

SUSAN SHAPIRO

Taking It Personally: A Feminist Defense Of The First-Person Essay

First read Jia Tolentino's May 18 anti-personal essay personal essay titled "The Personal Essay Boom Is Over" on The New Yorker's website. Next, google the writers Vivian Gornick, Roxane Gay, David Sedaris, Daphne Merkin, Zadie Smith, Gary Shteyngart, Jhumpa Lahiri, Elif Batuman or Joan Didion. Guess what you'll find? Great recent personal essays, many in The New Yorker.

All too often, a field filled with women, Jews, gay men and lesbians and people of color winds up (like teaching and nursing) marginalized.

Tolentino, 28, a newyorker.com contributing writer, worked at Hairpin and at Jezebel for three years, from 2013 to 2016. There she wrote and printed the kind of "too personal" "insignificant" personal essays her 1,900-word screed is now trashing. Yet the "ultra-confessional" personal essay "boom" by unknown writers that she addresses negatively did not start, as her piece asserts, in 2008, it wasn't a "boom," and it didn't fade when she switched gigs. Moving on to higher-brow lit-crit doesn't necessitate her about-face, especially when her semantic argument is myopic and disingenuous, ironically in The New Yorker – launcher of countless memoirs, essay collections and the franchise of David Sedaris.

Tolentino's piece is doing what she's criticizing: "inciting outrage" by giving voice "to horrible, uncharitable thoughts" for a splashy byline, a paycheck and clickbait. Tolentino briefly mentions the real talk of the town this month, The Atlantic's fascinating personal essay cover story, "My Family's Slave," by Alex Tizon, but points out its "backlash" instead of its significance.

As a feminist, memoirist and writing professor with successful students, I wish younger women would have more awareness and less condescension for the revelations of their rising star sisters. White men with big books and bylines get exalted, while smart, witty authors like Emily Gould and my former student Cat Marnell get bashed for their ambition and acclaim. Why is Marnell's dazzling addiction memoir "How To Murder Your Life" (Simon & Schuster) such a target? Is it uncouth for a woman to admit to wild adventures without proper repentance while making good money? That's something addiction authors Bill Clegg, Jerry Stahl and Pete Hamill were never criticized for.

Luckily, first-person writing remains democratic. To be well published you need only three original, exciting pages. You don't need money, a white penis, a college degree, a cute young body or media connections. Diverse talent is rampant among my New School students, and the personal can still be political, relevant and poignant in the repressive time of the anti-immigrant, anti-abortion Trump and Pence. Two women I teach explored recently their Asian roots, leading to first clips on The New York Times website. An African-American army wife with an autistic child detailed her struggles in *Dame*, *Ebony*, *Yahoo* and *The Washington Post*. A Muslim who survived ethnic cleansing has chronicled being a refugee in *Slate*, *Salon*, *Newsday* and *Esquire*. A girl from Guatemala with an eye disease just had her first clip in *The Wall Street Journal*. A



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trans pupil published a poetic series in *Teen Vogue*. Beautiful memoirs taking on abortion and college rape were launched in the *Modern Love* column, the most popular feature in *The New York Times* for a decade, along with 50 other books, a podcast and an upcoming movie.

While Tolentino and others espouse the simplistic, paternalistic view that women mining their intimate lives in public could be somehow exploitative and exploited, I quote Nora Ephron, "Everything's copy," and try to emulate her grace and sense of humor. I always found revealing secrets in print cathartic and liberating, repeating my shrink's mantra that to stay healthy, you should "lead your least secretive life." Indeed, I owe the career my conservative Midwest family hates to this form. I was originally compelled by this so-called 2008 "first-person industrial complex boom" decades before, as I devoured the audacious confessional

poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Ted Hughes, Robert Lowell and Nikki Giovanni in the staid Michigan *Jewburbs* in the '60s. Getting my Master of Fine Arts at New York University in 1981, I noticed that one could turn poetry subjects into essays and books (like the brilliant Mary Karr, Carol Muske-Dukes, and Katha Pollitt). After working at *The New Yorker* for four years, I wrote for *The New York Times' Lives* and *Hers* columns, *Newsweek's* "My Turn," *Cosmopolitan's* "Outrageous Opinion," along with *Glamour*, *New Woman* and *Marie Claire*, which, at the time, paid \$1,000 or more.

Tolentino attributes the shifting essay market to politics (a response to Trump's election) but as her own piece demonstrates, it's economics. She quotes former *Salon* editor Sarah Hepola saying the personal essay "boom" of her day was motivated by an online climate where content was needed and budgets were slashed. Yes, after Apple's *iTunes* destroyed the feasibility of music albums, the internet devalued paper tomes with e-books, which hurt print. Cheaper shorter faster online essay versions did proliferate, along with internet trolls and pop-up ads. Instead of 1,600-word, \$1,600 carefully curated pieces from *Jane* magazine, suddenly *xoJane* paid \$25 or \$50 for quick takes, many silly, which I blame on editors (who are, after all, our bosses) and on the higher-ups in charge, desperate to keep their businesses afloat. I didn't love all the *Tampax* and *cat-hair* pieces or prompts from *Hearst's The Mix*. Yet it seemed a worthy experiment since it gave young writers I knew clips, exposure, and literary agents. Cream rose, as always. *Gawker*, *xoJane*, *BuzzFeed*, *Hairpin* and *Jezebel* never represented an essay "boom," it was barely a blip on the radar, ephemeral insignificant modern conduits of an often-sacred art. It's like moaning "the novel is dead," citing *Harlequin* romances of the 90s. Top national newspapers, women's magazines, and Jewish publications such as the *Forward* pay for vital, passionate, provocative personal essays daily, as does *Salon* and *The New Yorker*.

Everyone enjoys trashing confessional writing, forgetting they read and buy it constantly. Worth mourning are print editions of *Self*, *More*, *Mademoiselle*, *New Woman*, *Ladies Home Journal* and *New York Press*, among others. Tolentino's piece lacks perspective on the important populist style of slave narratives, Holocaust testimonials, war confessions, and writers like Mark Twain, Simone de Beauvoir and Maya Angelou.

"It's ridiculous to say the personal essay peaked in 2015. Personal writing has been around since Montaigne in 1571. The genre's not disappearing," argued "Motherless Daughters" author Hope Edelman. And I agree with essayist Phillip Lopate: "The problem with confessional writing in this country is that people don't confess enough."

Lopate's astute overview, "The Art of the Personal Essay," (*Anchor*, 1995) crowns Seneca the Younger (c. A.D. 3-65) as personal essay originator. "Words are so over," a Facebook friend joked. Let's hold off decreeing the death of writing categories, especially platforms that spotlight women and minorities, and train more talented editors. The genre is flourishing. The question, as in any art form or profession, is how to make it better.

Susan Shapiro is a New School professor who teaches personal essay writing and is the New York Times best-selling author/co-author of 10 books. Her most recent novel is "What's Never Said" (Heliotope Books).