

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Evoking Emotional Resonance With Your
Readers From Asking to Answering



A Workshop by Jennifer Leigh Selig
www.jenniferleighselig.com/sanmiguel

In this workshop, I will

- Define the essential question
- Enumerate why essential questions are such an important tool to engage readers
- Offer a list of some universal, archetypal questions that may guide your work
- Provide examples of essential questions from popular works of fiction and memoir
- Suggest strategies for the placement of essential questions in your work



LITERATURE AS AN ARCHETYPAL JOURNEY

You (your character/s) start at one place,
something happens, you (they) end up in
another place

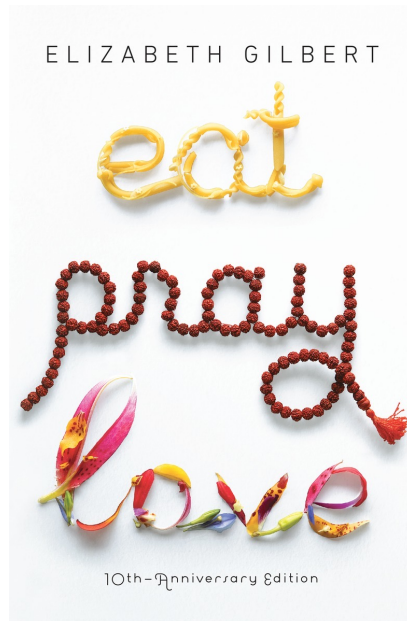
LITERATURE AS AN ARCHETYPAL QUEST

You (your character/s) start at one place,
something happens that raises a question,
and you (they) end up in another place
with, hopefully, an answer

Let's look for a second at the difference between the word "journey" and "quest." To journey means to travel from one place to another, while a quest, from the Old French *queste* means "search, chase, hunt, pursuit; inquest, inquiry."

A quest can be a hunt or chase in pursuit of a goal, but it's the connection to the words "inquest" and "inquiry" that I'm most interested in—a curiosity or inquiry we seek to understand, resolve, and/or answer.

My distinction—a journey doesn't necessarily involve a quest, but a quest involves a journey where we travel in search of answers to a question. Stated another way, it's a journey with purpose and intentionality. The question arises and we depart on a journey to seek answers. We go through trials and errors and missteps and dead ends and frustrations and moments of grace during the journey, and in the end, we return to our lives with the answer to our question (a failed quest is of course possible, but in literature, it would usually mean that though we didn't find the answer we were looking for, we returned with something else of value instead).

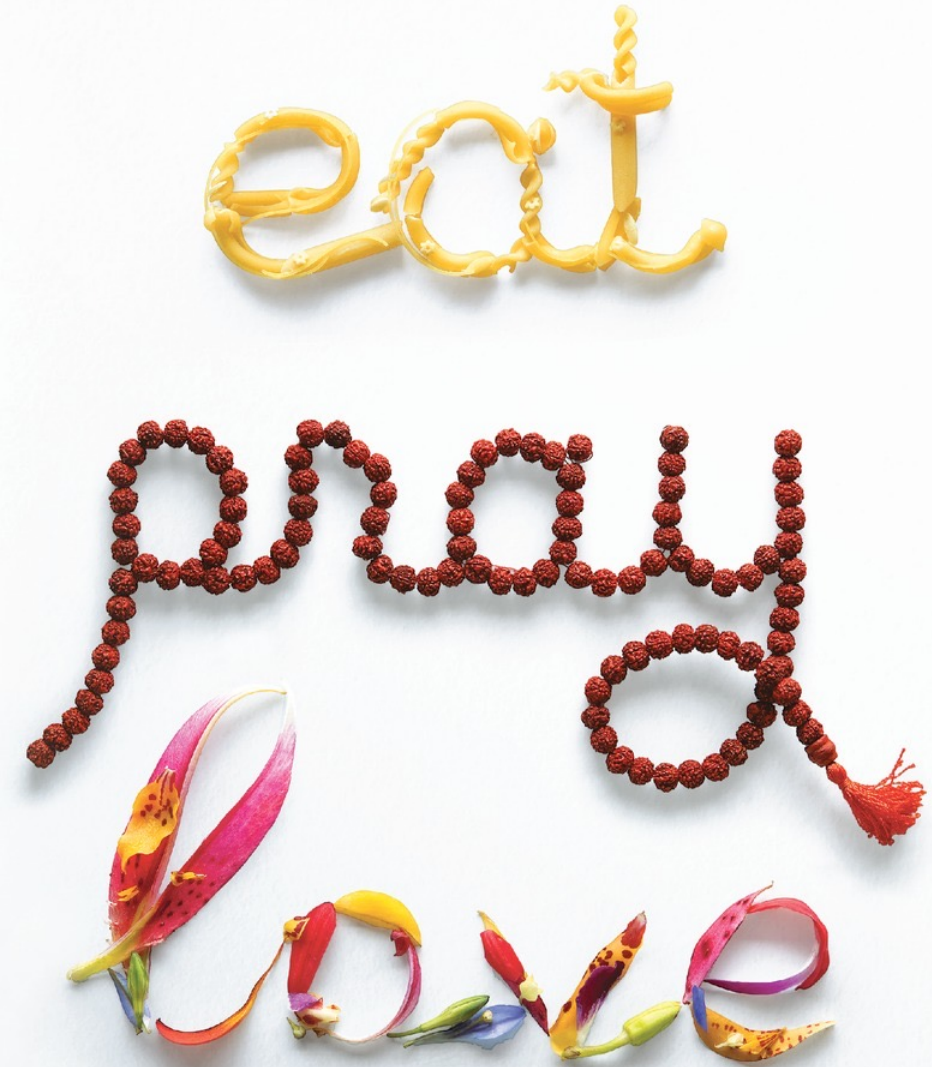


Eat, Pray, Love is a journey, yes,
but more importantly, it's a
quest. I'd argue that's in large
part what led to its popularity.

Elizabeth Gilbert argues that too.

ELIZABETH GILBERT

“My journey began with a series of questions. That’s how all journeys begin. The shape of my journey was a reflection of my own personal answers to those questions. The shape of your journey will be different from mine, but at bottom, our questions will be the same. These are not easy questions by the way. They are merely the biggest and oldest questions of any human life.”



10th-Anniversary Edition

Gilbert credits her essential question – *what if my life belonged to me?* – with the wild success of her memoir. She believes the book owes its popularity to those millions of readers who “used this story as a permission slip to ask themselves their own questions – often for the first time in their lives.” In this way, Gilbert’s book becomes e.e. cummings’ “the beautiful answer” that asks “the more beautiful question” of its readers.

“ALWAYS THE BEAUTIFUL ANSWER
WHO ASKS THE MORE BEAUTIFUL QUESTION.”
e.e. cummings

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS ARE



- Universal
- Archetypal
- The biggest and oldest questions of any human life, though they will have modern inflections
- Evoke the essence of the human experience
- At the heart and soul of a meaningful life
- Illustrated through story
- Serve as “the human instruction manual” (Dara Marks) for living life

PERSONAL QUESTIONS VERSUS ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS--EXAMPLES

PERSONAL: What was it like for me growing up as a "military brat" and living in 6 cities and countries in 8 years?

PERSONAL: How did being exposed to so many different communities shape me as an adult?

MORE ESSENTIAL: What are the effects on a child of an itinerant childhood?

MORE ESSENTIAL: What is lost, and what is gained, when a child experiences many different cultures and communities while growing up?

MORE ESSENTIAL: What do children need to feel rooted in childhood?

MORE ESSENTIAL: What does home mean to a child?

PERSONAL QUESTIONS VERSUS ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS--EXAMPLES

PERSONAL: Why did I eat Taco Bell?

PERSONAL: Why do I eat food that's bad for me?

PERSONAL: Why didn't I just stop at a market and get something healthy?

MORE ESSENTIAL: Why do we knowingly do things to our bodies that are not healthy?

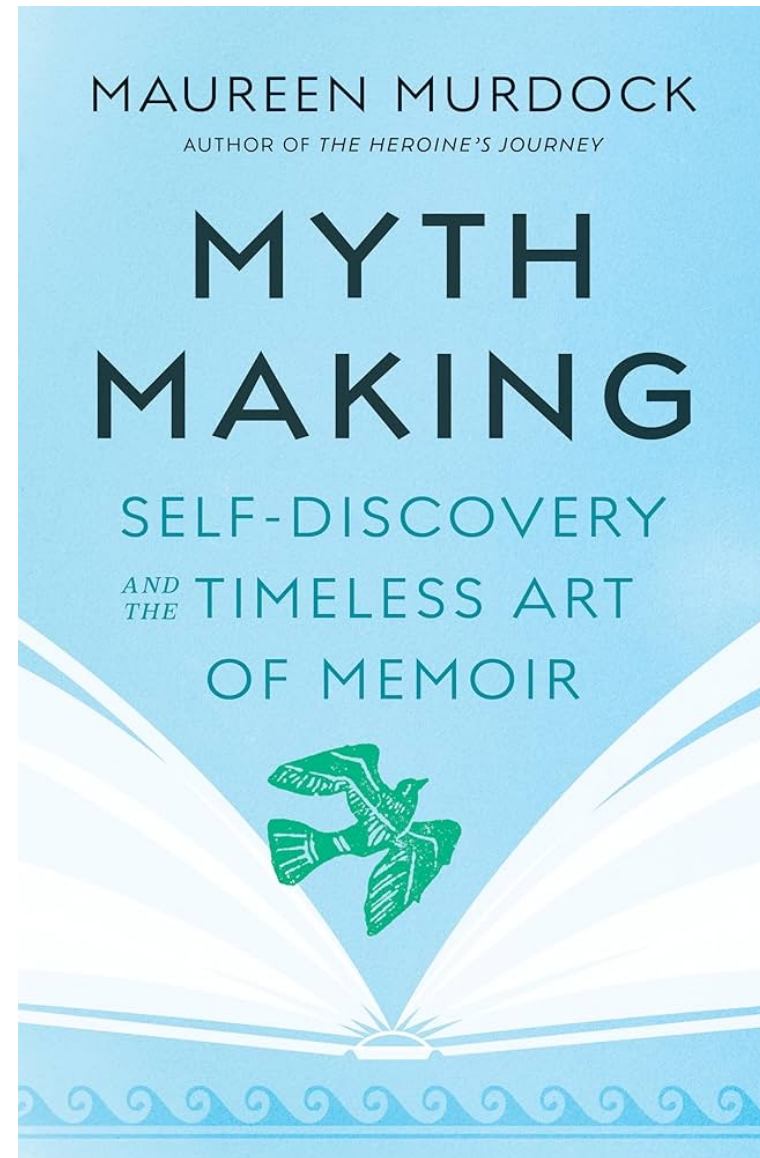
MORE ESSENTIAL: Why do we consciously do things that are self-destructive, or not in our best interests?

MORE ESSENTIAL: What are some unconscious factors at play in our mind-body disconnection?



MAUREEN MURDOCK'S FOUR ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Who am I?
- What is my people?
- What is my journey?
- What is my purpose?



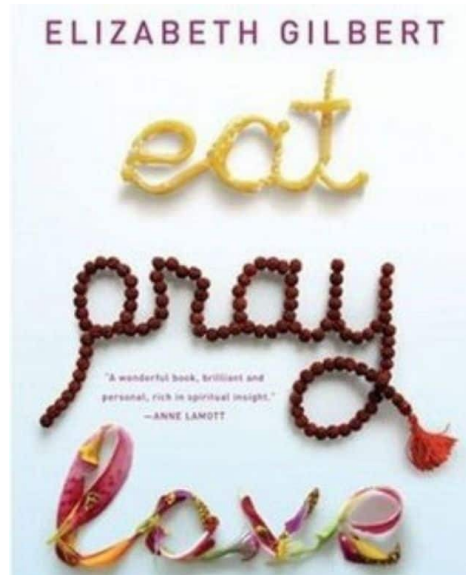
STEPHEN R. GRAVES

(EXECUTIVE COACH)

THE FIVE BIG QUESTIONS IN LIFE

1. Where did I come from? (Maureen's "Who am I?")
2. Who am I? (Maureen's "Who am I?")
3. Why am I here? (Maureen's "What is my purpose?")
4. How should I live?
5. Where am I going? (Maureen's "What is my journey?")

ELIZABETH GILBERT'S ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS



- Who am I?
- Who does my life belong to?
- What is my relationship to divinity?
- What have I come here to do?
- Do I have the right to change my own path?
- With whom do I want to share my path – if anyone?
- Do I have the right to experience pleasure and peace?
- If so, what would bring me pleasure and peace?

JENNIFER'S ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

- Where do I belong?
- How did I come to this place in my life, and where am I headed next?
- What makes life worth living?
- What are my values?
- How can I be in right relationship with others?
- How do I survive in the face of suffering or loss?
- How do I forgive those who have betrayed me?
- How do I live authentically?
- Who do I serve, or what am I in service to?
- What are my gifts, and how do I give them away?



