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FOR

DUMMIES®

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Ryan G. Van Cleave, PhD

*Award-Winning Author, International Speaker,
and Memoir Writing Teacher*



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Memoir Writing FOR **DUMMIES®**

by Ryan G. Van Cleave, PhD
Memoir writing instructor



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Dedication

To the many writing students of all ages who have ever entered my classroom, let *Writing Memoir For Dummies* serve as my answer to your two most common questions: Is my life worth writing about? Do I have what it takes to write a memoir? (The answers are yes and yes!)

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Introduction

A few years back, I worked with a twenty-something elementary school teacher who wanted to work on a memoir. We chatted a bit about the different themes in her life she was interested in exploring through writing. A coworker walked past and must've overheard us because he asked one of the big questions about memoir: "Why on earth would you write a memoir? You're so young!"

Her answer: "Last year, at my grandmother's funeral, I heard so many stories from my aunts and uncles that I realized I didn't know my grandmother at all. Each of us had a story or two about her, but it was always a different story. Together, we had more than a few tales about her childhood in Romania, her job waitressing on cruise ships, her violent first marriage, and her life as a nanny for a count's daughter, but we all realized that there were pieces of her life missing. Huge pieces. I can't stand the idea that my family and my future kids might not know me either."

What a great reason to write a memoir! It's true that she didn't cure cancer, survive a terrorist attack, nor did she inherit billions, but she found value and relevance in her own experiences. She thought that, properly told, her story could impact the lives of others, whether they're her immediate family or not. She's absolutely right.

Whatever the reason that you want to write your memoir, I welcome you. *Memoir Writing For Dummies* is ultimately an invitation to make sense of your life through writing. If you've ever felt the need for clarity or truth in this confusing, difficult world, writing a memoir may be the answer. To struggle with truth, honesty, and history brings revelation and understanding. It can also bring closure and healing. Who doesn't need more of those things in his or her life?

About this Book

If you've picked up *Memoir Writing For Dummies*, you've probably either tried to write a memoir before or you've been thinking about it for some time and want a little guidance to get started. Either situation is fine. There's no wrong way to enter the world of memoir — doing so is a worthy task to undertake, no matter how you come to it.

In my 20 years of teaching, I've encountered a lot of people just like you who at some point try their hand at writing a memoir. My goal with this book is to reveal all that you need to succeed with that task. In the pages to come, I identify the reasons why you should write a memoir, share the writing tips you need, and discuss what to do after you have a complete, well-edited, well-written manuscript. I also reveal the main pitfalls and how to steer clear of them. For those who want some extra inspiration and suggestions, I have you covered as well.

The ability to write sometimes doesn't get enough respect. This bias about writing is simply one of life's little injustices, I'm afraid. It comes from the realization people have: "Everyone can scribble something on paper, right? Big deal!" Well, you wouldn't expect to pick up a guitar or a paintbrush and create masterpieces in a week or two. The same is true for writing. Anyone *can* scribble something on paper, but to do it well is another thing entirely. But here's the reality: Writing is a craft. That means you can discover practical skills to improve your writing ability. This book gives you what you need to know to succeed in writing your own memoir, no matter the reason or goals you have for writing one.

I wrote this book with the idea in mind that everything that's included would've helped me a great deal during my first few years of being a writer. If anything doesn't make sense to you or runs counter to the way you choose to do things, that's fine. Break any rule I give. Avoid any tip or technique I share that feels unhelpful. Just remember, though — this book represents the insight of two dozen years of my professional writing life and career as a writing teacher and writing coach. It also brings in the wisdom of my colleagues and friends in the writing, editing, and literary agenting business. It's time-tested, solid stuff. All I request is this: Give all of it a good faith, earnest effort. You may be surprised at how often you'll strike gold.

The one golden rule of writing is that you can do anything you want . . . as long as the end result is good writing.

Conventions Used in this Book

I use the following conventions and guiding principles throughout the text to make everything clear and accessible to readers:

- ✓ I use *italics* when I define a term. I also use italics for all book, movie, and TV show titles.
- ✓ I use **bold** to emphasize keywords or statements in bulleted lists. I also use bold for specific steps you take in numbered lists.
- ✓ I format all Internet addresses in `monoFont`.

- ✓ All song names, short story titles, and poem titles appear in quotation marks.
- ✓ Although I wish it were otherwise, I'm a realist. I know that most budding memoir writers haven't read enough memoirs for me to exclusively use memoir examples throughout the book. Referring to texts you've never encountered isn't helpful, so I bring in lots of popular movie, novel, and TV examples to illustrate key points.

