

Chapter 6

The Incest Survivor Memoir

Memoirs about recovered memories of incest share in the new possibilities for expressing experiences of incest, but their reception has been influenced by the shift from media coverage largely supportive of recovered-memory stories in the late 1980s to coverage largely supportive of false-memory stories in the early 1990s. Prominent feminists have been among those voicing concerns about women's autobiographical tales of recovering memories of child abuse. Louise Armstrong, for example, followed her feminist anthology of incest narratives *Kiss Daddy Goodnight* (1978) with another book, *Rocking the Cradle of Sexual Politics* (1994), that scathingly indicts the recovery movement as betraying earlier feminist political analyses of incest as about power. How, Armstrong asks in this book, did we "go from total silence" (7) to so much mainstream media "noise," from a "feminist literature [that] boldly addressed the need for social change" (11) to a language of "personal pathology and recovery" promulgated by therapists? (39). As we have seen, other feminist writers such as Elaine Showalter, Carol Tavris, and Janice Haaken have raised similar concerns about incest stories as exploiting and making formulaic women's varied experiences of distress. Echoing Louise Armstrong's fears that incest literature is now a consumer fad, they suggest that the "incest industry" is feeding upon a victim culture that has encouraged women to write self-pitying tales about their fantasized woes. Incest, such critics tell us, is too hot a topic, the only one that sells. So much is this now the voice of common sense that it seems undeniable that there are too many incest memoirs. As it turns out, incest survivor memoirs are less available and heavily marketed than these commentators fear.

In this chapter, we will analyze incest survivor memoirs as a way of telling incest that, importantly, is distinct from those stories included in abbreviated form in anthologies and self-help books, fictionalized in novels and movies, or bandied about on many a talk show. By *incest survivor memoirs* we mean American and Canadian book-length autobiographical accounts about recovering memories of incest. These full-length incest survivor memoirs are far from readily available in huge numbers. A dedicated search of large and small book-

stores, as well as several databases, yielded—with much more difficulty than we had anticipated—twenty-one memoirs.¹ From this set of twenty-one available books, we have chosen to discuss seven: *My Father's House* by Sylvia Fraser (1987), *Don't* by Elly Danica (1988), *Dancing with Daddy* by Betsy Petersen (1992), *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* by Betsy Warland (1993), *The Laid Daughter* by Helen Bonner (1995), *The Architect of Desire* by Suzannah Lessard (1996), and *Memory Slips* by Linda Cutting (1997).

When we began to read incest survivor memoirs we not only assumed that there were too many of them, but we also expected that they would have a predictable narrative pattern. The master narrative, so familiar that it almost goes without saying, would have the following plot line: the author—a woman in distress over her contemporary dilemmas—suffers from flashbacks and bodily symptoms that she cannot explain. Operating like a detective, with the assistance of a supportive therapist, she begins to understand the forgotten origin of these symptoms—incest. Then, through a process of reconstruction, she discovers that her father was an evil perpetrator and she a silenced victim. Healing takes a narrative form, a coherent story about the past that gives the narrator a new identity as a survivor. Of this master narrative, Paul Antze, agreeing explicitly with feminist psychotherapist and writer Janice Haaken, has written that it comes at the “price of inducting survivors into an illness idiom that excludes fantasy, moral ambiguity, a sense of agency, and the kind of remembering that can offer openings to the future” (11). In short, this narrative is seen to sacrifice a sense of the glorious complexity of human subjectivity and put in its place a reductive sense of self.

