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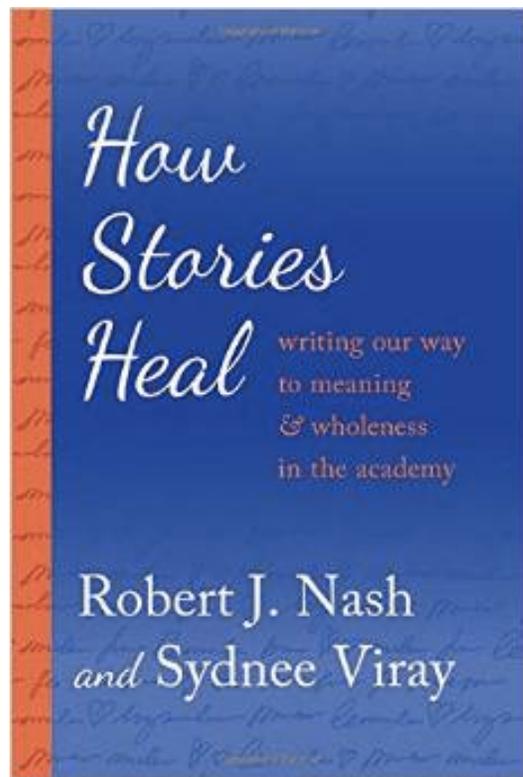
Nash, R. J., & Viray, S. (2014). *How stories heal: Writing our way to meaning in the academy*. New York, New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

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Reviewed by Bette J. Shellhorn
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How Stories Heal: Writing our way to meaning in the academy by Robert Nash and Sydnee Viray showcases the revolutionary Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) genre created by Robert J. Nash (2004) and highlights writings in the SPN genre. Nash has been a professor at the University of Vermont for 45 years and Viray is a highly respected student services administrator at the University of Vermont. I was instantly interested in this book when I read the title. For years I have taught a writing class to undergraduate students and the narrative assignments always brought out hidden and heartfelt personal stories of the lives of my students. Many of the students focused on topics that were deep and intimate, often writing about the death of a loved one, a tragic accident, an unfortunate life situation, and other very personal topics that would not be included in class discussions. Reading Nash and Viray's book affirmed that writing narrative stories can indeed bring healing, and the process of writing can help to discover meaning for many of life's painful and problematic circumstances and conditions. This genre of writing is also explained as academic worthy and Nash and Viray maintain that SPN is as rigorous as traditional academic scholarly writing.



Shellhorn, B. (2015, August 5). Review of *How Stories Heal: Writing Our Way to Meaning in the Academy* by R. J. Nash & S. Viray. *Education Review*, 22. <http://edrev.asu.edu/index.php/ER/article/view/1866>

The book has three parts: Part I – The Wisdom of Scholarly Personal Narrative – Writing from the Head to the Heart . . . and Back Again; Part II – The Emotional Impact of Scholarly Personal Narrative – Writing from the Gut; and Part III – The Transformative Power of Scholarly Personal Narrative – Writing about Change from the Field.

There are seven chapters in Part I and Robert Nash explains the “whats, hows, and whys” (p. 1) of Scholarly Personal Narrative in this first part. Nash and Viray begin the book with Chapter 1, “Writing Our Lives as an Act of Personal Witness” (pp. 3-15). The chapter commences with an SPN letter written to Nash “Please Help Me!” (p. 3) and authored by a former student in an SPN course.

Chapter 2, “Writing Our Way into Healing, Meaning, and Wholeness: A Personal Example” includes a piece of SPN writing by Nash about “What Does My Life Mean? The Most Urgent Question of All” (p. 17). Nash shares personal vulnerability through emotions and thoughts about his own life and offers thoughts about cycles of meaning making for younger adults, young adults, middle adults, and older adults (pp. 26-27). The chapter ends with universal implications about the “take-aways” (p. 28) of SPN writing: *healing, meaning, and wholeness*.

Nash begins Chapter 3, “If Stories Heal, Then What Exactly Is a Story? And How Do I Find My Writer’s Voice?” with a quote by Peter Brooks (1985), “Our very definition as human beings is very much bound up with the stories we tell about our own lives and the world in which we live” (p. 34). Nash states that everyone has a story to tell and in the way someone tells his or her own story, we find the way the person wants to live (p. 35). Finding your own unique voice for writing your story is reinforced by six confidence building concepts, such as, “. . . be confident that you can draw in your readers” (p. 37).

We have a look into Nash’s SPN course in Chapter 4, “Starting Out . . . and Finishing *The First Class Meeting – and the Last – on How to Write SPNs*,” with a letter written to students rather than a typical syllabus. The details of the course are highlighted with student comments and the chapter ends with a number of “Six-Word Memoirs” (p. 66), such as Deepak Chopra’s, “Dancing in fields of infinite possibilities” (p. 66) (Fershleiser & Smith, 2008).

In Chapter 5, “*Dissecting My Own SPN Writing: One Author’s Self-Evaluation*”, Nash revisits a previously published SPN and offers a fresh look at his thoughts about teaching and learning. His original writing is annotated with comments about his views now and how they may differ from the first writing.