What Not to Read

More than anyone, I understand how crazy busy life can be. You're juggling half dozen things at once and trying to keep your head above the fray. You want to write a memoir, but you don't have tons of time. Although I would love for you to (at least at some time or other) read every word, I do offer some things you can skip if you just need the essential, need-to-know information:

- ✓ **Sidebar:** These gray-shaded boxes are supplemental tidbits of information, but you don't have to read them.
- ✓ **Paragraphs marked with Technical Stuff icon:** These paragraphs have more technical bits of information that you may find interesting, but you don't need to write your memoir.

Foolish Assumptions

All writers know that you stand the best chance of hitting the mark with your audience if at some point in the writing process you stop and really think about who your audience is. I spent a good while thinking about you. Here is what I assume about you, the reader:

- ✓ You want to write or have started writing a full-length (book-length) memoir.
- ✓ You want to publish that memoir in one manner or another.
- ✓ You realize that you can use many different blueprints for telling a great story.
- ✓ You want this book to focus more on effective story-telling than grammar concerns.
- ✓ You want expert, tried-and-true guidance on writing memoirs.
- ✓ You want to only have to buy a single book that gives you all the need to know on writing and publishing memoirs.

If you've already put time into developing your ability to write on your own or in formal classes, no problem. Some of this book will serve as a useful refresher. Regardless of your current level of writing ability, I hope to reveal a few new insights along the way. The tips and techniques here can help you with writing memoir, but they also can help you if you decide to one day move on to writing screenplays, poems, short stories, or self-help books. Good writing is good writing.

How This Book Is Organized

This section describes what's in each of the five main parts of the book so you can more quickly locate what you need. Leap right in at whatever spot you like or start at the beginning. It's all up to you!

Part I: The First Steps to Writing a Memoir

Although you may think this part is mostly about what to do after you have pen in hand (or a Word file open), here I focus on what to do *before* that step. Chapter 1 gives a basic overview on writing memoirs. Chapter 2 furthers that by exploring what a memoir is, who writes them, and why. In Chapter 3, I show how stories work, and how to use that information to help create audience-pleasing stories in your own memoir. Chapter 4 deals directly with two key elements of any memoir — researching and remembering. Chapter 5 puts all that together and helps you develop your ideas just like experienced authors do. In short, this part gives you all the preparatory work to do before you start the actual writing.

Part II: Telling Your Story with Pizzazz

Now you're knee-deep (or for some, neck-deep) into the writing portion of your memoir. To write a memoir that's going to be well-received — no matter the size or scope of your publishing plan — you need to control several main aspects of effective story-telling. Chapter 6 covers all you need to know about structuring your story, including showcasing how other memoirists have structured their books. Chapter 7 focuses on how to create vivid settings and scenes. In Chapter 8, I go over the ins and outs of creating compelling characters. Because you can't have characters without dialogue, I give you Chapter 9 to reveal how best to handle all that talking. Chapter 10 has a different look at talking — it's all about the writing voice you have or wish to create. Chapter 11 discusses your point of view options as well as the pros of and cons of each choice. Finally, Chapter 12 tackles how to start your memoir strong and finish it even stronger. Taken together, these chapters give you step-by-step advice on how to utilize these core skills to great effect. After you finish this part, you have what you need to write that complete first draft.

Part III: Revising, Editing, and Pushing Your Story to the Next Level

After you have a first draft, it's time to go back and smooth out the bumps, correct the gaffes, and polish up all the shiny parts. These chapters help isolate many of the issues that memoir writers don't get right the first time. Chapter 13 covers the main ways you can fine-tune your memoir's structure and story for maximum effect. Chapter 14 examines how writers create theme and meaning, and shows you ways to make the most of those in your memoir. Chapter 15 is all about revision — the large-scale choices you make when working with an already-written section, chapter, or manuscript. If you want help at the sentence level, Chapter 16 is for you. This chapter also explains how to bring in and work with a professional editor, if you need that extra help. Chapter 17 explains how to know what and what not to write in your memoir. This covers how to handle painful memories, how to deal with family (living or dead), and how to circumvent any ethical or legal issues that may cause you grief once your book is published.

