

Six Ways to Jump-Start Writing About Your Life

By Daphne Larkin



Billy Cate (right) talked to Daphne Larkin’s memoir writing class at the Blue Ridge Community College about his self-published memoir “The Farm.”

If you made a New Year’s resolution or set a goal to write about your life and are still procrastinating, welcome to the club. Procrastination has been an age-old problem for writers who have a tendency to delay as long as they can. Some have resorted to strange and extreme measures to get the work done. Take Herman Melville whose wife, at his request, chained him to his desk until he finished writing “Moby Dick” and “Les Misérables” author Victor Hugo who stripped, gave his clothes to the butler and hammered out his story naked.

There are easier ways to jump-start your goal to write a memoir. Whatever you do, please do not follow in the footsteps of my husband, Chuck, who has extraordinary stories he could leave his two college-aged grandsons if he’d only write them. Truly, Chuck has had more far-flung adventures and narrow escapes photographing 25 years for National Geographic magazine than Indiana Jones in “Raiders of the Lost Ark.”

“Why don’t you write about your 20 brushes with death trying to get the photo?” I ask, referring to his hair-raising list of close calls on the job. “Or about taking the Microsoft wallpaper photo Bliss?” (Yep, Chuck took that photo – reputedly the most viewed in history.)

“The time you photographed yourself flying the ultralight?” I persist, recalling the flimsy plane made of fabric on which he installed cameras at the edge of the wings. It 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 quips, reminding me that Koko made one of the first selfies using a mirror.

Never mind. While Chuck, Melville and Hugo hesitate, you should not for as Samuel Johnson astutely noted in the 1700s, “The night cometh when no man can work.”

Here are six ways to start your engines and write your memoir – and they don’t involve chains or writing naked!

JUST JUMP IN: The best way to do something you’re not sure how to do is to begin it. Consider Billy Cate, a businessman, conservationist and farmer who had more collective knowledge about his family’s fourth-generation, 1,250-acre farm in South Carolina than anyone living. For years, people encouraged him to write about the farm, but he didn’t because, as he put it, he was “Much too busy and much too lazy!” Finally, he realized that if he didn’t record what he knew, most of it would be lost. In 2021, Cate published his memoir “The Farm” and he’s glad he did.

START SMALL: Take it a step at a time, or “bird by bird,” as Anne Lamott suggests in her book by that title. Focus on one moment and write 500 to 750 words, which is enough to say just about anything if you don’t stray off subject. Then write another 500 to 750 words on something else. Keep going and soon you’ll have something rich.

CREATE A ROAD MAP: Creating a “road map” or an outline of where you’re heading can make all the difference. I’m not talking about the kind of outline you learned to write in college, just one that starts with 1 and ends with 10. Easy!

ESTABLISH A WRITING HABIT: Get thee to thy desk for a couple of hours every day around the same time. Make it a habit. Before you know it, you’ll be on a roll.

GET ABSORBED: You are the hero – or heroine – of your story, a story in which you’ve faced life’s tests and ordeals, overcome obstacles, grown in wisdom and emerged transformed. What could be more interesting to write about than your own precious life? As the memoirist Tobias Wolff concluded 30 years after publishing “This Boy’s Life,” “Though some of what I describe here was difficult to live through, and difficult to relive, I have never been happier in writing a book ...”

BE ACCOUNTABLE: My memoir writing students tell me that one of the best things about taking a memoir writing class is the accountability. There’s nothing more compelling than a deadline – except knowing that your teacher and fellow writers are waiting for your story. Join a writing class or a writing group, or find a writing partner.

So, memoirists-to-be, are you going to live up to your New Year’s resolution to write your memoir – or not? You’ve lived a full life, a life to be remembered and shared with those you care about. For heaven’s sakes, quit dillydallying and get on with it!

An award-winning book author, columnist and magazine writer, Daphne Larkin will be teaching Memoir Writing at the Transylvania County Library (Adult Programming) from March 30 through May 18, with online registration beginning March 6. In June and July, she’ll be teaching at the Blue Ridge Community College on the Brevard campus. For more information, contact Daphne Larkin at daphne@daphnelarkin.com.