

Memoir: unlocking the treasures of personal story

OVERVIEW

Each of us carries a lifetime of memories, experiences buried under layers of life. Writing memoir brings those hidden gems to the surface.

A memoir may mark a grand adventure or showcase quiet, life lessons learned. You don't have to be famous to write memoir; you just have to have lived.

Writing personal stories enable the author to truthfully examine their experiences and give meaning to the events. Memoir may be as enlightening to the writer as it is to the reader. So, get ready to unleash your own sleeping dragons.

A memoir may represent a moment in a life or an epoch of adventures. The topic does not define or limit the scope. Only the writer can do that. The genre takes many forms: a poem, essay, anecdote, magazine/ newspaper article, podcast, short story or book. A single idea can morph into multiple forms.

There's an art to unearthing the perfect story ideas, ones that resonate with the human condition. These stories grab our attention on the first line and hold it captive until the last. It's a skill set that can be learned, if the writer is willing.

Detail rich stories bring the past to life. Doesn't matter if the writer has a less than perfect memory. There are ways to peel back those layers and let in the light. I will share tips to help.

To begin, all writers really need is the courage to start!

Writing Memoir/Joanne Huist Smith

Memoir: a record of events written by a person having intimate knowledge of them and based on personal observation.

Source: Dictionary.com

Introduction

Memoir tells the individual story of the author: the good, the bad, the beautiful and wicked. It may represent a moment in a lifetime or decades.

These personal accounts may celebrate momentous occasions or unadorned life changing events. We are not all heroes. We haven't all faced down villains. Don't lose heart, if you have not. Quiet stories can carry the same emotional weight for a reader as an act of heroism – if told with passion and heart.

For example, "Once More to the Lake" is a personal essay (memoir) written by E. B. White, first published in Harper's Magazine in 1941. When he was fifteen years old, he wrote a short pamphlet about a lake his family visited during his childhood. He then wrote a second draft of the essay in a letter to his brother, Stanley, in 1936. White returned in 1941 with his own son, Joel. The published version of the essay is inspired from this visit.

There are no fireworks in this piece, no action adventure or drama. In the essay, White struggles with themes of aging, death, and the passage of time...emotions we all experience. (I have included a copy of this essay at the end of the presentation.)

It Takes Guts.

Memoir falls under the genre of nonfiction, so first and *foremost* you can't make it up. Your story must be TRUE. Memoirists relive the life events they write about each time they place fingers on the keyboard or pick up a pen.

Still, the difficult task of recounting the story is not enough.

Writers must add perspective that can only be gleaned from the passage of time.

As I wrote *The 13th Gift*, it sometimes felt as if I were peeling back layers of protective skin that had grown over time and distance. It hurt. But, the triumph of my family over grief would not have been complete without the struggle.

Readers will sense insincerity and omission. Memoir writers must make a commitment to tell the whole truth, including the ugly moments that they'd like to forget.

Writing Exercise: Write 250-word essay Why I Write (examples included at end of presentation.)

Selecting a Memoir Topic

Selecting a topic for your memoir may be the most challenging and critical step in the process.

If you live in small town Ohio, drive a beat-up Chevy and spend weekends at home binge watching Netflix, it may be difficult to imagine a book-worthy story kicking around in your sleep-deprived brain.

At least that's what I thought.

I wanted to write the great American Novel, complete with spies, hot cars and romance, but my only knowledge of those things were from other books.

I was lucky. I had been journaling daily since second grade. Every New Year's Day, I grabbed a handful of my completed journals (I have several hundred) and read them. After rereading the events of my husband's death, I found the story I wanted to write. Having a story that could potentially help others suffering loss motivated me to write.

Writing Tip: If you truly want to write memoir, start journaling TODAY. Make it a daily practice. It only takes three weeks to develop a habit!

The Importance of Theme

Some of you might already have a life event in mind as your topic. If so, what is the theme? What message are you trying to convey? What is the point?

Look for universal themes; ones that reflect the human experience that others will be able to identify with: fear of death, joy of new love, overcoming an obstacle; wanting something or someone so badly you're willing to risk everything to attain it. In other words, life, loss, privation, challenge, coming of age and aging (to name a few),

Remember your theme is not a synopsis. You should be able to capture your theme in a single sentence.

Writing Exercise: Before you sit down to write your memoir, write one sentence describing the theme. For Example: The 13th Gift is the story of how a family emotionally frozen after a loss, come to experience joy again.

Getting Started

Where do stories ideas come from? When I write memoir, I start by asking myself questions.

Below is a list of story idea questions that I created for myself. Read, try a few on and see how they fit or create your own list.

