

# Healing Trauma Narratives

Webinar + Workbook



Carol Test  
[Writingcycle.com](http://Writingcycle.com)

# Looking for a new way to tell your trauma story?

Seeking insight into the origins of how complex & collective trauma shape who we are—and how we heal?

If so, this webinar, which debuted at the Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing Desert Nights, Rising Stars Conference, offers healing strategies along with creative vehicles by which to deliver such narratives.

Trauma writing presents challenges:

- Those who wounded us may still be in our orbit.
- We risk re-traumatizing ourselves in the process.
- Trauma fractures time & our ability to put fragments together.

So how do you share a story w/o a simple beginning, middle, & end? How do you tell a story that isn't yours alone? How do you write when language gets lost?

We'll probe psychology for answers, & explore techniques that reveal *within the telling* of any story ways people thrive.

**Note:** your *greatest* breakthroughs will occur if you pause to complete all exercises in this workbook.

### ***Why bother?***

Because right now there is someone  
out there with  
a wound in the exact shape  
of your words.

*—Sean Thomas Dougherty*

# Responsibilities of Trauma Writers

## TO OTHERS

The final stage in the writing process is being read. Always assume others who have experienced similar hardship will read your work. (In fact, they often become your best audience.) Many may be at more vulnerable places along the healing journey.

I never suggest writers censor material, but if work is not **reflective**, it is rarely transformative.

However you choose to treat material, be intentional. If, for example, you employ humor, ensure (as author) you do not minimize the seriousness of an event, even if your protagonist or narrator *does* prior to the work's conclusion.

At the same time, **do not worry** that those who wronged you will be angry with your version of events, or try to sue you. There are numerous craft techniques to deflect litigation. Memory is subjective. Others are welcome to write alternate accounts. So long as your focus remains on how an event *impacted you* & how *you* endured or overcame it, no one can silence your story.

# Responsibilities of Trauma Writers

## TO OURSELVES

Reliving traumatic events, even in writing, can have positive *and* negative effects on the brain. Constructing a coherent narrative out of fragmented, often unconscious, trauma forces us to acknowledge, process, and even gain power over events by imposing form. At the same time, it is also possible to re-traumatize ourselves in the telling.

It's **vital** to practice self-care during composition.

I ask clients working on trauma narratives: *Where are you on your healing journey?* Writing before you have healed may result in art absent emotion.

I urge writers drafting potentially triggering work to seek support from a trauma-informed therapist or mental health professional. **Art plays an ancient role in healing by uniting the unconscious and conscious mind; however, it is not a substitute for professional medical care.**

**Trauma:** the body's protective response to an event it perceives as potentially dangerous.

Your survival response is not a moral failing.

**Trauma is *not*:**

- An event.
- A character flaw.
- Weakness.

“An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior.”

~ Viktor Frankl

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# Resmaa Menakem

*My Grandmother's Hands*  
by Resmaa Menakem explores:

- Trauma in black, white, & police bodies.
- White supremacy via generational trauma.
- Somatic exercises for collective healing.

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**Trauma decontextualized  
in a person can look  
like personality. Trauma  
decontextualized in a family  
can look like family traits.  
And trauma decontextualized  
in a people can look like culture.**

—Resmaa Menakem

AUTHOR, *MY GRANDMOTHER'S HANDS*

# C-PTSD: What makes it distinct?

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## The threat is:

- **Chronic** (lasting years-decades).
- **Interpersonal** (caused by a caregiver).
- **Inescapable** (victim cannot escape environment).
- **Disruptive** (of key developmental stages / brain function).
- **Life-long.**

## Read

### ***Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving***

Pete Welker's seminal text is the most comprehensive for understanding & healing C-PTSD.



# The 4Fs: Trauma Types



## Fight

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Drive for power/security, narcissism, bullying, anger outbursts, emulation of abusive parent, repression, “true self” locked inside.



## Flight

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Workaholism, constant busyness/distraction/travel, turning every activity into a project, feeling worthless when not doing/achieving.



## Freeze

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Dissociation; escape into: daydreams, romantic fantasy, sleep, porn, games, books, TV; avoidance, numbing w/ substances.



## Fawn

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People-pleasing, martyrdom, codependency, transactional love, unable to articulate needs/desires, boundary issues.

