**Is *Night* a True Story?**

**Memoir**

A memoir is a special kind of autobiography, usually involving a public portion of the author’s life as it relates to a person, historic event, or thing. The text is about the personal knowledge and/or experiences of the author.

**Memory Construction**

Memory construction is very common with memories we claim to have from a young age.  What happens is called constructive processing, which is the retrieval of memories in which those memories are altered, revised, or influenced by newer information.  Because of constructive processing, there really is no way of knowing what part of your memory, if any part of it, is the exact truth.

Memories are not "stored whole." Instead, we store data used to generate an image or word or scene from our past. Each time we remember something, we are producing a fresh construction.

**Excerpts from “Truth and Fiction in Elie Wiesel’s Night” (Cockburn)**

* The book that became *Night* was originally a much longer account, published in Yiddish in 1956, under the title *Un di Velt Hot Geshvign (And the World Remained Silent*). Wiesel was living in Paris at the time. By 1958 he had translated his book from Yiddish into French, publishing it in that year under the title *La Nuit*.
* Amazon.com… had been categorizing the new edition of Night under “fiction and literature” but [after it was chosen as an Oprah’s Book Club Selection] hastily switched it to “biography and memoir”. Within hours it had reached number 3 on Amazon’s bestseller list. That same evening, January 17, Night topped both the “biography” and “fiction” bestseller lists on BarnesandNoble.com.
* …In its central, most crucial scene, Night isn’t historically true, and at least two other important episodes are almost certainly fiction.
* Wiesel substantially rewrote the work between editions — suggesting that the strident and vengeful tone of the Yiddish original was converted into a continental, angst-ridden existentialism more fitting to Wiesel’s emerging role as an ambassador of culture and conscience. …Wiesel altered several facts in the later edition, in some cases offering accounts of pivotal moments that conflicted with the earlier version. (For example, in the French, the young Wiesel, having been liberated from Buchenwald, is recuperating in a hospital; he looks into a mirror and writes that he saw a corpse staring back at him. In the earlier Yiddish, Wiesel holds that upon seeing his reflection he smashed the mirror and then passed out, after which ‘my health began to improve.’)
* …Wiesel [declared] to the New York Times that *Night* “is not a novel at all. All the people I describe were with me there. I object angrily if someone mentions it as a novel.” And yet, Silow Carroll [reported], “in the past, Wiesel hasn’t helped matters in this regard. In 1972, Hill & Wang packaged *Night* with two other books, Dawn and The Accident, which Wiesel clearly identified as novels. The set’s cover refers to the works as ‘Three Tales by Elie Wiesel.’ In a later edition of the same volume, Wiesel refers to all three books as ‘narratives,’ although he calls Night a ‘testimony,’ and the other two ‘commentaries.'”
* What is omitted in *Night* is that the 16-year-old was placed in a special barracks created by the clandestine underground as part of a strategy of saving youth. Block 66 was located in the deepest part of the disease-infested little camp and beyond the normal Nazi S.S. gaze. It was overseen by Czech Communist Antonin Kalina and by his deputy, Gustav Schiller, a Polish Jewish Communist.
* Schiller, who appears briefly in *Night*, was a rough father figure and mentor, especially for the Polish-Jewish boys and many Czech-Jewish boys; but he was less liked, and even feared, by Hungarian- and Romanian-Jewish boys, especially religious boys, including Wiesel. He appears in *Night* as a distant figure, armed with a truncheon.
* Wiesel since has acknowledged the role played by the clandestine underground but did not attend to it in *Night*. Fellow barracks members recall being protected from work and getting extra food. They recall efforts by their mentors to raise their horizons. They also recall heroic intervention …by Schiller during the final days to protect them.

**Questions for your group to consider** (Discuss and prepare to report your views to the class):

* Based on the facts that Wiesel started writing *Night* ten years after his release from the internment camp, which it’s been translated and rewritten several times over decades, and the information provided above, should we read it as a true, historical document?
* Should *Night* be classified as fiction?
* Does *Night* mean less if it is fictional?

Resources:

* <http://www.barbaradoyen.com/writing-nonfiction/what-is-a-memoir-what-makes-a-memoir-different-from-an-autobiography-or-biography>
* <http://www.counterpunch.org/2006/04/01/truth-and-fiction-in-elie-wiesel-s-night-is-frey-or-wiesel-the-bigger-moral-poseur/>
* <https://sites.psu.edu/intropsychs14n1/2014/03/06/long-term-memory-and-memory-construction/>
* <http://www.intropsych.com/ch06_memory/memory_as_a_construction.html>