1. Name a smell that reminds you of the holidays and write about it. (Read story Rolling at end of presentation.)
2. What was the happiest single moment of your life? This is not as easy as it sounds. It is much easier to define the worst.
3. What were you up to on the dirtiest (roll around in the mud, covered in Gold Medal Flour, skunk smelling nasty) day of your life?
4. Who is your best friend and how did he/she earn the title?
5. What does the word “sadness” remind you of?
6. Who influenced your opinion of religion, politics or social justice?
7. Traits of your parents you have inherited.
8. A moment of beauty that took your breath away - was it physical, spiritual, intellectual?
9. Was your mom a good cook or a disaster in the kitchen?
10. What did your father smell like?
11. Relate a laundry, gardening, or house cleaning experience. I shared a laundry room memory in *The 13th Gift*. It is one of the most dramatic in the book and the hardest to write. The scene opened with me finding a note in the pocket of a pair of my deceased husband’s jeans.
12. Did you have any pets as a child? This one brought back lots of memories for me, all sad ones. My first pet, a dog, I only had for one day. I was eight years old.

13. What is your earliest memory: I remember getting Cs on my first report card. Dad told me he “was disappointed in me.” Broke my heart. I never got another C.

Select one of these topics or develop a list of your own. Write the story in 10 minutes and stop. Don't worry about grammar, sentence structure, imagery or story flow. Just write. Be sure to include how you felt about the incident. What impact did it have on your life. If you like what you've written, expand on it.

Additional Source: Julia Cameron's book, *It's Never to Late to Begin Again*

Writing Tip: Newspapers are a great source of inspiration. I simply write how events in the news impacts me and my family!

Narrowing Your Scope

There is a great scene in the movie “*A River Runs Through It*” that mimics a rule of thumb that I use to narrow the scope of a piece.

In the scene, a father instructs his son to write an essay. The son diligently completes the assignment.

Father reads the piece and says, “make it half as long.”

Son goes back to his room and cuts the essay in half and again presents it to his father.

Father says to cut it.

When you sit down to create a list of memoir topics, jot down the big moments, then break them down into manageable beats. It is in those events that we learn lessons.

Memoir Form: one-liner, antidote, poem, article, short story, essay, book

Memoirs come in all shapes and sizes. Lengths may vary from a single sentence to a series of books. The topic will dictate the scope of the work.

Word of advice: Start small.

The 13th Gift started as a short story, morphed into a longer magazine article. Penguin Random House eventually published the piece as a full-length book. Each time I finished a version, I presented it to my writers' group. They kept wanting more, so I added to the story.

Writing Tip: I can't stress enough the importance of finding your writing tribe, even if your group can only meet on Zoom. Our stories are like our babies, we think each one perfect. In reality, they probably are not. My writers' group is always my first audience. They are gentle, but savvy enough to offer criticism that helps, even if it hurts a little.

Writing Tip: I always write a minimum of three versions of every sentence, paragraph, scene, essay or story. Those three versions comprise my first draft.

— Begin with the barebones, beginning, middle and ending. Focus on moving the plot forward and developing theme. I am not worried about the language at this point.

— During the second go, I fill in story gaps. What’s missing? Have I created confusing story questions? Read your piece aloud and ask yourself, “Am I giving the reader enough information to move on to the next scene.”

My third run through (remember we’re still on the first draft) is all about adding, “color” or making a flat scene, three-dimensional. Give your story life, bring your setting alive with personality, just as you would a character.

(Read: *Once More to the Lake* by E. B White) Enable your readers to not only read what is happening but experience it.

Close your eyes: what do you smell, hear, taste. If the answer is “nothing.” Go back to the keyboard.

How to Write Memoir If You Have a Rotten Memory

When I decided I wanted to write about the weeks following my husband Rick’s death, I had to develop my own memory jogging techniques. It was a slow process, but the kids and I created this book together, one memory at a time.

I am that woman who goes to the grocery store to buy a single ingredient, spends \$100, and comes home without the one thing I needed. I may have visited a friend’s house two dozen times, but still need to ask for directions. And, if you expect to receive a card from me on your birthday, better send a yearly reminder.

So, how can someone with a poor memory write memoir?

I am not a doctor or a psychologist. I have never studied the brain. I don’t even know how memory works and likely wouldn’t remember for long if I learned.

Here are some of the tools I used to help me prepare to write about an event that happened more than a decade earlier.