# The Art of Collective Trauma

**Queer:** Ocean Vuong *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*  
(novel).

**Trans:** Julian K. Jarboe *Everyone on the Moon is Essential  
Personnel* (sci-fi allegories).

**Holocaust:** Elie Wiesel *Night* (memoir).

## **COVID pandemic**

*Washington Post*, "How to Grieve During a Pandemic" (article, art installation).

## **AIDS epidemic**

Tory Dent, "The Moon and the Yew Tree" (poem).

## **Medical trauma**

Lorrie Moore, "People Like That Are the Only People Here" (short story).

## **Black oppression**

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (book of essays).

## **Indigenous survival**

Joy Harjo, "Grace" (poem).

# Collective Trauma

## Grace

BY JOY HARJO

*for Darlene Wind and James Welch*

I think of Wind and her wild ways the year we had nothing to lose and lost it anyway in the cursed country of the fox. We still talk about that winter, how the cold froze imaginary buffalo on the stuffed horizon of snowbanks. The haunting voices of the starved and mutilated broke fences, crashed our thermostat dreams, and we couldn't stand it one more time. So once again we lost a winter in stubborn memory, walked through cheap apartment walls, skated through fields of ghosts into a town that never wanted us, in the epic search for grace.

Like Coyote, like Rabbit, we could not contain our terror and clowned our way through a season of false midnights. We had to swallow that town with laughter, so it would go down easy as honey. And one morning as the sun struggled to break ice, and our dreams had found us with coffee and pancakes in a truck stop along Highway 80, we found grace.

I could say grace was a woman with time on her hands, or a white buffalo escaped from memory. But in that dingy light it was a promise of balance. We once again understood the talk of animals, and spring was lean and hungry with the hope of children and corn.

I would like to say, with grace, we picked ourselves up and walked into the spring thaw. We didn't; the next season was worse. You went home to Leech Lake to work with the tribe and I went south. And, Wind, I am still crazy. I know there is something larger than the memory of a dispossessed people. We have seen it.



Suzanne Brennan Firstenberg,  
COVID art installation

# Exercise: Distinction as Means to Survive & Thrive

**PAUSE the webinar:** complete the exercise.

The **best** texts, such as Natalie Diaz's *Postcolonial Love Poem*, draw upon traditions & humor unique to groups not *only* to cope with suffering, but to resist oppression & integrate experiences into new ways of living.

Journal on these questions to see which coping mechanism(s) might, in the end, save *your* narrator . . .

## 1. What distinctions characterize you?

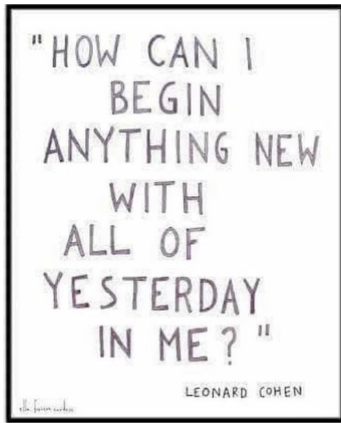
Everyone functions at a specific intersection of time, place, & eternity. Why not put specificity to work in your favor? You've been born into a certain era & culture. You possess distinct experiences. You remain steeped in all media consumed in your eighteen or eighty years.

**List ten things that make you unique.** They need not be dramatic, only specific. (In what religious tradition were you raised? How has being a second-born impacted the way you see the world?)

## 2. What distinctions do you share?

**Were any learned from or shared with an ancestor or group?** Did you play the same sport, or struggle with a similar disorder? Do you have a specific way of communicating in your family, for example: through food or film?

**List a distinct positive coping mechanism that may have helped you survive a traumatic past, & potentially reclaim power.** If it is familial or cultural, how might you make use of this in your writing?



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## Generational Trauma

- Three generations share the same biological environment.
- 98% of DNA = Noncoding DNA, responsible for personality traits, trauma response, & affected by environmental stressors.