Part IV: Sharing Your Story: A Publishing Primer

This part covers all the basics of finding the best mode of publication for your manuscript. From finding and working with a literary agent (Chapter 18) to sending out a manuscript on your own (Chapter 19) to self-publishing to e-publishing (Chapter 20), these chapters give clear, up-to-date advice on all your main options. With a little planning and a lot of legwork, you can discover exactly how to proceed toward the best publication method for your memoir. And if you want useful, actionable ideas on how to promote your finished product to prospective readers, Chapter 21 is for you. You can also check out my website (www.ryangvancleave.com/bonuschapter.pdf) for a bonus chapter on joining a writers' group to improve your writing before you submit your manuscript.

Part V: The Part of Tens

This section follows the *Dummies*-wide practice with quick resources, checklists, and reminders (all in sets of 10, of course!). This part does that, detailing the most common myths about memoirs (Chapter 22), the main reasons memoirs are rejected by literary agents and publishers (Chapter 23), and the most useful advice on writing your first book (Chapter 24). Don't be fooled by the size of this part — these chapters may be short, but they're chock-full of good information every memoir writer can put to good use. You can also find a bonus Part of Tens chapter online at www.dummies.com/extras/writersconference about ten perks of attending a writers' conference.

Icons Used in this Book

To make this book easier for readers to read and understand, I include icons in the margins to help you find and make sense of key ideas and information.



These are the hints, guides, and suggestions that pro writers know. They represent some of the best available advice. They're worth reading twice when you encounter them.



If you've ever clipped something from a book or magazine and taped it on your wall to revisit regularly, then you know what type of stuff you'll find after this icon. It's the bumper-sticker good material memoir writers need.



If you want to immerse yourself in all the historical and technical things about writing memoir, look for these icons. They can offer up some of the pretty cerebral things that can impress your writer friends at parties.



This icon gives you a heads-up on specific memoir-writing problems that you may encounter. Pay attention to avoid these hazards that other writers may succumb to.

Where to Go from Here

A great thing about any *For Dummies* book is that they're modular, meaning each chapter works well on its own. You can read any chapter at any time and not worry that you'll be lost because you skipped earlier chapters. If you're at all like me, then you may be inclined to skip to the parts that speak to what you're most interested in.

If you want information on story structure, focus on Chapters 3 and 6. If you're completely new to the business of writing — memoir, poems, essays, or otherwise — you may want to begin with Chapter 1 and work your way straight through at your own pace. You can also flip to the table of contents or index and find a topic that interests you.

Whatever the situation, you're here and there's a wealth of information on the pages to follow. Onward!

Part I

The First Steps to Writing a Memoir

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"I want to become a memoirist. I'm just not sure I have that much prose in me."

In this part . . .

Although you're excited to plunge into the actual writing of your memoir, you need to do some preparatory reading, thinking, and writing before going any further. In this part, I explain the basic characteristics of a memoir, consider the reasons for writing a memoir, discuss the best ways to gather and shape material, and outline the basic structures available to create an effective story. I also delve deeply into a host of inspiration-building writing prompts and techniques to help you think of yourself as a writer as well as get you prepared to succeed with creating your own memoir.

Chapter 1

The Lowdown on Memoir Writing: Just the Basics

In This Chapter

- ▶ Recognizing the characteristics of a memoir
 - ▶ Identifying the elements of a memoir
 - ▶ Revising and editing your memoir
 - ▶ Getting your memoir published
 - ▶ Knowing why you want to write a memoir
-

For a long time, writing a memoir was the province of celebrities and people living in retirement homes. Thanks to an explosion of exciting memoirs written by people of all ages, the memoir as a form is now a viable way for anyone to meaningfully share their story. There's something incredibly rewarding to finding the leisure time to think, remember, reflect, and then write about your past. In doing so, you can discover the emotional truths that create the undercurrent of your life.



The Bowker Industry Report shows that memoirs generated \$170 million in sales in 1999, and nearly \$300 million a decade later. That's a lot more than just chump change! There's a growing audience for memoirs and that's good news for you.

This chapter serves as your stepping stone to everything you need to know about writing your memoir. Find the information you need here, depending on where you are in the writing process, to get your story down.

Although I've been a teacher of writing for nearly 20 years, I'm not coming to you as a teacher now. I'm simply someone who's been down this path before and who's willing to share the wisdom I've gained and gathered throughout the years. There are no grades, no deadlines, and no penalties for mistakes. What matters is that you commit to reaching across the chasm of memory and start retrieving the deep past, then recording it faithfully and vibrantly on the page. Memory by memory, moment by moment, you'll see a story take shape and grow into something that is a lesson in compassion, understanding, and humanity. That's memoir.