When is it necessary to question the status quo? Who decides?

What is oppression and what are the root causes?

What factors shape our values and beliefs?

A GIANT LIST OF REALLY GOOD ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

How are prejudice and bias created? How do we overcome them?

When is the restriction of freedom a good thing?

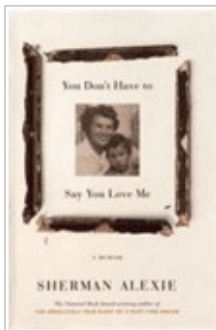
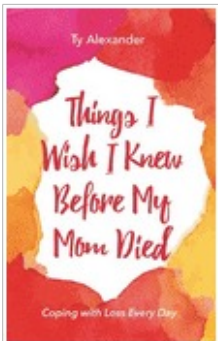
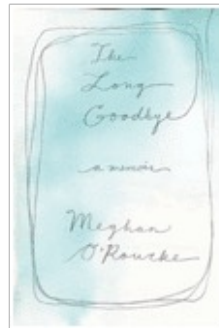
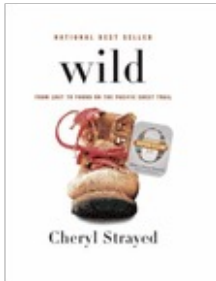
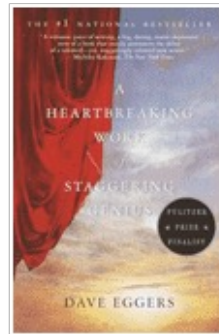
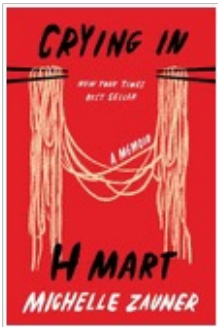
How can literature serve as a vehicle for social change?



ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS MAY SEEM GENERIC

Don't worry if your question/s seems generic—the big questions *will* be generic. And don't worry if your question/s has already been explored by two dozen or two hundred thousand other writers—the point is that the questions are so big and broad and deep and there is no definitive answer, there is only *my answer* and *your answer* and *his answer* and *her answer* and *their answer* and we need *a chorus of answers* to provide us with as many models as possible for how to live our lives with meaning and purpose in the face of x, y, and z.

METAPHOR: LITERATURE AS A PANEL DISCUSSION



No one voice will do. No one person has all the answers or even a definitive answer. Even though an experience is archetypal/universal, the particulars always vary.

**HOW DO WE LIVE WITH
OR THROUGH GRIEF?**

JOURNAL QUESTIONS

Think of a piece of writing you're working on or have completed.

- What personal questions have you/your characters been wrestling with?
- What are some essential questions that your/their personal questions are nested within?
- Are there universal questions that you have been living with or have interested you or defined your life?

JENNIFER'S: WHY DON'T PEOPLE JUST STOP HURTING EACH OTHER AND START LOVING EACH OTHER?



ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS EVOKE ENGAGEMENT AND EMOTIONAL RESONANCE

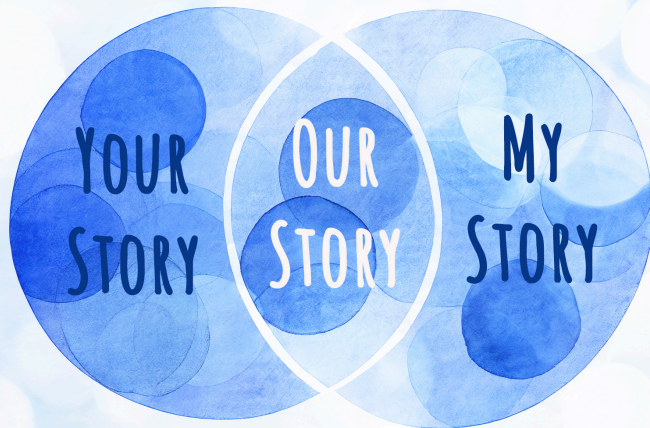
We want to know how you or your characters will answer them

We put ourselves in your/their shoes and ponder how we might answer them for ourselves

We want to compare your/their answers with our answers to see if there's congruence

DEEP MEMOIR

AN ARCHETYPAL APPROACH TO DEEPEN
YOUR STORY AND BROADEN ITS APPEAL

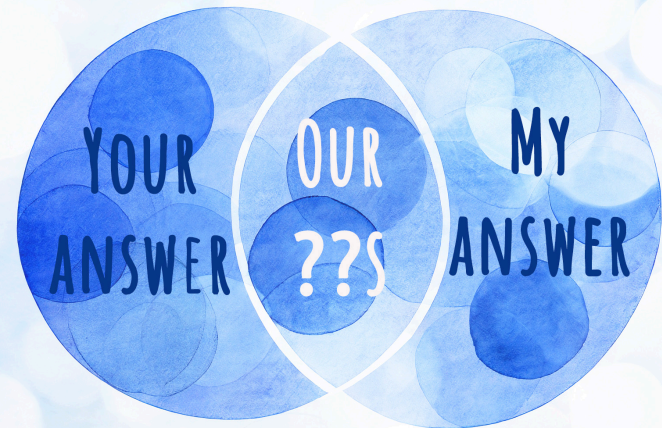


Jennifer Leigh Selig, Ph.D.

author of *Deep Creativity: Seven Ways to Spark Your Creative Spirit*

DEEP WRITING

AN ARCHETYPAL APPROACH TO DEEPEN
YOUR STORY AND BROADEN ITS APPEAL



Jennifer Leigh Selig, Ph.D.

author of *Deep Creativity: Seven Ways to Spark Your Creative Spirit*

Somewhere out beyond the edge of the universe there is a library that contains an infinite number of books, each one the story of another reality. One tells the story of your life as it is, along with another book for the other life you could have lived if you had made a different choice at any point in your life. **While we all wonder how our lives might have been, what if you had the chance to go to the library and see for yourself? Would any of these other lives truly be better?**

In *The Midnight Library*, Matt Haig's enchanting blockbuster novel, Nora Seed finds herself faced with this decision. Faced with the possibility of changing her life for a new one, following a different career, undoing old breakups, realizing her dreams of becoming a glaciologist; she must search within herself as she travels through the Midnight Library to decide **what is truly fulfilling in life, and what makes it worth living in the first place.**



I used to float, now I just fall down
I used to know but I'm not sure now
What I was made for
What was I made for?

Takin' a drive, I was an ideal
Looked so alive, turns out I'm not real
Just something you paid for
What was I made for?

Song by Billie Eilish

Barbie



Overarching Essential Question

To what extent are people defined by their actions?

Other Essential Questions:

What relationship exists between personal growth and asking questions?

How do people develop compassion and understanding?

How does society influence our identity and the choices we make?

What choices do people make in the face of injustice?

How can society's wrongs be righted?

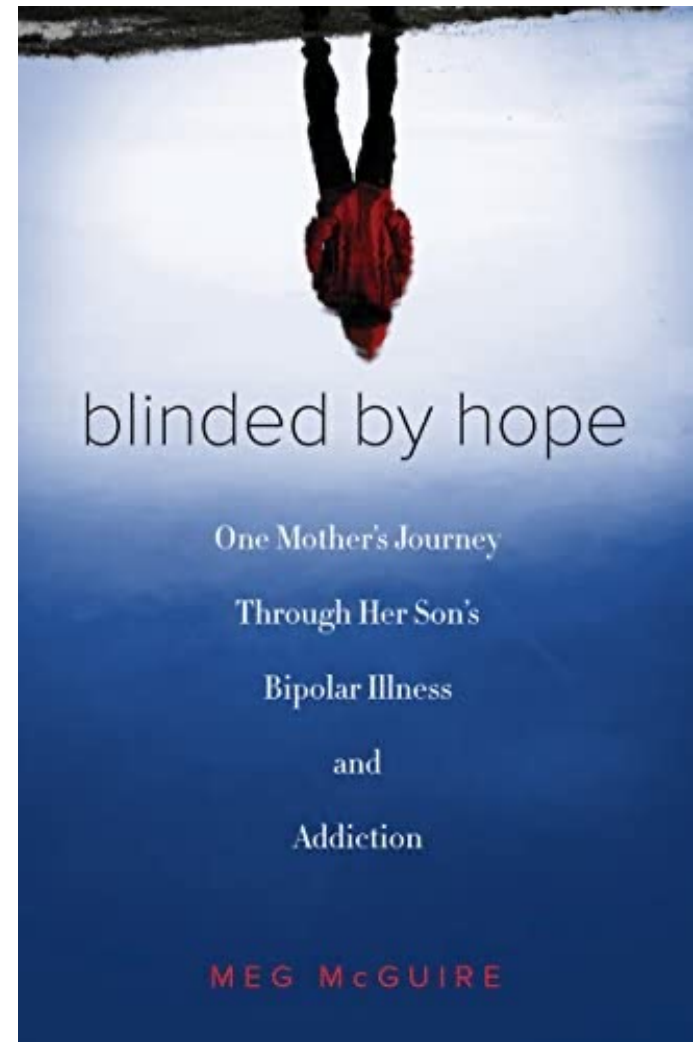
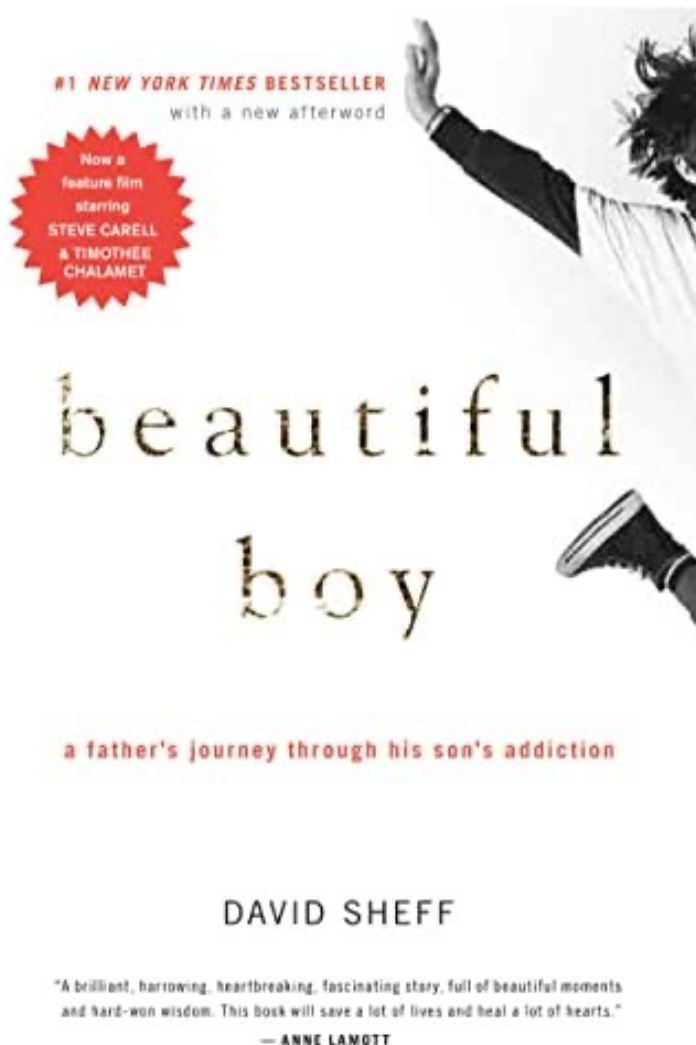


TWO KINDS OF QUESTIONS

Phenomenological questions ask, “What is/was x like?”

Hermeneutic questions ask, “What does it mean?” or “What is the meaning of x?”

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO HAVE A DRUG-ADDICTED CHILD?