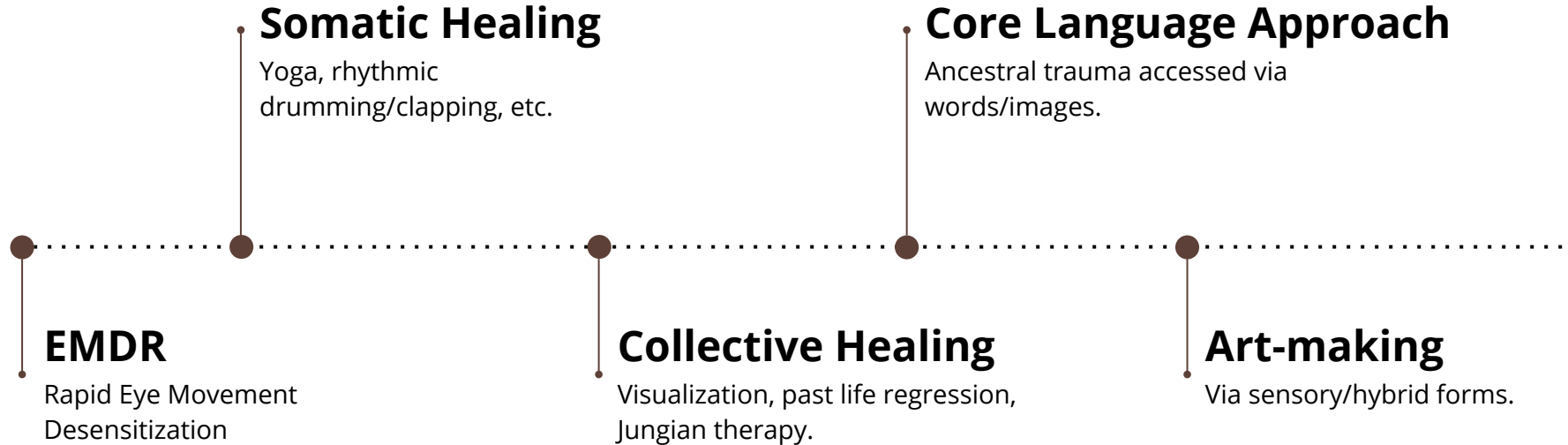
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The history you share with your family begins before you are even conceived. In your earliest biological form, as an unfertilized egg, you already share a cellular environment with your mother and grandmother. When your grandmother was five months pregnant with your mother, the precursor cell of the egg you developed from was already present in your mother's ovaries. This means that before your mother was even born, your mother, your grandmother, and the earliest traces of you were all in the same body—three generations sharing the same biological environment.

**Mark Wolynn**

*It Didn't Start with You: How Inherited Family Trauma Shapes Who We Are and How to End the Cycle*

# Healing Therapies



*\*Undertake therapies with trauma-informed professionals.*

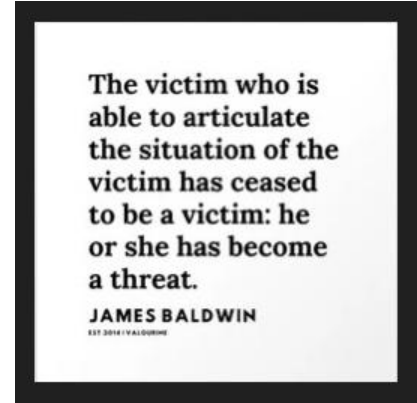
# Why trauma narratives?

**Agency.**

**Catharsis.**

**Empowerment.**

**Healing.**



"If you bring forth what is within you, what is within you will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what is within you will destroy you."

—The Gospel of Thomas





# The Core Language Approach

*It Didn't Start with You*

by Mark Wolynn:

the gold-standard text on generational trauma,  
combining epigenetics with Core Language  
exercises.

**A CORE SENTENCE  
ARISES FROM AN  
UNRESOLVED TRAGEDY.  
IF NOT OURS, THEN THE  
QUESTION IS: WHOSE?**

**Mark Wolynn**

*It Didn't Start with You: How Inherited Family Trauma  
Shapes Who We Are and How to End the Cycle*



# Exercise: Core Complaint for Trauma Healing

**PAUSE the webinar:** complete the exercise.

Dr. Wollynn refers to “core language” as fragments of ancestral trauma passed down in emotionally-charged sentences. Seemingly random words or images leave a trail of breadcrumbs leading us back to an original trauma, but they must be brought from the unconscious into the conscious mind. One way to do so is to identify a **Core Complaint**.

