

## SOME THOUGHTS ON MEMOIR

by Virginia Lloyd

This issue we invited memoirist, Festival presenter, author and teacher Virginia Lloyd to contribute some words on the writing of memoir. Here she provides a personal and insightful piece on what cleared the way and provided clarity for her in the writing of her own memoir.

When I began writing the scraps and fragments that eventually became my 2008 memoir, *The Young Widow's Book of Home Improvement*, I had a lot of experience as a book editor and manuscript coach. My professional life had begun as an in-house editor at a major Australian publishing company. Independently I had mentored two memoirists from their earliest drafts through to final manuscripts, and sold both books to publishers. Giving editorial advice to writers was something I enjoyed doing regularly. But I soon discovered that editing someone else's memoir was a radically different activity from writing my own sentences from scratch.

My book began when I was struck by some parallels I noticed between my house and myself. As a pathological grief response to the death of my husband John when I was 34 years old, I undertook an extensive renovation of the home we shared in an effort to counteract the destructive effects of chronic rising damp in its sandstone foundations. As the house slowly dried from the inside out, as the ruined walls were rendered and painted, I observed a literal transformation that had a metaphorical parallel with my own struggle to make a new life for myself out of the profound loss I had suffered. Without that metaphor to guide my path—without the governing idea that helped give me a structure and a story—I don't think I could have imagined, let alone written, my book.

What's important for aspiring memoirists to know is that the final published book

is very different from the draft pages I wrote at the beginning of my journey. Early on in the writing process I gave 100 pages of my first draft to a publishing colleague. For the first time I knew what it felt like to be on the receiving end of well-intentioned editorial suggestions. To my great relief she encouraged me that there was the potential for a book in what I'd written, but I was stunned when she announced that I hadn't revealed much of myself on the page.

'It's interesting that you've decided on this title, because there's no young widow and no home improvement in the pages you've given me,' she said.

How was that possible? I was writing a memoir, wasn't I? I had written down everything I remembered about falling in love with John, and about our tumultuous journey along the one-way road that was his terminal disease. What could she possibly mean?

'You've written about your marriage and the trajectory of John's illness, but that's only part of your story. You've got to put yourself in the action, own your own story,' she said. 'In this draft, the reader doesn't know what you look like, what you do for a living, where you live, what you felt about any of it. What's the relevance of home improvement? Who is the young widow of the title?'

My hands felt clammy and my stomach churned. My friend was right: there was a chasm between the book I imagined I was writing, and the words I had written. There was an enormous distance between the raw material of memory, and a publishable book. In that moment I realised that putting myself in my own

story was the last thing I wanted to do, but the very thing I needed to do to make it worth reading. How could I make a stranger care about John and me, about our joys and struggles, if I was unwilling to share the sorts of details that brought to life the events I was trying to document? I had a powerful story to tell, and if I were choosing to write a memoir then there was no way around the fact that I would have to be in it.

A few days later I retrieved a sheet of butchers paper from the recycling bin and found some coloured pens (everyone works differently, but I find this technique helpful). On the paper I wrote down the most significant and dramatic moments that came to mind when I thought about the three distinct narratives within my story: the path of John's illness and our relationship (his loss of mobility three days before our wedding, and being told he had one year to live, for example); my fumbling efforts to rejoin the world (such as going back to work); and the gradual transformation of the house (from rising damp, to rendered walls, then fresh paint).

I still recall the shiver of delight I felt on that Sunday afternoon, curled up on the couch with my coloured pens and butchers paper, when I realised that I had just located the spine of my book amidst the fatty tissue of draft sentences that had obscured it. By paring the elements of my story to their bare essentials, I began to see connections and relationships among the pieces that I had not noticed before. Vivid scenes from my memory popped into my mind's eye to illustrate the chronological stories of my manuscript. Some were



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terribly sad, while others were amusing or frustrating. I jotted them down in a different coloured ink: these were the moments I would have to try recreating in words, to dramatise them so the reader felt part of my story. It felt like working on a jigsaw puzzle, where the overall shape became, if not completely clear, then a lot less cloudy.

The next day I couldn't wait to start tearing my manuscript apart. I unpicked my draft, paragraph by paragraph, and moved the material around according to my new 'skeleton' structure. There were gaping holes everywhere, but now I knew what needed to fit into them: the events which, when writing about them, brought me to laughter or to tears. There was so much work to be done, but what a difference it made to understand how the pieces needed to fit together. (I should note that even at this point I imagined the final version would have three sections of reasonably equal length. In the end the manuscript had six parts of varying sizes. The home-improvement story took up the least amount of words of my three parallel narratives, but it was important symbolically. And I wrote about three times as many words as made it into the final manuscript.)

All memoirs are about personal journeys, which often involve change and transformation. They are quite different from autobiographies, which endeavour to remember everything noteworthy that happened, in chronological order, during the author's lifetime. Memoirs are much more selective, focused on a particular period of time in a defined place, or a series of related experiences. The strongest memoirs arise from the fact that the writer undergoes some kind of change due to specific experiences, and he or she now has the necessary perspective, analytical distance, and emotional courage to write about them. There are so many types of memoirs. Read many so you can see how varied they are in tone and structure. It should go without saying that if you are not already reading memoirs then you should not be attempting to write one.

I encourage the memoirists I mentor to think about change and transformation in terms of movement. We move through life in a series of physical locations (houses, workplaces, cities, bedrooms, countries), and we also live through periods of change that inevitably change us (love, grief, travel, divorce, abuse, illness, immigration, addiction). Not all memoirs need to

track a profound transformation, but more often than not they do reflect the author's journey from one place to another—literally and metaphorically. Our journeys have motivations that reflect human needs, be they for love, control, safety, or escape.

In the story you are trying to write, what journey(s) do you take? Can you pinpoint the key steps or most dramatic moments along that path? If you had to identify five crucial events in your story to help a stranger understand its most basic elements, what would they be? By identifying the pivotal dramatic points of your memoir, you can better determine what material you need to include—and more importantly, exclude—to illustrate it. If you can describe the gist of your memoir in three sentences or less, you are well on your way to crafting the story that is unique to you in a way that might appeal to a total stranger. **W**

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