

Judith Kitchen

## **BOOK REVIEW**

*To Memoir or To Essay?*

*Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*

By Nick Flynn

W. W. Norton, 2004, 345 pp., \$23.95, cloth

*Orphans*

By Charles D' Ambrosio

Clear Cut Press, 2004, 232 pp., \$12.95, paper

*Vermeer in Bosnia*

By Lawrence Weschler

Pantheon, 2004, 412 pp., \$25.95, cloth

At some point in the writing process, a writer of autobiographical nonfiction comes to a fork in the road. Will this stuff of the life become memoir, or essay? My suspicion is that this usually happens fairly early in the process, and, having taken the step in one direction, the writer then knows what to expect – either a meandering foray into the past, or a purposeful trek aimed at the future. Sometimes the nature of the material dictates one direction or the other, but it's more likely that the deciding factor lies in the writer's idiosyncratic preference.

The memoirist is interested in the essence of the experience on its own terms: the sensory details, the flavor of the conversation, the scene reenacted. The trajectory of memoir is a slow accumulation; the successive scenes take on weight and significance as we begin to gain perspective on the whole. Often, it feels as though we are keeping exact pace with the author, gaining insight as the memories unfold.

The essayist, on the other hand, seems almost from the outset to have sensed the need to connect the life with another, more universal, issue, setting the specificities of the personal smack in the middle of abstract idea. This can be achieved in a variety of ways, but the essay – even a personal essay – is always also about something else, something to which personal experience is merely a vehicle, providing the experiential authority through which the writer can perceive what’s at stake. The arc of the essay is much shorter, and however it digresses, its arrows are definitely aimed at what it’s making of the world.

In other words, the moment of the essay is the present; the moment of the memoir is the past.

Of course, most books blend the two in a variety of ways. Mary Karr’s *The Liars’ Club* is clearly memoir, but it raises the ante on the issue of truth and the consequences of deception. Mark Spragg’s *Where Rivers Change Direction* is a collection of discrete essays, but taken together, they chronicle not only his own coming of age but that of the American West. Norman Maclean’s *A River Runs Through It*, for all its elegant essayistic tendencies, is more of a memoir, trying to resurrect the past in order to make a sense of it, and its culminating insight on the limits of love is never stated by Maclean, but felt in the reader. Richard Rodriguez’s *Brown*, for all its memoiristic moves, is more one long essay in which autobiography merely serves to illustrate and illuminate Rodriguez’s commentary on the nature of race in the United States.

The current trend, even in the essay, has been toward autobiography, and there may be an incipient backlash brewing, as witnessed in “Occasional Desire: On the Essay and the Memoir” by David Lazar in *Pleiades*. He writes, “Perhaps we need a separate

camp, of destructive nonfiction, a wider, wilder, grayer zone, in which the essay and other fugitive forms, known and as yet undiscovered, can ply their wayward trades, following those occasional desires into open forms which . . . challenge facets of the imagination beyond the complacencies of memory's narratives." Both memoir and essay must negotiate between the subjective and the objective, but in differing proportions, and with differing intents. At its best, memoir can give us the feel of another life. Essays give us the feel of another mind. I'd like to look at the peculiar blend of life and mind in the works of three contemporary writers of nonfiction.

Nick Flynn's *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* bills itself on the front cover as memoir, and that's clearly its intent. But Flynn, a poet, is also clearly determined to shake up the form. To begin with, he tells another story along with his own – the pieced-together story of his father, who has figured as an absence for most of his life but now makes himself present as another homeless ex-con haunting the streets of Boston. Their lives converge as Flynn takes a job in a homeless shelter and is thus forced to encounter what his father's life has become. Flynn treats the sections on his father in a variety of ways, sometimes seeing him through the lens of his own first-person perspective, sometimes imaginatively entering his territory and giving us the world from Jonathan Flynn's point of view.

The memoir proceeds in sections, each given its own, specific time and point of view. As we complete the puzzle, we piece together the picture of a broken family: an unstable mother; a series of men who serve, briefly, as alternative fathers; and – behind all of this – the larger-than-life but ghostly presence of the small-time con man who

claimed to have written the novel of the century. Using sections of his father's letters and even a bit of his father's "novel," Flynn gives us a fairly clear sense of how Jonathan sees the world without perceiving the effect of his actions in it. The effect, we infer, can be seen in this account of his son's life: a somewhat streetwise kid, uninterested in school, attracted to taking risks; early experiences with drink and drugs; an inexplicable stint in college; the devastation of his mother's suicide; the fast downward spiral into a state that nearly approximates his father's drink-filled days; and a slow recovery of perspective, propelled, in part, by a growing sense of the dividing line between himself and his father. Yet the reader is left feeling that in many ways Nick has become another (more successful) Jonathan – a somewhat charming raconteur who, through words, makes his world seem more attractive than it really is.

