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Lee Martin on From Our House

Elizabeth Michaelson

From Our House: A Memoir is the portrait of an American family: farmer father, schoolteacher mother, spirited young boy living on a farm in rural Illinois. It all sounds like a prairie story straight from the children's literature shelf. Except that in 1956, when author Lee Martin was a baby, his father Roy's hands were cut off in a farming accident.

Roy Martin caught his hands in the snapping rollers of the corn shucking box and, as Martin puts it, "I know that all our lives began to curve and change that day in the cornfield," and the repercussions altered the family irrevocably. Martin left his parents' home years ago, but it wasn't until recently that the writer started to share the memories in *From Our House*.

Until the fall of 1996, Martin had only written about his father through fiction. But when he joined the staff of the University of North Texas, Denton, Martin was assigned to teach a creative nonfiction class. Speaking from his home in Texas, in his quiet voice which is a Midwestern twang overlaid with a Southern softness, Martin recalls, "I decided that I should try to write something in this genre, so I wrote an essay." He enjoyed the medium's directness, so he wrote more.



From Our House: A Memoir
by Lee Martin

"For me the value of writing memoirs for a fiction writer is that it makes one more courageous and more willing to see all there is to see about character and situation in stories and novels that they're working on. And also to see themselves."

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directness, so he wrote more, though at first he didn't think he was writing a book. "And then all of a sudden I started to see an arc to the book," Martin said. "And at that point I just threw myself into writing the memoir."

--Lee Martin

Lacking Fiction's Protective Guise

Writing fiction may not be easy, but memoir carries its own burdens. "One thing that I think is more difficult when you're writing a memoir is that you're sort of nakedly facing your own pains, your own experiences," Martin offers. He had a troubled relationship with his moody, demanding father and he found that "You don't have that protective guise that fiction offers, of writing about the self through invented characters in situations." Then there are more practical concerns. He admitted, "Of course there's always the worry of 'Oh, what are family members going to say, once this appears?'"

A memoir or autobiography purports to tell the truth, but after all these years, is it possible to be accurate? His characters are vivid, but for many of the descriptions Martin had no photographs or notes to consult. How did he bring these people—some of whom had been dead for years—to life? "I hope that what's happening in the description of characters is that the details themselves are vivid, but what I hope even more is that they conjure up an essence of the person," he says.

Should You Invent Dialogue?

"The idea of accuracy is a hot topic of debate among people who write memoirs and creative nonfiction. There's the camp that believes that the only thing you can put on the page is exactly what happened, that we shouldn't be inventing dialogue." Of course, this requirement means most memoirs would probably be pretty scanty. "Then there's the other camp, in which I fall, that says it's all right to invent some of that dialogue, as long as it's true to what you know to be the authenticity of the person in the situation."

So Martin drew on his fiction writing skills as well as his memory to write *From Our House*. "I can't claim that every line of dialogue in this book was actually uttered by a living person," Martin admitted, "but I know that when I was recreating a scene, and using my skills as a fiction writer to bring dialogue to character, I was always checking myself against what I know of these people and of these places. And if something rang false to me, then I had to take it out—much the same way that I would if it were a character in a novel or a story." He adds, "I don't think that we can make any sort of truth come alive if we don't first make the people and their scenes come alive."

Fathers as Shapers and Destroyers of History

In many memoirs and autobiographies, fathers seem to play an important role, and *From Our House* is no exception: Roy Martin's fierceness and anger are the lynchpin of young Lee's world. Fathers often dominate the stage, either by their personalities or by their absences. Martin supplied a

possible explanation for the preponderance of difficult fathers in memoirs: "Charles Baxter has a good theory on this. He edited [and contributed to] *The Business of Memory* from Graywolf Press, a collection of essays. He talks about how fathers are the distorters of family stories, and that the reason that so many memoirs feature fathers is that the writers are forced to reconstruct the family story because the fathers have been in the business of distorting it [family history], or simply not talking about it. The latter was my case as I was growing up. We never talked in my home about my father's accident. It was simply a fact that I had to live with. But we never talked about all the anger that was between us."

Finally, writing *From Our House* helped Martin in another way: "I know that because I wrote the memoir my fiction is different, because writing the memoir was sort of an enabling act for me. It required me to go head on into my own discomfort. And I think I'm more willing to do that now with my fiction than I was in the past. I guess for me the value of writing memoirs for a fiction writer is that it makes one more courageous and more willing to see all there is to see about character and situation in stories and novels that they're working on. And also to see themselves."

Elizabeth Michaelson is a freelance writer living in New York City.

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