



*The Art of Personal Narrative*

**VIVIAN GORNICK**

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# The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative

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# The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative

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**The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative** Vivian Gornick  
A guide to the art of personal writing, by the author of *Fierce Attachments* and *The End of the Novel of Love*

All narrative writing must pull from the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience, transform event, deliver a bit of wisdom. In a story or a novel the "I" who tells this tale can be, and often is, an unreliable narrator but in nonfiction the reader must always be persuaded that the narrator is speaking truth.

How does one pull from one's own boring, agitated self the truth-speaker who will tell the story a personal narrative needs to tell? That is the question *The Situation and the Story* asks--and answers. Taking us on a reading tour of some of the best memoirs and essays of the past hundred years, Gornick traces the changing idea of self that has dominated the century, and demonstrates the enduring truth-speaker to be found in the work of writers as diverse as Edmund Gosse, Joan Didion, Oscar Wilde, James Baldwin, or Marguerite Duras.

This book, which grew out of fifteen years teaching in MFA programs, is itself a model of the lucid intelligence that has made Gornick one of our most admired writers of nonfiction. In it, she teaches us to write by teaching us how to read: how to recognize truth when we hear it in the writing of others and in our own.

## The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative Details

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## From Reader Review The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative for online ebook

### Candice says

Excellent resource on memoir writing using many examples of other memoirs and essays to bolster her explanations, and gave me a new reading list for further research. Type of book where you write down quotes. I will look forward to her other works as well, as she is a very insightful and intelligent writer.

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### Tim Baldwin says

I think Gornick's final statements captures the way in which this book should be read. She writes, "How does the writer of personal narrative pull from his or her own boring, agitated self the truth speaker who will tell the story that needs to be told? That is the question I asked, and in the course of answering, I trained my eyes on writing: how it got done, how it functioned, took its place in the world, helped alter literary history." With this in mind, we should approach the reading of this book as almost a primer for nonfiction writing. Within it, Gornick provides a great deal of examples of writing and how the writing got done, how it functioned, and how it took its place in the world. In doing this, she expects that we will go and train ourselves in the same manner that we too might be able to pull from ourselves the truth speaker who will tell the story that needs to be told.

I only wish I understood this as her intent when I first started reading the book. Knowing this now, I'll go back and reread.

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### Sherard H says

#### Wait, Let Me Tell YOU

The Situation and the Story by Vivian Gornick  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, NYC  
2001

"Here's the situation, and the story, and you can like it, or get out."~Vivian Gornick.

Just kidding. But she might as well have gone that far. *The Situation and the Story* by Vivian Gornick is a short novel about nonfiction writing, with a notable section on writing memoir. Gornick, who has taught M.F.A. classes concentrated in nonfiction and also in memoir, holds unique gems and insights into the world of writing nonfiction, most notably the eponymous difference between the situation in a piece, and its story. The situation is what the piece is about at face level (i.e., visiting one's sister in Barbados), whereas the story pertains to the inner plots of the story (i.e., coming to terms with past wrongs). She produces a good sound byte or two, such as "it's the absence of dynamism that keeps the essay static, stifles its growth from within."

The piece primarily focuses on, however, quoting and analyzing essays and novels that Gornick enjoys or finds pertinent to nonfiction. It is therefore, a fusion of many different author's writings, and Gornick's

opinion on what works or doesn't work in the passages that she chooses to highlight.

I found this style to be as double-edged as the writing itself. At times, I thoroughly enjoyed the quoted pieces and therefore read Gornick's notes with fervor. At other intervals, I found the pieces dull or impenetrable, and Gornick's notes on them merely magnified in literary desiccation. Outside of her significantly separating the situation and the story, as well as suggesting a necessity for the narrator to be both what they are, and what they are not ("When someone writes a *Mommie Dearest* memoir—where the narrator is presented as an innocent and the subject as a monster—the work fails because the situation remains static. For the drama to deepen, we must see the loneliness of the monster and the cunning of the innocent. Above all, it is the narrator who must complicate in order that the subject be given life."), Gornick offers little in advice or insight—she only blindly praises or scathingly disapproves. Perhaps the only way around this is to read the works in which she's describing first hand, and then reread what she has to say, but as a stand-alone, I really don't find her *The Situation and the Story* to be all that insightful.

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### **Leah says**

I rarely write book reviews, but this book was so far from what it is presented to be that I felt I needed to let others know my observations about it.

I enjoyed the first 26 pages (the introduction), but reading the rest of the book was an exercise in frustration. The introduction explains the difference between a situation and a story in a piece of writing - very helpful. I thought the remainder of the book would continue to explain these differences and how to know which one is which in one's own writing. I was wrong.

