

Who Wrote It?

Vivian Conan



Word Count 1,528

“Who wrote your memoir?” a friend asked.

My book—*Losing the Atmosphere, A Memoir: A Baffling Disorder, a Search for Help, and the Therapist Who Understood*—is about living with and healing from dissociative identity disorder, formerly called multiple personality disorder. He was asking which of my parts—my term for alter personalities—wrote it. I had to think before I answered.

For most of my adult life, whenever I was in public, I tried to ensure that only the “regular” sliver of me was visible. I was successful, but at a price. Maintaining a nonstop filter and translator between the calm exterior I presented to the world, and my internal chaos was exhausting.

In writing a memoir, I’d be reversing the process. What I had been trying to hide from the world I now wanted to present. I had long been spilling Inside onto paper—words both sensical and nonsensical of varying styles and maturity, often mixed with scribble and backward writing that had to be held up to a mirror. It was how I “talked” to therapists when I couldn’t express myself verbally. Those writings wouldn’t do for a book. If I wanted Outside people to understand, I would have to retool the translator. To that end, I enrolled in a writing workshop.

The workshop was a shock. My body may have been 50 years old, but many of my Inside parts were children. Sitting around a table with 15 grownups in a situation where I was supposed to participate as an equal, not just peek from behind a facade, caused panic Inside.

For the first three of the ten-week session, I listened without participating. Feedback was constructive. I saw that the aim was to figure out what someone wanted to say and help them say it better. The fourth week, when the teacher asked her usual, “Who brought something in?” I raised my hand.

Heart pounding, I began to read. My voice shook. My hand trembled so much the paper rattled audibly. On the second of ten pages, I stopped. “I can’t finish,” I said, feeling my face flush.

“This is fascinating,” came the teacher’s quick response. “Do you mind if I read it for you?”

“OK,” I said, grateful. I wouldn’t have to forfeit my turn.

I listened to my words being read aloud. They sounded as legitimate as anything heard in class before, and the students’ faces were attentive. As my panicked parts began to recede, the sliver who felt more like the students’ equal was able to come forward. By the time the teacher reached the end, I was ready for the discussion.

The main comments were that I had summarized too much. They wanted detail.

“Can you unpack that?”

“Can we hear the voices of some of your alter personalities?”

To my surprise, everyone agreed they would be interested in reading more.

When class let out, a woman fell into step with me. She was gay, she said, and related to my piece because she knew what it was like to hide who you were. The following week, as I was taking my seat, another woman slipped me a note. She had lived through an earthquake, I read. In the morning, she’d had an apartment and possessions. In the afternoon, she had nothing. She related to my piece because even now, years later, she couldn’t take anything for granted.

One of the reasons I was writing the book was my desire to be seen. Being mentally ill means being lonely. It means feeling invisible, less-than, unworthy. The fact that I was successful at hiding it only reinforced my shame. The writing workshop was the first time I had come out of the closet to people who were not clinicians. My fellow students didn’t see me as a freak or dangerous. They gave me my first experience of being seen, accepted, and understood. That was both scary and exhilarating.

Early in the 25 years it took to write my memoir—I started at 50, finished at 75—I made a decision about structure. I wanted the reader to experience events as they had unfolded for me. That meant writing from the perspective of the person I was at the time I had an experience, not from the perspective of someone older and wiser looking back, layering meaning onto what happened. To do that, I had to recreate events in detail, even those that

took place decades ago. In this, the disorder I was writing about, dissociation, proved an asset.

Dissociation—the internal walling-off of parts of the self—doesn’t usually begin as a disorder. Like an immune system fighting invading microbes, it provides a protective barrier against emotions that would otherwise overwhelm our psyches. Dissociation turns into a problem only when the trauma that gave rise to those emotions is passed, but the internal barriers remain. Then it is like an overactive immune system mistaking our own bodies for the intruders; it becomes *too* protective, shoring up internal divisions that are no longer necessary. Each of the dissociated parts holds its own specific memories and the feelings associated with them. The memories and feelings remain unchanged, even though the trauma may have ended decades ago.

When I began work on my memoir, some of my parts were stuck where they were when they first came into being in the 1940s and 1950s. This made maintaining the facade difficult but was helpful when I sat down to write. I could remember what happened and how I felt when I was six because it didn’t feel like remembering. It was as if I *were* that young child.

At the same time, another part was able to have enough distance from whatever event I was writing about to shape it into a story. Contrary to some media portrayals of DID, dissociative barriers between parts are not always impermeable. There can be leaks, either one way or multi-directional. This is called co-consciousness. And because more than one part can be “out”—in control of the body—simultaneously, I could be feeling something intensely with a six-year-old heart while also observing that child and writing about her in proper adult sentences.

That duality was fragile, though, and could happen only under specific conditions. It had to be in the morning, as soon as I woke, before I brushed my teeth or even listened to the weather report. I would set up my computer on my bed and prop Rocky, my miniature teddy bear, against my leg, his eyes facing the window. I live on the fourth floor, level with the treetops on my urban street. Whether the branches were lush with leaves or laden with snow, I didn’t feel separated from them by a windowpane. I was in my very own treehouse, a place having no connection to my apartment or the sidewalk below. There, in an almost hypnotic state, I hovered at the intersection of two worlds: sleeping and waking, Inside and Outside, then and now.

Anthropologists who do fieldwork know that they influence the dynamics of the communities they are studying simply by their presence. In the same way, the process of writing a book about myself changed the me I was writing about. Healing from DID—dismantling the dissociative barriers so I could “know” what I had hidden from myself—happened mostly through therapy but was facilitated by my time in the treehouse. The story in the finished book is a chronological one, but I didn’t write it in order. Whichever Inside part was closest to the surface on any given day was the part I wrote about. The only constant during those early morning hours was the part who did the writing. Though I didn’t think of her as “TheWriter” until my friend asked his question, I was always aware

that there were two of me. TheWriter was like an empathic witness, giving dignity to my story by documenting it, allowing the part being written about to feel worthy of being seen. That feeling of worthiness was reinforced whenever I got feedback from the workshop.

Little by little, as TheWriter began to string their stories into a narrative, parts began to feel they belonged to a whole. I didn't realize it at the time, but this memoir was our first collective effort. More than co-consciousness, which means parts being *aware* of one another, this was cooperation—parts *working together* toward a common goal.

The feeling of participation, coupled with acceptance from my class, led to a slow lessening of shame, to the extent that, about ten years into the writing, I changed from using a pseudonym to using my real name. That change made me feel connected to my story in a new and deeper way. The whole was no longer a book, but a person being assembled in a book.

I was now ready to answer my friend. When I began writing, I said, I hadn't known my entire story. With TheWriter's help, I uncovered it as I went along. TheWriter herself evolved in the process. At first, she was separate, only documenting. Gradually, she became the container that held our stories, and we poured ourselves into her. Far more gradually, inside that container, *us* became *me*.

Vivian is a writer, librarian, and IT business analyst who lives in Manhattan. A native New Yorker, she grew up in a large Greek-Jewish clan in Brooklyn, graduated from Brooklyn College, and holds master's degrees from Pratt Institute and Baruch College. Her work has appeared in [The New York Times](#), [New York](#) magazine, [Lilith](#), [Narratively](#), [Next Avenue](#), and [Ducts](#). Her memoir is [Losing the Atmosphere](#). More info at [VivianConan.com](#).