#1 INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

THE
DIVING BELL
AND THE
BUTTERFLY

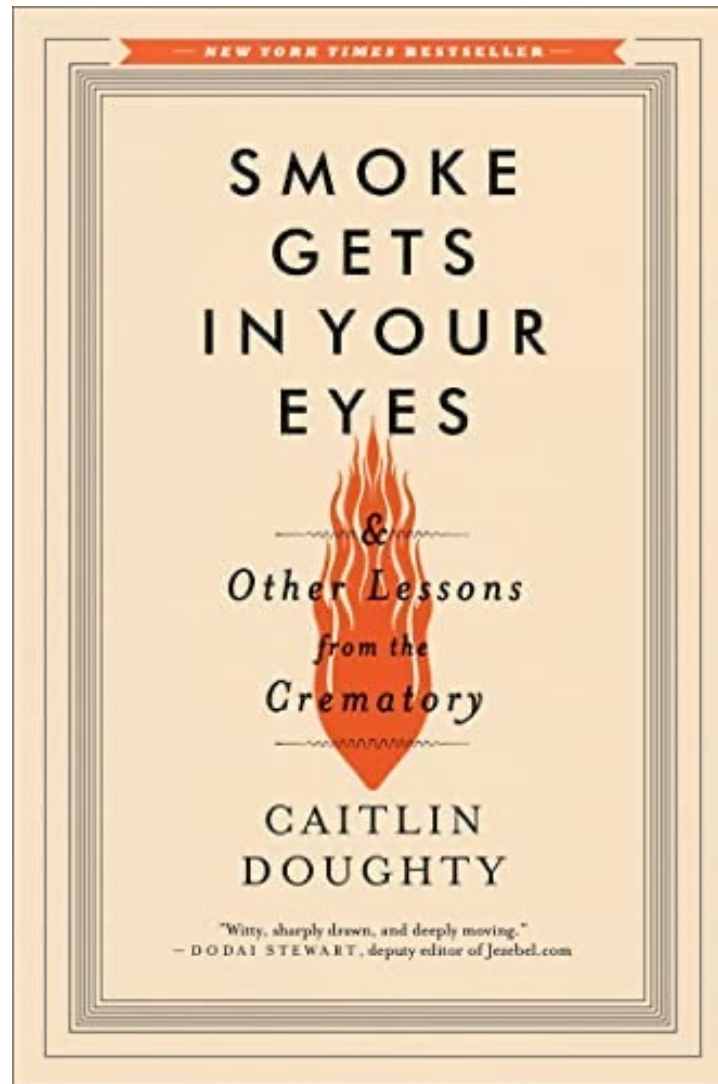


"A wistful,
poetic, ironic and whimsically
affirmative testament by a man
who refused to die in spirit."
-The New York Times

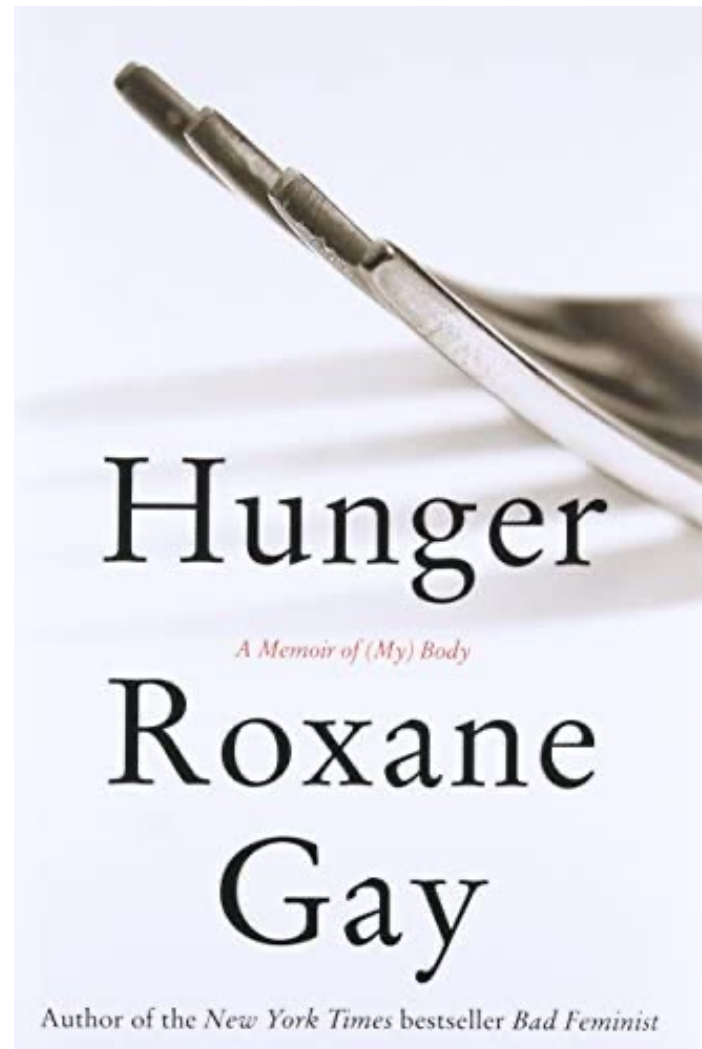
JEAN-DOMINIQUE BAUBY

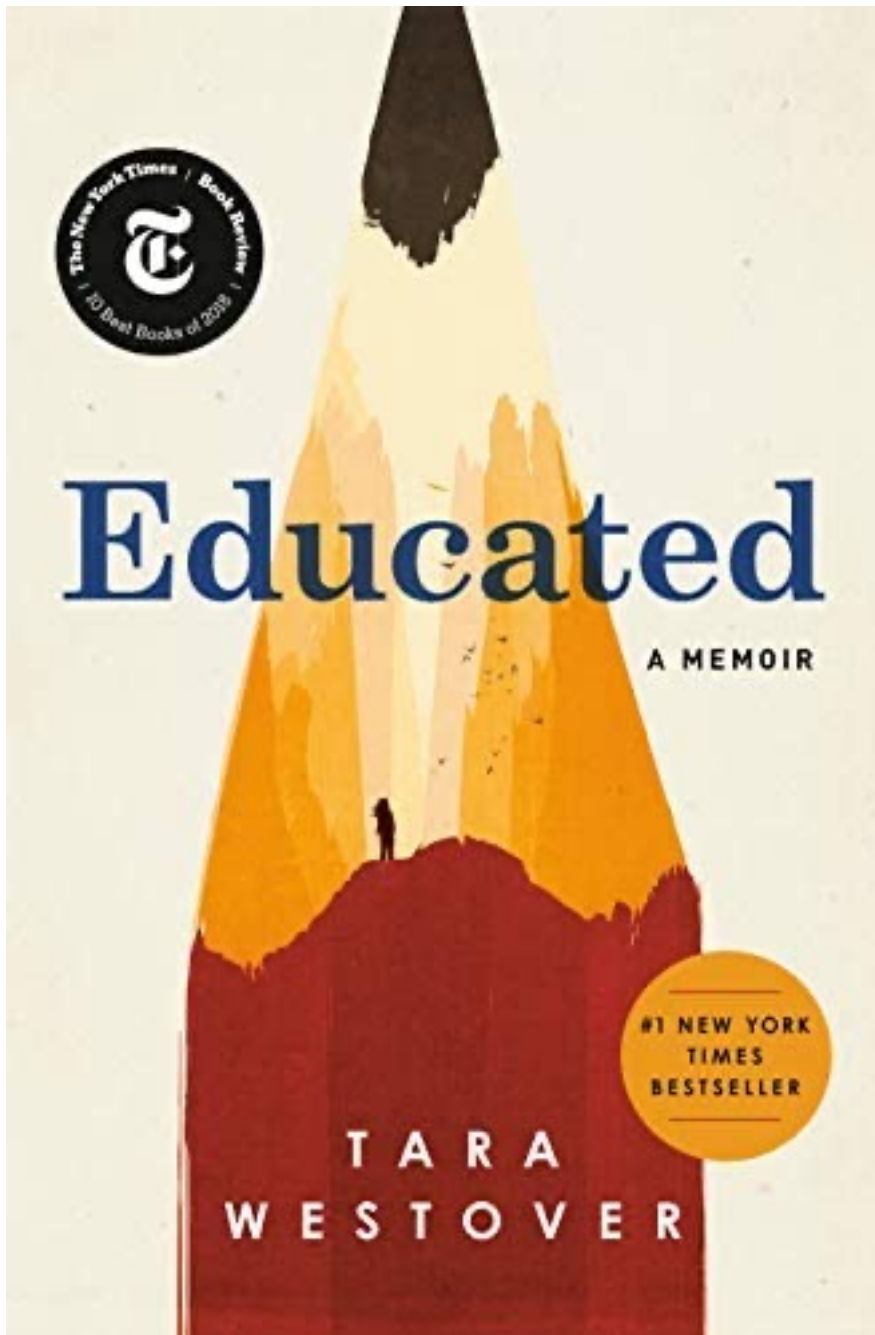
**WHAT IS IT LIKE
TO BE LOCKED IN
YOUR BODY
WHILE YOUR
MIND IS ACTIVE?**

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO WORK IN A CREMATORY?



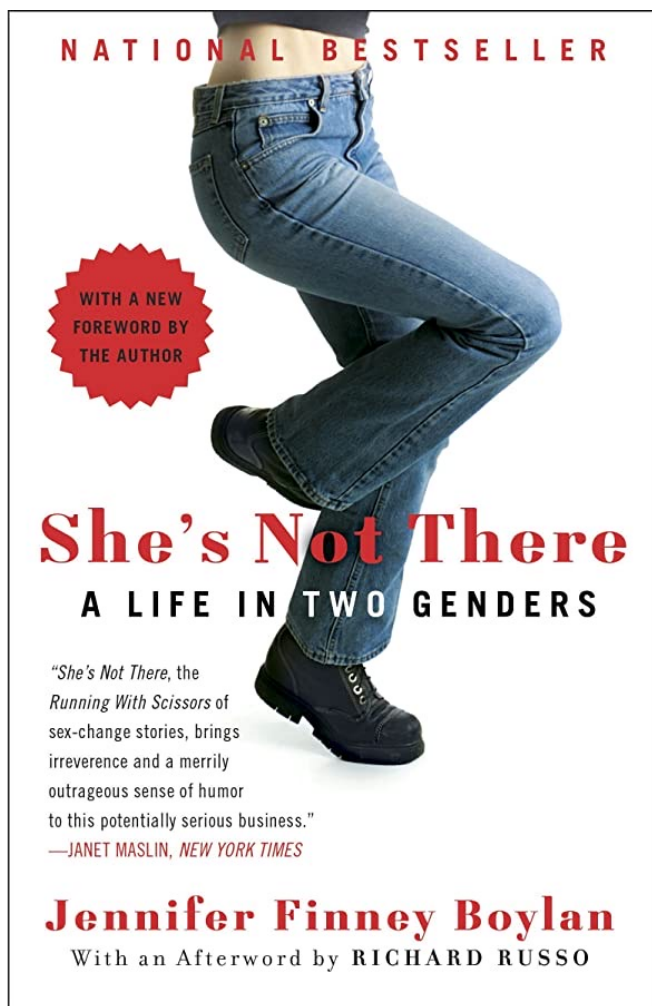
WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE IN A MORBIDLY OBESE BODY?





**WHAT IS IT LIKE
TO LIVE ALMOST
ENTIRELY
ISOLATED WITH
A SURVIVALIST
FAMILY IN
IDAHO?**

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO TRANSITION FROM ONE GENDER TO ANOTHER?



