The Personal Past as Inspiration: Authors Honor Their Life Experiences in Their Stories.

Ernest Hemingway was wrong. It is not necessary to leave home and go out and experience "Life" in capital letters to have "stuff" about which to write. The daughter of a kindergarten teacher, Louisa May Alcott wrote a book about her family life which became one of the most popular children's classics, "Little Women." All people are storytellers. Life stories order and interpret life events. Listeners/readers sympathize or empathize, and writers explore this when choosing moments from their lives to share with others. Alice Walker, a sharecropper's daughter and author of "The Color Purple," felt ugly, disfigured, and suicidal when she was blinded in a childhood accident. A later poem, "On Sight," spoke of her joy at seeing the African desert. While she was studying at Sarah Lawrence College, pregnancy and a subsequent abortion were inspiration for "Once," her first published book of poetry. One of her professors, the poet Muriel Rukeyser, passed Alice's poems along to her own editor at Harcourt, who later became Alice's editor too. Out of Alice Walker's isolation grew her art, and the written word would sustain her survival, a passionate testimony to the power of the artist to use her art to overcome life's hardest blows. (Contains "On Sight" and 17 references.) (CR)
The Personal Past as Inspiration: Authors Honor Their Life Experiences in Their Stories


Dr. Marcia Baghban
Associate Professor
Elementary Education
Queens College, CUNY
65-30 Kissena Boulevard
Flushing, New York 11367

BEST COPY AVAILABLE
Ernest Hemingway was wrong! And I say this without fear even though yet another version of "A Farewell to Arms" is about to appear in movie theaters. We do not need to purposely leave home and go out and experience LIFE in capital letters in order to have stuff about which to write. We can live our lives and still find "stuff" to write about.

Over 100 years ago a kindergarten teacher's daughter, living constantly on the brink of poverty, realized this very simple fact about writing. Louisa May Alcott wrote about her family life and the interactions of family members to create in Little Women one of the most popular children's classics about ordinary, daily life. The New York Public Library lists Little Women as one of their two most circulated titles. First published in 1868, by 1968 Little Women had been published in more than 30 countries (Russ, 1969, p. 521). In 1994, more than 125 years after its publication, Little Women saw two more editions (Little, Brown and Alfred A. Knopf's Everyman's Library) and the third rendering of the motion picture. While we may speculate that public taste does not necessarily determine great literature, public taste is also fickle. For a work to be an instant best seller, remain in print, endure more than a century, and still speak to readers, there has to be something to its story. Louisa's example gives us an important lesson.

We are all storytellers. Granted some of us may be better at telling stories than some others, but nevertheless we all tell stories every day. The simplest version of our stories is our response to, "How was your day?" and we hold forth on how our alarm didn't go off, our car wouldn't start, we forgot an important meeting, our daughter is
getting married to the wrong guy, etc. or on the (better) other hand, we bought a new	house, our son is accepted to Harvard, we are spending a month in Bali, etc. We
introduce a topic and then we elaborate. These daily personal experiences become
part of the collection of stories which comprises each of our lives.

Life stories order and interpret our life events, for a story is a construct. We
resort to story to make an entity of our experiences, and story gives our experiences
form and balance. As we create stories, we structure and modify our experiences, and
we create generalizations about the world. Others listen to these generalizations. If
they have had similar experiences and feelings, they can identify with us. We are
united as human beings through our common experiences. If they have not had
similar experiences and feelings, they can sympathize with us. Once again we are
united as human beings. Writers explore these moments of identification and
sympathy when they choose moments from their lives to share with others. And when
ordinary, daily life gives writers shattering blows, they can use these events to write
about. One such writer is Alice Walker, the eighth child in a family of Georgia
sharecroppers. She grew up to win both the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize
as well as many fellowships for writing, and is best known for her novel *The Color
Purple*. The blows in her life which I will discuss are blindness and abortion.

