

“Memoir or Fiction--That is the Question”

Submitted by Diana Y. Paul for *San Diego Book Review*

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When I started conceptualizing my novel, *Things Unsaid*, I constructed a plot relevant to baby boomers (the “sandwich generation”) and their aging parents and adult (or teenage) children. Baby boomers have to face difficult truths about themselves and about the impossible choices they will have to eventually make. With a Janus-perspective-- one face turned towards parents’ needs as they age and one face turned towards children who continue to need their support and comfort,-- many of us baby boomers are sandwiched between the family we are born into and the one we create as adults.

I had to decide about the profiles of the family members and the coming-of-age in the 50’s and 60’s, if I were going to give a backstory to *Things Unsaid*. “Write what you know”, so I set the backstory in Ohio, in a suburb where I grew up. I could name streets, popular teenage hangouts, schools, the political and cultural attitudes of the middle class.

While I looked at childhood scenes I remembered, I began to realize I needed to make a decision: memoir or fiction. A majority of my author friends were writing memoirs. But they felt the need to tell a story in such a way that it would not hurt people they knew. So, experiences

were left out, controversial scenes were censored or they waited until the main characters had died. While every child may think she knows her parents, that's an illusion, a fiction. Each family member seeds differently and remembers what they choose to or only what they can bear. I wanted the freedom to impose a narrative pattern on memories and imagination both. Consequently, memoir wasn't going to work for me.

I wanted the characters to be riveting, even extremely unpleasant—the people a reader feels glad to have never met. So I began to imagine more exciting situations with intricate plots and subplots. Yet a few of the characters were familiar, drawn from scenes from my own life and those of close friends.

I leaped into my debut novel, *Things Unsaid*, imposing a narrative pattern on the scenes, and drawing upon the memories of growing up in the 60's in Akron, Ohio. Half remembered events....memories of memories of memories. When I couldn't remember a teenage feeling or a parent-teenage interaction, I made it up or included a friend's recollection.

I was moving into a different relationship with my past, however. Certainly not a memoir as the characters took on a life of their own and were invented as more conflicted, and more engaging. After seven revisions, some were completely deleted. I started reshaping

characters, making composites drawn from memory, imagination, and listening to friends talk about their families.

I was entering the realm of fiction and no longer could even consider memoir as the vehicle of the story, even for the venue of Akron, Ohio.

But turning life into fiction—what, then is truth? And memory is subjective too. Just as imagination is. Memory and imagination hold hands in truth-telling. I want my readers to recognize their own lives in the story I have written, to connect the dots between scenes, to complete the story from their own experiences. The emotional truth in *Things Unsaid* has scenes originating from, but not exactly like, my own family's and there are other scenes adapted from friends, favorite novels, movies and anywhere else I could find rich material of shared moments of a family's life.

Everyone has a story to tell and I thought some of my friends' stories as well as mine would make great scenes for a novel, so I started recording them and exploring my composite characters. I had the freedom to impose a narrative pattern on memories. But, when family and friends know you have written a novel, they try to see themselves in the novel. Ironically, the scenes they identify are often the ones I completely imagined. So, all you authors out there—beware. The most frequent question at book events—and I am asked every time—is how much of this story is based on your life? Some friends and family will look into every sentence to see themselves!

AUTHOR BIO:

Diana Y. Paul was born in Akron, Ohio and is a graduate of Northwestern University, with a degree in both psychology and philosophy, and of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, with a PhD in Buddhist studies. Her debut novel is *Things Unsaid* (She Writes Press, October 2015). A former Stanford University professor, she is also the author of three books on Buddhism, one of which has been translated into Japanese and German (*Women in Buddhism*, University of California Press). Her short stories have appeared in a number of literary journals and she is currently working on a second novel, *A Perfect Match*. She lives in Carmel, CA with her husband, Doug, and two cats, Neko and Mao. Diana and Doug enjoy visiting their two adult children, Maya Miller (San Francisco) and Keith Paul (Los Angeles), as often as they can.

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