PAGEBOY

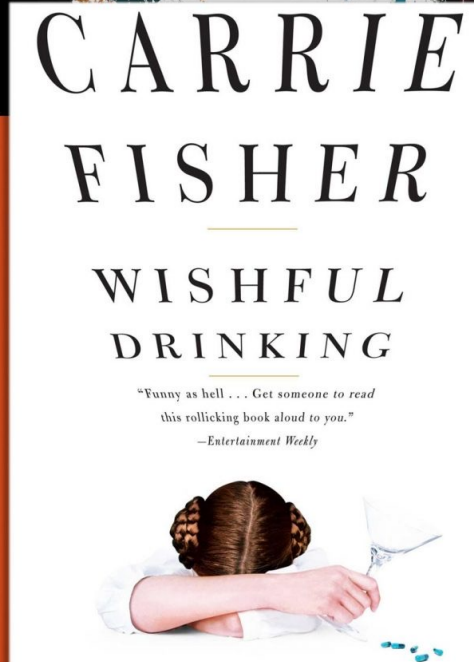
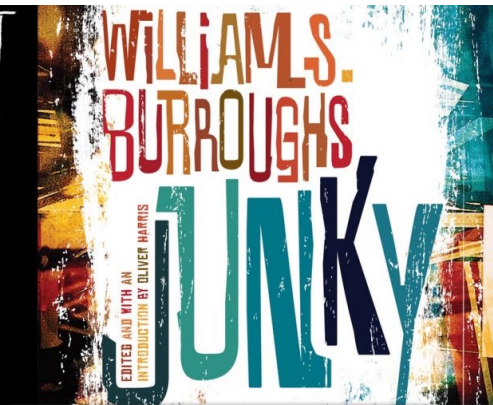
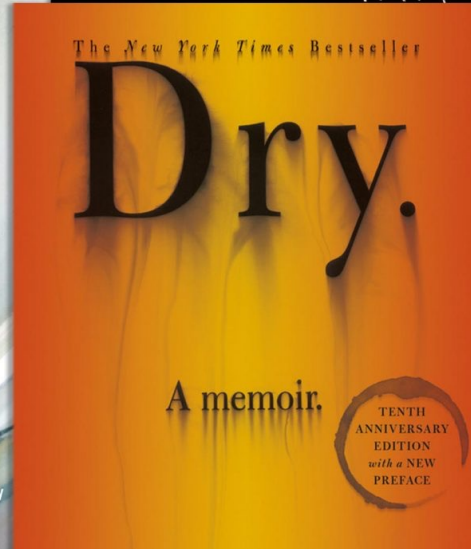
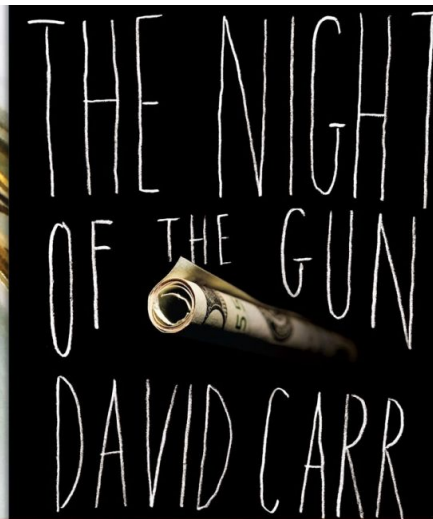
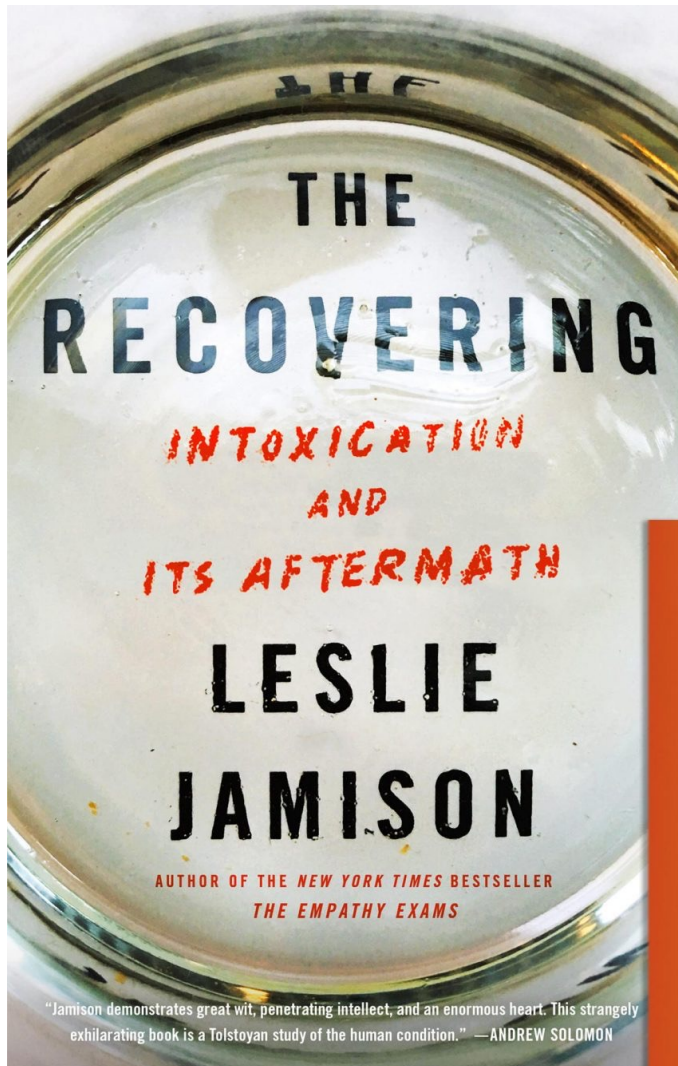


A MEMOIR

A MEMOIR

ELLIOT PAGE

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO GET SOBER/CLEAN?



WHAT IS IT LIKE?

Phenomenological literature explores the lived experience of something

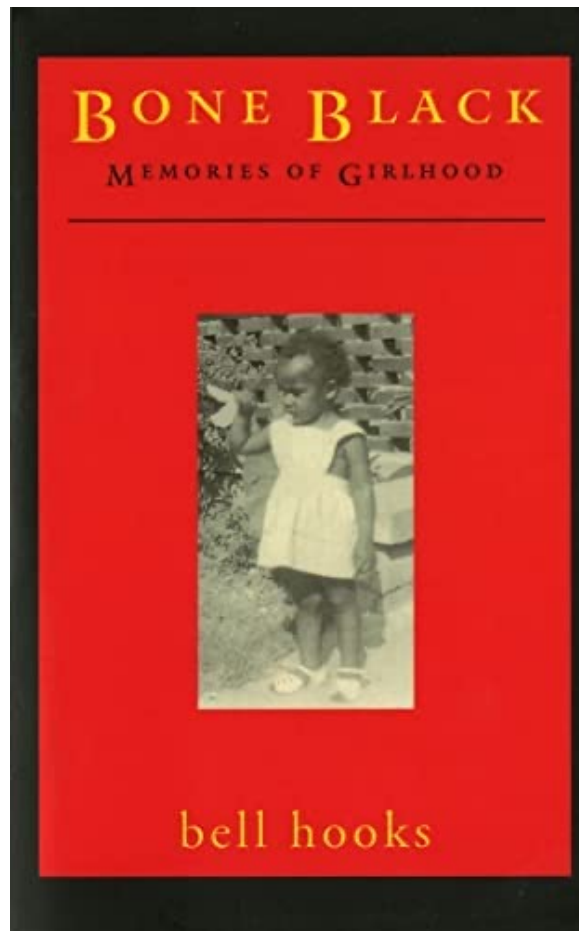
We may be drawn to this literature because

1. We are curious about an experience we've never had
2. We may be curious about an experience we're currently having or anticipate having
3. We may want to live vicariously through someone else's experience
4. We have a need to understand an experience that someone we know is going through or is about to go through
5. We need someone's lived wisdom to help us through a similar situation or an adjacent question – answering the question, “How did they do it?” or “How did they survive it?”

**SUB-GENRES WITHIN
MEMOIR THAT ARE
PHENOMENOLOGICALLY-
BASED**

VOCATION STORIES

How does one become a ...



ILLNESS STORIES

What is the experience of having...



EVE ENSLER

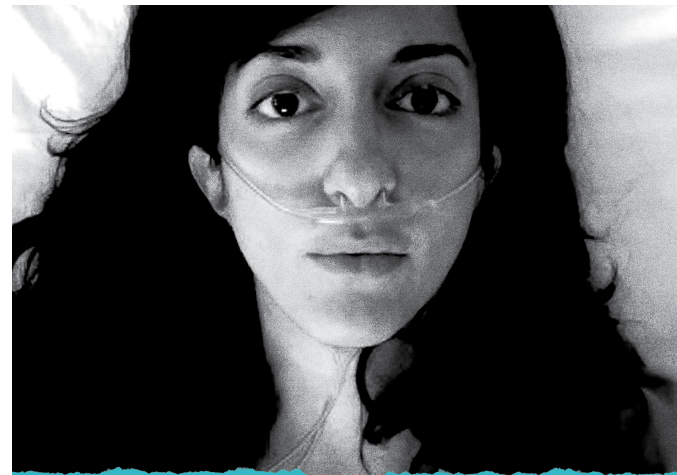
AUTHOR OF *THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES*

IN THE BODY
OF THE WORLD

A MEMOIR OF CANCER AND CONNECTION

"Ensler has written a profound and vulnerable book, full of tenderness and strength. This book isn't meant only for patients; it is meant for anyone whose life has intersected with illness—in short, for all of us." — Siddhartha Mukherjee, author of *The Emperor of All Maladies*

PICADOR



SICK

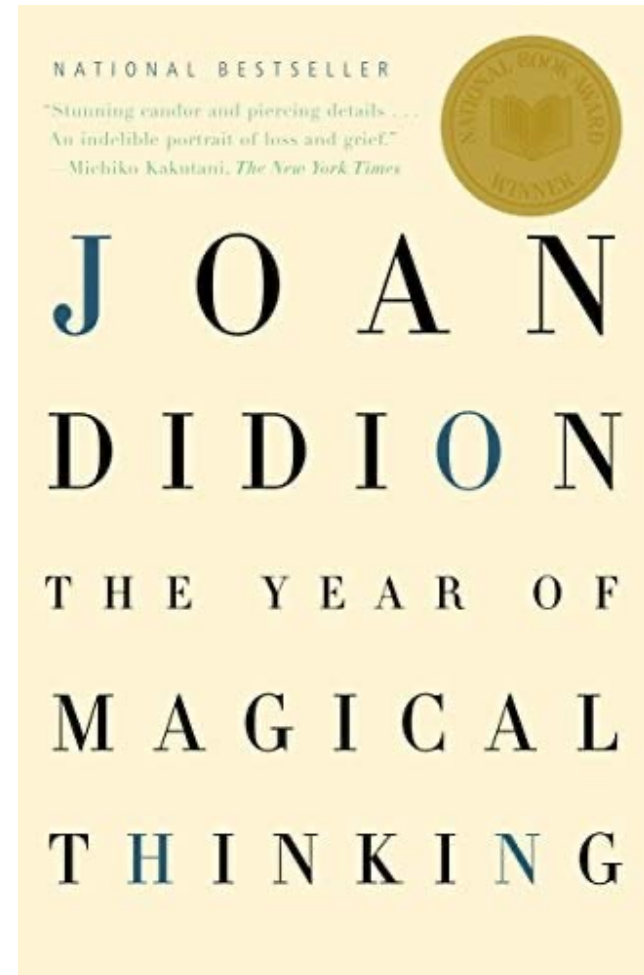
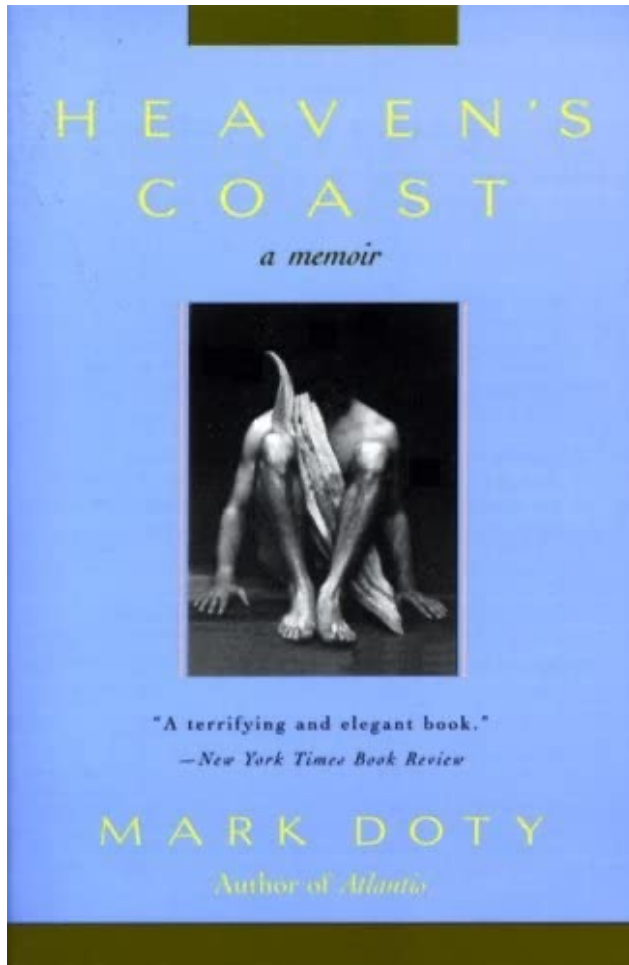
A MEMOIR

