

Mark Waldman's

Six Figure Book Camp

Biographies and Memoirs Edited and Compiled by Mark Waldman

“From things that have happened and from things as they exist and from all things that you know and all those you cannot know, you make something through your invention that is not a representation but a whole new thing truer than anything true and alive, and you make it alive, and if you make it well enough, you give it immortality.”

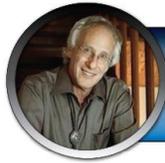
- Ernest Hemingway, *The Paris Review Interview Vol. 1. 1958*

Although a memoir or biography is a real-life story, from the standpoint of a publishing house they are considered a work of fiction. Memoirs and biographies also require book proposals, but they are treated differently than other nonfiction genres. They are also harder to sell because the writing must be superb and the story gripping, from beginning to end. In that sense, they are treated like novels, with a well constructed beginning, middle, and end. Agents and publishers will often want to see at least three chapters: the opening one, the closing one, and a middle sample chapter. But you also have to write a standard, but somewhat modified, book proposal.

You also have to ask yourself this question, a question the agent and editor will grill you on: *Why are you qualified to write this book?* For a memoir, you're qualified because it is *your* story, but you'll have to demonstrate why your story is better than the thousands of other memoirs that are out there and competing with yours. Thus, your story must be unique, offering a new perspective when compared to the competitive memoirs that have already been published.

Publishers also want memoirs and biographies to appeal to the largest group possible. For example, if you are a survivor of breast cancer, your book will appeal to every woman who has such a fear. If you address breast cancer survivors only, you've eliminated 90% of your market, but if you can tell a story that shows women how to avoid it, your female audience increases by 1000%. Include in your memoir vignettes about how family members are affected, you might be able to reach men whose spouses and girlfriends have been affected, doubling the size of your readership. These are key elements the agent or publisher will consider when reviewing your proposal and sample chapters.

One more note: because memoirs are so personal, you'll need to have an expert tell you if your story holds up.



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Proposals for Memoirs and Fiction

A memoir requires that you submit a standard book proposal, but with several modifications – the most important being the submission of a synopsis. Here's what Nathan Bransford has to say about this critical section of your proposal. Bransford is the author of several children's fantasy books, and he was formerly a literary agent with Curtis Brown Ltd. I recommend you visit his website which is filled with excellent information on writing and publishing books: <http://nathanbransford.com>. Here is what he says about synopsis writing (it's written with fiction in mind, but the same holds true for a memoir because it is an unfolding story with "characters" that include the author):

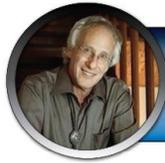
There's really no one way to write a synopsis....But here is the thing to know about synopses: A synopsis is not an opportunity to talk about every single character and every single plot point in a "and then this happened and then this happened" fashion. A synopsis needs to do two things: 1) it needs to cover all of the major characters and major plot points (including the ending) and 2) it needs to make the work come alive. If your synopsis reads like "and then this happened and then this happened" and it's confusing and dull, well, you might want to revise that baby.

A good place to start for a model on how to write a good synopsis is to mimic book cover copy, only also include in the synopsis what happens in the end. The blurbs on flap jackets and on the back of paperbacks are usually good synopses -- they're a hybrid of plot points but with a bigger sense of what makes the book unique and interesting (although discard the stuff in cover copy that talks about the author -- that doesn't go in a synopsis). You want to strike a balance in the synopsis between covering the plot and characters, but also conveying the spirit and tone of the book and smoothing over gaps between the major plot points you describe....

Introduce major characters and their relationships, and make sure you're conveying the core of the conflicts between all of these elements. But then, rather than just filling in with more and more plot and more and more characters, connect the dots between them with your own summarizing, in order to make the synopsis easy to read and compelling on its own....

How long should a synopsis be? Unless the agent specifies otherwise or you have found better synopsis-writing advice elsewhere (the odds of that are pretty good, frankly), I'd shoot for two to three pages, double-spaced. If it's longer or shorter than that I don't think anyone is going to be angry, but that should be enough to do what you need to do.

Surprisingly, I could not find good memoir synopsis examples online; most address fiction and suggest you build your memoir description in a similar manner. You'll find a



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variety of fiction synopses here: <http://www.writersdigest.com/editor-blogs/guide-to-literary-agents/synopsis-writing>. And here's what Jim Levine, of Levine/Greenberg Literary Agency has to say about the memoir, which is also called narrative nonfiction:

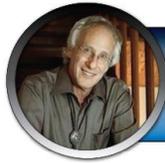
The media tells us that narrative non-fiction is the novel of these times, and we certainly have first-hand evidence of its new dominance. Our narrative-nonfiction authors write from the front-lines and the back offices, illuminating with candor and lyrical prose worlds heretofore hidden from view. New York Times bestselling *Miracle in the Andes* is the harrowing account of Nando Parrado's seventy-two day survival after the plane carrying his Uruguayan rugby team crashed in the Andes. Another survivor is This American Life contributor Cheryl Wagner, whose *Plenty Enough Suck to Go Around* is a dark but funny account of rebuilding her home in New Orleans. In *The Man Who Loved Books Too Much*, journalist Allison Bartlett brings us into the world of rare books, and into contact with collectors, thieves, and "bibliodicks."

