

**GH101: Third Place**

## Is Life Writing Controversial?

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Controversy is defined as “a discussion marked especially by the expression of opposing views” (“Controversy”). When writing an autobiographical text, authors are often faced with the idea that certain parts of their life would be too controversial to include for their target audience. The idea of controversy differs with the group concerned by generation, location, gender, or something else completely. Topics that cause dispute can be found in nearly any autobiography, including in the omission or inclusion of specific details. Including controversy is vital to the audience’s understanding of the author’s life story. Controversy in life-writing is the most crucial element of any story, even if it only surrounds the book after being published, as it provides contrast to the other events mentioned.

The definition of controversy slightly varies between sources, however the main idea is that controversy is a disagreement which is typically public and prolonged. Controversies are a part of most authors’ lives, whether they have been directly involved in controversies or experienced them as outsiders. The authors I will reference have experienced controversy in their life stories and following the publication of their work.

Each book used in this semester of autobiographical writing has elements that could be considered controversial. These topics range from physical violence, illegal activity, and detailed sexual experience. Some events cause less controversy in the audience’s opinion of the event but are considered controversial to reveal, such as the detailed depiction of physical violence in *The Woman Warrior* (Kingston). In other cases, it is controversial to participate in and share the events, like in *Unbowed* with her blatant ignoring of authorities (Maathai).

When they were first published, *Maus* (1980) and *Maus II* (1992) were very controversial due to their comic nature. The author, Art Spiegelman, used different animal species to represent different races of people. Many people felt that the simplified portrayal of those involved in the Holocaust was too comedic, causing the story to have less seriousness than the horrifying events merited. Spiegelman explained this choice as a way to reduce the audience's sympathy for his family and as a way to retain truthfulness (Puneet). He believed that the animals showed that he had only truly experienced any of these events through his parents. He explained that, had he chosen to draw them in any other form, he would have felt that the book would be inauthentic (Green). He chose to make a creative decision to better portray the story he was telling, which caused controversy.

*Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* by Audre Lorde includes many detailed accounts of her sexual experiences with other women (Lorde). Today, most readers would not consider these topics to be controversial. However, during the 1950s (the period of Audre's experiences), they were taboo in American society. The book focuses on her many relationships with women, including familial, sexual, and friendly. Though there was a growing lesbian population in many cities, LGBT relationships were highly controversial and public displays were illegal. Being gay was often considered a mental disorder (Byers). The book was published in 1982, shortly after the AIDS Epidemic began to take over all actions for LGBT rights ("Gay Rights"). Lorde published her book anyway despite LGBT relationships being very controversial during that time.

*A Diary of a Young Girl* is another famous autobiography containing controversial ideas. This version of the diary of Anne Frank, edited by her father, is referred to as Version C. Anne Frank was a young teenage girl who lived in Amsterdam during the time of the Holocaust and

kept a diary of her life during the war. Anne wrote all her thoughts in the journal, which she named “Kitty.” Her original manuscript in the red checkered journal is Version A. In 1944, she heard a radio broadcast requesting all diaries and journals from the Holocaust be kept for publication. She began to revise her writing for publication, creating Version B. Most audiences are not familiar with either Version A or B of her diary due to their controversial nature and the censorship that followed (Reimann).

After the war was over Anne’s father, Otto Frank, came in possession of her journals and began to translate pages of it into different languages to share with friends and family. He was told that her writing should be published, so he began to prepare it for the public (Reimann). While editing, he censored many controversial ideas Anne had written about, particularly with regards to her sexuality. In the Version A diary, Anne had written four sexually-toned jokes and several lines on sex education and prostitution (Jackson). She covered these pages so no one would see them. These pages were not revealed until many decades later, in 2016. The other excerpts containing information about Anne’s sexual maturity were removed by her father in order to please the publishing company (Jackson). As an example, Anne’s depiction of puberty was deemed too sensitive for the audience, many of whom were seeking a simple account of a Holocaust victim. Female sexuality was still not freely discussed in the late 1940s when the diary was published, so including any mention of it would have caused more controversy over her writings.

Otto Frank also removed some of Anne’s thoughts on her friends and family members, especially those who had passed on during the war. He also removed information about himself and his wife that portrayed a negative view of them. Anne wrote in her diary about the tense relationship between her mother and father (Jackson). She wrote that she did not believe her

father loved her mother and had simply married her to fill the space of a wife. She also mentioned that her father had visited brothels, but this too was removed from Version C of the book.