Understanding What Makes a Memoir a Memoir

The short answer for what makes a memoir a memoir is that like a novel, it tells a story, but unlike a novel, a memoir is 100 percent truthful. But that's an insufficient definition. A memoir also has other obligations that make it unique and distinct from other literary utterances. Understanding those differences is to understand the memoir's strengths. To know those is to know what areas you should play up when writing your own.



In order to be considered a memoir, your book needs to be in-line with the following:

- ✓ **Be book length.** Generally, a memoir is between 60,000 and 120,000 words.
- ✓ **Limit what's included:** A memoir is focused on parts or elements of a life, whereas an autobiography strives to include everything about a life, from birth to death.
- ✓ **Be truthful.** You can't play loose and free with the truth and still be called a memoir.
- ✓ **Use the elements of narrative.** Fiction writers know how to tell a story and make it interesting. See the next section for more on this.
- ✓ **Show desire.** A story gets interesting when the main character wants something — desperately so. Be specific and clear about what your main character wants, and readers will care.
- ✓ **Have conflict.** If a character can just get what he or she wants, who cares? That's not drama, that's grocery shopping. It's when a character *can't* get what he or she desires that things get interesting. Tell that story and you have the makings of a strong memoir.

Check out Chapter 2 for more information about the concepts of a memoir in far greater details.

Naming the Essential Parts of a Memoir

Like any good work of art, numerous parts comprise a memoir. Getting the best end product comes from knowing and having control over all of those smaller elements. Most of what a memoirist needs are skills borrowed from the world of fiction writing, though those skills are used somewhat differently in the world of nonfiction in general, and memoir in specific. For instance, you can't generate more conflict to heighten reader interest in a chapter if the scene you're writing simply didn't have that level of conflict. You can't reinvent the past to make a better story. With fiction, you can (and should).

Some of the main elements that make up a memoir include

- ✓ **Structure:** This is the shape of your story on the page. You may assume that the *structure* of your story has to be chronological, from beginning to end, but you have many more options than that. See Chapter 6 for the skinny.
- ✓ **Setting:** *Setting* is the where and when that a story takes place. A memoir may have two, three, or even as many as 23 different settings if you traveled or moved around a lot. Setting matters because it has a direct influence on character. See Chapter 7 for details on how to create and utilize setting to best effect.
- ✓ **Characters:** *Characters* are the people who populate the scenes and settings of your story. Yes, they're real-life people, but memoirists still call them characters, as novelists do. For more on why as well as how to make them come alive on the page, visit Chapter 8.
- ✓ **Dialogue:** The conversations that your characters have are called *dialogue*. This is a particularly tricky thing to use in memoir because memory is imperfect. Who walks around recording all conversations so you can accurately quote people later? You can discover more about the challenges and strengths of dialogue use in memoirs in Chapter 9.
- ✓ **Voice:** *Voice* is the unique manner in which a writer writes. It comprises distinctive decisions, such as word choice, rhythm, and the way a writer says things — taken together, voice creates a powerful effect on the reader. Interested in knowing more? Chapter 10 covers voice in depth.
- ✓ **Point of view:** The perspective through which the story is seen is called *point of view*. This is an important choice because it can drastically change how your story is conveyed. Read more about point of view in Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Theme:** *Theme* is what your memoir is about. It speaks to universal truths, core ideas, and emotional truths through the development of key scenes, moments, and tensions in your story. See more about theme in Chapter 14.

Making the Necessary Revisions and Edits to Help Your Memoir Shine

A great memoir doesn't appear by magic, but rather it's the result of good revision (to get the big stuff under control) and careful editing (to get the little stuff under control). How often in life do you wish you had a Do Over button? With writing, you do. You get a second, a third, or tenth chance if you require it, which is good news because you can improve the mistakes and poor decisions that you made earlier in the writing process.



After you have a rough draft of either your entire manuscript or even just a chapter, you can begin the revision process. Revision is important because it asks you to focus on large story elements without worrying much about specific word choices or sentence-level issues. While revising, you certainly look over all of the essential parts of a memoir (which I discuss in the previous section) to make sure each is functioning well on its own as well as connecting meaningfully to the entire book. You have another obligation, though. You need to think like a reader, not the writer. You handle revision first because you may revise and remove an entire chapter or scene from a book. You don't need to spend the extra time polishing those sentences that won't appear in the first edition. Stay efficient revising first and then editing after. Refer to Chapter 15 for more on making revisions.