That's not to say that Flynn does not face the dreary landscape of his own drink- and drug-filled days. Nor does he turn from the implications of what his life was fast becoming. But he does manage to coat this realization with the somewhat fashionable patina of dysfunction-as-allure. We are meant to be charmed:

It's midafternoon and hot and I've already gotten high a few times, which makes the day pleasantly endless. Can this be the same sun, the same back road, that Mary and I drove just this morning in her mom's car? . . . Some part of me must have been aware of the inherent danger of riding a motorcycle bare-foot, but not enough to give up on my only sneakers.

There's plenty of charm here – most notably in the breezy offhand style and the writer's verbal facility. One of my favorite sections is a four-page spread in which every phrase or euphemism used for drinking is listed (from "bottoms up" to "rotgut" to "coming home on all fours" to "tiddly" to "half in the bag" to "stinko" to "hair of the

dog” – a total of 339 ways of falling down drunk). This is fascinating not for its content, but for the varied and vivid ways we’ve found to describe the same sad phenomenon.

And there’s plenty of experimentation – a couple of sections are written in the form of a play (complete with stage directions), and one chapter is entitled “thirteen random facts” which are less than random in the writer’s mind, beginning with the invention of dynamite and including the author’s birth announcement in the newspaper (itself one of his father’s somewhat meaner jokes). If we’re meant to get the destructive (and self-destructive) nature of the man, we get it.

For all the intimate details and the (assembled) chronology, what we don’t get is a strong sense of the author’s interior life. There’s clearly interest – as movie contracts and national awards would indicate – in this yet-another-story-of-dysfunction-and-youthful-indiscretion, but the trajectory of the book is incomplete. The story does not move sufficiently into the present; we do not sense an overarching adult narrator, and so, as memoir, it fails to reveal the author’s understanding of what it all adds up to. Despite Flynn’s recognition that he doesn’t want to relive his father’s life, one is left feeling that, taking a cue from the catchy, reductive title of the book, he has charmed himself away from genuine introspection, settling for less than his story could have provided. This is nowhere more clear than in the craft itself.

Tense is a problem throughout *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*. Nick Flynn’s natural instinct is to go for the immediacy of present tense, but it’s used haphazardly. Sometimes he chronicles his current present, sometimes he reenacts his past, sometimes he imagines a moment in his father’s life as though it were happening then and there. Many other sections are rendered in a conventional past tense. That alone would not be

problematic, but some sections, even some paragraphs, contain both tenses, giving the impression that this was written in haste and published in even more haste.

Italics, too, pose a problem. Instead of providing a convention by which we begin to understand their function as quotes from letters, things said by others, internal (and unarticulated) responses, or imagined conversation, they seem to serve all those roles somewhat indiscriminately. The result is that we can't quite trust them to deepen perception or to reflect reality.

The greatest indicator that this book has not realized its full potential, though, is found in its contrast to *Some Ether*, Flynn's first book of poetry. There, Flynn deftly uses the understatement and synthesis of poetry to explore the same material. Through indirection, the same ghostly losses take on added weight. The result is the insight that comes through metaphor. Speaking speculatively to his absent father, he discovers something about himself: "Maybe // the silence you move through / shaped me, the way // a church bell ringing resonates // long after the ear ceases to perceive it . . . ."

Charles D'Ambrosio's *Orphans* is an attractively-produced, pocket-sized book of essays, taking its title from an essay about the inhabitants of an orphanage in Svirstroy, five hours out of St. Petersburg, Russia. Yet all of these essays are orphans, seemingly cut loose from any parent philosophy, making their way on their own terms. The subjects vary widely, and the only central point of reference is D'Ambrosio's hometown of Seattle. They range from his adolescence in an adolescent city to the sadly exotic case of Mary Kay Letourneau to the whaling practices of the Makah at Neah Bay to manufactured homes in Woodland, Washington, taking off for Texas and Russia and points in between

before they return to explore the gray skies of Richard Hugo's poetry. Held together by more than geography, these essays exemplify what we might call a presiding sensibility – not the least element of which is that slippery thing we call a “voice.”

The voice of *Orphans* is that of the intelligent counterculture, young and insouciant, but fuelled with a passion for truth. And truth, in D'Ambrosio's hands, is personal and opinionated; it comes from poking at anything and everything from multiple angles, turning and turning the issues until they yield more than the conventional journalist can uncover. In fact, D'Ambrosio has something to say about journalists in general as he watches one particular Bonnie Hart cover the Mary Kay Letourneau case:

In other words, her authority is mostly occupational, though it seems she's possessed of omniscience . . . . By the strident and aggressive tenor of the talk you couldn't tell if this BH entertained any doubt, then or ever, she was so careful not to cross herself, so careful to arrange her moral outrage along the lines of least resistance.