Our review of incest survivor memoirs suggests that critics of the genre have themselves told too simple a story. Indeed, incest survivor memoirs may be less formulaic than the two dominant narratives of incest that they challenge: the mainstream critique that says it is now all too easy to recover and tell memories of incest, and an older, yet related, narrative that insists that incest does not happen in middle-class homes. To our surprise, the memoirs that we read do offer a feminist political analysis, and contrary to feminist worries about incest survivor memoirs, they are not self-pitying victim stories. Furthermore, in their acknowledgment of paradox and contradiction, they demonstrate a surprising stylistic and formal subversion in their ways of telling about traumatic pasts. These memoirs bring an analysis of middle-class ideology to this formal experimentation, in which an “official” story of a protective and nurturing middle-class family is brought into dynamic conflict with the horror of something unspoken and finally unresolvable as experience, memory, or representation. In other words, as an emerging genre of autobiographical “telling,” these memoirs do not insist that they represent the past as a certainty or foundational truth.² As a result, the narrative “I” is situated less firmly as a type—the victim or survivor—than as a mobile effect of contexts past and

present. We hope to show how the incest survivor memoir thus differs from the recovery story, both in its challenges to the ease of achieving agency and identity and in the way it inscribes the intrusiveness and elusiveness of the past as two impediments to the construction of a coherent story.

These memoirs are written by middle-class women, which may explain why there seem to be too many of them. As these women narrate their pasts, their consciously remembered childhoods seem the very apogee of middle-class upbringings. They remember homes that range from Fraser's "three story frame house on a shady street" (3) in Hamilton, Ontario, to Petersen's comfortable home in northern California's most prosperous neighborhood, Hillsborough, to Lessard's life on an estate, "The Place" on Long Island. Their parents are often hardworking and dutiful, keeping the lawn trimmed, the "house smell[ing] like furniture polish," and "everything ironed, even the sheets, even the underwear" (Bonner, 37). So what's to complain about? These memoir writers take a considerable risk with their readers' patience. Some reviewers of these memoirs suggest that, given such comfortable lives, these women should not harp on their unhappy pasts. Further, the received story enforces the view that incest does not really happen in the middle class.

In an article in the *New Yorker*, Joan Acocella repeats this story, insisting that "as for poverty, study after study has shown its high correlation with child abuse" (78).³ After Acocella locates incest as a problem of the poor, she goes on to suggest that recovered memories and multiple personality disorder primarily appeal to women supposedly left behind by the feminist movement, "notably a large number of working-class women" who apparently go into therapy to get "something that they could not get from society: an interesting job" (69). Acocella thus reinforces dominant sociological myths not only about the shiftless poor, but about incest as a working-class problem. These myths are comfortable to a middle class, always fearful, as Barbara Ehrenreich reminds us, of "falling" and anxious to maintain its sense of virtue by scapegoating other classes. Given the evidence that indicates "incest is in fact more prevalent in the white middle class than it is willing to admit," Elizabeth Wilson points out that "all the hostile suspicion being raised about repressed memories seems like an instance of class consolidation against an internal threat to its moral self-representation (and eventually to its class power based on that self-representation)" ("Not in This House," 52–53). Thus it is not surprising that survivor memoirs written by middle-class women are met with incredulity and charges of self-indulgence.

It is feminine self-indulgence that is highlighted in critiques of the incest survivor narrative as too formulaic. Carol Tavris, in her controversial *New York Times* review of women's writing on incest, uses Betsy Petersen's memoir, *Dancing with Daddy*, as a way to point out this problem of the incest survivor memoir in more detail: "Betsy Petersen seems to have completely shut out 'the world

outside my skin,' and ultimately this is the problem and appeal of the survivor narrative. It places responsibility for the common problems in women's lives on a single clear villain, someone safely in the woman's past. The victim doesn't have to do anything except understand the origins of her problems. . . . And she gets a love bath from her friends and supporters. Who could resist?" (17). Tavis thus insists on the seductions of what she calls the survivor narrative; the survivor simply needs to rely upon a formulaic script with clear villains and victims; armed with this formula, she then "doesn't have to do anything but understand the origins of her problems." Likewise, the victim experiences no resistance to telling her story, given the promising reward of a "love bath."