Note: our Core Complaint may not necessarily belong to us.

To identify your **Core Complaint**:

FIRST, answer:

- What is your deepest fear?
- What makes you most angry?
- What one or two sentences do you tend to repeat under stress, a tic that may betray a deeper fear?

THEN, review:

- Which verbs/images/*sensations* stand out? (They will be vivid & SPECIFIC.)
- Do these words correspond to any particular age or circumstance of onset?

FINALLY, look at your family tree: (you might have to sketch one out).

- Is there anyone for whom these fears might *also* have been true?
- Are these words *better-suited* to the situation of a parent, grandparent, or relative than to your life?
- Can you create a ritual to **honor** this person by acknowledging their pain, and release this core complaint **back** to them in a **conscious** fashion?

# Tips for Writing Trauma Narratives

Use **dissociation & alinearity** to your advantage.

**Re-tell** trauma **3 different ways**.

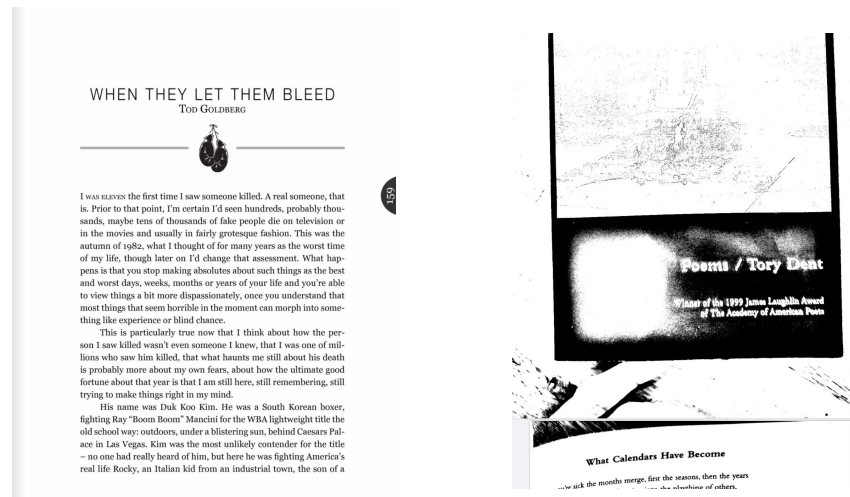
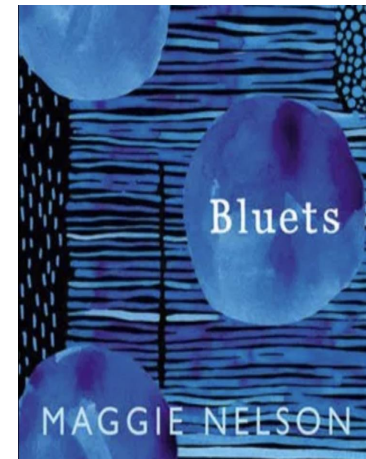
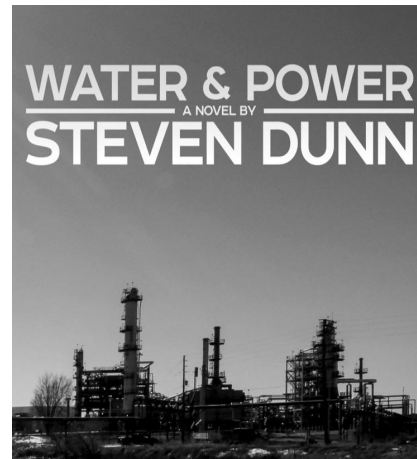
Imagine **other participants'** accounts.

Engage with an another author's text in a **duet**.

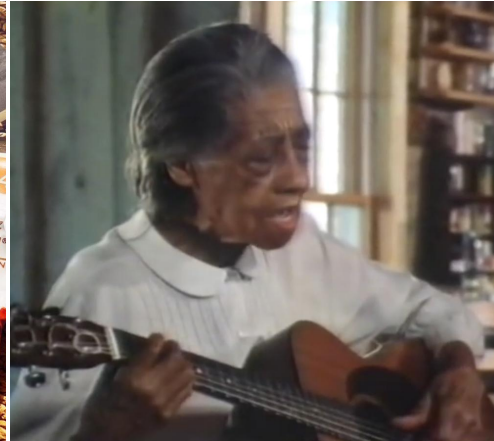
**Mix** narrative with **reportage** on a seemingly unrelated event.