The sections on essays and memoirs were mainly lengthy passages from the writings of others followed by Gornick's opinion on what was beautiful, effective, affecting, and worthwhile about the piece. My frustration with this format is that Gornick continued to use the word 'we' instead of 'I' to describe her own reactions, observations, and connections, thereby presuming that the reader felt the same way and interacted with the work in question in precisely the same way as she did. Presumptions of how the reader feels, thinks, and observes are rampant throughout this book. One should never write as if one knows how the reader understands and responds to a piece. This is a very basic rule of composition. If she had just had the courage to say 'I felt this...This is when I realized what the purpose of the story was...This is how I responded, etc' instead of trying to get me to believe that we shared identical thoughts and experiences, I wouldn't have disliked the book as much as I did. I still would have thought that everything beyond the introduction was unnecessary and not what the book purports to be about, but I wouldn't have hated it like I did.

If it hadn't been for her frequent and lengthy copying of works by other authors, the book would have been nothing more than a pamphlet, which is what it should have been. All Gornick needed to show the importance of the situation and the story and the power of knowing the difference as a writer was the first 26 pages. The remaining pages were filled with the writings of others, grammatical errors, and presumptions.

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### **Katherine says**

Vivian Gornick's tremendous book on the craft of nonfiction writing, *The Situation and the Story*, is an

exemplary resource for writers. In this book, Gornick discusses in great detail the art of writing personal essays and memoir. However, the driving force behind this book is how no one can be taught how to write; rather, outstanding nonfiction writers look at themselves with reflective introspection in order to connect with their subject matter. It is this introspection that draws the reader in to the writing.

Gornick draws upon the writings of other writers whom she believes to be emblematic of both strong and weak personal nonfiction writing. Substantial portions of the book are devoted to directly citing the writing of other authors. Gornick then interweaves her own lucid and enlightening analysis through the text in order to provide a larger context of understanding for the reader.

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## Thomas says

### 3.5 stars

A cerebral and abstract homage to the art of personal narrative. Vivian Gornick skips over the fundamental techniques of creative nonfiction to address the craft's deeper issues: the importance of empathy, the construction of the self, and how this style differs from fiction and poetry. She spends a large portion of the book analyzing other writers' work and dissects how they use their "selves" to separate the situation and the story. As a creative nonfiction fanboy, quite a few passages made me sigh in pleasure. One quote I enjoyed about the fashioning of a persona through nonfiction narrative:

*"To fashion a persona out of one's own undisguised self is no easy thing. A novel or a poem provides invented characters or speaking voices that act as surrogates for the writer. Into those surrogates will be poured all that the writer cannot address directly - inappropriate longings, defensive embarrassments, anti-social desires - but must address to achieve felt reality. The persona in a nonfiction narrative is an unsurrogated one... The unsurrogated narrator has the monumental task of transforming low-level self-interest into the kind of detached empathy required of a piece of writing that is to be of value to the disinterested reader."*

Overall, a thoughtful and thorough examination of the essay and the memoir. Those who want more direct instruction may feel disappointed with this one, because Gornick shares a few gems about writing and then applies them to a gamut of work. Still, her years of experience and deep appreciation of the craft shine in *The Situation and the Story*. Would recommend for those who want to get serious with writing personal narrative. A couple more quotes I loved from the book to end this review:

*"In all imaginative writing sympathy for the subject is necessary not because it is the politically correct or morally decent posture to adopt but because an absence of sympathy shuts down the mind: engagement fails, the flow of association dries up, and the work narrows. What I mean by sympathy is simply that level of empathic understanding that endows the subject with dimension... For the drama to deepen, we must see the loneliness of the monster and the cunning of the innocent. Above all, it is the narrator who must complicate in order that the subject be given life."*

*"The idea of the self - the one that controls the memoir - is almost always served through a single piece of awareness that clarifies only slowly in the writer, gaining strength and definition as the narrative progresses. In a bad memoir, the line of clarification remains muddy, uncertain indistinct. In a good one, it becomes the organizing principle - the thing that lends shape and texture to the writing, drives the narrative*

*forward, provides direction and unity of purpose. The question clearly being asked in an exemplary memoir is 'Who am I'? Who exactly is this 'I' upon whom turns the significance of this story-taken-directly-from-life? On that question the writer of memoir must deliver. Not with an answer but with depth of inquiry."*

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### **Stephanie says**

If Aristotle tells us that a writer must evoke ethos, pathos, and logos in order to craft a successful persuasive essay, Gornick fails at the first two miserably. Based on the introduction, she does not establish ethos - proving to the reader that she is knowledgeable about what she is writing on. There are no prizes for cramming as many words into a sentence as you can and phrasing things in the most oblique way possible. After the introduction, I couldn't trust anything she said (thus pathos was out the window.) The rest of the book is a masterbatory exercise where she attempts to explain her premise of "the situation and the story" (something I still do not understand and I read whole book.) Rather than providing information and then including an example essay for the reader to analyze themselves, Gornick opts to include excerpts of famous works (accompanied by synopsis where necessary) and her own "in depth reading" of them. This feels self-serving and preening - particularly since she appears to be so proud of herself.