Journal like you want to remember

I have surrendered my heart, screamed my frustrations and chronicled my joy in the pages of a journal since I was in fourth grade. These bound volumes are my confidants, and they have unfailing memories. If I try a new hairstyle or color, I record it there. Stubs from movie or concert tickets, photos, business cards (I ask for two, one for my card file and one for my journal) also have a home in my journal along with newspaper clippings, post cards and other mementoes. Each entry is a snapshot of my life at that moment. These entries jog my memory much better than exercising, though I did lose 25 pounds while writing the book.

If you write memoir, or hope to, start journaling immediately. Fifteen minutes a day will be worth the time spent.

Organize family/school photos and videos.

How tall was my daughter Megan in 1999 when her father passed away? Did we have that hideous green couch that Christmas or had we already replaced it? I found the answers to these questions and many more by organizing family photos chronologically and by child. With the photos before me, I wrote detailed profiles for each of the characters in my book, including myself. I had to get to know these people again as they were that Christmas.

Visit a library: While most people turn to the Internet when looking for information, don't forget the local history room at your neighborhood library. There you'll find newspaper archives and historical documents rich with information about everything from the weather to crime reports.

If your memory is vague: write what you do remember. To make the task less daunting, break down the incident into small beats. For example, each of my children developed unique coping skills to deal with the loss of their father. Megan played sports. Nick always had his nose in a computer and Ben, turned away from me and toward his friends. Each of these coping skills became a beat that I wrote about and set aside. When I finally started writing the actual book, I had 50 to 60 beats already written that I dropped into the story.

The act of writing actually helps to jog my memory. It is like turning on an old faucet. The water trickles down at first, but after it runs away, it flows.

Give it a try: Cast aside negative thoughts about poor memory and just write.

Four memories are better than one.

Once I felt I had taken a scene as far as I could alone, I interviewed others who were present at the time. *The 13th Gift* really is a combination of the collective memories of all my family members. It was a slow process, but the kids and I created this book together, one memory at a time.

Writing Tip: The memoir writer takes advantage of many of the tools in the fiction writer's tool belt: theme, plot, characterization, setting. Master the Art of Fiction Writing and crafting memoir will be much easier.

Writing Tip: Write memoir as if it were a scene in a movie. Remember action and conflict advance the plot (just as in fiction), not exposition and background. Highlight all lines in your piece that give background. Make sure they do not overpower sentences that show action. It should be the other way around.

Writers' Block: Don't believe in it

Some writers need all elements of a story plotted, before they sit down at the keyboard. So, if they can't figure out all the plot points they never start writing. Don't do that to yourself. Even when I **Think I Know** exactly where my characters are taking me, they often go in another direction. So, cast aside any thoughts of writers' block. That's a phenomenon I refuse to let enter my workspace. I believe in "full speed ahead, no matter what. If I get stuck, I know it's because I have not done my homework, my research. Just because memoirists lived through an event doesn't mean they are off the hook when it comes to gathering background.

When you get stuck, don't stop writing. Instead, write a vivid outdoor scene or develop a character sketch. What did your main character look like at the time the story was set? What clothing was popular at the time? Was the person a trendsetter or conservative? Write until you remember. If you are not absolutely sure about a fact, tell your reader. Be honest.

This is often when I go back to my journals and read or interview others with knowledge of the story. Here's something you will need to do anyway: write how you felt about the event. Never take your fingers off the keyboard.

The 13th Gift is set in December. I could have fudged the weather, because I know Ohio winters are mostly wet and gray. Instead, I tracked the weather using archived copies of the Dayton Daily News and data from the National Weather Service. That research helped to jog my memory and create one of the early scenes in the book when we discovered the first anonymous gift left on our doorstep that first Christmas after my husband died. It was raining!

Writing Tip: When it is time to stop writing for the day, never stop at the end of a scene. Stop in the middle of a scene with notes on how to complete it. That way you won't be staring at a blank computer screen in the morning unsure of where to go. Just pick up where you left off.

Writing Tip: Ask a friend to read your work aloud to you. Are the punch lines funny? Does the writing flow? I often skim when I read and sometimes what I say aloud is not what I have written down on paper. Hearing your work read by others, seeing how they react to punctuation and line structure may point out flaws that are easily fixed.

Writing Tip: Catalogue your work in two ways. I write fiction, nonfiction, poetry and essays. I often start a piece and get busy with something else. To make sure I don't drop the ball on any one piece, I keep a double record.

First: name your file. Give it a name that will jog your memory upon site. On an excel spread sheet: List the date you worked on the piece; file name (along with genre indicator like M for Memoir, P for Poetry, etc.) and one sentence about the story line. You can list them in alphabetical order or by date.

