

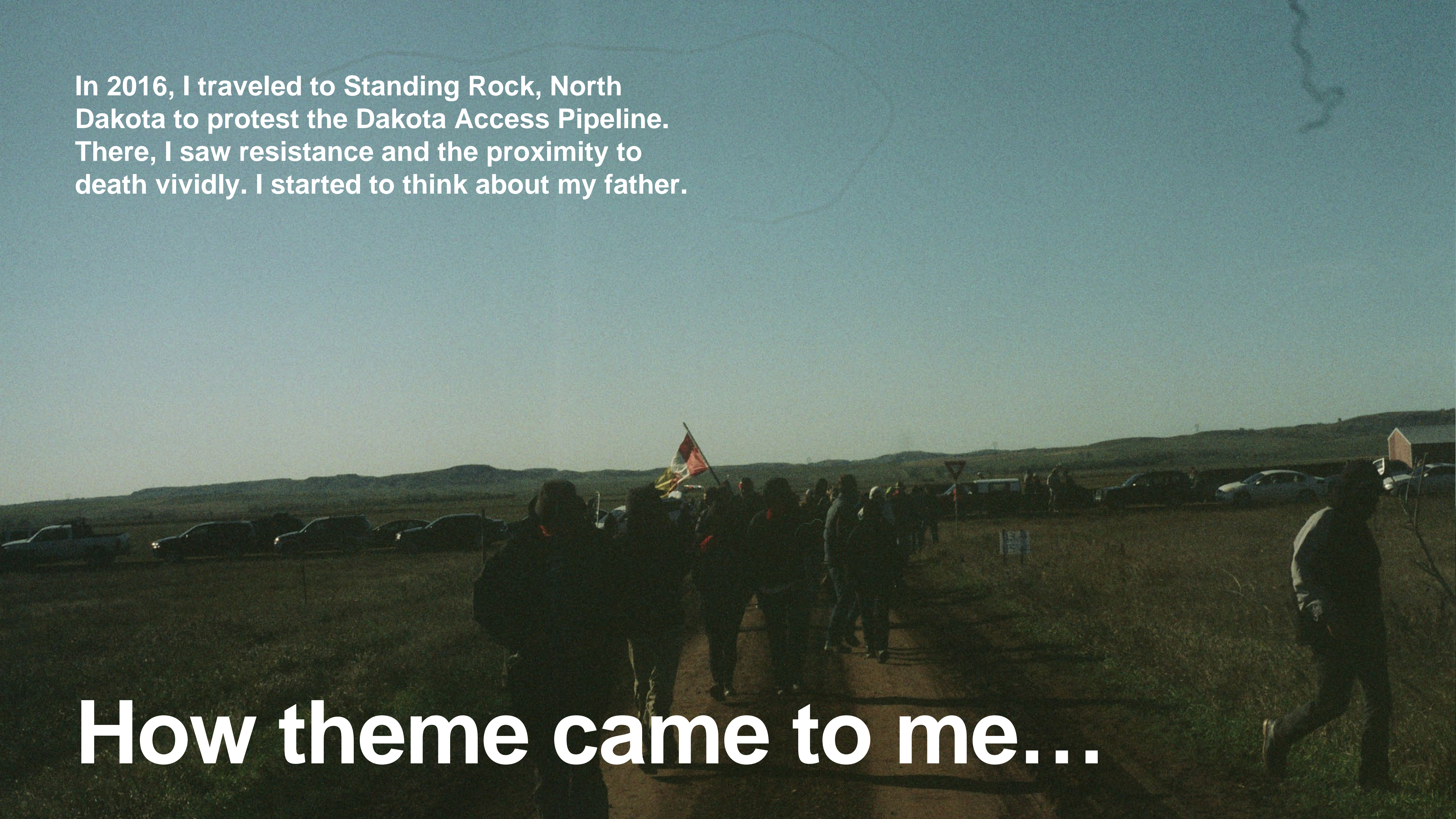
How Theme Can Transform Your Memoir

A Craft Lecture

By Prince Shakur, 2024

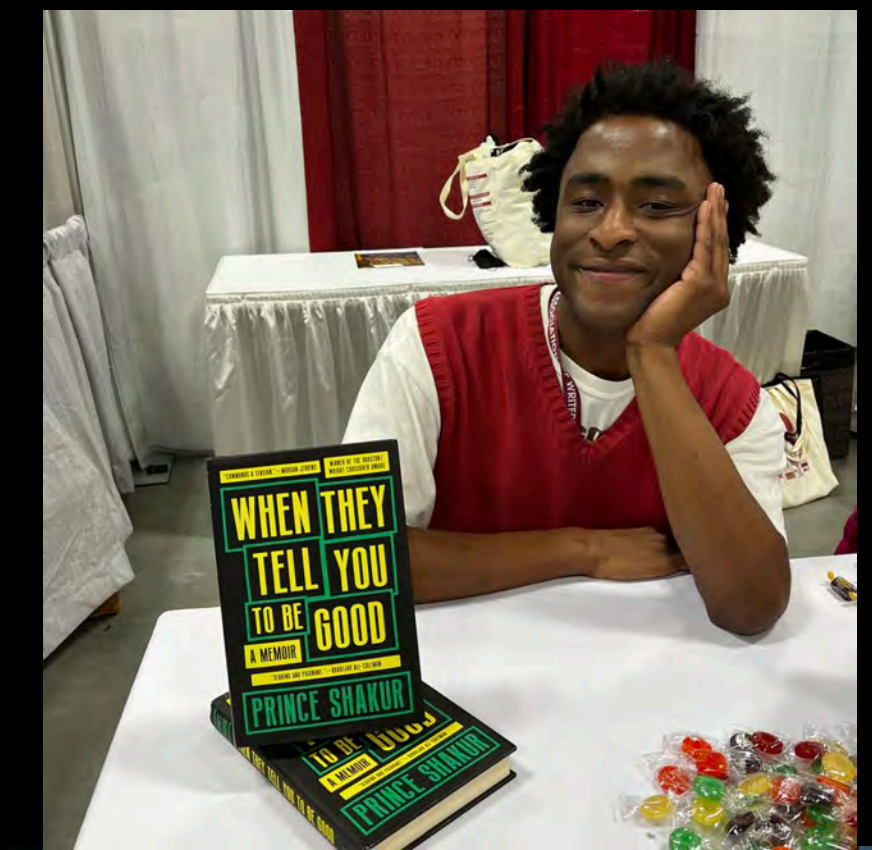
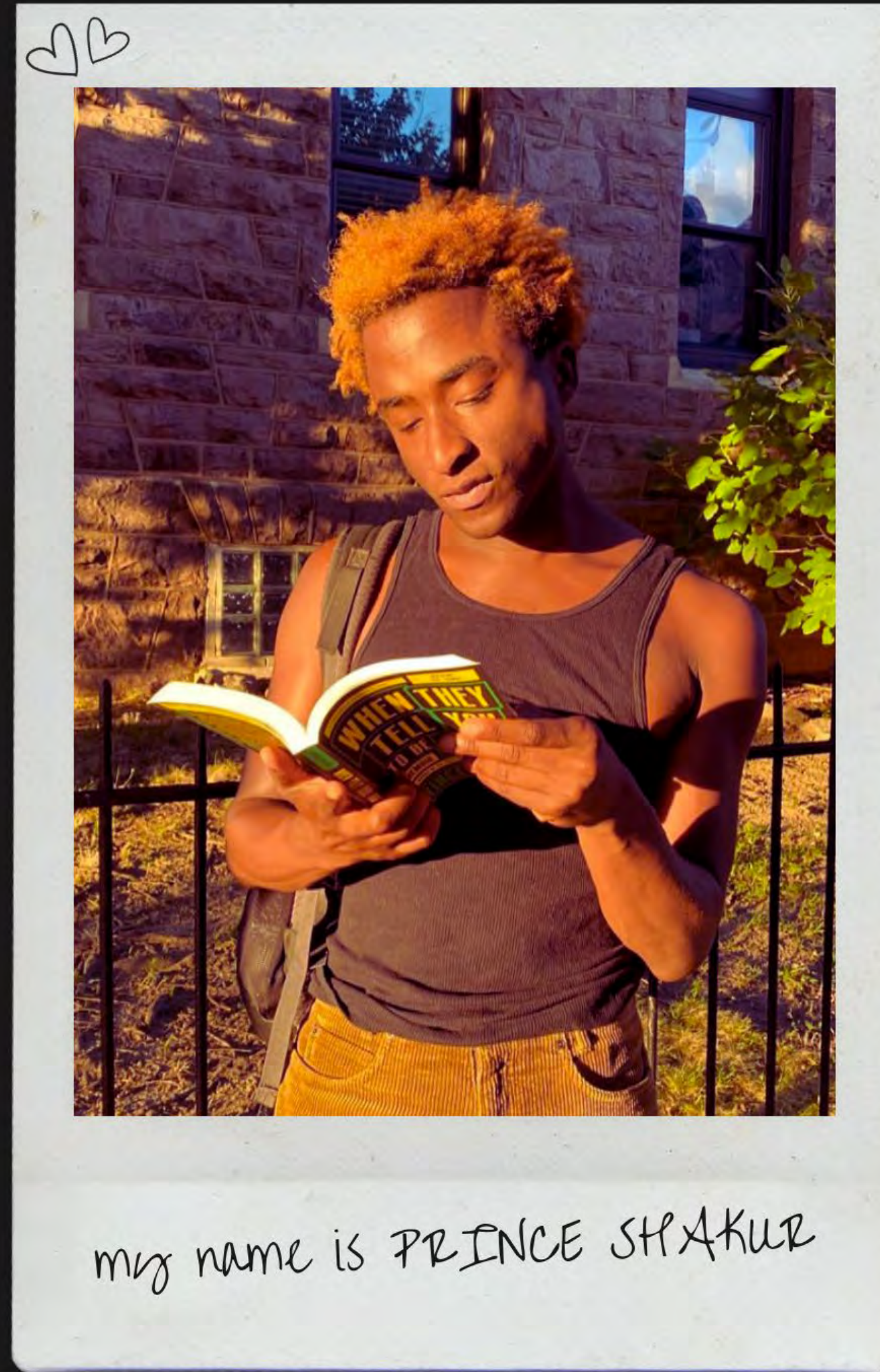
In 2016, I traveled to Standing Rock, North Dakota to protest the Dakota Access Pipeline. There, I saw resistance and the proximity to death vividly. I started to think about my father.

