



The Courage to Write

by [Dawn Raffel](#) Editor {[View Profile](#)}

A conversation with Nancy Bachrach about what it takes to write a memoir—and how she learned to laugh about a devastating childhood.

Nancy Bachrach was a young American woman living in Paris (with the job of trying to sell deodorant to the French) when she received a life-upending phone call: Her father had been asphyxiated by a gas leak and her mentally ill mother was in a coma. The year was 1983; Bachrach flew home to Providence, Rhode Island and—with her siblings--braced for a double funeral. Against all expectations, her mother survived: delusional, amnesiac, grandiose, demanding—and robustly alive.

Bachrach's moving memoir, [The Center of the Universe](#) (her mother's name for herself), is just out from Knopf. That it's

harrowing isn't surprising—but that it's shockingly funny is. When I went to hear Bachrach read to a large crowd New York, she was constantly interrupted—as she wished to be--by the audience's laughter.

A few days later, Bachrach and I had this conversation:

Q: There is a vast literature of troubled families, but not many memoirs are as genuinely funny as yours. Your mother wasn't just quirky, she was mentally ill. How did you find the humor in it?

A: I wasn't laughing at the time. When my mother was soaring, she was a force of nature who could come up behind me as suddenly as a twister and turn Providence into Oz. And when she crashed, she was the wind shear beneath my wings. But sometimes what's deranged and absurd is also ridiculous, especially when seen through a long lens, and after a lot of therapy.

Q: Many women want to write memoir but are afraid of how their families will react. Did you worry about that?

A: I never thought I'd publish this memoir while my mother was alive, so I allowed myself to say some things that were supposedly unsayable. The pen is a blunt instrument, and I told stories that I'd never said aloud to anyone, certainly not to her. But she read a draft, and it was quite a conversation-starter. Afterward, the self-proclaimed "center of the universe" announced that I'd "never have better material." The decision to publish it was hers — it isn't a revenge memoir, after all. In fact, she thought I should call it *Love Story*.

Q: How did your siblings react?

A: My brother and sister lived through the same lunatic childhood, as well as the freak accident that came later. They encouraged, abetted, and, occasionally, parodied my drafts — once, unforgettably, to music. I will always be grateful that they both have a sense of humor.

Q: Were you always close, or did the problems in your family cause you to draw apart at some point?

A: The mother lode brought us closer. We circled the wagons whenever there was a crisis. And while the craziness drove us away from home, it also drove us forward — and held us together.

Q: How did your mother react to the book's publication?

A: A close friend who's a comedian gave a show a few weeks ago in my mother's community, and she went backstage. He asked her if she was proud of my "book about the family." She answered that the book isn't about "the family," it's about her. The day the memoir was released, she went to her local bookstores and insisted on signing copies.

Q: The events you write about occurred during your childhood and when you were a young woman. Did completing the book—putting these memories and feelings in a finite space between covers—change the way you view what happened?

A: It righted some things that had been awry for a lifetime. After years of cringing when my mother tried to hug me, of treating her like a virus I might catch — as though I was the victim, not she — the book was both catharsis and epiphany. It was a clarifying purge. My huge hoard of childish fury dissolved into thick lumps of sadness and mucus and guilt. And I began to fall in love with the real-life character who is my mother.

Q: I've always thought that writer's block comes out a fear of what we're going to say—what's going to come out on the page. Did you ever feel blocked?

A: I couldn't get these stories down fast enough. I started taking notes for a book about my mother as soon as I learned the alphabet. And in kindergarten, I drew pictures of mommies who were anatomically correct in every detail, except that they were missing their heads. That got me

sent to the school nurse —for about 20 years — but I wrote through all of it. The hard thing was stopping.

Q: What did you learn about yourself in the course of writing the book?

A: I hope I learned forgiveness. I finally forgave my mother for all the things that had been beyond her control during my childhood. And after that, I forgave myself for behaving like an adolescent long after I should have grown up.

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