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# Reader's Guide

from Mike Scalise  
 author of *The Brand New Catastrophe*

## Author Asks:

1. The epigraph to the memoir is from Anatole Broyard's posthumous essay collection, *Intoxicated by My Illness*: "You eke out your illness. You'll always be an amateur in your illness. Only you will love it." In what ways do plot or character elements in *The Brand New Catastrophe* grapple with that concept?
2. Vivian Gornick, author of *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*, claims that every memoir "has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that occupies the writer." In *The Brand New Catastrophe*, how does the "situation" interact with "the story"? What is the book's primary "circumstance," and how does that relate to the book's primary "emotional experience"?
3. One of the reasons I wrote the memoir was to put a very specific persona on trial—that of a young person who comes alive under the spotlight of personal disaster. How does that persona change throughout the evolution of the book's narrative? What stays the same for that persona, and why do you think so?
4. I structured the memoir as a series of "lessons" on how to tell a personal disaster story. How do you come to understand the hopes and desires of the narrator through these "lessons"?
5. Certain passages throughout the book are devoted to the pop-cultural history of acromegaly and its related condition, gigantism. How do these passages shift how you view the narrator, or his response to his own illness? Why?
6. How does the idea of control relate to each character in the book? Do any characters seem to have more control over their predicaments than others?
7. The book attempts in several ways to examine humor as a narrative element. In what ways is that humor successful? In what ways does that humor fail, and what does the success or failure of those attempts at humor reveal about the characters involved?
8. How would you describe the narrator's voice? What evidence in the text allows you to describe the narrator's voice in that way?
9. What is resolved for each character at the end of this book? How do the narrator's mother's resolutions differ from his own? What does it mean for both of our futures?
10. In his essay collection *Magic Hours*, Tom Bissell writes that a nonfiction writer should always "find a story that you are uniquely well situated to tell, a story that cannot be told without you." In this book, I zeroed in on what it was like to live with too many hormones, then with none. What story are you "uniquely well situated" to tell? Why?

# Writing Exercises:

## Exercise A

Write a one-page “how-to” primer for a personal experience only you can write about. Use a numbered list, like you might see on wikiHow, or Instructables. What is the first step? What’s the last, and why are you the person to write it? Who is your audience, and what do they need to know?

## Exercise B

Fold a paper in half. One half, give yourself no more than ten minutes to jot down the anecdote you have told the most in public: either at parties, or at work, or in a group of your friends. This shouldn’t be your deepest, darkest secret. Rather, the opposite: a quick tale that’s time-tested, that you tell all the time, and that you feel comfortable telling. Focus on the moments that get laughs, or illicit shock, or sympathy.

When you’re done, use the other half of the paper to answer the following questions:

- What is “situation,” or circumstance, of the anecdote?
- What is the “story,” or emotional experience at the core of the anecdote?
- What is your “persona” when you tell it?

Finally, use these notes write a fully fleshed-out personal essay that re-tells your most tried and true anecdote for a non-social audience. How does your persona changes for a reader as opposed to your friends, or classmates? Why? How do the situation and story interact? How does your persona change? And finally, what does writing an anecdote for a reader require that telling that same anecdote in public does not?

## Further Reading:

1. *Intoxicated by My Illness*, Anatole Broyard
2. *Patrimony*, Philip Roth
3. *The Two Kinds of Decay*, Sarah Manguso
4. *The Pharmacist’s Mate*, Amy Fusselman
5. *The Afterlife*, Donald Antrim
6. *Sam the Cat*, Matthew Klam
7. *Revolution: The Year I Fell In Love and Went to Join the War*, Deb Olin Unferth
8. *The Infinite Wait and Other Stories*, Julia Wertz
9. *Oh the Glory of It All*, Sean Wilsey
10. *Funny Misshapen Body*: Jeffrey Brown