How the theme came to me...



WHO AM I?

My name is Prince.
I'm 29 years old. I've
traveled, organized
in numerous
communities, have
run podcasts,
educated on writing
and abolition, and
much more.

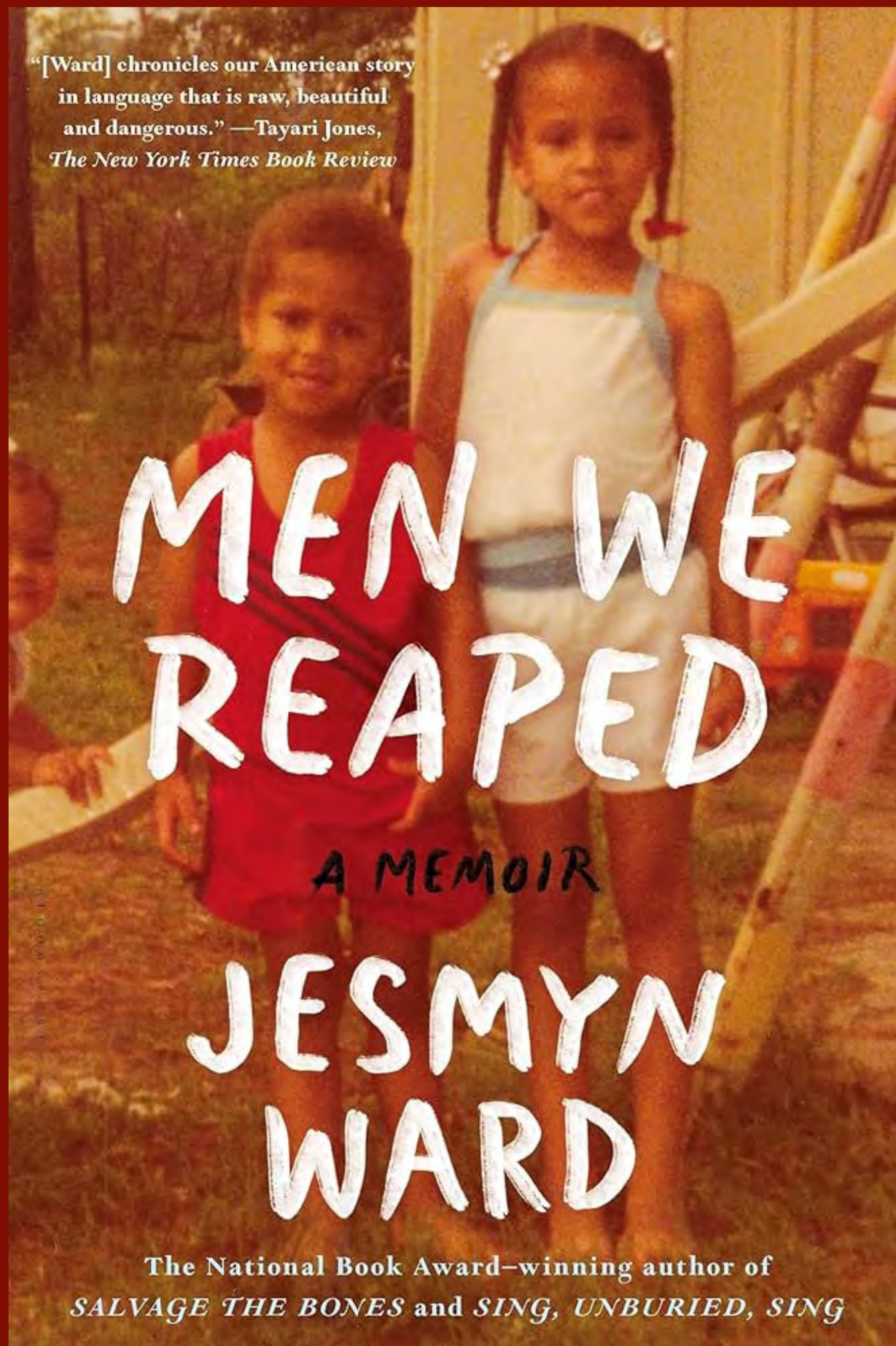


What is theme?

Theme(s) are the emotional, philosophical, and existential musings that give your book shape. They are the emotional hauntings that return to your character, the fatal lie they begin with in the beginning and eventually transform. In other words, themes are philosophical questions that can guide your character, affect their actions, or the world around them.

Some questions that help orient us around theme...

- What emotional or existential questions am I trying to answer in my narrative?
- What haunts you in your life?
- How have your values and beliefs evolved over time?
- Are there reoccurring motifs or symbols in your life?



Themes explored...

