

# How to Write a Memoir

Be yourself, speak freely, and think small

**By William Zinsser**

One of the saddest sentences I know is “I wish I had asked my mother about that.” Or my father. Or my grandmother. Or my grandfather. As every parent knows, our children are not as fascinated by our fascinating lives as we are. Only when they have children of their own—and feel the first twinges of their own advancing age—do they suddenly want to know more about their family heritage and all its accretions of anecdote and lore. “What exactly were those stories my dad used to tell about coming to America?” “Where exactly was that farm in the Midwest where my mother grew up?”

Writers are the custodians of memory, and that’s what you must become if you want to leave some kind of record of your life and of the family you were born into. That record can take many shapes. It can be a formal memoir—a careful act of literary construction. Or it can be an informal family history, written to tell your children and your grandchildren about the family they were born into. It can be the oral history that you extract by tape recorder from a parent or a grandparent too old or too sick to do any writing. Or it can be anything else you want it to be: some hybrid mixture of history and reminiscence. Whatever it is, it’s an important kind of writing. Too often memories die with their owner, and too often time surprises us by running out.

My father, a businessman with no literary pretensions, wrote two family histories in his old age. It was the perfect task for a man with few gifts for self-amusement. Sitting in his favorite green leather armchair in an apartment high above Park Avenue in New York, he wrote a history of his side of the family—the Zinssers and the Scharmanns—going back to 19th century Germany. Then he wrote a history of the family shellac business on West 59th Street, William Zinsser & Co., that his grandfather founded in 1849. He wrote with a pencil on a yellow legal pad, never pausing—then or ever again—to rewrite. He had no patience with any enterprise that obliged him to reexamine or slow down. On the golf course, walking toward his ball, he would assess the situation, pick a club out of the bag, and swing at the ball as he approached it, hardly breaking stride.

When my father finished writing his histories he had them typed, mimeographed, and bound in a plastic cover. He gave a copy, personally inscribed, to each of his three daughters, to their husbands, to me, to my wife, and to his 15 grandchildren, some of whom couldn’t yet read. I like the fact that they all got their own copy; it recognized each of them as an equal partner in the family saga. How many of those grandchildren spent any time with the histories I have no idea. But I’ll bet some of them did, and I like to think that those 15 copies are now squirreled away somewhere in their houses from Maine to California, waiting for the next generation.

What my father did strikes me as a model for a family history that doesn’t aspire to be anything more; the idea of having it published wouldn’t have occurred to him. There are many good reasons for writing that have nothing to do with being published. Writing is a powerful search

mechanism, and one of its satisfactions is that it allows you to come to terms with your life narrative. It also allows you to work through some of life's hardest knocks—loss, grief, illness, addiction, disappointment, failure—and to find understanding and solace.

My father's two histories have steadily grown on me. At first I don't think I was as generous toward them as I should have been; probably I condescended to the ease with which he brought off a process I found so hard. But over the years I've often found myself dipping into them to remind myself of some long-lost relative, or to check some long-lost fact of New York geography, and with every reading I admire the writing more.

Above all, there's the matter of voice. Not being a writer, my father never worried about finding his "style." He just wrote the way he talked, and now, when I read his sentences, I hear his personality and his humor, his idioms and his usages, many of them an echo of his college years in the early 1900s. I also hear his honesty. He wasn't sentimental about blood ties, and I smile at his terse appraisals of Uncle X, "a second-rater," or Cousin Y, who "never amounted to much."

When you write your own family history, don't try to be a "writer." It now occurs to me that my father, who didn't try to be a writer, was a more natural writer than I am, with my constant fiddling and fussing. Be yourself and your readers will follow you anywhere. Try to commit an act of writing and your readers will jump overboard to get away. Your product is you. The crucial transaction in memoir and personal history is the transaction between you and your remembered experiences and emotions.

In my father's family history he didn't dodge the central trauma of his childhood: the abrupt end of his parents' marriage when he and his brother Rudolph were still small boys. Their mother was the daughter of a self-made German immigrant, H. B. Scharmann, who went to California as a teenager in a covered wagon with the forty-niners and lost both his mother and his sister on the journey. Frida Scharmann inherited his fierce pride and ambition, and when she married William Zinsser, a promising young man in her circle of German-American friends, she saw him as the answer to her cultural aspirations. They would spend their evenings going to concerts and to the opera and holding musical salons. But the promising husband evidently turned out to have no such yearnings. Home was for falling asleep in his chair after dinner.

