

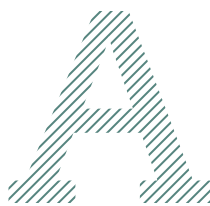


Full

Disclosure

If you're driven to tell your story, you may need to relive things you'd rather forget. Here's why it's important not to gloss over the tough stuff.

BY LAURIE ROSIN



memoirist's inspiration often stems from life's most unpleasant circumstances: a serious illness, emotional or physical abuse, mortal danger, personal or professional failure. The writer prevails over these miseries

and then feels motivated to share hard-earned lessons with an audience. The underlying theme of such memoirs is often an inspirational or empowering one: "If I overcame my hardships, so can you."

If this rings true for you and your story, you have a lot of company. There's one hitch, though. To write an effective, authentic, cohesive memoir, you'll likely need to revisit or even relive the pain you'd rather forget. You can't gloss over the tough stuff. You have to dive in, come clean and carry on.

I've been an independent book editor for more than 30 years, and I've worked with many memoirists who've sidestepped important aspects of their experiences—almost always to the great detriment of their stories. The good news is that you can learn from their mistakes. Let's look at the three biggest reasons why full disclosure is important—and how you can achieve it in your own memoir-in-progress.

1. Omissions can leave holes in your narrative.

A client I'll call Jonathan was plagued by terrifying flashbacks. (Because the memoirs cited as examples in this article have not yet been published—and because intensely personal experiences like these deserve to be conveyed in the full context of each author's own words—I'll refer to them anonymously here.) He'd been on the University of Texas campus in Austin during Charles Whitman's shooting rampage in 1966—but he had no recollection of the firestorm that accounted for his episodes. With the help of a psychotherapist, he'd eventually brought that day's events to his conscious mind. The manuscript he brought to me was his powerful story of getting in touch with the repressed memories that had triggered his flashbacks. He felt driven to share his own experiences in hopes they might help others find the strength to heal.

But something unexpected had happened during his writing process. Another repressed memory had surfaced that had nothing to do with the massacre. While in graduate school, Jonathan had been the night manager of a small convenience store. Every night at the end of his graveyard shift, he'd walked with a security guard to a nearby bank to deposit the day's receipts into a drop box. One night, robbers fell upon the two men and forced them into a car. They sped away to a wooded area outside town.

"And then," Jonathan wrote, "we were surrounded by squad cars and rescued."

First and foremost, remember that readers will be rooting for you. Memoirists are the protagonists of their own books.

Wait a minute, I thought. Something's missing here. How did the police learn that Jonathan and the guard had been kidnapped? How did the officers know where to find them? Did the robbers surrender immediately, or did they resist arrest?

Obviously we had a yawning gap. Any reader would have noticed it. Jonathan had taken us up to a point and then expected us to leap over a void to the next event. So, I asked him: "What *really* happened?"

After a few moments of silence, he gave me the whole story. The robbers had driven into the woods, and one of them had sexually assaulted him. This was Jonathan's

secret, the event he could not include in his memoir. "I'm too mortified to write about it," he said.

Jonathan needed to revisit his trauma for the strength of the story. But before he could write about the experience, he first had to come to grips with his shame. He was too afraid of both his own feelings and the audience's condemnation to be forthcoming with his readers. He did not feel safe.

How was Jonathan able to move forward? He came to understand that when full disclosure takes place, readers embrace it; when something is omitted, they detect it. He realized that if he was going to write his story effectively for an audience, he'd have to tell the *whole* story. So, he revealed all the details surrounding the kidnapping and the robbers' capture. His resulting memoir is truthful, and it moves from one episode to the next without a lapse.

2. Readers are drawn to authentic, motivated characters.

A client I'll call April had been diagnosed with Stage 4 breast cancer. Single and in her 40s, she'd had a mastectomy, undergone chemotherapy and radiation, and become a survivors advocate. She'd come to fully accept her body without the breast, but had eventually elected to have breast reconstruction surgery. Her memoir was about this decision and how ecstatic she was with the results. She hoped her own story might encourage other women to do the same.

Before her reconstruction, April enjoyed an active social life. She had several romantic relationships. "The men were fine with my one breast and the scar," she wrote. "They treated me as if I were the most desirable woman in the world."

