

Finding Meaning through Memoir

The pause button has been pressed on life as we know it, and an enforced period of self-isolation finds us thrown back on the challenge of finding meaningful ways to fill an indefinite period of time. But while the privations are many, so too could be the opportunities. Our busy lives, full of insistent distractions and demands, can make self-reflection impossible, as we career helter skelter from one meeting, supermarket shop and school drop-off to the next. Might this stretch of time - that's lifted us from the predictable and deposited us into previously uncharted territory - provide the opportunity to embark on a piece of autobiographical writing? A memoir. The story of you and your life.

The process of casting back in time, revisiting memories, reviewing them with the benefit of hindsight, placing them in the context of the events that preceded and succeeded them could enable your life's narrative arc to become perceptible. Defined. The possibilities are endless. So why not put your phone on airplane mode and let your mind drift into *Remembrance of Things Past* mode. And since time is elastic but not finite, and the very idea of such a project daunting, how about some simple structural and stylistic tips to get you started?

And remember, lives don't have to be extraordinary - as defined by conventional metrics - and full of pinnacle achievements. Every life story matters, and every life story is unique.

See if some of the following basic suggestions inspire you and, then help get you started. Whatever the outcome of anything you do commit to paper, the only person who has to satisfy is you. Liberating, right?

- Start by assembling the visual cues that will prompt reminiscence and reflection, and scour cupboards, shelves and boxes in search of old polaroids, snapshots and - for the more organised - photo albums before moving on to your phone library. Next, cast an eye over your bookshelves - novels, poetry collections, works of non-fiction can all help benchmark certain times in our life (that novel you devoured lying in the back garden one summer). Turn then to CD, tape compilations (remember those?) and vinyl collec-

tions (stashed away under the stairs perhaps) and spend some time listening to those albums and songs that defined a significant era of your life, or recall the obsessive playing-on-a-loop that marked the end of your first significant relationship. The sad moments and low points all have their part to play in threading together the warp and weft of your story. The revisiting of times laden with grief and despair is just as important as the high points, as too is a recognition of the ordinary, humdrum rhythm of so much of our lives. And what of those less obvious reminders of key moments, like the airline ticket of your first trip abroad, a ticket stub from a gig or play, the bill from a special meal? Consider too those tactile memory stimulants, like the soft toy from your childhood, the sarong from a gap year. Oh, and food and smells too - both incredibly powerful memory triggers. Lastly, why not talk to those who've played significant roles in your life thus far? Potentially an invaluable resource for prompts to reminiscence, but also a lovely way to connection. This list of suggestions only scratches the surface, but the takeout is a simple one: cast your memory net wide.

- Some of us are assiduous planners, and find that an architectural structure around which to build a writing project gives confidence and a spur to creativity. Others enjoy a more free-style approach that favours flow and spontaneity: a see-where-the-process-takes-you attitude. You may sit unequivocally in one camp or the other, but if not, try experimenting with both approaches and see where an open mind takes you. Whatever your inclination and the parameters of your comfort zone - tightly circumscribed or boundless - this is probably a good point to ask yourself to what extent you'll want to adopt an approach that broadly favours well-established conventions of memoir writing, or eschews predictability in favour of an experimental, highly individualistic guiding spirit. It's all about finding a mode of writing that facilitates productivity, and accessing a voice that feels both authentic to you and - crucially - pleasurable to work with.
- Assuming the planning approach is one you feel most comfortable with, the next consideration relates to length (and if you think this should be influenced by your age, I'd suggest it's really not a given that where you currently sit on your narrative arc should determine how much you write) and structure. When it comes to the former, it might be best to err on the side of what feels realistic to aim for; being too ambitious could make the whole undertaking more overwhelming than pleasurable. Next comes the business of structure. One obvious route would that of a narrative with a beginning, a middle and an

end (i.e the present day) - not unlike a conventional novel, then. So opening with earliest memories and then segueing into the neat chronological organisation of key life chapters and milestone moments - primary school, secondary school, then maybe further education or an apprenticeship, before moving to a first job, and so on. You get the picture. As you go, consider the significance of key relationships and pivotal moments and decisions, both those that were happy and unhappy. It's (probably?) important to capture life's physical and emotional diversity; both the peaks and the troughs of experience. Even if you choose to work with a predictable structure, don't forget the many structural variants at your disposal; for example, could the soundtrack of your life prove an appealing organisational rationale, or what about the food preferences that mark out one period from another? Or are you one of those people who's benchmarked their progress though life by the setting - and achievement, or otherwise - of goals and ambitions? It's your prerogative to develop the memoir around organisational coat hangers that work for you.

- It's probably worth giving some thought to whether you want your prose style to be led by pragmatism - in the sense that it's primarily concerned with content, while the prose acts as a vehicle for that content - or whether prose style will also assume a central role - so a narrative that's equally concerned with creative word play - think similes, metaphor, imagery and the kind of writing that delights in the imaginative possibilities of prose - and investing the content with emotional resonance. Put another way, might be helpful to give some forethought to the likely sensibility of your memoir, and how the interaction between what it's about and how it's written will play out. Are you, for example, more concerned with producing a memoir that's about chronicling your life thus far for posterity, or with using it as medium for self-reflection, catharsis even?
- Do give some thought as to whether you envisage the project to be purely for your own pleasure (and enlightenment?), or whether you'd like to share it with an audience. This decision will have an appreciable effect on how you choose to direct certain aspects of your writing. So if it's a memoir that will be guided solely by a deeply personal desire to reflect, the following could probably apply - 'I remember how Mum always made me feel loved and secure'. Or if it's a piece of writing to share with others, perhaps 'I remember, Mum, how you always made me feel loved and secure'. Consider too how you'll balance the present and the past - whether you'll be a curious, fond or dispassionate observer of, say, your teenage self. Will you want to draw lessons from the past, and have hindsight

play a role, or simply lay down the 'facts'. And if you're looking to share your writing with other, perhaps think a little about whether you'll feel comfortable with a deeply personal or confessional form of expression.

Lastly, the best piece of advice I can offer?

Don't stress over the detail, but instead prioritise the drive to expression, whatever form it may take. Now is probably a good moment to park perfectionism, given that we're all stuck in make-do mode, so feel free to chuck any plan out of the window if it's not working and... don't be hard on yourself.

Right now, to reference Bing Cosby, it's all about accentuating the positive!