

Country Real Estate, #309: December 12, 2013

Stuff your memoir in a stocking

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I discovered late in life that everyone has a story that's worth telling, because every story has something worth knowing.

Every life has moments when something is done or not done—a decision to bail or stick; an act of kindness or ugliness; even an off-hand remark that bends the arc of your own history. Everyone has drama of this scale.

Most people I know, including myself, would not think themselves worthy of a memoir. Such writing is thought to be the province of celebrities who produce these books for reasons of hard vanity and easy income. Politicians write them to stroke themselves and zing their foes—to set the historical record straight, they say.

Ordinary people who've led ordinary lives and don't think they've done anything out of the ordinary usually believe they have nothing to say.

“Who would want to read about me? And anyway, I can't write.”

Everyone, every life, has something to pass along.

Memoirs are not autobiographies. They're not blow-by-blow accounts of a life in full narrative voice. Memoir is a snapshot; autobiography is the whole roll.

It's a snapshot of you taking a turn in your road. It's a turn that you believe your readers -- most of whom you'll never know -- will think was worth the time they spent reading it.

A private memoir, done for yourself or family, can be no more than a page or two. It can be a single conversation. Or a description of what happened. Or a moment that was important for reasons the writer and reader will understand. Memoir is catching the mood, the feeling, of something significant.

Memoirs are stories about people—what they experienced; what they did; why they did it; how they felt; what they believed; who they loved; what they valued; and how they adapted to opportunities, losses, unfairness and the times in which they lived.

I'm a democrat when it comes to memoirs. I think everyone should write something. It's your voice writing about your life in your own way. No substitute is better.

I'm also a democrat when it comes to writing. I think everyone can do it well enough. Memoir is a matter of getting the story down. It's not about pleasing a grammarian or getting accepted by a literary magazine.

Better writing is, of course, better reading. But the memoir of John Doe is about what he feels a need to say, and not about the quality of his prose.

Some memoirists are enthralled with their own writing. Their pirouettes get in the way of appreciating the ballet itself—see what I mean?

I like a simple tone in memoirs, something like what I'd hear at a kitchen table after the kids have gone to bed and the two of us, friends with a long history, are talking for our own record.

Dangers lurk in writing, of course. You can hurt yourself and the feelings of others by naming names and placing places. You can anticipate that someone you've mentioned will be upset no matter where you stand on the continuum that ranges from being scrupulously fair to outrageously unfair.

I think memoirs should be about truth as the writer sees it, but that's not necessarily as things happened exactly.

Memoirists know that the idea of truth changes with time. Recollection changes with distance. What you write depends on when you write it. I would report "the truth" differently today than 30 years ago. Probably, with a pen that leaves a more shallow line in the paper.

The late Carey Dowd, my father-in-law who was a physicist by training and inclination and a Baptist by parentage and choice, wrote a book about epistemology.

It's his memoir to his children about his long tussle with the questions of how do we know what we say we know, how do we know a fact and how do we know what is absolutely true.

His conclusions are based on an extensive study of 115 philosophers and systems of belief and analysis, ranging from Peter Abelard to Zeno of Citium.

Carey concluded: "...**we do not know** how we know what we know." He claims this conclusion is only his opinion, not a fact. "What we **can** do is discover that getting close [to The Truth] is good enough."

He found that setting upper and lower limits of acceptable variance produces a workable alternative to Absolute Truth.

This idea of plus-or-minus leeway is useful for memoir-writing. Get the truth down as best you can, without getting snarled in the knots of perfect accuracy. Some truth is in the details; but most of it is larger.

It's inevitable that every memoir blends levels of truthfulness. This blending is just another one of those eternal annoyances with which we have to make peace.

Truth in memoir can be negotiable. Carey might agree that it often turns out this way, but disagree that one should engage in it.

Occasions arise both in living and writing when being as true as you can to what happened or what you think is simply hurtful without compensating benefit. Absolute honesty is not always the best policy. I think all of us know this.

When a memoir is fair enough and true enough, it can be the last word. When it isn't, it's likely to be just the first word out there. Others will feel the need to chime in.

A reader needs to be aware of various renditions of the same event. Several women, for example, have written memoirs of affairs with President Kennedy during his White House years. Wouldn't his take be almost as interesting?

Who, then, is a memoir for?

Like all other writing, it is, first, for the writer. The urge to have your say is powerful. It goes beyond making money, which may or may not figure into what you're writing. The writer's motivation may be to better understand self or what happened. Or the writer may want to say something into time that has yet to come.

Second, it's for those the writer involves in the story.

Writing your version gives the reader a look into your mind and heart. It's a retrospective look, and one that's considered. Memoir is as much about others and for them as it is about you and for you.

This is tricky. It's easy to step on toes, even toes that you didn't know were tender, as well as those you didn't even know were there. You have to use judgment about what you write and how you express it.

Keep in mind Carey Dowd's gift to every memoirist who's scared about navigating The Truth: close enough is good enough. But close enough has to be careful and caring.

And finally, memoirs are for everyone, because they show that we're all in the same boat.

Everyone has had a success or two. But every thing tried does not work out perfectly for everybody every time. Everyone screws up more than once.

Marriages creak like mining timbers under strain. Money is either too much or not enough. Kids can drive you nuts. Big events -- wars, depressions, social and cultural changes -- slap everyone around.

All of this we share. We all start, stop and go between the two. That's why I like to read memoirs.

Writing is an odd way to connect with other people, both those you know and those you don't. The writer always throws the ball, and the reader hopes to catch it. The reader throws nothing back (except, maybe, a bad Amazon review). It's not the give and take of conversation.

Memoirists have no idea who may read their work, and readers only have words by which to know the writer.

Each reader has to determine how much the memoirist can be trusted on words alone. The usual clues we use to measure our trust in others -- tone of voice, body language, facial expressions, eye movement and sixth sense -- aren't available.

The writer has to build trust with sentences. I always assume that words on paper are clearer than words spoken, because you have to think before you write.

Thinking does not always precede speaking, at least in my experience.

We are alone with life in one sense and riding along with everyone else in another. Memoir works both.

In The Season when gifts are exchanged, you might want to consider adding to your give-list a bit of memoir about something that's important to you.

A memoir can be expensive in time and effort. But it's one present, at least, that will not add inches to the receiver's waist or go bad if it's not refrigerated after opening.

It's also possible that it may get better with age.