

12-1-2008

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Recommended APA Citation

Duffy, M. (2008). No-Drama Obama: Personal Memoirs, Bestsellers, and Qualitative Research: A Review. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(3), 44-48. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol13/iss3/19>

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Abstract

Personal memoirs and life histories are forms of qualitative research that from time to time appear on bestsellers lists. These forms of research detail the authors' experiences of living and reflecting upon their everyday lives—lives that may be unique in some sense or lives made unique by the richness of the interplay of living, reflecting, and writing. In this review, I make the case for viewing moments in all lives as worthy of the development of personal memoir or life history and for using memoir as a way of generating takeaways or lessons learned. I review Elyn Saks' (2007) memoir and bestseller about her life with schizophrenia, *The Center Cannot Hold*, and the British actor, author, and comedian, Stephen Fry's 2006 documentary about bipolar disorder *Stephen Fry: The Secret Life of the Manic Depressive*. Both are examples of life histories that provide an abundance of opportunities for learning about what we might otherwise never know.

Keywords

Personal Memoir, Life History, Lessons Learned

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“No-Drama Obama,” Personal Memoirs, Bestsellers, and Qualitative Research: A Review

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*Personal memoirs and life histories are forms of qualitative research that from time to time appear on bestsellers lists. These forms of research detail the authors' experiences of living and reflecting upon their everyday lives—lives that may be unique in some sense or lives made unique by the richness of the interplay of living, reflecting, and writing. In this review, I make the case for viewing moments in all lives as worthy of the development of personal memoir or life history and for using memoir as a way of generating takeaways or lessons learned. I review Elyn Saks' (2007) memoir and bestseller about her life with schizophrenia, *The Center Cannot Hold*, and the British actor, author, and comedian, Stephen Fry's 2006 documentary about bipolar disorder *Stephen Fry: The Secret Life of the Manic Depressive*. Both are examples of life histories that provide an abundance of opportunities for learning about what we might otherwise never know. Keywords: Personal Memoir, Life History, and Lessons Learned*

The title of Erving Polster's 1990 book, *Every Person's Life is Worth a Novel*, states a qualitative research truth. The everyday stuff of human life consists of so much material and so many questions to explore that it is easy to imagine another book with the title *Every Person's Life is Worth a Bunch of Novels*. For example, I am intrigued by the moniker applied to Barack Obama, “no-drama Obama,” for his reputed insistence on running a campaign and now a transition team that is low on whatever it is that Obama considers drama. I have questions about Obama that have nothing to do with his vision for the presidency and the country. I have questions about why Obama doesn't like drama, what he thinks drama is, how he came to hold his views about drama, what happens when he gets upset about something, what happens when his kids get upset, what happens when he has a quarrel with Michelle, and did he go against his own rules in hiring Rahm Emanuel to be his Chief-of-Staff given that Rahm has a reputation for being a no-holds-barred kind of guy when telling you what he thinks. I'm interested in the drama of “no-drama Obama.” My imagined book or novel about Obama would be a real fringe one about Obama and drama rather than a mainstream one about Obama and politics. My “no-drama Obama” book is never going to be written, of course, because I can't really see Rahm Emanuel giving me some time to talk with Barack about his opinions of personal drama. Rahm would probably tell me in short order what he thought of my request to learn about Obama's views on drama. Even without my book about “no-drama Obama” on the shelves, we can be sure that there will be a lot of other ones on the shelves soon and I'll eat my hat if one of them has the words “no-drama Obama” in its

title. There's a lot of other stuff to be written about Obama but I'm going to miss not learning more about what he has against drama.