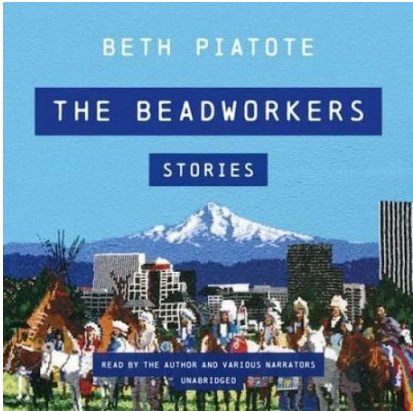
Make a **collage**, the mixtape of lit.

Make it **visual** or **interactive** for readers.



# Examples





## Script for Child Services: A Floor Plan

Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called. Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called. Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called. Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called. Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called.

**Bedroom One** why she called. Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called. Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called. Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called. Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called.

**Bedroom Two** I was young. I didn't know better. I was young. I lied it all away. I was young. The police were big. I was young. No one believe us. I was young. I was afraid. I was young. I made a mistake. I was young. I was young. I made a mistake.

**Living Room** he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called. Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called. Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called. Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called.

**Kitchen** he called. Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called. Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called. Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called. Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called.

**Hallway** a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called. Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called. Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called. Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called.

**Bathroom** I forgave Allah. But I can't stop repeating. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called. Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called. Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called. Repeat after me: he is not a monster. Nothing happened. She isn't feeling well right now. That's why she called.

# Exercise: Craft Tools for Trauma Writers

**PAUSE the webinar:** complete the exercise.

Consider the different techniques writers have used to render trauma in this presentation and/or the works cited at its conclusion.

Commit to trying **ONE** in your own work-in-progress to add depth, resonance, or render trauma in a new way.

Which will you choose? Circle one.

- Dissociation.
  - Fractured or alinear chronology.
  - Telling the same story different ways, or from different generational points of view.
  - Redaction.
  - Collage or hybrid forms.
  - Reportage on a seemingly unrelated topic.
  - Speaking of trauma metaphorically, through the language of . . . (movies/medicine/sports.)
  - Interactive elements, i.e. structuring work to mimic a ceremony or game.
  - In conversation with a literal or artistic ancestor who experienced similar trauma.
  - Using humor to entice readers in.
  - Employing visual elements.
-

# Works Cited

This presentation was inspired by many genres, and emphasizes hybrid forms to inspire innovation.

Art is drawn from diverse groups, with links to artists and source materials to encourage you to dig deeper into their work.

In lieu of charging for this webinar + workbook, please patronize an artist by purchasing one of the texts.

# Psychology Texts

*It Didn't Start With You: How Inherited Family Trauma Shapes Who We Are and How to End the Cycle*, Mark Wolynn:

<https://www.amazon.com/Didnt-Start-You-Inherited-Family/dp/11101980389>

*Complex-PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving: A GUIDE AND MAP FOR RECOVERING FROM CHILDHOOD TRAUMA*, Pete Welker:

<https://www.amazon.com/Complex-PTSD-Surviving-RECOVERING-CHILDHOOD-ebook/dp/B00HJBMDEXK>

*My Grandmother's Hands, Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, Resmaa Menakem:

<https://www.amazon.com/My-Grandmothers-Hands-Racialized-Pathway/dp/1942094477>



# Creative References

## Essays

"When They Let Them Bleed," Tod Goldberg,  
full text:  
<http://todgoldberg.com/when-they-let-them-bleed/>

*Bluets*, Maggie Nelson:  
<https://bookshop.org/books/bluets-9781933517407/9781933517407>

## Poems

"Grace," Joy Harjo:  
<https://www.amazon.com/Mad-Love-War-Wesleyan-Poetry/dp/081951182X>

"The Moon and the Yew Tree," Tory Dent:  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/tory-dent>

"Script for Child Services: A Floor Plan,"  
Fatimah Ashgar:  
<https://www.fatimahasghar.com>

## Novels

*Infinite Jest*, David Foster Wallace:  
<https://www.powells.com/book/infinite-jest-9780316066525>