Second: Start each piece with a journal page. On that page, note every time you work on the story, what you've accomplished and the direction you plan to take it. Update this entry every time you write. This really helps when you have taken time away from a piece. You won't have to struggle to remember where you were going. You'll know exactly where to pick up on the plot.

Examples:

Why I Write/Joanne Huist Smith

I write to silence ghosts. I write to banish voices whose love words encouraged me to be timid, to hide my dreams under scratchy blankets. I write for the father who told me little girls from Dayton don't grow up to be writers. I write to prove him wrong. I write to prove myself right. I write for two sisters who bought me pencils and ink pens and a Delta 88 Brougham trunk-load-full of pink legal pads at a garage sale. I write for those same sisters who accepted, "no excuses" when I shillyshalled about putting said pens to paper.

I write for the man who believed in my art, who gave me a typewriter — with a broken key — and a space to scribble out of earshot of our children, even though he wanted nothing more than for me to be happy as a wife and mother. I write to shorten the distance since he went Home, a time longer now than he made me feel alive. I write so there is a record of his life demonstrating he was the elusive "just" man Plato sought in his Socratic dialogue. I write to forget him, to move on...love again, if possible.

I write for myself. I write in the hush of the night, when the house snores and white noise wakes me. I write to avoid snacking at midnight. I write to solve problems and create others. I write to honor the authors who instilled in me a love of words and rhyme and the rhythm of a story well told. I write to quell the voices in my head that won't shut up until I bring them to life. I write the truth to remind humanity what it sounds like. I write out of fear, that in the chaos, I will forget

Why I Write by Lee Martin

I write because my father told stories, and I listened. I write because my mother loved books and taught me to love them, too. I write because I want to live in someone else's life. I write because everyone's a mystery, even me, and stories have the power to make us understand. I write because I have to give some shape to the chaos. I write because I fail time and time again, both in my writing and my living. I write because the music of language spoke to me in books and I wanted to make a beautiful noise to answer back. I write because there's so much I don't know. I write because I love to be entertained by a well-crafted narrative. I write because once upon a time someone said to me, "Once upon a time." I write because my fourth-grade teacher told me I had no imagination. I write because rarely in my childhood home did, we touch each other with affection. I write because, when I do, I know what it is to love. I write because the end is coming, and I'm whistling in the dark. I write because I want to talk to you; I want to know why you write, or sing, or dance, or paint, or cook, or garden, or play music, or pray. I want to know someone's listening. I don't want to be alone. Please tell me.

Rolling/Joanne Huist Smith

My sisters and I received the summons a week before the celebration marking the 50th wedding anniversary of my grandparents in 1964. The request came in writing from our Polish Grandmother, Baci, and I would not have dreamed of denying her.

The aqua chiffon confection hanging in my closet with embroidered rosebuds on the bodice had been a gift from her. I couldn't wait for Daddy to whirl me around the dance floor at the anniversary party in that dress to the step, step, step, hop of a polka or the one, two, three of a waltz.

The mystery of the invitation intrigued me, especially so close to a celebration more than a year in the planning.

"What's this about, Momma?" my nine-year-old self asked incessantly.

"You'll learn soon enough," she answered

Dad drove my mom, sisters and I to the Polish Club in Old North Dayton on the assigned date and dropped us off at the door. We met aunts and cousins on our way inside

and I wondered if we were being initiated into a secret sodality or some kind of coven, as only female relatives and neighbors entered through the metal hall door.

Inside, the overpowering aroma of cooked cabbage met us. Giant vats of raw meat set 10 deep across a table, flanked by bowls of rice and the largest cans of tomatoes I had ever seen.

Mom rolled up her shirtsleeves, then motioned for my sisters and I to do the same. My aunt wrapped a giant apple-patterned apron around my four-foot-tall frame, then smiled and said, “let’s get messy.”

We were making cabbage rolls, hundreds of them for the anniversary party.

Of course, I loved eating this Polish delicacy, but I had always managed to make myself scarce until after Mom or Baci pulled the bubbling goodness out of the oven.

Not so that day.

We formed a line in the kitchen to wash our hands, and then each of us girls got assigned a bowl of raw meat, a mixture of sausage and hamburger. Our elders added in onion, rice, salt and pepper, tomatoes and we mixed it with our bare hands. The gist felt stone cold on my fingers and got stuck under my nails. I imagined myself a mad scientist kneading human brains.

My mother stood between my sisters and I demonstrating how to roll the oblong-shaped meatballs and then tuck them securely into cabbage leaves.

I had never felt so close to the women of my family. We more than made a meal that day. They passed down a legacy. At first, I resented that my younger brother hadn’t been forced into the chain gang, but by the end of the evening I just felt grateful that I had been.

