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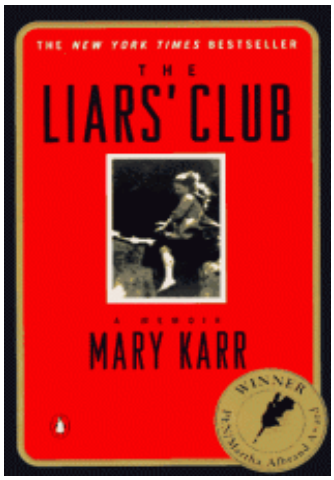
The Liars' Club

by Mary Karr



About the Book

The Family Sideshow

When I set out on a book tour to promote the memoir about my less than perfect Texas clan, I did so with soul-sucking dread. Surely we'd be held up as grotesques, my beloveds and I, real moral circus freaks. Instead I shoved into bookstores where sometimes hundreds of people stood claiming to identify with my story, which fact stunned me. Maybe these people's family lives differed in terms of surface pyrotechnics ? houses set fire to and fortunes squandered. But the feelings didn't. After eight weeks of travel, I ginned up this working definition for a dysfunctional family: any family with more than one person in it.

Maybe coming-of-age memoirs are being bought and read by the boatload precisely because they offer some window into other people's whacked-out families, with which nearly everyone born in the fractured baby-boom era can identify. They also guarantee a central character emotionally engaged in a family narrative. Any writer's voice ? even an omniscient, third-person narrator's in fiction ? serves as a character in the text. But in memoir, the alleged "truth" of a given voice makes it somehow more emotionally compelling. It announces itself as real. Because family memoir lodges us in a writer's personal history, we can almost see the voice being shaped by factors of geography, socio-economics, psychology. Like a ghost that assembles itself from mist, so the writer's self seems to appear from her voice. Believe this, the autobiographer says, it's real. If metafiction has been working double-overtime to explode the lie that fiction is true, memoir somewhat reestablishes the reader's dream.

Of course, most readers doubt the absolute veracity of a memoir's reconstructed dialogue and so forth. Tobias Wolff noted in a recent lecture at Syracuse University that all memory involves imagination and vice-versa. Some memoirs also clearly wander into the realm of the fantastic to construct what read like family myths ? Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, for instance. There the author steals her Chinese mother's method of "talking-story" to meld her own somewhat conflicting Chinese and American selves.

Still, we presume that the truth's skeleton underlay Hong Kingston's tale. So the character speaking to us from those events also feels, in some way, like a more real escort through the drama than a fictional narrator's. However "real" Ishmael may seem in *Moby Dick*, Mary McCarthy offers me as a reader what feels like greater intimacy with a living character in Memories of a Catholic Girlhood.

Don't get me wrong. Greater intimacy with a narrator isn't always what a reader wants: I haven't given up reading novels. But in the cocooned isolation we occupy at this millennium's end, a friendly voice on a page has value.

A child's voice or perspective can also open the often firmly locked door to a reader's own memories of youth. When I read in Harry Crews's *A Childhood*how that backwoods Georgia boy made up stories about models in the Sears catalog, I identified with it wholesale, even though I grew up far from the savage poverty Crews lays out:

> "Nearly everybody I knew had something missing, a finger cut off, a toe split, an eye clouded with blindness from a glancing fence staple.... I knew that under those [Sears models'] fancy clothes, there had to be swellings and boils of one kind or another because there was no other way to live in the world."

Anybody would twig to some universal truth about the childhood Crews describes here, I think. We all lose our innocence in part by coming to marvel at the rift between one's private life ? family fights, say ? and the glossy families sold by the media. Crews's voice conjures that innocence for us, the time when a family universe was still so colossal that you could project that reality onto the lives of strangers. Crews's private experience ultimately overrode the lie of the Sears catalog. The stories he made up with his friend gave him, he later wrote, "an overwhelming sense of well-being and profound power."

Crews's survival is also encouraging, a testimony of sorts. In a class on memoir I taught at Syracuse University last year, my students puzzled me at the term's end by praising the genre's sense of hope. Of the dark and dire stories we'd read ? mental institutions for Susanna Kaysen and rape for Maya Angelou ? hope didn't seem the leading emotion (except perhaps in Henry Louis Gates's *Colored People*). "They lived to write books," one student said. "They grew up and got away from their parents," said another. The fact that the writers outlived their troubled pasts, walked out of them into adulthood, ultimately served as empowering for that class of readers.

Not everyone's so wowed by what memoir offers up. William Gass took a hard swipe at the whole genre in *Harper's* last May ("Autobiography in the Age of Narcissism") primarily scolding the genre's lack of truth. "The autobiographer is likely to treat records with less respect than he should.... Autobiographers flush before examining their stools."

