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How to Capture the Stories of a Reluctant Memoirist

By Daphne Larkin



The reluctant memoirist, Chuck O'Rear, shows his wife, Daphne Larkin, his 1983 *National Geographic* cover shot flying an ultralight – while unseen by the camera, a B-52 bomber streaked 500 feet below him. (Submitted photo)

As a memoir writing teacher, I'm always on the lookout for people who have good stories to tell – and it so happens that I live with one of them.

“You’ve had more adventures and narrow escapes shooting for *National Geographic Magazine* than Indiana Jones in ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark,’” I tell my husband, Chuck O’Rear. “You should write your memoir.”

You’d think he’d be interested, right? Well, no, he is not.

This makes me crazy. Over the years, I have nagged, begged and bartered. Finally, one day Chuck went to his computer and started pounding away. Hours later, he handed me a list. It read: “The Twenty Times I Almost Died Shooting for *National Geographic*.”

I studied the list. It was interesting. I collected a pen and notepad and asked Chuck to tell me the story of his near death by ultralight, a tiny, flimsy plane made of fabric, powered by a lawn mower engine.

And so, he did. In 1983 Chuck was flying an ultralight in North Dakota waiting for white pelicans with 15-foot wingspans to fly with him. Suddenly, a B-52 bomber from a nearby airbase streaked 500 feet below him.

“It was a close call,” Chuck said. “The pilot of the B-52 could not see the ultralight on his radar screen. But I got the shot,” he added, explaining that he took a photo of himself flying the plane by installing cameras on the wings.

The photo was the magazine’s August 1983 cover shot.

“Koko, the gorilla and I are the only two photographers ever on the cover of *National Geographic*,” Chuck quipped. “And our pictures were probably the first selfies. Koko used a mirror to take her photo and I used remote control to take mine.”

But perhaps the strangest story of all on that list of the 20 times Chuck defied death was the one about almost being eaten for lunch.

“How did you escape being on the menu?” I asked.

“You mean Chuck a La Carte?” Chuck said with a grin. “Let’s open a bottle of wine and I’ll tell you the story.”

We opened the wine, Chuck began his tale, and I started writing.

“In 1985, when I was covering the country of Indonesia for *National Geographic*, I decided to go where Michael Rockefeller had disappeared in the 1960s on an outer island called Irian Jaya. The official report that he’d drowned had been questioned after Dutch missionaries heard he had been eaten by tribespeople in the area who practiced cannibalism. My translator set up the trip to retrace Rockefeller’s steps,” Chuck went on.

“She hired a guide to also act as a guard and the three of us took a small plane to a village in the jungle with an airstrip. Our guide, who had a rifle and spoke the local dialect, arranged a dugout canoe with an outboard motor. So, off we went with drinking water and mosquito repellent on a river without a name that was filled with crocodiles. As we motored down that river in the deep jungle, we were apprehensive.

“Finally, several hours later the guide said, ‘This is the spot,’ and we pulled up our canoe onto the muddy bank. Almost instantly, a few tribesmen met us. We got out of the dugout and I took several pictures. One was of the chief who wore nothing but a loin cloth made of animal-skin – or was it human skin? He had a skull cap decorated with teeth that looked human, a necklace of big, jagged crocodile teeth and a menacing grin.

“Our guide exchanged some words with the chief in the native dialect. Then, the tribesmen hastily departed and our guide picked up his rifle and shouted: ‘We have to go now! They’ve gone after their spears!’ We rushed to the boat, and pushed off from the muddy bank as fast as we could.”

“Were you terrified?” I asked.

“No,” Chuck said. “All I could think about was that I didn’t have more time to take photos.”

Chuck showed me his photo of the chief who looked fierce, protective and utterly uncolonized – and like he was anticipating a meal of Chuck Roast.

“Talk about a close call,” I said.

“Well, what followed was almost as bad,” Chuck went on. “We endured a long and dangerous ride in the pitch black of night down that crocodile-filled river in our rickety dugout canoe before finally arriving at the airstrip. There, we spent the night on the ground to await daylight when a Missionary Air Transport plane would pick us up. While we slept, big, black furry spiders crawled all over us, but I didn’t care because at least I’d gotten a few pictures.”

Not long after Chuck told me these stories, he attended a local men’s discussion group where he mentioned he’d shot 25 years for *National Geographic Magazine*. When the meeting ended, the group leader asked him to stay behind.

As people filed out of the room, the man said: “Chuck, you have some fascinating stories. You should write those stories down.” Then, the man added, “You know, there’s a woman in town who teaches memoir writing at the Transylvania County Library.”

Chuck started laughing. “Yes, I know,” he said. “I am married to her.”

And so, the reluctant memoirist and I began recording his stories in earnest. Chuck tells them to me and I write them down, using his words. If you live with a reluctant memoirist or know one, you can enjoy the pleasures and challenges of memoir writing as I am doing by translating his or her experiences onto the page. Then, you can write your own memoir.

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. Larkin will also teach a flash memoir workshop at the Lucy Clark Gallery & Studio in Brevard from August 30 to September 13. For more information, contact Daphne Larkin at daphne@daphnelarkin.com