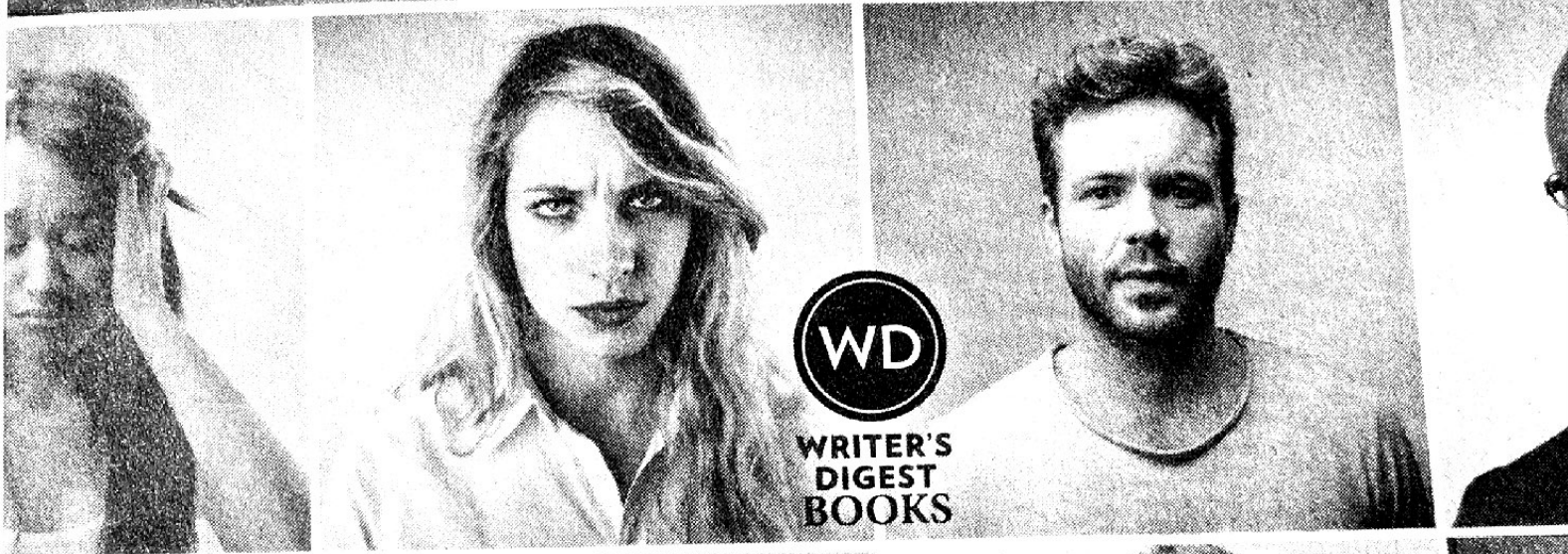


THE TRUTH OF *memoir*

How to Write About Yourself and Others
with Honesty, Emotion, and Integrity

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ness...
ily dinner or a holiday gathering. Do you catch your-
self telling the reader that “my sister felt ...” or “my fa-
ther acted ...?” How could you illustrate these things
through your family members’ behavior or dialogue,
rather than telling the reader?

6. Pick a memoir that focuses on a family secret. What makes the secret a “family secret”? How does keeping the secret affect each of the characters in the book?
7. Pick a memoir that focuses on a family secret. Imagine you’re reading the memoir from the point of view of someone keeping the secret. How does it feel to have that secret exposed?

WRITING MY SISTER REAL

Ona Gritz

I couldn’t write about Angie—her life or her death—until everyone else in our immediate family had died. Not that I planned it, waiting ghoulishly, ticking names off a list. I simply never imagined trying to capture my sister’s story on paper. It was too painful. Too complicated. It would upset too many people. Besides, I’d locked the details of her life away so thoroughly, and so long ago, that I probably couldn’t access them if I tried.

Then one rainy morning, two-and-a-half years ago now, I heard what had once been a favorite song of hers on an oldies station. *I’m the only person alive who knows she loved that song*, I thought. And what occurred to me next, as though she’d bent and whispered it in my ear, was that she deserved to live in a bigger place than my faulty memory. *You’re not a writer for nothing, Baby*, I nearly heard her say.

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The thing is, that song—*My Baby Loves Love*—had been a hit. I'd heard it countless times over the years, and while it always reminded me of my sister, it never before came with a call to write.