Until that chapter in the manuscript, April's prose had soared. It was earnest and at times hilarious. Despite the serious topic, her memoir was upbeat. When we came to her lovers' attitude toward her, however, the writing fell apart. All the words were in place, but the sparkle was gone. As a reader, I spotted the difference immediately.

"How was it *really*, April?" I asked.

She paused. "It was awful," she admitted.

The men hadn't been as enamored as she wanted her readers to believe. When she told her suitors about the mastectomy, their rejection was devastating. April stopped dating and investigated the possibility of recon-

struction. Her memoir, like Jonathan's, had a gap. After her genuine self-acceptance, what had motivated her to consider cosmetic surgery? Also like Jonathan, April had focused on her happy ending. She was so thrilled with her new appearance, she zeroed in on it and withheld her ordeal. As a result, April's entire story lacked authenticity. In order for readers to fully understand what was driving her—as the book's main character—toward the pivotal event of her memoir, she was going to have to push through her fear of humiliation and divulge her experience as it had truly happened.

When you've faced rejection in the events of your story, how can you find the confidence to unmask yourself for an audience? First and foremost, remember that readers will be rooting for you. They want to identify with a hero. Memoirists are the protagonists of their own books. Begin building that relationship with your readers on Page 1, and trust that by the time you get to the difficult spots, they'll be firmly on your side.

If you're still reluctant to lay yourself bare for readers, you might not be ready to write your story for publication. And that's OK—there are many reasons to write a memoir, all of them valid in their own right. Here's my suggestion: Go to the blank page anyway. Forget about an audience. Instead, commit yourself to telling the truth. One magnificent thing about writing is the distance it affords us from the subject matter. Setting down on paper that which has harmed us may heal us. And even if it doesn't, then the memoir can prove to be a valuable indicator of residual self-reproach, anger and sadness. That's how it was for April. As in her case, we may need the help of friends, support groups or therapists to make peace with the past. Only then can we get on with our lives—and perhaps find ourselves ready to give our memoirs another try, too.

3. Strong stories require dramatic unity.

Raymond was working toward a Ph.D. in geology; his study involved fieldwork and an analysis of the data he collected for his dissertation. Then, his academic advisor unexpectedly left the university for another position. Raymond's new supervisor, as it turned out, had worked in the same field area as Raymond—and had come to his own conclusions about the rock samples there.

Raymond's findings did not agree with this professor's. In fact, his evidence proved his new advisor's conclusions to be wrong.

This man controlled whether or not Raymond would be awarded his doctoral degree. He rejected Raymond's findings outright, even though the scientific evidence was irrefutable. Raymond was forced to transfer to another university to earn his Ph.D. But he didn't let the setback stop him. He went on to become a professor, lecturer and published author in his field.

Raymond's memoir mentioned his upheaval only briefly. It had the potential, however, to be the backbone of his story. The dispute had a clear beginning, middle and end. It held tension and suspense. The conflict had an obvious protagonist as well as an antagonist. The stakes were high. There were obstacles in Raymond's way. His story could have had a compelling arc of a personal journey, the attainment of his degree by prevailing over opposing forces.

Did he want to write that story? Absolutely not. In an e-mail, he said, "It's uncomfortable going back into all that, a real sore spot. I would rather write about something else."

When I explained the concept of dramatic unity, he wrote back, "You're right about the story. I'll try."

Try he did, and the end result is a cohesive, fascinating memoir.

Reliving trauma requires courage. It may call for forgiveness and acceptance of ourselves and others. These aren't easy to offer when people have harmed us or when life has crashed down around us. But Raymond's story is a great illustration of why it's so important not just to include those elements, but to give them the weight they deserve in our work.

Our responsibility as memoirists is to create an honest, unified life story with our whole spirit behind the words. Once it's written, then we can decide if we want to go public with it or keep it to ourselves or perhaps share it with only dear friends and family members. That decision doesn't have to be permanent. In time, we can change our minds and open ourselves to a broader audience.

A memoir isn't the place to withhold or deconstruct events. It's not a vehicle for fooling or protecting ourselves. We must tell the truth about what happened, how we feel about it, and how we've changed because of it. It is, after all, about real life. **WD**

LAURIE ROSIN has been a book editor for more than 30 years and has edited 38 national bestsellers. She is the recipient of a writing fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities.