

CREATING THE MEMOIR- By Anne Schroeder

WHAT IS A MEMOIR? It is a recording of the times and events surrounding a family or group within an era. It includes emotions, actions, reasoning and consequences to which the writer is central.

DEFINING YOUR PROJECT:

Are you planning a Book? Photo Album? Collection of Essays? *Belle Lettres*? Journalistic Interviews? Video Montage (still photos combined with taped interviews)? Video Documentary? Tape Recorded Interviews? (You can have them transcribed at a later time). Compilation of family records and receipts? Or are you planning something else?

GETTING STARTED:

Asking questions: WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, WHY, HOW BECOMES

1. WHO DID IT HAPPEN TO?
2. WHO DID IT? And WHY?
3. WHAT CHANGED MY ANCESTORS' LIVES? WHAT HAVE WE LOST? GAINED?
4. WHERE DID IT HAPPEN? DESCRIBE THE PHYSICALITY OF THE SETTING.
5. IN WHAT CONTEXT DID IT HAPPEN? WHAT WAS THE WORLD LIKE?
6. WHY DID A CHANGE OCCUR? WAS LIFE BETTER or WORSE AFTERWARDS?
7. HOW DID THESE ACTIONS AFFECT ME AND MY CHILDREN?
8. HOW DID IT FEEL AT THE TIME?

ARE YOU WRITING a HISTORICAL RECORD OF A FAMOUS RELATIVE OR AN ERA? Are you seeking EMOTIONAL CLOSURE? Are you trying to compensate for the lack of DINNER TABLE STORIES? A RECORD FOR POSTERITY? Are you writing this for YOUR GRANDCHILDREN? CHILDREN? ANONYMOUS READERS?

You must decide your writer's VOICE. Narrative? Humorous? Tongue-in-cheek? Scholarly?

FLESH OUT YOUR STORY: Use background sources like MAPS, LEGAL RECORDS, FINANCIAL RECORDS, BILLS, NEWSPAPER ACCOUNTS. Quote from other authors who write about the era or area of your memoir. E-mail relatives. Seeking out their advice invests them in the project and they will want copies.

EVOKE THE SENSES. Describe daily life: your toys and schooling, modes of transportation. Sometimes the fascination is in the mundane. That you walked seven miles to school is a cliché. Write about the blisters from the cardboard in your soles, the encounter with the skunk, the feel of frost on your six-year-old nose after three miles. Try to put your reader in your memories. Don't package it for them. Use old phrases and turns of speech. How did your mother's pies smell cooling on the windowsill? The weight of three quilts on your bed. The smell of kerosene when you were pregnant. The feel of a bath after two weeks of doing without water. The sound of the windmill creaking when a breeze broke the drought. Recall what you did without. Study photographs. They will evoke many memories.

MY TWELVE CENTS ON WRITING MEMOIRS

1. *FACTUAL TRUTH AND EMOTIONAL TRUTH ARE NOT NECESSARILY THE SAME THING.* Spend some time thinking about this. If you want to create chaos in your family, write about them.

2. *THERE IS NO PERFECT AGE TO WRITE A MEMOIR.* Too many people wait too long. By age 75, many people have lost their passion and zest (and their clarity of recall.) Writing it early frees the mind to create new interests. There is a difference between grandchildren rejecting your stories and not being ready to accept them. By your writing them, they can read them when they are ready.

- 3. TRY TO GET THE FACTS RIGHT.** Start with the oldest members of your family. Then check the facts with two other family members. (Facts are different than memories.) If in doubt, go with the oldest or most credible person. If there is a discrepancy, print both versions and let the reader decide. Most families have unresolved issues. Be a devil's advocate but not a referee.
- 4. ERR ON THE SIDE OF KINDNESS.** Don't write a memoir to vent, to punish, or as a vehicle for revenge. For others, seeing their deeds in print can be stark and shocking. A book is more permanent than a feud. Avoid avenging the fear, pain, or humiliation "buttons" from your past.
- 5. YOUR WRITING VOICE MUST HAVE AUTHORITY AND A MORAL TONE. USE YOUR UNIQUE VOICE.** You can be serious, ironic or angry, but you CANNOT be whiny.
- 6. EVEN IF YOU BEGIN WRITING FROM SORROW OR ANGER YOUR SUBCONSCIOUS WILL RECALL HAPPY EVENTS.** Just keep writing. You will gain a fuller knowledge of your past as you write.
- 7. WRITING YOUR MEMOIR WILL EFFECT A PERMANENT CHANGE IN YOU.** Embrace it. But be careful what you ask for, you might get it. "The unexamined life is a _____ life."
- 8. WRITE EVERYTHING AND THEN REWRITE IT.** No one gets it right the first time.
- 9. HOW CAN YOU WRITE ENGAGINGLY WITHOUT COMPROMISING THE TRUTH?** Humor, Humor, Humor. Your children and grandchildren can still hear criticism or a lecture, even if you're writing it to them. Watch the moralizing. We made mistakes even in the "good old days".
- 10. TRUTH ALONE DOESN'T MAKE GOOD WRITING. TRUTH AND ART (CRAFT) DOES.** Study a book on memoir writing. Read a few to see what works.

11. *DON'T THINK YOU HAVE TO WRITE A BOOK.* Write letters to your children. Write essays. At some point a book will begin to emerge and you will outgrow your fear of the “B” (Book) word.

12. *BE READY FOR SOME CRITICISM.* Get your story right and be proud of it. Writers are bold. That’s why they are my heros.