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Personal Narratives & Their Unique Personalities

Aayesha Ejaz
I will not get married! I do not want to get married. I need to go to college. Education is important. Marriage can wait, education can’t. I want school to end. I don’t want to memorize page after page. Will I even get into college? I’m not working half as hard as I used to on my exams. Also, when did Math become so hard?!
Towards my final years of high school, I was frazzled about college, and other “life decisions” as they immediately became monumental. I was unfit to be an adult and take charge—I came from a cultural background where life after high school isn’t paid heed to. Higher education is a choice, and to make that choice, one needs to have a plan. I always wanted to study design, but everyone else wanted me to do something substantial. So I kept quiet and tried to find my way into the mainstream. I tried to learn things at my own pace to fit this requirement.

Unfortunately, my efforts did not pay off, four years in high school made me dread academics and examinations. I became unhappy as I couldn’t match the lofty standards of school and society where my worth was continuously measured by a stick.

So to find comfort in the chaos, I started listening to “real people” talk about their lives online. I watched vlogs (video blogs) by millennials and TED talks on YouTube. Even though YouTube was a distraction from finals, it helped calm me down for a while. I saw people my age navigate their lives while laughing over their mistakes, and sometimes even sharing their bad days on camera, which was oddly sustaining. TED talks were about a famous personality or an almost-famous person sharing their narrative or a synopsis of their profession. I can never forget Brené Brown’s TED talk on “The Power of Vulnerability”, in which she frames vulnerability as the birthplace of joy, creativity, belonging, and love. She believes vulnerability is all about embracing our imperfections and letting ourselves be seen as we are, and telling ourselves we are enough.

Since I was raised in surroundings where people had to look or behave a certain way to be accepted and appreciated in life, this was all so moving. I saw a big world out there while I sat fretting about my high school finals. These narratives were quite reassuring to someone who had felt like a misfit all their life.

1 The Power of Vulnerability, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jCvmsMzlE7o&ab_channel=TED.
Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines misfit as something that fits badly. Kirk Gleason, a character in Gilmore Girls, is the perfect example of a misfit. Gilmore Girls (2000-2007) is a TV drama with charming characters set in a fictional town in Connecticut. Kirk has a different job in every episode. In one episode, he’ll be selling skincare products, and in the next, a termite inspector. Once Kirk even played Tevye in an elementary school production (as a full-grown adult) of Fiddler on the Roof!

Luckily, my final year of graduate school allowed me to reconnect with my twelve-year-old self, and realize how much I enjoy immersing myself in a character’s world. By a character’s world, I don’t mean a fictional world with monsters or fantastical creatures along the way, though I do enjoy fictional and fantasy worlds from time to time. But I particularly like narratives based in the real world and depict a character trying to carve their path through whatever means. I appreciate real-life settings since I can place myself in similar conditions whereas in a fictional setting, things are entertaining but hard to believe.

To illustrate this, we can consider the example of Gilmore Girls again. In Gilmore Girls, we see two female characters carving their path in life through education and work. The protagonist, Lorelai Gilmore was impregnated at sixteen. Once Lorelai’s parents found out about her pregnancy they pressured her to marry the father of her child. According to her parents, it was the “right” thing to do, but Lorelai didn’t want that. Once she gave birth to her daughter, Rory, she decided to leave her parent’s house due to their differences.

Fortunately, Lorelai found shelter in Stars Hollow, a fictional town in Connecticut, where a woman kindly hired her as a maid at an inn. Lorelai single-handedly raised her daughter and built her life brick by brick and taught Rory to do the same. Once Lorelai had some financial stability, she went to business school to complete her education. In the show, we see the mother-daughter duo navigating their lives in Stars Hollow and the world outside of it.

Gilmore Girls might be based in a fictional town, but the challenges and struggles of every character are authentic. The entire storyline is based on Lorelai and Rory’s relationship, education, independence, and feeling at home, together always.

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Some more examples of real-life setting stories could be the books I grew up with, and admire to this day. I devoured Dav Pilkey’s notoriously misspelled words and bizarre plots with “purple potty people” in the Captain Underpants series (1997-2015) and felt comforted by Jacqueline Wilson’s heartfelt narratives in books like The Suitcase Kid (1992) and Secrets (2002) woven around young girls in real-life situations and adorned with Nick Sharratt’s friendly illustrations. These stories were home to my twelve-year-old self. They sounded real enough for my bizarreness (which school and society termed as “immaturity”) and sensitivity to be accepted.

