

You Can Do It!

Memoir Made Easy

**What you
need to write
and publish
your memoir**

Karen Hodges Miller

Open Door Publications

Memoir Made Easy
What you need to write and publish your memoir

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*To everyone out there with a story to share. Never lack
the courage to tell the world about it.*

Contents

Chapter 1

What Is Memoir?1

Chapter 2

Why Write a Memoir?7

Chapter 3

Who Are You Writing For?.....11

Chapter 4

Set Your Goals14

Chapter 5

Put Yourself Out There18

Chapter 6

Hybrid Memoir and Memoir Plus.....22

Chapter 7

The Arc of Change25

Chapter 8

Organize Your Book.....28

Chapter 9

Who Is Your Reader?30

Chapter 10

Dialogue and Point of View34

Chapter 11

Your Photographs.....39

Chapter 12

Copyright and Disclaimers44

Chapter 13

What Comes Next?50

Chapter 14

Decisions, Decisions55

Chapter 15	
Beta Readers and Advance Readers	61
Chapter 16	
Using Reviews	65
Chapter 17	
Some Publishing Basics	72
Chapter 18	
Amazon KDP vs. Ingram Spark.....	79
Chapter 19	
E-Books and Audiobooks	85
Chapter 20	
Marketing Basics.....	94
Chapter 21	
Launch Your Book	101
Chapter 22	
Keep the Sales Going.....	109
Resources	114
Acknowledgments	122
About the Author	123

Chapter 1

What Is Memoir?

Memories need to be shared.

— Lois Lowry

You've decided to write your memoir. You know exactly where you want to start. The opening paragraph has been written in your head for months, years, or even decades.

Now it's time. You sit down and write that first chapter. But where do you go from here?

In this book I hope I can help you think in new ways about your writing, your life, what you want to tell people about it, and then what to do with your memoir once it is completed. What lessons have you learned that you want to share with the world? What events were so compelling that other people need to hear about them? And finally, in what format should your memoir be written?

Some Definitions

The first matter you need to think about is what memoir is and what it is not. Many of the subgenres of writing about a person's life overlap, and while it may not be important to understand the subtle differences between some of these genres, defining them can help you reflect on exactly what it is you want to write about and how you want it to read when completed. Let's start at the very beginning by looking at the difference between fiction and nonfiction.

Fiction is a story invented by the writer. While some of the characters may be based on actual people, the story is not true. The author can take complete control of the characters and is in charge of what happens to them. **Nonfiction**, on the other hand, is *factual*. It is true—or at least it is as true as the author can make it. One person's perception and memory of events are

2 Karen Hodges Miller

often quite different than that of other people who lived through the same events. I'm not talking "alternative facts" here. I'm talking about the interpretation of facts. Two or more people often live through the same event, describe the facts in the same way, but interpret the events in a totally different way.

Let's look at a simple example that many people may have experienced: an auto accident. When I landed my first job in journalism at *The Butler Eagle*, a daily newspaper in Butler, Pennsylvania, I was assigned to the police beat. It was a smalltown paper that still published a daily list of all traffic accident reports, even the most minor. I was taught to always use the phrase "two cars collided" when writing up the accident, as in "two cars collided at the corner of Main and Brady Streets." The quick one-paragraph story went on to list the names of the drivers and if anyone was injured. The phrase "two cars collided" assigns no blame. It gives no interpretation of which driver was at fault. Changing the sentence to "A car driven by John Jones struck a car driven by Mary Davis" changes the entire slant of the story. And that was not my job as a newspaper reporter. My job was to just state the facts. Assigning blame was up to the police department that issued any tickets.

If this was a memoir written by John, the story might be told this way: "I was stopped at the red light at the corner of Main and Brady, just minding my own business, when out of nowhere this woman in a blue Ford pickup comes barreling around the corner and slams into my car. I did nothing wrong. I was just sitting at the light."

