

## Book Review

American Journal of Evaluation  
1-7

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House, E. R. (2015).

*Cherry Street Alley*. North Charleston, SC: Create Space Independent

Publishing Platform. 108 pp. \$8 (available through Amazon.com in paperback or Kindle), ISBN 9781517603205.

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DOI: 10.1177/1098214016639671

You don't have a right to the cards you believe you should have been dealt. You have an obligation to play the hell out of the ones you're holding.

—Cheryl Strayed (2015, p. 19), American memoirist, novelist, and essayist

Ernest R. House has written a memoir. He was dealt some lousy cards early in life. And he has played the hell out of those cards. Resilience doesn't begin to do justice to Ernie's story. Consider his relationship to his first stepfather.

Late one night after a particularly bitter fight [with my mother], my stepfather emerged from the bedroom with his rifle and walked to the bed where I lay. He stood over me with the gun pointed at me, the blue vein at his temple throbbing, his eyes wide. Not moving, I watched him through half-shut lids, pretending to be asleep. His action made my mother frantic, and she screamed at him. Hesitatingly, he moved back into the bedroom and closed the door, their voices still strong . . . .

The arguments between my mother and stepfather increased in violence. Regularly now he emerged from the bedroom and put the gun to my head. I no longer pretended to be asleep. Although I was only eight years old, I could see that he was unbalanced. (pp. 44–45)

But of what interest is House's memoir to evaluators? House writes that as he began documenting and interpreting his childhood memories, he saw how his experiences as a child had informed and affected his work as an evaluator.

I saw connections between the professional work that I had done and the child that I had been. I wrote about how childhood events had affected my work. Trauma has a way of making some experiences indelible. The memories themselves did not change, but my interpretation of them did. (p. 94)

### Social Justice as a Criterion for Evaluations

House is an evaluation pioneer and, in the language of the day, an eminent and distinguished *evaluation thought leader*. He has also been the profession's stalwart moral compass, consistently emphasizing that evaluation—and evaluators—must first and foremost serve the public good, and worrying that evaluation—and evaluators—too often serve the powerful and privileged, and ignore (or harm) the interests of the poor and less powerful. He has emphasized that evaluators should bring moral concerns about social justice into negotiations over the design of an evaluation, including concerns about whose interests are represented in the questions asked and who will have access to

the findings. In challenging what he has called “clientism”—“the claim that whatever the client wants . . . is ethically correct”—House (1995) asked, “What if the client is Adolph Eichmann, and he wants the evaluator to increase the efficiency of his concentration camps?” (p. 29). House has provided a comprehensive perspective on social justice as an evaluation framework including attention to philosophical, conceptual, theoretical, ethical, political, practical, and even methodological underpinnings and implications. In classic House style, his parsimonious but pointed abstract introducing an article on methodology and social justice cut to the heart of the matter:

Evaluation methodology itself has sometimes led, in complex and subtle ways, to systematic injustices. The main source of error lies in our standard conception of causation, which is inadequate and incorrect. (House, 1990, p. 23)

Attention to social justice has become a major theme in the profession. Here are just a few examples over the last 25 years. The first volume of *New Directions for Evaluation (NDE)* to be focused on social justice was published in 1990 (Brandon, 2015, p. 1; Sirotnik, 1990). Evaluation and social justice was President Karen Kirkhart’s theme for the annual American Evaluation Association (AEA) conference in 1994. In his plenary address at the 2006 AEA conference, House described, in detail, threats to social justice including how political considerations, power dynamics, and money corrupt pharmaceutical research and the supposedly independent governmental regulatory processes used for approving drugs (House, 2008). In his plenary presentation at the 2015 AEA conference, he addressed the enduring effects of racism in American communities and the need for evaluators to illuminate rather than ignore institutional racism in explaining evaluation findings about disparate experiences and outcomes for Whites versus minorities, especially African Americans.

House’s vision of incorporating social justice considerations into evaluators’ professional deliberations is spotlighted in a recent *NDE* volume titled *Evaluation and social justice in complex sociopolitical contexts*. In introducing that volume, the editors observed that social justice concerns have taken on ever more urgency due to the “widening gaps among social classes: the rich, the upper and lower middle classes, and the poor . . . Thus, it is becoming increasingly necessary for those in positions of influence to join forces and take responsibility for promoting social justice. Evaluators are in a pivotal position to do so. Indeed, many of them are reemphasizing social justice and responsibility, as inspired by House” and others (Rosenstein & Syna, 2015, p. 3).