POROCHISTA
KHAKPOUR



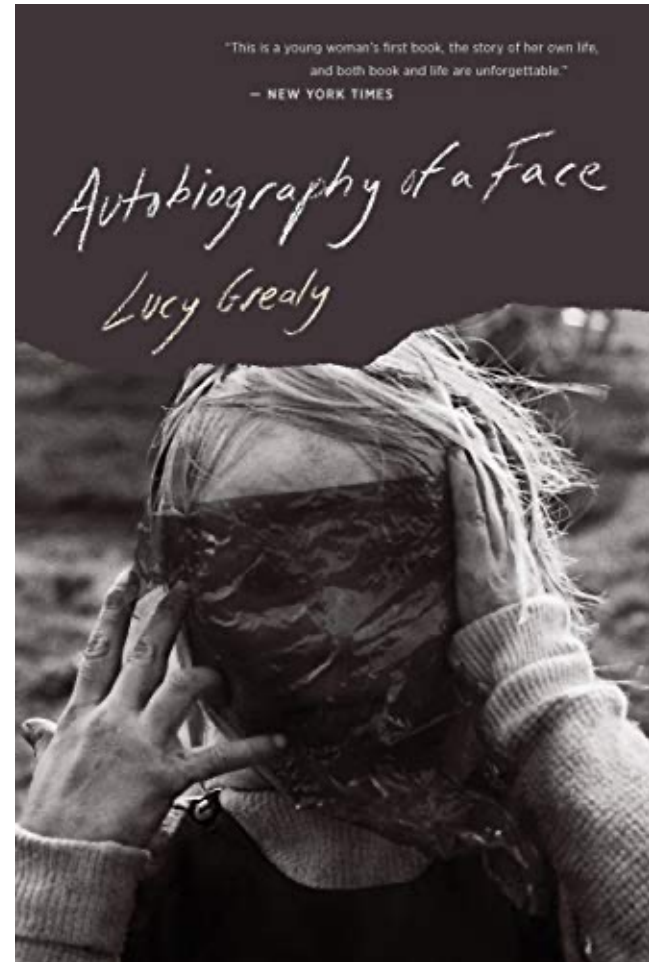
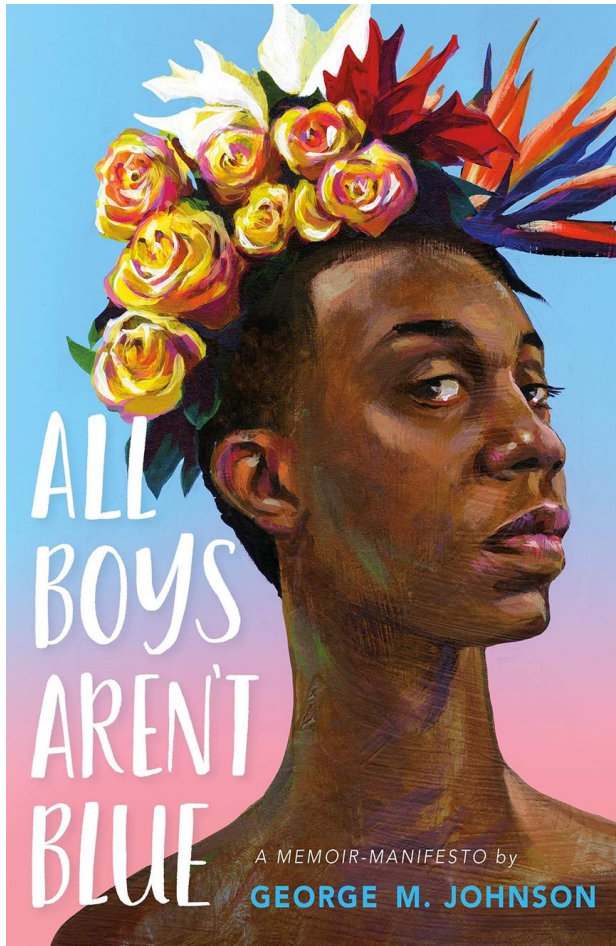
GRIEF STORIES

What's it like to lose . . .



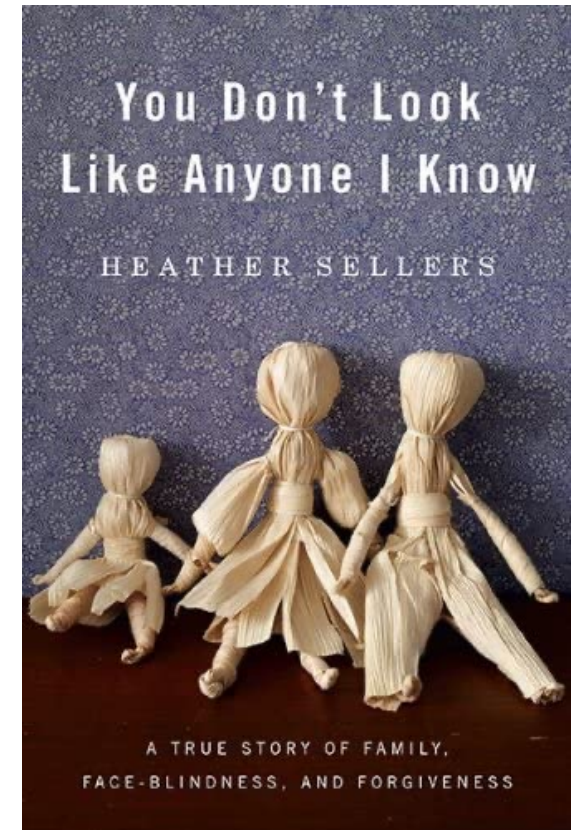
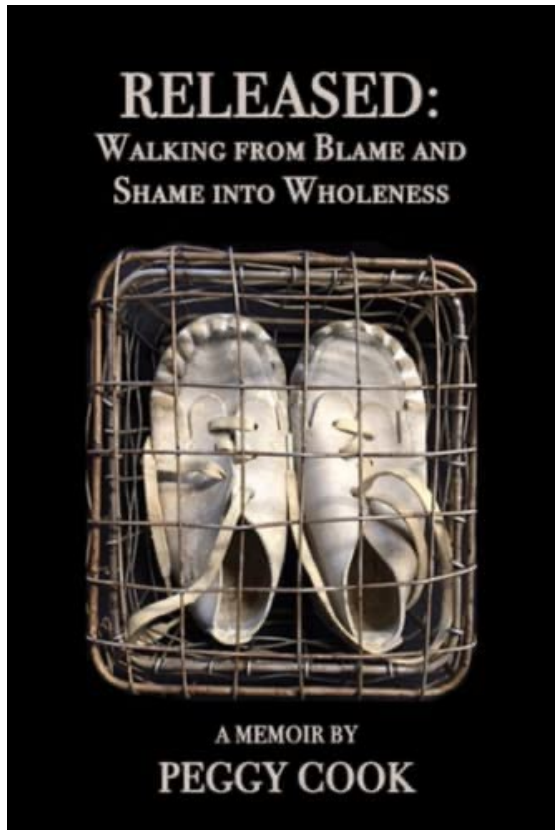
COMING-OF-AGE STORIES

What's it like to grow up . . .



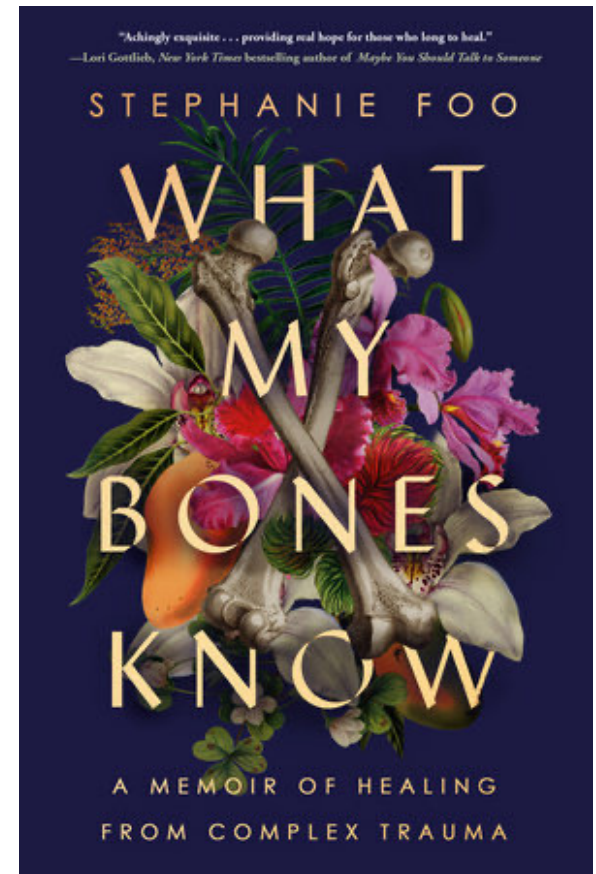
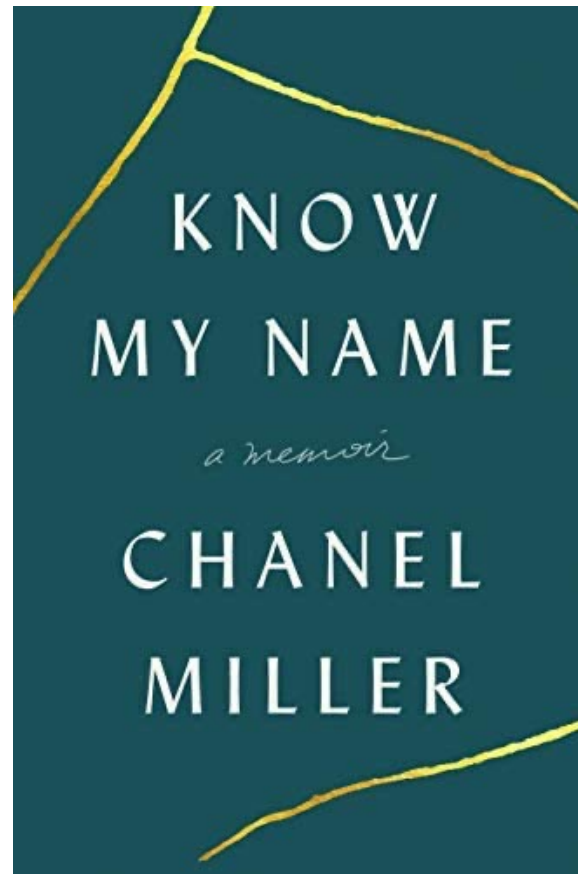
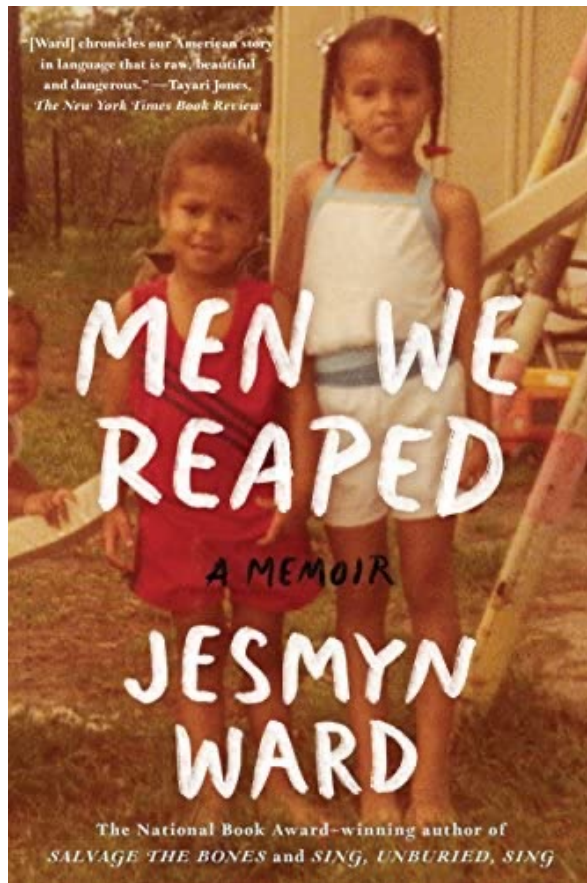
BEING DIFFERENTLY- ABLED STORIES

What is it like to experience . . .

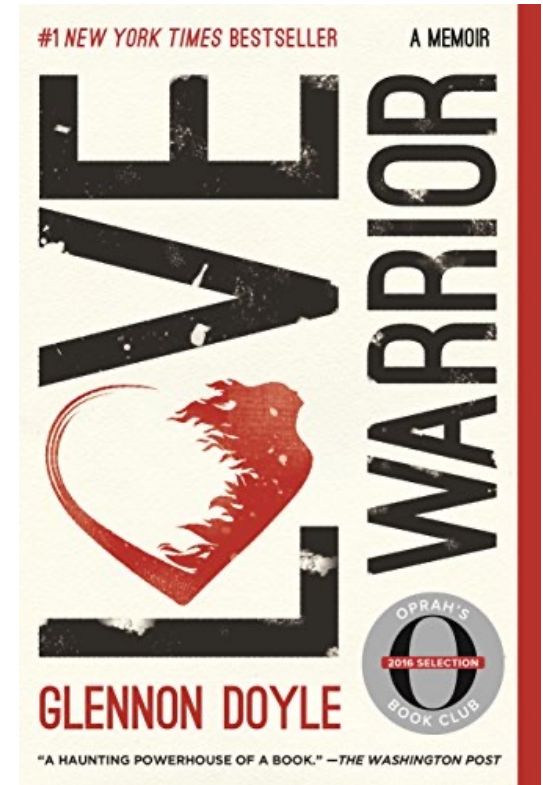
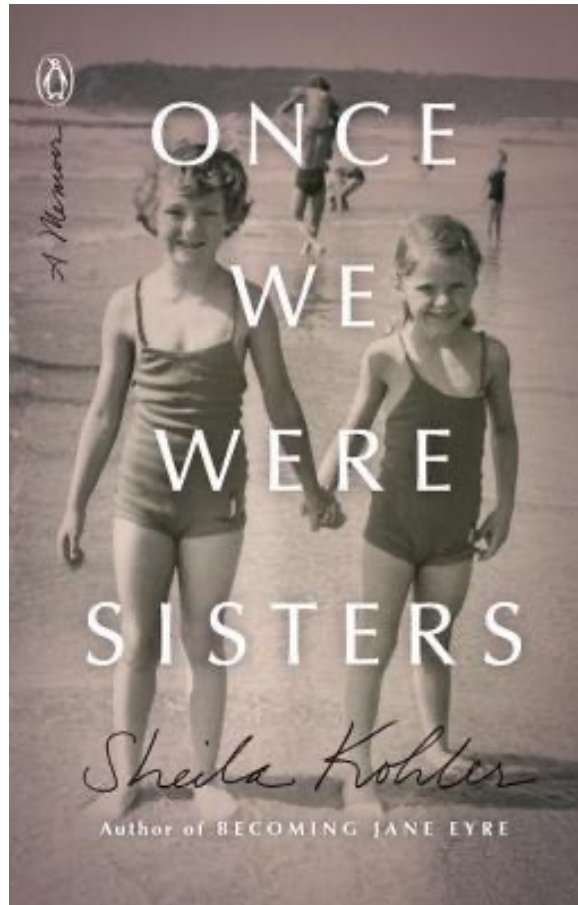
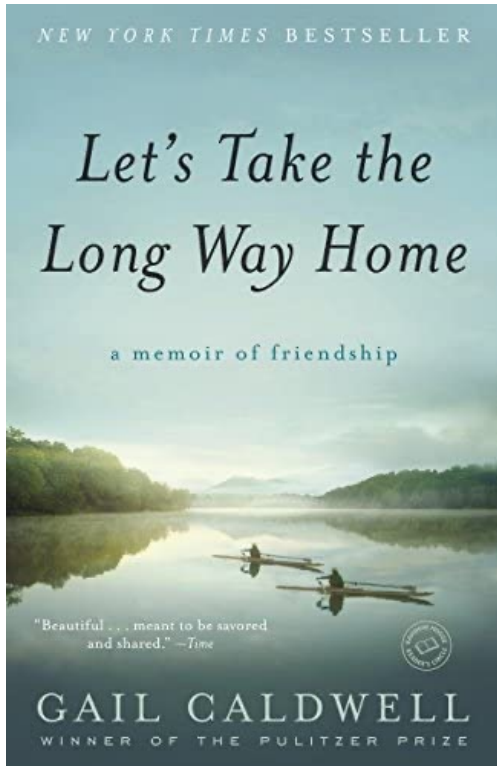


TRAUMA V

What is it like to experience . . .

