

[Memoir Writing Tips from Marion Roach Smith](#)

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Jeff Goins, Writer" <Jeff.Goins@gmail.com> interviews Marion Roach Smith, Author of the Memoir Project.

I met [Marion Roach Smith](#) online several months ago through this blog. She told me that she teaches people to write [memoir](#) — a nonfiction writing genre I am particularly interested in (both as a reader and writer).

I read Marion's book, [The Memoir Project](#), and was blown away. It's approximately 100 pages of practical, entertaining inspiration that will get you sharing your most (and least) favorite memories in a compelling, interesting format.

It only seemed fair to share all the riches Marion was sharing with me — with all of you. So I asked her for an interview.

Interview with Marion Roach Smith

Jeff: How long have you been teaching memoir writing?

Marion: I've been teaching memoir writing for more than 14 years. Most of that teaching takes place at the Arts Center of the Capital Region in Troy, NY, though I've also taught at such marvelous places as New York's great Chautauqua Institute, as well as online at [CafeMom](#), [Beliefnet](#) and at my own website, marionroach.com.

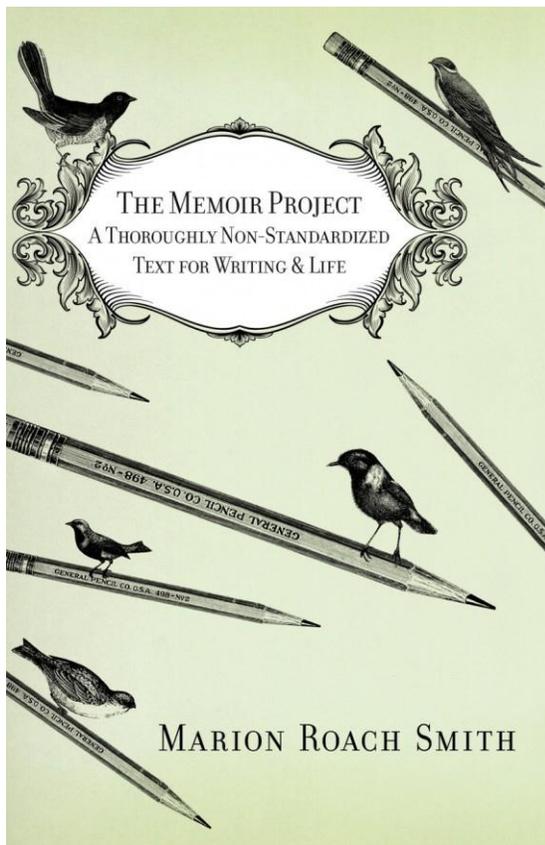
Jeff: What are some of the typical mistakes you see almost every time you teach?

Marion: The biggest mistake is to go too big too fast. It's inevitable. Given the permission to tell one's tale, most beginning memoirists attempt to tell us the whole tale, and in that, they crash and burn out.

Memoir is a genre, within which are many methods. I encourage mastering the personal essay, a piece of non-fiction of no more than 750 words. The essay is the single best way to understand one of the basic rules of memoir, which is to tell one story at a time. Master the essay and you've mastered the scene, as well as the intent of memoir.

From there, you can go anywhere.

Jeff: What is the best kind of memoir? What elements does it have? What does it lack? What makes it better than the rest? Examples?



The Memoir Project by Marion Roach Smith

Marion: The best memoir is about something, and that “something” is not “me.”

In the best memoir, the writer illustrates something but is not the subject of the tale. The subject is mercy or honor, growth, transcendence, patriotism, love, or some other universal theme, and our stories – and

all of us have a million of them – illustrate those themes.

Otherwise, you're just reading me your datebook, and no one should be subjected to that, right?

Here's a list I give out in my class. These are not required. They are books and stories that have taught me something about writing memoir.

