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Larkin: Finding Your Voice in Memoir

By Daphne Larkin



The Cedar Mountain Writers' Workshop celebrates the conclusion of its winter gathering with workshop leader, Daphne Larkin (front row, second from right).

“I found my voice!” Margaret Brown announced one day in my memoir writing class.

“How did you find it?” I asked, knowing how challenging capturing one’s voice in memoir can be.

“I had stopped writing because my subject matter about a difficult time in my life was dragging me down,” Brown remembered. “So, I decided to write about what brought me joy. I kept working on this, every day writing with joy about my garden and my family. Then one day I realized my story sounded like me.”

Bingo! When your memoir begins to “sound” like you, you have found your “voice.”

But what exactly is “voice” in memoir?

Simply put, your voice is you — like your fingerprint. It’s your personality, character, and view of the world expressed through your choice of words and observations. It’s the way you talk, the way you think. It’s what makes your memoir distinctive, different from every other memoir in the world.

Consider three unique voices in memoir. Think of Ernest Hemingway’s lively and witty voice in “A Moveable Feast,” his story about being a young writer in 1920s Paris. Or the youthful, naïve, rebellious voice of Tobias Wolff in “This Boy’s Life.” Or of Michelle Obama’s warm, wise, authentic voice in “Becoming” in which she describes her upbringing and her time in the White House. These voices – all compelling, all different, all singular to each writer.

So, why is it so important to “find” your voice? Mary Karr in her book, “The Art of Memoir,” says, “Every great memoir lives or dies based 100 percent on voice,” and it must “exist from the first sentence.” It’s that simple. Without your distinct voice, your memoir is dead.

Well then, how do you “find” your voice? It’s different for every memoirist, but no one seems to think it’s easy. Writing about her first memoir, “The Liar’s Club,” Karr says she spent “nine, hard, exasperating, concentrated months on the first chapter.... which essentially was time developing that voice...noodling with syntax and diction.” The memoirist Jeannette Walls says while she wrote the first version of “The Glass Castle” in six weeks, she “spent five years rewriting it, trying to be honest, and part of being honest is finding your voice.” Even Frank McCourt, author of “Angela’s Ashes,” recalled it took him years to gain enough distance to find an optimistic, even humorous voice in his coming-of-age story of an impoverished childhood in Ireland.

Memoirists, do not despair! You can “find” your voice. Here are five easy steps to help you do that.

FIND YOUR VOICE IN FIVE STEPS

Pretend you are telling a story to a good friend: You are being open, vulnerable, and revealing your feelings. After you tell this story out loud, write it down. Does it “sound” like you, your authentic self?

Write daily for one month: Every day, write about what happened, what you said, what you thought, how you felt. Do this for one month, then go back and

pinpoint with magic marker everything that “sounds” like you: the way you talk, your cadence, your syntax, the tone of your voice.

Nail down “voices” you like in memoirs: Pick a voice you are particularly drawn to, one that feels familiar, like your own. Identify the voice. Was it playful? Humorous? Conversational? Cynical? Passionate? Thoughtful? Entertaining? Study how the author made his voice feel authentic, engaging, come alive.

Write a one-page story five times: Each time you write the story, tell it in a different voice. Which feels the most natural to you? Which most closely sounds like you? If you’re struggling, try writing some dialogue into your story so you can “hear” your voice.

When you think you’ve found your voice: Write short stories using that voice as a naïve teenager, a college student, a person about to marry, and a spouse celebrating a big wedding anniversary. Could you make the leap across the years and maintain a voice that sounds like you, and no one else? If you have, bravo! If not, back to the drawing board!

Do these five easy steps to find your voice and after you do, you may feel as Mary Karr did when she found her voice: “But suddenly the wagon I’d been pulling like a trudging ox was a vehicle with an engine, moving down the road.”

Daphne Larkin is an award-winning book author, columnist and magazine writer who lives in Brevard. She teaches memoir writing at the Transylvania County Library in the spring and fall. Her next class will be held on Tuesday, from 10 a.m. to noon, from March 31 to May 19, and is limited to 10 students. Online registration for the class opens March 3 at noon.