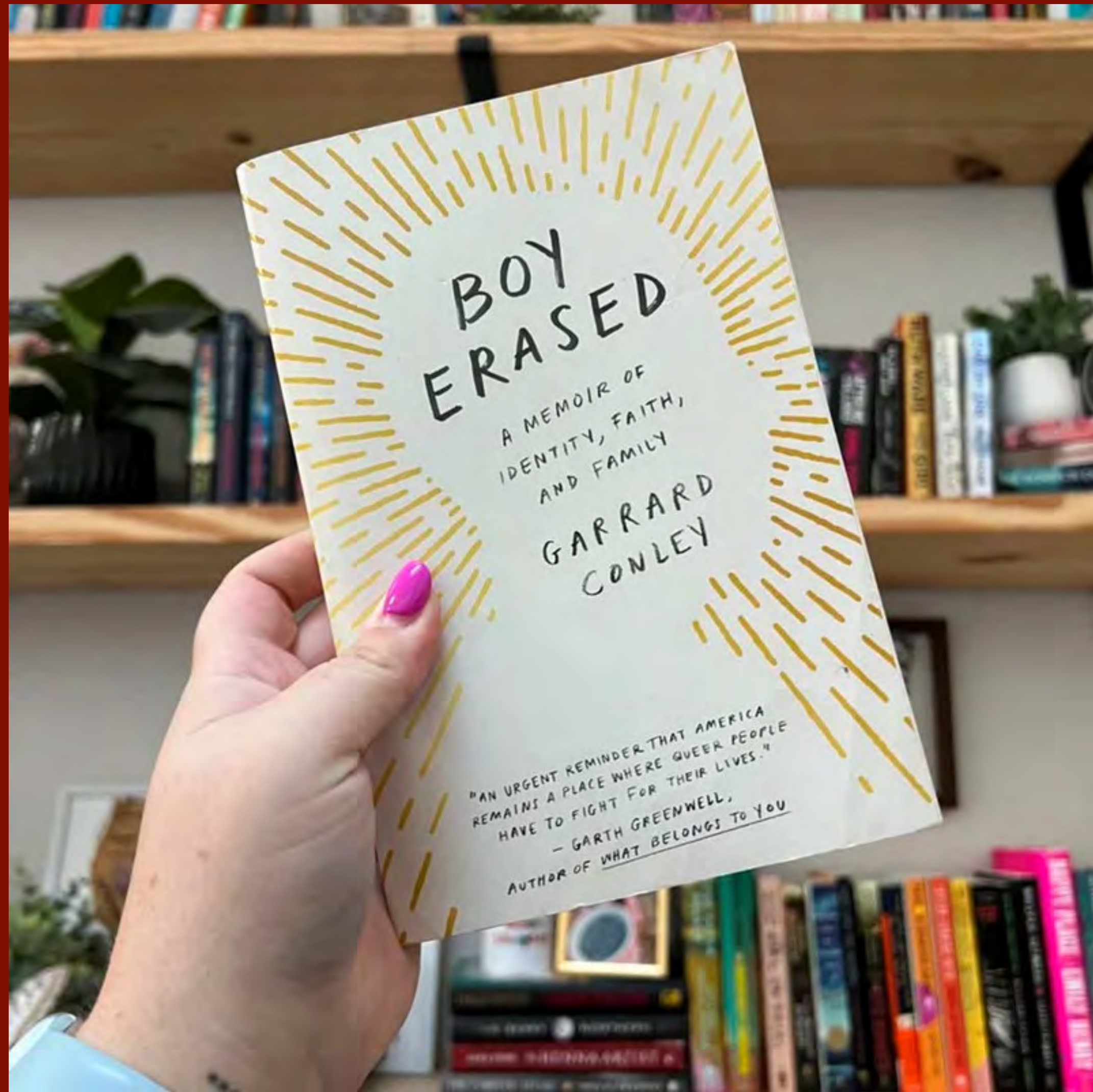
The role of women

Familial dysfunction

The complexities of masculinity

The pervasiveness of Black
Death

“Both of us on the cusp of adulthood, and this is how my brother and I understood what it meant to be a woman: working, dour, full of worry. What it meant to be a man: resentful, angry, wanting life to be everything but what it was.”



Themes explored...

The power of religion and denial

Not turning away from one's suffering

Family versus devotion versus love

Self acceptance

“You cut out what was once dear to you, ignore the ache in the back of your throat, erase the details you want to forget.”

Themes explored...