Graduate school has allowed me to look at my visual inspirations in retrospect and ask myself,

“Why do people share personal stories with the public? How is it that they’re able to do so with minimal shame? What’s their process like? Who are the people who enjoy reading such stories?”

To answer these questions, I found Why We Write About Ourselves (2016), a book based on twenty memoirists sharing their respective memoir-writing processes and rationales. Meredith Maran, the editor of the book, is an American author, journalist, and book critic who has written several memoirs herself. The contributors commonly seek redemption, healing, resolution, and some closure by writing about their lives. But in no way does memoir-writing mean to “spill out one’s guts”. One of the contributors of the volume, a former op-ed Los Angeles Times columnist Meghan Daum reminds us that a personal narrative is an invitation to the reader. It’s an act of generosity to share and confide in the reader. It’s about serving “just the right ingredients in just the right proportions.” Anne Lamott, a novelist and non-fiction writer, in the same book, calls memoir-writing a “gift” as it has the power to explore what most families don’t discuss in conversation. Memoirs help unfurl a layer that we keep hidden inside us.

Every person has a story to tell but to share it with authenticity while seeking permission from the real-life personalities involved with a cohesive sequence of events in the form of a narrative is a skill. After all, a memoir needs to be true to the author’s experience.

Meghan Daum also says, “I’m also conscious of which stories are mine to tell and which stories belong to other people. If I tell a story involving someone else, I make sure to tell it from my point of view.” Yes, some characters involved in the narrative might be hurt. And if the characters don’t approve of being featured in the book, memoirists usually either edit their parts or change the names. Just as Anne Lamott’s editor once told her, “It won’t be exploitative if you don’t exploit anyone.”

Talking about our lives on a platform like TED, recording a video of our day and uploading it on YouTube, and writing a memoir are a few ways of sharing personal stories. It takes a lot of courage to share one’s flaws and imperfections openly. TED Talks, like memoirs, often explore the most difficult questions of finding the meaning behind our existence. They make one’s stories believable and relatable, and the audience finds solace in them. There’s always something in a nuanced personal story that one can connect with.

But what is a memoir? And how is it different from a diary or a journal?

A Diary & A Memoir

The composition and delivery of a story make all the difference in how we share our inner feelings and tensions. For instance, a diary isn’t always great writing; it is expressive, private, extremely therapeutic, and cathartic for the author. Memoir-writing may start with an expressive writing process like that of a diary, but a memoir requires cohesive sequencing of memories and thoughts chronologically to piece together a narrative. Writing a memoir means undertaking responsibility for our actions, and of those who affected us. Memoir-writing helps the author see their lives in a single thread with all its ups and downs from a distance. In hindsight, it all makes sense for the author and leads to an “Aha!” moment. Writing expressively about our lives involves catharsis, which is the release of repressed emotions that makes one feel better. According to Aristotle, catharsis eventually leads to purgation—a feeling of pleasure after releasing a suppressed feeling. We live in a world where our cultures and systems don’t always allow us to express our emotions openly—similar to the lofty standards of school and society I was raised with. This idea is fictitious, and a total sham. Humans aren’t robots or puppets—we are all entitled to feel things. Therefore, if a story, song, movie, or any other form of media or art evokes some emotion in humans, it is seen as a creative success.

To summarize, we have explored an intersection between maintaining a diary and writing a memoir. And found that in many cases the former leads to the latter—diary entries help release bottled-up feelings whereas memoirs are more efficiently written pieces of the same bottled-up notions and sensibilities.

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6 Meredith Maran, ed., Why We Write About Ourselves: Twenty Memoirists on Why They Expose Themselves (and Others) in the Name of Literature, 2016th ed. (New York: Plume, n.d.).
7 (Daum, n.d.)
8 (Lamott, n.d.)
9 (Daum, n.d.)
10 (Lamott, n.d.)
11 (Maran, n.d.)
Personal stories don’t just appear in books, movies, or TV shows—we also experience them in music.