### **Evaluation Roots**

What does all this have to do with House’s memoir? His concern for social justice is deeply rooted in, and informed by, a traumatic childhood in Illinois that included living next to a whorehouse, periods of poverty, the early death of his father, the mentally unstable stepfather who would point a loaded gun at young Ernie’s head to terrorize his mother, relatives and family acquaintances in and out of jail, and deeply entrenched racism in all aspects of institutional and community life, including schools, police, and his own family.

How did these childhood experiences affect my work? When conducting evaluations, I don’t necessarily believe what people tell me. I validate what they say with other data and with what others say. I have a keen sense of looking beyond appearances towards what lies beneath. My motive is to develop a deeper understanding, with the idea of preventing serious mistakes.

I also empathize with the poor and powerless. Evaluators typically come from the same backgrounds as those in charge, while those receiving benefits come from the lower social classes or else are children, patients, or victims, helpless to protect themselves. Empathy with the poor and powerless has prompted me to hold strong positions about social justice, which I have tried to incorporate into evaluation. (House, in press)

The preceding reflection is not in the memoir, but rather in a chapter in a forthcoming volume of *NDE* titled *Childhood Influences on the Work of Seven North American Evaluation Pioneers* (Williams, in press). (Spoiler alert: The perdurable seven are Alkin, Chelimsky, House, Patton, Scriven, Stake, and Stuffelbeam.) But unlike the highly reflective and analytical reminiscences in the *NDE* volume, House's memoir is all memoir all the time—simply, descriptively, and evocatively relating his childhood memories without evaluative interpretation. He wrote a draft of the memoir years ago, but put it away unfinished until recently, when he felt drawn to reflect more deeply on and share his past. The memoir's meaning and significance as illumination for House's huge contributions to evaluation will require reference to other sources, a matter to which I shall return below. But first, how might we evaluate the memoir?

## Evaluating the Memoir

I propose to use four literary criteria for judging a memoir adapted from distinguished essayist and literary critic Christopher Hitchens (2012, pp. 40–41).

*Criterion 1.* “That it makes us wish we knew its subject in person.”

Since I do know the subject in person, I can tweak this criterion slightly and attest that the memoir, which I found completely enveloping and read in a single sitting (just 90 pages), deepened my already substantial appreciation and admiration for said subject.

*Criterion 2.* That “it inspires in us a desire to improve on such vicarious acquaintances as we possess.”

I take this to mean that the memoir in question stimulates a desire to know more about the personal histories and journeys of those we appreciate and admire, and who have influenced us along the way. That it most certainly did. I urge readers of this review to purchase House's memoir to demonstrate that there is a market for such writings and to encourage other intrepid but aging evaluation pioneers to follow House's thoughtful and courageous example.

*Criterion 3.* That the memoir distinguishes “the essential from the inessential, winnowing the quotidian and burnishing those moments of glory and elevation that place a human life in the first rank.”

House meets this criterion admirably, in large part because he is so finely attuned to what makes his story coherent. He reflects briefly in the book's postscript about his predilection for coherence:

One result [of writing] has been to make my life story seem more coherent than it was. All of us have parts of our lives that don't fit together. More than most, I sought to integrate these events and memories into a coherent story, just as I tried to integrate disconnected ideas and observations in my evaluation work. Of course, we can never integrate everything. It has also occurred to me that lack of complete integration allows us to function sometimes, as when we set grief and loss aside to go on. (p. 94)

*Criterion 4.* That the memoir “furnish something by way of context, so that the place of the subject within history and society is illuminated, and his progress through life is made intelligible by reference to his times.”

This is a core feature and exemplary characteristic of House's memoir. For example, he grew up in Illinois during World War II.