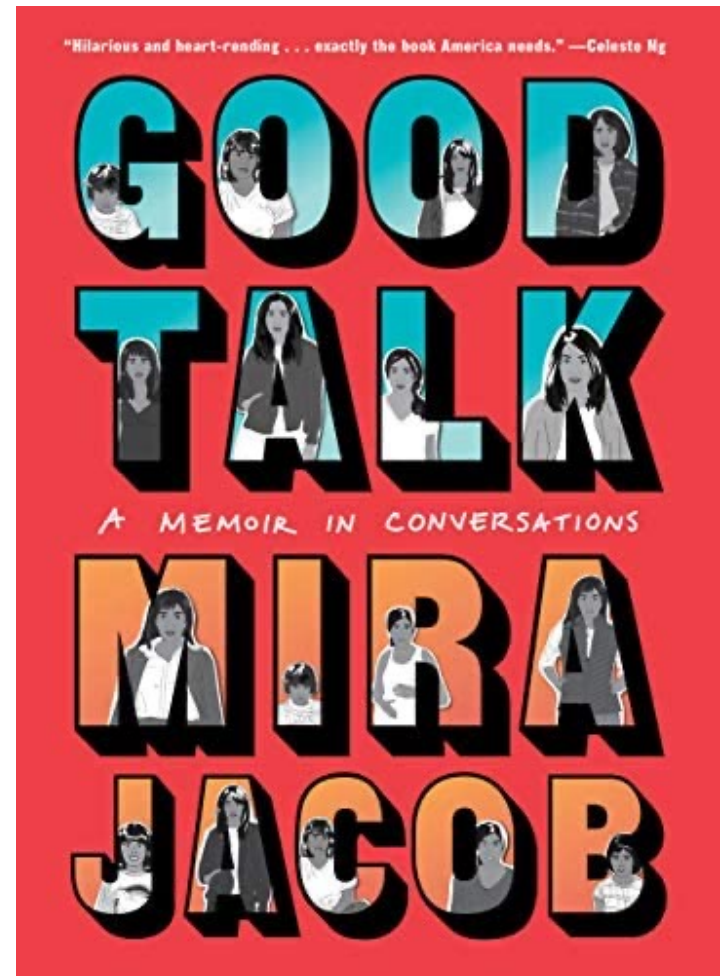
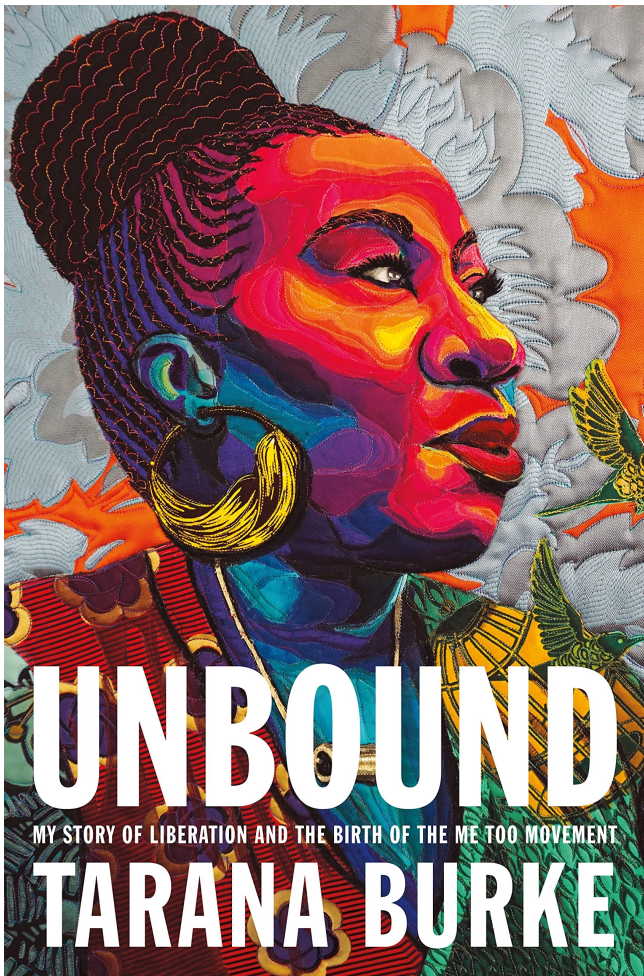


RELATIONSHIP STORIES



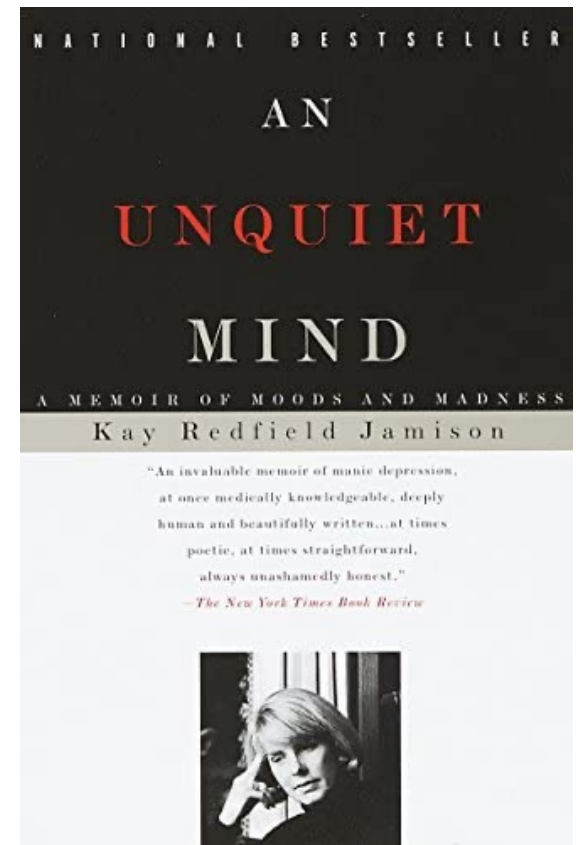
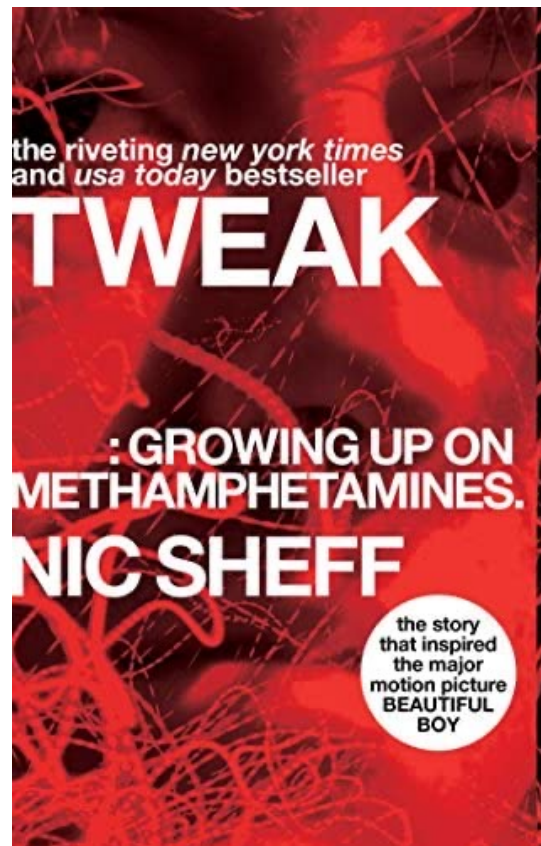
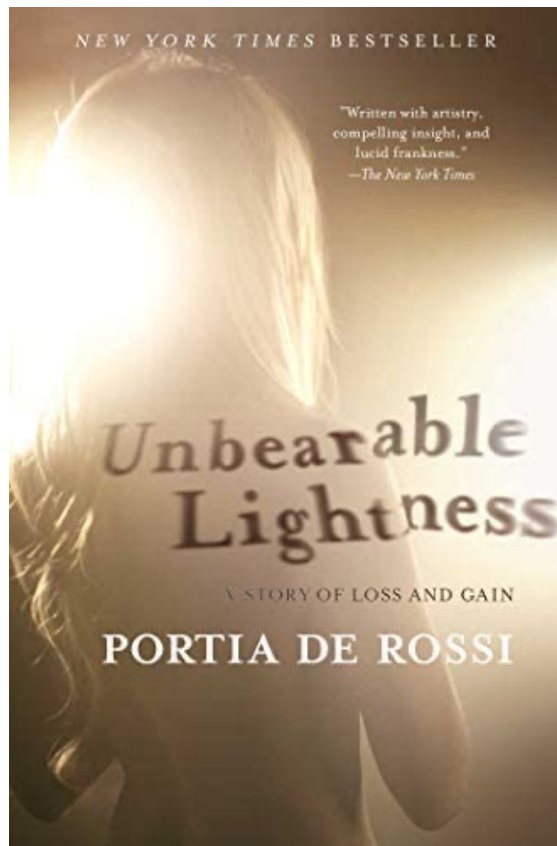
IDENTITY STORIES

What is it like to be . . .



PSYCHOLOGICAL DISORDER STORIES

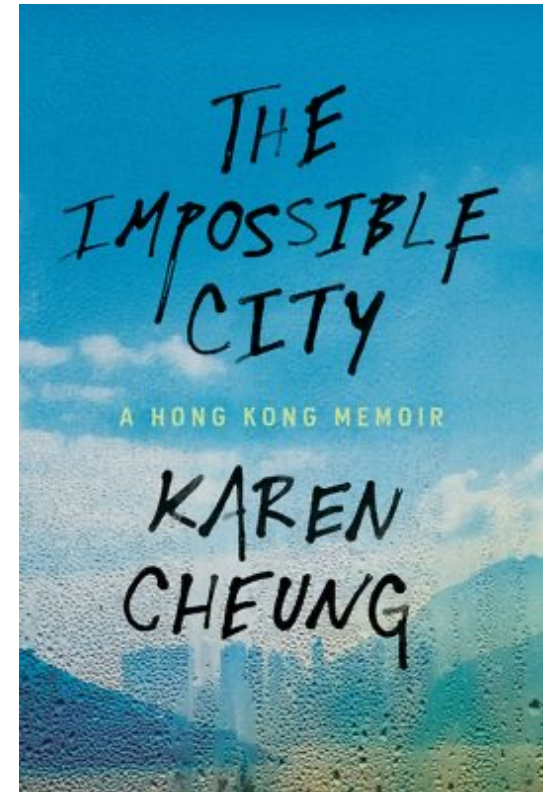
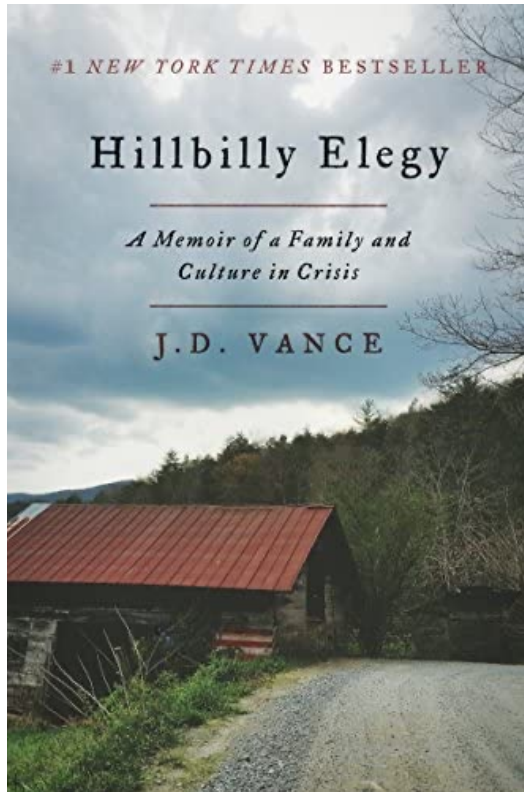
What is it like to have or experience . . .