Now let's look at Mary's side of the story: "I was coming home from the grocery store and saw the light was turning yellow. I was really in a hurry to get home so I sped up just a little bit to make it through the light—and I did. I'm sure it was still yellow when my truck crossed into the intersection. That other driver jumped the gun. He started to move before his light turned green."

Luckily, we don't have to sort out the facts of this case. The fictional police officer in this fictional town has that problem—and I'm sure some heated words were exchanged

between the two drivers before it was all settled. But I hope you see the point here. Everyone interprets the actions they see around them differently. This doesn't mean that one person is right or wrong. And it doesn't make one person's version of the story fiction and the other nonfiction.

Your job in writing your memoir is to make the story as true to yourself as possible. Often we think of nonfiction as being written in a dry, "just the facts" style that takes all the joy out of reading. While this style is just fine for technical, legal, scientific, and other factual writing, it does not lead to an interesting memoir. That's where **creative nonfiction** comes in.

What? How can nonfiction be creative? Doesn't creative mean that you have stepped away from the truth? No, it does not. *Creative nonfiction is factual material written in a way that tells a story.* While the writing style may be similar to a novel, creative nonfiction sticks to the facts. This is the old "show me, don't tell me" part of writing that authors must master if they want to keep their readers' attention and make them want to keep turning the page. If you've never heard this phrase, we'll discuss it more in Chapter 10. Writing creative nonfiction means that you write in a narrative style, and that you offer scenes, dialogue, and descriptions whenever possible.

Here are a few more genres for you to be aware of.

Biography: Biography is the factual account of a person's life written by another person. When we use the term biography, we often think of a birth-to-death account of the subject. This is not always the case, however. Some biographers focus on just one or two important events in their subject's life, while others try to encompass an entire era.

Autobiography: A factual account of a person's life written by the person himself.

Memoir: A factual account of a portion of the writer's life emphasizing one or two specific themes or lessons learned.

Portrait Memoir: This is an interesting type of work that is halfway between biography and memoir. It is the only case in which a memoir is written by someone other than the person it is about. For example, if you have found extensive

4 Karen Hodges Miller

material written by the person you are researching (diaries or other works where the person describes both events and emotions as well as experiences) You could write a “memoir” about the person rather than a biography. The writer must only include the subject’s thoughts, feelings and actions without their own interpretation.

Hybrid memoir: This is a term some authors use to discuss a work that is part memoir yet combines it with other elements, such as a self-help or “how-to” work, inspirational messages, or even poetry. Yes, some very successful memoirists have used poetry to tell their story.

Historical fiction: This is another method a shy memoirist may use to tell their story while hiding the fact that it is true, and that the events actually happened. It can be successful for a number of reasons. It gives the author leeway to get to the existential truth of their message without worrying about strict adherence to the truth. What you must understand is that if you are writing a combination of historical fiction and memoir, you must make it clear to your reader exactly when and where you cross that line.

Using historical fiction techniques also allows you to use dialogue and descriptions for events in which you either were not present or for which you do not have a clear memory. You may want to describe events that happened before you were born, as I do in my hybrid memoir *Hibiscus Strong*. The book includes stories of events in my parents’, grandparents’, and great-grandparents’ lives. Although the stories were told to me often as a child, obviously, I was not present when many of these events happened and cannot know exactly what my great-grandfather said to my great-grandmother at a specific time, or their exact motivations. For example, consider this excerpt:

“I don’t like it. You know the Weather Bureau says there’s a hurricane coming.”

“Mary, the Weather Bureau is about as reliable as a chocolate teapot,” Herbert scoffed.

His reaction didn’t sit well with his wife. Mary sniffed loudly, trying to make the sound scornful, but he knew very well that she was trying to hide her tears. After almost thirty

years of marriage, she couldn't fool him. Mary didn't like his job. Well, that wasn't strictly true. She used to like it. She had liked it until five years ago. That was when he'd switched from the Miami-to-St. Augustine run to the Key West run.

