

## LAUREN SLATER

Lauren Slater opens her groundbreaking “metaphorical memoir,” *Lying*, with a two-word admission: “I exaggerate.” From there unfurls the story of a childhood of obsession, compulsion, and epilepsy—the last of which, it is crucial to note, the author never had. *Lying*’s assertion—that we may discuss our lives metaphorically—made it both controversial and a seminal text in the current debates regarding the necessity (or lack thereof) of truth in nonfiction writing. Recipient of numerous awards, author of six books and many widely-anthologized essays, Ms. Slater is a Harvard-trained psychologist living outside of Boston. Her most recent nonfiction title, *Opening Skinner’s Box*, took advantage of that dual expertise as she examined ten 20<sup>th</sup> century psychology experiments. Written in the now quintessential Slater style (one that is poetic, playful, and doubtful), *OSB* garnered a reaction from the psychology community that was largely, even harshly, negative. Slater has not interviewed since that 2004 release, nor—aside from a 2005 fairy tale collection, *Blue Beyond Blue*—has she released another book. She corresponded with essays editor Sandra Allen via email and telephone.

***Sandra Allen, Wag’s Revue: Your last published solo nonfiction work, Opening Skinner’s Box, caused a bit of a “truthiness” scandal. Some critics accused you of poor fact-checking, others claimed offense at some of what you insinuated about various psychologists or studies or psychology in general (that, for example, one could feign mental illness and receive dozens of pills, as you claim to have done). A few of the book’s subjects, most notably B.F. Skinner’s daughter Deborah Skinner Buzan, were quite upset at how they were or weren’t depicted. What I’m struck by, having read the book and then a great deal of the negative reaction to it, is how blind to the book your critics seem. Mrs. Buzan, for example, wrote an irate article in the British paper The Guardian wherein***

*she accused you of expressly stating that she had (as the rumors go) been raised by her father in a box. Her article made me wonder whether she'd read your book, or simply a review of it. In actuality, your book tells the story of you exploring and challenging the rumors about Skinner and his daughter, of going to view the actual box and learning it to be, essentially, a Plexiglas temperature-controlled padded crib; of hearing from her sister that Deborah was living in London; and of your unsuccessful attempts to find her. I would also characterize your account as being rather sympathetic of Skinner as a man, philosopher and psychologist. Nevertheless, Mrs. Buzan reacted as if you'd published some sort of smear journalism that depicted rumor as truth, a sensationalist quest for sales. While I recognize that that incident is now six years passed, the questions it causes one to ask are no less pertinent.*

**LS:** I did not anticipate *OSB* engendering the reaction that it did, in large part because I thought the scientific world would never read it. And, it seems to me, they still haven't read it—except for, most unfortunately, excerpts of it that were prominently published in *The Guardian*. At its core, your question seems to be about what it was so enraged those scientists about the book. And while you posit that it is in part because there is no place in nonfiction for something less than the boxed-up truth of journalism, I would suggest that there was something less interesting at play, in part.

The scientists reacted negatively to *OSB* because it often portrayed their work or their arguments in the form of question, rather than conclusion. This outraged scientists like Robert Spitzer, the architect of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, which is a guidebook for diagnosing the mentally ill with, one hopes, the utmost of validity and reliability.

Psychiatry is a field that is haunted with questions of validity and reliability and Spitzer has dedicated his life to eradicating those as far as the DSM. Then along comes this...what... this journalist? this writer? this wanderer?... who with an impish smile on her face suddenly throws into question what he'd spent his life trying to construct. Had *The Guardian* not prominently excerpted the chapter I'm sure Spitzer would have tossed the book off as something to ignore; there are dozens of books critiquing the DSM, but none of them have been prominently placed in an international newspaper for all the world to see. Spitzer's rage was unfathomable to me, boundless, depthless. Joining him were a large bevy of his colleagues and friends who, together, created The Slater Hater Listserv (this is what they called it), a place to do I'm not sure what. I don't deny that the larger issues germane to creative nonfiction were at play in the rage my book generated, but I do want to point out that a significant part of this was pissed-off scientists, hugely conceited, who saw the book being excerpted in international newspapers and ran to cover their reputation and defend their valor.

The same can be said of Deborah Skinner. She read an excerpt of the BF Skinner chapter in one of these prominent newspapers and became enraged, and based on that engaged an attorney whose name, I recall, was Ovary, or perhaps the firm was Overy and Ovary. Her complaint of course was that I'd smeared her father, gotten him all wrong, spread rumors, told lies such as that she lived in a box, all exactly the *opposite* of what the chapter was saying. I can't tell you, Sandra, how frustrating this was to me, and I felt I had no way of making my voice heard above the din. If I had, what would I have said? "You have to read the chapter. The chapter does not say Deborah was raised in a box and it does not say Skinner was a fascist madman, but you'll have no way of knowing that

unless you read the chapter.” I tried to say something like this but my words went limp and slumped down sideways next to Deborah’s pointed ballistics.

*SA: And yet their reaction, as you say, relates partly to issues germane of nonfiction writing. In contemporary culture, there is often a presupposition that a nonfiction writer must write “truthfully.” The fiction of memory, the existence of deceit, the subjective viewpoints from which we all live and write—these are left unacknowledged by traditional journalism, or by most scientific writing.*

**LS:** These comments hit home for me. You are absolutely right that traditional journalism and scientific writing have no room for subjective viewpoints, memory, what have you. I suppose that leaves memoir as the repository of these things but, as we’ve seen with incidences like James Frey, the public is insisting that memoirs, too, adhere faithfully to the truth. And of course they must! And of course they can’t! If James Frey never spent a night in jail then damn him! If James Frey never spent a night in jail who gives a rat’s ass. I, first of all, have never read a *Million Little Pieces* but it was painful for me to see that man ripped to a million little pieces over what were probably issues of exaggerated facts.

It seems to me there has been an assumption in nonfiction books—and I don’t know when this assumption was made

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but sometime *well* after Defoe—that a nonfiction book has almost a grammatical relationship to its author; the book refers absolutely to its author; without its author the book is meaningless (and indeed, what kind of publicity would publishing houses do). The public expects this from all nonfiction books, including memoirs, and readers frequently say they'd feel “let down” or “duped” if they found out an author didn't tell the truth in a memoir. I consistently find these kinds of comments odd. I am reading, right now, *Naked* by David Sedaris. At many points in the book Sedaris quotes long vile monologues from people he met along the road and it has occurred to me, only because of the conflicts, that there is simply no way he could remember *so much* trash so poetically put. It's wonderful actually and I have no problem with the idea that Sedaris has relied on memory and invention to give dialogue to his characters, and why do I have no problem? Because the book, for me, exists in its own frame of reference, its own bubble, and I judge it not on how well it refers to the author, who has completely disappeared for me, but rather on how well it holds up its own magical spell.

*SA: There are many points in OSB when you directly relate the psychological finding at hand to art. My favorite: “A person, say, a critic, comes to an experiment the same way a reader comes to a novel; there are similar aesthetic demands in terms of structure, pacing, revelation, lesson learned. You cannot close The Brothers Karamazov and say, ‘Very interesting, although I’ve no idea what it was about,’ because you just can’t.” Artists eschew the reason or definitiveness of science perhaps as often as scientists eschew the supposed unreason of the arts. While your work is itself an argument for how the sciences could benefit from exposure to art, do you think the arts stand to benefit from scientific interrogation and explanation?*

**LS:** I feel the arts could hugely benefit from exposure to the sciences, to all aspects of the sciences, including the language, the scientific quest for truth, problems broken down into their component parts—the opposite of the unity artists often strive for—one scientist studying one part for perhaps his whole life. Artists have a lot to learn from how scientists work, especially, I think, the slow day to day minutiae that accompany so many scientific experiments, the waiting, the tedious work; it parallels in some respects how great pieces of literature are written.

**SA:** *In this issue, Wag's is also featuring an interview with David Shields. While the two of you agree about many things to do with writing, one of your points of disagreement, I believe, is about the importance of narrative. Shields believes that fiction (novels in particular) are a waste of time because the artifice they demand—setting, character, plot—gets in the way of real meaning-making, of a writer revealing how it was they navigated being alive (which he asserts is the point of writing). In an interview published in Fourth Genre conducted in 2003, you said, "I know writing is supposed to be a process of self-discovery—I mean Peter Elbow and others say that you have to go into the dark and discover what it's all about—I don't like the dark. I use flashlights as often as possible.... Narrative is the most important thing for me..." Do you still feel this way? If so, why is narrative so important to you, even in memoir writing?*

**LS:** Shields may well be on to something but I'm not yet at that place. For me every piece of writing is about how I can create a story from whatever fragment I have. Stories transport more than any other art form I know. I love to be transported and I want to transport.

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Narrative is something you search for. Life presents as a jumbled mess; the story on your desk feels flat, that character has nothing to say. As a writer you have to go down into the river of fragments and find the mysterious and sometimes sacred-feeling links between them; you have to take the flat plain story and in an act of imagination find the edges, the surprising swerves, that give it life. Narrative gives writing life and that's why it so excites me to create it and depresses me when I fail to.

*SA: In that same interview, you said, “The memoir backlash is getting to me; I now suspect Prozac Diary is just too self-centered.” This struck me as ironic because all of your nonfiction works liberally rely upon the personal (scholarly papers aside). Even your most recent publication, a 2005 fairy-tale collection Blue Beyond Blue, is prefaced by a personal essay about the therapy of writing. Is the “memoir backlash” still getting to you? In general, how do you navigate the fear of self-centeredness when writing about yourself? Why do you, at least, nevertheless turn to use of the “I”?*

*LS: You are quite right when you say all of my works rely upon the personal, and this reliance is, as you suggest, fraught for me, although I'm not sure that has anything to do with a specific backlash in a specific period of time. While there is a venerable tradition of first-person essayists stretching*

back to Defoe and probably earlier, that tradition has been counterbalanced by a long line of suspicious mean-mouthed critics who have an inherent dislike of the stark naked “I” splayed upon the page, seemingly without etiquette or reserve. Of course this is not true; the first person requires much if not all of the same strategies employed by the writer of fiction or poetry; in fact one of the strategies employed by the first person essayist is the appearance of lubricated ease, of casual conversation between himself and his subject, when in fact this is never the case. The essayist may feign friendship with the reader but his or her real focus is on getting those unruly words to take shape, and make meaning.

