

Heals

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not based on cooperation among equals but rather on long-term roles for a few who sacrificed for the good of the group. The fireside, division of labor, altruism and cooperation “put a high premium on social intelligence ... and enriched communication.” Developing a better capacity for language became synonymous with higher survival and reproductive rates. Those who communicated most successfully – through storytelling – could form alliances, develop trade and extract necessary materials and energy from the natural environment.

Since the beginning, we have been telling stories to each other; stories that entertain and enlighten, stories that build bridges of understanding and empathy.

Storytelling has a rich tradition in the Granite state. The New Hampshire Storytelling Alliance lists six chapters statewide and includes a myriad of talented storytellers.

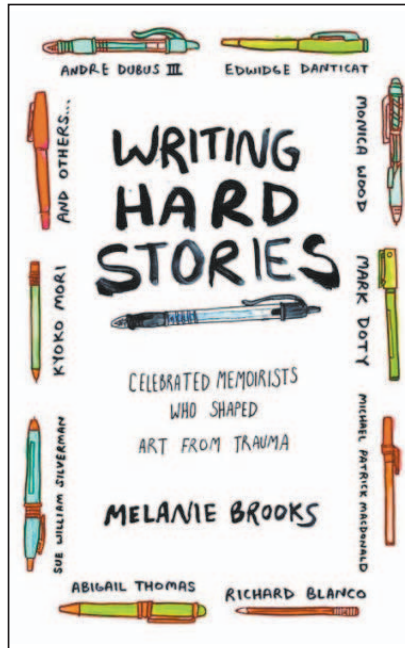
What about storytelling about things that are difficult, even traumatic? How can stories deliver us from pain and teach us new things about ourselves, our families and the wider world?

In her new book “Writing Hard Stories: Celebrated Memoirists Who Shaped Art From Trauma” (Beacon Press, 2017), Nashua writer Melanie Brooks shares the experience and words of advice from writers who tackled tough personal stories in order to make sense of trauma.

Brooks, a freelance writer, college professor and mother, received her MFA in creative nonfiction from the University of Southern Maine’s Stonecoast MFA Program, and teaches at Northeastern University, Merrimack College and Nashua Community College. The impetus for Brooks to seek out other memoirists came from her own struggles with the shadow of a difficult family story – the long-held family secret about how her father, an accomplished surgeon, contracting HIV-AIDS through a contaminated blood transfusion.

“Hard Stories” goes backstage behind the scenes with writers who fought the fear of trauma with the courage of storytelling by writing probing memoir – not just to balance public with private personas, or to appease a family situation, but primarily to deliver the writer from the angst of pent-up tales that, if left untold, fester rather than heal.

The memoirists featured in “Hard Stories” include: Richard Hoffman on abuse suffered at the hands of a coach; Andre Dubus III on his relationship with an absent



celebrity father; Sue William Silverman on suffering sexual abuse by her father; Michael Patrick MacDonald on growing up poor in South Boston, losing four brothers to crime and addiction; Joan Wickersham on her father’s suicide; Kyoko Mori on straddling two cultures; Suzanne Strempek Shea on breast cancer; Abigail Thomas on the loss of a spouse; Monica Wood on her father’s death; Mark Doty on losing a partner to AIDS; Edwidge Danticat on the injustices of an immigrant’s life; Marianne Leone on losing her quadriplegic son; Jerald Walker on race and growing up in a doomsday cult; Kate Bornstein on the transsexual experience; Jessica Handler on losing two sisters to genetically base disease; Richard Blanco on growing up a Cuban immigrant in Miami; Alysia Abbott on growing up with and losing her gay father to AIDS; and Kim Stafford on making sense of a brother’s suicide.

Storytelling involves finding the right words to convey the truth of emotion.

For Abigail Thomas, finding words transformed her life.

“I think we all need to express or make something out of experiences that otherwise have no meaning. If what you want is clarity and meaning, you have to break the secrets over your knee and make something of those ingredients. ... I’d made something that meant nothing mean something.”

One reader with a similar experience confided to Thomas: “I used to feel so guilty, and now I just feel human.” Thomas: “It’s a reason to be honest in a way that’s uncomfortable. To discover things about yourself that you wish weren’t true. There are so many experiences where the details are different but the feelings are the same. I’ve been enormous-

ly grateful to those who have seen themselves in my stories.”

Sue William Silverman talked about writing through certain scenes in her life, writing to find the words, writing from a place of unknowing in order to discover the meaning you have yet to find.

“The reason I write memoir is to be able to see the experience itself. ... The therapy is one way of ... processing things. ... Writing is a way to organize your life, give it a frame, give it a structure so that you can really see what it was that happened.”

Hoffman said about finishing his book: “To borrow a phrase from the Dylan song, I felt like I made into heaven before they shut the door. ... I had taken the thing that was the deepest, darkest, foulest thing that was a part of me and turned it into art.”

Andre Dubus III: “You don’t have to tell the family story. You have to tell your story of being in that family.”

Michael Patrick MacDonald: “What we remember and how we remember it really tells us how we became who we became.”

While these “hard stories” most likely originate in the darkness and chiaroscuro moments of the campfire, they find their way into the daylight through heartfelt memoir. Though traumatic experiences never disappear, as Brooks says, “we learn to carry the story in a new way.”

Brooks, who currently is seeking a publisher for her own memoir, calls it “coming to terms” with our stories.

“We find language to unravel the complexities of what happened, and we re-stitch those complexities into narratives that can become meaningful to others. And those are the narratives that have the potential to give others the courage to find their own.”