A Caged Bird Sings The Blues

British singer and songwriter Adele Adkins is often considered the “Queen of Catharsis”—she uses music as an outlet for her interpersonal issues.

Adele’s fourth album, 30 (2021) is known as her “divorce album”, which was inspired by her divorce from her then-husband, Simon Konecki. Releasing 30 allowed Adele to make sense of her grief and help her eight-year-old son, Angelo understand the same. Interestingly, she doesn’t name anyone in her songs, but at times adds an exchange of dialogues in-between. In the song “My Little Love”, Adele’s telling her son about her separation from her husband, and how she has been feeling lately—

Adele: Mummy’s been having a lot of big feelings recently
Angelo: Like how?
Adele: Just, like, hang on, my fingers are trapped
Adele: Like, um, I feel a bit confused
Angelo: Why?
Adele: I don’t know
Adele: And I feel like I don’t really know what I’m doing
Angelo: Oh, at all?

This interaction between Adele and her son gives the listener a glimpse into Adele’s intimate life. It tells the audience about her relationship with Angelo, and how she’s processing the lingering anxiety and loneliness.

The zeal and panache with which Adele sings are similar to that of a “caged bird”—she expresses her feelings honestly, yearning for redemption through the process. Thematically speaking, her songs are about heartbreak and love and hence, sound like a lament. She aims to put her tensions in a container (her songs) outside her being. By doing so, she does not just sing for herself, but also for the audience to hear and connect with. Her rhythmic words strike a chord in the audience; whether the audience has been through a terrible breakup or a tragic event

that made them deeply emotional, they find consolation in Adele’s lyrics.

“I’m holding on (barely)
Mamas got a lot to learn (it’s heavy)
I’m holding on (catch me)
Mamas got a lot to learn (teach me)”

- Adele Adkins, “My Little Love”, 30

This chorus is a perfect example of someone living on the edge, trying hard not to give up, especially as a mother. Adele’s struggling to communicate to Angelo that she needs time and help to heal.

Adele has declared that music is her therapy, and she shies away from sharing certain songs because they are too personal for her. It’s not all fun and games—when she’s overwhelmed, she goes to her basement studio to record, where no one can see her in pain there. She released 30 hoping to help people.15

Girija Kaimal, a researcher in health and well-being, explains that human beings are naturally social creatures who rely on communicating with each other for survival and seeking validation. Channeling complicated emotions and feelings into art has been proven by psychology to lower cortisol levels.16 If we keep repeating to put our triggers into our creative work, we feel relieved and as a result, have a grip over our feelings. Crying also helps release endorphins, which help us feel lighter. After a good cry, we reflect and get a sense of clarity, accept what happened to us, and try our best to move ahead with our lives.

This section inspects music as therapy for Adele Adkins. 30 explores motherhood and heartache while trying to move past despair. In her songs, Adele explicitly admits what it feels like to be hurt, grieving, and helpless, with an eight-year-old to look after on top of other responsibilities.

**The Tactile Personality of Picture Books**

Similar to Adele, author-illustrator Jayde Perkin routinely creates autobiographical art that stems from her personal life—she tries to make sense of the world for herself. For instance, in *Mum’s Jumper* (2019) Perkin aims to share the idea of grief with young readers through a picture book. Perkin had lost her mother less than a decade prior and has been channeling her grief into her art ever since. In her book, Perkin places herself in the shoes of a kid who’s learning to cope with the same. She uses a jumper (that belonged to her mother) as a metaphor for grief. Perkin depicts the kid wearing the jumper daily as its smell is reminiscent of her mother. Through the jumper, Perkin aims to explain that her grief will perhaps stay the same size and won’t go away, but she’ll grow into it with time.

“My body ached, like I’d been swimming for days; how could I get to the shore?
Dad told me this feeling is normal.
It’s called grief. He was swimming too. We were grieving together.”

- Jayde Perkin, *Mum’s Jumper*18

Perkin shares that both she and her father are grieving the loss of her mother in the book. She describes that grief feels endless to both of them and uses the extended metaphor of swimming in a lake repeatedly with no sign of seeing a shore in sight. It seems like grief has engulfed her as well as her father. He helps her understand the feeling by naming it, and reassuring her that it’s common, as he is grieving the loss of her mother too.