This is reportage turned on the reporters, but the essayist follows up with “This seemed a crude and retrogressive project since what really distinguishes us from the apes is not the opposable thumb but the ability to hold in mind opposing ideas, a distinction we should probably try to preserve.” With wit and great good humor, then, and by calling on the collective wisdom of Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Einstein, Shakespeare, Tillich, Shelley, D. H. Lawrence, Adam Smith, and *Harold and the Purple Crayon* along the way, D'Ambrosio comes to an understanding empathy with the defendant who, in his words, “wasn't glib, wasn't corny, she never once deliberately lied or even delivered a pat, practiced answer,” who “dared to be unclear in public.”

D'Ambrosio, also a fiction writer, does not fabricate so much as excavate. One of his basic moves is to examine the syntax of the moment – whether found in news articles,

court reports, family letters, public relations, or literature. Using literature and philosophy as a lens through which to see the present, he freely gives us his own present-tense take on the world so that we come to know just who is taking us on this ride. Often, the fun he pokes is at himself. Here's one aside found in "Whaling":

The Catholic in me thought eating a little leviathan – which I prayed would not in any way remind me of chicken, and suspected would taste like a petroleum produce, say a bike tire or Vaseline – might bring me sacramental or at least alimentary insight.

This long, sinuous sentence is characteristic, but it is astoundingly short in comparison to others. Fingering one at random, I count 154 words (among them "congenial," "incompliant," "Luddism," "syncretic," "apostatic," and "atavastic") with a total of seventeen commas, three dashes, and an internal exclamation mark. But never once do I lose touch with that presiding voice – the one that can say "Myself, I really doubt the efficacy of the Makah project because generally I'm skeptical about movements to restore culture" or "Anyone born in geographical exile, anyone from the provinces, anyone for whom the movements of culture feel rumored, anyone like this grows up anxiously aware that all the innovative and vital events in the world happen Back East, like way back, like probably France, but before expatriation can be accomplished in fact, it is rehearsed and performed in the head."

What is performed in the head defines the essence of *Orphans*. Charles D'Ambrosio does not mistake his opinions for anything more than a propensity to be opinionated. Irreverent and genial in equal measures, he willingly tackles sacred cows. I find myself charmed even when I don't agree with him, savoring the logic that takes him in one direction while mine veers off in the other, the good humor with which he presents his circumstances, the oddball observations that make absolute oddball sense, the

openness to others, the self-questioning, the sheer curiosity, and the way I never believe that he's made up his mind beforehand and is manipulating me, therefore, with all his other ploys.

Along the way, we come to realize that this author, also, has experienced his share of sorrow, suicide and attempted suicide, and family dysfunction. Those circumstances serve as illustration and become part of the fabric of the essay, deepening our perceptions of why this particular writer sees events in certain ways. The main focus, however, is away from personal tragedy. Memoir, here, is incidental, yet it becomes an important element in how we "read" these essays. By the time we get to the title piece, we fully understand the sadness he turns on himself as he scrutinizes his inability to probe past the translator's generalities in order to see each Russian child as someone you'd have to "do something" about. When he turns his back to leave, he knows exactly what he's doing.

The book ends with an essay on Richard Hugo's poem, "Degrees of Gray in Phillipsburg." It takes a meandering, thirty-four pages to talk about the various grays D'Ambrosio finds in his own encounter with Phillipsburg, a foray into history and myth and literature and small-town America that culminates by wrestling with the issues raised by 9/11. The essays of *Orphans* are personal in the best sense of the word, infused with personality and seen through a subjective lens. But this is a young man's book, and it will be impossible to keep that stance forever, so I look forward to seeing what this engaging voice will evolve into, how Charles D'Ambrosio's name may come to be synonymous with a finely-tuned, mature irreverence.

Lawrence Weschler is nowhere and everywhere in his collection of essays, *Vermeer in Bosnia*. Opening with a statement of why he doesn't write fiction, he tells us that "the world is already filled to bursting with interconnections, interrelationships, consequences, and consequences of consequences." As his title suggests, Weschler seems to be in search of interesting interconnections (not only Vermeer in Bosnia, but Shakespeare in Srebrenica and Aristotle in Belgrade, Roman Polanski's Polish roots, David Hockney's photographic tribute to cubism, and much much more) in order to perceive the consequences. It's in his perceptions that he inhabits these essays, a presiding eye, much like the shoes that Hockney puts in the foreground of his photographic collages to stand in for himself as the observing eye. The "I" of these pieces is ever-present, even pervasive, but it is almost always subsumed in what he is looking at, thinking about, studying intently. Even when the material is personal, his inclination is to the objective, personalized only in that he is present at the event and is the one making the connections.

