Taking It Personally: A Feminist Defense Of The First-Person Essay


All too often, a field filled with women, Jews, gay men and lesbians and people of color winds up (like teaching and nursing) marginalized. Tolentino, 28, a newyorker.com contributing writer, worked at Hairpin and at Jezebel for three years, from 2013 to 2016. There she wrote and printed the kind of “too personal “insignificant” personal essays her 1,900-word screed is now trashing. Yet the “ultra-confessional” personal essay “boom” by unknown writers that she addresses negatively did not start, as her piece asserts, in 2008, it wasn’t a “boom,” and it didn’t fade when she switched gigs. Moving on to higher-brow lit-crit doesn’t necessitate her about-face, especially when her semantic argument is myopic and disingenuous, ironically, in The New Yorker — launcher of countless memoirs, essay collections and the franchise of David Sedaris.

Tolentino’s piece is doing what she’s criticizing: “inciting outrage” by giving voice to “horrible, uncharitable thoughts” for a splashy byline, a paycheck and clickbait. Tolentino briefly mentions the real talk of the town this month, The Atlantic’s fascinating personal essay cover story, “My Family’s Slave,” by Alex Tizon, but points out its “backlash” instead of its significance.

As a feminist, memoirist and writing professor with successful students, I wish younger women would have more awareness and less condescension for the revelations of their rising star sisters. White men with big books and bylines get exalted, while smart, witty authors like Emily Gould and smart, witty authors like Emily Gould and my former student Cat Marnell get bashed for their ambition and acclaim. Why is Marnell’s dazzling addiction memoir “How To Murder Your Life” (Simon & Schuster) such a target? Is it uncouth for a woman to admit to wild adventures without proper repentance while making good money? That’s something addiction authors Bill Clegg, Jerry Stahl and the “ultra-confessional” personal essay “boom” by unknown writers that she addresses negatively did not start, as her piece asserts, in 2008, it wasn’t a “boom,” and it didn’t fade when she switched gigs. Moving on to higher-brow lit-crit doesn’t necessitate her about-face, especially when her semantic argument is myopic and disingenuous, ironically, in The New Yorker — launcher of countless memoirs, essay collections and the franchise of David Sedaris.

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Luckily, first-person writing remains democratic. To be well published you need only three original, exciting pages. You don’t need money, a white penis, a college degree, a cute young body or media connections. Diverse talent is rampant among my New School students, and the personal can still be political, relevant and poignant in the repressive time of the anti-immigrant, anti-abortion Trump and Pence. Two women I teach explored recently their Asian roots, leading to first clips on The New York Times website. An African-American army mate lives in public could be somehow exploitative and exploited, I quote Nora Ephron, “Everything’s copy,” and try to emulate her grace and sense of humor. I always found revealing secrets in print cathartic and liberating, repeating my shrink’s mantra that to stay healthy, you should “lead your least secretive life.” Indeed, I owe the career my career, worked at Hairpin and at Jezebel for three years, from 2013 to 2016. There she wrote and printed the kind of “too personal “insignificant” personal essays her 1,900-word screed is now trashing. Yet the “ultra-confessional” personal essay “boom” by unknown writers that she addresses negatively did not start, as her piece asserts, in 2008, it wasn’t a “boom,” and it didn’t fade when she switched gigs. Moving on to higher-brow lit-crit doesn’t necessitate her about-face, especially when her semantic argument is myopic and disingenuous, ironically, in The New Yorker — launcher of countless memoirs, essay collections and the franchise of David Sedaris.

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