It would take me years to recreate a formal description from the little-bits-of-this and pinches-of-that recipe the women shared with me. I happily share it with you.

Smaczno...Enjoy your meal.

Rolling (cut in half)

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Once More to the Lake by E. B. White

About the Author: E. B. White (1898 - 1985) began his the newly founded New Yorker magazine in the 1920s. Over the years he produced nineteen books, including collections of essays, the famous children's books Stuart Little and Charlotte's Web, and the long popular writing textbook The Elements of Style.

One summer, along about 1904, my father rented a camp on a lake in Maine and took us all there for the month of August. We all got ringworm from some kittens and had to rub Pond's Extract on our arms and legs night and morning, and my father rolled over in a canoe with all his clothes on; but outside of that the vacation was a success and from then on none of us ever thought there was any place in the world like that lake in Maine. We returned summer after summer--always on August 1st for one month. I have since become a salt-water man, but sometimes in summer there are days when the restlessness of the tides and the fearful cold of the sea water and the incessant wind which blows across the afternoon and into the evening make me wish for the placidity of a lake in the woods. A few weeks ago this feeling got so strong I bought myself a couple of bass hooks and a spinner and returned to the lake where we used to go, for a week's fishing and to revisit old haunts.

I took along my son, who had never had any fresh water up his nose and who had seen lily pads only from train windows. On the journey over to the lake I began to wonder what it would be like. I wondered how time would have marred this unique, this holy spot--the coves and streams, the hills that the sun set behind, the camps and the paths behind the camps. I was sure that the tarred road would have found it out and I wondered in what other ways it would be desolated. It is strange how much you can remember about places like that once you allow your mind to return into the grooves which lead back. You remember one thing, and that suddenly reminds you of another

thing. I guess I remembered clearest of all the early mornings, when the lake was cool and motionless, remembered how the bedroom smelled of the lumber it was made of and of the wet woods whose scent entered through the screen. The partitions in the camp were thin and did not extend clear to the top of the rooms, and as I was always the first up I would dress softly so as not to wake the others, and sneak out into the sweet outdoors and start out in the canoe, keeping close along the shore in the long shadows of the pines. I remembered being very careful never to rub my paddle against the gunwale for fear of disturbing the stillness of the cathedral.

The lake had never been what you would call a wild lake. There were cottages sprinkled around the shores, and it was in farming although the shores of the lake were quite heavily wooded. Some of the cottages were owned by nearby farmers, and

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you would live at the shore and eat your meals at the farmhouse. That's what our family did. But although it wasn't wild, it was a fairly large and undisturbed lake and there were places in it which, to a child at least, seemed infinitely remote and primeval.

I was right about the tar: it led to within half a mile of the shore But when I got back there, with my boy, and we settled into a camp near a farmhouse and into the kind of summertime I had known, I could tell that it was going to be pretty much the same as it had been before--I knew it, lying in bed the first morning, smelling the bedroom, and hearing the boy sneak quietly out and go off along the shore in a boat. I began to sustain the illusion that he was I, and therefore, by simple transposition, that I was my father. This sensation persisted, kept cropping up all the time we were there. It was not an entirely new feeling, but in this setting, it grew much stronger. I seemed to be living a dual existence. I would be in the middle of some simple act, I would be picking up a bait box or laying down a table fork, or I would be saying something, and suddenly it would be not I but my father who was saying the words or making the gesture. It gave me a creepy sensation.

We went fishing the first morning. I felt the same damp moss covering the worms in the bait can, and saw the dragonfly alight on the tip of my rod as it hovered a few inches from the surface of the water. It was the arrival of this fly that convinced me beyond any doubt that everything was as it always had been, that the years were a mirage and there had been no years. The small waves were the same, chucking the rowboat under the chin as we fished at anchor, and the boat was the same boat, the same color green and the ribs broken in the same places, and under the floor-boards the same freshwater leavings and debris--the dead helgramite, the wisps of moss, the rusty discarded fishhook, the dried blood from yesterday's catch. We stared silently at the tips of our rods, at the dragonflies that came and wells. I lowered the tip of mine into the water, tentatively, pensively dislodging the fly, which darted two feet away, poised, darted two feet back, and came to rest again a little farther up the rod. There had been no years between the ducking of this dragonfly and the other one--the one that was part of memory. I looked at the boy, who was silently watching his fly, and it was my hands that held his rod, my eyes watching. I felt dizzy and didn't know which rod I was at the end of.