How bitterly his lassitude must have dawned on the young Frida Zinsser I can imagine from knowing her as an older woman, endlessly pushing herself to Carnegie Hall, playing Beethoven and Brahms on the piano, traveling to Europe and learning foreign languages, prodding my father and my sisters and me to cultural self-improvement. Her drive to fulfill the broken dreams of her marriage never faltered. But she had the German penchant for telling people off, and she died alone at 81, having scolded away all her friends.

I wrote about her once, many years ago, in a memoir for a book called *Five Boyhoods*. Describing the grandmother I knew as a boy, I praised her strength but also noted that she was a difficult presence in our lives. After the book came out, my mother defended the mother-in-law who had made her own life far from easy. "Grandma was really quite shy," she said, "and she wanted to be liked." Maybe so; the truth is somewhere between my mother's version and mine. But she was like that to me. That was my remembered truth, and that's how I wrote it.

I mention this because one of the questions often asked by memoir writers is: should I write from the point of view of the child I once was, or of the adult I am now? The strongest memoirs, I think, are those that preserve the unity of a remembered time and place: books like Russell Baker's *Growing Up*, or V. S. Pritchett's *A Cab at the Door*, or Jill Ker Conway's *The Road from Coorain*, which recall what it was like to be a child or an adolescent in a world of adults contending with life's adversities.

But if you prefer the other route—to write about your younger years from the wiser perspective of your older years—that memoir will have its own integrity. One good example is *Poets in Their Youth*, in which Eileen Simpson recalls her life with her first husband, John Berryman, and his famously self-destructive fellow poets, including Robert Lowell and Delmore Schwartz, whose demons she was too young as a bride to understand. When she revisited that period as an older woman in her memoir she had become a writer and a practicing psychotherapist, and she used that clinical knowledge to create an invaluable portrait of a major school of American poetry at the high tide of its creativity. But these are two different kinds of writing. Choose one.

My father's family history told me details about his mother's marriage that I didn't have when I wrote my memoir. Now, knowing the facts, I can understand the disappointments that made her the woman she became, and if I were to take another shot at the family saga today I would bring to it a lifetime of trying to fathom its Germanic storms and stresses. (My mother's family of New England Yankees—Knowltons and Joyces—managed to get through life without emotional melodrama.) I would also bring to it a lifetime of regret over the tremendous hole at the center of my father's story. In his two histories his father gets scant mention and no forgiveness; all sympathy goes to the aggrieved young divorcée and her lifelong grit.

Yet some of my father's most attractive qualities—the charm, the humor, the lightness, the bluest of blue eyes—must have come from the Zinsser side, not from the brooding, brown-eyed Scharmans. I've always felt deprived of knowing more about that missing grandfather. Whenever I asked my father about him, he changed the subject and had no stories to tell. When you write your family history, be a recording angel and record everything your descendants might want to know.

This brings me to another question that memoir writers often ask: What about the privacy of the people I write about? Should I leave out things that might offend or hurt my relatives? What will my sister think?

Don't worry about that problem in advance. Your first job is to get your story down as you remember it—now. Don't look over your shoulder to see what relatives are perched there. Say what you want to say, freely and honestly, and finish the job. Then take up the privacy issue. If you wrote your family history only for your family, there's no legal or ethical need to show it to anyone else. But if you have in mind a broader audience—a mailing to friends or a possible book—you may want to show your relatives the pages in which they are mentioned. That's a basic courtesy; nobody wants to be surprised in print. It also gives them their moment to ask you to take certain passages out—which you may or may not agree to do.

Finally, it's your story. You're the one who has done all the work. If your sister has a problem with your memoir, she can write her own memoir, and it will be just as valid as yours; nobody has a monopoly on the shared past. Some of your relatives will wish you hadn't said some of the things you said, especially if you reveal various family traits that are less than lovable. But I believe that at some level most families want to have a record left of their effort to be a family, however flawed that effort was, and they will give you their blessing and will thank you for taking on the job—if you do it honestly and not for the wrong reasons.

