

Memoir Matters—Bringing biographical writing alive

Brief Overview of Workshop

- Will deal with some ‘macro issues’ such as rationale for writing memoir, ethical questions, parameters, structure etc then ‘micro issues’ such as narrative voice, pace, techniques for bringing your memoir to life
- Notes available on my website afterwards on hidden page—take a card and email me

Books on memoir/biography writing

Writing Your Life: A Journey of Discovery Patti Miller Allen and Unwin 2001
The Memoir Book Patti Miller Allen and Unwin 2007
Handling the Truth Beth Kephart Gotham Books 2013
Old Friend from Far Away Natalie Goldberg Simon & Schuster 2009 (lots of writing exercises)
The Artist’s Way Julia Cameron Pan Books 1995 (For journaling/reflection)

Books on general/fiction writing

Bird by Bird Anne Lamott Scribner publications 2008 (or Anchor/Random House 1994)
On Writing Stephen King Scribner 2000
The Little Red Writing Book Mark Tredinnick UNSW Press 2006
Revision and Self-Editing James Scott Bell Writers’ Digest Books 2008
A Novel Idea Various best-selling Christian fiction authors Tyndale 2009
Writing 21st Century Fiction Donald Maass Writers’ Digest Books 2012

NB Need to read a variety of memoirs/biographies and notice how other authors approach this genre. See classified long list of memoirs in Appendix of *Handling the Truth* by Beth Kephart

Definitions of memoir, autobiography/biography

Memoir is an aspect of a life shaped by any number of parameters, including time, place, topic or theme (Eg a search for meaning, a journey of recovery, overcoming some challenge in life etc)

... Apart from categories, a memoir is simply an impression of being, a record of memory. **The**

Memoir Book Patti Miller p3-4

Autobiography is generally an account of a whole life—from one’s origins to the present.

Biography is an account of someone else’s life.

Two contrasting comments about memoir

• Positive

*In the writing world, memoir is the new black. Readers – and publishers – are hungry for distinctive, beautifully told true tales that give new insight into **what it is to be human in a particular place, at a particular time**. You don’t need to have been stuck between two rocks for 127 hours (or had a misery-drenched childhood) for your story to be worth telling – but you do need to know how to tell it in a way that will engage readers and offer something unique and valuable.* NSW Writers’ Centre workshop ‘The Ultimate Selfie—Writing Memoir’, Jo Case

• Negative

A moment of silence, please, for the lost art of shutting up.

There was a time when you had to earn the right to draft a memoir, by accomplishing something noteworthy or having an extremely unusual experience or being such a brilliant writer that you

could turn relatively ordinary occurrences into a snapshot of a broader historical moment. Anyone who didn't fit one of those categories was obliged to keep quiet. Unremarkable lives went unremarked upon, the way God intended.

But then came our current age of over-sharing, and all heck broke loose. These days, if you're planning to browse the "memoir" listings on Amazon, make sure you're in a comfortable chair, because that search term produces about 40,000 hits, or 60,000, or 160,000, depending on how you execute it.

Sure, the resulting list has authors who would be memoir-eligible under the old rules. But they are lost in a sea of people you've never heard of, writing uninterestingly about the unexceptional, apparently not realizing how commonplace their little wrinkle is or how many other people have already written about it. ... Sorry to be so harsh, but this flood just has to be stopped. We don't have that many trees left. Neil Genzlinger, 'The Problem with Memoirs', Sunday Book Review in The New York Times, 28 Jan 2011.

Decide on the narrative theme and parameters of your memoir

- Find your focus and stick to it! The aim of a memoir is to find the universal in the particular or the specific ie to share your experiences to make a larger point.

