



The special power of present tense

By Mimi Schwartz

For creative-nonfiction writers, it can retrieve memories, deepen the sensory details, and transport readers

For creative-nonfiction writers, the act of discovery is what makes the genre so appealing. We are devotees of E.M. Forster's question "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" and get a high when the messiness of real life turns into narrative order—at least on the page.

The present tense, I've found, is a powerful way to make these discoveries happen, especially when writing memoir. "I am sitting on a roller coaster, flying high" transports me back to that moment more intensely than "When I was 8, I rode on a roller coaster." The sensory details and how they felt return more easily; plus I have the double perspective of then and now. The child I was and the adult I've become rendezvous—and that's when epiphanies happen, the kind that make you get up at 5

a.m. to write while normal people sleep.

Of course, most present-tense writing is technically a fiction. Aside from journaling and letter writing, "I am" refers to something that happened six or 20 years ago—or last week. Readers know that. They accept that "I scream as the roller coaster dives!" is a literary conceit to make what was into what is.

Another literary conceit is the author's innocence. That child doesn't know what will happen next, but the adult author does, even as the "I" plunges downward with terror and delight. What the author doesn't know—at least at the outset—is why the memory matters. Why does she return to that unnerving ride again? Finding out is what makes writing worthwhile.

Sometimes the answers come easily, in early drafts; sometimes they require patience, with many drafts over time—and a switch from present tense to past tense. That happened in "My Father Always Said," an essay I began in present

tense, as if I were again a bratty American teenager on a family trip to my father's German village:

I am being dragged through Europe by a father who is intent on convincing me that Forest Hills, Queens, is not the world. He hates that his Yankee-born daughter—me!—wants to be exactly like my best friend Arlene, whose mother has bleached blond hair and serves Campbell Soup for dinner. "In Benheim, you didn't do such things!" he'll say, 100 times a day—especially when I want to hang out at Penn Drug on Friday night after the basketball games. Or when I want to go to a party where they "don't know the family."

I was on a roll for six pages, and then I got stuck. The 13-year-old narrator started to irritate me. She was lightweight, silly even—and only after I switched to past tense did I realize why. She did not understand her father's grief over the life he had lost fleeing Hitler 15 years before—and that insight was becoming essential to the story. So I dropped her as narrator, and let the adult "I" take over, keeping the echo of that girl—but in past tense, which allowed more reflection on her world:

For years I heard the same line: "In Benheim, you didn't do such things!" It was repeated whenever the American world of his daughters took my father by surprise. Sometimes it came out softly, in amusement, as when I was a Pilgrim turkey in the P.S. 3 Thanksgiving play. But usually, it was a red-faced, high-blood-pressure shout, especially when my sister, Ruth, became pinned to Mel from Brooklyn or I wanted to go with friends whose families he didn't know ...

The immediacy of present tense

Often, though, the present tense not only helps retrieve your memories, but others', too. Li-Young Lee in his memoir *The Winged Seed*, for example, describes his mother's childhood with such immediacy that it reads like a novel:

When my mother Jiaying is a girl in China, she loves the summers in the mountains. The rest of the year she lives in the city below, in the haunted mansion ruled by her father's mother, a woman as cruel as she is small and desiccated ...

Nature and travel writing also gain immediacy with present tense. In Gretel Ehrlich's essay "Island," we feel as if we are with her on her island right now:

I come to this island because I have to. Only geography can frame my mind, only water can make my body stop. I come, not for solitude—I've had enough of that ... —but for the discipline an island imposes, the way it shapes the movement of thoughts.

Maybe she wrote the whole piece while sitting on a rock on her island. I doubt it. Most of it, I suspect, was writ-

ten and revised at her desk in her study. But that was no reason to change the tense to "I came to this island because I had to." She wants readers to experience firsthand the immediacy she had felt.

Aside from the power of present tense to retrieve memories and create an illusion of immediacy, one of its greatest benefits is to show the "I" changing over time. In her essay "Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self," Alice Walker uses 10 scenes of memory—all in present tense—to re-create the effects of a childhood eye accident on her sense of self. The scenes are impressionistic, not chronological; they shift around in time. But the reader is never confused, thanks to time markers that begin each section:

- *It is a bright summer day in 1947. My father, a fat, funny man with beautiful eyes and a subversive wit, is trying to decide which of his eight children he will take with him to the county fair.*
- *It is Easter Sunday, 1950. I am dressed in a green, flocked, scalloped-hem dress...*
- *I am twenty-seven and my baby daughter is almost three. Since her birth I have worried about her discovery that her mother's eyes are different from other people's.*

Inviting the readers along

Much to my surprise, I ended up writing a whole book in present tense. What began with that essay about visiting my father's village at age 13 ended as a 220-page memoir called *Good Neighbors, Bad Times: Echoes of My Father's*

German Village. I didn't expect that. I thought "My Father Always Said" was an end, not a beginning. But the village and the villagers kept drawing me back, literally and figuratively, into their living rooms and kitchens, as I tried to uncover why these people mattered to me in New Jersey, 70 years later. And the present tense let the reader come along; we walk together in my father's old world, trying to figure it out.

This time I didn't get stuck in present tense, because in the 12-year interim I'd learned how to time-travel with phrases like: "Later I will find out ..." "It'll be 40 years until I know ..." "I didn't know that 10 years earlier ..." These let me move among present, past or future tense, as needed. They let me shuttle between the voice of innocence that reacts to the moment, and the voice of experience that provides a context for that moment, telling readers what happened before and after—and who was involved.

Collectively, these two voices, these two selves, helped me gain the double perspective that complicates and deepens understanding of the initial experience. The result is a creative tension that energizes the narrative, as I discover and reveal, in real time, what I didn't know I knew.

Mimi Schwartz

Mimi Schwartz's five books include *Good Neighbors, Bad Times: Echoes of My Father's German Village*, winner of a *ForeWord Book of the Year Award* in autobiography/memoir. Another recent title is *Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction* (with Sandra Perl). Web: www.mimischwartz.net.

WORKOUT

TO EXPERIENCE the powers of present tense, try this two-part exercise:

1. Take a moment in your childhood and write as if it is happening now. Use present tense ("I am," not "I was") to capture it. Sensory details are essential, so include at least five (e.g., sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches), as well as two colors and a piece of furniture. *Tip:* Remember to use the voice of the child you were, including characteristic vocabulary and rhythms.
2. Reflect on this experience as an adult looking back, using past tense. Explore ideas about why this experience matters: why of all the stories you could tell you chose this one. *Tip:* Be sure to speculate. "Maybe it was because ..." is a great little phrase. Use it several times.

—M.S.