We caught two bass, hauling them in briskly as though they were mackerel, pulling them over the side of the boat in a businesslike manner without any landing net, and stunning them with a blow on the back of the head. When we got back for a swim before lunch, the lake was exactly where we had left it, the same number of inches from the dock, and there was only the merest suggestion of a breeze. This seemed an utterly enchanted sea, this lake you could leave to its own devices for a few hours and come back to, and find that it had not stirred, this constant and trustworthy body of water. In the shallows, the dark, water-soaked sticks and twigs, smooth and old, were undulating in clusters on the bottom against the clean ribbed sand, and the track of the mussel was plain. A school of minnows swam by, each minnow with its small,

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individual shadow, doubling the attendance, so clear and sharp in the sunlight. Some of the other campers were in swimming, along the shore, one of them with a cake of soap, and the water felt thin and clear and insubstantial. Over the years there had been this person with the cake of soap, this cultist, and here he was. There had been no years.

Up to the farmhouse to dinner through the teeming, dusty field, the road under our sneakers was only a two-track road. The middle track was missing, the one with the marks of the hooves and the splotches of dried, flaky manure. There had always been three tracks to choose from in choosing which track to walk in; now the choice was narrowed down to two. For a moment I missed terribly the middle alternative. But the way led past the tennis court, and something about the way it lay there in the sun reassured me; the tape had loosened along the backline, the alleys were green with plantains and other weeds, and the net (installed in June and removed in September) sagged in the dry noon, and the whole place steamed with midday heat and hunger and emptiness. There was a choice of pie for dessert, and one was blueberry and one was apple, and the waitresses were the same country girls, there having been no passage of time, only the illusion of it as in a dropped curtain--the waitresses were still fifteen; their hair had been washed, that was the only difference--they had been to the movies and seen the pretty girls with the clean hair.

Summertime, oh summertime, pattern of life indelible, the fade proof lake, the woods unshatterable, the pasture with the sweet fern and the juniper forever and ever, summer without end; this was the background, and the life along the shore was the design, the cottages with their innocent and tranquil design, their tiny docks with the flagpole and the American flag floating against the white clouds in the blue sky, the little paths over the roots of the trees leading from camp to camp and the paths leading back to the outhouses and the can of lime for sprinkling, and at the souvenir counters at the store the miniature birch-bark canoes and the post cards that showed things looking a little better than they looked. This was the American family at play, escaping the city heat, wondering whether the newcomers at the camp at the head of the cove were "common" or "nice," wondering whether it was true that the people who drove up for Sunday dinner at the farmhouse were turned away because there wasn't enough chicken.

It seemed to me, as I kept remembering all this, that those times and those summers had been infinitely precious and worth saving. There had been jollity and peace and goodness. The arriving (at the beginning of August) had been so big a business in itself, at the railway station the farm wagon drawn up, the first smell of the pine-laden air, the first glimpse of the smiling farmer, and the great importance of the trunks and your father's enormous authority in such matters, and the feel of the wagon under you for the long ten-mile haul, and at the top of the last long hill catching the first view of the lake after eleven months of not seeing this cherished body of water. The shouts and cries of the other campers when they saw you, and the trunks to be unpacked, to give up their rich burden. (Arriving was less exciting nowadays, when you sneaked up

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in your car and parked it under a tree near the camp and took out the bags and in five minutes it was all over, no fuss, no loud wonderful fuss about trunks.)

Peace and goodness and jollity. The only thing that was wrong now, really, was the sound of the place, an unfamiliar nervous sound of the outboard motors. This was the note that jarred, the one thing that would sometimes break the illusion and set the years moving. In those other summertimes, all motors were inboard; and when they were at a little distance, the noise they made was a sedative, an ingredient of summer sleep. They were one-cylinder and two-cylinder engines, and some were make-and-break and some were jump-spark, but they all made a sleepy sound across the lake. The one-lungers throbbed and fluttered, and the twin-cylinder ones purred and purred, and that was a quiet sound too. But now the campers all had outboards. In the daytime, in the hot mornings, these motors made a petulant, irritable sound; at night, in the still evening when the afterglow lit the water, they whined about one's ears like mosquitoes. My boy loved our rented outboard, and his great desire was to achieve single-handed mastery over it, and authority, and he soon learned the trick of choking it a little (but not too much), and the adjustment of the needle valve. Watching him I would remember the things you could do with the old one-cylinder engine with the heavy flywheel, how you could have it eating out of your hand if you got really close to it spiritually. Motor boats in those days didn't have clutches, and you would make a landing by shutting off the motor at the proper time and coasting in with a dead rudder. But there was a way of reversing them, if you learned the trick, by cutting the switch and putting it on again exactly on the final dying revolution of the flywheel, so that it would kick back against compression and begin reversing. Approaching a dock in a strong following breeze, it was difficult to slow up sufficiently by the ordinary coasting method, and if a boy felt he had complete mastery over his motor, he was tempted to keep it running beyond its time and then reverse it a few feet from the dock. It took a cool nerve, because if you threw the switch a twentieth of a second too soon you would catch the flywheel when it still had speed enough to go up past center, and the boat would leap ahead, charging bull-fashion at the dock.

