Excerpt from…

Zinsser, William. “How to Write a Memoir.” *On Writing Well: the Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. New York, Harper Collins, 2006.

My final reducing advice can be summed up in two words: think small. Don't rummage around in your past -- or your family's past -- to find episodes that you think are "important" enough to be worthy of including in your memoir. Look for small self-contained incidents that are still vivid in your memory. If you still remember them it's because they contain a universal truth that your readers will recognize from their own life.

That turned out to be the main lesson I learned by writing a book in 2004 called Writing About Your Life. It's a memoir of my own life, but it's also a teaching book -- along the way I explain the reducing and organizing decisions I made. I never felt that my memoir had to include all the important things that ever happened to me -- a common temptation when old people sit down to summarize their life journey. On the contrary, many of the chapters in my book are about small episodes that were not objectively "important" but that were important to me. Because they were important to me they also struck an emotional chord with readers, touching a universal truth that was important to them.

One chapter is about serving in the army in World War II. Like most men of my generation, I recall that war as the pivotal experience of my life. But in my memoir I don't write anything about the war itself. I just tell one story about one trip I took across North Africa after our troopship landed at Casablanca. My fellow GIs and I were put on a train consisting of decrepit wooden boxcars called "forty-and-eights," so named because they were first used by the French in World War I to transport forty men or eight horses. The words QUARANTE HOMMES OU HUIT CHEVAUX were still stenciled on them. For six days I sat in the open door of that boxcar with my feet hanging out over Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. It was the most uncomfortable ride I ever took -- and the best. I couldn't believe I was in North Africa. I was the sheltered son of Northeastern wasps; nobody in my upbringing or my education had ever mentioned the Arabs. Now, suddenly, I was in a landscape where everything was new -- every sight and sound and smell.

The eight months I spent in that exotic land were the start of a romance that has never cooled. They would make me a lifelong traveler to Africa and Asia and other remote cultures and would forever change how I thought about the world. Remember: Your biggest stories will often have less to do with their subject than with their significance -- not what you did in a certain situation, but how that situation affected you and shaped the person you became.

# Excerpt: How To Be Black

Chapter One: Where Did You Get That Name?

Barry. Barrington. Baracuda. Bartuna. Bartender. Bartunda. Bartholomew. Bart. Baritone. Baritone Dave. Baranthunde. Bar—. Brad.

This is a representative sample of the world's attempts to say or recreate my name. For the record, it's Baratunde (baa-ruh-TOON-day).

I've trained for decades in the art of patiently waiting for people to butcher my name. It's often a teacher or customer service official who has to read aloud from a list. I listen to them breeze through Daniel and Jennifer and even Dwayne, but inevitably, there's a break in their rhythm. "James! Carrie! Karima! Stephanie! Kevin!" Pause. "Bar—." Pause. They look around the room, and then look back at their list. Their confidence falters.The declarative tone applied to the names before mine gives way to a weak, interrogative stumbling:

Barry? Barrington? Baracuda? Bartuna? Bartender? Bar-tunda? Bartholomew? Bart? Baritone? Baritone Dave? Baranthunde? Bar—? Brad!!

The person who called me Brad was engaged in the most lazy and hilarious form of wishful thinking, but all the others kind of, sort of, maybe make some sense. This experience is so common in my life that I now entirely look forward to it. Like a child on Christmas morning who hasn't yet been told that Santa is a creation of consumer culture maintained by society to extend the myth of "economic growth," I eagerly await the gift of any new variation the next person will invent. Can I get a Beelzebub? Who will see a Q where none exists? How about some numbers or special characters? Can I get a hyphen, underscore, forward slash? Only after letting the awkward process run its public course do I step forward, volunteering myself as the bearer of the unpronounceable label and correct them: "That's me. It's Baratunde."

I love my name. I love people's attempts to say it. I love that everyone, especially white people, wants to know what it means. So here's the answer:

My full name is Baratunde Rafiq Thurston. It's got a nice flow. It's global. I like to joke that "Baratunde" is a Nigerian name that means "one with no nickname." "Rafiq" is Arabic for "really, no nickname," and "Thurston" is a British name that means "property of Massa Thurston."

In truth, Baratunde is derived from the very common Yorubwa Nigerian name, "Babatunde." A literal translation comes out something like "grandfather returns" but is often interpreted as "one who is chosen." Rafiq is Arabic for "friend or companion." And Thurston, well, that really, probably, is the name of the white guy that owned my people back in the day.

Of all the groups of people who react to my name, I've found that white people are the most curious about its meaning and origin. Upon hearing of its origin, they want to know when I last visited Nigeria. Other non-black people are nearly as curious, assuming "Baratunde" to be a family name that goes back generations, that was passed to me through a series of meticulously traceable Biblical begats. Black Americans, on the other hand, rarely even pause to ponder my name. Considering how inventive black Americans have been with their own names, that's not very surprising.

Where I never expected any particular reaction, however, was from Nigerians themselves. Nigerians have very strong opinions about my name. They don't like it, and they want me to know.

Constantly.

I call this phenomenon The Nigerian Name Backlash. Rarely does a week go by without a Nigerian somewhere on the Internet finding and interrogating me. I first encountered the NNB when I was near twelve years old. I called my Nigerian friend, who went by "Tunde," on the phone, but he wasn't home. Instead, his extremely Nigerian father answered, and our interaction proceeded

as follows:

"Hello, who is calling?"

"Hi sir, this is Baratunde."