This is all a convoluted way of saying that I think the “memoir backlash,” has been back lashing a long, long time, with periods of quietude alternated with periods of real roughhousing, but either way, there’s always been some degree of discomfort with a writer who talks solely about him or her SELF. It rubs the wrong way and brings to mind a drunken sailor singing stories at a bar while his “audience,” trapped by the rain outside, has no choice but to listen to stories that in singular would have been quite nice, but in plural drag on and on, acquiring mass at the same rate with which they lose revelation.

Now, I myself don’t buy into this view of the personal essayist. I do not believe I am a drunken sailor and last I looked no one was listening to me due to inclement weather. I use the “I” not because I’m tipsy but because, just the opposite, I see straight, and have no myopia when it comes to my proclivities as an artist. I do write fiction and even the occasional poem but the first person essay is home for me; it’s where I feel most myself and where my words seem truest. This has nothing to do with a need to “confess” to the reader or

otherwise understand my life. People frequently ask me if I write because it's therapeutic, and I always say no. Writing, with all of its stressors and disappointments, may cause me to need therapy, but never have I felt that I've been "healed" by my serial "I's," compelling though they may be to me.

I have no inherent fear of self centeredness when writing about myself. That fear has been pasted upon me by "the backlash." It may sound strange to say that I have no inherent fear of self-centeredness, that my fears are all the result of critics, but this is true. I don't believe people in general are self centered when they are trying to tell a tale that means something to them. They may be bumbling, or stumbling, or plain out-and-out spastic, but the human need to tell the story of self is as basic, I think, as thirst. The personal essayist is struggling with an ancient and deeply honorable human drive, and if he does the work well he will have, in the end, a beautiful story one can read, or not, and if he does the work poorly he will have, in the end, a chance to try it again.

*SA: Since becoming a mother, your stream of books has slowed from the clipping one-every-two-years pace it had maintained since your first publication, Welcome to My Country. It's now been five since you've published a book. When is the next? Does the hiatus relate, as I fear, to the reaction to Opening Skinner's Box?*

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**LS:** My next book, due out from WW Norton, is as of now untitled. It will be published I think sometime in 2011. It is a collection of essays that explores the roles animals have played in my life. Animals have been central to my life, from the raccoon I kept as a pet when I was a child living in a foster family to the majestic horses I rode competitively to the swan I saved when I was working as a vet tech, just out of college; each animal has added something vital. The book also looks at animals from a larger perspective. 83% of American households have pets. In one study, women said they would be more likely to pay for their pet's medical care than their own. In terms of medical care, veterinary hospitals and specializations have skyrocketed, all of this reflecting the fact that, as a culture, we have increasingly come to value animals, to a degree that sometimes seems odd to those in the third world. Setting aside the possibility that this is all bourgeois excess (the book deals in depth with that question), is it possible that there is an inverse relationship between how much we value animals and how much we value ourselves, as animals? Right this minute oil is spewing from some ripped rupture one mile under the sea, gumming up the coastlines and killing fragile species. The glaciers, of course, have melted far faster than we ever could have predicted, with polar bears snacking on garbage in dumps that dot the skyline of ruined towns, towns built on permafrost, now sunken into the sea. As it becomes increasingly impossible to deny that fact that homo sapiens have badly bungled their position as keepers of the zoo, might we not be slowly stepping down and allowing other animals their due? That's the book, or the best I can describe it.

As for its five-year germination period, yes, that does have something to do with *OSB*. After an attack that vicious and prolonged one becomes fearful, or I became fearful anyway.

I was afraid of being attacked again, and that fear has stayed with me but shrunken with time.

I'd be wrong to blame the hiatus all on *OSB*. I had my first child after *Lying* was published and my second right after *OSB* was published. There's no doubt that parenthood can make it harder to find time to write, especially when you combine parenthood with a full time job, which I had for many of the years of my children's earliest life. I also had breast cancer, plus my car kept breaking down, plus there was a leak in the roof and no one could find it plus someone sued me—good God—plus it seemed there were always birthday parties I had to bring my kids to, plus this and this and that.

*SA: What's Dr. Hayward Krieger up to these days?*

**LS:** I just heard from Dr. Krieger the other day, in fact. He sounded very overworked.

*SA: The title of this magazine, Wag's Revue, features the word 'wag', which is an old-fashioned term for a wit or a joker. Who is your favorite wag—from life, literature, imagination—and why?*

**LS:** In all seriousness my favorite wag is my dog, Musashi, whose humor is not solely unintentional. Musashi is a wise, philosophically inclined fifteen year old Shiba Inu neutered male. I'm not going to tell you what he does that's funny because there's nothing worse than hearing about people's dogs; you'll just have to take it on faith; this is one funny hound.