A long time ago in a class I taught on multicultural issues in counseling, I gave the students a pretty simple assignment and asked them to go and do something that was culturally different for them. That was the extent of my directions. I didn't give them any suggestions or ideas. I remember this class because we had a lot of fun together and because in the process of having some fun we learned a lot about the unexamined assumptions that we all carry around with us. A male student got permission to sit in on a women's group for survivors of domestic violence. A Haitian student went to a gay and lesbian club on South Beach and came back to class and told the others that her mother would have killed her if she had known where she was. Another student went to a Native American reservation and brought back the information that the residents had Halloween decorations on their doors—knowledge that seemed surprising to her. It took me a while to figure out that the student had expected the Native Americans to be living in teepees. Another student interviewed a woman who had recently emigrated from Eastern Europe. The student was worried because the Eastern European woman had started crying at the end of her interview and the student feared that she may have done something wrong. I asked the student what the woman had said at the end of the interview when she started crying. The student answered that the woman had said that she hadn't realized what an interesting life she had led and that she thought her life had been pretty boring until she got to talk about it with the student and that she kept repeating, in the midst of crying, that she had actually led an interesting life. The woman apparently was in her late 50's, so given the outcome, I was very happy that the student had decided to interview that particular woman. That woman had lived long enough thinking that her life had been uninteresting. She was overdue a break and an accidental qualitative research interview seemed to provide it.

Each of the examples in this review so far could easily be expanded into a book or, at least an essay, about the people behind the incidents described and how these interesting but ordinary moments of their lives are connected to their families, cultures, and personal and social histories. How might knowing more of their stories engage, disturb, inspire, or amuse us? In fact, with the exception of the "no-drama Obama" book, a well-researched and well-written book about any of the people referenced in this review could conceivably hit the best-sellers lists. But since I don't think their stories have been written yet, we're not going to find them on the best-sellers lists. So let's see whose stories we might find on those lists and what they might say to us about things we could otherwise never know.

One of the stories of my life is that I'm a family therapist and that I work with people with serious brain disorders like bipolar disorder and addiction. When I look at the New York Times best-sellers list, as I do weekly, the books about people with brain disorders tend to jump out at me. I'm especially drawn to the personal memoirs and autobiographies. The best of these books, by any other name, are exquisite works of qualitative research. These stories are also acts of courage that are quickly changing the face of mental illness and that are providing real data, real stories about what it's like to have one of these disorders. If I ever teach a course in psychopathology again, I'll be able to describe delusions better than I ever have been able to in the past because of Elyn Saks' (2007) book about her own schizophrenia entitled *The Center Cannot Hold*. The

decontextualized symptom list of the DSM-IV-TR (2000) can't hold a candle to Saks' descriptions of her delusions, and the DSM certainly can't change widely held beliefs about people with schizophrenia the way that Saks' book can and does.

Like Kay Redfield Jamison's (1995) book about her bipolar disorder, *An Unquiet Mind*, Saks' book provides an insider's view of living with serious mental illness that until relatively recently hasn't been easy to find. As well as providing the insider's view, these books have the effect of transforming people's understandings of mental illness and challenging their long-held assumptions that people with serious mental illness are doomed to live diminished lives. Books in this genre provide detailed pictures of the lived experience of having what I prefer to call brain disorders, they present insider perspectives that outsiders can never know in the same way, and they serve as vehicles for transforming individual and collective understandings of mental illness. These narratives have an anthropological quality to them in that they bring news of previously isolated or uncontacted groups to the outside world in the words of members of those groups themselves. These books are not the potentially colonizing narratives of mental health professionals about schizophrenia and bipolar disorder; they are the raw experiences of living with mental illness, even if one is a mental health professional, as in the case of Jamison. And, as in the best qualitative case studies, they present a number of takeaways or lessons learned.

Saks is a tenured Professor of Law at the University of Southern California and the occupant of an endowed Chair as well as the author of several books and publications—formidable accomplishments for anyone, much less someone with a thought disorder like schizophrenia. She acknowledges in her book that she was lucky in life's lottery—getting both intelligence and family resources. Her narrative is graphic and detailed about her psychotic episodes and her periods of decompensation and hospitalization that thread through her life as a college student, law student, and law professor. The major takeaway, of course, is that she accomplished major successes in life with schizophrenia as a constant life partner. The other takeaways are almost more interesting. Saks credits anti-psychotic medication with allowing her to have a life but she credits therapy, in particular, psychoanalysis, with providing her a life worth living. Conventional wisdom in the mental health profession, beginning with Freud, holds that persons with psychotic disorders like schizophrenia cannot be psychoanalyzed and that briefer, more cognitively-based models are the only effective way to go.