**Blindness**

When Alice was eight years old, she was a tomboy and her playmates were her
brothers, two and four years older than she. On Saturday nights they went with their
mother to the local moviehouse to see Westerns. At home "on the ranch" they chased
each other for hours pretending to be Tom Mix or Hopalong Cassidy. Finally their parents gave in to the boys' pleas, and bought them BB guns. Alice's brothers shot at everything with their guns while Alice, relegated to the position of Indian, shot only with a bow and arrow. One day while standing on top of their makeshift garage she felt an incredible blow to her right eye. Both brothers rushed to her side. They told her that if she told their parents she was shot, they would get a whipping. Her older brother gave her a piece of wire and told her to say she stepped on one end and it flew up and hit her. As the pain increased, Alice decided to agree to anything that got her to her mother. The children stuck to their story. A week later, after Alice endured a shock and a fever, her parents took her to see a doctor who terrified her by saying, "If one eye is blind, the other will be also." But it was how she looked that bothered her the most. Where the BB pellet had struck, there was a glob of whitish scar. People stared. The cute, outgoing, little girl who once did so well in school would not raise her head again for six years.

From the time of the accident Alice daydreamed--not of fairy tales--but of falling on swords, of putting guns to her heart or head, or of slashing her wrists with a razor. She felt ugly and disfigured (O'Brien, 1973). She writes,

I believe...that it was from this period--from my solitary, lonely position, the position of an outcast--that I began really to see people and things, really to notice relationships and to learn to be patient enough to care about how they turned out. I never felt like the little girl I was. I felt old, and because I felt I was unpleasant to look at, filled with shame. I retreated into solitude, and read
stories and began to write poems (Walker, 1983, 244-45).

Alice's mother had the wisdom to recognize that Alice had a special gift more valuable than physical beauty. Even when Mrs. Walker was working in the fields or in white women's kitchens and Alice was the only daughter still living at home, Mrs. Walker excused Alice from household chores and respected her need to sit and read.

When Alice was fourteen she baby-sat for her brother Bill who then lived in Boston. He and his wife took Alice to a local hospital where doctors removed the white scar tissue on her eye. Although a small blue crater remained where the scar tissue had been, Alice began to face people again. She won a scholarship to Spelman College in Atlanta, but unhappy at the conservative atmosphere, transferred to Sarah Lawrence. While in her twenties, Alice attended the World Youth Peace Festival in Helsinki and traveled to Africa. She wrote that she traveled like a madwoman, looking and this, looking at that, storing up images against the fading of the light. She never forgot the doctor's words, "Eyes are sympathetic. If one is blind, the other will likely become blind too." The first time she consciously confronted the meaning of the doctor's words, she was in the African desert and completely in love with what she saw. When she realized that if she had been totally blind she might have missed seeing the desert, she fell to her knees in gratitude for the years of sight she experienced. On her knees in the African desert, poem after poem came to her. One example is called "On Sight" (Gay, 1992, p. 36).

I am so thankful I have seen

The Desert
And the creatures in the desert
And the desert itself.

The desert has its own moon
Which I have seen
With my own eye.
There is no flag on it.

Trees of the desert have arms
All of which are always up
That is because the moon is up.
The sun is up
Also the sky
The stars
Clouds
None with flags.

If there were flags, I doubt
the trees would point.
Would you?
Abortion

Alice's second major life blow occurred when she returned for her senior year at Sarah Lawrence, "healthy, brown, ... and pregnant" (Gardens, 245). Her childhood dreams of suicide very nearly became a reality. Alone and afraid, she had no one to whom she could turn. Her mother believed abortion was a sin, and when Alice's middle sister Ruth had shown an interest in boys, her father had beat her and locked her in her room. He told her to never come home if she found herself pregnant. When Alice reached out to her two sisters, one never replied and the other called her a slut. Feeling at the mercy of everything, Alice slept with a razor blade under her pillow. At the last moment, a college friend saved her life by giving her the phone number of an abortionist. She drove Alice to the doctor's and afterwards tucked her in bed in the dormitory; another friend brought food from the college cafeteria. Alice fell asleep and dreamt of Africa. Awakening alone before dawn, she nibbled at the food left for her, picked up a small blue notebook and began to write down her dreams. They came out as short poems. As she grew stronger, she slipped the poems daily under the door of her professor, Muriel Rukeyser, who passed them along to her editor at Harcourt who eventually became Alice's editor. These poems, written in an outpouring of creative energy in the week following the abortion, later became Alice's first published volume of poetry.

