

This is such a good article, I had to share it with you. I have not thought about the difference between memory and backstory before, but this really nails it.

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Writer Unboxed: Using Memory vs Backstory

Using Memory vs Backstory

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A few years ago, I became obsessed with the way storytellers play with memory. I started noticing it with *The Affair*, which is only very good the first season or two, and then more urgently with *This is Us*, the story of a family in Pennsylvania, from the meeting of the parents through the current day (and sometimes jutting forward into the future).

Both shows explore memory and how we see things differently according to who we are and what kind of emotional impact the moment has on us. You've had this experience—arguing with a sibling or a long-time friend about the details of an event ages ago. What *actually* happened?

The truth is: whatever happened in each person's mind is what really happened.

As a novelist, this single thing fascinates me. How do our memories shape us? What part do they play in what happens to us and how our lives play out? I've always played with memories and family legends and narratives a lot, but I worked with memories heavily in *When We Believed in Mermaids*, two sisters telling the story of their childhood and how it influenced each of them to become who they are, twenty years later.

Why do our characters do what they do? What brings them to the moment in time where we are beginning to write about them? How are they formed, what do they know and how did they get to know it?

It isn't the objective facts of what happened, but the experience of those moments and their interpretation that bring out the power. How we use memory to slant and explore each character is a very powerful tool.

This both is and is not the same thing as backstory. Chunks of backstory in the authorial voice can be distracting and even boring as the reader wants to rush forward to what's happening in the current moment. But memories, layered in throughout in the character's viewpoint, in relation to whatever is happening in the story, can add depth and breadth and, most importantly, a sense of verisimilitude to the tale. Not factual truth, but emotional truth.

How does this work? Let's try some examples. You might want to go ahead and do some writing, but at least give the memory exercises a try.

1. Take one minute and think about your mother when you were a child. What comes up? How does she look? Smell? What's happening?

Think about yourself in relation to that memory. How old are you? Where are you living? What else is going on in your lives? If you like, take a minute and write this all out, just writing without thinking about how good it is or what you're getting at. Just write. Let that day, that moment, bubble up.

Mine is young, not yet 30, and the prettiest (and youngest) mother on the block, always. Her hair is dyed platinum blonde, which she wears in a poofy helmet. I see her in a multicolored sleeveless blouse and green capris and barefeet. We're all dancing, all four of us kids and some of the neighbor kids. She's smoking one of her L&M menthol cigarettes. The house is one we lived in when I was in third grade, between the move from Temecula and the one to Denver so my dad could be a state patrolman. My dad

rented the house when he came back from California early, and I was devastated to have to leave my grandmother there, and I begged him to find a pink house, so he did. I miss my grandmother and my uncle Tex desperately, and Tex has sent me a package with two rings and a brass bracelet from India, which I wore every minute of every day for the next twenty some years.

Exercise #2

Think of something dramatic or traumatic that happened when you were a teenager. Who was there? What was happening? What did you feel then? What do you feel about it now? How did it influence your life?

I'm fifteen, in a high school away from my friends, and hanging out with new friends at a parking lot across the street from the school. We are all smoking cigarettes. My hair is impossibly long and I've recently streaked it, and I'm very shy, but my new friends are nice to me. There are a couple of older boys with us today, maybe an older brother of one of the girls and his friend, I don't know, but they're kind of losers, scraggly blond hair, not very clean clothes, but nice losers. The police arrive for a reason I can't recall, and we're told to disperse, but one of the boys gets mouthy, and a fight ensues. They slam the boy against the car, his arms behind his head. It's wrong. I know it's wrong, my dad was a cop and I should know, and these guys are seriously wrong, and they keep hitting him and take him to jail and I call my dad from a pay phone and beg him, sobbing, to come get me.

What I see from the long lens of adulthood is that the cops were bullies. The kid shouldn't have mouthed off, but really—why beat him up? I was furious and outraged then, and I'm even more so now. I am a lifelong rabble-rouser and protester and much of it came right out of that moment, when the authorities abused their power.

What would that cop remember? He's probably a really old man now, but what would he say? Would it even have stuck with him? What about that kid himself? How did it impact his life? Or did it? Did it only stick with me, this moment in time?

In *The Affair*, the emotional stakes are very high for each of the four main characters, and the shading given to each one, who was the aggressor? Who was the victim? Who is to blame? Is this lust or passion?

We all tell a different story. Memories influence us, create a narrative of our lives. What happened in the history of your characters that shaped them, specifically?

I've been deeply engaged in my book for next year, about a family of women who are all engaged in a fight for autonomy in their lives and their careers. But one event is at the heart of it, and I kept writing around it, writing around it, writing around it. It was hard to grapple with it, but there is absolutely no way the lives of these characters would be what they are, both for good and bad, if this event had not occurred. When I sat down, finally, and wrote out the actual event from the point of view of each character, it brought about a million pieces into focus. The girls in the basement had left room for it, but until I got real with it, I couldn't fill in those blanks.

How do you bring those memories in within the character's point of view without big dumps of backstory? Weave it in as memories occur in our real lives. If I see an iris, I think of my grandmother, who loved them. I often cut bouquets of them for her birthday, May 16, and now I grow irises all over my yard. Objects have meaning, and trigger memories.

The memories are almost never sequential, and it feels more natural in a story if they are not sequential there either.

If I see a woman wearing cat-eye glasses, I think of my young mother and the way the cat-eye swoop accentuated her amazing cheekbones. Maybe it takes me to a moment when she was angry with me when I was sixteen and wanted to wear something she thought was inappropriate. Maybe that takes me back to the day we were all dancing in our living room in a pink house.

Notice how memory works for you. You don't think of everything. You think of a bit. A few moments, frozen in time, in meaning. You see a bag of jacks and flash on playing the game with your sister in the kitchen on a cold night, the linoleum clammy under your thighs. A mention of pinochle will take me back to summer evenings when my parents were young and played the game with their friends. They all smoked and drank cola over ice while the kids ran wild around the yard and street.

There is a lot of power in the memory of moments, moments that tell the story, fill in emotional resonance, that blocks of backstory simply can't deliver. Try working with each character and their memories, and then try to see it from another point of view.

Do some free writing around the event and see what comes up. Then, layer those memories in with a light hand and perfect choice of details.

What challenges do memory and backstory give you? What have you struggled with? Let's talk about it.

PS Feel free to post your memory work and muse about it

About Barbara O'Neal

Barbara O'Neal has written a number of highly acclaimed novels, including 2012 RITA winner, How To Bake A Perfect Life, which landed her in the RWA Hall of Fame and was a Target Club Pick. She is a highly respected teacher who also publishes material for writers at Patreon.com/barbaraoneal. She is at work on her next novel to be published by Lake Union in July. A complete backlist is available here.