays, I imagined my son peeking over my shoulder at every instance, sometimes saying things like "Really, Mom? Are you really going to say that?" I tried harder than I've tried in my whole life to be honest and fair, to say the whole truth as I knew it, which meant that sometimes my son seems like a sweet, smart, but confused young man, and sometimes he seems like a monster. I think he would have approved. Although I still anguish, especially about my son, I feel the only way to honor my son is to say the complicated truth about him. There are so many memoirs about recovery; this is one about a young man who didn't recover and who I can't ask permission even if I wanted to. It feels like an important story to tell. Sometimes I think all we have are our own versions of the truth, but we always have to remember it's our version, not theirs.

I do ask my husband when I write about him if it seems like I'm going to reveal something potentially embarrassing. When, for an essay about a condition I have that makes it difficult if not impossible to have intercourse, the editor asked if I could add some scenes about my husband and I attempting to have sex (and how he set the scene with music, candles, etc.), he thought a minute and then said, "It's fine—just say that I have a big penis." We both laughed.

A friend I rarely see recently visited me last year, and we had an intense conversation about our lives. I shared some of my fears. She returned home and wrote a poem in which she used some of the things about which I am most vulnerable. I was hurt and told her so. She apologized, but then she said to me, "Sheryl, you know this poem is really about me, not you." It took me a while to be okay with that, but now I am. And now I have a sense of what it feels like.

KATHLEEN LIVINGSTON

I have published a handful of narrative nonfiction and lyric essays, a creative-critical dissertation that lives on my laptop, titled "The Queer Art and Rhetoric of Consent," and a bunch of cut n'paste zines I've published myself, the most

recent of which is called “Consent Games for Circus” (2018). Much of my recent storytelling work has been in the form of contemporary circus performance, which I do under a stage name. I write narrative nonfiction and lyric essays about sexual assault, consent culture, and being a queer young person, so my comments come from that framework.

The reason this question is so provocative for me is because it presents a number of tensions. I love a good ethical dilemma. When I was working on *Fourth Genre*, the interns and Laura had long conversations about the politics of representation, including who has the right to represent whom, how to negotiate the power dynamics that exist in all relationships, and particularly what to do when the writer has significant power—not only the power of telling the story, but also power residing in identity or role/position. Parents, for instance, have more power than their children, and mentally well people, in many cases, have more power than those who are mentally ill.

When I was working on *Fourth Genre* several years ago, I tended to give cautionary reviews of any piece in which I perceived the writer to have a large degree of power over their subject if the writer did not seem self-aware about that fact in the essay itself. White people traveling to other countries and writing about the people and place from a Western lens did not tend to fare well with me. Neither did stories that focused on subjects once removed from the writer, stories about an HIV+ gay sibling written by a straight person, or the sexual assault of a friend. I was irritable about these kinds of stories: how many gay people think, gee, we really need more stories written about us by straight people? At the very least, I expected these writers to shine the light on themselves while exposing their family members’ secrets, identities, or shame. Excellent essays must do this anyway, in my mind—must ask How am I implicated? What is my role? What does this experience mean in a larger context outside of me?

At the very least, I expect writers who are writing about others to give the subject of their stories the first read. This is a foundational principle of consent: simply, to ask. The ethical principle of asking does bring up a number of questions. What if the subject of the story is too unwell to consent? Too vulnerable? Too young?

When I was young, I spent time at an LGBT community center a mile from Detroit in Ferndale, Michigan. Most of the youth who went to the drop-in center were homeless or precariously housed, certainly under-resourced and

vulnerable for multiple reasons. Every so often, social workers, psychologists, or others in training would come from nearby universities to do service projects for us or to gain experience working with “at risk” populations. They would offer us a \$10 gift card or \$10 cash and have us sign a waiver giving them permission to publish our stories. That money was bus fare or enough to last several meals. Many would argue that this was a harmless practice, that academics operate within ethical frameworks, that we should have been grateful, but honestly, it was hard to say no.

Now that I am an academic and writer, it makes me angry to think about how little I was willing to ask to give my stories away for another person’s gain. These academics furthered their path to tenure while most of the people at the center struggled to get by.

I wouldn’t say that I’ve mellowed in my views about the necessity of consent and carefulness when we’re writing nonfiction about other people, only that I’ve found nuances. All writing that appeared to be writing about others used to raise a red flag for me. Now, I tend to say: it depends. Whether or not consent is even a useful framework depends on the power dynamics and the relationship between the people involved.

Consent is also far more than asking permission. Consent has to do with how we negotiate boundaries (“You can write about this/You can’t write about that”). Consent has to do with what we desire (“I want to use writing to heal this traumatic experience”).

As I was navigating writing about coming out, Laura, who was my writing mentor and teacher, gave me useful advice about writing about others. I’m paraphrasing, but she basically asked me: How important is it to you to have a relationship with your family? That will influence how generous you are about what you say.

As Native writer Thomas King says in *The Truth about Stories*, “words are powerful, and they can be dangerous.” The way we craft our language can mend a rift or explode a conflict. In my essay “Be Here Now,” which was published by Barrie Jean Borich in *Slag Glass City*, I thought about that advice because the piece would be easily accessible online. I didn’t ask permission to write the story because I knew my family would prefer I keep what happened private, and because they felt bad, in retrospect, about their behavior. But I did balance my desire to tell the story from my perspective with the need to heal myself through writing, enough to invite them back into my life in a new way.