

5-MINUTE MEMOIR

Tales From the Writing Life

The One Story I Can't Write

BY BRENDA JANOWITZ

"Why are all of the mothers in your books so awful?" my mother asked.

"I don't think the mothers in my novels are so bad," I defended.

My mother explained that the world now thinks that *she* is an atrocious mother. Why else would I write about terrible mothers so often?

"You're my best friend," I said. • "Anyone who reads the Acknowledgments of my books knows that."

But she had a point. In each novel, there is mention of the protagonist's mother. In my first book, it's a few throwaway lines (where the mother is the butt of the joke). In the follow-up, she takes a larger role (but is also the butt of the joke). In my third, the mother is a major character (until she gets killed off).

"Why can't they have the sort of relationship that we have?" my mother asked. "Why can't you write about a mother and daughter who are best friends?"

I explained it to her: For fiction to work, there needs to be conflict. Without conflict, there is no story. Instead, you have a woman having lunch with her mother. They compliment each other's outfits and drink tea. No one wants to read an entire novel about drinking tea. (Except *Memoirs of a Geisha*, but that novel's protagonist had a very, very bad mother. *Hey, Mom, at least I never had any of the mothers in my books sell their daughters into servitude!*)

"Conflict," my mother repeated.

"Yes."

I went on: Without conflict, all you have is a character study. That's a good place to start, but then you need to put your characters out in the world. They need to experience adversity, whether internal or external. It's what drives all novels.

"Then here's an idea," she said. "It's the story of a woman and her mother, best friends. Her mother succumbs to dementia, then dies. The book is about the woman coming to terms with the loss."

"That's awful," I said, teary.

My mother's mother suffered from dementia that progressively got worse. At my son's *bris*, she'd forgotten that my husband and I were married, and thought that our infant belonged to my cousin.

In her younger days, Grandma Dorothy had been the Queen Bee of her friends. • She had killer blue eyes that sparkled, a mane of black hair that shone and a slim figure that complemented her petite stature. I learned the art of conversation by watching her. She was an amazing cook—her chicken fricassee was famous in our family.

As my grandmother aged, she remained beautiful. She



may not have been able to hold conversation like she once had, but most people didn't mind as she flashed them her baby blues. "Your grandmother looks great!" they'd say, not knowing her appearance belied the truth. By the time I realized how bad things were getting, I'd missed countless chances. I asked her for her secret recipe for chicken fricassee, but she could no longer recall how to make it.

"You said that if the mother and the protagonist were best friends, there was no story," my mother said. "I've given you a wonderful idea."

But that's the one story I can't write. I'm scared that my own mother will suffer the same fate as Grandma Dorothy.

I tell her this. And she says: "Ah, conflict."

Brenda Janowitz is the author of four novels. Her fifth, *The Dinner Party*, is forthcoming from St. Martin's Press in the spring. Her work has also appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Salon*.



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