It paid more and it was only a half-day trip, which theoretically meant he was home most nights. He only had to stay over in the Keys if there was a problem. However, there were a lot of those. Even five years after its inaugural run, Mr. Flagler's Overseas Railroad was still called "Flagler's Folly" by most Miamians. And that was Mary's issue. The daily trip to Key West was dangerous.

Obviously, I wasn't present for this conversation, but I can make an educated guess about what was said and the motivation of the characters based on my knowledge of my family. This is the type of writing that adds color to a memoir. Your memoir is your story, and you can write it any way you want. So don't let someone else tell you that you are not writing memoir, or not writing nonfiction, if you add a scene such as this one. It is important to make clear to the reader, however, what you know as a fact and what you are making an educated guess about after researching your subject.

To sum things up, your story can be told in any number of ways. The important point is to lead your readers on a journey of discovery to the one important idea or theme that you want them to understand when they finally reach the end of the book.

Action Item

Think about your own story. What is the best way for you to tell others about it? Look over the types of memoirs listed in Chapter 1 and decide which is best for your story.

Chapter 2

Why Write a Memoir?

Write about small, self-contained incidents that are still vivid in your memory. If you remember them, it's because they contain a larger truth that your readers will recognize in their own lives.

Think small and you'll wind up finding the big themes in your family saga.

— William Zinsser

“I’m going to write my memoir.” It sounds quite pretentious, doesn’t it? As if you were some really important and elderly person who, after a long and storied career, wants to write it all down so that others can learn from their accomplishments.

This, however, is rarely the case. I’ve worked with many people who were writing memoirs. The youngest writer was still in her twenties. When she came to me, I was skeptical that she had enough to say. But she was an expert in her subject—women’s sexuality—with a very strong story to tell. Her memoir was quite successful.

Other memoirists I’ve worked with have included a World War II veteran, a man who escaped a Communist country as a young boy, a woman who worked with the United Nations in many countries, a person who had overcome dyslexia—and has gone on to write four more books, the mother of child who died unexpectedly at age 20 years, and many more. And these are just the traditional memoirs. The hybrid memoirs that come to mind include a book on sibling abuse, a couple of books on business success, a memoir written in poetry, and the story of a man helping his father through the last stages of cancer.

All these writers had different stories to tell; each of them were of different ages, genders and races. The one element they had in common was that they had lived through

8 Karen Hodges Miller

something that they wanted to share with others. They thought their stories could help other people navigate some aspect of their own life.

What's Your Story?

So why do you want to write your memoir? Is it for family eyes only? Or do you plan to publish it and make it available to everyone? There are many great reasons to write for yourself and just your family but having the desire to publish your work for others to read—to influence, teach, and inspire them—is a different game.

So before you begin to sit down and write that chapter that has been in your head for so many years, decide what your reason is for writing in this particular genre.

Have you learned an important life lesson that could benefit others? Have you been through a particularly unusual or dramatic event? Have you or a family member experienced a mental or physical illness that has given you information and insights that others can use? Have you come up with a new method for success that you know others can benefit from?

There are as many good reasons to publish a memoir as there are people who write them. There is only one bad reason to write a memoir: revenge.

If the only reason you want to write something is to get revenge on someone you feel has wronged you, don't do it. I'm not saying don't write the story; I'm saying **DO NOT** publish it. It will only backfire on you. If revenge is your reason for writing a memoir, take the pages you have written to a therapist and discuss your story. Then move on.

Standing Out

Thousands of memoirs are being published each year. The best way for your book to stand out in this vast ocean of information is to make sure that your writing isn't just average but is interesting, informative, and relevant to the reader.

There are no new ideas. This is as true of writing a memoir as it is for any other genre. Other people have written

memoirs about their garden, their religion, their childhood, their marriages (both good and bad). With so much competition out there, you might ask yourself why you should finally go ahead and write that book you've always dreamed about. Other people have surely written something similar already. There really are very few new ideas in the world.

