

How to Write Your Memoir

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Thinking about your legacy? Wondering how to achieve a small measure of immortality? Write a memoir.

Jeannette Walls had a hardscrabble youth. Nomadic, poor, often hungry, she grew up in the desert Southwest and the mountains of West Virginia. She eventually escaped her poverty and moved to New York City, where she became a successful gossip columnist. Her parents moved there too. Only, they soon found themselves homeless. One night on her way to a party, dressed in designer clothes, she saw Mom rooting through a Dumpster. She lowered her head and asked the cabbie to take her home. My, how people would gossip if that were known.

"I was terrified," says Walls. "I had this great life, a husband who loved me, a great job, a house with flush toilets, yet I felt like a fraud. I had a compulsion to write about this embarrassing stuff even though I knew I was risking everything."

Walls made false starts on her memoir four times over 20 years, on each occasion growing so frustrated and fearful that she threw out the entire manuscript. Finally, when she was 44, [The Glass Castle](#) was published. It's been on the New York Times bestseller list for almost three years, has sold more than two million copies, has been translated into 23 languages, and will soon be a movie.

"One of the lessons I've learned from writing this memoir is how much we all have in common," says Walls. "So many of us think that certain things only happened to us and somehow they make us less of a person. I'm constantly urging people, especially older folks, to write about their lives. It gives you new perspective. It was hugely eye-opening for me and very cathartic. Even if the book hadn't sold a single copy, it would still have been worth it."

You don't need to have had a hardscrabble youth in order to write a memoir. You don't need eccentric parents. Believe it or not, you don't need anything dramatic. And you certainly don't have to publish it. Consider this exchange that Frank McCourt, the Pulitzer Prize—winning author of [Angela's Ashes](#) and other memoirs, had with a skeptical student: " 'Mr. McCourt, you're lucky,' " the author recounts in [Teacher Man](#). " 'You had that miserable childhood, so you have something to write about. What are we gonna write about? All we do is get born, go to school, go on vacation, go to college, fall in love or something, graduate and go into some kind of profession, get married, have the 2.3 kids you're always talking about, send the kids to school, get divorced like 50 percent of the population, get fat, get the first heart attack, retire, die.' "

" 'Jonathan,' " McCourt replied, " 'that is the most miserable scenario of American life I've heard in a high school classroom. But you've supplied the ingredients for the great American novel. You've encapsulated the novels of Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, F. Scott Fitzgerald.' "

In other words, 99.9 percent of people lead boring lives. But every single one of them is trying to make some sense out of his or her existence, to find some meaning in the world, and therein lies the value and opportunity of memoir. It's therapeutic for the writer, and it eventually even helps his or her descendants understand themselves better.

"Memoir is about handing over your life to someone and saying, This is what I went through, this is who I am, and maybe you can learn something from it," says Walls. "It's honestly sharing what you think, feel, and have gone through. If you can do that effectively, then somebody gets the wisdom and benefit of your experience without having to live it."

Writing about your life is also about coming to a fresh understanding of it at an age when you probably think you know yourself pretty well. Novelist Stephen King has said, "I write to find out what I think." He means that until you set an experience down on paper, until you ponder the perfect words to describe it, you can't fully appreciate or understand it. Threading related experiences together, you see a pattern in the quilt of your existence. It's about creating a legacy that doesn't have dollar signs in front of it but has far greater residual value for family and friends.

There are as many different types of memoir as there are people. Like Walls and McCourt, you can write about your childhood. You can write about places you've visited, as Elizabeth Gilbert did in the blockbuster memoir [Eat, Pray, Love](#). You can write about a particular person who influenced you, as Lorna Kelly did in [The Camel Knows the Way](#), which chronicles her time with Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity. You can write about a crime or injustice you encountered, as Mary-Ann Tirone Smith did in [Girls of Tender Age](#), which traces the murder of a classmate. You can write a memoir about anything, no matter how small or seemingly inconsequential. Everybody has stories shelved in his or her subconscious, awaiting translation.

The challenge is getting started, coaxing the story out. (Indeed, there are those who say beginning is half done.) Since there is inherent worth to the endeavor beyond public acclaim, you don't have to be a professional writer or someone with connections in publishing to succeed. You can write it for yourself.

Kelly was involved with Mother Teresa and her work for about 16 years, leaving a career as a Sotheby's auctioneer in Manhattan to work in the slums of Calcutta and elsewhere in the world. "Occasionally, when I was home, I'd do public speaking. People kept telling me I should write these experiences down. I didn't think of myself as a writer, but I got that message so many times, I thought I better pay attention. So I started writing on my Selectric typewriter. I was pretty naive because I thought I'd write a book and the next week I'd do something else. But in the end, of course, I let the whole apartment go and was doing nothing else."

Kelly self-published her book, printing 10,000 initial copies, and funding the project by working odd jobs (including a stint as a doorman). Depending predominantly on word of mouth and her own passion, she has since gone into a second printing and sold a total of 15,000 copies.

"Success isn't measured in how many I've sold," she notes. "It's measured in the delight I got in producing something really wonderful."

By contrast, Smith had written eight novels before she decided to address in memoir an experience that, she came to realize, had been haunting her for decades. When she was nine, a friend named Irene was sexually assaulted and strangled in her neighborhood. But since it was the grin-and-bear-it 1950s, no one talked about it. When Smith decided to "take her finger out of the dike" decades later, the memories came flooding back.

"You think that you'll never remember the details of what happened so long ago," she explains, "but all you have to do is find a quiet, comfortable place and write one line. That's when you'll start to see the whole scene right in front of you. It's incredible."

Be forewarned: Some of what comes back may be painful. "Writing memoir is like preparing yourself to go to confession," says McCourt, who didn't publish *Angela's Ashes* until he was 66. "You have to examine your conscience." And that entails honesty. You can't write an effective memoir if you're worried about family and friends looking over your shoulder. Even if the truth hurts, if it is truthful, then there's no other way to present it. At the very least, readers will recognize the courage in that and respect you for it.

"When you're truly honest and revealing about yourself, it creates a sigh in other people," says Lorna Kelly. "They realize they're not alone, they're not a freak: Someone else has felt the exact same way or lived their dream. If you're going to skimp on the truth, then you're doing a disservice. Honesty is not only a gift to other people—it's a gift to yourself."

The other half of successful memoir writing is retrospection. It's not enough to just chronicle your life as if you were a newspaper reporter. Memoir demands that you write about what you've learned from your experiences. For instance, Walls initially wrote about her childhood as a detached observer, and the result, her literary agent told her, was a story that read like it was "wrapped in cellophane." Only when she assumed the persona of herself as a little girl did it become real and powerful.

In many ways, writing a memoir is like painting. You slap some words on a blank canvas, take a few steps back, look at how they're coming together, then refine things further. That step back is retrospection. It's thoughtfulness. It's an attempt to figure things out. It's the search for your truth.

"A smart therapist once told me that what I had done in this book was exactly what he tries to get patients to do, and that is confront the truth," says Walls. "For many years I was running from it, but the truth has a way of catching up with you, and this was my way of coming to terms with it. The things that haunt you, the things that have power over you—once you confront them, they lose their power. So many people ask me, 'How can you forgive your parents for treating you that way?' Well, actually, the person I had to forgive was myself. By sitting down and telling what really happened, I was able to understand it for the first time."