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Larkin: What kind of memoir are you writing?

By Daphne Larkin



Submitted photo

The spring memoir writing class at the Transylvania County Library prepare to read their stories to the public.

Since the 1990s publication of “Angela’s Ashes” and “The Liar’s Club” by Frank McCourt and Mary Karr, respectively, there’s been a steadily growing interest in memoir. And with that interest, the market for writers of memoir has opened up to anyone with a good story to tell. And people are telling them.

Some of those people are my memoir writing students at the Transylvania County Library. Most come to class with the desire to write a few stories about their lives, but as they begin writing, something happens. More often than not, an alchemy of desire takes hold and soon they want to write a book-length memoir.

“Go for it!” I say, and they’re embarking on opening a window – a very personal window – into their lives. It is thrilling to watch a writer begin to transform her story into literary art, a story she not only wants to record as well as she can, but one to share with a larger audience. To witness the launch of a project so immense, so life-changing is to be nothing less than awed.

I have been enthralled with memoir – with reading it, with writing it, with teaching it – for many years. I love the genre. I am a glutton for new memoir, old memoir, classic memoir, all memoir. Having lived with my own memoir for so long, I know the value of writing one. It can bring all kinds of gifts into a life. It can save it, too. It surely saved mine. But that’s another story for another column.

If you are interested in writing memoir, you should know about the three basic types, including a relatively new one that’s becoming more prevalent. Let’s take a quick look at these three memoir types.

CLASSIC MEMOIR

The Classic Memoir has been around forever and, likely, you’ve read a few. The story typically opens with the narrator having a problem. As it progresses, he confronts a complication, then a turning point (or climax) before he begins to resolve the issue, ties up loose ends, and brings the story to a satisfactory conclusion.

Consider the classic memoir my student Brandon Cook is writing. “My coming-of-age story, which has a clear narrative arc, is based on a series of extremely dysfunctional relationships with all the girls I loved—or thought I did anyway,” he says. Two other examples, both best sellers, are Cheryl Strayed’s “Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail” and “This Boy’s Life: A Memoir” by Tobias Wolff.

MEMOIR-IN-ESSAYS

Many of my students have gravitated to writing Memoir-In-Essays because they have lots of short stories, rather than one big one. Like the Classic Memoir, a memoir of essays is usually built around a theme, which ties the essays together. For example, student Karen Cole is writing essays about her many interests based on a theme of “what drives my life at 70.” Two other Memoir-in-Essays with clear themes are “I Am, I Am, I Am: Seventeen Brushes with Death” by Maggie O’Farrell and “Mama Makes Up Her Mind: and Other Dangers of Southern Living” by Bailey White. An example of a Memoir-In-Essays not theme-based is Rachel Kushner’s “The Hard Crowd: Essays 2000-2020,” which covers a wide range of topics held together by a distinct voice and a sharply defined philosophy.

HYBRID MEMOIR

Unlike the Classic Memoir or the Memoir-in-Essays, the new kind of memoir – the Hybrid Memoir – combines personal narrative with interviews, research, statistics and sometimes crosses over into narrative non-fiction.

Agents and editors are beginning to ask for the Hybrid Memoir because it offers “something extra,” according to Jenna Glatzer in her *Writer’s Digest* article (March/April 2025) titled “Memoir Plus.” Glatzer explains that extra something can be educational. The idea she says, is readers get more than just a personal story, they learn, too.

The Hybrid Memoir may be a trend, but if you’re writing memoir, you should consider whether your story lends itself to this format. For my student Rowena Williams, it does. She’s writing about gynecological cancer and weaving in her own experience navigating an unusual diagnosis for a woman her age with interviews from doctors and specialists. “I want to help the reader understand the challenges of this kind of cancer diagnosis and what all women and their loved ones should know about it,” she says.

Two other examples of Hybrid Memoir are Helen Macdonald’s “H is for Hawk” in which she tells the story of adopting and raising a falcon while educating the reader about falconry, and Paul Theroux’s “Deep South: Four Seasons on Back Roads” in which he takes us on a road trip below the Mason-Dixon line as he explores the people, landscapes and culture.

So, what kind of memoir are you writing? Classic, Essays or Hybrid? If it’s Hybrid that could work well in the current memoir publishing environment. If its Classic or an Essays collection, I don’t think readers will ever tire of reading an interesting, well written story. I certainly won’t!

Daphne Larkin is an award-winning book author, columnist and magazine writer. Her fall memoir writing class at the Transylvania County Library will be held from September 25 to November 13, on Thursdays from 3 to 5 PM. For more information, contact Daphne Larkin at daphne@daphnelarkin.com