Tavis's own desire to find polarized victims and victimizers in the survivor narrative makes it an easy target and masks the extent to which memoirs like those we are analyzing are structured by a paralyzing ambivalence, by the daughter's respect for and anger at her father—and her sense of guilt as well as her feelings of victimization. The father in many incest survivor memoirs, for example, is anything but a "single clear villain." Indeed, while the 1980s memoirs emphasize the terrifying power of fathers to silence their daughters by explicit threats, many 1990s memoirs render the father and the daughter's situation differently. So, for example, survivor memoirs such as Elly Danica's *Don't* and Sylvia Fraser's *My Father's House* represent the perpetrator-father as making specific threats and as dominating and intimidating their families. But in later memoirs, daughters rarely seem to be silenced by fathers who threaten violence. They instead write about self-silencing: the internalization of the perpetrator's voice and covert family "rules" about keeping up appearances based upon an understandable desire to remain ensconced in the security of a middle-class family life that is both real and fantasized.

Many of the daughters who write incest survivor memoirs describe themselves as girls who adored their fathers, represented as idealized figures of protection and generosity. Fathers are educated, often successful, and not infrequently respected by the outside world as compassionate, intelligent, and gentle. Betsy Petersen goes so far as to include in her memoir letters of appreciation from the patients of her father, who was a successful surgeon, patients who viewed him as no less than a saint. And, of course, fathers desire to be idealized—exaggerating their own role as providers—while also feeling insecure about their own power, a mixture of fear and strength that makes vulnerable adoring daughters a likely target for the mixture of violence and love that is expressed in incestuous assaults. Both the perpetrator and the victim attempt to live up to a cultural ideal of virtuous middle-classness—and the fear of falling from this ideal fuels compulsive efforts to make "good." Much work is involved in such facades, work that usefully makes reflection and remembering difficult. To remember would not only challenge a revered way of life, but would also indict the rememberer as crazy, as madly unable to appreciate and

be grateful for such an existence. Obeying rules of middle-class discourse—the demand to keep things sanitized and polite—makes it hard to rehearse and thus remember events that are so transgressive of the “official story” about how things are.

The “official story” is a discourse that reinforces middle-class ideology and is reproduced both in a family’s private attempts to keep up appearances (efforts described in most incest survivor memoirs) and in celebrations of middle-class family life by the media, church, and state. This discourse promotes a sense of the middle-class family as benevolent and orderly, governed by parental figures who are protective and in control. In a sense, trauma theory requires recognition of the power of dominant stories, such as this one, so as to understand why certain traumatic experiences might not be representable within them. According to theorists of trauma, a traumatic event is an experience that is violent and unpredictable and overwhelms an individual’s ability to integrate or accommodate it within an existing framework—a framework such as the discourse that we are calling the “official story.”

The issue of representability comes up in the very definition of trauma itself. As Cathy Caruth puts it, the traumatic wound is “the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world. . . . an event experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known” (*Unclaimed Experience*, 4). As most writers on trauma point out, a trauma is not necessarily defined by the nature of an event alone, since violent events do not traumatize everyone equally. Similarly, an early definition of traumatic events in the 1987 American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* as “outside the range of ordinary human experience” has been contested as neglecting the impact of repeated traumas within everyday life, with special reference to women’s daily experiences of violence. This way of rethinking the definition of trauma might be seen as making the definition too broad, but “trauma” need not stand for all women’s troubling experiences of daily life. It may usefully refer to a portion of them.

The debate about the validity of trauma theory, however, has less to do with the definition of a traumatic event than with what happens in the mental processing of it. That such an event might be “stored” in memory and return “absolutely true to the event” has, as we have already seen, been met with skepticism. Skeptics, such as Elizabeth Loftus and Frederick Crews, point to the inevitable erosion and distortions to which memory is subject over time. Responding to such criticisms, contemporary trauma theorists make a distinction between nontraumatized and traumatized memory, often relying upon the growing field of cognitive science that posits different memory systems and different functions for the brain in storing and accessing memory, processes that take place outside of conscious awareness.⁴ These writers also build upon the work of Janet and Ferenczi, claiming that classical Freudian psychoanalysis overemphasizes internal psychic conflict and repression and neglects the

impact of actual events. As Cathy Caruth points out, however, Freud himself returned to a notion of trauma that is in keeping with current trauma theory in his study of the “war neuroses” of World War I. Unable to account for the nightmares of traumatized soldiers within his own framework of wish fulfillment and unconscious meaning, he was astonished to find that these nightmares represented “purely and inexplicably, the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits” (Caruth, *Trauma*, 5).