But something big had happened since the last time I'd stumbled upon that snippet of nostalgia on the radio. My half-brother, Steve, lost a years-long battle with cancer. He and I had been the sole survivors of our nutty, disjointed clan. His father had died of a stroke a decade before. Not long after, our sister Tina (his whole, my half) had succumbed to hepatitis C. Then my parents (our mom, my dad) died of cancer within two months of each other. And, of course, Angie—the one sibling I grew up with, the one I imitated and fought with and followed around the house—had been the first to go, murdered at twenty-five, along with her husband, infant son, and the nearly full-term baby in her womb.

I'm the only person alive who knows she loved that song. A heartbreaking realization—I'm all she has—but also a freeing one. If I were to explore Angie's story and commit it to the page, there was literally no one left who might be wounded, made raw or furious by what I revealed.

I had been with Angie and her family the day before they died. I'd met the "friends" who were later convicted of killing them. Yet I knew very little about what had happened. *Just the facts, ma'am*, a television detective said on a show Angie and I watched in reruns as children. The facts—skeletal, unadorned—were all I could handle. A few words I could recite quickly, without really hearing them, before changing the subject. *My sister and her family were murdered by a couple who were staying with them. Yes, I know. It was awful. Do you have any brothers or sisters?*

But now that Steve was gone, a brother I grew to know and love in adulthood, I felt a renewed longing for my sister. There was no bringing her back, but writing would be a way to spend time with her.

Even after thirty years, the facts surrounding a quadruple murder can be found, some right on the Internet. Others I uncovered from news articles I read hunched before a microfilm reader. Still more I learned from trial transcripts. And I talked to people. I called the man who had been my sister's landlord and who, one late February afternoon, cleaned out the long-neglected crawl space beneath the building and found my brother-in-law's decaying body. I interviewed the attorney who spent day after day in a courtroom, working to ensure that the killers were locked away for good. I sought out my brother-in-law's two brothers and introduced myself. *We're the same*, I kept thinking during our long hours on the phone. *My loss was their loss, too.*

Here are some things I learned from the articles and transcripts. Angie's body was found in a nightie, panties, and a single slipper. My brother-in-law had been hog-tied before he was shot. By the time my nephew's remains were uncovered, he no longer had a face. The unborn baby, removed from my sister's womb by a coroner, would have been a girl.

And here is something I learned from talking to people. I was wrong in thinking it was safe now, wrong in thinking everyone affected by my sister's story was gone.

When I was six and Angie—whom we still called Andra—was twelve, she ran away from home. There was a song she'd taught me that looped through my mind during those long nights I slept alone in our shared room. *The cat came back the very next day. They thought he was a goner, but the cat came back . . .* It was my version of a prayer, and it worked. My sister did come back, in dirty, unfam-

miliar clothes and with a new knowledge of the world I could sense by looking in her eyes. After that, running away became something she did—frequently. She was here, gone, here again, until I came to feel she only existed in my presence; her life simply halted in the in-between times as if someone hit the pause button on a tape player.

At twelve, Andra was precocious, womanly, a notorious bad girl. The way my parents explained it, running away was yet another thing bad girls did. They stole change from their mothers' pocketbooks. Snuck cigarettes. Did "God-knows-what" in the hidden corners of school yards with boys. They ran away.

I believed all of this. Despite that no one else I knew had a runaway for a sister. Despite that our mother, who coddled and adored me, only ever scolded Andra, scowled at her, and, once, chased her through the house and beat her with a metal dustpan while I screamed at her to stop.

Context. Motivation. Backstory. These are things I think about as a writer. If a child runs away from the safety of home, it's likely that home is not actually safe. I know this, and yet I never applied this knowledge to Andra. Before I started to write her story (at forty-nine!), I thought of her with the mind of a baby sister. Andra was here, gone, here, finally gone for good. The cat came back, and then it didn't. Andra began leaving for the wide-open dangerous world at twelve because she was wild, a runaway. It's why she got killed, because it was in her nature to fly toward danger. My parents had told me that, too, when I was nineteen and my sister's body in its nightie and one slipper were discovered. Believing them was the quickest way to close the door on the horror of what had happened and on the shameful fact that I failed to save her.

Now, finally, the door was propped open—by a song and a longing for the girl who had been my first love. A girl who clearly

had run away because she needed to. She needed to remove herself from her mother's, *our* mother's, *my* loving mother's, abuse.