Perkin is extremely candid about her creative process and pursuits. In an interview, she tells *It’s Nice That*:

“The act of writing and drawing a memoir was also in equal parts cathartic and terrifying at the time.”19

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She tries to open her heart to the audience and also reflects on her thoughts to give a sense of closure to her narratives.

Her chosen medium, watercolor itself, gives her narrative a lifelike, fluid, and evocative quality. The handwritten and imperfect text gives the form its tactile personality. It’s like she’s whispering to the reader, this is how I am dealing with it, and I know it’s hard.

Perkin crafts and composes each page in *Mum’s Jumper* with love; we can see pieces of Perkin’s sensitivity in her work.

**Top**
A spread from *Mum’s Jumper* (2019) where we see Perkin’s younger self prancing around in her mother’s jumper, living in it.

**Left**
In this page, we see Perkin in overalls with the jumper in the background and a big sunflower blooming as a metaphor for lighter times in Perkin’s life. She adds delicacy to her illustrations with worms, ladybugs, bees, butterflies and flowers sprouting everywhere in the book.

**Right**
A panel from page 16 from *Tomboy* by Liz Prince (2014)
Liz Prince Prefers Swords Over Tiaras

In a similar vein to the work of Perkin, Tomboy by Liz Prince (2014) is a heartfelt and touching graphic memoir of a tomboy (Prince, herself) who was searching for acceptance all her life.

Prince strings together a linear narrative in chronological order from childhood to adulthood. She starts the story as an assertive young girl who grew up in a supportive family in a suburb of Boston. Prince wishes to be celebrated for being funny and a girl on her terms. She enjoys dressing up in baggy clothes, prefers action figures over dolls, reads and makes comics, and loves skateboarding. She has male role models because the female leads in popular culture always needed a man to rescue them, but Prince wants to be a hero!

Along the way, Prince discusses how school and society have always had rigid gender roles. Prince uses the metaphor of a sponge (depicted on the next page) to explain how one internalizes things as a child and then involuntarily vomits things out into the world without being sensitive about others’ feelings. She portrays not just herself, but her younger brother being bullied in school because they were both seen as outcasts.

After many such herky-jerky years, Prince’s path finally converges with like-minded females and other artists at the Teen Art Center where she works after school. These females appreciate Prince’s comics, sense of humor, and editorial voice.

Prince’s art style includes simple black-and-white imagery with handwritten text and no strict emphasis on human anatomy. The illustrations aren’t perfect or “technically precise,” but her style works well with her narrative.

Liz Prince had always been looking for an outlet to share her story, and it was through comics that she found her voice. In an interview with the ComicsAlliance, she mentions that the process of writing Tomboy was quite different than her usual comic strips. Prince had to accumulate many anecdotes from her past in a way that didn’t seem like a rant, and string them together to shape a long narrative. It still surprises Prince when parents write to her saying that reading her memoir has helped them be gentle on their “tomboy daughters.” Prince’s work stands out and resonates with many people because of the honest and believable depiction of herself and society. She truly tells it like it is.

In this section, we looked at the first-hand experiences of a tomboy growing up in the United States. The way with which Prince unfurls each moment at a specific time in her life allows us to empathize with her toils. The haven didn’t come easy to Prince—she kept trusting her gut and stayed true to herself for years.

For me, Tomboy was one of the first comics where I saw a part of myself represented. The book was a warm hug to my younger self. Inspired and ignited, I’ve always wanted to take a similar flair in my work. As mentioned earlier, I come from an Islamic household in India where higher education isn’t paid heed to, and marriage is given

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This page
Page 74, 75 and 76 from Tomboy by Liz Prince (2014) where Prince uses the metaphor of a sponge to explain how one internalizes things as a child and then involuntarily vomits things out into the world without being sensitive about others’ feelings.

Right
Page 12 from Aayesha by Aayesha Ejaz (2023) where Aayesha catches her profile on a matrimonial application on her mother’s phone!
more importance. Fortunately, I was raised by a woman who taught me to move beyond the status quo.