What are the wrong reasons? Let me take you back to the memoir-crazed 1990s. Until that decade, memoir writers drew a veil over their most shameful experiences and thoughts; certain civilities were still agreed on by society. Then talk shows came into their own and shame went out the window. Suddenly no remembered episode was too squalid, no family too dysfunctional, to be trotted out for the titillation of the masses on cable TV and in magazines and books. The result was an avalanche of memoirs that were little more than therapy, their authors using the form to wallow in self-revelation and self-pity and to bash everyone who had ever done them wrong. Writing was out and whining was in.

But nobody remembers those books today—readers won't connect with whining. Don't use your memoir to air old grievances and to settle old scores; get rid of that anger somewhere else. The memoirs that we do remember from the 1990s are the ones that were written with love and forgiveness, like Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club*, Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life*, and Pete Hamill's *A Drinking Life*. Although the childhoods they describe were painful, the writers are as hard on their younger selves as they are on their elders. We are not victims, they want us to know. We come from a tribe of fallible people and we have survived without resentment to get on with our lives. For them, writing a memoir became an act of healing.

It can also be an act of healing for you. If you make an honest transaction with your own humanity and with the humanity of the people who crossed your life, no matter how much pain they caused you or you caused them, readers will connect with your journey.

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Now comes the hard part: how to organize the damn thing. Most people embarking on a memoir are paralyzed by the size of the task. What to put in? What to leave out? Where to start? Where to stop? How to shape the story? The past looms over them in a thousand fragments, defying them to impose on it some kind of order. Because of that anxiety, many memoirs linger for years half written, or never get written at all.

What can be done?

You must make a series of reducing decisions. For example: in a family history, one big decision would be to write about only one branch of the family. Families are complex organisms, especially if you trace them back several generations. Decide to write about your mother's side of the family or your father's side, but not both. Return to the other one later and make it a separate project.

Remember that you are the protagonist in your own memoir, the tour guide. You must find a narrative trajectory for the story you want to tell and never relinquish control. This means leaving out of your memoir many people who don't need to be there. Like siblings.

One of my students in a memoir class was a woman who wanted to write about the house in Michigan where she grew up. Her mother had died, the house had been sold, and she and her father and her 10 sisters and brothers were about to meet at the house to dispose of its contents. Writing about that task, she thought, would help her to understand her childhood in that large Catholic family. I agreed—it was a perfect framework for a memoir—and I asked her how she was going to proceed.

She said she was going to start by interviewing her father and all her brothers and sisters to find out how they remembered the house. I asked her if the story she wanted to write was their story. No, she said, it was her story. In that case, I said, interviewing all those siblings would be an almost complete waste of her time and energy. Only then did she begin to glimpse the proper shape of her story and to prepare her mind for confronting the house and its memories. I saved her hundreds of hours of interviewing and transcribing and trying to fit what she transcribed into her memoir, where it didn't belong. Remember: it's your story. You only need to interview family members who have a unique insight into a family situation, or an anecdote that unlocks a puzzle you were unable to solve.

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Here's another story from another class. A young Jewish woman named Helen Blatt was very eager to write about her father's experience as a survivor of the Holocaust. He had escaped from his village in Poland at the age of 14—one of the few Jews to get away—and had made his way to Italy, to New Orleans and, finally, to New York. Now he was 80, and his daughter asked him to go back with her to that Polish village so she could hear about his early life and write his story. But he begged off; he was too frail and the past was too painful.

So she made the trip on her own in 2004. She took notes and photographs and talked with people in the village. But she couldn't find enough facts to enable her to do justice to her father's story, and she was deeply upset about that. Her despair hung over the class.

For a few moments I couldn't think of anything to tell her. Finally I said, "It's not your father's story."

She gave me a look that I still remember as it dawned on her what I was saying.

"It's your story," I told her. I pointed out that nobody has enough facts—not even scholars of the Holocaust—to reconstruct her father's early life; too much of the Jewish past in Europe has been obliterated. "If you write about your own search for your father's past," I said, "you'll also tell the story of his life and his heritage."

I saw a heavy weight drop off her shoulders. She smiled a smile that none of us had seen before and said she would get started on the story right away.

The course ended, and no paper was handed in. I called her and she said she was still writing and needed more time. Then, one day, a 24-page manuscript arrived in the mail. It was called “Returning Home,” and it described Helen Blatt’s pilgrimage to Plesna, a small rural town in southeastern Poland that wasn’t even on the map. “Sixty-five years later,” she wrote, “I was the first member of the Blatt family the town had seen since 1939.” Gradually making herself known to the townspeople, she found that many of her father’s relatives—grandparents and uncles and aunts— were still remembered. When one old man said, “You look just like your grandmother Helen,” she felt “an overwhelming sense of safety and peacefulness.”