Meanwhile there is also a time to edit, which is before you finish and start thinking of publication. Editing asks you to re-examine every word choice, reevaluate sentence structure, and think about how you're using paragraphs. Editing is a sentence-by-sentence level of attention that can feel tedious, but it's often the difference between a promising book that gets published or not. Some of the things that occur at this level of editing are adding or improving imagery, cutting clichés, removing most adverbs and adjectives, and tightening language across the board. Refer to Chapter 16 for more on line-by-line editing.

Focusing on the End Goal: Publishing

When I was in high school, an English teacher who recognized that I devoured F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (Scribner), William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (Modern Library), and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (Penguin Classics), gave me a copy of Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* (Scribner). I was blown away by it as fully as I'd ever been by any work of fiction. This book had grace, excitement, lovely language, melancholy, and a nearly-perfect sense of the extraordinary place Paris was in the 1920s. And most impressive to me? It was all true.

From that point on, I recognized that part of my goal of being a writer wasn't just to write a great memoir one day, but to have people read it and hopefully be swept up by that same kind of reaction I had to Hemingway. (A tall order, I realize, but it's okay to dream big!) I wanted others to experience the same visceral sense of wonder and awe that I did about the past with Hemingway's book. And the way to do that is through publishing your book. It's your avenue to finding readers and inviting them into the magic of a story only you can share. These prospective readers won't be sneaking into your house at night, rummaging in your file drawers or peeking into your computer files in pursuit of great literature. You have to send it to them, and the best way to do so is publishing.

Attending a writers' conference

If you want some community with people who will understand your impulse to tell stories, consider attending a writers' conference. There are hundreds of these throughout the country to choose from. Some specialize in the type of books they talk about, and others are more general. Here are just ten of the many writers' conferences that might suit the needs of a memoir writer. Research each online for more information.

- ✓ Writers in Paradise (St. Petersburg, Florida)
- ✓ Antioch Writers' Workshop (Yellow Springs, Ohio)
- ✓ San Miguel de Allende Writers' Conference & Literary Festival (San Miguel de Allende, Mexico)
- ✓ Orange County Christian Writers Conference (Fullerton, California)
- ✓ Wesleyan Writers Conference (Middletown, Connecticut)
- ✓ Stonecoast Writers' Conference (Portland, Maine)
- ✓ Taos Summer Writers' Conference (Taos, New Mexico)
- ✓ Green Mountain Writers Conference (Tinmouth, Vermont)
- ✓ ArtsQuest Memoir Writing Conference (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania)
- ✓ Story Circle Network's Annual Women's Memoir Conference (Austin, Texas)

Check out the website for the National Association of Memoir Writers (www.namw.org). Their "Writing Resources" link shows many online and real-world workshops and events all around the country.

Even if you decide your target audience is small — your family, or the people of your hometown — the idea of making something publishable quality is important. It means that it's the best that you can make it. It means you're understandably and honestly proud of it. It means that the writing you've labored over is likely to be engaging, memorable, and lasting for those special readers. And if you want to reach millions like Stephen King did with his memoir *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (Scribner), publishing a well-written, publishable-quality book is your only way to approaching that size of an audience.



Before you seek a publisher, you may want to seek advice and feedback from your peers or even a literary agent to ensure what you have is the best that it can be. A writing critique group can be a great help in terms of getting advice on the quality of writing or receiving revision ideas (see www.ryangvancleave.com/bonuschapter.pdf for a bonus chapter on writing groups). One step further, a literary agent can take this manuscript and showcase it to publishing houses that have the infrastructure in place to print your book and distribute it to online and real-world bookstores throughout the world. Chapter 18 provides more insight about what an agent can do for you.

You have a few publishing options when you're ready to publish your book:

- ✓ **Traditional publishing:** For the last century or so, this is the main route that authors had to seek print book publication. You write the book, send a letter of inquiry (a query letter) to a publisher, and then hope for a positive response. If the publisher likes your letter, it asks for the manuscript. If the publisher likes the manuscript, it sends you a contract, and two years later (give or take), the memoir appears in bookstores. For more information on this time-honored option, Chapter 19 awaits.
- ✓ **Self-publishing:** If you're interested in writing, printing, and selling your own memoir, then *self-publishing* is a fine choice. With 211,000 self-published books appearing in 2011 alone, other authors have clearly liked this choice a great deal. If self-publishing interests you as well, see Chapter 20.
- ✓ **E-publishing:** This is a subcategory of self-publishing that's emerged as a viable outlet for books in the past few years. An e-book isn't a print book, but with so many people having e-readers or e-reader capabilities on their computers, getting published in an e-book format is no longer a disincentive for an author. Chapter 20 has what you need to know about this new publishing option.