**Aayesha: A Graphic Memoir**

One year of graduate school meant a lot to my younger self. I was living alone—doing the dishes, laundry, and cooking regularly. I was also grateful to have a part-time job to help pay for groceries and other expenses. I felt sustained emotionally, mentally, physically, and financially. I could see my trajectory and knew I had come a long way.

But the day I landed in New Delhi, I learned that my mother had created my profile on a matrimonial site without my permission. I couldn’t believe the step she had taken—she had always stressed education over everything else. I guess old traditions die hard, being 23 and single isn’t easy for my mother to digest. This moment consumed me. The idea of marriage is vulnerable for me—it brings back all my previous fears inside me. It makes me feel as if time is slipping out of my hands.

My thesis project, *Aayesha*, stemmed from the same incident. *Aayesha* is a 68-page graphic memoir and a pure work of nonfiction. I wanted to share a deeply personal story about how I've grown up into the person I am today.

As someone from India, attending school in the United States, I was seeking to craft a narrative for a global audience. To do so, I used tools such as infographics and footnotes to explain things with brevity and clarity to the reader. Like Perkin and Prince, I used traditional methods to add a personalized quality to the story. I inked and lettered the memoir by hand. It’s not a comic with perfectly shaped panel after panel. Instead, it features hand-drawn
I never understood why I had to change my attire since Bhaijan didn’t necessarily have to cover his head.

It was important for us to be close to our religion. And learning to read the Quran was the first step.

I didn’t know what I was being taught. It was like a code...

Sometimes I’d laugh or ask questions —

You shouldn’t speak like that!
since I don’t see myself as a writer, I also did a test read where I shared a penciled draft with women from different age groups back home and in the United States. I asked them questions like—

“What feelings did the story evoke in you? What do you think is the theme of the story? What is this story about, according to you? Which was your favorite part? Why? Did you find any gaps in the narrative? If yes, where? Did you lose interest at any point? Where? Why? Would you like the author to elaborate on any part? Who would you recommend to read this story?”

I received honest and sincere responses to these questions which helped enrich my narrative further. And, of course, this also strengthened my faith in my project and story.

My memoir covers themes of a mother-daughter relationship, familial intergenerational trauma, growing up as a Muslim woman in India, self-expression, mental health, and finding oneself by moving beyond the status quo (choosing education over marriage).

During the final stages of my thesis project, the process of inking, coloring and moving things around became meditative and helped me realize a few things about myself, and my practice as a creative. I don’t usually talk about my problems or feelings openly, but through art (illustration), I have found my voice. Drawing has been an outlet for me for five years now. I started drawing to find my visual style by exploring different mediums, later I moved to mindless
Conclusion

Personal stories enlighten people to live their lives better and make them feel less alone. Every memoirist, artist, or singer has a different approach to writing, crafting, and sharing a personal story. It may be melancholy, controversial, confessional, accusatory, fearful, joyful, magical, or even timid, but it’s still a narrative unique to one’s experiences. These stories are shared not just for one’s self, but to make room for others and give them a ray of sunshine.

Personal storytellers or memoirists aim to deconstruct the idea that people who “make it big” have had a flawless path. For instance, Brené Brown is perceived as a pristine personality. However, in her TED Talk, Brown talks about how one year of research turned into a six-year-long project. She even had a nervous breakdown while conducting her research, and had to visit a therapist for the first time. Brown was not ashamed to share these details with a large audience (she was talking about vulnerability, fear, and shame, so she chose honesty). This story woven into her TED talk nudges people to make room for difficult emotions instead of denying them and pushing them aside. There is a sense of rawness in her vulnerability which in turn touches the hearts of many.

Personal narratives are like a hand reaching out to help another (in need). My thesis project is for an ode to all the girls who found themselves mulling, questioning, daydreaming, and resisting conformity while holding onto hope. It took me a lot of time to come to terms with my upbringing, surroundings and accept myself as I am. I can only hope and wish that my memoir helps some girl find solace and comfort.

22 The Power of Vulnerability, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCvmsMzlF70&ab_channel=TED.
But there were some rare occasions when things made sense to me in school.

Rosa Parks Sat S

How Rosa changed the lives of so many citizens by standing up for what she believed in.

I thought all women should be like her.

Her story gave me hope!

One day!
Bibliography


The Power of Vulnerability, 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCvmsMzlF7o&ab_channel=TED.
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