

**Write On America**  
**Interview June 10, 2013**

**Q:** This is Adam Scull. Welcome back to another edition of Write On America. [Bio] Stephen Gallup, welcome to Write On America. Part biography, part story teller, part personal essay, part exposé, and part novel, memoir vexes even the most adept of authors. Because memoir is so rooted in the personal and emotional experience of the writer, is it difficult to approach memoir with the same professionalism that you apply to your technical writing?

**A:** Memoirs are often difficult, because they cover very personal material. In the process of going over what has happened, viewing the choices you made, in light of what you now know, it's actually very healthy I think. But I cannot say how many memoirists I've seen break down and cry as they try to read passages of their work aloud to a group. If you're writing a memoir and you don't feel some pain, you probably aren't digging deep enough.

**Q:** When and why did you decide to become a writer?

**A:** That goes way back. The role model who inspired me was my father, because when I wrote papers in high school he used to check them for me, and he always got on my case for not being clear enough about what I was trying to say. So I learned from him never to be satisfied with early drafts of anything, but to go over those words repeatedly and to try and think about it from someone else's point of view, to try and spot whether maybe there were some assumptions or logical gaps. What attracts me to writing is the process of delving into that question. I think it was Alfred Kazin who said "the writer writes to teach himself." That's what I'm always doing. I'm really writing for myself, because I'm trying to understand things better.

**Q:** During the process of writing *What About the Boy?*, it must have been difficult to relive your experience, after seeing your son suffer in such a tragic, unexpected way. How did you work through those emotions on the page?

**A:** One thing we can say about memoir—the key thing for *me*, I believe—is what is remembered, versus the way you lived it at the time. There's a kind of implied trust that you're telling the truth in writing a memoir, as opposed to, say, a novel, where you have license to change things, even if it's an autobiographical novel. In writing the memoir, yes, it's very difficult, but it was a question I felt that I had to pursue. I had to get to the bottom of what happened in that story. It was very healthy for me.

**Q:** Steve, memoir is such a delicate craft, a balance between the personal and everything else. What do you consider to be the most essential elements of a well-written memoir?

**A:** Memoir writers are interested, I think, in *relational* truth, issues between the self and another person—questions like "Why is it, growing up, I had such difficulties with my mother?"—or even between the self and the self, such as "Did I become the person I wanted to be, or did I become someone else?" *My* memoir is largely about the self's interaction with experiences and

ideas. “I used to think XYZ was true; now maybe my point of view has evolved.” Maybe, neither one of those points of view is precisely *true*, but the analysis of them is what leads to greater understanding.

**Q:** What beginning steps would you suggest a writer take before they begin to write a memoir?

**A:** I began my memoir right in the middle of it. This is kind of the way I write anything. I start with random jottings—whatever ideas are most compelling to me. And I get that much down on paper and sort of build from that. I might go backwards, I might go forward. I end up with scattered bits and pieces and then I need to fill in the gaps between them. That’s the way one might start. When going back in memory you don’t necessarily have control over what you have ready access to. But a much more important thing, once you have all that together, is to get some feedback from other people. Because you *have* to make this accessible. It has to make sense. It has to be meaningful to other people as well as to yourself.

**Q:** In a memoir based on memories of an incident that occurred in the past, where do you feel the writer’s responsibility lies, with the truth of the fact or the perceptions and feelings about what occurred?

**A:** As I said, there’s an implied trust that you *are* telling the truth. There are examples of memoirs that deviate from the actual facts, and I can’t avoid saying that everything we write *is* subjective to a certain extent. Maybe it is impossible to provide pure objective truth. But I believe in going for as much accuracy as you possibly can, without diminishing the emotional side of things.

**Q:** It definitely takes great courage to field such personal stories. What advice can you offer to a writer who is struggling with a decision of whether or not to expose details from previous illegal activities?

**A:** It doesn’t hurt at all to write about it. Whether you end up publishing it is another question. That decision should be put on the back burner till you know what you’ve written. You can decide at that point what your purpose was. I’m sure a lot of good material is written that never sees the light of day and still serves a good purpose.

**Q:** For our aspiring memoirists, what memoirs currently in print would you recommend they read as examples of the genre?

**A:** One of my favorites, though it may not be the best example of the genre, is *Alex: The Life of a Child*, by Frank Deford. He’s a sports writer. He wrote about having a daughter who had cystic fibrosis. Joan Didion wrote a great memoir. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a great memoir. *All Over but the Shouting*, by Rick Bragg is another one. I happen to have a preference for titles that have to do with children. *Schuyler’s Monster* is a memoir, a very well-written one, by a father whose daughter could not speak.

**Q:** What has affected you the most in writing your memoir?

**A:** What really had an effect on me was participating in a memoir critique group. It was run by a man who had written a book about memoir, called *The Memoir and the Memoirist*. We were all able to provide good feedback to one another. *Any* criticism is something a writer has to be able to accept, or at least listen to. Someone criticizing your work *could* be missing the point, but if it's possible for him to miss the point that's a clue that maybe you haven't covered all the bases the way you should. Now, sometimes criticism can be painful, but I think every bit of it that my writing has gotten has helped me. I also think writers ought to go out and actively look for feedback, and not just from your friends, necessarily, who may just want to say nice things, but from people who're going to tell it like it is.

**Q:** If you could give one final bit of advice, or inspiration or encouragement to aspiring memoirists, what would it be?

**A:** Can I give three things? Respect your readers and give them what they need. Tell your story as well as you can—don't cut corners, take as much time as you can to do it perfectly. And finally, tell the truth. I think that applies even in writing fiction. We're presenting a truth about experience even then.