No matter what publishing method you decide on, you want to promote your finished work. If you don't promote your memoir (for example, with a website for your book, or with social media to alert people that your book is available to purchase), then people won't know about it and won't buy it. In today's publishing world, publishers do very little marketing and publicity for a book unless you're getting a huge amount of money from them upfront; this reality shifts the responsibility for book marketing and publicity duties to your shoulder. Chapter 21 offers some great suggestions for promoting your book, whether you do it on your own or hire a professional to help out with some or all of it. With more than 4,000,000 new books (or new editions of existing books) published in 2011, you need to find ways to get the attention of readers.

Answering the Question: Why Do You Want to Write a Memoir?

People ask me all the time about why I ever chose to write a memoir. "Why put yourself through that? Why put your family through that?" They ask — sometimes by dancing around the topic, and sometimes saying it outright — why I'm interested in sharing pain and experiencing the potential shame of revealing secrets, mistakes, and transgressions?

If you're serious about being a memoirist, be prepared to answer these questions. You need to be able to answer them yourself, in your own words, in a way that makes sense to you. Don't duck the hard questions. Think them

through and come to a sense of peace with your reasons, no matter what they are.



Here's something else you'll encounter beyond those questions — even if you obscure the names of real-world people who appear in your book, your friends and family will make great effort to figure out who is who. Whether people guess at which character is them or if you use their names and exact likenesses, they will (a) feel proud to have been immortalized in print, (b) nitpick all the things about themselves that you got “wrong,” (c) feel a little exploited/ violated, or (d) have some other reaction that's impossible to predict.

Here are some of the most popular and self-justifying reasons to write a memoir. See if you identify with any of them. You want to

- ✓ Find some kind of meaning and order to the often-chaotic swirl of existence
- ✓ Discover who you really are by confronting the truth(s) of your life
- ✓ Be the star of the show versus remain someone who stands behind a curtain offstage, or worse, stays in the audience (or even worse, never arrives to the show at all)
- ✓ (Re)witness the most important stages of your life
- ✓ Overcome fear, guilt, shame, and regret
- ✓ Preserve your family's history
- ✓ Improve your ability to communicate with others
- ✓ Build self-esteem through valuing yourself and listening to your own voice
- ✓ Figure out who you are
- ✓ Become a better thinker because good writing isn't from the seat-of-your-pants; it's from reflecting, making connections, and creatively engaging with your material
- ✓ Learn how to forgive yourself
- ✓ Create a deep empathetic connection with readers who will learn and be inspired from your life
- ✓ Confess something — confession is, as they say, good for the soul
- ✓ Defy the aphorism “it's all been said before,” because you haven't said it

To deny the validity of memoir is to deny that the past powerfully affects the present. Whether your past is full of darkness, bright with joy, or a chiar-oscuro containing both, examining that and bringing the chaos of disarray (which memories generally are) into order can change lives for the better. I've seen it happen many, many times. Through the writing of a memoir, you can take full possession of your life — possibly for the first time. You don't have to be famous. You don't even have to be a professional writer. You just have to be honest, faithful to the past, and generous in the telling. That's memoir.

Celebrity doesn't sell memoirs

You don't have to be a famous person to write a memoir. Still, your memoir will probably sell more copies if you won *Dancing with the Stars* or if your face has graced a box of Wheaties. But simply having celebrity is no guarantee that your memoir will sell and be successful. See this for yourself from this list of celebrity memoir stinkers:

- ✓ *Jersey Shore* star Snooki's memoir only sold 4,000 copies during its first week. (She had more than a million Twitter followers at the time, and the premiere episode of season three of *Jersey Shore* drew almost 8.5 million viewers.)
- ✓ Wikileaks founder Julian Assange's unauthorized biography barely sold 600 copies in its first week. He received a \$1.5 million advance in 2011 for this title.
- ✓ Actor Alec Baldwin's *A Promise to Ourselves: A Journey through Fatherhood* (St. Martin's Griffin) is reported to have sold only 13,000 hardcover copies in four years.

Although having a famous person's name attached to a book can guarantee a few sales, a bad book is a bad book, period. After people figure that out, the sales will scream to a stop.

A well-written, honest, interesting memoir, however, can actually make you a celebrity. Amy Chua, the author of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (Penguin Press), received a ton of media attention over how she humorously portrayed the "superiority" of super-strict Chinese mothers. That attention turned into huge sales for the book and made Chua a prominent media figure.