- *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders* by Jennifer Finney Boylan
- *Green Fields* by Bob Cowser
- *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel
- [The War of Art](#) by Steven Pressfield
- [What I Thought I Knew](#) by Alice Eve Cohen
- [The Center of the Universe](#) by Nancy Bachrach
- [Perfection: A Memoir of Betrayal and Renewal](#) by Julie Metz
- *Going Gray* by Anne Kreamer
- *About Alice* by Calvin Trillin
- *Travels with Alice* by Calvin Trillin
- *Let Me Finish* by Roger Angell
- *The Rural Life* by Verlyn Klinkenborg
- *Manhattan, When I was Young* by Mary Cantwell
- *Patrimony* by Philip Roth
- "The Dog that Bit People," by James Thurber, in the book *My Life and Hard Times*
- [Between Meals](#) by A.J. Liebling
- *So Long, See You Tomorrow* by William Maxwell
- *Ancestors* by William Maxwell

Jeff: Why should people care about memoir?

Marion: Memoir is the single greatest portal to self-discovery — both reading and writing it. [Everyone has stories to tell](#). Telling them teaches us what we really think about everything. Reading them lets us see the universal themes of life explored.

Jeff: There's some controversy, it seems, about this genre. Is it literature? Is it biography? How much license does an author have to rewrite his or her story? Where do you stand on this? What's your personal philosophy of memoir?

Marion: You are not writing your autobiography when you write memoir, and while entire academic conferences are devoted to howling over the semantic differences, I keep this distinction pretty simple by defining autobiography as a book-length depiction of one's entire life, and memoir as depicting a specific aspect of that life.

When students arrive saying they want to write "my memoirs," I'll immediately attempt to redirect that to be "a memoir."

I don't always succeed in getting them to boil down their ambitions, though I can say with complete

assurance that those who do stand a far better chance of not only being read by someone else, but of having readers enjoy the work.

I leave biography to biographers writing about the lives of others, autobiography to the famous, whose highlights we already know, and whose details we'd like to have filled in for us, and memoir to the rest of us who would like to scrutinize life a little by using our own best tales.

Rewriting one's history should never be the intent of writing memoir. [Tell the truth](#). The French (of course) have a phrase that best illustrates the desire to rewrite, specifically for those bon mots we wish had popped out of our mouths but didn't. *Esprit d'escalier* means "the wit of the staircase," and it's among memoir's most dangerous temptations. Do not go up those stairs.

The desire to have a snappy comeback — to portray ourselves as witty, clever, and informed — is universal. But rarely are we witty on demand. We all wish we'd said some clever thing when we got dumped. We didn't, not out loud and at the time, and when writing memoir we're not allowed to make ourselves sound more snappy than we are.

At moments of confrontation, our inability to spit out what we long to say reveals our frustration; as we walk away, the words that roll in our heads represent our fears, our manners — ourselves — better than any snappy retort. Not being witty when we want to be is far more human than having some patterned repartee. And far more interesting.

In fiction and movies, everyone is witty. In nonfiction, we wrestle with the obvious, and we share our humanity. These little moments, revelatory real events, are what turn and shape our lives. So write about those. What do you wish you had said? That might be interesting; it's certainly universal.

But since we rarely carry a notebook when we're getting thrown out by the man we love, how do we resolve the dialogue issue? How can you be accurate?

Instead of replicating events, think about intent. If I don't know exactly how something was actually said, I tell you that a conversation went "something like this," but never alter the intent of the exchange. If there is a moral responsibility in writing nonfiction, it favors the intent of life's actual circumstances.

Jeff: If someone wants to write a memoir, how do they begin — aside from buying your book?

Marion: The best place to begin is with a short personal essay on one topic, jumping in at the middle of the action. In other words, do not start with your height, weight and eye color, your birthday, or your address. Start where things are already heated up, where there is something at stake, so that the reader can jump aboard with wide-open interest.

* * *

I took Marion's advice and wrote a 750-word essay. She was right. It was a great way to begin. I may even share it with you at some point.

So, now it's your turn. Go write your memoir.

And if you need help, read Marion's book: [The Mentoring Project](#)

You can follow Marion on her [blog](#), on [Twitter](#) (@mroachsmith), or via [Facebook](#).

If you were writing a memoir, what would you call it? Share it in the comments.

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