Make your memoir about more than just you. Holly Robinson, 'What Makes A Memoir Great' HuffPost blog 13/8/2012

Rather than focusing on the events of the story, focus on the purpose of it, and steer what you choose to share toward that purpose. Just as you would in a novel, allow yourself to skip time, ignore meaningless events – and get to the good stuff. Joanna Penn, 'Seven Mistakes to Avoid When Writing Your Memoir' on blog 'The Creative Penn' 14th March 2012

Examples:

Tuesdays with Morrie: An old man, a young man, and life's greatest lesson Mitch Albom Hachette 1997: *The last class of my old professor's life took place once a week in his house, by a window in the study where he could watch a small hibiscus plant shed its pink leaves. The class met on Tuesdays. It began after breakfast. The subject was The Meaning of Life. It was taught from experience.* (p 1)

Surprised by Joy C S Lewis Fontana 1955: *This book is written partly in answer to requests that I would tell how I passed from Atheism to Christianity and partly to correct one or two false notions that seem to have got about. ... The book aims at telling the story of my conversion and is not a general autobiography ...*

- What is your time frame for your memoir? Eg childhood, years of travelling etc
- What **areas** of your life will you include? Eg what relationships, what else you did in these times

Exercise: Share the narrative theme of your proposed memoir/biography in groups of three.

Work out your real reason(s) for writing a memoir/autobiography/biography

- This will affect your 'narrative voice' ie the tone of your work. (See 'Check your narrative voice' section below)
- Be honest with yourself! What are you trying to achieve? Your obvious reason might be to recount your story (or someone else's), but what is your underlying reason?

Some possibilities:

- To make sense of your life or part thereof ie self-therapy through writing

NB Different views on this—see book *The Healing Power of Memoir*, Linda Joy Myers as opposed to those who feel there is danger in producing raw, unprocessed writing.

- To encourage and inspire others going through similar situations
What you are, if you are a memorist, is a person who has been trusted to help us see, or help us think, or remind us that we (the rest of all us mes) are not alone. Beth Kephart *Handling the Truth* p 161
- To teach about some aspect of the Christian life via story ie ‘show’ don’t ‘tell’ par excellence!
- To set the record straight ie give your version of events
- To get back at someone/others—or apologise
Wanting to settle a score or make an apology are perfectly valid motives for writing a memoir. But, take care, settled scores and apologies don't necessarily translate into engrossing reads. Victoria Costello ‘Ten Secrets of Successful Memoir Writers’ HuffPost blog 16/2/2012
- To leave a record for future generations
- To honour someone else’s life and achievements (biography)
- This may not become clear until you are well into writing your memoir. It’s okay to change—that’s what the first draft is for!

Illustration: Reasons for writing *Soul Friend*—making sense of a draining period in my life; to teach about mentoring; to encourage others; to honour my mentor.

Exercise: Write down your reasons for writing your own (proposed) memoir/biography.

Write with honesty and integrity

- Don’t lie—to yourself or to your readers! Resist adding events that never happened or deliberately blending two events into one or combining two conversations. If you aren’t sure about something, then tell your readers this is how you remember it.
- Avoid making yourself or the person you are writing about into a hero or into the perfect Christian. Balance those strengths and weaknesses.
We need to hear the whole story. Not just the pretty, shiny, fancy parts. Not just the moments when we make the right decision, or offer grace or parent with patience or turn the other cheek, but the moments when we fail to do so, too. Because these are the moments that make us real and relateable. ... These are the moments that have us nodding our heads in recognition and encourage us to be courageously authentic, too. Michelle Derusha ‘Tell the truth as you understand it’ on ‘Incourage’ Book Club blog 28th July 2014
- **But ...** work out how open it is wise for you to be about yourself or the other person. How vulnerable are you prepared to be? And will what you share be helpful to others anyway?
I've often said jokingly to my students, "Writing a memoir is like taking your clothes off in public." True, but it doesn't go far enough. It's like taking your clothes off and reading your journal in public. Linda Joy Myers ‘Balancing Craft and Vulnerability on your journey to “The End”’, HuffPost Books blog 22/7/2013
- **Also ...** choose the right time in your life to make yourself vulnerable via your memoir. Sometimes it’s better to wait until you can view the period or aspect of your life you want to cover with more objectivity.
‘Wait ten years to write about a painful experience.’ (Author unknown)

Never write from anger or unresolved issues. Write, ultimately, from a place of peace. It will take some editing and refining to get there ... sometimes the process of draft writing itself helps you resolve issues. This is good; writing is therapeutic and serves multiple purposes to the author as well. But don't publish this raw version, ever. Carolyn Weber, 'Five Golden Rules for Writing Spiritual Memoir' on blog 'Spiritual Autobiography', 26 Oct 2013.