Sometimes in the evenings we had blackouts. We turned off the lights in the house for air raid drills and lay on the daybed watching for the warden who came around in a helmet to check the lights. I thought enemy bombers could arrive at any time. (p. 25)

At school the “war drives” reached a crescendo. Every week we were urged to bring old newspapers and flattened tin cans to school. An area in the playground was fenced in where we threw our collected newspapers and cans. Contests were held to see who could bring the most. Each student’s contribution was weighed and recorded. Clara Barton School was scandalized when two third-graders were caught concealing brickbats in their bundles of papers to win the contest.

Inside, classes proceeded routinely. Our class was divided into three reading groups—the Jeeps, the Marines, and the Tanks. (p. 32)

## Memoir as Autoethnography

Autoethnography involves studying one’s own culture and oneself as part of that culture (Patton, 2015, pp. 84–91). “Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). House doesn’t call his memoir an autoethnography, but he does say this:

I began this childhood memoir in the late 1970s to inform my two children about what life had been like for me as a child. They were growing up in a professorial, middle-class family in the university town of Urbana, Illinois. How could they know what life in a working class family in the shadows of the Great Depression and World War Two might be like? My intention was to make my origins clear and *convey a broader conception of the social world*. (p. 94, emphasis added)

Having begun this review of House’s memoir using literary criteria, let’s see how it stacks up against five criteria for judging the quality of an autoethnography as articulated by and adapted from distinguished autoethnographer Laurel Richardson (2000a, p. 254).

### Criteria for Judging the Quality of an Autoethnography

1. *Substantive contribution*: Does this piece contribute to our understanding of the social, cultural, and political life and issues of the time?

House is an exquisite observer. His skill as an observer has been a hallmark of his evaluation work. He attributes that skill to the necessity of becoming a keen observer of the volatile and unreliable adults who dominated his childhood. For young Ernie House, observation was not a social method, it was a survival skill. Throughout the memoir, we are treated to young Ernie experiencing his chaotic world, navigating ever-treacherous relationships and oppressive institutions, including his own family, and sharing his observations of that time and place, that culture and all-encompassing world.

2. *Aesthetic merit*: Does the use of evocative analytic practices and creative writing open up the text, bring the reader into the setting and events described, and invite interpretive responses? Is the text artistically shaped, engaging, appropriately complex, and not boring?

The writing is compelling, and the story’s depth and detail are completely enveloping. House transports the reader into the culture and community of that time. Everything about the characters, his family members, and his own experiences is raw and real. I was especially taken with the vividness and intensity of his memories. He made extensive use of photographs to recollect and reconstruct people and events. As a literary writer, he has mastered the mantra: *Show, don’t tell*.

Such writing differs monumentally from academic writing. I know firsthand the difference. I’ve tried my own hand at writing an autoethnographic memoir (Patton, 1999). It was the hardest writing I’ve ever done. A literary editor who reviewed an early draft was scathing in his criticism, especially

of my seeming need to explain and explain and explain, not trusting the reader to get the point. House avoids this academic temptation and just tells the story.

3. *Reflexivity*: Is the author's point of view explicit and acknowledged? Does it feel authentic? Can the reader understand and appreciate how the author's subjectivity both produced and been a product of the writing? Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgments about the quality of the author's recollections and reflections?

I offer this from the postscript:

Once underway, the childhood memoir became a therapeutic outlet for expressing memories and emotions that I had long suppressed. For example, I always thought that I had been too young to be deeply affected by my father's death. However, in writing that chapter, old memories came flooding back, and I was overwhelmed repeatedly with a sense of grief and loss. For decades afterward, I was unable to reread the chapter without tears. The memoir became a means of repairing and reconstituting myself. I tried to recognize the black holes in my own personality and work around them. (p. 94)

House developed a capacity for reflexivity at an early age. He tells of getting knocked unconscious while playing, likely resulting in a concussion. During his recovery, he remembers a moment of unusual clarity while he was out walking by himself.

I was . . . thinking hard, when suddenly I realized that I was myself, that I was myself thinking about myself. A connection was made in my head, so that I became aware of myself as a person. Before that, I had merely thought and felt, but not seen myself do so. Now I had another head outside my head, a brain beside my brain. I could watch myself think. (p. 35)

He was 7 years old.

