Remembering Michael Steinberg (1940–2019) [1]

December 19, 2019 Authors [2]
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Essay by Martha Nichols

The Inscape of Memory

Yesterday morning in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I stared at the snow outside coating our back deck. I sat with my first cup of coffee and Cathleen Schine's 2019 novel *The Grammarians*. I felt caught between reading about a fictional father's funeral and contemplating what to say about a nonfiction mentor of mine who had died.

Such a gray day, yet the light was pearly, the snow a two-inch layer of frosting on chocolate wood. Michael Steinberg would have understood this mix of moods, landscape, and memories. In his piece "Living in Michigan, Writing New York," published last December in TW, he observed:

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> I'm beginning to realize that there's an internal process at work here. In writing about New York from my cottage in northern Michigan, I'm all the while transforming the landscape of place into the inscape of memory.

I'm sad, of course. There are so many reasons to miss Mike Steinberg. His death on December 9—just over a week ago—caught me off guard. Somehow, I thought he'd always be here, fighting the good fight for literary nonfiction, insisting on its power to move people. In my own inscape of memory, he wasn't just part of the scenery; he had my back.

Michael Steinberg was a gifted essayist and memoirist. A longtime professor at Michigan State University, he advocated for creative nonfiction and helped develop its practice. He died at home in Lansing, Michigan, and is survived by his wife Carole Steinberg Berk. (Carole's painting "Northport Reverie" is featured below, as it was in his TW essay.)

I didn't know him well. Mike founded *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction* in 1999 (collaborating with Michigan State University Press) years before I met him. But his work as an editor of that landmark journal no doubt sparked me when *Talking Writing* got its start in 2010. I'm sure Mike recognized this before I did. He contacted me and TW co-founder Elizabeth Langosy early on to say how much he liked what we were doing. Mike went on to become one of TW's first board members.

I remember feeling so naïve and grateful back then, picking his brain about everything from upcoming themes to submission fees. Elizabeth and I first met with Mike and Carole about a decade ago, during one of his summer residencies at the Solstice/Pine Manor College MFA program in the Boston area. We were working on TW's "Teaching Writing" issue and, as I recall, Mike leaned forward and said, "You could do an issue on teaching writing *every year*."

The funny thing is, when you work with somebody as an editor (and as a mentee), you do get to know them—or at least what they choose to write about. I know that capturing the essence of a place was important to Mike. In his TW essay, he described grappling in the mid-1990s with some of the essays that became part of his collection *Living in Michigan, Dreaming Manhattan* (Carmike Books, 2017), wondering why he ever left New York City.

He came of age in Queens; he didn't move to Lansing until 1964 to get his Ph.D. During that winter retreat in the '90s with Carole, "I decided that if I wasn't going to New York this Christmas, I'd bring Manhattan to northern Michigan,"

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Mike wrote. "So I packed all my New York books and my CDs of New York music, and took them with me."

Beyond the specifics of a given landscape, though, he loved self-reflection—the way memory, personal changes over time, and reality can come together to conjure a place far beyond documentation.

I last saw him this spring at the AWP Conference in Portland, Oregon, on a panel we co-organized called “How to Talk About Yourself in Nonfiction” (Phillip Lopate, Ana Maria Spagna, and Yi Shun Lai were also on the panel). In response to the opening question of our presentation—*What makes a first-person voice engaging?*—he emphasized the value of inner narrative:

> As an editor and a teacher, what I don’t see frequently enough are inner narratives. A lot of nonfiction writers narrate only the literal story of their experience and leave out the story of their thinking.
>
> I often find myself telling aspiring writers something like this: ‘The main thing that's missing is *your* story.’ I’m not talking here about self-absorbed, strictly confessional narratives. The story I’m looking for is what’s going on *inside* the narrator’s mind as he or she struggles to find shape and meaning in the writing.

I feel fortunate that I worked with Mike this year, especially as part of a panel so deeply connected to his lifetime of writing and teaching. In the sidebar below, you’ll find his "Strategies for Inner Narratives," excerpted from a handout we distributed at AWP 2019. There, he nodded to the late essayist Judith Kitchen—a typically generous recognition of another writer.

All right, I’m a little tearful now. I’ve finished my coffee. The clouds are gone, the sky is blue, a jet is roaring overhead to an unknown destination. I’m still struggling with my own thoughts, but I hope Mike would recognize this attempt to make sense of loss and change.

He also described brewing coffee on a snowy early morning, then writing at the dining-room table during that retreat in the 1990s. Our inner narratives do live on, if we have the grace to release them for others. And maybe it was kismet, coming across this quote in Cathleen Schine’s novel when I needed it—a quote from the inner narrative of a budding poet:

> This is what words do, she realizes. They call out from the page and force you to listen. No, they allow you to listen.