Chapter 2

Getting Started: What You Need to Know about Writing Your Memoir

In This Chapter

- ▶ Recognizing why people write memoirs
 - ▶ Allowing yourself to write
 - ▶ Ignoring fame and fortune
 - ▶ Exploring the vaults of memory
 - ▶ Considering the role of reading
-

Writing a memoir is a noble endeavor that involves the author in ways that poetry, fiction, and other types of nonfiction simply don't. With a memoir, you, the author, are front and center with the spotlight burning down from above, and the world is watching — waiting and expectant.

Question: What type of person volunteers to put him or herself under that kind of scrutiny?

Answer: Writers who want to create, discover, witness, preserve, and uncover something real and honest about themselves and their past.

What makes memoirs even more alluring is that people like to read real-life stories. Memoir isn't just based on true events; it *is* true events. And thus, readers feel more is at stake.

This chapter identifies the main reasons why people yearn to write memoirs. It also covers some of the main challenges as well as the rewards memoir writers may encounter. The final part of this chapter examines the role that reading plays in any writer's development.

Figuring Out Why Anyone Would Want to Write a Memoir

Before you set pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard), though, I want to explain why people write memoirs. They obviously write memoirs for various reasons. Knowing why you're writing one can help determine your intended outcome. If you don't have a clear target, you can't expect to hit the bull's-eye. Read on to see which one(s) resonate with you most clearly.

You're an authority in your field (or you aspire to be one)

Say that you've been involved with helping senior citizens re-enter the workforce so they can have a higher standard of living, keep active and healthy, and be financially able to get better insurance than the government offers. To help the most people, you need to reach a lot of people, right? Writing a memoir that details your life and how you came to commit yourself to helping this particular demographic of citizens can do exactly that. In this hypothetical memoir, you'd probably detail a few of the most compelling stories you had about helping someone find a life-changing job at age 60 (or 70, or 80). Anyone reading the book may well take away a few how-to tips from those case studies alone, which is a good thing.

A possible outcome for a memoir like this is media coverage. A well-written memoir on any topic can net the author radio and TV interviews, magazine stories, blog write-ups, and word-of-mouth. A good memoir can help raise awareness of what you do in a very big way.

You could then follow up your memoir with a good self-help or how-to nonfiction book, and you're even closer to cornering the market on your topic.

Here are a few other success stories where a published memoir helped establish someone as an authority on his or her topic:

- ✓ **Elie Wiesel's *Night* (Hill and Wang):** It's considered one of the bedrocks of Holocaust literature.
- ✓ **David Pelzer's *A Child Called "It": One Child's Courage to Survive* (HCD):** This 1995 memoir of childhood abuse led him to write other books and become a highly-paid motivational speaker.
- ✓ **David Mura's *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei* (Atlantic Monthly Press) and *Where the Body Meets Memory: An Odyssey of Race, Sexuality & Identity* (Anchor):** Mura, a third-generation

Japanese-American, gives educational presentations at schools, businesses, and organizations. His events combine poetry, presentation, and personal testament that tackle some of the most powerful cultural issues faced today.

You have a powerful, unique story to share

Another reason authors seek to write a memoir is to share their incredible story. Say for instance, you cured whooping cough. You took a snowboard journey across the Arctic. You won 35 blueberry pie eating contests in the past two years, and you still fit into a size zero miniskirt. You developed a blackjack strategy that helped you take Las Vegas casinos for \$35 million. You swam from Hawaii to Australia . . . and you're blind!

If you did any of these things — or something equally amazing — you *should* write a memoir so other people learn about it. Your barber knows, as does the fellow in the cubicle next to you at work, and maybe the kid who delivers your newspaper does too, but the rest of the world doesn't. The rest of the world salivates for amazing real-life stories like yours. It makes everyone feel warm and squishy inside when they see the heights the human spirit can achieve.

Here are a few examples of this type of memoir:

- ✔ **Isobella Jade's *Almost 5'4* (Gamine Press):** This book details her struggles with being one of the smallest models in the business. Even more amazing was that she wrote it at the Apple Store on Prince Street in Soho, because she was homeless and living on McDonald's dollar menu items.
- ✔ **Ernesto Che Guevara's *The Motorcycle Diaries: Notes on a Latin American Journey* (Ocean Press):** This book, which has been a *New York Times* bestseller multiple times, details Che's travels across South America with his biochemist friend. Together, they witnessed so much social injustice that Guevara became an iconic revolutionary for the rest of his life.
- ✔ **Julie Metz's *Perfection: A Memoir of Betrayal and Renewal* (Voice):** Seven months after her husband dropped dead, she found out that he'd been cheating. So this brutally honest memoir recounts how Metz does what every cheated-on person dreams of — she hunted down and confronted every single woman. (Although the situation of being cheated on isn't that unique, how she handled it indeed was.)