Ethical issues

- Be kind and compassionate—write with empathy for yourself and those you mention. *Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.* Ephesians 4:31-32
Illustration: Autobiography of missionary where sending organisation criticised. Later mentioned they had made a public apology but it left a sour taste for me.
- Be respectful. As much as you can, ask for permission before including information that might embarrass others. Show them what you plan to include.
And do not forget this. Learn it from me. People grow up. Children do. Memoirs freeze people in time. Sometimes that isn't the most loving thing to do. Others may forgive you, but will you forgive yourself? Beth Kephart op cit p 26
Illustration: My experience of asking Joy's permission re what to include in *Soul Friend*—but I couldn't ask permission of another key person in the story.
- If in doubt, give your manuscript to a third party who knows those you plan to mention to see what they think.
Illustration: Friend's vs sister's vs daughter's opinion re how much to say in *Soul Friend*
- On the other hand, remember you can't please everyone and make everyone comfortable with what you write. Others will often have a different perspective on events—and this is yours.
- Sometimes it is wiser not to identify a person or a place or a church or even a denomination. Sometimes things can be kept vague enough so that no one knows who you might mean.
Illustration: My decisions in writing *Soul Friend*

Finding material

- Pay attention to your life. Take time to reflect with God on it all, including your hopes, desires, doubts, fears. Keeping a journal will help you focus on what is happening to you and what God might be teaching you. It will also help you develop your memoir writing style, so the process as well as the content in that journal will be invaluable for later memoir writing.
If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this: Listen to your life.
 Frederick Buechner *Listen to Your Life* HarperCollins 1992
- Learn to be observant of others around you and, in particular, their responses to you. As writers, we need to be like bowerbirds, gathering shiny bits and pieces for our nests!
- Assemble and utilise all your resources—letters, emails, blogs, journal entries, diary entries, photos, interviews etc.
Illustration: Use of journal entries (including *The Artist's Way* and *An Authentic Life*), emails, Joy's DVDs, discussions with Joy in writing *Soul Friend*

- Research well—even facts you think you know! Otherwise, someone will point out your mistakes somewhere along the line. This can apply even with our own family history.

Illustration: My sister’s memory of how we grew up differs from mine at times! But does that matter? This is my life as I remember experiencing it.

- Take time to reflect and remember—‘mine your memory’. Sometimes you will be surprised what you discover inside you, so be gentle with yourself.

Your well (ie the ‘well’ that is the depths of your soul) goes down deeper than you know, and it has been gathering information for a very long time. When you are doing work that is truly creative, you are tapping the well. You will tap a lot of things that are already in your life but that you just weren’t aware of ... Vinita Hampton Wright *The Soul Tells A Story* p 93

- Remember to use all your senses as you think back eg What sounds do you remember from the years you are writing about? What colours? What smells?

Illustration: Description of Joy’s garden and study in *Soul Friend*

Exercise from Natalie Goldberg’s *Old Friend from Far Away* p 6. Write for two minutes on the following, beginning with ‘I remember’:

- A memory of your mother, aunt or grandmother
- A memory of the colour red
- A memory of sound

Decide on a structure for your memoir/biography

- Will you start at the beginning or choose a key focal point, then back track?

Play with chronology. Although it is often useful to write the sequence of events ‘as they happened’ so that readers find out in the same way that you did, it can be effective to shuffle events. ... Perhaps try starting at the end. Or at a hinge—the point where events swung one way rather than another. Patti Miller *The Memoir Book* p 79

- Will you structure your memoir via a timeline or a theme ie via narrative or topic? If you choose the chronological approach, always keep the theme in mind. Issues with both approaches.