Skepticism about the “literal return” of any memory often leads critics of trauma theory to point out that it seems to neglect the importance of conflictual wishes and of fantasy in the reporting of memorial events.⁵ To give one example, Janice Haaken, a careful critic, emphasizes what she feels is Freud’s main contribution to the understanding of mental life, namely the child’s active agency in the creation of meaning, a form of agency that seems to be obscured in trauma theory’s emphasis on dissociative states. Freud’s “repression model,” she writes, “posits that events with affect-laden, personal meaning are never passively registered in memory but filtered through motivational states and psychic structures” (*Pillar of Salt*, 74). In contrast, the concept of traumatic memory, which requires a notion of what Haaken calls “split-off areas of mind,” seems to posit an unacceptable and threatening passivity in the adult who is represented in this theory as “possessed” by memories. When the “possessed” are women, women haunted by memories of incest, they appear to be cast in a stereotypic role as both morally innocent and lacking in aggression and desire.

Yet precisely because critics of trauma theory tend to play up the rememberer’s capacity for fantasy, they often play down the importance of physical reality in the child’s life. Further, the perpetrator’s own capacity for fantasy may disappear from the picture, as it does in many false-memory proponents’ tellings of the father’s story. In other words, challenges to trauma theory may minimize the extent to which a traumatized child may be processing both an actual overwhelming, terrifying event and a perpetrator’s definition of that event, a definition that is a product of the perpetrator’s own fantasy (“we shared something special”) and that may also be internalized by the victim, who is often told she is responsible for what is happening to her.⁶ Incest survivor memoirs suggest the struggle of the memoir writer to represent and to account for disturbing, returning fragments of memories that are at odds with a fantasized self-image that is, itself, in part built upon the idealized notion that middle-class families are a safe haven from familial violence. It is precisely this gap between the sanitized picture of middle-class life and unspoken and barely remembered horrors that is an expressed source of great pain for writers of incest survivor memoirs. In *The Architect of Desire*, Suzannah Lessard captures the consequences of denying experiences of familial violence:

In the beautiful environment of the family past, there was a magnificent figure who had gone out of control, in ways destructive to those in his course—including his family—and ultimately to himself. Behind my memories of a blissful childhood in a beautiful place, there were also destructive forces that were blind and out of control, but unacknowledged. Yet to this inner truth and all its ramifications I had no access. (4–5)

The child in such an environment loses “access” to what everyone around her also denies, the irrational and often violent behavior of adults. Fathers, in the sacrosanct privacy of their well-kept middle-class homes, are further protected by an ideology of success that garners the admiration of the outside world. Given this level of denial, it is not surprising that these memoirs are shaped by a sense of something hidden, forgotten, a “secret.” Feelings about the past as both idyllic and violent are perhaps best summed up in Lessard’s oxymoronic phrasing: the past, she writes, was for her, a site of “serene catastrophe” (56).

The conventional view of incest, namely that it is found only among “other” families, makes it especially plausible that incest within the middle-class family would be experienced as traumatic by the victim and understood as confabulation by many others. Incest survivor memoirs, describing a gap between an experience of incest and conventional paradigms for understanding it, reflect and shape new understandings of trauma and its expression. Indeed, reading middle-class incest survivor memoirs helped us to appreciate the usefulness of efforts in psychiatry and critical theory to understand trauma, especially the pressure put on narrative by what is not fully narratable. Trauma theory’s basic insight is that trauma is produced by just the sort of gap between a discourse of benign normality and a lived reality of abuse as that experienced by middle-class daughters. Indeed, trauma is defined by the inability of victims to integrate experiences of violence into a culturally dominant paradigm about how everyday, mainstream reality is understood. So, for example, the internalization of a domestic ideology that exalts middle-class morality and material success makes experiences of incest inexplicable to the child victim and perhaps to her victimizer as well. The experiences are a content without a language or a form of knowledge to speak them.