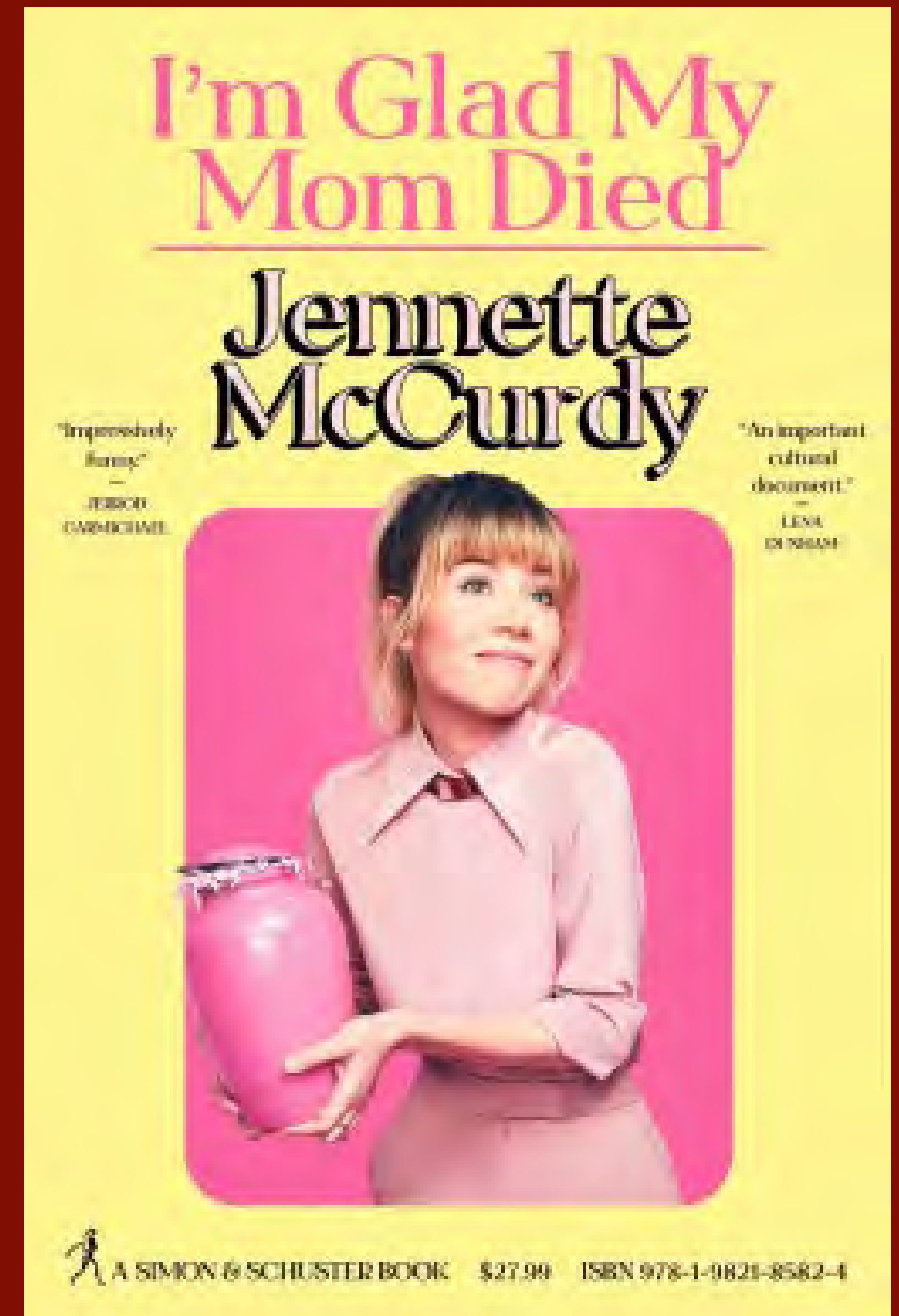
On the costs of fame

Dysfunctional child/parent relationships

Body image and autonomy

Self worth and family

“She wanted this. And I wanted her to have it. I wanted her to be happy. But now that I have it, I realize that she’s happy and I’m not. Her happiness came at the cost of mine. I feel robbed and exploited.”



II.

**How theme
transforms different
parts of the memoir
writing process**

Theme can help establish narrative structure

Since memoir is a genre of creative nonfiction that explores *specific areas of your life*, not necessarily it's entirety. In other words, memoir allows you to explore your life through one or a series of lenses. **This is how theme helps writers on the path to finding narrative structure.**

- What are pivotal moments in your life that taught you a specific lesson related to an ideal that you hold dear?
- What thematic takeaways do you want to end the memoir with? What do you want the reader to learn? And how can the beginning and middle guide this?
- What people along the way represent certain themes, ideas, or questions? Who or what moments hold the answers to long-held desires?

Theme on display in text to guide narrative structure...
When They Tell You To Be Good by Prince Shakur

FIRST LINES

“I was nineteen years old and traveling cross-country when my mother told me that I’d die soon, **like a man lunging out of a car and away from attackers.** I stood in the antique shop in Montana, frozen by the cracking sound in my chest. It was the second time in five years that my mother brandished my father’s murder, like a long and rusted machete. Is a **mother’s heartbreak worse than the heartbreak** she gives her son?”

MIDDLE POINT

“The dream ended like a hammer slamming down on my throat. The force of it bulged my eyes open, contracted my throat, and jolted me awake **as I scrambled for the backseat door handle.** I stumbled outside, thankful that we were in a parking lot and not on some highway en route to North Dakota. I stared out at the expansive dull green of the roadside off of the McDonald’s parking lot. It was early October of 2016. My tongue swelled in my mouth. A heat moved through me, lighting up my insides.”

THE ENDING

“We pull away **with the sky so huge and unnameable that I become a child as I melt into my seat.** I decide this place will be the opening scene of whatever book I write next. It will be a bestseller, a meditation on unmangled love, an act of revenge. I decide that I will be a star.”

