

Writing About Yourself (if you're serious about it)

A few years back I was contacted through email by an old friend. He was approaching the ripe old age of fifty and expressed a deep desire to write a memoir about his life. He wanted some tips on how to accomplish this Herculean task but I suspect what he really wanted was for me to do the actual work for him (If I did this for everyone who asked me, I'd never get around to my own work until I was on my deathbed).

He sounded sincere enough in wanting to get certain aspects of his life down on paper, but it's been my experience that most people, though sincere about wanting to write their memoir, truly aren't serious about it when they realize the massive amount of work and time the project will demand.

"Here's what I'll do," I told him. "I'll put together a simple, easy to understand, abbreviated list of tips for you to follow to get you started, that way it will be completely up to you on whether your project gets off the ground or not. Contact me when you get a second or third draft finished and I'll take a quick look at it."

He liked the idea. The following is what I came up with, maybe you can use some of this advice for your own memoir (should you choose to accept the mission)...

First, read some memoirs about subjects you like (politicians, actors, poets, writers, rock band groupies, rock bands, rock stars, etc.), pay close attention to how they structured and organized their memoir. It's okay to copy how they did this, just don't copy what they wrote.

Keep a journal by your side all the time, especially at your bedside as ideas often pop into an author's head during sleep. Keeping a journal will help you organize your ideas later on and you'll find it easier not having to keep all that information in your head. Keep in mind that we've forgotten twice as what we remember. And sometimes writing in a journal will spark another memory and another. Break your journal up into sections like "Memories", "Dreams", "Interesting Dialogue You've Heard", "Smells", "Tastes", "Similes", "Story Ideas", etc, it all depends on your needs. For the untrained author, a journal will help you avoid brain overload, which leads to chaos, which always kills the writing process.

I've never met a single person who appreciated reading one of my stories in longhand. I strongly suggest you get yourself a laptop with a word processing program like "Word", or borrow one from somebody. Publishers will definitely not read a story in longhand. Laptops are cheap nowadays and you'll find it much easier when you have to go back in and reorganize elements or punctuation in a story. If you're scared of using one, don't be, they're made so that a first grader can use them.

As you're writing the first draft of your manuscript, don't worry about spelling, punctuation, characterization, metaphors, story turns, etc. The first draft is all about getting it down on the page, nothing more. Your second and third drafts are all about polishing the story so that it's readable to people. Sometimes fourth, fifth and sixth drafts are needed. The truth about writing is that the real act of writing happens during the editing process.

Don't worry about organizing your stories yet. When I wrote my humorous memoir, "Thirty Three Terrific Tales of Lake County, Illinois," what I did was write whatever story interested me at the time and then when I was finished writing them all, I went back and arranged them in an order that was entertaining for me and the reader. This was a very fun process. You can organize your stories by date, place, event, etc., you'll figure this out after you've finished writing all your stories.

As I wrote my stories, I gave each one a manila folder, titled the folder whatever the story was titled and moved all the information I had in my journal concerning that story to the folder, that way I had easy access to it, no searching around in pages and pages of the journal. Writing a story is hard enough, make it easier on yourself and you'll find it a smoother process. Remember to put a line through whatever you used from the journal so that you don't use it again.

Find someone who will read your stories with a critical eye (your mother is out, unless she's a writer herself she will not give you the critique a serious writer needs - I know this from experience). What a writer needs most is someone who is honest. And don't take the criticisms personally, if you do then you shouldn't be writing in the first place. A critique is all about making your story the best it can be.

To this day I don't know if my friend even started the process, I haven't heard from him. Perhaps he wasn't serious after all.

Thanks for your time,
GC Rosenquist