VARIATION:

WHAT IS/WAS THAT PLACE LIKE?

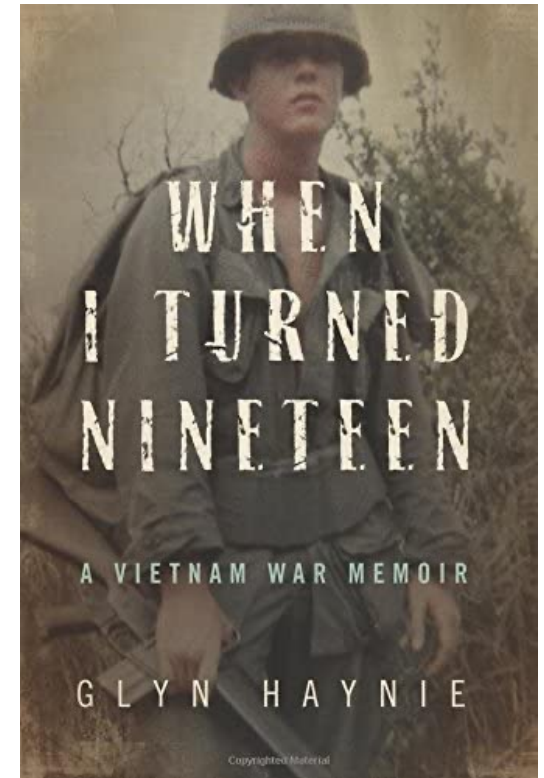
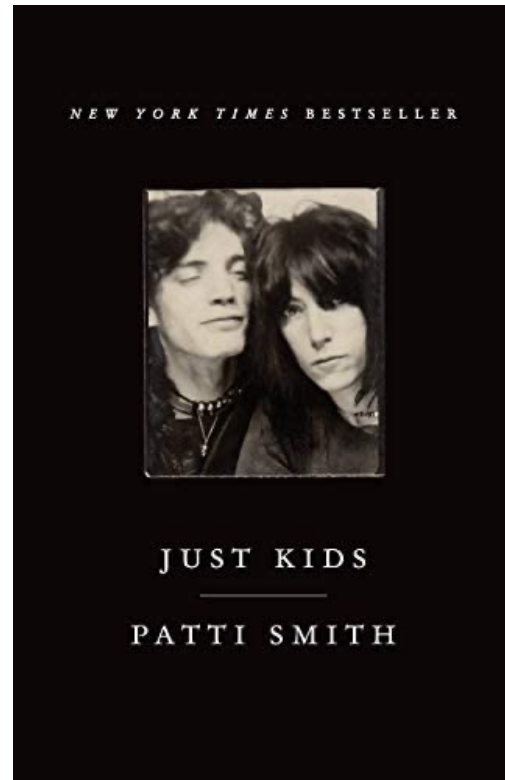
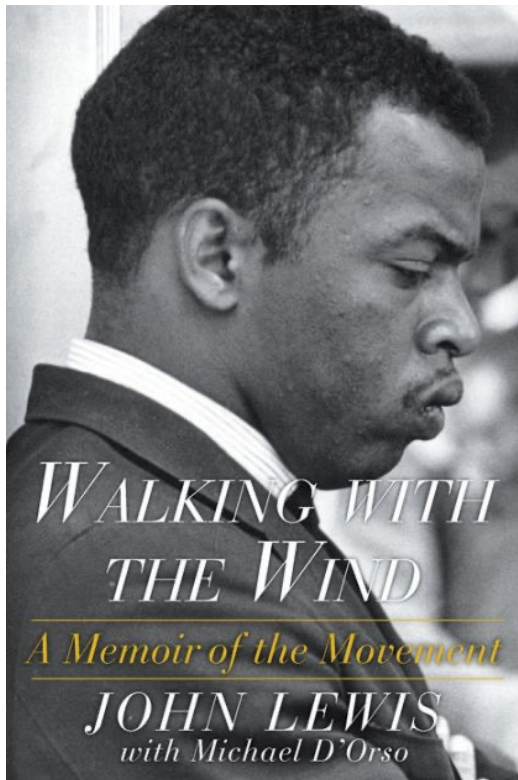
Phenomenological stories that explore the experience of some place



VARIATION:

WHAT WAS THAT TIME LIKE?

Phenomenological stories that explore the experience of some time in history



JOURNAL QUESTION

What phenomena or experiences have explored or have you been exploring in your writing?

Write it in the form of

What it's like to ...

What x is like...

“What is x like?” is not an essential question. We may be curious about the phenomenon. But when we’re finished, we may be left with, “Okay, that’s what that’s like.”

A phenomenological story must add a hermeneutic question to it in order to make it essential. In other words, it must get to the meaning of the experience.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Hermeneutic stories explore the meaning we make of something, or what is meaningful about something, or how to make the seemingly meaningless meaningful

“

**We had the
experience but
missed the
meaning.**

- T. S. Eliot

If we return to the idea that story is the human instruction manual for living our lives, then we can imagine that one of the central questions that manual must answer is, *What does it mean?* and a myriad of questions similarly worded questions: *What is the meaning of life? What does it mean that these things happened to me? What meaning can I take away from what happened? What makes life meaningful? How do I make meaning from the seemingly meaningless experiences that have befallen me? How do I live my life in the most meaningful way possible?*

Meaning is the boon we offer our readers from our heroic journey through life's vicissitudes.



EVE ENSLER

AUTHOR OF *THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES*

IN THE BODY OF THE WORLD

A MEMOIR OF CANCER AND CONNECTION

“Ensler has written a profound and vulnerable book, full of tenderness and strength. This book isn’t meant only for patients; it is meant for anyone whose life has intersected with illness — in short, for all of us.” — Siddhartha Mukherjee, author of *The Emperor of All Maladies*

PICADOR

“My job was to survive and find a way of imagining all this so that I could transform and tolerate it. My job was to find the poetry.”

Her job, as she saw it, was to transfigure her cancer experience by imagining it as meaningful, even poetic. Her essential question: *What made my cancer experience meaningful? Or, what meaning can I wrest from this experience of cancer?*

Eat, Pray, Love could have stayed on the phenomenological surface, answering the question, "What is it like to eat in Italy, pray in India, and love in Indonesia?"

The Essential Question in EPL:

"What if your life belongs to *you*?"



“This is the question that I asked myself back when I was lost in a fog of sickness, shame and sadness.” And that question obviously resonated for millions of readers. Gilbert writes, “For me, the most gratifying thing is to see how people, mostly women, took that story and then applied its questions to their own life and made changes in their own lives based on what they had read. Because, as outrageously insane as this may seem in 2016, there are enormous numbers of women out there in the world who still have not gotten the memo that their lives belong to them. . . . all of a sudden they realized about a situation in their own life, *Maybe it doesn't need to look like this anymore. Maybe I can change everything. . . . Maybe I have agency.*”

GILBERT'S ANSWER TO HER ESSENTIAL QUESTION

ELIZABETH GILBERT

eat

pray

love

“If your life has become a trash compactor, then you are allowed to try to escape that trash compactor, whatever it takes. By escaping your own trash compactor of an existence, you can revive, reinvigorate and reinvent yourself, almost at a cellular level.” That is the boon of the book, the wisdom she earns through her journey, the way she makes her meaningless life meaning-full again.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS AND THEIR ANSWERS

“The wise man doesn't give the right answers, he poses the right questions.” (Claude Levi-Strauss)

The wise author

- Shares the questions she is (her characters are) grappling with
- Allows us to see her (their) struggles toward answers (shows her/their work)

THE OPENING ESSENTIAL
QUESTION POSED TO SUICIDAL
NORA:

“Would you have done anything
different, if you had the chance to
undo your regrets?”

NORA SEES OTHER LIVES IN
THE MIDDLE OF THE BOOK

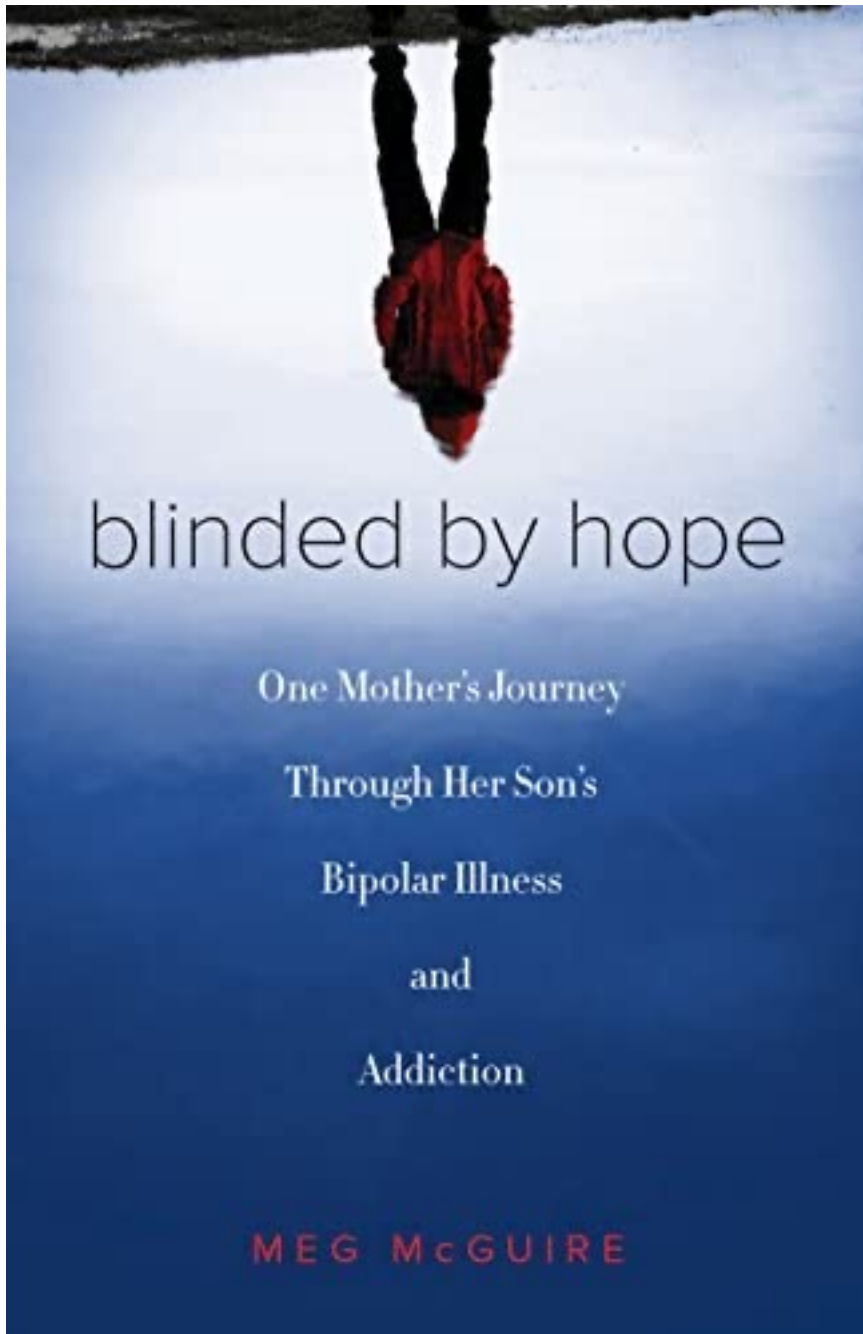


NORA'S ANSWER IN THE END AS SHE CHOOSES LIFE, HER LIFE

“It is quite a revelation to discover that the place you wanted to escape to is the exact same place you escaped from. That the prison wasn't the place, but the perspective. And the most peculiar discovery Nora made was that, of all the extremely divergent variations of herself she had experienced, the most radical sense of change happened within the exact same life. The one she began and ended with. . . . That heavy and painful *Book of Regrets* had been successfully burnt to dust.”

The wise memoirist

- Is honest – if she doesn't have any answers at the end of her quest, she tells us this, BUT she still
- Offers any wisdom she's gleaned from her quest, if not definitive answers
- Is careful about being too didactic
- Walks the fine line between showing and telling BUT
- Doesn't shy away from telling what her life has taught her
- Is generous with her reader about owning her own truth and then giving it away



From the back cover text, the essential question: “How does a mother cope when love is not enough?”