For "truth" Gass favors history without bothering to note ? as Tobias Wolff did in the aforementioned lecture ? that historians are no more neutral toward their subjects than memoirists are. Nor can such primary sources as letters and diaries be construed as "objective." Gass also neglected history's glaring failures. My high school history text cheerfully

described the westward migration without a glance at the native peoples whose bones got plowed under in the process.

Gass also praised fiction for veracity because it doesn't announce itself as true. I could borrow that same reasoning to defend memoir for its blatant subjectivity. In our time we've watched most great sources of "objective" truth ? churches and scientific studies and presidents among them ? topple in terms of their moral authority. So any pose of authority can seem the ultimate fakery. In this way, Michael Herr's psychedelic memoir of Vietnam,*Dispatches*, seems way more authentic to me in describing that war than the Defense Department's records "objectively" assembled under Robert McNamara.

In our loneliness for some sense that we're behaving well inside our very isolated families, personal experience has assumed some new power. Just as the novel form once took up experiences of urban, industrialized society that weren't being handled in epic poems or epistles, so memoir ? reliant on a single, intensely personal voice for its unifying glue ? wrestles subjects in a way that readers of late find compelling. The good ones I've read confirm my experience in a flawed family. They reassure me the way belonging to a community reassures you.

My bookstore chats did the same. On the road, I came to believe ? despite the dire edicts from Newt Gingrich and the media about the moral, drug-besotted quagmire into which we've all sunk ? that our families are working, albeit in new forms. People have gone on birthing babies and burying their dead and loving those with whom they shared troubled patches of history. We do this partly by telling stories ? fictional and non-fictional ones ? in voices that neither deny family struggles nor make demons of our beloveds.

Discussion Guide

1. A major theme running through *The Liars' Club* is the difference between Mary Karr's parents. "With Mother," Karr writes, "I always felt on the edge of something new, something never before seen or read about or bought, something that would change us.... With Daddy and his friends, I always knew what would happen and that left me feeling a sort of dreamy safety." Karr's mother is artistic and glamorous, while her father is down-to-earth. How do these contrasts lay the foundation for the Karr's family life? Did you empathize with one parent more than the other? Did your feelings change as the book went on and more was revealed about them?

2. Despite the horror that permeated Karr's childhood, characteristics like humor, honesty, and courage pervade *The Liars' Club*. Karr does not pass judgment on her family or tell us how she thought they should have behaved. Would you have liked to have known more about Karr's feelings about the events that she recounts? In what instances? Or were you able to discern how she felt through her actions? What emotions did you experience while reading *The Liars' Club*?

3. Karr is a character in her own book, as well as its author. On the page, she's a tough, scrappy kid who also has a tremendous sensitivity and devotion to the people around her. As readers, we understand the interior joys and terrors that make her such a rich and vivid character. How do you think she seemed to the people around her? If her mother was to make a list of her strongest characteristics, what would they be? If her father made such a list, would it differ in any way?

4. Karr tells her story for the most part from the point of view of a child, and what a child sees and understands. How might the story ? and Karr's perceptions ? change if she had told it from the point of view of an adult, with the benefit of everything she has come to understand about her upbringing and her family? What would be gained, and what would be

lost?

5. The author's mother, Charlie Marie, never fully realized her dreams of becoming an artist. The author, who as child began to write poetry, was able to realize her creative ambitions. What gave Karr the strength to pursue that ambition? Was it "sheer cussedness," one of the traits that characterized her as a child? Do you think the sadness of her mother's unfulfilled dreams somehow propelled her? Do you think it had anything to do with her relationship with her father?

6. How would you characterize Karr's relationship with her sister, Lecia? Does it change as the book progresses?

7. After Karr's grandmother dies she sings, "Ding dong the witch is dead." Were you surprised that she was happy her grandmother passed away? What in the grandmother's character was so oppressive? Do you think her grandmother contributed to her mother's despair and alcoholism? How important a part did she play in Karr's life?

8. In a recent interview Karr said that she had previously tried to write a novel based on her childhood experiences: "When I tried to write about my life in a novel, I discovered that I behaved better in fiction than I did in real life. The truth is that I found it easier to lie in a novel, and what I wanted most of all was to tell the truth." What do you think of this statement? Karr's father was famous for the tales he told during meetings of the Liars' Club. At any point did you feel that the author was perhaps altering or stretching the truth?

9. In the introduction to this guide, Karr states that while on tour to promote *The Liars' Club* people from all walks of life told her they identified with her story. Do you identify with the Karr family? Did this influence you while you were reading the book? Is it "the essential American story," as one reviewer stated?

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

"The essential American story.... *The Liars' Club* is a beauty. "

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