But where did my mother's venom come from? Going by my experience alone, it had always been there. *Stop it, Andra*, I grew up hearing my mother hiss. I watched her frown whenever my sister spoke to her, even if Andra was simply relaying a funny story from school. Worst of all, I learned early that I could set my sister up. *She bit me!* Andra complained to our mom one rainy afternoon. I had. I'd bitten her hand. But our mom responded the way I knew she would. *Oh Andra. Leave her alone. She's just a little girl.*

Writing about Andra meant facing that awful ending, but it also meant uncovering the beginning. The part of her story that predates my earliest memory of the two of us side by side on a bench on a boardwalk, the salty breeze tossing our hair into our eyes. I was probably three then, which would make her nine. When she was six months old, my parents—a hitherto confirmed bachelor and a divorcee with two children living on the opposite coast—adopted her and brought her home. I needed to understand Andra's life in that window when she was our parents' only shared daughter.

Miraculously, Andra's junior high still had her records. I pored through them, watched *Bs* turn to *Cs*, a *helpful child* become someone who gets into fights. Midway through, I found myself on the page, in a note by a counselor who saw Andra in sixth grade. *Seems unhappy at home. Feels mother loves "real" sister, not her.*

I swallowed hard, left the papers spread on the floor, took the dog for a long walk. I'd been the favored one, my parents' surprise

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midlife baby, their child by blood. And just as I feared, I'd been the root of Andra's despair.

Due to a series of feuds and splits, Andra and I grew up barely aware of our extended family. We had cousins, but we rarely saw them. Now I sought them out. Strangers to me who knew my sister before I did. Three cousins, surprised yet seemingly pleased to hear from me. Deeply affected by the murders. Willing to talk.

Rachel had never seen a mother show less interest in a little baby. "I was just a kid when they brought her over, but it left such an impression on me I wrote a paper about it for a psychology class in college." Lois remembered my mom letting Andra roam the neighborhood unattended when she was no more than a toddler. Lauren recalled her leaving Andra outside to play alone on the stoop in bitter cold December while she cleaned the house.

My mother as villain. My mother as victim. She had divorced her philandering first husband in the unforgiving 1950s. "No one got divorced in my day but Elizabeth Taylor," my dad once said. He didn't want the neighbors to know his wife had been previously married. Nor did he want to be a stepfather. He craved a fresh start, so my mother's children were sent to their father. But that fresh start didn't go as planned. Two miscarriages. A baby who died in days. Finally, the adoption. My mother's assent was clearly begrudging. She had children, and she'd given them up. If she tried at all to love her new daughter, she failed.

In photographs my sister is a beautiful baby. Bright, curious eyes, white-blond hair, puckish smile. After hearing what my cousins witnessed, I wanted to pluck her out of each picture, pull her through the decades, and take care of her. At the same time, I felt the release of something ancient and heavy. The issues predated me. My birth wasn't the thing that ruined my sister's life.

Still I remained haunted by that note in her school records, *Feels mother loves "real" sister, not her*. Regardless of what came before, I was named and implicated in her misery. And there was something else about that quote that tugged at my insides. Its odd phrasing. In those days the language of adoption emphasized separateness, artifice. One's birth mother was one's *real* mother. Andra, in talking about us, took this even further. The counselor—I can tell by her placement of quotation marks—noticed this, too. In Andra's mind, I was real. She was not.

Years later, in reaction to the murders, I made that true for myself as well. I closed myself off from our shared history, made her as thin as a paper doll. Only by putting words on the page have I begun to change that. As I write I feel her long fingers poking lightly at my ribs. See her smile twist as she holds back a laugh. Hear the earnestness in her voice as she explains her side of an argument. Note the pride with which she announces, "This is my baby sister."

As of this writing, I'm in the midst of editing the manuscript. It's very much a work in progress, and there's no knowing what may come of it. Except that it's already given me this gift—made my sister real to me again. My goal, now, is to make her just as real to you.

Ona Gritz is a columnist for *Literary Mama* and co-poetry editor of *Referential Magazine*. Her essays have appeared in *More; The Utne Reader; New York Family Magazine; Brain, Child; Bellingham Review*; and elsewhere. She is the author of two poetry books, two children's books, and, most recently, a novella-length memoir, *On the Whole: A Story of Mothering and Disability*. Ona is currently at work on a memoir, tentatively titled *Everywhere I Look*, about her sister's tumultuous life and violent death.