

## **Palm Springs Writers Guild**

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Notes from today available for download after program: [lisadalenorton.com](http://lisadalenorton.com)

### About me

- What I do
  - 1) Freelance editor—clients writing and editing books
  - 2) Teach online memoir classes
  - 3) Speak/teach nationally
- Credentials
  - **Books:** St. Martin's Press:  
*Shimmering Images: A Handy Little Guide to Writing Memoir*;  
*Hawk Flies Above: Journey to the Heart of the Sandhills*
  - **Clients:** worked with hundreds of writers
  - **Degrees:** Bachelor's Reed College, Master's University of Iowa
  - **Academic:** Extension Writers' Program UCLA; Augustana College, +
  - **Industry:** conferences, centers: Open Center; Writer's Center, D.C., +

### What we are going to do

- Define memoir—autobiography vs. memoir
- Walk through steps of writing memoir; leave you with blueprint
- Look at current book examples that illustrate memoir
- Discuss one piece of writing craft central to memoir—narration & reflection
- Q & A

### What is Memoir?—Autobiography vs. Memoir

- Explain difference between autobiography and memoir
  - Visual
  - Difference between recording events  
& discovering meaning, and connecting to larger world
- Why difference key?
  - Immediately begin winnowing your material
  - Only by focusing life experience can you  
get to your story's **nugget of universal meaning**
  - **That is what connects with readers, and sells books**
- Both valuable forms

## Examples

- Year I lived in France during graduate school—*being American*
- The summer I worked as a ranch hand—*the natural world*
- Adventure in Bali when flight was unexpectedly diverted—*cultural expansion*
- My twenty years at Bell Labs—*creative discovery*
- The time I lived across the Atlantic—*survival*

## Key steps of writing memoir

- **After you have narrowed life material:**

- 1) Find your Shimmering Images
- 2) Figure out what they mean (Heart of the Story)
- 3) Structure them into a natural flow

### **1) Find your Shimmering Images—these form the backbone of your story**

- Define Shimmering Images
- How to find them
- How to “name” them
- Write many

### **2) Figure out what they mean—Heart of the Story**

- Define Heart of the Story—connecting your story to larger world
- How to do it
- Why do it—doorway to audience. **Your connection to the larger world.**
  - Recent *Publisher's Weekly* said about memoir:  
“Everyone has one, whether it’s about the trials of growing up different, finding love, or learning a language unspoken for centuries. Well told, any story, about anything at all can give us that aha moment, because, truth be told, what’s important is the connection we have to we have to each other through sharing our experiences.”

**HAVE TO KNOW WHAT IDEA YOU ARE SHARING**

### **3) Structure them into a natural flow**

- How to do it
- Can not decide ahead of time, as with how-to or general nonfiction
- Structure in memoir is organic, rises out of material
- Why? Because memoir about **discovering meaning**
- In process of writing, you do this
  - and come to understand Heart of the Story—**its nugget of meaning**
- Structural choices then become obvious

**Look at current titles that Narrow Life Material and define Heart of the Story**

- Remember, unlikely you'll do this in beginning of writing your own memoir
- Moving to the analytical part of being a writer, thinking about craft
- **Focus here on, what I call, *Common Person Memoir***
  - **how they Narrow Life Material and define Heart of the Story**
- But first—do not be confused by *Celebrity* or *Near-Celebrity Memoir*
  - Autobiographies in disguise using word “memoir” to capture attention
  - Not best examples of how your story might be conceived

*The Celebrity Memoir — Household Names*

• **Born to Run**

Bruce Springsteen—What else? His life!

• **The Secrets of My Life**

Caitlyn Jenner. Grand Central—Story of the most famous transgender woman in the world, from her childhood as Bruce and Olympian Gold to her transition and life today.

*Near-Celebrity Memoir — Well-Known in Certain Circles*

• **Between Them: Remembering My Parents**

Richard Ford. Ecco—The Pulitzer Prize-winning author mines his life to write a memoir in two parts about his love for the parents he lost too young.

*Pop Culture Memoir*

• **The Magnolia Story**

Chip and Joanna Gaines—Husband and wife team who host HGTV's *Fixer Upper* shed light on their success in business, and view of long to their hit show.

