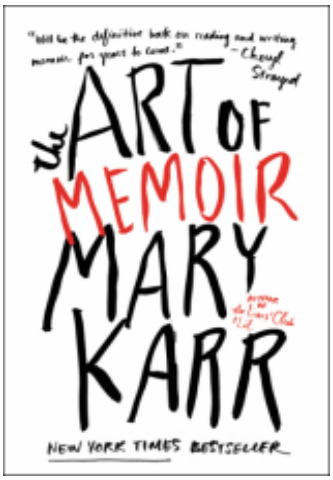
The Art of Memoir

by Mary Karr



About the Book

Credited with sparking the current memoir explosion, Mary Karr?s THE LIARS? CLUB spent more than a year at the top of the *New York Times* list. She followed with two other smash bestsellers: CHERRY and LIT, which were critical hits as well.

For 30 years Karr has also taught the form, winning graduate teaching prizes for her highly selective seminar at Syracuse, where she mentored such future hit authors as Cheryl Strayed, Keith Gessen and Koren Zailckas. In THE ART OF MEMOIR, she synthesizes her expertise as professor and therapy patient, writer and spiritual seeker, recovered alcoholic and ?black belt sinner,? providing a unique window into the mechanics and art of the form that is as irreverent, insightful and entertaining as her own work in the genre.

Anchored by excerpts from her favorite memoirs and anecdotes from fellow writers? experience, THE ART OF MEMOIR lays bare Karr?s own process. (Plus all those inside stories about how she dealt with family and friends get told --- and the dark spaces in her own skull probed in depth.) As she breaks down the key elements of great literary memoir, she breaks open our concepts of memory and identity, and illuminates the cathartic power of reflecting on the past; anybody with an inner life or complicated history, whether writer or reader, will relate.

Joining such classics as Stephen King?s ON WRITING and Anne Lamott?s BIRD BY BIRD, THE ART OF MEMOIR is an elegant and accessible exploration of one of today?s most popular literary forms --- a tour de force from an accomplished master pulling back the curtain on her craft.

Discussion Guide

1. For years Mary Karr resisted writing autobiographical nonfiction and instead wrote poetry and fiction. Why was this? How is each of these genres different? What are the strengths and limitations of each?

2. What particular abilities and talents make a great memoirist?

3. Examine Karr?s emphasis on the importance of carnality in memoir writing. Why is unique, sensory detail so important? How does it have ?psychological effects? on a reader?

4. Both memoir writing and psychotherapy require the act of revisiting and articulating past experience, telling the stories. In what other ways are these two complex pursuits similar or different?

5. How does revisiting and engaging with past trauma or difficulty potentially transform its effects?

6. How does the unreliability of human memory influence a person?s attempt to understand herself? In what ways might a writer bridge gaps of information on the page?

7. How much of a person?s identity is the result of arbitrary early experience? To what extent can she forge a new identity? How might this influence the writing of memoir?

8. Given that ?from the second you choose one event over another, you?re shaping the past?s meaning,? how should a memoir writer best think about and negotiate the truth of her experience? What is a necessary and appropriate balance of honesty and creativity in non-fiction writing?

9. Karr believes that lying is not just unethical for a writer but usually ?carve[s] a lonely gap between your disguise and who you really are.? What are the effects of such a personal disassociation? Karr adamantly claims ?each great memoir lives or dies?on voice.? What is voice? How does a writer develop it? How does ?finding?inner truth about psychological conflicts? help?

10. What is the nature and importance of the ?inner enemy? in a memoir? Why might ?a blazing psychic struggle? be essential for the writer and the reader?

11. Karr admits that she ?hid from readers on pages that sugarcoated any emotional truths,? and finds many of her talented students doing the same. Why is this resistance so common even after one has decided to write memoir?

12. Karr believes that memoirs often fail because ?the narrator fails to change over time.? Why is experiencing and articulating personal change or transformation so essential?

13. Karr says, ?every writer needs two selves --- the generative self and the editor self.? How are these essentially different? What?s the best way to balance them?

14. Considering writers like Maya Angelou, Maxine Hong Kingston and Michael Herr, in what ways can or should a memoir be a social or political act?

15. Considering G. H. Hardy?s self-evaluation in A MATHEMATICIAN?S APOLOGY, how might an earnest writer evaluate the value of her experience short of public recognition or financial success?

Author Bio

Mary Karr is the author of three award-winning, bestselling memoirs: THE LIARS? CLUB, which kick-started a memoir revolution and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award; CHERRY, which was excerpted in *The New Yorker* and hit ?notable book? lists nationwide; and LIT, which was a ?Top Ten? *New York Times Book Review* pick (and hit virtually every other Best of the Year list) and also a National Book Critics Circle Award finalist. A Guggenheim Fellow in poetry, Karr has won Pushcart Prizes for both verse and essays. Other grants include the Whiting Award and Radcliffe?s Bunting Fellowship. She is the Peck Professor of Literature at Syracuse University.

Critical Praise

?Karr is a national treasure --- that rare genius who?s also a brilliant teacher. This joyful celebration of memoir packs transcendent insights with trademark hilarity. Anyone yearning to write will be inspired, and anyone passionate to live an examined life will fall in love with language and literature all over again.?

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