## Stories

*The Beadworkers: Stories*, Beth Piatote:  
<https://www.counterpointpress.com/dd-product/the-beadworkers/>

"The Best Girlfriend You Never Had," (full text) Pam Houston:  
[http://theycenter.org/uploads/3/5/3/7/35378126/1589\\_001.pdf](http://theycenter.org/uploads/3/5/3/7/35378126/1589_001.pdf)

"Cowboys are My Weakness" Pam Houston:  
<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B004OA6KJM/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?encoding=UTF8&btkr=1>

## Hybrid Forms

*Water & Power*, Steven Dunn:  
<https://tarpaulinsky.com/steven-dunn/water-power/>

*O Mission Repo*, Travis MacDonald:  
<https://www.amazon.com/Mission-Repo-Travis-Macdonald/dp/0982077300>

# Creative References

## Songs

"Marry the Night," Lady Gaga:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cggNqDAtJYU>

"Freight Train," Elizabeth Cotton:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUK8emiWabU>

## Craft

*The Art of Memoir*, Mary Karr:

<https://www.amazon.com/Art-Memoir-Mary-Karr/dp/0062223070>

## Humor

*The Last Black Unicorn*, Tiffany

Haddish: <https://www.amazon.com/Last-Black-Unicorn-Tiffany-Haddish/dp/1501181823>

*Running with Scissors*, Augusten Burroughs:

[https://www.amazon.com/dp/B007KA1E26/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?\\_encoding=UTF8&btkr=1](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B007KA1E26/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?_encoding=UTF8&btkr=1)

*The King of Staten Island*, (film), screenplay by Judd Apatow, Pete Davidson, and Dave Sirus:

<https://www.amazon.com/King-Staten-Island-Pete-Davidson/dp/B089RRL12>



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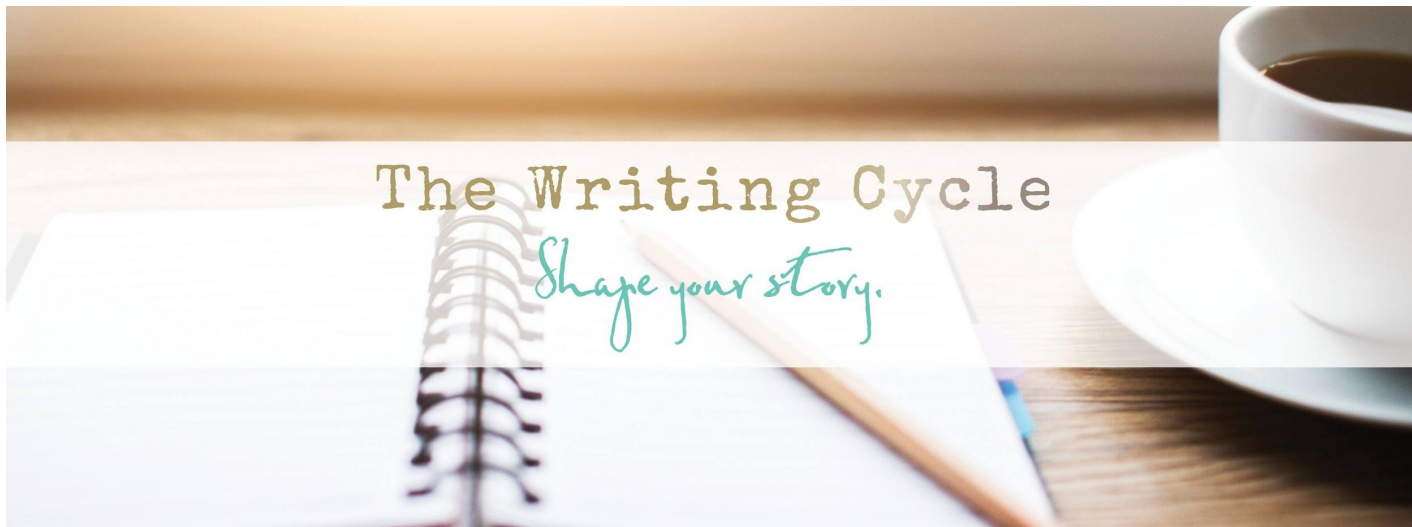
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Carol Test  
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