We had a good week at the camp. The bass were biting well and the sun shone endlessly, day after day. We would be tired at night and lie down in the accumulated heat of the little bedrooms after the long hot day and the breeze would stir

almost imperceptibly outside and the smell of the swamp drift in through the rusty screens. Sleep would come easily and in the morning the red squirrel would be on the roof, tapping out his gay routine. I kept remembering everything, lying in bed in the mornings--the small steamboat that had a long rounded stern like the lip of a Ubangi, and how quietly she ran on the moonlight sails, when the older boys played their mandolins and the girls sang and we ate doughnuts dipped in sugar, and how sweet the music was on the water in the shining night, and what it had felt like to think about girls then. After breakfast we would go up to the store and the things were in the same place--the minnows in a bottle, the plugs and spinners disarranged and pawed over by the youngsters from the boys' camp, the fig newtons and the Beeman's gum. Outside, the road was tarred and cars stood in front of the store. Inside, all was just as it had always been, except there was more Coca Cola and not so much Moxie and root beer and birch beer and sarsaparilla. We would walk out with a bottle of pop apiece and sometimes the pop would backfire up our noses and hurt. We explored the streams, quietly, where the turtles slid off the sunny logs and dug their way into the soft bottom; and we lay on the town wharf and fed worms to the tame bass. Everywhere we went I had trouble making out which was I, the one walking at my side, the one walking in my pants.

One afternoon while we were there at that lake a thunderstorm came up. It was like the revival of an old melodrama that I had seen long ago with childish awe. The second-act climax of the drama of the electrical disturbance over a lake in America had not changed in any important respect. This was the big scene, still the big scene. The whole thing was so familiar, the first feeling of oppression and heat and a general air around camp of not wanting to go very far away. In mid-afternoon (it was all the same) a curious darkening of the sky, and a lull in everything that had made life tick; and then the way the boats suddenly swung the other way at their moorings with the coming of a breeze out of the new quarter, and the premonitory rumble. Then the kettle drum, then the snare, then the bass drum and cymbals, then crackling light against the dark, and the gods grinning and licking their chops in the hills. Afterward the calm, the rain steadily rustling in the calm lake, the return of light and hope and spirits, and the campers running out in joy and relief to go swimming in the rain, their bright cries perpetuating the deathless joke about how they were getting simply drenched, and the children screaming with delight at the new sensation of bathing in the rain, and the joke about getting drenched linking the generations in a strong indestructible chain. And the comedian who waded in carrying an umbrella.

When the others went swimming my son said he was going in too. He pulled his dripping trunks from the line where they had hung all through the shower, and wrung them out. Languidly, and with no thought of going in, I watched him, his hard little body, skinny and bare, saw him wince slightly as he pulled up around his vitals the small, soggy, icy garment. As he buckled the swollen belt suddenly my groin felt the chill of death.

If You Want to Write Memoir, Read Memoir.

20 Best Memoirs to Make You Laugh, Cry, and Think, According to Goodreads Users

'Educated'

Goodreads' choice for Best Memoir & Autobiography of 2018, *Educated* follows Tara Westover as she leaves her survivalist family in Idaho and sets off on a journey that leads her to earn a Ph.D. from Cambridge University. The reception to the book, and what it says about the gulf between educated and uneducated people in the United States, earned Westover a spot on *Times* list of the Most Influential People of 2019.

'Becoming' (2018)

Even if you think you know all there is to know about Michelle Obama from watching her during her eight-year tenure as First Lady of the United States, her memoir will show you that there's still lots to learn about her. From her upbringing on Chicago's South Side to her triumphs and disappointments in the White House, *Becoming* offers a deeply personal look at Obama's life.

'When Breath Becomes Air' (2016)

Paul Kalanithi didn't set out to become a writer — in fact, he was an M.D. with more than a decade of training as a neurosurgeon, until he was diagnosed with Stage IV lung cancer. After switching from doctor to patient, he set out to write this memoir to examine what makes life worth living.