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### **Melissa Matthewson says**

I know everyone loves this book, but I was bored with it mostly. A few good tips gleaned from reading. I like the book recommendations. Maybe I'll read again in the future.

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### **julieta says**

I absolutely loved it. I love Vivian Gornick because of her wonderful Fierce Attachments, and this is like taking a class with her. I recommend this to anyone who would like to write some form of essay or memoir, the way she helps you to read is just wonderful. I will look for some of the essays discussed here, but mostly I really appreciate her view on them, and she leaves me wanting to read more memoir, or more like read it differently, thinking of the possibility of writing.

She speaks of how in a novel, the author finds many different voices who can create dynamic, and in a memoir it must come from your own self investigating. Wonderful book.

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### **Rena Graham says**

This has become one of my favorite books on writing personal narrative. It's a small book that goes deeply into exactly what the title suggests. I love Gornick's super-smart voice and the way she teases apart what happened to the writer vs what the writer was able to make of what happened. Her inclusion of V. S. Pritchett's quote, "It's all in the art. You get no credit for living" feels like the heart of this book. I also appreciated some of her more obscure literary references, like The Rings of Saturn by W. G. Sebald.

165 pages tagged many times, ready for a second read soon.

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## **David E says**

Well worth the read - especially if you're writing a memoir. In *The Situation and the Story*, Vivian walks her audience through a number of successful memoirs, drawing connections between tone of voice and meaning. It goes a lot deeper but that's the main vein of thought. enjoyed her writing and learned a great deal about voice.

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## **Sorayya Khan says**

So many ways to read, so many ways to think about writing, so many ways to teach reading and writing. Gornick's book explores personal narrative, what makes it work and why, and how to differentiate between essay and memoir, but she doesn't believe in craft--or rather, that craft can be taught. She takes her time with examples, inviting us to read with her before telling us why the piece works. One of her examples is Duras' *The Lover* which I've read and loved, but plenty of others, like Loren Eiseley's *All the Strange Hours* -- about the Depression -- which I must now read. I'll have to discover on my own whether Eiseley's book is that good or whether it's just Gornick's description of it: "The book he actually wrote is remarkable because the writing welled up out of a place beyond the reach of conscious intent and it rescued him repeatedly from his own defensiveness."

Some passages I'd like to remember:

On reading writing: "Writing enters into us when it gives us information about ourselves we are in need of at the time we are reading."

"How does the writer of personal narrative pull from his or her own boring, agitated self the truth speaker who will tell the story that needs to be told? That is the question I asked, and in the course of answering, I trained my eyes on the writing: how it got done, how it functioned, took its place in the world, helped alter literary history. To read out of one's own narrow but clarified need, I concluded, was to teach oneself better how to write--and how to teach writing."

"These writers might not "know" themselves--that is, have no more self-knowledge than the rest of us--but in each case--and this is crucial--they know who they are at the moment of writing. They know they are there to clarify in relation to the subject in hand--and on this obligation they deliver."

"Above all, it is the narrator who must complicate in order that the subject be given life."

"In nonfiction, the writer has only the singular self to work with. So it is the other in oneself that the writer must seek and find to create movement, achieve a dynamic."

On Natalia Ginzburg's essay, *He and I*: "He and I is an essay rather than a memoir because the writer is using her persona to explore a subject other than herself: in this case, marriage. If it had been a memoir, the focus would have been reversed. Ginzburg would have been using marriage precisely to explore--illuminate, define--herself. That would have been her intention. Her simple intention, I might add."

"Modern memoir posits that the shaped presentation of one's own life is of value to the disinterested reader only if it dramatizes and reflects sufficiently on the experience of "becoming": undertakes to trace the internal movement away from the murk of being told who you are by the accident of circumstance toward the clarity that identifies accurately the impulses of the self that Cather calls inviolable."

On Geoffrey Wolff's *The Duke of Deception*: "He is, rather, a man who sets out to document what the narrator of every work of twentieth-century literature has been at pains to demonstrate--that the task is to become acquainted with the stranger who lives inside your own skin, the one who answers when your name is called."

"Agnus Smedley also knows what the century knows: that we become what is done to us."

"In Edmund Gosse, Agnes Smedley, Geoffrey Wolff, we have a set of memoirists whose work records a steadily changing idea of the emergent self. But for each of them a flash of insight illuminating that idea grew out of the struggle to clarify one's own formative experience; and in each case the strength and beauty of the writing lie in the power of concentration with which this insight is pursued, and made to become the writer's organizing principle. That principle at work is what makes a memoir literature rather than testament."