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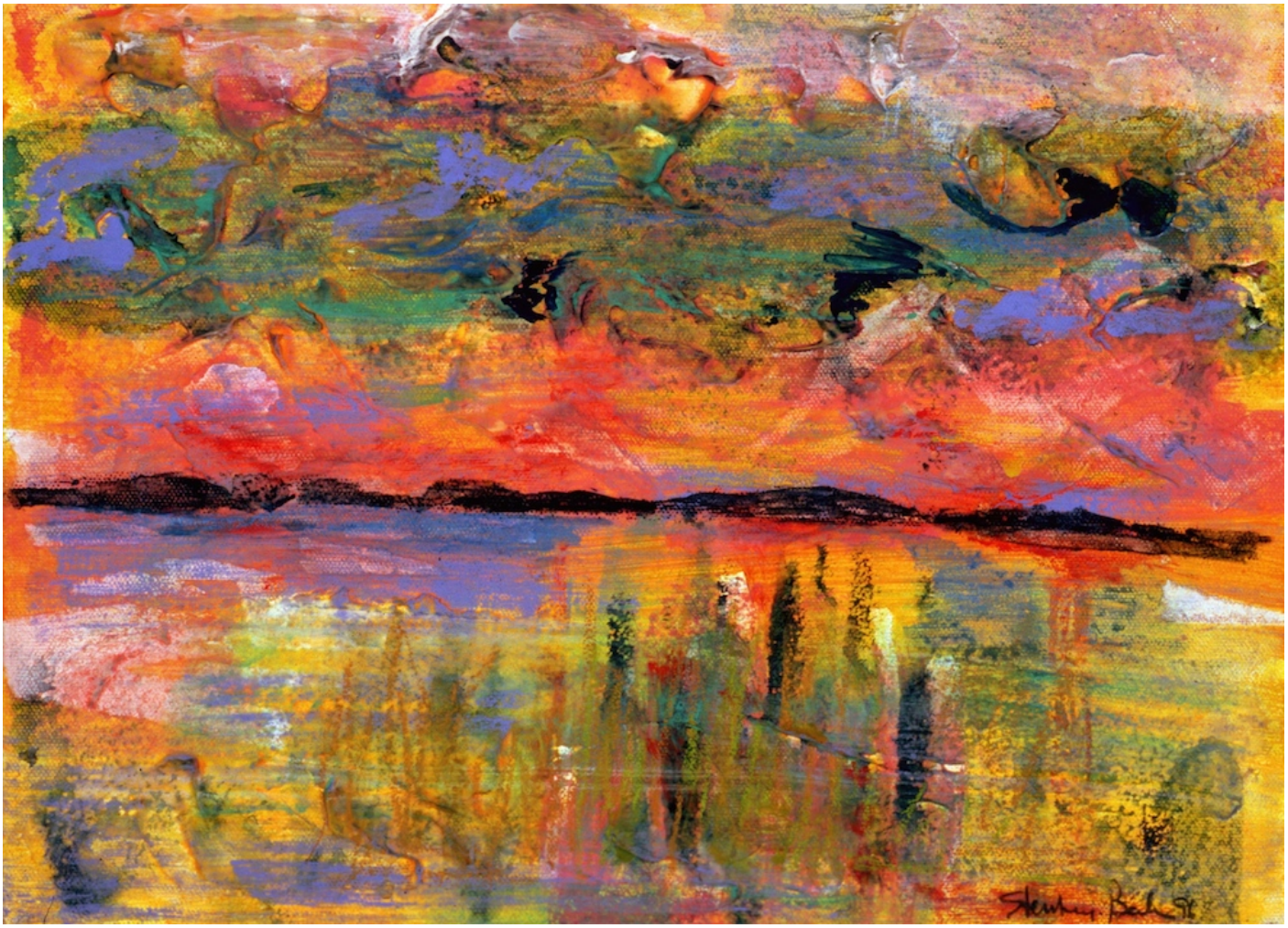

Strategies for Inner Narratives

From a Handout by Michael Steinberg

1. ***Reflection:*** thinking things out, searching for meaning.
2. ***Speculation:*** playing "what if.''
3. ***Self-interrogation:*** asking the hard questions about yourself, the ones you don't always want to know the answers to.
4. ***Projection:*** the unconscious ascription of a feeling, thought, or impulse to someone else.
5. ***Confession:*** not for the sake of itself, but to serve the larger narrative.
6. ***Digression:*** allowing the mind to wander away from the subject (some of the richest discoveries come from digressions).

Publishing Information

- "Living in Michigan, Writing New York" [5] by Michael Steinberg, *Talking Writing*, December 10, 2018.
- "How to Talk About Yourself in Nonfiction" [6] (AWP 2019, Porland, Oregon, March 28, 2019).
- *The Grammarians* by Cathleen Schine (Sarah Crichton Books/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2019).

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Art Information

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Martha Nichols is Editor in Chief of *Talking Writing*. She's also a faculty instructor in the journalism program at the Harvard University Extension School. Her "First Person" column, about media and publishing trends, appears regularly in TW.

If you'd like to know know more about Michael Steinberg, here are some other links, including a moving tribute to Mike right after his death:

- Michael Steinberg's website [8]
- "Michael Steinberg Made the World Better" [9] by Jack Ridl
- *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction* [10]

Martha offers special thanks to Carole Steinberg Berk for help with confirming information in this piece.

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