"Where did you get that name!?"

Let's pause the exchange right here, because you need more context. Father Nigeria did not simply ask where I got the name as one might ask, "Oh, where did you get those shoes? They're really nice. They're so nice that I need to know where you got them so I can possibly get myself a pair." No, that was not the tone. The tone was more along the lines of "Who the hell do you think you are coming into my house, stealing my gold, priceless family jewels, my dead grandmother's skeleton, my porridge, and attempting to walk out through the front door as if I would not notice? By all rights, I should kill you where you stand, you thieving, backstabbing boy."

Shocked by the question, but determined to be both honest and respectful, I answered.

"I got it from my parents," I told him.\*

"Do you even know what it means?" Father Nigeria asked me in the same way you might ask a dog, "What model iPad do you want?" Fortunately, I knew exactly what it meant, and I proudly answered, "It means grandfather returns or one who is chosen."

He reacted swiftly and loudly. "No! It means grandfather returns or one who is chosen."

As I was about to explain to him that I'd just said the very same thing, he launched into a tirade: "This is the problem with you so-called

African-Americans. You have no history, no culture, no roots. You think you can wear a dashiki, steal an African name, and become African? You cannot!"

Remember, when this self-appointed Father Nigeria decided to indict, judge, and reject all of African America for its attempts to rebuild some small part of the ancestral bridges burned by

America's peculiar institution, I was twelve years old and not in the best position to argue that maybe he should calm down and stop acting like a bully.

His reaction stunned me, but it also prepared me for the regular onslaught from members of the Nigerian Name Backlash community.While he made a sweeping dis against all black Americans who sought cultural identification with Africa, most other Nigerians I've encountered have more technical complaints. Every few weeks a new batch finds me on the Internet, usually Twitter, and swarms with the same basic set of questions and challenges:

"Are you Nigerian?" they excitedly ask.

"No. My parents just wanted me to have an African name."

"You know your name is Nigerian right?"

"Yes."

"But it is wrong, your name. What is this 'Baratunde'? You mean 'Babatunde' right?"

"No."

"Where did you get that name?"

Sigh.

My name has served as a perfect window through which to examine my experience of blackness. For non-blacks, it marks me as absolutely, positively black. However, most of the vocal Nigerians I've met (which is to say, most of the Nigerians I've met) use my name to remind me that I'm not that black.

# Excerpt: Why Not Me?

IN SEVENTH GRADE I STARTED AT A NEW school. On the first day, I was so anxious to make friends, I brought a family-size bag of Skittles to homeroom so I could pass them out and entice my new classmates to talk to me. "Do you like Skittles?" I asked. Kids would nod, cautiously. "Here, take some. I'm Mindy!" I said, trying to rope them into conversation. It didn't work very well. Even back then the kids thought this was suspicious behavior, like I was covering for something unseemly they couldn't quite pinpoint. Still, I persisted, striking up conversations like a middle school Hare Krishna, and cornering kids with aggressively banal chitchat. "That's so funny you like the color blue. I like turquoise. We're so similar." I did this until my art teacher, Mr. Posner, pulled me aside.

Mr. Posner was soft-spoken and wouldn't let us talk about the movie Silence of the Lambs, because it contained violence against women. I hated him. "You don't have to give people candy to like you, Mindy," he said. "They will like you . . . for you." I nodded meaningfully, knowing he wanted to see that my mind had been blown by his awesome humanity. Then he took my Skittles and I thought, What a load of garbage. At twelve years old, I had experienced enough to have zero faith in the power of my looks or personality to reel in the friends I wanted so badly. I needed my Skittles. The next day I brought in more, and Mr. Posner called my parents. The Skittles stopped, and I wished that Mr. Posner was trapped in the bottom of a well, and later killed, like in Silence of the Lambs. My parents encouraged me to play field hockey, where I eventually did end up making a few friends. I remember that time as one of the most stressful periods of my life. Every kid wants approval, but my desire to be well liked was central to my personality.

As I got older, I got craftier and less obvious, but I've always put a lot of energy and effort into people liking me. That's why I've never understood the compliment "effortless." People love to say: "She just walked into the party, charming people with her effortless beauty." I don't understand that at all. What's so wrong with effort, anyway? It means you care. What about the girl who "walked into the party, her determination to please apparent on her eager face"? Sure, she might seem a little crazy, and, yes, maybe everything she says sounds like conversation starters she found on a website, but at least she's trying. Let's give her a shot! And these days, I find I'm caring less and less about what people think of me. Maybe it's my age, maybe it's my security in my career, maybe it's because I'm skrilla flush with that dollah-dollahbill- y'all, but if I had to identify my overall feeling these days, it's much more "Eh, screw it. Here's how I really feel." The truth is, it's hard to get people to like you, but it's even harder to keep people liking you. You'd have to bring in Skittles every single day. The result of my not caring so much about what I say allows me to care more about how I say it. I think it makes my writing more personal and more enjoyable.

If you're reading this, you're probably a woman. Or perhaps you're a gay man getting a present for your even gayer friend. Maybe you accidentally bought this thinking it was the Malala book. However this book made its way from the "Female Humor/ Brave Minority Voices/Stress-free Summer Reads!" section of your bookstore to your hands, it doesn't matter. The important thing is you are here now. Welcome. I'm excited to share my stories with you, so you can see what I'm really like. If my childhood, teens, and twenties were about wanting people to like me, now I want people to know me. So, this is a start.