4. *Impact*: Do I take something meaningful away from the reading? Does it affect me emotionally and intellectually? Does it evoke my own memories? Does it raise questions for me? Move me to write? Move me to try new research practices? Move me to action? (Richardson, 2000b)

Consider this: I read the memoir immediately following the 2015 AEA annual conference in Chicago, facing a huge backlog of work from having been away a week. The holiday season was beginning and I faced a number of end-of-year deadlines and holiday commitments. But upon finishing the memoir, I put everything aside to write this review, rereading the book as I did so. I felt compelled to write, which was my way of processing the rich and intimate experience Ernie had shared in his own writing.

5. *Expression of a reality*: Does this text embody a fleshed-out, embodied sense of lived experience? Does it seem "true"—a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the "real"? Do I trust the author's depictions and revelations?

An expression has emerged in our culture that captures the essence of experiencing truth: *You can't make this shit up!* That is my thoughtfully rendered scholarly judgment on whether the memoir passes the sniff test for being true and real.

Moreover, House knows better than most of the difference between fiction and nonfiction. Before he became a memoirist, he wrote and published an evaluation novel: *Regression to the mean: A novel of evaluation politics* (House, 2007). I've read it—and it's a damn good read. It tells the story of Paul Reeder, an experienced educational evaluator who must unravel political, ethical, and technical puzzles in a complex and conflict-laden world both within and outside of school settings. The novel, intended to take evaluation students and novices into the realities of evaluation practice, shows the challenges and

entanglements that can arise when institutional accountability, outcomes mania, interpersonal relationships, and human foibles collide, including most spectacularly, the foibles of the evaluator. The novel captures the complexities of evaluation politics in ways academic texts do not. That said, House's memoir is a memoir, a genre distinct from his novel, each revealing truth in its own way.

## In Search of Coherence

House's astute sense of coherence serves both the story and the reader. But his childhood memoir is but one piece in the larger coherence puzzle. His novel is another piece. To these writings you have to add his "Work Memoir" from *Evaluation roots* (Alkin, 2013), his Oral History featured in *American Journal of Evaluation* (AJE; Miller, King, Mark, & Caracelli, 2015), and his chapter in the forthcoming *NDE* volume on childhood influences on evaluation pioneers (House, in press). Put all these reflective (and reflexive) practitioner writings together and you may begin to get a sense of one Ernest R. House, evaluator and human being par excellence. Then, read some of his many important and influential evaluation articles and books (House, 1980, 2014b; House & Howe, 1999), including his most recent contribution to the profession, *Evaluating: Values, Biases, and Practical Wisdom* (House, 2014a), which will be reviewed in a forthcoming issue of *AJE*.

Two story lines emerge and intersect in the collective writings of Ernie House. The first is his own journey and commitment to examine the origins of, and influences on, his social justice approach to evaluation. House offers us a model for in-depth *reflexivity*, that is, the challenge of being attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and economic origins of our own perspective as well as the perspectives of those with whom we engage. To be reflexive is to undertake an ongoing examination of what I know and how I know it. For ease of use, it means being explicit about our personal epistemologies and ontologies, and their origins, implications, effects on, and consequences for our professional work. (For an extensive discussion of reflexivity, see Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009; Hertz, 1997; Luttrell, 2009; Patton, 2014, 2015, pp. 63–66; Steier, 1991.)

The second story line is that of the profession of evaluation, which House (1977, 1993, 2014a) has also chronicled. The AEA Oral History Project, Marv Alkin's (2013) seminal work documenting and analyzing evaluation's roots by tracing theorists' views and influences, and David Williams's (in press) *NDE* volume on childhood influences all document the development of the evaluation profession by highlighting the experiences of evaluation pioneers. Let me reiterate: These important resources tell more than the stories of individual evaluators. They tell the story of the emergence of our profession.

The personal and professional ultimately intersect. But the personal factor rules. *Who* does an evaluation matters. The background, perspective, values, and experiences of evaluators matter. We are, to be sure, methodologists, theorists, practitioners, academics, consultants, public servants, and evaluators. But first, foremost, and always, we are people—individuals who bring who we are and how we have been formed to our work. Memoir is a method for making explicit the intersection between the personal, the historical, and the cultural. Reflexivity connects the dots between past personal history and professional practice. House shows us how to make those connections honestly, thoughtfully, and courageously. He models what it means to be a consummate reflexive practitioner.

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