

EDITORIAL OBSERVER

Memory, Workmaid and Mother of the Muses, Hits the Print Button

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Frank Conroy, the author of the classic memoir "Stop-Time," succeeded so well at capturing "the attenuated agonies of growing up" that he justified the book's title. Vladimir Nabokov was no less true in the lyrical tale of himself, "Speak, Memory" - the bounding lepidopterist caught in "the act of vividly recalling a patch of the past." And Allen Ginsberg, the poet who daily worked the dense turf of his own mortality, once offered me a beguiling summary of his obsession with life's flight as treasuring "the dearness of the vanishing moment."

And now comes James Hyland, a figure from the distant history of our having shared in the military draft 49 years ago, popping up uninvited as a Web cookie and brandishing his high-tech memoir: 249 pages hot off the first instant book-printing machine to be found in an American bookstore.

That's right: scraps from a life's complexity downloaded from his computer disc to a handsomely printed and bound book in a matter of minutes. And at a price - \$150 or so per 10 copies - far cheaper than even the new Internet-based vanity publishers can offer. Thus empowered, the cheeky author is happily flooding family and friends with his tale-on-the-cheap. He has included me in the text without advance warning. He's playing me out with him through anecdotes of teenage keg tappings, misdemeanor flights from the police, and, climactically, our dropping out of college together to "push up" our draft eligibility in quest of some imagined adventure.

Entirely unsought, I wander the memoir. Weird, I feel a sense reminiscent of peering down at the X-rays routinely taken of one's feet at the old Buster Brown shoe stores of my childhood when, in wonderment ... (No, no, no. Shhh, Memory. Shhh. Let Hyland make the fool of himself.)

The book, entitled "Greetings, Your friends and neighbors ..." makes me finally realize this free-speech business can be carried a step too far. Where was the vetting opportunity for my litigators? Is there no comfort of a public editor involved in this past-forward new world of publishing? And might ex-Private Hyland have at least consulted me as the professional writer for treatment tips about buzz, edge and snarkiness? (One approach: "We were peacetime soldiers, draftees who served without complaint and helped keep the nation from war. Yet, where, America, is our memorial?" etc., going gently on the whining.)

But Mr. Hyland goes off like Chaucer on embarrassing wanderings and questionable back story. Of what moment is it that our first stop home after basic training at Fort Dix, N.J., was a favored tavern from our beloved days of false draft cards - Creedmore Rest, adjacent to a state hospital for the insane? Yes, I can verify that strange old Barney was working the bar, but where's the Proustian detail? (Recall how cold and soothing the beer was, but did Barney pour us free 'housers' as we leaned there in our pathetic Eisenhower jackets?)

The machine that published this memoir (it is available at www.booksbybookends.com) and a fast increasing number of other works - helixes of anybody's fact or fiction - is at Bookends, an otherwise harmless bookstore in Ridgewood, N.J.

The result is lifelike, the tone in sync with the younger, impish Mr. Hyland's nonstop narrations. It was odd how even back then he would retell with great embellishment some innocuous teenage event from the week before - the occasional practical-joke theft of someone's couch or tombstone, that sort of thing.

Why, it's as if this emboldened memoirist was also aware of the dearness of the vanishing moment.

James Hyland's irrepressible storytelling is finally in print, Oprah be damned. Professional experience forces me to judge that, as a product, my old friend's effort seems no more consequential than that bit of Emily Dickinson:

*I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you - Nobody - too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell! they'd advertise - you know!*

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