

Retirement-Writing

Telling It All

Despite the notoriety caused by books like James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, memoirs are still a highly viable genre, and a favorite category for those who are eager to try writing in their retirement.

Reflecting on the highlights of their lives is very comforting for many retirees. Others have a great desire to offer inspiration to their children by relating how they themselves achieved success after overcoming numerous obstacles. Still others take great pride in their family histories, and want to leave a permanent record of the accomplishments of generations of family members, an invaluable gift to children and the generations that follow.

The memoir can be a fine starting point for novice writers because it gives them an opportunity to write about something they know intimately. That doesn't mean they can sit down at the computer without some intense preparation. Like every other category of writing, memoirs require careful research.

Memories can unintentionally mislead even the most honest memoirist. No one can accurately recall all of the pertinent circumstances of events that occurred years before. What you are able to remember is seen from your own particular bias, which may or may not be factual or match the recollections of others.

Planning Your Book

The first critical step in planning your memoir is to determine the audience you hope to reach. Will it be just family and intimate friends? Perhaps you feel your life and the events you have experienced are so unique that they will be of interest to a multitude

of readers? That decision impacts many key decisions that range from what information you include in your story to the size and cost of the press run. Indeed, even to the type of printer you will require.

To shift your recall into high gear, take a full week and devote an hour each day recalling people and happenings that were significant to you as you moved through life. Much like meditation, clear your mind of every distraction.

Scour your memory for events like vacations, holiday dinners, school days, graduations, communions and bar mitzvahs. Try to remember the people who participated in those events. Think of significant accomplishments in your life like learning to swim or drive a car or even tie your shoe...and of the people who taught you how.

By week's end, you will be amazed at the list of recollections you have gathered, particularly from the early years. More recent events in your business or professional life will be easy to list. Use all of that to structure your life story, and then begin the process of validating those memories through research. This can follow many avenues.

The Goal Is Integrity

It is essential that your memories be honest...or at least as honest as you can make them by talking with others and attempting to remain as objective as possible. Neither anger nor vengeance has a place in the honest memoir. However, that doesn't mean that everything you write must praise others.

If criticism of someone else is truthful and forthright and pertinent to understanding the circumstances you are reporting, then by all means use it. Similarly, if retelling of salacious material has a true relevance to your story, then it too may be

included. What must be avoided is adding these juicy passages just to attract readership, as has been done far too often in recent writings.

For an example of a well-balanced and honest memoir, turn to *Angela's Ashes*, one of the outstanding memoirs of recent years. Although author Frank McCourt states he loved his father dearly, he is honest enough to describe him in the book as a drunk who abandoned his family.

Researching

If you are intent on producing a highly factual and inclusive memoir, you will turn to as many family members and family friends who are still alive. If distance is a factor, interviewing them in person or by phone or mail will reward you with endless knowledge and impressions that have escaped you.

If you are in need of information that predates any of these living witnesses, public records of marriages and births are available, as are genealogical charts. The library and the Internet are marvelous research tools. They can provide a great deal of information about the specific periods of time that you may be writing about.

If your predecessors arrived in the United States within the last hundred years or so, check the vast sources of immigration information available at Ellis Island. Perhaps a member of your family has been interested enough to research a genealogical chart already.

Viewpoint

Just as we are deeply concerned with viewpoint when we discuss a novel, so here too some careful thinking is necessary to help you make a very critical decision. "Who is

writing your memoir?” “Who is the narrative voice?” The answers will exert a profound influence on how you write the book.

Denis Ledoux, author and director of *Soleil Lifestory Network* (www.turningmemories.com) wants you to ask yourself those questions. He’s not trying to trick you, nor asking foolish questions; just attempting to help you set the tone and theme of your story. Will it center around you? Or the family? Will you be the martyr sacrificing yourself for the family? Or the hero who has overcome endless obstacles as he/she struggles to reach the top of the mountain of success?

What Ledoux is pointing out is that the answers to questions like these will determine who is telling the story and how.

Description

Expand the snapshots you recall from past years into a full blown framed photograph. Strive to capture as many details as the long intervening years allow to help you better understand your predecessors and the events in which they participated.

The richness of a memoir is in great part the result of the details you are able to include. Be specific, if you can. Your family didn’t live in an old house. It was a two-story farm house painted a soft yellow with contrasting black shutters.

As in all writing, your challenge is to “show, not tell.” That means describing through action, metaphor, simile, dialogue and the other tools of description in the writer’s tool chest.

I stress to all my classes and also in my forthcoming book *The Writer Within You*, the richness of a story is in the details the writer offers. Well done, description invites your readers into the story. They come to know the characters intimately, as well as the

environment within which the characters function. In essence, they become participants in the story because of the details you offer.

Share In the Benefits

As you move along through the process, you will find that the benefits of your memoir are not restricted to your readers alone. You, the author, will benefit in direct proportion to the research you do and the detail you uncover. Writing a memoir should be a fulfilling experience.

When discussing her book *An American Childhood*, Pulitzer Prize winner Annie Dillard said, “In the course of writing this memoir, I’ve learned all sorts of things...about myself and about various relationships.” Give yourself this gift of self-discovery now that you’ve reached retirement. You’ll enjoy it for the remainder of your life.