With Saks, we have an insider saying that not only can someone with a psychotic disorder participate in psychoanalysis but that she can transform her life through it and, further, that she depends on it to this day. Another more minor note that provides an important takeaway is Saks' self-understanding that she does not feel comfortable away from home and she identified either three or four days as the limits of her "away from home" tolerance. And finally, for someone interested in organizational life, the role of Saks' colleagues at the University of Southern California and the role of the institution itself raise important considerations about how they helped Saks succeed and how they stood by her when things got rough. The formal roles of these colleagues and her institution are underdeveloped in her narrative. Given the eliminative impulse of so many organizations, including academic ones, I want to know more about her institution and her colleagues. Saks' book was a bestseller. It stands as a personal memoir of a landscape not known by many, about experiences in the world that have been the cause of immense

personal and public suffering, as an insider's account of things that most people could not possibly know.

Personal stories that connect with important issues of our time are told in written memoirs like Saks' *The Center Cannot Hold* (2007). They are also told in video documentary form as in *Stephen Fry: The Secret Life of the Manic Depressive* (2006), a British Broadcasting Company (BBC) production. Stephen Fry is a kind of Renaissance figure. He is an actor, a comedian, a filmmaker, an author, an intellectual, an advocate. He also has bipolar disorder and made the decision to talk about his experiences as a way of addressing, head-on, the stigma that people with mental illness face. In his documentary, *Stephen Fry: The Secret Life of the Manic Depressive*, Fry functions as a participant observer. He describes, in detail, how bipolar disorder has impacted his life, including his suicide attempt in 1995 when he walked out of the West End play *Cell Mates* in which he was starring. Fry also interviews both celebrities and non-celebrities who have come out about their own bipolar disorder. Among the celebrities Fry interviews are Carrie Fisher (Princess Leah of Star Wars fame), and Richard Dreyfus who has had multiple starring roles apart from those he held in *Jaws*. The documentary was originally made in two parts, although it has been posted on YouTube in multiple parts.

As in Saks' book, there were many takeaways. One, of course, was the intensity of the experiences of moods. A very funny piece in the documentary shows Fry in a men's clothing store jubilantly going through the ties with a cognitive-behavioral therapist (CBT) tagging along beside him asking him whether he really needed each tie that he was putting into his basket. Fry, who is a model of British civility, except when he's not, barely responds to her other than to say something like "No, no, no, it's not that I need the ties, I just like them." A more sobering part of the documentary shows Fry retracing his steps after he walked out of *Cell Mates* and went home intent on gassing himself in the garage with his car. He had received some "middling" (as the British would say) reviews of his performance and they sent him into a suicidal tailspin. But the big takeaway from Fry's documentary occurs when he asks a number people with bipolar disorder that if they could press a button and make the whole disorder go away, would they, and, to a person, they answer that they would not. Fry leaves you with little doubt that his answer would be "No" also.

Since I've been talking takeaways, one of the takeaways from this review, I hope, is, to paraphrase Polster (1990) and to repeat myself: every person's life is worth a bunch of novels. And when you can't get the novels, what you may well be able to get is life history and memoir, either by doing the research yourself and penning a bestseller about some aspect of your own or someone else's life, or by scouring the bestsellers lists for memoirs and life histories to read that will act as obliging gatekeepers and usher you into worlds and landscapes that you might otherwise never know. In fact, when things settle down for Rahm, and he gets a chance to read this article, he'll probably want to rethink his resistance to me interviewing Barack about why he has acquired the "no-drama Obama" appellation and set me up with a research interview!

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Article Citation

Duffy, M. (2008). "No-drama Obama," personal memoirs, bestsellers, and qualitative research: A review. *The Weekly Qualitative Report*, 1(9), 44-48. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/WQR/obama.pdf>
