

crooked letter 31

Baby unlove

My subjective, slightly catty opinion on the art of autobiographical narrative

After finishing Rebecca Walker's *Baby Love: Choosing Motherhood After a Lifetime of Ambivalence* I felt more than a little ambivalent.

I write this piece to puzzle out why I am irritated by Walker's writing. I may at times present what seem, and maybe are, contradictory opinions. But since I am interested in the muddy process by which a writer comes to a conclusion, whether about her life or someone else's writing, I am not striving for a perfectly cohesive piece. And while I'm sure Ms. Walker is a very nice person and deserves respect and kindness, I believe any writer's book and the subject matter of said book are fair game.

After reading Walker's book, I felt hungry, like when you are at some shi-shi event that doesn't have real food, only those tiny appetizers brought near you once in a blue moon by waiters in black and white, and you've managed to snag one or two of the hors d'oeuvre but really what you want to do is snatch a whole damn platter and eat every last one despite knowing that you still would be hungry afterwards.

I like naval gazing, self-obsessed narratives; it would be more than a little hypocritical of me if I didn't. But I want rich language, interesting imagery, some gut busting and gut wrenching writing as well as the banal, the trivial, the small, insignificant but still interesting details of daily life.

Most of Walker's book is a series of journal entries. In my black and white composition notebooks there are plenty of entries that read like an almost imageless list. Woke up, did this, thought that, said this, saw that, concluded such and such, so and so did this, I think fill in the blank about that, obsessed about this damn thing, etc.

While I find uses for such writing, and I might use them as a stock to flavor later writing, I find my list like entries mind numbingly boring. Unless there is good reason, or really good writing to be found in a particular entry, I do not subject my readers too often to list like journal entries or catalogues of obsessive mental mastication without thickening it up with some concrete images.

Walker's story and ideas would have been better served, if she had not relied as much on her boring diary entries and had focused on expanding and polishing the bits of words that could sparkle after some elbow grease. She obviously polished up her sentences; they are too grammatical to be off the cuff writing. But they needed a lot more spit and polish to shine. Some writer's daily lists of their lives, polished or unpolished, are interesting. Mine aren't. Walker's aren't.

What is missing in the list like entries are the details that flesh out a narrative. When you write in your journal, you tend not describe the people in your life, because you know them, you have no need of fleshing out the details. Reading your scribbles later, your memory will retrieve the necessary information. I don't need a lot of details, since I am most interested in the emotional through line in such pieces, but I need some. I want a bit of a detail or two about the sounds of someone's voice, the shape of her body, the way the light looked.

In her diary entries, we seldom see or feel or touch or taste or smell the people in her life. What does her husband's armpit smell like that she wants to cuddle up with her nose in it? There are more details about her own body's changes. But even that lacks the touches that make us feel the author's physicality.

We learn that she rubs lotion into her belly as a talisman against stretch marks, but don't know how the lotion feels as it is rubbed in. She tells that when her baby got caught under her pelvic bone, it hurt like hell. But what does hell hurt like? Was it sharp, tearing, radiating?

It is not that there are no details of her physical world. Glancing through the text I find more concrete descriptions than I remember. The descriptions and the imagery are not memorable and get overwhelmed by the focus on her mental life. There are lots of long, sort of boring, passages about what she thinks about vaccinations or the nonexistant paternal leave in this country. (I know I'm using the word boring a lot, but I can't help it. Her book was boring).

While I believe most people's diaries have rants about these sorts of things, I can not credit that hers are not heavily edited after the fact. If we are going to have to read the boring list like entries, than show us the sweaty idea wrangling as well. It might be unwarranted for me to expect everyone's journals to be like mine, but when I write in my diary about things like the lack of parental leave in the US, it tends to be a lot rougher. The ideas do not come out in order. The grammar and spelling often suck. I struggle to clarify my understanding and to find the words to fit the necessary conceptual shape shifting.

When I decide to polish it up, I turn it into an essay; I do not pass it off as memoir. If I want to share it as a diary entry, then I would leave it rough because that would be a truer picture of the process. If I wanted it to be more polished memoir writing, I would write about my struggles getting words to fit the ideas.

Now Walker might be one of those anal-retentive types who nit picks over every word as she writes. This kind of writer works for complete sentences right then and there. There is something to be said for that kind of writing, but it is not the sort of writing that makes reading a diary entry interesting. We read other people's diaries to find out what they are like when they drop their facades; to see them and their ideas in the rough. Memoirs are allowed to present one's life, including the nasty parts, in their Sunday best, but even then we want to see more of the struggle. I find her writing palid.

Much of her writing has a slightly distant essay writing tone of voice. That is good for essays and bad for autobiographical narratives. She starts each section with an essay, which is followed by her journal entries. If I wanted to read a book length essay about thirty-something women's ambivalence about motherhood, then I'd much rather read a book that includes a wide range of women's experiences. Her book suffers because it sits on the fence; is it an extended essay on the topic or is it a memoir? It does neither well.

I do not expect to be moved by everything I read, but I expect it from autobiographical narrative. Some books you can't put down; this was the kind of book that was hard to pick back up. It is not the kind that I would recommend as a must read, and it is the kind, despite writing this book review, that I will forget quickly.