On narrative structure

Theme can help guide research

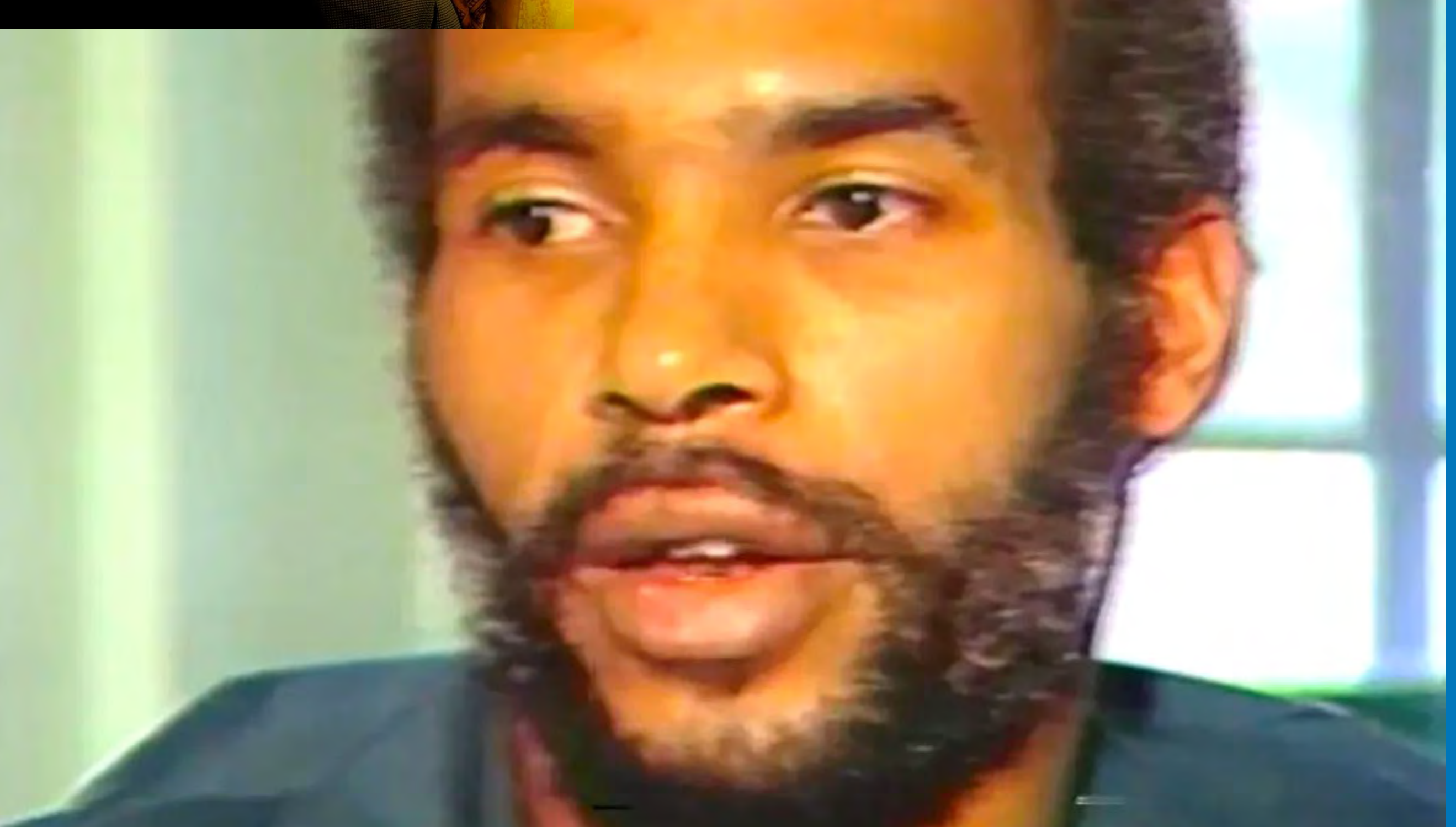
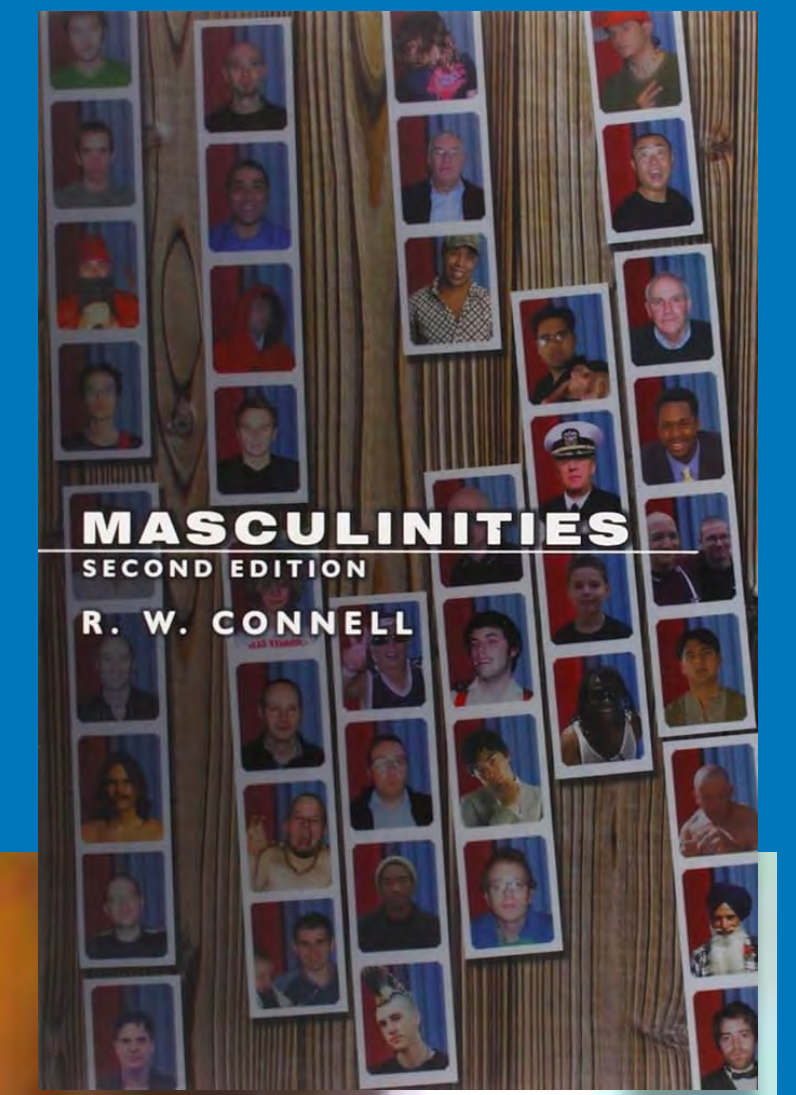
Since theme is personal, cultural, political, psychological, and more, it can require to research to deepen or expand our own understanding of it as artists. **Through this lens, knowing theme can help us know what to research to deepen the world of our memoir.**