From the prologue, the last line: “The unfairness is that mental illness is stronger than a mother’s love.”

From the next to last chapter: “My journey is the untold reality of countless mothers and fathers who try to ‘fix’ their sons or daughters and fail. We are all defeated in the face of mental illness and addiction.”

In the remainder of that chapter: She gives away her lessons, the answers she came to, using first person. **She ends honestly inside of her ongoing struggle:** “I still struggle to find compassion for my powerlessness in the face of his challenges.”

JOURNAL QUESTIONS

What meaning do you want readers to take away from the experience/s you are writing about?

What meaningful answers do you have to the essential question/s you have identified in your writing?

THE BLESSING

Gregory Orr



a memoir



"This book offers eloquent testimony to the engaging power of art in a man's life."

WASHINGTON POST

On the original jacket cover is the question, "How do we find meaning in the face of death?" In the first chapter, the question is raised, "Why was I spared?" and the final chapter offers answers to both those questions, while the middle chapters show the struggle, the journey from meaninglessness to meaningfulness.

Essential Question: How do we find meaning in the face of death?

From Chapter 4: “It’s not possible to live in a world without meaning. Or at least I don’t think I could. I know that as a twelve-year-old child I needed meanings to understand my life. But all the meanings, all the childish understandings of life that had sustained me up until that day were suddenly and completely eradicated by Peter’s death. My whole understanding of the world, my whole sense that the world was understandable, vanished in the immediate aftermath of the catastrophe. . . . Peter’s death wiped out all the easy meanings I had lived by until that day, as if a giant hand swept the counters and dice of a child’s game off the board. . . . What now? How was I to orient myself on a board as bare and empty as an Arctic ice flow? What meaning was strong enough to set against this sinister glare, blank and blind as an eye glazed over with cataract?”

Essential Question: How do we comfort someone in grief, especially if they played a part or are implicated in the death?

From Chapter 4: “Could anything have saved me from that sense of absolute desolation on the day of Peter’s death and in the days and years that followed it? I think if someone had held me at some point during that day, it would have helped; it would have given me some animal comfort. I think if a person had been able to break through my shell of terror and shame and spoken to me out of their own human brokenness and confusion, it would have helped. I felt as if I was in free fall through the Void. I needed arms to catch me. I needed some voice to tell me I was not alone. I needed my parents to be there with me to save me from the accusing voices that were shouting, ‘Murderer, murderer!’”

Essential Question: How do we survive the death of someone who dies suddenly?

From Chapter 18: “When someone you love dies suddenly, the process of surviving them is complex. Part of the difficulty is separating out your entangled identities. Grieving, you celebrate the love bond between you and the dead one, but also, as you grieve, you are distinguishing yourself from the dead one.

Whenever I thought of Peter, my feelings were so tangled up in guilt that I, too, wanted to be dead. And I thought of him constantly in those days and weeks and months after his death.

When I imagine healthy grieving, I see the living one packing a little boat with clothes and food and mementos. The dead one climbs into the boat and when the time for departure comes, you send him on his voyage into his new life. You, the living, stand on the shore and watch as the loved one rows out into the dark alone.

No one spoke to me about Peter’s dying. No one told me how to help my little brother on his journey to the land of the dead; no one showed me how to bless him and let him go. No one offered to help me sort out the threads of memory and guilt and grief that confused our two identities into a single tangle. I did my best. . .”

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A MEMOIR'S TOPIC AND THEME/S AND ITS ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Topic = subject matter

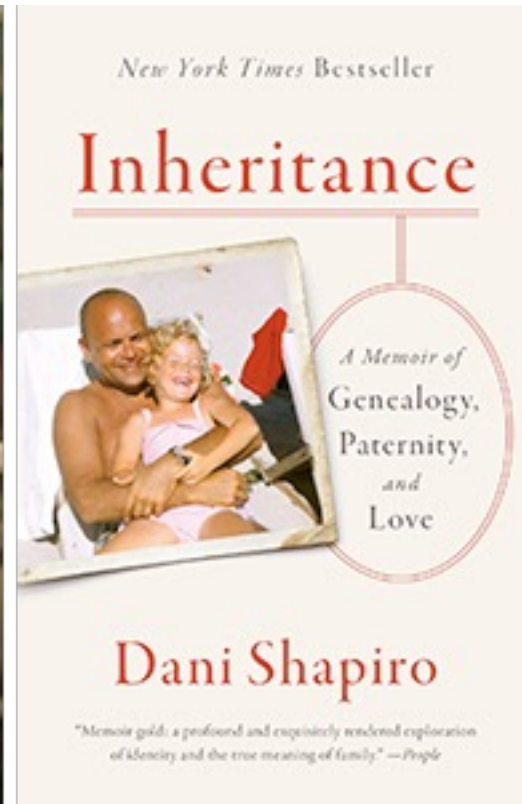
Theme = perspective, point of view,
message, the “what about?” the
topic, your take on the topic

STRATEGIES FOR THE PLACEMENT OF ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Raise them on the back cover summary of the book (and before that, in your book proposal)

Memoir teacher Beth Kephart explains, “The questions, themes, and concerns that fuel a memoir are often best enunciated at the start.” It’s a great way to hook a reader, especially if they are asking themselves the same question. The question creates curiosity – *I want to know the answer to that question!* – even suspense – *How is the author going to answer it? What will I learn from their answer?* – which is always good for keeping a reader engaged.

- Raise them in a prologue or introduction, tell your lived experience in the chapters, then share the answers you discovered in the epilogue or afterword

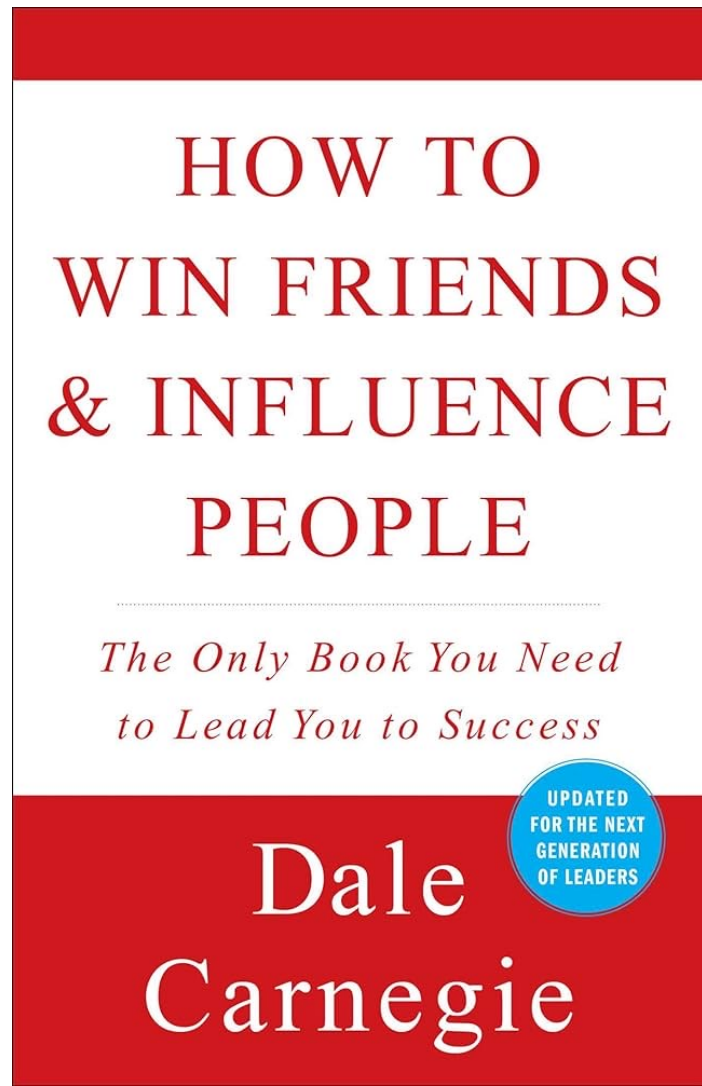
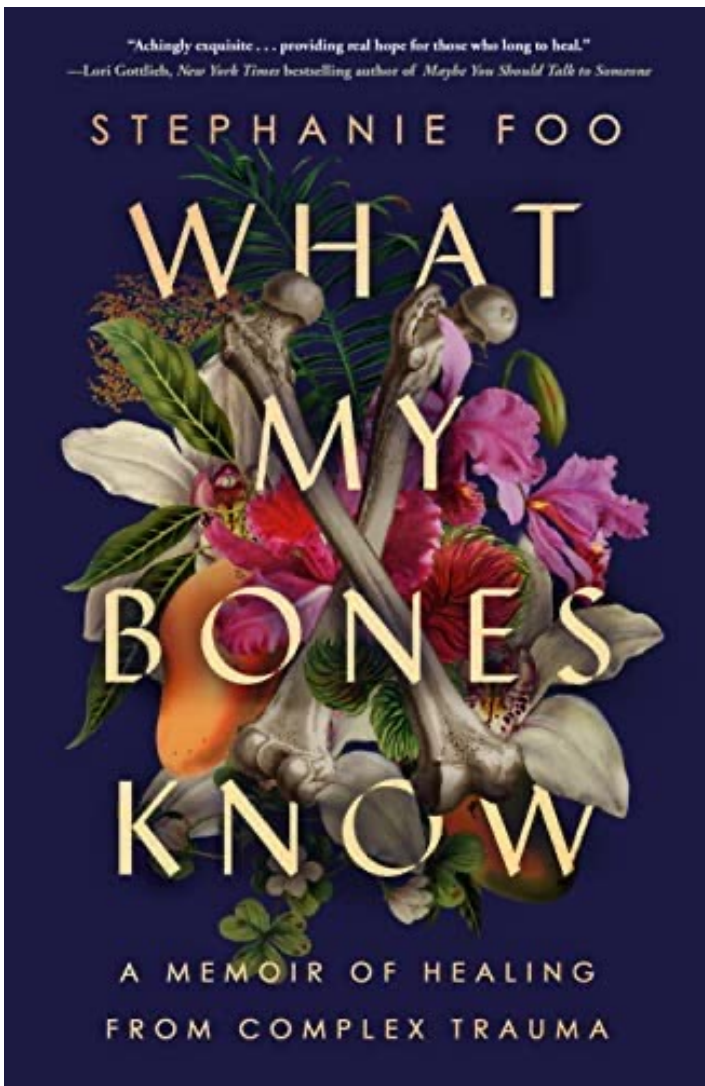


From the epigraph of *Inheritance: A Memoir of Genealogy, Paternity, and Love*:
“If you want to keep a secret, you must also hide it from yourself” (George Orwell)

Topic: Genealogy, Paternity, and Love

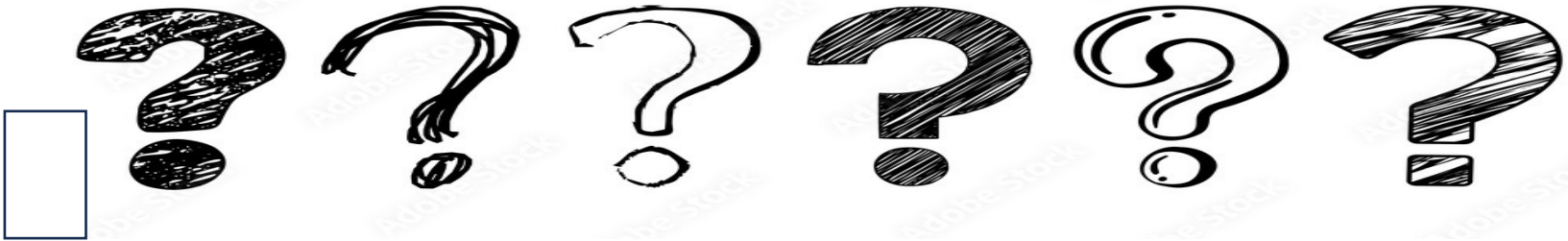
Questions Implied by Epigraph: How can a secret hide in pure sight?
And, why would we want to keep a secret, even from ourselves?

- Suggest the question in the title, implying your intention to answer it (more common in memoir and non-fiction)



- Include them in the chapters themselves, either as “I” statements (“I began to ask myself, what binds a family together? Is mere DNA enough, as my father seemed to think, or is love the important factor?”) or as “we” or “you” statements (“We may ask ourselves, what binds our family together?” or “One day you may find yourself wondering, what binds a family together?”)
- Place them in your dialogue. One character can raise the question to another
 - He looked at me and asked, “Why you? I mean, why do you think all this bad shit is happening to you?”
 - My therapist asked the question I feared the most— “What do you think it’s going to take for you to change your life? ”

ODDS AND ENDS ABOUT ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS



- You may know them from the beginning or
- They may appear during the writing process
- They may change over your writing time, as you deepen your process. You may discover new layers, what lies beneath your question, or the bigger question within your question
- Too many essential questions can dilute the potency of your work
- Knowing your essential question/s can help you focus as a writer and avoid “mission creep”