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*The Common Person Memoir*

COMING OF AGE MEMOIR

• **Alpine Apprentice**

Sarah Gorham, Univ. of Georgia, Mar.—Part travelogue, part memoir, the poet, essayist and editor-in-chief of Sarabande Books tells of her *life-changing coming-of-age at a small boarding school* in Switzerland.

PLACE MEMOIR

• **Island Home: A Landscape Memoir**

Tim Winton. Milkweed, Apr. 11—An *evocative portrait of the unique landscape* of Australia and the *author's lifelong connection to its singular environment*.

- **Ice Diaries: A Memoir**

Jean McNeil, ECW, Mar. 15—McNeil, a fiction writer, chronicles her years spent on ice in the Antarctic and her subsequent travels in Greenland; Iceland; and Norway, confronting the *lifelong effects of growing up in a cold place*.

JOURNEY/ADVENTURE MEMOIR

- **The Amazing Story of the Man Who Cycled from India to Europe for Love**

Per J Andersson, trans. by Anna Holmwood, Oneworld, Mar. 14—Kumar born into a poor, untouchable family in a small village in eastern India, meets a young Swedish woman. Armed with nothing more than a handful of paintbrushes and a secondhand Raleigh bicycle, he made his way across Asia and Europe in 1978 *in search of her*.

- **Juliet's Answer: One Man's Search for Love and the Elusive Cure for Heartbreak**

Glenn Dixon, S&S/Gallery, Feb. 7—Spurned by love, Dixon moves to Verona, Italy, where he volunteers to answer the thousands of letters sent from lovelorn people all over the world to the hometown of Shakespeare's Juliet; *a tale of modern-day love steeped in the romantic traditions of eras past*.

ISSUE MEMOIR

- **Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body**

Roxanne Gay, Harper, June 13—An exploration of one woman's struggle to *understand the anxieties around pleasure and denial and the meaning of self care*.

- **Girl Walks Out of a Bar: A Memoir**

Lisa Smith, SelectBooks, Apr. 1, 2016—A *candid portrait of alcoholism*, this is the story of a young lawyer at a prestigious firm in New York City in the early '90s and the *addiction that took over her life*.

- **Blue on Blue: An Insider's Story of Good Cops Catching Bad Cops**

Charles Campisi with Gordon Dillow, Scribner, Feb. 7—The head of the NYPD's Internal Affairs Bureau from 1996 through 2014 tells the story of joining the world's largest police force, then spending almost half his career *putting bad cops behind bars*.

COMPLEX: ISSUE/ADVENTURE, OR SOME OTHER COMBO

- **A Country Between: Making a Home Where Both Sides of Jerusalem Collide**

Stephanie Saldaña, Sourcebooks, Feb. 1—The author and her new husband, Frederic move with their sons to a neighborhood where the fractious sides of Palestinian and Israeli Jerusalem collide, and Frederic embarks on a *spiritual journey that forces the family to redefine their lives, their love, and the place they call home*.

- **Filling Her Shoes: A Memoir of an Inherited Family**

Betsy Graziani Fasbinder, She Writes, May 9—A stepmother navigates living in the shadow of a young mother taken too soon as she creates *love and joy in a new family, which becomes the richest kind of inheritance*.

• **How to Make a French Family: A Memoir of Love, Food, and Faux Pas**

Samantha Vérant, Sourcebooks, Apr. 1—At the age of 40, the American Vérant, marries a Frenchman, moves to southwestern France, and deals with the *culture shock of making her instant French family into a happy one.*

Some Classic Memoir books

The Year of Magical thinking—Joan Didion

Eat Pray Love—Elizabeth Gilbert

The Tender Bar—J.R. Moehringer

The Glass Castle—Jeanette Walls

The Liars' Club—Mary Karr

Angela's Ashes—Frank McCourt

This Boy's Life—Tobias Wolff

Key craft

- Memoir is a dance of Narration and Reflection—essential
  - Define

What we did

- 1) Defined memoir by looking at differences between memoir and autobiography
- 2) Walked through a blueprint for writing a memoir:
  - find your shimmering images
  - get to the heart of what they mean
  - structure them in their innate order
- 3) Learned about the central craft dance of memoir—narration and reflection
- 4) Looked at contemporary examples of memoir books

Q & A

*Thanks for being here. I hope we get to work together again!*

*— Lisa*