Narrative nonfiction also includes different styles of literary journalism and what is known as the lyric essay. As you can judge by the titles mentioned above, agents and publishers are looking for memoirs with unusual twists and taut riveting stories on subjects that have rarely been written about in the past. That's a tough bill to fill, but here are many excellent books to help you develop your memoir. Just type in "writing memoirs" as your search on Amazon.com.

Biographies

With biographies, the first question you should ask is this: "Why would the average reader want to know about this person, and what would be so fascinating about their life that others would want to peek inside?" The second question would be this: if the person is famous, what makes their story different from other famous people. Just because the rock star or criminal is notorious, doesn't mean that your biography will offer something different from the competition. For example, what made Capote's *In Cold Blood* so spectacular is the way he got the reader to climb into the mind of the murderer. So ask yourself this question: "What new strategy can you dream up to present your 'character' in a unique way?" That's why biographies are similar to fiction: it's not the person you're writing about but the way you write about that person.

As with memoirs, you'll again have to prove that you are qualified to write one. If you don't have previous publishing credits, start building them immediately, for if you look at the competition you'll discover that you're in the company of some of the most famous journalists in the world.



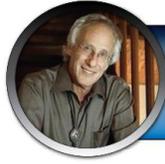
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Biographies also require excellent documentation for nearly every paragraph you write, so make sure that you have a comprehensive understanding of the law, especially clauses dealing with invasion of privacy. You'll also need to have permission from everyone you choose to include in your book, unless your information comes from previously published sources.

Here are some essential tips, but please note: the privacy laws are more stringent in some countries outside of the United States.

1. Do you have permission from the person? If not, please read this article by Lloyd Rich on the legalities of publishing an unauthorized biography: <http://www.publaw.com/article/publication-of-an-unauthorized-biography/>. Rich, who specializes in publishing laws states: "The general legal rule is that an author can write a biography without the subject's permission providing that the biography is accurate and does not invade the subject's right of privacy, misappropriate his/her right of publicity, infringe copyright protected material of the subject, engage in unfair competition or violate a breach of confidence with the subject."
2. If not, what qualifies you for writing this biography? What makes you an "expert," and how do you prove that you have done diligent research?
3. If you have not published before, how will you demonstrate your ability to write a biographical book?
4. If you have interviews with related people (family, business), do you have their written permission to publish them? Publishers now demand permission for even a couple of sentences of quoting, or evidence that the information came from a reliable source such as an Associated Press. Read this for general guidelines when conducting interviews: <http://managementhelp.org/businessresearch/interviews.htm>.
5. Are you familiar with the rules about over-quoting from a previously published source?
6. Do you have permission for any photographs you may want to use?
7. Do you know how to protect yourself from lawsuits claim libel or defamation? If your manuscript is accepted for publication, be aware that the publisher's attorney may ask for substantial revisions. Remember, the accuracy of what you write is paramount; if you get it wrong, and upsets the person you are writing about, lawsuit is likely. And even if you're right, a lawsuit is still possible especially if you portray anyone in the book in a negative light.
8. Have you written your book from a neutral point of view, showing all sides of the argument? Publishers don't like rants, yellow journalism, or sensationalism. They prefer an impartial tone, and look very carefully for any undocumented statement that would reflect the author's bias.
9. Have you considered seeking legal advice *before* you write your book?



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10. How will writing a biography help you in your career? In other words: why do you *want* to write a biography?

Here are some additional resources that will help you prepare a biography book proposal:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Biographies_of_living_persons

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Neutral_point_of_view

<http://www.publaw.com/>

http://www.web-biography.com/Sample_biographical_questions.html

http://www.writersservices.com/mag/05/Writing_biog_autobiog_1.htm

http://www.writersservices.com/mag/05/Writing_biog_autobiog_2.htm

http://www.writersservices.com/mag/05/Writing_biog_autobiog_3.htm

Books That May Be of Interest:

The Complete Guide to Writing Biographies, Ted Schwartz, Writer's Digest Books, 1990

Writing Biographies and Getting Published (Teach Yourself). Ina Taylor, McGraw-Hill, 2000.

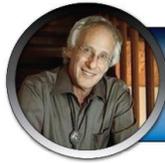
Writing Biography and Autobiography (Writing Handbooks) by Brian D. Osborne, A.C. Black, 004)

The Arvon Book of Life Writing: Writing Biography, Autobiography and Memoir by Sally Cline and Carole Angier, A&C Books, 2010.

Please read the following article by Inga Simpson, who gave me permission to include it in this paper and workbook. It is written from the perspective of the legal restrictions in Australia, the UK, and other countries, but U.S. law is not as strict. You can also read her article here: <http://inga-simpson.suite101.com/the-ethics-of-biographical-writing-a230885>. See also this article by biographer Jeffrey Spivak: <http://writeonline.com/2010/05/13/write-on-writing-a-biography-book-proposal/>

The Ethics of Biographical Writing

By Inga Simpson



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There are a number of ethical and legal issues to consider when writing memoir, autobiography and biography.