On W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*: "It is, I think, a measure of the bankruptcy of fiction that *The Rings of Saturn* is repeatedly called a novel.

On teaching writing: "To approach the work in hand as any ordinary reader might was the learn not how to write but--more important by far--why one was writing."

". . . But for me "Get the narrator, and you've got the piece" proved an irresistible guide to how essays and memoirs organize a mass of raw material. This was the perspective that, in my hands, yielded breadth of interpretation. The experience taught me something crucial about how we read."

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## **Ying Ying says**

The title contains the main message of the book. Vivian, who teaches memoir writing, tells us that there are two components to the personal narrative: the situation and the story. This differentiation is enlightening because we often focus on the situation: the facts and the dates, while ignoring what makes an essay truly remarkable: the human story, e.g. of love or loneliness. The book explores this narrative duo by interpreting brilliant pieces of memoir. Like the author, we should learn to better read such essays in order to become better writers.

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## **El says**

This slim volume is helpful to anyone writing essays or a memoir, primarily, but I think there's benefit to fiction writers reading this as well. The idea is simple, and one that is brought up all the time in workshops which can be one of the hardest questions to answer: What is the story?

Let me use myself as an example. I was writing an essay about what I thought was a trip I took to Alaska in high school, but the essay wasn't working. I was reading this book at the time and I realized, duh, that going to Alaska was the *situation*. The *story*, however, was my mom. Ugh. This led me to scrapping the original concept entirely and running with this realization, and that brings us up to date. The essay is working better now. But I have to constantly remind myself to stay on track with the *story*, and not get wrapped up in the *situations*. It's easy to do because I tend to wander and meander and, holy shit, where did I even wind up. I need to keep an eye on myself.

Every work of literature has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say.

(p13)

Gornick goes on to use examples of essays that work for her which just adds to my reading list. She spends a little too much time, in my opinion, dwelling on some of the other writings which is a shame because it took away from her own thesis. I wanted to know what she thought about the craft more than what she thought about other examples, but I understand it can be a funky slope - hard to talk about one without flashing up some examples from which to make one's point.

Some pieces she referenced were Joan Didion's "In Bed", Harry Crews's "Why I Live Where I Live", and Edward Hoagland's "The Courage of Turtles."

She explains the distinction between an essay and a memoir - an essay is when a writer uses her persona to explore a subject other than herself, and a memoir is the reverse of that.

I'm still sorting that one out, but it's a good place to start.

It's the depth of inquiry that guides the personal narrative from essay into memoir.  
(p85)

Gornick ends with suggestions for further reading, so here it is for posterity:

Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art, Judith Barrington  
Modern American Memoirs; Annie Dillard and Cort Conley (eds)  
I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory; Patricia Hampl  
Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life; Anne Lamott  
Living to Tell the Tale: A Guide to Writing Memoir; Jane Taylor McDonnell  
Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir; William Zinsser (ed)

For the most part, a lot of great insights here, but got a little lost in some of her examples and lengthy thoughts on them.

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## **Anton says**

"You cannot teach people how to write." Any book that says that, I'm going to have a lot of problems with. The sentiment is more a reflection of bankrupt ideas about teaching than a judicious assessment of what can happen when a group of people get together to talk about writing and are provided structure and guidance in getting their own writing done. But, yes, you can't make people good writers by lecturing at them, nor under

any circumstances are they likely to morph into "writers," whatever that means, over the course of a single semester.

So, the fact that I'm STILL giving this book five stars (because, yes, Gornick, a writing teacher writing a book on how to write, does say you can't teach writing), speaks volumes to the persuasive power of this book.

I'm not entirely sure how useful it's been in terms of my own writing, or how useful it would be to fledgling personal narrative writers (though I suspect I will assign it should I ever teach personal narrative again). It does raise questions of self-representation--through readings of a number of superior essays and memoirs, both widely acknowledged classics and lesser known gems--that I will be thinking about for a very long time. We are shown examples of what a working personal narrative looks like, and how it succeeds, but sometimes I wanted to hear more about HOW to do this in my own writing.

But this book is not going to spoon feed you craft tips--that's just not what it is, and I don't fault it for that.

What I was tempted to fault it for was a tone that sometimes felt authoritarian, though I'm not sure that word quite captures it. Her writing exhibits a control and focus that sometimes feels off-putting, but at its best is exhilaratingly clear and provocative.

When I realized this, I realized also that Gornick's book might be better read as a personal narrative in its own right, and as such it rivals any of the masters of the form she cites throughout its pages. We see her in every sentence, in every observation; it doesn't matter if we agree with her commentary--it's enough to see it realized. The book has its own situation and its own story. The situation is writing truth in the wake of postmodernism. And the story is how a single-minded, self-insistent art can most powerfully betray the very subjects it seems to deny: loneliness, vulnerability, the fear of losing oneself.

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