The twenty-one essays in this collection, many of them published first in *The New Yorker*, were written over a period of several years. Many come with postscripts, catching us up on the intervening years. The subjects he chooses fascinate us much as they must have fascinated him, and this is because he carefully orchestrates his own growing interest and his thinking process. So it is that we see him retreat from the tribunal in The Hague (where he is covering the trial of Dusko Tadic for war crimes in Bosnia) to the quiet confines of the museum where he can bask in the tranquility found on the canvas. Weschler delves into the bloody history during which Vermeer produced his masterpieces, suddenly seeing them in new light: newly aware of the maps on the

walls and the history they chronicle, the soldiers, the letters in the young girls' hands, and the sources of these letters. Taking a long look at *Head of a Young Girl*, he remarks on her very autonomy, the disregard with which she turns away from the viewer's gaze. Vermeer, Weschler concludes, was "inventing peace." Returning to the atrocities in Bosnia, Weschler suddenly finds himself confronting the still of Tadic's televised face, turning away in similar fashion. Both the painting and the photo are reproduced so that the reader takes Weschler's place, making connections, seeing consequence.

Weschler continues this technique throughout, and the results are stunning. Read in retrospect, the student strikes in Belgrade take on the weight of history. So, too, with Roman Polanski's movies, Jerzy Urban's shenanigans in pre- and post-martial law Poland, Art Spiegelman's comic strip *Maus*, and then, the most personal part of the book, a section comprised of six family essays whose central figure, Weschler's maternal grandfather, Ernst Toch, himself had escaped the Holocaust. Even this personal section is characterized by Weschler's passion for research, and the tone is one of near-dispassionate wonder at the stuff of this world. It is as if Weschler looks even at himself as a potential subject, and subjects himself and his family to scrutiny in order to place them in a larger context.

The context becomes more apparent as he begins to explore a variety of ways of looking at his hometown of Los Angeles, and even more so as he tackles the way artists actually see the world. Weschler quotes Hockney as saying "Working on these collages, I realized how much thinking goes into seeing – into ordering and reordering the endless sequence of details which our eyes deliver to our mind," and the reader perceives that Weschler's essays are a verbal counterpart – piecing together different angles of vision,

zooming in for clarity, then finding the long view. Luckily, the book contains many visual examples of what he's talking about.

In fact, Weschler has an uncanny sense for when words will not suffice. He writes to, from, and around the photographs, incorporating them into the text in a seamless web. In an odd way, they make the book much more personal than it is, so that we believe in his narrating sensibility more for having seen his photo with his infant daughter than for having his grandfather stare out from *The Seattle Times*. In addition, he pays tribute to his subjects by using extensive quotes, giving other people their say, so to speak. But when Weschler speaks for himself, he is rarely speaking about the self, but rather about those interconnections he manages to find:

The joy in the streets, such lively inventiveness, the verve of long dormant political engagement – of course, all that was wonderfully engaging. But there was a hollow in the center – the roar of everything that was going on left conspicuously unsaid. (I was reminded of Sartre's critique of Freud's notion of the unconscious in *Being and Nothingness*, composed in the immediate aftermath of World War II – how repressed material, far from being salted away and hidden from consciousness, as Freud posited, surely must have to persist at its very forefront; being virtually all the mind can think about, though of course in the mode of strenuously laboring to avoid even accidentally happening to think of it.)

What persists at the forefront of Weschler's consciousness has become the larger context for this collection. Recent events in Eastern Europe have dredged up scenes from the Holocaust that even an assimilated American Jew could not ignore. Once he began to see the connections, everything fell kaleidoscopically into place. The quality of light in L.A. is all the more captivating for the darkness that precedes it.

*Vermeer in Bosnia* is a book one can return to, savoring its eclecticism and the particular shape of its collective insight. Weschler ends his book looking at a poem by

Wisława Szymborska that takes him – surprise! – back to Vermeer’s *Lacemaker*: “how in the perfected work of art (be it a poem or a painting), across that endlessly extended split second of concentrated attention, artist and audience alike partake of a doubled awareness of expansive vantage (lucidly equipoised) of God, the concentrated experience (meltingly empathic) of his most humble subject.” In this unique fusion of personal and public, we find Lawrence Weschler comfortably at home in the parentheses of his own concentrated attention.