During my interview with fiction author Joyce Beaulieu, she mentioned how she would avoid writing certain topics about friends and family to avert their anger or hurt. She has attempted, in the past, to write a memoir about her father, which included her views on his relationship with his family. When she showed other family members, many of them had different opinions about him and their relationships. She told me that she would avoid writing about such topics in the future because the sensitivity around such topics.

In both the case of Anne Frank and Joyce Beaulieu, we see that writing about close friends or family members could cause controversy. Anne Frank's father was the only surviving member of her immediate family after the Holocaust. He decided that releasing certain portions of her diary would cause too much controversy to other audience members who read the diary, especially family friends or relatives. Her writing revealed topics about many people that they might not have wanted divulged.

When Beaulieu talks about the parts that she might keep out of her own life writing, she mentions that she would not write any controversial elements down. Anne Frank did write those controversial elements down and chose to keep many in her revisions, but they were ultimately removed by her father in Version C. Beaulieu wants to avoid anything appearing in her autobiography that could hurt those involved. "I wouldn't write anything about my family members in an autobiography, identifying them by name," she joked, "but I can always use them as characters in my books! In fact, I think I need a character like that now" (Beaulieu).

Over the course of researching controversial topics in life-writing, I began to think about my own approach to autobiography, both as a reader and a writer. When I read an autobiography, I expect to learn several details of the story or aspects of the author's life. As the audience of an autobiographical work, I feel that no idea or event is too controversial to include as each gives a better picture of the author's character. In our interview, Joyce Beaulieu explained similar opinions as she believes that nothing is off limits for books. She mentioned Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, John Irving's *Prayer for Owen Meany*, and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. Each of these books discusses content that can be uncomfortable for the reader, like sexual assault and pedophilia, but which the authors want to share with their audiences. As a reader, we feel more comfortable reading about someone else's embarrassments and controversial ideas than sharing our own.

When writing my own autobiography, I would like to include many aspects of my life to create a full picture. However, I also would be reluctant to share shameful events or embarrassing stories, especially if they had occurred recently. Either including these events or leaving them out could be considered controversial in separate ways if what had happened caused disagreement or leaving it aside changed the overall view of the book. Also, it is important to think about the type of picture you are creating to represent your life or a specific story. If I were to write about my early elementary education, I probably would not include information about my sexuality or social and political views as an adult. Though I do not consider this to necessarily be controversial information, people in the audience might find it controversial that I added this information in a work about learning as a young child. Controversial ideas do not necessarily need to be used in every part of a person's life story, but they should not be avoided for the sake of either the reader or writer.

Many people believe it is best choice in writing to avoid any controversy with their story. However, when we consider the nature of our life stories, we discover that there is some element of disagreement in many aspects of our lives. It is important to consider both our thoughts and ideas and interactions with other people. Controversy is the contrast between other activities in our lives. Even if we believe that we do not lead incredibly exciting and adventurous lives, we can include events that give contrast to our typical daily activities. For example, if an author were to write about their experience in high school, and those four years were fairly level and monotonous, they might include description about the ridiculous adventures they had with their friends one summer.

What is considered controversial in autobiographical writing? Is there such a thing as *too* controversial for writing? Is there any difference in controversy in life writing versus fiction? Different groups of people find certain things controversial, especially depending on their age, location, and background. I believe that no topic is too controversial for writing as every aspect of our thoughts and actions is a part of our story and our character. Leaving these out would deplete our view of the character in the audience's perspective. In both life writing and fiction, any and all topics can and should be explored. Though many topics can be difficult to read and write, they teach us more about other people and allow us to understand better the world around us.

Another important point is that the inclusion of controversial thoughts, actions, events, and ideas in autobiographical works is the reason many people enjoy reading these stories. Though outlandish activities often occur in fictitious works, when reading an autobiography, we are expecting truth from the author, whether that includes the full story or not. Without any hint of controversy, the story can become monotonous. As audience members, we expect some sort

of change throughout the writing. Without any tension, which often includes something controversial, the story can become difficult to read. Though not everything is controversial to each audience member, it is important to include the most memorable aspects of your own life. The audience might understand how that moment was controversial in the author's life even if it not controversial in their own.

In summary, the inclusion of controversial events is important in autobiography as it allows the audience to understand the writer's full life story. Though certain ideas become less controversial over time while others come to the foreground, controversies are often vital so that the audience can understand the writer's life. Controversy is defined as something that causes a dispute, something which can be as simple as deciding what ice cream flavor is best. However, without any ideas or facts involving disagreement or contrast in the writer's life, the story remains incomplete. Controversy should be at the heart of every author's words.

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