

# Remembering the Losses

From Hoosiers to Outside Shooter

BY PHILIP RAISOR

I did not write the memoir *Outside Shooter* out of a deep emotional need or a sappy talk-show urge to be confessional. I had no dysfunctional family, suicides, obesity or gun-runners to write about. I had no scores to settle.

But I had always been fascinated by personal stories, especially of an Ernest Hemingway or Malcom X or Joan of Arc and the lives that crossed the pages of Mark Twain's *Roughing It* or Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That*. Recently, I've jumped on Frank McCord's *Angela's Ashes*, Mary Karr's *The Liar's Club* and my colleague Michael Pearson's *A Boyhood in the Bronx*. In those stories, I've zeroed in on the changes in people's lives, and the effect those changes had on me. I knew, for example, when I read W. D. Snodgrass' *Autobiographical Sketches* the other day, I would never read his collection of poems, *Heart's Needle*, the way I always had. His personal life had become art, and his poems had become more personal.

I'm not saying I love to go to parties and have strangers tell me their life stories, but the literary voice is not the slurred speech of a late-night rummy. In literature, deft arrangement, selected details, pace and delicious surprises draw us into lives that become increasingly meaningful as action and thought lead us deeper into their motives. At times, because I know them better, I feel closer to King Lear, Madame Bovary or Huck Finn than I do colleagues and friends. The techniques of fiction, non-fiction, drama and poetry are all designed to draw us into experience and hold us there until we see or feel more deeply than we did.

## David vs. Goliath

So why did I write the memoir? Here's where the story gets really personal.

I once played in a state championship basketball game in Indiana in 1954 that later inspired two Indiana natives to write and produce the movie "Hoosiers" in 1986. The small-town team beats the big-town behemoths on a last-second jump shot. Even today, an older generation of Hoosiers can still remember where they were on the night tiny Milan beat towering Muncie Central, and as we arrive at the 50th anniversary of that game in March 2004, the myth-mill grinds on. I am a part of that myth, but as one of the "bad guys" who got his comeuppance.

Long ago I put that game behind me, until the movie came out. Then the questions, sometimes in a phone call from California, began. "What was it like being on the losing team?" "Was the game really like that?" "Was the Milan coach like Gene Hackman played him?" I couldn't remember. I made up stories.

Most movies have a short shelf life, but "Hoosiers" recycles monthly on TV it seems, so the questions continued. In 1993, I was even invited back to Indiana, where the governor gave both the Milan and Muncie players Indiana's highest service award, the Saginaw of the Wabash. My father was in public education for more than 50 years, and truly deserved one. I got mine for being on a losing basketball team. Perhaps it was then, out of this sense of irony and unfairness, that I began to review "The Game" and my life in the 1950s in Muncie, Ind.

At Old Dominion University, I have taught memoirs and the craft of writing in my classes for years, but I had not thought of applying my scholarly knowledge to my own life. As soon as I did, I realized I was already seeing my growing up from several different angles. From boxes I pulled letters, photographs, ticket stubs, faded ribbons, unfinished journals and school papers. Juanita, my wife and high school sweetheart, had her own collection of pressed flowers, mysterious notes and class texts. My greatest find was my mother's scrapbooks which she had diligently kept through the years that my brother and I played for the Muncie Bearcats (He won two state championships!). Then there were my family's reminiscences, hours in library archives, and friends' and bystanders' different versions of history.

Although the research was conventional enough, I kept shaping a narrative that changed not only with the evidence, but also with my feelings about the evidence. This was new. When working on the fiction of James Joyce or William Faulkner for an article, I would be persistently objective. Now, a game lost to Kokomo or a journalist's cutting remark would test

me. Did I want that in or out? Not, "Should that be in or out?" But, did I want it in or out? Before long I realized I would destroy my story unless I decided on the goal of the memoir, and then let that goal determine the content of the book. Once done, I became simply another character in a plot.

I embraced that idea, but tempered it as well. Total objectivity is not possible, and my goal was to portray living in the late '50s and early '60s when profound cultural change was beginning to surface on the American landscape. I knew from my first conception that the book would include a heavy dose of basketball, but that I would use it as Hemingway used bullfighting in *The Sun Also Rises* and the movie "The Turning Point" used ballet—as a dramatic center for discovery of both self and society. My coming-of-age story would include my version of the Milan/Muncie game, but only as the springboard for becoming aware of losses all around me.