Illustration: Difficulties with structure of *Coming Home to Myself*—jumping ahead

- As with novels, make sure your memoir has as good story arc. Where are you going to place the climax? The story has to lead somewhere eg overcoming a huge obstacle; arriving at a place of acceptance and peace; achieving reconciliation and forgiveness; coming to faith in God.

NB If necessary, refer to book dealing with plot and structure in fiction eg relevant chapters in *A Novel Idea* or James Scott Bell’s *Plot and Structure*.

Think about the natural start and end points, and what the climax of the story looks like. Each chapter should be shaped like that as well, with its own narrative arc. Holly Robinson Blog ‘What Makes A Memoir Great’ HuffPost blog 13/8/2012
Write your life-story as a classic story, with three acts and a clear protagonist. Why? So it will appeal to a wider readership than those already familiar with you. ... This story structure will help you filter the events of your life. Look at the development process as you would for writing any classic story. Any line, scene, character, insight or witticism that doesn’t advance the story or relate to them must be cut. Tim Ferguson ‘8 Steps for writing your memoir’ in *Newswrite*, The NSW Writers’ Centre magazine, Issue 214 p 4.

- Draw up a list of chapters and jot down points to be covered in each chapter. You can make this as detailed as you like, depending on how much of a ‘plotter’ or ‘pantster’ you are!

- Avoid a lopsided or ‘lumpy’ structure ie too much detail in one part and not enough in another.

Check the pace of your memoir/biography (linked with narrative theme and structure)

- Try not to say too much too soon. The tension has to be maintained to keep readers turning those pages. As with novel writing, let the plot unfold little by little—and respect your readers!
- Watch out for sections that slow the pace down because of too much detail. Reading your work aloud may help you pick up these sections. Also, putting your completed work aside for a significant period of time should help you see which parts could be tightened up.
- Avoid self-indulgence, particularly in memoir writing. Some life experiences may seem vital and riveting for you but will not necessarily grip your readers. This is where having good, honest manuscript readers/critique partners will help you, as well as a good editor.

Check your narrative voice

- How do you, as both the narrator and main character in your memoir, ‘sound’ to your readers? How are you depicting the person whose biography you are writing? Are readers drawn to your character or put off or overwhelmed?
- What emotions are you really conveying—self-acceptance, self-pity, anger, frustration, boredom, disdain, respect and admiration?

Voice conveys your attitude, your relationship to your life. Voice is more telling than anything you say—this is as true of writing as it is of the spoken word. A friend might say, ‘I don’t care about him anymore,’ but you know from her voice that the opposite is true. In memoir, what you feel about your life, rather than what you think about it, will be revealed in your voice.

Patti Miller *The Memoir Book* p 38—see this entire chapter on ‘The Storyteller’s Seat’.

For reflection and discussion

How could any of the reasons for writing a memoir or biography mentioned earlier (or your own reasons) affect your narrative voice? What emotions might be conveyed as a result?

- To make sense of your life or part thereof ie self-therapy through writing
- To encourage and inspire others going through similar situations
- To teach about some aspect of the Christian life
- To set the story straight ie give your version of events
- To get back at someone/others
- To leave a record for future generations
- To honour someone else’s life and achievements (biography)

Illustration: *My China Mystery* Marion Andrews. I sense great love for her father and a strong desire to honour him in this biography.

Write with emotion

- We engage with books with our hearts as well as with our minds—we want our readers to be emotionally connected to our writing and to be ‘in’ the story with us.

Your emotional responses are the crux of your memoir. So, begin your memoir by recounting an event that will entice the reader. Include plenty of emotion—the more deep and authentic the emotion, the more the reader becomes curious. You want the reader to wonder, “Who is this person, how did this happen, why did it happen?” Roberta Temes, ‘Ignore These Rules’, HuffPost Books Blog 21st June 2014

- Take care of yourself in the process of expressing your emotions. It might help for you to have a good friend or spiritual mentor who can partner you on this journey. Allow yourself time just to sit and process things, without necessarily writing.