During this period, Alice received a letter from home. A longtime family friend, known as Mr. Sweet, had died. She had not thought of the old guitar player in years. With tears pouring down her cheeks, she sat and wrote a short story about him. As
she recalled years later, "I was grief-stricken, I was crazed. I was fighting for my own life" (Walker, Living, 39). She entitled the short story, "To Hell With Dying" and took the razor blade from under her pillow and put it in the bathroom where it belonged. The old musician in Georgia had turned her attention to life at a time when death was very much on her mind.

Her professor sent the essay "To Hell With Dying" to Langston Hughes who wrote Alice praising the story and saying he would try to publish it. The story came out two years later, just as Hughes had promised. The essay was Alice's first published work, and in 1987 it was republished as an illustrated children's book.

Alice realized that she was not alone in the world. About Mr. Sweet she wrote, "He went deep into his own pain and brought out words and music that made us happy, made us feel empathy for anyone in trouble, made us think. We were taught to be thankful that anyone would assume this risk" (Walker, Living, 38). From Langston Hughes she learned that he was another Mr. Sweet, "Aging and battered, full of pain, but writing poetry and laughing too, and always making other people feel better" (Walker, Living, 40). In these artists, she saw how they understood that their work was often born of suffering, and they welcomed others who could fight through their pain to make a song or a poem or a painting from the suffering.

Alice Walker could live now. By twenty-one years of age she had learned that writing quite literally could save lives. By twenty-four years of age, with the publication of Once her first volume of poetry which almost immediately went into a second printing, she found not just a way of life but a career. Out of her isolation grew her art,
and the written word would sustain her survival through whatever additional pain came her way. Her life is a passionate testimony to the power of the artist to use her art to overcome life's hardest blows.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Title: "The Personal Part as Inspiration: Author Honor Their Life Experiences in Their Stories."

Author(s): Marcia Baghban

Corporate Source: Publication Date: NOTE '96

II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, Resources in Education (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic/optical media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS) or other ERIC vendors. Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following two options and sign at the bottom of the page.

Check here
For Level 1 Release: Permitted reproduction in microfiche (4" x 6" film) or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic or optical) and paper copy.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 1 documents.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEminate THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Sample
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Check here
For Level 2 Release: Permitted reproduction in microfiche (4" x 6" film) or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic or optical), but not in paper copy.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2 documents.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEminate THIS MATERIAL IN OTHER THAN PAPER COPY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Sample
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Level 1

Level 2

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits. If permission to reproduce is granted, but neither box is checked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

"I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce and disseminate this document as indicated above. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche or electronic/optical media by persons other than ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for non-profit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries."

Signature:

Dr. Marcia Baghban

Printed Name/Position/Title:

Dr. Marcia Baghban, Assoc. Prof.

Organization/Address:

Queens College, CUNY
65-30 Kissena Blvd.
Flushing, NY 11367

Telephone:

(718) 997-5300

FAX:

E-Mail Address:

Date:

9-3-96

(over)
III. DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY INFORMATION (FROM NON-ERIC SOURCE):

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, or, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

Publisher/Distributor:

Address:

Price:

IV. REFERRAL OF ERIC TO COPYRIGHT/REPRODUCTION RIGHTS HOLDER:

If the right to grant reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please provide the appropriate name and address:

Name:

Address:

V. WHERE TO SEND THIS FORM:

Send this form to the following ERIC Clearinghouse:

ERIC/REC
2805 E. Tenth Street
Smith Research Center, 150
Indiana University
Bloomington, IN 47408

However, if solicited by the ERIC Facility, or if making an unsolicited contribution to ERIC, return this form (and the document being contributed) to:

ERIC Processing and Reference Facility
131 Piccard Drive, Suite 100
Rockville, Maryland 20850-4305

Telephone: 301-258-5500
FAX: 301-268-3395
Telex: 800-700-3742
E-mail: ericfac@inet.ed.gov

3/96/96)