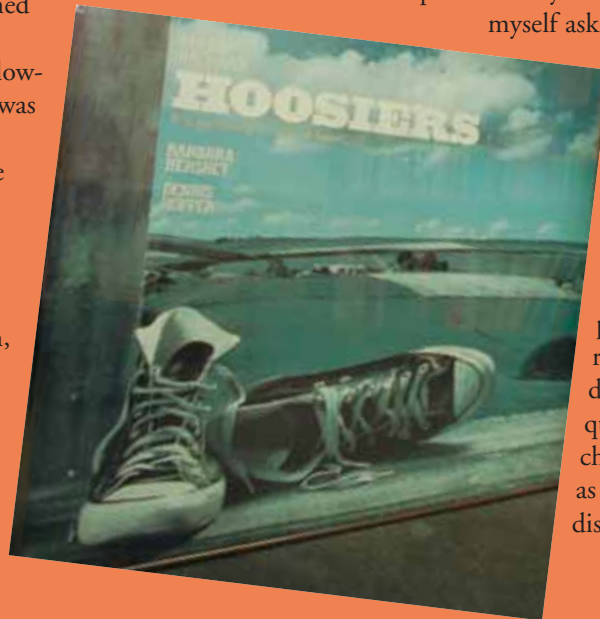
But trouble lay ahead. Central characters John Casterlow and coaches Jay McCreary and Dick Harp had died. I couldn't get their stories. Juanita and close friends Fred Scott and Mick Keppler didn't remember some of the events the way I did. Stores, landmarks, train routes and whole downtowns had been altered or dismantled. And how was I to tell the truth of what happened 45 years ago when my memory of some events was as sharp as a stone edge and of others was flattened out like waves retreating from sand?

Important questions surfaced. Should I change some of the names? Can I compress several characters into one? I remembered e. e. cummings' favorite caveat: "Don't let facts get in the way of truth." Did I have the right to invent scenes? I had asked these questions in the classroom, answered assuredly when I was examining someone else's text, but wavered now, in the middle of a scene, when no

concrete details leaped from my notes or brain. I found myself asking about the role of

imagination in the memoir, about the relationship of the memoir to journalism, creative nonfiction and even fiction itself.

In this age of proliferating memoirs, reality television and docudramas, these questions are inevitable, challenging, divisive and as ubiquitous as children disliking okra. But the



answers are elusive. They range from the strict adherence to known facts, accurate dialogue and photographic representation to who let the dogs out—meaning there are no hard and fast gates in this world of literary nonfiction. Noted editor

I didn't do that when I was growing up, but in recapturing the events I included in *Outside Shooter*, I realized how my own memory worked. I could remember individual scenes better than sequences of events, so I developed a

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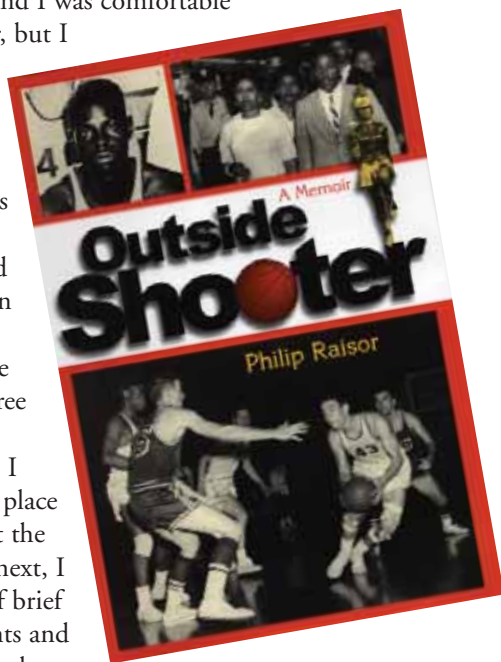
William Zinsser, in his book *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, which includes essays by Annie Dillard, Frank McCourt and Toni Morrison, says in his introduction, "Memoir writers must manufacture a text, imposing narrative order on a jumble of half-remembered events. With that feat of manipulation they arrive at a truth that is theirs alone, not quite like that of anybody else who was present at the same events."