“How ‘Deep’ Writing Heals: When It Comes to Love, ‘We Are All in the Same Boat,’” is the title of Chapter 6, written by Nash. There are examples of deep writing in the chapter and the notion that we are all in the same boat is expressed throughout the chapter. Nash states that the mark of a true teacher is, “to edify and to love” (p. 106).

Maya Angelou and her writing is the inspiration for Chapter 7, “Some Pungent Reflections on How to Do Personal Narrative Writing: *Inspired by Maya Angelou*.” Quotes by Angelou offer the backdrop for Nash’s comments and reflections about life. “There is one main theme in all my writing: we may encounter many defeats, but we must not be defeated. A second theme is that human beings are more alike than unlike” (Angelou, 2009).

Part II shifts the focus to “The Emotional Impact of Scholarly Personal Narrative – Writing From the Gut,” with Sydnee Viray as the author of Chapters 8 to 11. In Chapter 8, “*Connecting My Isolated Self to My Communities*,” Viray describes her “journey from student to author, story-listener to story-teller, and assimilated community to community engager” (p. 118) and the chapter ends with Viray’s opinion that the greatest healing is, “to allow our stories to heal us no matter what others may think or believe to be true” (p. 122).

In Chapter 9, “Creating Wholeness Amidst the Brokenness of My Everyday Life,” Viray offers a very honest and vulnerable reflection of how she found wholeness through SPN writing. Viray writes a letter to the reader entitled, “To All Souls Who Have Ever Felt Broken” (p. 124), with her own life memories interspersed with quotes from others who touch on the very heart and raw nerves of her experiences. There is a journey in the parts of this chapter as Viray moves from “The Deeply Disturbing Episode” (p. 125), to “In Darkness, Detachment and Descent Are Witnessed” (p. 127), to “Deserving Detachment” (p. 129), to “The Cycle Transforms” (p. 130), and finally ends with “A Final Reflection on How I Found Wholeness in SPN Writing.”

Part II continues with Chapter 10, "Revealing the Healing Ironies of My Everyday Life." Viray shares the ironies in her life and how facing them, and SPN writing, have helped her to find meaning and wholeness in life. "The contradictions of our lives are hard to avoid, and, for me, being able to write from one theme to another helps me to see the meaning of my life come around 'full circle'" (p. 136).

In Chapter 11, "Walking My SPN Talk: Writing My Healing Is the First Step Toward Helping Others", the notion that self-validation comes before universalizability, or in other words, others might find healing through my own story. SPN is described as mindful writing (p. 143) and even though Viray does not view herself as knowing all there is to know about SPN, she encourages the reader that SPN is worth giving a try.

Part III is the last section of the book, "The Transformative Power of Scholarly Personal Narrative: *Writing about Change from the Field*." Three highly respected professionals SPN authors have a steadfast belief that change must start from within a person before change can happen outside a person (p. 145). Chapter 12 is written by Wind Paz-Amor, the Associate Director of the Living-Learning Complex on the University of Vermont Campus and is titled, "See Me, See You: *Finding and Accepting Your Authentic Self*". The focus of the chapter is authenticity and autonomy and Paz-Amor writes questions to herself and shares her own poetry that helps her make sense of life experiences and form a bridge to the truths she holds.

Madelyn Nash is the author of Chapter 13, "Enlarging the Circle of Students' Self-Understanding Through Stories," and she is also the wife of Robert Nash. This chapter begins with contrasting examples from her life and the chapter then goes on to explain how having a "responsive classroom" (p. 165) where students feel safe and respected, supported and nurtured can help students to take a risk to grow when writing from their own inner life stories.

Chapter 14, "Anybody's Fairytale," is written by Jennifer Prue, a professor at the University of Vermont in the teacher-preparation program. She begins with a letter to the reader about her life with the hope that others will be able to identify and find value in her story.

Sydnee Viray writes a letter to readers in Chapter 15, “A Final Letter to Our Readers: *Down to Earth Tips for Writing Stories That Heal*,” with 14 tips for, “getting started, sustaining, and finishing” (p. 187) stories that heal. These tips are “down-go-earth” and easy to follow.

As a person who has kept a personal diary or journal for many years, I found this book to be inspiring with fresh ideas to add to my own inner stories. The SPN genre is new to the academic world and offers a way for students and scholars to grow in rigorous academic writing while bringing healing to one’s own life by honestly writing about the deep places of the heart. My first impression of the book was that it is well organized and easy to follow. Each chapter is well written and has meaning and insight into the SPN genre. Through very personal writing, the genre is described, explained, and modeled through letters to the reader, personal stories, poetry, and examples of SPN. Readers will be able to find their unique voices and begin SPN writing to bring healing to their own lives for the broken, painful, confusing, and often misunderstood experiences we all have at one time or another. This book would be helpful to students, faculty, and scholars alike.

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About the Reviewer

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Bette J. Shellhorn, Ph.D. is the first person to obtain a doctorate in her family. Her father was a first

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