



The Rise of the Memoir

Alex Zwerdling

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The Rise of the Memoir traces the growth and extraordinarily wide appeal of the memoir. Its territory is private rather than public life, shame, guilt, and embarrassment, not the achievements celebrated in the public record. What accounts for the sharp need writers like Rousseau, Woolf, Orwell, Nabokov, Primo Levi, and Maxine Hong Kingston felt to write (and to publish) such works, when they might more easily have chosen to remain silent? Alex Zwerdling

explores why each of these writers felt compelled to write them as that story can be reconstructed from personal materials available in archival collections; what internal conflicts they encountered while trying; and how each of them resisted the private and public pressures to stop themselves rather than pursuing this confessional route, against their own doubts, without a reasonable expectation that such works would be welcome in print, and eventually find an empathetic audience. Reconstructing this process in which a dubious project eventually becomes a compelling product—a "memoir" that will last—illuminates both what was at stake, and why this serially invented open form has reshaped the expectations of readers who welcomed a vital alternative to "the official story."

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