

Your Life Story: A Book or an Article?

Years ago, when I was living in Muncie, Ind., a woman called me and told me I should write a book about her. When I asked why, she said, "Because I gave birth to three sons, all in different years, but each born on March 9." That turned out to be an article I sold to *The Muncie Star* for \$30, not a book.

Another time a woman called me and told me her daughter was getting married and I should write a book about it. When I asked why, she said, "Because my mother got married on her mother's 25th wedding anniversary, and I got married on my mother's 25th anniversary, and now my daughter is getting married on my 25th wedding anniversary." That turned out to be a wedding reception photo and 400 words of copy I sold to *Modern Bride* for \$275, not a book.

It has never failed to happen in 25 years of teaching at writers' conferences that I have not had a conferee come up to me and say something along the lines of, "I've written my life story. It's 350 pages long, but I haven't been able to get it published. Will you look at it and tell me who will buy it from me?"

Because television is glutted daily with shows like *Dr. Phil*, *Oprah*, and *Montel Williams*, where people come on and gush about how miserable life has been to them, it has spawned a mass of would-be memoir writers. Each hopes to gain fame and fortune by slapping together a hastily written diary and seeing it rise on the bestseller lists.

Reality, Not a Royalty Check

For a fact, biography and autobiography have been the top-selling categories of nonfiction for the past 25 years, topping even cookbooks, how-to texts, and computer manuals. Some of these books, most notably those written by the Clintons, Colin Powell, and Norman Schwartzkopf, have sold millions upon millions of copies. And even books written by or about totally unknown people have sold millions of copies.

However, always one of two factors makes these books succeed: (1) the person writing the book is phenomenally famous or strongly affiliated with someone phenomenally famous,

and readers are eager to get an inside look into who that person really is or was; or (2) the book has the potential to provide some kind of astounding lessons about life, secrets of success, or insights of wisdom that can be passed on to readers.

Fame by association is the back door to a bestselling memoir. Not to be cold about it, but let's face it: Who would have given two cents to read the life story of Lisa Beamer if she had not been the widow of Todd Beamer, the man who yelled "Let's roll!" during the takeover of United Flight 93 on 9/11?

Similarly, who actually gives a rip who George Jacobs is? Nevertheless, his life story became a bestselling book and was made into a motion picture. Why? Well, look at the title of the book: *Mr. S: My Life with Frank Sinatra*, about the years 1953–1968 when Jacobs was the personal valet of "Old Blue Eyes."

Yes, a close association with someone famous, if it can be validated, will make you famous too. Even Britney Spears's mother has signed a contract with Thomas Nelson Publishers to write a book about bringing up her famous daughter.

But you may be protesting that you are not close friends with any governors, astronauts, Nobel Peace Prize winners, or NASCAR drivers. Nevertheless, you think your life story is significant, that you have something of merit to share with others. Well, that leaves you with limited options, but options nevertheless.

How Big Is the Story?

Begin by asking yourself if you have one basic incident to share or one specific lesson to teach. If so, condense that incident or lesson into an article, the way I did with the two opening examples. People often think that because an incident is significant to them and their closest relatives and friends, the whole world will find it significant too. This is seldom the case. Most such events are passing amusements, oddities, small surprises—but not life-altering traumas.

So report your incident succinctly, with all the relevant facts; but inject no opinions or add-ons, no matter how desperately you'd like to

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include a list of other family members and their reactions.

If, however, your memoir truly is a big-picture story, filled with drama, action, intensity, struggle, achievement, and ultimate victory, and if readers can gain takeaway value from it, then you have a book.

Such movies as *Stand and Deliver*, *Dead Man Walking*, *Mr. Carter*, and *Freedom Writers* have been about common people who gained uncommon achievements by going above and beyond normal expectations. These people (teachers, a nun, a high school principal) serve as role models to the rest of us, and we are fascinated by them. We want to know what motivated them to do what they did, as well as how they managed to do it.

Let's take a specific example of a book by a totally unknown person that became a bestseller. *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* by Aron Ralston might at first have seemed to be a story that was astounding and praiseworthy, surely entitled to lots of news coverage for a day or two, but probably not deep enough to warrant a whole book about it. Aron was the backpacker who was pinned under a huge boulder and had to cut off one of his arms, climb down the side of a mountain, and then walk many miles across a desert to find help.

What gave this story substance, weight, and takeaway value was Aron's character, focus, and determination. It's safe to say that not one in 1,000 men would have had the level-headedness, willpower, and pragmatism to do what he did in order to survive. Finding out what creates a man like that cannot be summarized in a magazine profile, much less a two-minute interview on TV.

In writing his book, Aron gave us the whole scope of what led to his bravery at that defining moment. He explained the influence of other people on his life, previous training he had gained as a hiker and mountaineer, goals and ambitions he had yet to reach and fulfill. Each chapter was educational and entertaining. The chapters were also dramatic in the sense that they kept moving the reader closer and closer to that fate-

ful day alone on the mountain top.

What About Your Story?

If you can be content with writing a full book about your life and having 50 copies run off at a local print shop as legacies for your grandchildren and other relatives, then do it as a project. However, don't assume that a private agony (widowhood) or personal setback (job loss) or family joy (first one to graduate from college) or even an out-of-the-ordinary event (birth of quadruplets) is, in and of itself, a transferable learning experience for thousands of other people.

Keep things in perspective. If it's a book, then it's a book. But if it's only an article, be content with that.

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