Far from feeling that they have a story that is easy to tell, these writers report, as Helen Bonner does in her memoir, “No one ever worked harder to discredit my own memories than I did. They emerged despite enormous resistance” (243). As Bonner puts it in the beginning of her memoir, “What if something even did happen back there. It was so many years ago, what did it matter? I was fine. I had a good job. I did it well. I had good friends. Leave it alone” (15). Here, again, middle-class prosperity argues against unnamed and unnameable experiences. Elly Danica also describes “enormous resistance” to

remembering. Her memoir, *Don't*, “took so long to write, through so much denial, through so many false starts, so many pages of pain. Thirteen years and 2,100 pages later the book is published” (Afterword, 97). The finished book is only one hundred pages long. The media’s commonsense view of incest stories is that they are all too easy to tell. What these memoir writers reveal instead are the powerful social, economic, and psychological forces that constrain both remembering and telling.

These women are constrained not only by their internalized sense of, and desire to maintain, middle-class order and safety within the family, but also by their internalized commonsense view that such horrifying experiences could never have been forgotten. Because they also share mainstream doubts about the credibility of memories of incest, victims feel that flashbacks and fragmentary memories could be proof of their own craziness. Betsy Petersen portrays that part of herself as an internalized “red-faced prosecutor” who says to her, “I am willing to believe . . . that you have not deliberately lied. But isn’t it possible, just remotely possible, that you might be mistaken? How in the world can you expect us to believe that you *forgot* something of such importance?” (158). One reviewer of Sylvia Fraser’s *My Father’s House* gives voice to these concerns: “What form of repression could have Fraser disavowing incidents that recurred over the first 17 years of her life, while leaving her to function as well as she did? How are we to understand the status of her memories?” (Hamilton, 33). The issue here is both how she could forget and, again, how she could be so successfully functional and yet have suffered so much.

In our view, the severity of the problems narrated in survivor memoirs—memoirists recount an overwhelming sense of fragmentation and a loss of connection with their sexuality, their past, and their sense of worth—convincingly suggests past violations by a trusted and loved figure. Jennifer Freyd argues, for example, that any child, dependent upon caretakers for its survival, might be uncertain about, or unwilling to understand, experiences that suggest a radical disregard for the child’s needs and desires.⁷ As Freyd and other trauma theorists argue, a child is not simply silenced by threats but is motivated to dissociate experiences of betrayal, motivated to “not know” in order to preserve and protect a sense of order in the world and of a caretaker’s goodness. Forgetting, or rather an effort at forgetting, may be the child’s strategy for coping with an intermittently terrifying situation and ensuring her survival. Furthermore, these memoirs record the growing acknowledgment that a family culture of denial also reinforces the child’s motivation to forget. When those around her act as though nothing has happened, the child learns to minimize the experience of abusive behavior.

If we say that incest survivor memoirs are *plausible*, especially if read through the lens of studies about trauma, dare we say that they are historically *true*? Sylvia Fraser announces at the beginning of her memoir that she has found corroboration for her recovered memories, and Suzannah Lessard writes

that three of her sisters had the same memories of sexual abuse. But for many of these memoirists and their readers, it is simply impossible to know for certain. Our point is not to emphasize the historical truth of these accounts, though trauma theory asks us to consider the significance of actual events, but rather to understand the way in which the very impossibility of knowing for sure shapes these narratives. The writers of these memoirs, from this perspective, have the daunting task of making real—for themselves and their readers—a past life that is not ever fully known to themselves.