Part of my ambivalence is due to the lack of humor. Walker is too damned earnest. I did not once belly laugh, and ask any of my friends I'm an easy laugh. I do not connect to the autobiographical unless there is, at some point, a laugh inducing passage on the absurdity of it all, and pregnancy seems to me an absurd state.

I did not chuckle, I did not grin. My eyes did not tear up, not even when she wrote about the difficult relationship with her mother, Alice Walker, famed for *The Color Purple*. I am a sucker for narratives about bad juju between mothers and daughters, but Walker's did not move me. Nada, zip, no tears, no way.

This may be because she drags the skeleton half way out of the closet. She reveals the skull and the neck and the shoulders, but leaves the rest hidden in the shadows of the closet. She tells us that her mother is difficult, but while she's willing to indict her mothers, she's not willing to show us too much ugliness, especially not her own ugliness. She doesn't say that her mother is a selfish, nasty bitch, though I would based on the what she reveals.

Walker, perhaps, is trying to have it both ways, dishing the dirt but also leaving the door open for reconciliation. Say her mother sucks, but do so in a "kind" manner. Though maybe she forgot that once it's drug out, it ain't going back into the closet. And it is never kind to rat out your parents, necessary to tell your truth perhaps, but not kind. And if your mother's nasty, she ain't going to take kindly to you telling the world that.

If you tell me that your mother is mean to you, but don't show me how, then I, as a reader, think you might as well have kept it to yourself. None of this "unmentionables" stuff in place of what your mother wrote or said. Tell me. If you're going to bring out the shitty cruelties of family life and be damned by your bitchy mother, then be brave and bring it all out. Don't be wishy-washy. Let your readers judge your assessment. They might not agree with you.

Besides, based on what she shared, I concluded that the younger Walker is a selfish, cry-baby. “Okay Rebecca, I feel your pain. I have a nasty, bitchy, crazy mother. And, your mother seems an A-one bitch. But if at 34, you still complain to your mother that she is not the maternal type and demand that she apologize to you and change her behavior. And you can’t believe that her friends have her back because maybe, just maybe, you might be contributing to the shitty dynamic and you say as much to her with a snotty ‘I’m protecting myself and my future child’ attitude, don’t be surprised that she is hateful back to you.”

At one point, after a difficult exchange with her mother, Walker’s partner, Glen, comforts her by saying that her mother is not being rational. Well, Rebecca Walker isn’t being rational either. Those of us who have contentious relationships with our mothers often yearn for apologies and reconciliation. But that seldom is possible. We cannot change other people. It is not rational to expect an apology from a difficult person, no matter how much we might want one.

And on a very personal gripe note, Walker is way too smug and self-righteous about her intense maternal feelings. The subtitle of her book “Choosing motherhood after a lifetime of ambivalence” led me to believe that we are going to get down and dirty with her ambivalence. We hear about her ambivalence most often in the bloodless essay like sections. She tends to confuse ambivalence with fear. One can be fully committed to a course of action and still be afraid.

When she shares her emotional experience about being pregnant and her imminent motherhood she gushes about how much she already loves her baby and how she can’t imagine ever telling her child she doesn’t want to be his mother anymore (as her mother tells her) and how she would die for her baby, if necessary, to protect his life.

Come on, every mother hates their child at some point, even good mothers. The good mothers try, sometimes successfully, not to tell their children this when they are young and impressionable, but they might, like Anne Lamott in her beautifully written and moving memoir, write about it. And even the good mother’s end up saying shitty things to their child at some point. One of the things that makes Lamott’s writing so good is that she shows her ugliness.

Walker does not admit to her ugliness. She is not truthful about her hatefulness to her bitchy mother. In many ways her book is a big nanny nanny boo boo to her mother. “See how, unlike you, I *love* my child *unconditionally*. I could never say such and such to *my* child.” The fact that she does not see that her book carries a nasty thread of revenge and self-righteousness makes her assertions about her life callow. Much of her book is a barbed message to her mother. Her book would have been much better, if it had been a loving message to her child and her readers.

And I cannot believe she never, when deprived of sleep and subjected to seemingly never ending screaming, wanted to shake the little fucker. Granted, when Walker finished up her book, her child was still the shitting, eating, sleeping, crying and looking cute phase. Maybe that made it easy for her to gloss over the ugly feelings. I cannot believe she is so good. If she is being truthful about her never ugly feelings for her child, she is in for a nasty surprise when her child gets old enough to tell her that he hates her. Children seldom are as dishonest as adults about their nasty feelings.

It's great that Walker feels so intensely positive about her child, that she likes to spend all day staring at her baby. It makes me want to vomit. She tells us what she misses about her life before the kid entered the picture, that she misses her breasts and her free time. But somehow, despite those acknowledgements, it ends up wrapping up into an unbelievably nice, neat tidy package. It is too pat. There is little real feeling about it all, except for her smug satisfaction. She doesn't have any regrets and being a parent is so much better than experiencing or making art, it is so much more important though she admits making art is somewhat important since she is writing this book. I wonder why she bothered.