This is how her story ends:

After I returned home my father and I spent three straight days together. He watched every minute of the four-hour video I made as if it were a masterpiece. He wanted to hear every detail of my trip: who I met, where I went, what I saw, what foods I liked and disliked, and how I was treated. I assured him that I was welcomed with open arms. Although I still have no photos of my family telling me what their faces looked like, I now have a mental picture of their character. The fact that I was treated so well by complete strangers is a reflection of the respect my grandparents earned from the community. I gave my father boxes of letters and gifts from his old friends: Polish vodka and maps and framed photos and drawings of Plesna.

As I told him my stories he looked like an excited child waiting to open his birthday present. The sadness in his eyes also disappeared; he looked jubilant and giddy. When he saw his family’s property on my video I expected to see him cry, and he did, but they were tears of joy. He seemed so proud, and I asked him, “Daddy, what are you looking at with such pride? Is it your house?” He said, “No, it’s you! You have become my eyes and ears and legs. Thank you for taking this trip. It makes me feel as if I’ve gone there myself.”

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My final reducing advice can be summed up in two words: think small. Don’t rummage around in your past—or your family’s past—to find episodes that you think are “important” enough to be worthy of including in your memoir. Look for small self-contained incidents that are still vivid in your memory. If you still remember them it’s because they contain a universal truth that your readers will recognize from their own life.

That turned out to be the main lesson I learned by writing a book in 2004 called *Writing About Your Life*. It’s a memoir of my own life, but it’s also a teaching book—along the way I explain the reducing and organizing decisions I made. I never felt that my memoir had to include all the important things that ever happened to me—a common temptation when old people sit down to summarize their life journey. On the contrary, many of the chapters in my book are about small episodes that were not objectively “important” but that were important to me. Because they were important to me they also struck an emotional chord with readers, touching a universal truth that was important to them.

One chapter is about serving in the army in World War II. Like most men of my generation, I recall that war as the pivotal experience of my life. But in my memoir I don’t write anything

about the war itself. I just tell one story about one trip I took across North Africa after our troopship landed at Casablanca. My fellow GIs and I were put on a train consisting of decrepit wooden boxcars called “forty-and-eights,” so named because they were first used by the French in World War I to transport forty men or eight horses. The words QUARANTE HOMMES OU HUIT CHEVAUX were still stenciled on them. For six days I sat in the open door of that boxcar with my feet hanging out over Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. It was the most uncomfortable ride I ever took—and the best. I couldn’t believe I was in North Africa. I was the sheltered son of Northeastern WASPs; nobody in my upbringing or my education had ever mentioned the Arabs. Now, suddenly, I was in a landscape where everything was new—every sight and sound and smell.

The eight months I spent in that exotic land were the start of a romance that has never cooled. They would make me a lifelong traveler to Africa and Asia and other remote cultures and would forever change how I thought about the world. Remember: Your biggest stories will often have less to do with their subject than with their significance—not what you did in a certain situation, but how that situation affected you and shaped the person you became.

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As for how to actually organize your memoir, my final advice is, again, think small. Tackle your life in easily manageable chunks. Don’t visualize the finished product, the grand edifice you have vowed to construct. That will only make you anxious.

Here’s what I suggest.

Go to your desk on Monday morning and write about some event that’s still vivid in your memory. What you write doesn’t have to be long—three pages, five pages—but it should have a beginning and an end. Put that episode in a folder and get on with your life. On Tuesday morning, do the same thing. Tuesday’s episode doesn’t have to be related to Monday’s episode. Take whatever memory comes calling; your subconscious mind, having been put to work, will start delivering your past.

Keep this up for two months, or three months, or six months. Don’t be impatient to start writing your “memoir,” the one you had in mind before you began. Then, one day, take all your entries out of their folder and spread them on the floor. (The floor is often a writer’s best friend.) Read them through and see what they tell you and what patterns emerge. They will tell you what your memoir is about and what it’s not about. They will tell you what’s primary and what’s secondary, what’s interesting and what’s not, what’s emotional, what’s important, what’s funny, what’s unusual, what’s worth pursuing and expanding. You’ll begin to glimpse your story’s narrative shape and the road you want to take.

Then all you have to do is put the pieces together.