## More than a Memoir

I set my posts as close as I could to the truth I remembered and could verify, and I was comfortable with chronological order, but I

wanted the story to live as an engaging work of art as well. At one point, one of the chapters was presented as a series of letters I had adapted from some I had sent to Juanita. That plan was later discarded. Another chapter used the tall-tale format about three boys on a raucous jaunt. That was retained. Since I wanted meaning to take place on several levels, not just the level of what-happened-next, I introduced a sequence of brief scenes about bees and ants and swamps which I tied together at the end in order to enhance the significance of a young man's understanding of his connection to society. I realized that these devices might not be immediately recognized, but that was all right—understanding and pleasure often happen below a conscious grasp.

My favorite device was the epiphany, a brief moment when even the commonest object or situation reveals a significant meaning. For example, if you listen to a strained, whispered conversation at the next table in a restaurant, one that jumps from subject to subject, you probably can imagine the texture and tone of two peoples' whole lives together. James Joyce used to carry around 3 x 5 cards, and at parties, pubs and parades, he would epiphanize a gesture or action, and then use it in one of his books.



method of connecting epiphanies. Important scenes early in the book could be brought back later when they could provide insight into the development of a character's mind. The result, perhaps, could surprise and delight both the character and the reader.

Here is an example, in three scenes, of how it works in the book.

The first is when John Casterlow and Oscar Robertson, both black, shake hands immediately following Indianapolis' Crispus Attucks High School's defeat of the Muncie Central Bearcats in the 1955 "Dream Game":

*Oscar had dropped in 25 points, and John had 21. I reached to shake Oscar's hand, but it was extended toward John's.*

*'A war,' Oscar said.*

*'I know, man,' John said. 'You did great.'*

*'You, too. You, too,' Oscar said.*

*I watched them looking at each other. Then I watched them understand. I don't know what they understood, but they were looking past the eyes into something deeper. Only a year ago, I had done that with John and seen a friend, someone who would understand without words. But Oscar and John had gone somewhere else, I thought. They weren't on the same team, but they were in the same place.*

Much later in the story I prepare to pass out petitions on the Louisiana State University campus and expect a confrontation with fellow students and, possibly, police. Juanita is apprehensive. When I say lightheartedly that surely she would save me if I got in trouble, she says she wouldn't:

*I stepped back, feeling as though air had been pulled from around me. 'Does that mean you don't love me enough to save me?'*

*She smiled, shook her head slowly, and came into my arms. 'It's not about love, darling,' she said. 'It's about saving yourself.'*

*In the silence, as we held each other, I let her words sink in. Slowly I felt the rightness of them. They seemed true to her life. How else had she learned to survive, to live, to relate to others, without drowning? I suddenly thought of what my mother had once said about having to save yourself. I didn't know my mother's life. I couldn't understand. I knew Juanita's life. I felt closer to her now than ever before.*

