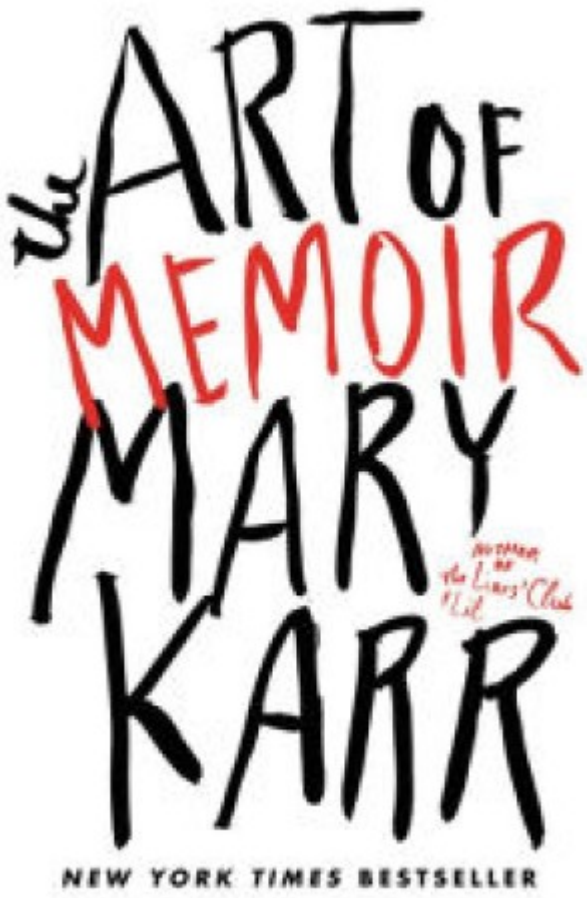
Teaching love

by Shirley Hershey Showalter in the April 13, 2016 issue

In Review



The Art of Memoir

By Mary Karr
Harper

The poet William Wordsworth addressed his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge near the end of the poem *The Prelude* with these now-famous words: “what we have loved / Others will love; and we will teach them how.”

The Prelude thrusts the poet's own childhood and the subject of memory directly into the reader's consciousness. This early 19th-century epic poem also describes connections between reading, remembering, writing, and teaching that have become commonplace since.

Mary Karr is this century's Wordsworth. Her three memoirs, *The Liars' Club, Cherry*, and *Lit,* have earned her the title of expert on the genre—a title she deftly disavows in the opening line of her new book: "No one made me the boss of memoir." Right away, we trust that voice, and as soon as we ask a question, she answers it. She draws back the curtain on her own apprenticeship in the genre, analyzes other memoirs in detail, explains fragments of a philosophy she had hoped would become the Unified Theory of Memoir, and offers advice to readers and writers alike.

In other words, Karr teaches. She teaches what she loves, inviting us to love it also, and then she shows us how to write memoir ourselves. If you weren't lucky enough to get selected for the Syracuse master of fine arts program, *The Art of Memoir* offers a do-it-yourself curriculum. Start with the list of 15 memoirs at the beginning of the book. Fill in with as many as you like of the other great memoirs on the required reading list in the appendix. Then come back, texts in hand, and pay attention to what Karr does with the stories her long, tall Texan daddy told in his group, the Liars' Club.

Karr doesn't want readers to consider the book an overgrown syllabus, however, and she instructs them to "pole vault" over whole sections if they seem too professorial. "So this book's mainly for that person with an inner life big as Lake Superior and a passion for the watery element of memory." She also observes that "everybody has a past, and every past spawns fierce and fiery emotions about what it means." She wants all readers to consider the merits of memoir, not just for literary but for personal benefit.

Faced with how to write about memoir, she could have chosen to come at it by way of history or structure or theory. Karr considers these options briefly, then rejects them. But when she writes about voice, you can tell she's in love. In fact, voice is the whole rodeo for her: "The secret to any voice grows from a writer's finding a tractor beam of inner truths about psychological conflicts to shine the way." Great memoirs go back to the old admonition "Know thyself" and show us a narrator's discovery that the self is not unified. Honestly facing the conflict of self with self and choosing words that reveal the particular manifestations of it in one life is hard, hard work.

If forced to pick three words for Karr's voice, both in this book and in her memoirs, I would choose hilarity, carnality, and humility. These qualities illuminate her pages like lightning in a dark summer sky. They emanate from a radiant inner self aware of its brokenness, a self that charms us with its vulnerability, audacity, and originality.

Hilarity is a word that writer George Saunders applies to Karr, his colleague at Syracuse University, on the dust jacket of this book. If hilarity connotes surprise combined with an underlying treacherous delight, then it names something deeper than humor, and it aligns with Karr's Texas roots.

Karr's first struggles with voice instinctively and protectively covered up her past. She tried to produce novels that rewrote her life from the real world she was ashamed of to the sophisticated, genteel world she imagined. It didn't work.

Today if you hear Karr speak, you hear echoes of her daddy, who liked to say that it's raining "like a cow pissing on a flat rock," and of her mother, who offered existentialist classics like *Nausea* and *The Plague* to her 12-year-old daughter and routinely shot at her boyfriends and husbands with a pistol. As terrifying as both her parents were during her childhood, they gave her great artistic gifts: storytelling, a metaphoric mind, and a craving for artistic, literary escape. Most of all you hear in Karr's voice the daughter who forgave them their sins but who has not forgotten their desires. She has become fierce with meaning. Her voice on the page is grounded in the earth.

Carnality is the word Karr chooses for what other writers call sensory expression. For her, the body is sacred, but not in a pious, abstract way. It's carne, meat. And memory is the body's way to smell, taste, touch, hear, and feel. By choosing this word, Karr illustrates the physical connection between the writer and the reader. Voice happens when your description of what is going on in your body triggers the same response in the reader: you learn to "lodge" your memories in "someone else's head." "The reader gets zipped into your skin."

Despite her boldness and bluster, exaggeration and enthusiasm, Karr never strikes an arrogant note. Her awareness of her own limits and of the blurriness of all memory makes her an advocate of admitting these boundaries to the reader. She exemplifies the virtue of humility.

Her adult decision to join the Catholic Church, described in *Lit*, gives a theological dimension to the humility in her voice. She long agonized about how to tell her

conversion story, putting off her agent and editors, and throwing away multiple drafts of her third memoir. She recognized the cognitive dissonance readers might experience as they moved from her second memoir, *Cherry* (2000), about awakening adulthood, to Lit (2009), her later story of addiction and conversion. She claims to have broken the delete key as she tossed drafts of the latter book. Karr described her dilemma in an interview for the *Paris Review*: “Writing about spiritual stuff for a secular audience is like doing card tricks on the radio.”

Karr’s mature voice, full of hilarity, carnality, and humility, offers a worthy model for aspiring memoirists. But don’t try to copy it. Mary Karr the teacher would transfer your attention away from herself and return it to you. She’s shown us what she has loved, and she’s done so in a way that only she could do.

Wordsworth would call it the philosophic mind. Karr calls it voice.