Legitimized my story: My own authority-figure experience

A few weeks after my own memoir (*Unplugged*) came out, I was invited out of the blue to do a three-hour interview with George Noory on *Coast to Coast*, a radio program that averages three million listeners. After the interview, the Amazon sales ranking for my book jumped from more than one million to well under 1,000 and stayed there for quite some time. And from that single interview, I got three invitations to do other radio interviews and dozens of requests for advice on my topic from regular people. Because of that single book, I have more speaking event opportunities than I can possibly do, and I've been on shows like *Dr. Drew, Issues* with Jane Velez-Mitchell, and *ABC News*. I've

even had an Associated Press story on me that ran in more than 100 newspapers and appeared in 15+ countries. In essence, writing this one book made me an authority on my topic — video games and video game addiction — overnight.

If I didn't have a book published on this subject, I wouldn't have been featured in all those media outlets. I didn't get any more knowledgeable on my subject by virtue of writing or publishing a book — I knew the same stuff before. But the book validated it in a public way that people understand and respect. A memoir can make you seem more legitimate in their eyes.

You want to understand/know yourself better

Self-knowledge is a great goal, and more people seek this goal as they mature. Writing a memoir is the careful observation of your inner world. Stick it out through the entire process, and you'll have a much stronger handle on who you are, what you're about, what you believe in, and why you're the person you are today.



A real benefit of this reason for writing a memoir is that publication for the masses isn't a huge motivation. You may even choose to keep the final book-length product in the family, or amongst a select group of friends, which is no problem. Make sure you do read the chapters on publication, just in case. Told well, any memoir has value to others.

You want to document your life

If you're like most people, around age 50 you start to realize how much you didn't know about your parents, and their parents, and *their* parents, all of whom are likely no longer with you. You've lost access to a rich, meaningful past that is part of your family's legacy. You don't have to be a genius to realize that your own kids or other family members might one day feel the same way.



You can use the writing of a memoir as an opportunity to document yourself and your experiences. Keep your story — your family's story — immune to the ravages of time. Plus you just might build family unity, create memories, and establish traditions for generations to come along the way.



Families with rich oral histories can benefit from this type of reason for writing a memoir. For that type of book, a lot of Q&A may be effective because it'll capture the tempo and tenor of people's speech. It'll place the stories in a strong social context that you won't have to develop as much in exposition.

You want to set the record straight

People write this type of memoir to clarify the truth of an event or series of events. For most people, this reason isn't the main one for writing a memoir unless they were thrown out of office, accused of a sordid sex scandal, or falsely imprisoned for 11 years for a hate crime.

Although you can try to get your record-setting story out via newspapers, radio, TV, and the Internet, none of those options has the respect and lasting power of a well-published, well-written book. In fact, publishing a book that details the true account of how you *didn't* do something will likely earn you plenty of media coverage, but the reverse isn't always true. Plenty of people get a radio interview or two-minutes on a TV show to tell their side of a story, and that doesn't lead to a book deal. So just write the book in the first place and utilize the publicity techniques in Chapter 21 to know with confidence that you're taking the best option to revise the incorrect "truth" most people believe.

Some memoirists aren't trying to show that the events are untrue, but rather set the record straight by offering the full context that created the events. Some readers and critics may see this as the author trying to absolve himself or herself of guilt or culpability, which is okay. Giving people a fuller appreciation for something that happened is a fine motive for writing a memoir.

A few examples of this type of book include

- ✓ **Jose Baez and Peter Golenbock's *Presumed Guilty: Casey Anthony, The Inside Story* (BenBella Books):** Here, Anthony's lawyer says Florida detectives should've realized Casey Anthony "wasn't playing with a full deck."
- ✓ **Courtney Love's untitled forthcoming memoir:** In this tell-all, Love gives the real scoop on her life with Kurt Cobain, his suicide in 1994, her own drug problems, and her Hollywood career. Her goal is to get past all the tabloid falsehoods and literally "set the record straight," as she explained to the Associated Press.