Don't let that discourage you.

Take a stroll through your nearest bookstore (yes, there are a few of them still out there), and you'll see entire sections of books devoted to the same topic. The internet has redefined the niche market. It is now much easier to find that small group of people interested in a very narrow subject.

Here are a few possible reasons for your memoir.

- You always wanted to write your story; you've had an idea in your head and an outline in your bottom drawer for years. This is true in my case. I decided to write a book about my family when I was eight years old. I even wrote that statement down in my diary. Of course, I didn't know the word "memoir" at the time; I just knew that someday I would like to tell my family's story.

- You know a better way. There are books on every business, every hobby, every passion. Some of them are strictly "how-to" books; others are memoirs or hybrid memoirs—a combination of a personal story with additional tips and guidance in following the author's path.

- You would like to become the go-to pro. Many successful business owners combine their personal experiences with tips on how the reader can emulate their success. With some marketing assistance, this type of book can make you the person that newspaper television commentators, radio hosts, or online bloggers call upon when they need to quote an expert in the field. Adding your personal story to a basic "how-to" book can make for much more interesting reading.

Action Items

What's your reason for writing your memoir? Answering the following questions can help you clarify your objectives.

- What would you like your book to accomplish for you?
- How can your book help you?
- How will your book help others?
- What other goals do you have for your book?

Chapter 3

Who Are You Writing For?

Don't try to visualize the great mass audience. There is no such audience—every reader is a different person.

— William Zinsser

Who do you want to read your memoir? Your children and grandchildren? Other family members? Friends? Or do you want to publish it and try to gain a national audience? The audience you plan on reading your book will affect the way in which you write it. Whether you are writing a private memoir or a public one, it is important to know your market.

If you are writing a book that is strictly meant for family and friends, you may not need as much of an introduction to the often complex relationships in the average family. But also, don't forget that even if this book is written for your current relatives, you also probably hope that future generations will read it. Make sure you are providing the necessary background information that makes your personal story compelling.

If you are writing for the general public, it is even more important to make sure that you know who you are writing for. If you've spent any time at all in business, you've heard the phrase, "find your target market." Your target reader is not everyone, or even "anyone who likes to read memoir."

Most people don't search for a book using the keyword "memoir" or "biography." They go to the bookstore—online or in person—looking for a book about a particular subject. It might be family relationships, gardening, how to start a business, medical issues, or any of a few thousand other topics. *They are looking for information.*

Let's think about someone who has just been diagnosed with cancer. They may begin by looking for factual information on their particular type of cancer but will also be drawn to personal stories of cancer survivors who can give personal,

12 Karen Hodges Miller

inspiring stories about how they conquered the disease. That is where memoir comes in. It gives specific information on one person's story that can help others learn and grow in their own lives. That's what makes a memoir special.

Before you begin to write your book, come up with as detailed a description of your target reader as possible. The more you know about your readers, the better equipped you will be in writing a book they will be interested in buying and reading.

Are your audience experts on your subject, such as your family members? Are they beginners in the field? This might be the case if you are writing a book on how to start a business or how to conquer a particular problem. Knowing whether or not your reader has background on your subject matter will help you adjust your vocabulary to the correct level. A book written for beginners that does not explain complex vocabulary specific to your subject will quickly turn off readers who are unfamiliar but want to learn.

Knowing who your reader is has a huge impact on how you write your book.

Action Items

Here are a few questions to ask yourself about your target readers.

- What is their gender?
- What is their age?
- What is their income level?
- What are their hobbies?
- What other books do they read?
- How much do they know about the subject of my book (i.e., is this written as a book for beginners or for experts)?

Write a description of your target reader. This person can be someone you know or a fictionalized, composite character. Either way, make your description as detailed as you can. When you work on your book, picture this person sitting at the table across from you. Write as if you are having a conversation with them.