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TWELVE TIPS FOR WRITING MEMOIR

1. If you want to grab the reader right away, start in “scene,” with action, detail and concrete description of the lived moment. Example: *“I was admiring the scarlet blush of a cardinal perched on a bare branch when the smell of cigarette smoke startled me.”*
2. Remember there are two main voices that tell a memoir: the voice of the lived life (the you “then”) and the present voice (the you “now”). Allow yourself to alternate: Example of now: *“Looking back, I can see that my mother held on to her fear and couldn’t let go...”*
3. Include concrete details and sensory language
Write through the senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch
Make sure that what you think you have written on the page is *actually* on the page.
4. Give readers a sense of place. No story exists in a placeless place.
5. Root your story in a sense of time (of both the story and history). NO story exists in timeless time.
6. Honesty: As best you remember, recreate the experience of your life – but don’t make stuff up! (If you don’t know for sure, tell the reader).

And don’t be afraid to admit flaws and mistakes. Reveal warts and all—no one is perfect and no reader will believe you if you try to make them think you are. Be fair but honest when writing about others.
7. Dialogue: Use to break up sentence rhythm, illuminate relationships, character. Sprinkle don’t pour!!! (Never use in lieu of exposition or summary). Listen to how real people speak – rarely in full sentences). Write the way you – and your characters speak, with distinct rhythms and signature phrases. (such as “Damn right, he did” or “My bad.” Or the teenager of a certain age: “Cool.”).
8. Research: Use research to help verify dates, places, jog memory, elucidate. Consider all the options available to you—internet, reference library, even travel.

9. Voice: Appreciate your own unique voice. Allow your personality, musings, idiosyncrasies, ways of speaking and thinking to show up on the page. Give us a sense of who you are. (Write naked!)

10. Allow your first draft to include all you think it needs and more.

Then, tighten and revise in revision. Indulge first, then economize. FIRST DRAFT, put in all you want/need. Revision: Revise: Tighten. Cut out the fat. OR Add in missing ingredients. OR do both.

11. Read out loud to hear where the writing drags and clunks. (the musical rhythm of the sentences.)

12. Ask yourself what is this really about? Then ask again, what is it REALLY about? For example, at first I thought my book "Short Leash" was about walking my dog in the park and how it changed both of us. But it was really about me walking out of decades of fear and healing trauma.

What do I want to tell when telling this story? Are you telling it?

And realize, sometimes you have to keep writing to find out what it's really about. Let yourself have a first draft that leads you to the story and lets it unfold. Or begin by writing chapters that might feel not on point, but keep writing until you have direction. You can go back later and write up to where you start hitting your stride. Sometimes it takes writing the first draft and reading it to see what the story is).

AND DON'T BE DISCOURAGED. WRITING IS HARD WORK. SHOW UP AT THE PAGE AND BE STEADFAST IN YOUR DEVOTION.

George Washington Carver said:

"IF YOU LOVE SOMETHING ENOUGH, IT WILL REVEAL ITS SECRETS.

I have found that to be true.