To dramatize her own experience of dissociation, for example, Fraser writes that as child she split into two personalities, which she refers to as the Girl Who Knows and the Girl Who Doesn't Know. Fraser's neat story of how she packaged what she could not allow herself to know or to remember is belied by her memoir, in which refused knowledge cannot be so easily managed. In telling her story of growing up, the narrative is repeatedly interrupted by fragments, printed in italics, of her reconstructed memories of incest. Rather than being completely banished, then, it might be more accurate to understand the experience of incest as occupying a site of contradiction and paradox. Survivor memoirs attempt to tell a story about experiences that have never been fully accessible to memory but that continue to haunt and hound the victim. When traumatic experiences are never consciously articulated, rehearsed, or narrated, these historical experiences are not, as Cathy Caruth points out in her writings about trauma, "a possessed knowledge, but itself possesses, at will, the one it inhabits . . . [and] often produces a deep uncertainty as to its very truth" (*Trauma*, 6). So, for example, not ever having been fully known, the experience of incest announces itself in muted, repetitive symptoms that intrude, belatedly, to mark traumatic moments of the disconnected past. These symptoms create other forms of disconnection: in all the memoirs, writers talk about feeling cut off from self and others.

The traumatic event, in other words, can only be known in its aftereffects. Elly Danica, for example, says that she was motivated to remember when she found herself "unable to function on any level in the real world, to hold a job, to handle a relationship" (qtd. in Gzowski, ix). Sylvia Fraser could not find a reasonable explanation for a seemingly irrational hatred for her father, a terror of her own home, a driving anxiety that accompanied roller coaster changes in mood, and an almost compulsive need to write novels full of sexual violence, even as she never set out to tell such stories. Betsy Petersen writes that her inexplicable rage at the demands of her sons prevented her from, as she puts it, "being the mother I wanted to be" (4). Linda Cutting, a concert pianist, stopped being able to perform because she suffered memory slips. Suzannah Lessard writes of early promiscuity, a broken marriage, and finally a writing block that was only lifted when a conversation with her sisters began to make public her family's hushed-up history. In all of these accounts, the unbearable

symptoms that motivate these victims to tell their story mark a loss of connection, not only with significant others in their lives but with themselves and their sense of the past.

The writers of incest survivor memoirs, then, must contend with a set of conflicts and paradoxes that not only fuel their need to remember and tell, but also challenge the very conventions of the memoir that is their chosen vehicle of telling. In popular understandings of the genre, the memoir, as autobiographical project, lays claim to authenticity and facticity and makes a contract with its reader to record “what really happened.” Yet these writers have access to their pasts and what happened only through elusive memories and intrusive symptoms. The plausibility and credibility of what they narrate both contributes to and depends upon an explanatory, conceptual framework of trauma that directly challenges assumptions about memory as a reliable archive. The conventional memoir would seem to promise a coherent self that can be referentially captured, and yet these memoir writers feel that they are fragmented and must convey that experience of fragmentation to their readers. On the other hand, these writers would also seem to be out of tune with postmodern critiques of representation and unitary subjectivity because they choose to tell their stories in a genre whose assumptions and conventions are so aligned with realism. What is interesting from the point of view of narrative is that these writers have found a way to challenge conventions of realism while giving shape to the felt reality of their experience.

Though all of the memoirs aim to end numbing self-censorship and to challenge family and social denial, each memoir writer deploys a somewhat different set of terms to record the impact of this experience. Two of these writers, for instance, choose metaphors that have personal meaning, yet resonate on a mythically collective level. In this way, these memoirs both adopt and challenge heroic feminist models of “beset womanhood” and triumph similar to forms of feminist canon-formation that we have already discussed. Elly Danica’s interest in archaeology, for instance, led her to the myth of the goddess Innana who makes a descent into the underworld. The allusion to Innana’s journey structures Danica’s narrative of her memories as a journey through successive gates of hell, each gate marking entry into another more terrifying memory. Danica also chose Innana’s story as one, like the story of incest, that has been, as she puts it, “either hidden or retold from a masculine perspective where we are erased or marginalised” (qtd. in Williamson, 84). Helen Bonner, too, connects her personal story with stories of legendary women who have been silenced, by playing on her name and Helen of Troy’s, a reminder that women must reclaim their past or repeat it.

