

# MontclairPatch

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## **Professor Talk: So You Want to Write a Memoir?**

The popularity of memoirs continues to grow as more and more are published daily. And these bestsellers are not limited to the lives of celebrities and world leaders, but frequently tableaux of everyday people and events.

But what does it take to write your own memoir? What would you pass down to posterity? And more importantly, what is a memoir?

Montclair Patch recently spoke with an expert in the field: Rita D. Jacobs, professor in Montclair State University's English Department.

### **Before we get started, let our readers know what the difference is between a memoir and autobiography.**

Jacobs: One of the simplest ways of defining memoirs is that they can cover any amount of time in the writer's life, whereas an autobiography includes the writer's full life — starting at birth and ending wherever he or she is.

Cheryl Strayed's "Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail" about her hiking adventure is an example of a memoir because it is one episode in her life.

### **When was the heyday for memoirs?**

Jacobs: You know what, that heyday might be right now.

I think in the last 15 years or so, people have been drawn to memoirs, even before the blogging phase we are in right now. The reasons could be because our society is focused on itself in a lot of ways.

People are writing now about their confrontations with their demons, and one way of getting it out is through a memoir. Mary Karr's "The Liars' Club" is about a battle with alcoholism, for example, while others have written about their abusive childhood.

Many of us probably think of Anne Frank's "The Diary of Young Girl" as a memoir, which most of us read growing up.

The memoir that really got things started, I would say, is "Angela's Ashes" by Frank McCourt, which was published in 1996.

### **Why do you think memoirs are so popular now?**

Jacobs: I think it is connected to the fact we are insatiably curious about other people's lives. Mostly, we are looking to see if we are like other people. And a memoir allows you to live a life you will never get a chance to live.

There is a British philosopher and literary critic named Adam Phillips that says we go to therapy when we get stuck telling ourselves the story of our lives. A memoir is a way to tell the story of your life and perhaps get unstuck by writing it.

**Memoirs today don't seem to be limited to the most prominent and wealthy, right?**

Jacobs: People sometimes write a memoir to pass a story down to family. Today, especially with self-publishing, people publish their memoirs regularly. But in terms of finding a large audience for your story, you need to be well-known or have a great story or be a great writer.

Look, Frank McCourt who wrote "Angela's Ashes" was a high school teacher. He came from a very poor family in Ireland, but he had the gift of being able to tell a story that could engage so many other people, so his story went on to be a bestseller and Pulitzer Prize winner.

**Say someone reading this wants to write their own memoir, what are some of the essential ingredients he or she would need to sit down and write one?**

Jacobs: Well, if you want to start writing a memoir, you should start small.

Don't say, "I'm going to write about my whole life."

Start with the particular. Tell a story about a particular moment, incident, person in your life. You can start with small story about how you got your name, or your first day of school, or the person who is most influential in your life, or an embarrassing moment that you have never been able to tell anyone about but are finally able to put on a page.

You want to focus on something that has to do with a full beginning, middle and end that is a part of your life. That is what you are doing: stringing these things together as you are writing.

It can be totally overwhelming to sit down and write a memoir.

Another tip is that you should read memoirs before you write one, so you have a sense of the kind of memoir you like and the kind of memoir you can tap into.

**Are memoirs traditionally associated with being untruthful?**

Jacobs: The hardest part about writing a memoir is telling the truth.

There is a lot of controversy around memoirs, especially after James Frey was outed by Oprah for not telling the truth in his memoir "A Million Little Pieces."

*Want some more tips about writing memoirs? Then check out [Jacobs' blog posts at biographile.com](#)*

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