'I Am Malala' (2014)

When she was 15, Malala Yousafzai was shot in the head at point-blank range while riding the bus home from school because she spoke out about Taliban rule. Not only did she survive, she went on to publish her memoir and become one of the most leading voices for change, and a symbol of how one person can change the world.

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'Yes Please' (2014)

Amy Poehler's collection of essays is as funny as you'd expect from the former star of *The Upright Citizens Brigade*, *Saturday Night Live* and *Parks and Recreation* — but it also contains lots of useful real-world wisdom, such as advice about when to be funny and when to get serious.

'Wild' (2012)

Before it became a movie starring Reese Witherspoon, Cheryl Strayed's *Wild* was hitting the top of best-seller lists for its portrayal of a woman who had lost herself to grief, but then found redemption by hiking on the Pacific Crest Trail from California through Washington State.

'Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me?' (2011)

Mindy Kaling deserves credit for always living life on her own terms, and her book offers some of her keen observations about life that helped her get to where she is. In it, she details her thoughts about what makes a great best friend, romance, show business and an examination of what it was like to grow up with immigrant parents.

'Bossypants' (2011) Tina Fey describes her path to a celebrated career in comedy — and it's not a smooth ride. Her series of essays about her journey from her nerdy beginnings to her time leading the *Saturday Night Live* writing staff (and beyond) are full of laughs and give hope to all the one-time dorks out there.

'Eat, Pray, Love' (2006)

With her account of finding herself by traveling through Italy, India, and Indonesia, Elizabeth Gilbert was preaching about paying attention to your needs back before self-care was something that anyone ever talked about.

'The Glass Castle' (2005)

Jeannette Walls describes her unconventional and nomadic upbringing, being raised by nonconformist parents — including an alcoholic father — who taught them how to "embrace life fearlessly." The story pops off the page so strongly, it was adapted into a feature film starring Brie Larson.

'Running with Scissors' (2005)

Augusten Burroughs writes another tale about an unorthodox childhood shaped by damaged parents; his mother abandoned him to be raised by a therapist. Yet somehow, the story isn't maudlin, and Burroughs manages to walk that fine line of being brutally honest about his upbringing, without losing sight of the humor in his situation.

'Marley & Me' (2005)

Everybody has a dog-lover somewhere in their lives, which is why everyone can feel for John Grogan, who wrote about the ups and downs of life with his ill-behaved pup. It all boils down to a truth every dog-mom knows: The love you get from an animal is 100% pure.

'Me Talk Pretty One Day' (2000)

David Sedaris trains his humorists' eye on his experience in Europe, trying to learn a second language — with hilarious results. Tip: Check it out on audiobook, and you can hear recordings of Sedaris reading to an audience.

'Tuesdays with Morrie' (1997)

Writer Mitch Albom's remembrances of his weekly visits to an old college professor in the last months of his life show the importance of absorbing as much wisdom as you can from the older people in your life — those lessons stick with you forever.

'Angela's Ashes' (1996)

Frank McCourt borrows from Tolstoy when he says he had, "of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while." His memoir follows him from Depression-era Brooklyn to the slums of Limerick, Ireland, in a story about survival that still manages to maintain its humor.

'A Child Called It' (1995)

Dave Pelzer's autobiography details the horrific abuse he suffered at the hands of his mother from age 4 to age 12, when he was put in the foster-care system. If the story grabs you, you can also read the two sequels, also written by Pelzer, for a trilogy about resilience, dedication, forgiveness, and love.

'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' (1969) There's a reason Maya Angelou's autobiography is a classic that's still widely read today: Angelou is able to so beautifully capture both struggles, and the joys, of growing up against the backdrop of racism in the United States.

'Night' (1958)

Author Elie Wisel eventually earned a Nobel Peace Prize for speaking out against violence, racism, and repression — work that started when he published his memoir, *Night*, about the horrific experience of surviving a Nazi concentration camp in World War II.

'Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl' (1947)

Like *Night*, even though it was first published more than seven decades ago, Anne Frank's in-the-moment account of living in hiding in Nazi-occupied Amsterdam still resonates, bringing the events of World War II down to a personal level.

'Man's Search for Meaning' (1946)

Another memoir that tries to process the events of World War II, Psychiatrist Viktor Frankl's memoir examines his time treating patients who survived the Holocaust. He comes up with a theory, known now as logotherapy, that "our primary drive in life is not pleasure, as Freud maintained, but the discovery and pursuit of what we personally find meaningful."

MARISA LASCALA_Parenting & Relationships Editor
Marisa LaScala covers all things parenting, from the postpartum period through empty nests, for GoodHousekeeping.com; she previously wrote about motherhood for Parents and Working Mother.

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