Though now some feminists challenge, as a representational strategy, the appeal to legendary heroines, this strategy speaks poignantly to the traumatized narrator’s feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness, feelings compensated

for by identification with idealized figures of strength or beauty. The reliance on legendary stories that seem to lend historical weight to these memoirs may also reveal the difficulty of finding a language for telling. Given the way these stories work inward, rather than outward as they would for the typical (male) hero, they record how hard it is to move on and out when so much—trauma, memory, gendered places in the family—pulls them back and in. Invoking patriarchal myth is repetition, as well as a plan of escape.

Other writers turn to structural metaphors of more personal significance. Linda Cutting shapes her narrative using the metaphor of “memory slips” and also by alternating between two narratives, set ten years apart, that reflect the way “time is experienced in the first movement of Beethoven’s Sonata, op. 109. One narrative spans a year, the other, one month. In the 1982–83 sections, time is moving quickly, even rushing by. In the 1992 sections, time slows down, almost to a standstill” (12). Suzannah Lessard is not only writing about architecture to tell the story of her great-grandfather, the famous architect Stanford White, but uses architecture as a metaphor to render the family legacy of denying the impact of White’s secret life of sexual promiscuity with young girls. She had long realized, Lessard says, that there was a “correlation between the architecture of my family history and my inner life . . . in both, something was hidden” (4). And even in a metaphor that would seem to have only private meaning—Betsy Warland’s bat that had blue eyes—the creature speaks to a personal memory of a bat in the house that was caught and buried alive still squealing, and also to broader cultural links of this creature in the popular imagination with the terrifying blood-sucking vampire, and, in other cultures, with shamanism, rites of initiation, and healing. These chosen metaphors, then, are integral both to the life being narrated and to the shaping of the life, and are a reminder of the memoir’s artful selection and design.

In addition to these familiar conventions of ordering are more challenging violations of a linear sense of time (such as those suggested by Cutting’s use of the Beethoven sonata). The more experimental memoirs incorporate violations of conventions of space in terms of both narrative distancing (that is, the space between narrator and reader) and the arrangement of words on the page. Perhaps the most experimental narrative, *The Bat Had Blue Eyes*, forsakes, as Warland puts it, “nostalgia for narrative” and renders her experience of incest in fragments of prose and poems that are not explicitly connected for the reader, even on the page. In an effort to explain how “in grade 3 i lost faith in words / At 43 I understood why” (35), Warland’s project is to place language in the foreground, not only deconstructing the part it plays in perpetuating and silencing abuse but the blindness involved in trusting its neutrality and transparency: “The reason that shook my faith in the written word far more profoundly. I was being sexually abused . . . as is often the case, my abusers’ words placed the blame on me” (34). Her experimental narrative, self-conscious in its

use of feminist and deconstructive practices and published by a small press, is unlikely to reach a large audience and challenge mainstream views of what the discourse for telling incest sounds like.

Elly Danica, in her memoir *Don't*, makes a more considered effort to challenge expectations that incest is easy to tell, while also creating a text accessible to a wider public. In an interview, Danica reflects upon her attempt to achieve this difficult balance: "I had to find a structure that would function on more than one level because I did not want to eliminate a whole group of readers who weren't interested in experimental writing. I had to make it clear enough for that group, but interesting enough for women who read it on more than one level" (Williamson, 81). Though the metaphor of a journey to hell anchors and guides the reader, the journey is presented in short prose fragments with no explicit transitions. The effect she aimed to achieve is, as she puts it, "to present on paper the pain of this experience with no space between the text and the reader. No distance" (qtd. in Williamson, 79). In this respect, the prose fragments both reflect and embody the narrator's sense of her self as "The woman made of potshards. Pieces. Not herself. Never herself. Who is herself? Only broken pieces" (*Don't*, 14). The voice of her father, a voice Danica has internalized, dominates some of the fragments and becomes intermingled with the narrator's own injunctions to herself: "Don't tell. Don't think" (7). By closing the distance between her father and herself, herself and the reader, Danica attempts a form that will help the reader understand the child-victim's experience of incest as a violation of boundaries. It is a narrative structure that "inscribes the dynamics of abuse at the level of reading" (Winter, 188).

