

THE Transylvania TIMES

Tuesday, June 25, 2024

Do You Have the 'The Right Stuff' to Write a Memoir?

By Daphne Larkin



The library's spring memoir writing class at the dress rehearsal preparing for their public reading with instructor, Daphne Larkin (standing).

"Do I have the talent to write a book-length memoir?" one of my memoir-writing students asked me the other day.

"I wouldn't ask if you have the 'talent' or even wish for that," I told her. "I'd ask if you are passionate about writing your story."

She was, and now she's off and running the writing equivalent of a marathon, for writing a memoir is certainly no sprint.

But what about others, perhaps you, who are thinking about tackling the rewarding, sometimes daunting, but always transformative journey of writing about your life? What are the essential qualities and capabilities you need – or “the right stuff,” as Tom Wolfe called it in his book by that name about the first astronauts? I asked some friends who've published memoirs to weigh in on this and here's what they told me.

COURAGE

Writing memoir is one of the bravest things you can do. After all, what other genre requires you to shine a light on a slice of your life, disclose your deepest issues and worst fears, your shortcomings and failings? It took decades for Fergus Bordewich to be able to write "My Mother's Ghost" (2000). Asked how he got there, he said, “I had to become willing to open myself to the deep well of -- I felt unassuageable – grief I knew lay beneath the hardened memory I had of my mother's sudden, violent death.”

HARD WORK

Are you willing to learn the basic tools of memoir writing, create a true story, and edit and rewrite, over and over? Before you say yes, consider what my late mother, Charlotte St. John Evans, did. In her fifties, Mom used her background in psychology to write a Young Adult (YA) novel about a girl finding her way through the tumultuous teen years. She sent it to me to read and when I made some suggestions on how to rewrite the story, she moaned and groaned. But she did it and sent her story to a New York agent. He had her rewrite that book six times. Then he sold it. Soon, he got Mom a contract to write a series of YA novels. Was it worth all that work? My mother thought so.

HONESTY

Memoir is not only about what happened, but how your experiences influenced who you are today. To do it successfully, you must give the reader the whole picture, and that means you must, “Be honest, dirty laundry and all,” said Bryan Miller, former reporter for The New York Times who published his memoir “Dining in the Dark: A Famed Restaurant Critic's Struggle with and Triumph over Depression” (2021).

EMOTION

Expressing your emotions is where the gold is. Mine it like Hillary Johnson did in her 2020 memoir about the death of her mother. In “Reimagining Ruth: Unraveling and Reweaving a Mother-Daughter Relationship,” Johnson said, “I refused to sugar coat my feelings, thus my book included a lot of mother-daughter guilt, regret, raw sorrow. I leavened my story with my mother's sardonic commentary about her final illness and life. And yet, I did weep over every page.”

DISCIPLINE

The professionals know the only way to get the work done is to establish a writing habit. For Anita Harris, who's published two memoirs – “The Ithaca Diaries: Coming of Age in the 1960s” (2014) and “The View from Third Street: Ani and the Harrisburg Independent Press” (2022) – “It's in the morning after a cup of coffee and a run. That's when my brain is itching to write and I do it for three to four hours. Once I'm working on a creative project, I can't let go of it till it's done.”

TRANSFORMATION

In memoir, you must confront your flaws and show the reader how you worked to overcome them. Debbie Weingarten, whose memoir-in-essays about motherhood, desert farms, and other utopian dreams will be published next year, said, “In my real life, I distrust people who never change, and it's the same on the page. I want a narrator who embraces the entire spectrum of their own evolution—the light, the shadow, the messy truth. I will follow that narrator to the last page.”

DO YOU HAVE IT?

Now that you know what it takes to write a memoir, do you have “the right stuff?” Even if you don't, but want to try your hand at memoir writing, a class can help. There, you will meet people like yourself and will learn how to create your own compelling story, whether it is 700, 7,000 or 70,000 words.

Daphne Larkin is an award-winning book author, columnist and magazine writer. On Aug. 2, she will lead a Flash Memoir Open Mic Evening from 6:30 to 8 p.m. at Canto 34 Coffee Lounge at 114 W. Main St. in Brevard. Her next memoir writing class will be held at the Transylvania County Library on Thursdays, from 3 to 5 p.m. beginning Sept. 26 through Nov. 14. For more information, contact Larkin at daphne@daphnelarkin.com.