



Fragmenting Fatherhood: Nonlinear Memoir's Articulation of the Effects of Toxic Fatherhood

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ABSTRACT

To write about “the father” as an entity, institution, or character in memoir requires the writer to adapt and innovate craft to interrogate the harm created by traditions American fatherhood and its portrayal in media ranging from literature to advertising to television and beyond; frequently, the American father is physically or emotionally absent, if not physically or emotionally abusive. The act of writing this realistic, American character often results in two-dimensional storytelling, as it lacks the elevated and requisite toolbox of craft that articulates paternal absence while creating interesting and powerful characterization. The use of literary storytelling allows writers to document and critique traditional notions of fatherhood in both culture and literature. This paper seeks to explore the craft of writing toxic fatherhood through a creative/critical examination of the memoirs of Alex Lemon, Patricia Lockwood, Dinty Moore, and Lidia Yuknavitch as well as my own writings about my father. Together, these examinations offer the opportunity to adequately examine fatherhood through affective criticism, scholarship, and creative work.

Memoir offers a unique opportunity for examination of social issues due to the dual narrator, frequently labeled the voice of innocence and the voice of experience. In these memoirs (*Feverland* [Lemon], *Priestdaddy* [Lockwood], *Between Panic and Desire* [Moore], and *The Chronology of Water* [Yuknavitch]), fragmentation works as tool to ‘dimensionalize’ the absent or toxic father. Using the child voice, a place of little power and marginalization, these memoirists are able to continually return to scenes of trauma and fatherly oppression to reflect and re-examine ‘the father’ as more than an extension of themselves but as characters, thus utilizing craft to combat entrenched social power. To do this, however, these memoirists use various strategies, including brevity, de-chronologization, and hermit crab forms that produce a similar range of effects, such as “yo-yoing,” repression (and the later return of the repressed), and alternative visions of fatherhood.

Using these memoirs, I seek to interrogate the possibilities of memoir to adequately examine the father through childhood experiences. Using these findings, I then seek to theorize the way that contemporary memoir craft has created “fragmented fatherhood” as a means of critiquing

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contemporary American fatherhood in a way that processes childhood trauma as while also presenting methods and alternatives for dismantling domestic forms of toxic masculinity.