FAST-DRAFT YOUR WAY TO A COMPLETE MEMOIR

Rachael Herron
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- 23 books (mainstream lit, feminist romance, memoir, and nonfiction), hybrid.
- Bestselling! Still kinda broke. This isn’t a get rich quick scheme!
- Instructor at Stanford and Berkeley in the creative writing depts.
A Life in Stitches
Knitting My Way Through Love, Loss, and Laughter

20 Stories by RACHAEL HERRON
FAST-DRAFT YOUR MEMOIR
WRITE YOUR LIFE STORY IN 45 HOURS
FROM BESTSELLING MEMOIRIST
Rachael Herron
Remember!

- I am completely right about all of this!
- Unless I am wrong, and what I say doesn’t work for you.
- Don’t trust anyone who says the first sentence without adding the second.
What is memoir, anyway?
Your memoir will only cover a few select years or a few select issues.

Today, we think about those “few.”
Types of Memoirs

- Celebrity, athletic, political or public figure
- Travel
- Spiritual
- Food
- Grief
- Animal
- Farmsteading
- Mommy Dearest/Growing up dysfunctional
- Escape from religious extremism
- I’ll take you there (zeitgeist)
- I will survive memoirs/disaster
- Love and romance
- Family, friendship, and business relationships
- Workplace or career/business
- Exploration or adventure
- Illness
- Addiction/recovery memoirs
- Humor
- Call to action
Six pivotal moments

What events have made you YOU?

1. Learned to read, and from that, that there was someone behind the words
2. Decided to go to grad school for writing, not knowing if it was a good idea or not
3. Decided to go into a profession that was uncreative in order to keep writing
5. Got married (learned about love)
6. Grieved (learned about loss)
6 Word Memoir

• For sale, baby shoes, never worn.

• Fall down, get up. And repeat.

• Words strung together make a life.
Choose a theme/time frame!

You, as a character, have to have a character arc.

We see that character change through narrative arc. This is crucial.

You *have* to choose.
Character Arc

- Who has one?
- All heroes (and antiheroes)
- You’re the hero.
Why Tell Stories?

- We want to cause an EMOTIONAL REACTION.
- The 3-act structure has been around since the Greeks, almost unchanged in its form.
- Plays and oration were the only form of storytelling for thousands of years until the 15th century. Why?
The Structure of Stories
(narrative arc)

- They’re built this way for a reason.
Your Brain on Words

- Our brains believe the tale.
- Classical language areas of the brain involved in language processing: Broca’s Area and Wernicke’s area.
- But in 2012, a study found that words with strong odor associations (lavender, coffee) lit up olfactory cortex. (NeuroImage Journal)
- Words like velvet and leathery light up the sensory cortex.
- Words like kick or grab light up the motor cortex.
Keith Oatley (emeritus professor of cognitive psychology, U of Toronto) has proposed that reading produces a vivid simulation of reality, one that “runs on minds of readers just as computer simulations run on computers.”
Why we scream in movies
There are as many ways to structure books as there are writers writing about writing (A LOT!)

Common structures you may be familiar with:

- Hero’s Journey (Joseph Campbell)
- 3-act Structure (Aristotle)
- Save the Cat (Blake Snyder)
- 4-act Structure (Larry Brooks) ← MY FAVE
- Story Grid
The most important parts of my life are measured in tiny things: words and stitches. My life’s trajectory can be tracked by writing about the sweaters I’ve made.
6-Word Memoir
Six Pivotal Moments
Two sentences

LIFE OUTLINE (in chronological order)

A LONELY LIFE

1. I was born lonely
   a. My mother liked to tell me she didn’t see me for the first ten days of my life
   b. I was an only child raised in an old-age home
   c. I wasn’t good at sharing anything
2. I was lonely in grade school
   a. Kids never remembered what my name was
   b. Teachers didn’t notice when I wasn’t there
3. I chose a profession in which I could excel at being lonely
   a. Park ranger in national forest, wildfire lookout, why I wanted it
   b. First day on the job, fell out of basket
   c. Boss known to roar – the stories I heard.
4. KEEP THIS GOING to 8, 9, 10+
Why Not To Write a Memoir

- The Anger Memoir
- The I’m So Awesome Memoir
- The I’m So Sad Memoir
- The I Have a Terrible Memory Memoir
  - TRICK! This one is okay!
Shame

- The most universal emotion
- The strongest emotion
BRENE BROWN:

I believe that guilt is adaptive and helpful – it’s holding something we’ve done or failed to do up against our values and feeling psychological discomfort.

I define shame as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging – something we’ve experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection.
Shame

- The less we talk about it, the stronger it grows
- The more we talk about it, the weaker it becomes (and everyone leans in to really, really listen).
Getting it Done

- In 45 hours? Yes. This is doable.
- What kind of draft will this be?
- What if I have to edit as I go?
Tools I Use

- Freedom
- 45/15s
- Write or Die / Written Kitten
- Community: RWA, MWA, SFFWA, NaNoWriMo, Twitter
- Dictation
What Comes Next?

- How to publish your memoir.
  - Trad or Self?
  - Hire your own editor?
    - NYBookEditors.com
    - Reedsy.com
Available on all digital sales platforms (Amazon, Barnes & Noble, iBooks, etc.)

Also available in paperback and audiobook!

E-book - $5.99
Paperback - $11.99
Stay in Touch!

- RachaelHerron.com
- Writer’s weekly email: RachaelHerron.com/write
- Coaching: RachaelHerron.com/coach
- Twitter/Facebook

Retreats (West Coast in Sept, Venice in April)

Podcasts:
- How Do You Write?
- The Writer’s Well