Illustration: My experience of writing *Soul Friend* two years ago, then *Coming Home to Myself* further down the track. Both emotionally draining in different ways. *Any artist will have to find ways to process emotional work. Sometimes there is no easy way, and you will have to bear with those difficult emotions ... On the other hand, you must look for ways to give your soul some breathing room. Perhaps a habit of prayer will help. Or maybe physical exercise will provide a pressure valve. You are doing spiritual work, and the emotion is part of what makes it powerful. But you are also living your own life in the midst of it, and you owe it to yourself and those around you to take care of yourself.* Vinita Hampton Wright op cit IVP 2005 p 114

- Be aware of what God is teaching you as you write. **In the end, the whole journey might be for your sake and not for your potential readers.**

Keep your writing varied and interesting

- Vary your sentence and paragraph lengths. Leave enough 'white space'.
- As with writing novels, remember to 'show' as well as 'tell' by integrating scenes that utilise setting, action and dialogue. Too much straight telling can make for flat and lifeless writing.
- Remember to appeal to all the senses—seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling. This will help readers relate on a deeper level and bring the story to life. But don't overdo this by including too many long, descriptive passages.
- In writing dialogue, if you can't remember the exact words that were said, try to capture the general gist and feel of the conversation at least. This is how you remembered it anyway—this is your 'truth'. **But** readers need to feel the dialogue you write could at least be possible. For example, would you remember exactly what your mother said when you were three years old?

Unless you walk around your entire life with a tape recorder in your pocket, dialogue will become one of the greatest moral and storytelling conundrums you will face when writing memoir. You may feel that you need some of it, a smattering at least, to round out characters, change the pace, dissect the rub between what was thought and what was actually said. You may need dialogue because, in life, people talk to one another and readers want to know what they said; they want to know the sound of the relationships. Beth Kephart op cit p 83

When it comes to dialogue, you won't recall every single word said. So go with the gist of conversations. The other people involved won't recall chats word-for-word unless you were married to them at the time. (!) Tim Ferguson op cit p 5

- Use suitable quotations from Scripture and from other sources to add variety.
- Weave narration and reflection together in a good balance.

Illustration: Beginnings and ends of my chapters in *Coming Home to Myself*

Exercise

Rewrite the following memoir excerpt in a more interesting way:

When I was around eleven, my parents took me to audition for a new junior choir at the Conservatorium of Music. Again, I felt so nervous and insignificant as I was ushered into the Principal's studio and stood there alone, gazing at his rather craggy, intimidating face and shock of

white hair. He surveyed me over his glasses for a moment as he sat at that beautiful grand piano, then pointed to a line of music in a manuscript in front of him and asked me to sing it.

I stumbled my way through it, correcting myself once, but he seemed reasonably satisfied. Then he played Middle C, followed by another note, and asked me what the second note was. I tried to work it out by humming it in my head and eventually decided it must be A. I was so relieved when the Principal told me I was right and that I had perfect pitch.

[A suggestion:

When I was around eleven, my parents took me to audition for a new junior choir at the Conservatorium of Music. Again, I felt so nervous and insignificant as I was ushered into the Principal's studio and stood there alone, gazing at his rather craggy, intimidating face and shock of white hair. He surveyed me over his glasses for a moment as he sat at that beautiful grand piano, then pointed to a line of music in a manuscript in front of him.

'Now, Jo-Anne, please sing that for me if you can.'

I stumbled my way through it, correcting myself once, but he seemed reasonably satisfied.

'Hmm—good. Now ... I'm going to play Middle C, then another note after it. Can you tell me what that second note is?'

I hummed that first note and then the second. Inside my head, I tried to count the steps in between. There were four steps—or was it five? I checked again, softly humming each one this time. Yes, definitely five. It must be A then.

'I think it's A,' I whispered.

'Excellent—you have perfect pitch,' I heard him say, much to my relief.]

For sharing/discussion

- Name a memoir/biography you enjoyed and share why it impacted you.
- How do you respond to the description of memoir/biography as being 'creative non-fiction'?