Even memoirs that are more apparently reliant upon a realistic narrative line, such as Betsy Petersen's *Dancing with Daddy* and Helen Bonner's *Laid Daughter*, are not the predictable teleological fables of recovery that the mainstream press has led us to expect. Both of these memoirs, for example, announce the writer's recovery of incest memories immediately in their opening pages. Recovering more details of this experience and insisting upon its historical accuracy in every detail is not the point. Given the elusiveness, if not the inaccessibility of memories of past traumatic experience, "what happened" is deliberately and necessarily represented as a sequence of reconstructions that are shaped by fragments of dreams, associations, fictions, and journal entries. Bonner's memoir also undercuts the expectation of a straightforward journey from blindness to insight by narrating a repetitive process that leads her to ceaselessly reinvent herself; so much so that the reader can lose track of Bonner's many different jobs and relationships. Her repetitive reinventions of herself suggest an insatiable need to rupture intimate relationships. This repetitive rupturing is the point, serving as both symptom and clue to the childhood shattering of a trusted relationship. An acknowledgment of her past does not lead to recovering a coherent self; instead it gives recognition to her many

selves, with whom she “checks in” from time to time, an offhand comment meant to convey her sense that a composite self is quite ordinary (Bonner, 245). Linda Cutting’s memoir explicitly and self-consciously plays with the terrifying deep freeze of repetitious behavior that cannot be accounted for, a legacy of harboring a traumatic secret. Entitling a chapter “Fugue,” she uses this term both as metaphor and as shaping device. Musically, a fugue is a complicated piece ceaselessly inventing variations on a single theme. In psychoanalysis, a fugue state can refer to the experience of dissociation and the terrifying inability to remember that fuels repetitive behavior. Both in shape and in content, these memoirs reveal that the more the child “forgot,” the more she fell prey to the psychological paralysis associated with repetition. The repetitions of these memoirs, then, take shape from the traumatic experience they attempt to convey and, in doing so, challenge the conventions of realism by reminding us of the self as composite and invented. The story of achieving a sense of self, or “a whole that I could live with,” as Danica puts it, is also held up as the product of conscious design and selection. In *Beyond Don’t*, her second book, she reminds readers that her memoir is not the sum total of her identity. There are other stories that she could tell.

Recovery and healing for these writers, then, is bound up in an act of authoring, of trying to *own* memories, through a conscious reenactment, that seemed to own and control them. The narrative practice of acknowledging previously buried selves and memories and producing a story dependent upon reconstructions that make sense or feel real is less a claim to an essential unified self than a bid for a sense of agency and authority. Unlike recovery stories, memoirs of incest remind their readers of both the psychic and the political necessity of achieved coherence and identity, and the artificiality of this achievement. The selfhood and traumatic past of these memoirists are explicitly acknowledged to be reconstructed upon the base of bodily symptoms and fragmentary memories—something really happened—and yet dependent upon a language that enacts gaps and discontinuities and interrogates foundational truths offered by the victim and her class. As with narratives of the recovery movement that we discussed in chapter 4, the practice of writing is important to healing, but healing is interrogated by giving far more space and attention to the experience of trauma, the damaging legacy of the past, and the difficulty of telling it.⁸

These memoirs are haunted by the unsaid and unknown—and all of them are maddening because they both do and don’t recover from the past. In an odd way, these memoirs make the reader want what critics say they actually are: a life story written as a linear narrative in which the “I” achieves a new and triumphant identity as a survivor. Although Linda Cutting returns to her concert career, Fraser writes successful novels, and Lessard achieves family harmony and writes her best-selling book, their memoirs record something else; they

teach that stories about triumphs often mask pain. How is the reader to distinguish a false start from a genuine one? The incest survivor memoir is a narrative of self-understanding that reveals self knowledge to be a labored production that is both constraining (for it is a facile middle-class imperative to say everything is fine) and transformative, for the memoir revises and critiques that story even as it enacts it. Given this troubling of middle-class waters, it is not surprising that even feminists might feel that there are too many incest survivor memoirs, though perhaps there are too few.