LET'S TRY AN EXERCISE

Try writing a list of the themes you want to explore in your memoir. Then, write a list of questions to help you dive into these themes deeper. Which of these questions will require research?

ON MASCULINITY AND THE DIASPORA

Theme as research



Theme and the Foundational Lie

The establishment of a foundational belief in a memoir is crucial as it sets the stage for the narrative arc. This belief is typically deeply ingrained in the narrator's worldview and influences their perceptions of themselves and the world around them. It could be a moral value, a cultural norm, or a personal philosophy that has been inherited or developed over time. The theme encapsulates this belief and allows readers to engage with the narrator's mindset, making the memoir a journey of both self-reflection and shared understanding.

Questions to Consider on **Theme and the Foundational Lie**

- What is the foundational belief or core principle that has shaped my identity throughout my life?
- How did this belief influence my decisions, relationships, and life choices?
- Can I identify specific moments or events that strongly reflect the theme of my memoir?
- What external factors or life-altering events might have triggered a confrontation with my foundational belief?
- Were there internal realizations or shifts in perspective that made me question the authenticity of my long-held belief?
- How did I emotionally respond to the challenges and confrontations related to my foundational belief?

Theme can make your scenes come alive

Knowing theme can help orient your scenes towards being more proactive and having believable conflict.

Theme can help instill a sense of **CAUSE AND EFFECT.**

- By assuring that your beliefs (or themes) are throughout the narrative, you also provide a narrative opportunity to have these themes/beliefs challenged, therefore showing your principles as a narrator.
- If a narrator is poor and needs food and a theme in the memoir is the evils of hoarding resources, this can lead the character to confront theme through robbing a bank to make ends meet (a confrontation) of theme.
- In other words, your narrator should have **moments of thematic confrontation throughout the narrative.**

How I did this in my own memoir....

“I knew what was coming—the sometimes pained twinkle in her eye whenever I talked about how fun Crystal was, how threatened my mother felt over my level of ease with Crystal’s family, and how this could mean that I, in turn, didn’t care enough to understand my mother. Pretty soon, all the hurt bubbling beneath the surface would all come flying out of my mouth. My heart started to race. I bit down on the inside of my lip. Through the fresh, hot grief in my mind, I stared at myself standing in a little vintage shop in Wyoming, trying to imagine the horrible things my father had done to make my mother curse me to death. I was staring at my mother peel open Crystal’s door to find her on the ground. I was watching my mother use her religion to rationalize everything, even pushing me away by demanding I be something that I wasn’t. I was waiting for her God to bring Crystal back. I wanted to scream.”

(Page 10, *When They Tell You To Be Good*)

Let's do a Q&A...