Many writers, past and present, have spoken about authorial privilege, the 'right' of artists to use whatever material they want, however they want. Writers have and will continue to publish works that offend individuals, families and groups. There are, however, also moral, ethical, and even legal issues to consider.

Ethics in Biographical Writing

At times, the desire to be accurate can conflict with the desire to be ethical. Negative or potentially scandalous revelations may well be true, but writers and biographers need to consider the impact of this information on friends and family: to weigh up the 'public interest' or relevance of the information against the private damage it may cause.

Accuracy: Do the Research

If there is anything worse than exposing John Brown's dirty past as a porn star and destroying his marriage, it's getting it wrong. Or the wrong John Brown. Do the research, cross-check and double-check and confirm with multiple sources.

Legal Considerations: Defamation

Publishing material that puts someone in a negative light without their express permission (if that person can be identified) leaves the publisher and author open to legal action. The more serious the information (for example, the suggestion someone committed a crime) the more likely legal action is. Even insinuating or inferring something negative about another person can be called defamation.

Publishing houses will seek and pay for legal advice if concerned about these sorts of issues. However, in increasingly difficult economic times for publishing, potential legal concerns could mean a project is rejected for being too complicated and potentially expensive. Seeking legal advice on an early draft can prevent these sorts of issues from arising.

In the Public Interest

'In the public interest' refers to matters that the public has a right to know about; issues that if kept hidden could result in harm to members of the community or thwart democratic or legal processes. The concept should not be confused with the public's high level of interest in finding out about something, for example, a movie star's sexual history or drug habit. If, however, the person of interest is a world leader, in a position of



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authority, some would argue that the public that elected him/her in does have a right to know about issues that might affect their capacity to do their job.

Natural Justice

The administrative law principle of 'natural justice' requires that individuals be advised of a decision or action that will affect them. It is a good idea to give affected people a chance to see what has been written about them before sending it off to the publisher or agent.

Seeking the cooperation of other people mentioned in a biographical project, can often be a positive experience. They are much more likely to be supportive if involved and may even provide useful information not otherwise available.

Ethics and Autobiographical Writing

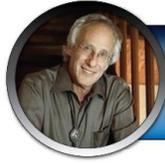
An autobiography or memoir will likely involve the lives other people: friends, families and associates. It is one thing to publish a tell-all about one's own deep dark secrets but quite another to reveal someone else's. Even if the person is now dead, there are their children and extended families to consider.

Ultimately, it is a personal decision. Writers must weigh up the artistic integrity their work against its potential impact on other people. The consequences might be the loss of a friendship or relationship, or a court case.

If writing a 'tell all' style memoir or autobiography, do make sure it is true and accurate. *Running with Scissors*, Augusten Burroughs's 'memoir' of a shattered childhood, earned Oprah's approval, spent more than two years on the New York Times best-seller list, spawned a Hollywood movie, and earned him literary stardom. It also drew a lawsuit from the Turcotte family, with whom he had lived, who challenged the truth of his portrait of them (and himself).

The Ethics of Writing Someone Else's Biography

The ethics of writing someone else's life are a little different. Permission will be required from the subject, their family, or the person responsible for the administration of their estate. If contracted to write a biography, either by the individual themselves, their family, or a public body, then some of these ethical decisions may be made by others. The subject or their family may specify 'no go zones'. An editorial board may



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set parameters or express discomfort with some of the draft content. The spouse or executor may have final say.

It is a good idea to ask lots of questions at the outset, to establish any areas of potential sensitivity, and to negotiate how to handle them. If, through research, potentially sensitive issues emerge that weren't divulged, check the facts thoroughly before approaching anyone else and discuss it with the subject or next of kin (if deceased) first.

David Marr was still completing his biography of Patrick White, when White died:

I was aware by this time that Manoly was rewriting the death scene to his own specifications. His version was elaborate, touching and untrue. I faced a difficult problem as I drafted the dozen extra paragraphs that would now end the biography. If I wrote about White's death with White's absolute attention to the truth, I would expose Lascaris's innocent lies. I flinched. He would have enough to cope with when the book came out, so I decided to save him from this last embarrassment. I wrote: "At about 9 Lascaris went to sleep in his room across the landing. He was exhausted. At 5 the next morning he heard a disturbance and went in to help. White stopped breathing a few minutes later ..." I came to regret the decision. In a rather unhappy review of the biography, a protégé of White's, the poet Robert Gray, accused me of stinting on White's death ([The Monthly](#), April 2006).

Ethical concerns, then, need to be weighed up against the integrity of the work: its truthfulness, its completeness, and its coherence as a whole. It will, after all (unless ghost writing) be the writer called to task by reviewers and academics and experts.

[Inga Simpson](#) is a novelist, writing teacher, and experienced professional writer living in the Sunshine Coast hinterland, Australia.