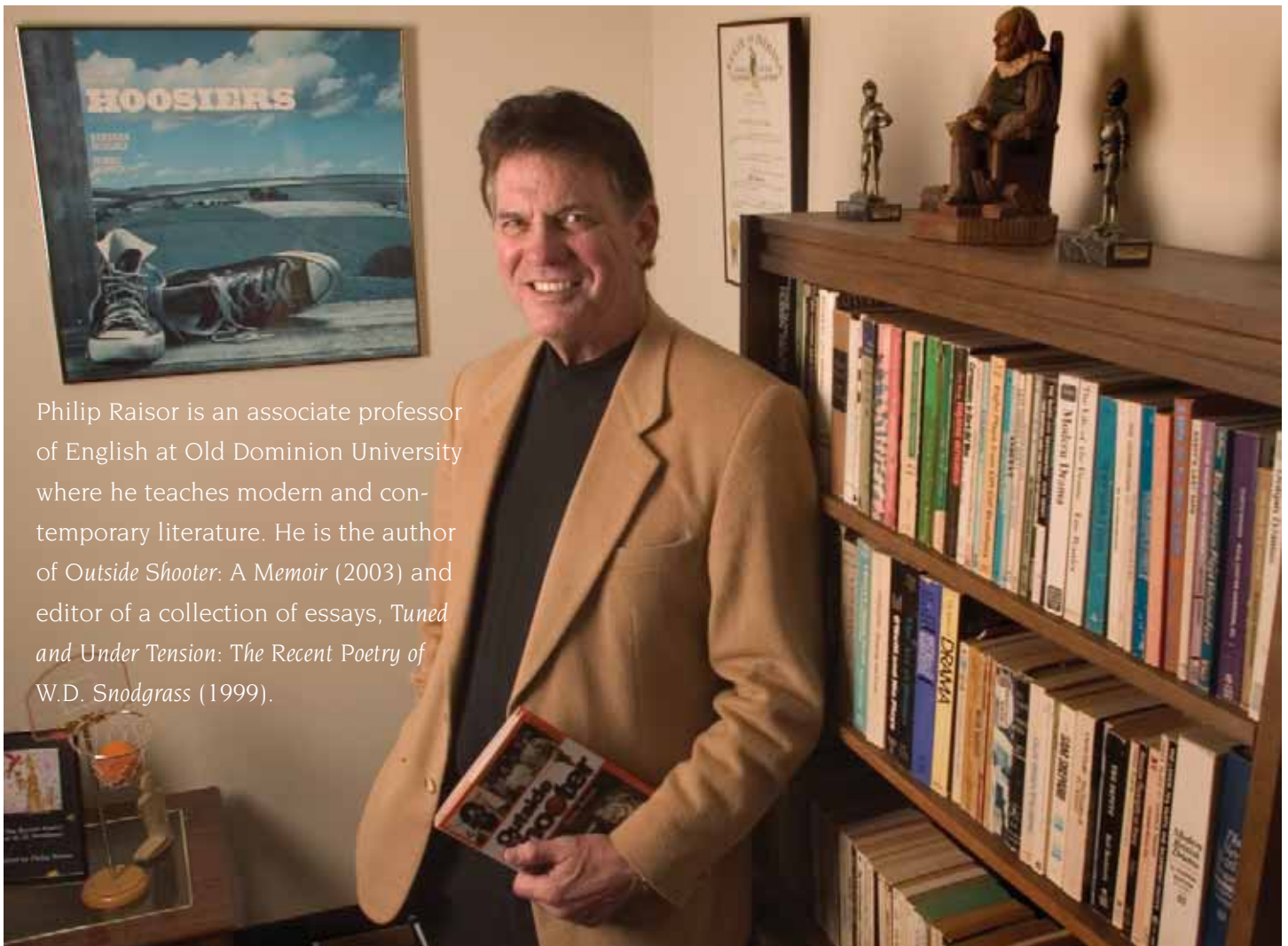
The connection between these two scenes is finally made following early civil rights protests in 1960, when black students from Southern University marched on downtown Baton Rouge, sat at lunch counters and demanded their rights. I was told my help wasn't needed. This protest was theirs.

*For the first time, I thought I understood what John Casterlow and Oscar Robertson saw when the two basketball adversaries shook hands at the end of a game. Color did matter. Maybe it would not forever, but for now, it was a bond that only they, at the deepest level, could share. How could that not be true? My wife's bond with herself was rooted in the same perception. We don't choose our circumstances, but we certainly rise or fall on what and who we learn to trust. If she trusted herself more than me, she was right to do so. She had learned from long experience that she would not let herself down. I was still learning.  
We all were.*

I really did engage the world that way, bits and pieces coming together, surprising myself when forgotten events

would connect with current ones, and I would realize that I had discovered something important for me. In time, I learned to trust that process, realizing I didn't always need to hammer knowledge and understanding into my brain, but could let it come on its own terms.

Writing *Outside Shooter* took me far beyond my basketball seasons in high school and college, a history I could relive in a scrapbook way, but not a meaningful one. Certainly, the experiences of exhilaration, despair, competition, personal measurement and the dynamics of a community are all reflected inside the fixed lines, locker rooms and coliseums of this national pastime. But basketball is not life. It is a game. When I finished playing, I moved it into the garage with lawn mowers and other items on my "To Do (occasionally) List," but when a movie stirred the blood again, I brought it back into the living room. I'm glad I did, because I found that in my youth, though I didn't know it at the time, I had not only escaped the world I was born into, but had also taken from it the joy, knowledge and limits of the escape. An outside shooter may go his own way, but he's still part of the team.



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