

The Ups & Downs of Your Adoption Journey: You Should Write a Book

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Thinking about the Big Picture

- What do you want takeaway to be? What life lesson, what feeling?
 - What of your past is essential to share?
- Why is it urgent to share it now?
- What/who keeps you from writing your memoir?

Telling *That* Secret

- In the first draft
- On the problem with telling
 - The problem of memory
 - The problem of ownership
 - The importance of the struggle
 - The importance of the change
 - Determining what's important
 - How to convey what's important
- On needing the whole story
- On needing standards
- On the duty to notify
- On prioritizing story vs. relationship
- On the reason for telling

Trying to Remember Everything

- What do people who weren't there need to know to feel as if they were?
 - About Time
 - What events will you include?
 - Which connect best with attitude and arc (overall narrative)?
 - Which particular slices of time represent the larger life lived?
 - What else was happening then—in your life and in the world?
 - How are events connected?
 - About People
 - Who have been the people who changed you?
 - Remember how they look from far away vs. up close
 - Remember them top to bottom
 - What do readers need to know to pick them out of a crowd?
 - Remember what they say, how they say it
 - Remember what they do, how they do it
 - Most significant moments shared with you
 - What moments shared show how they changed who you are?

-About Place

- Work from outside in, how you move through the place
- Picture/remember what room was like where key events played out
- List all things present in the room
 - Include all senses—capture especially texture, sound, smell

-About Things

- Be specific, help reader see
- Can recreate difficult-to-remember event
 - by first focusing on specific, concrete objects from that moment

Structuring your story

-How is your story like a quest? (*see* Zinsser's craft books)

-Where does your story begin?

What moment made all the difference in your life?

-Options for a narrative structure: (*see also* the Lenard-Cook & Miller craft book)

-Chronological

-Coming of Age

Angela's Ashes—growing up poor in Ireland
Townies—growing up poor in Massachusetts

-By Event that Changed your Life

Lost & Found: A Memoir of Mothers—birthmom's call
A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius—death of parents
Half a Life—accident

-By Defined Event or Time Frame

Wild—hiking Pacific Coast Trail
Year of Magical Thinking—when Didion's husband and daughter die
The Possibility of Everything—daughter's sickness, journey, and cure

-Form

-Complementary

Lab Girl—chronological, with essays interspersed on plant development
Rules of Inheritance—stages of grief
Caution: essays still need to form a unified whole (with an overall arc)—or else collection tends to drag (e.g., my reading of *Circling My Mother*)

-Imposed

Eat, Pray, Love—four months each in three amazing places
Gifts from the Sea—shells found help author explore marriage difficulties
Julie & Julia—a recipe a day
Reading Lolita in Tehran—a book club continues in a war-ravaged city

-Subject

- Cancer: *Anatomy of a Face; When Breath Becomes Air*
- Grief: *H is for Hawk; This Lovely Life*
- Unwed Motherhood: *Without a Map; Surrendered Child*
- Alcoholism: *Liar's Club*
- Mental Illness: *Girl Interrupted; Life Inside; Lab Girl; Swallow the Ocean*
- Difficult Parents: *Undertaker's Daughter; Bullshit Night; Florist's Daughter*

-List: *S**t my Dad Says*

RECOMMENDED READINGS FOR WRITING AN ADOPTION MEMOIR

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For General Inspiration

King, Stephen. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. New York: Pocket Books, 2000.

Lamott, Ann. *Bird by Bird*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1994.

For Craft Tips on Writing Memoir

Barrington, Judith. *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art, Second Edit.* Portland: The Eighth Mountain Press, 2002.

Gornick, Vivian. *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.

Karr, Mary. *The Art of Memoir*. New York: Harper Collins, 2015.

Lee, Sherry Quan. *How Dare We! Write: A Multicultural Creative Writing Discourse*. Ann Arbor: Modern History Press, 2018

Miller, Lynn C. & Lenard-Cook, Lisa. *Find Your Story, Write Your Memoir*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013.

Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. New York: Collins, 2006. (See also his *Inventing the Truth*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998.)

Adoption Memoirs

Chung, Nicole. *All You Can Ever Know*. New York: Catapult, 2018.

Hall, Meredith. *Without a Map*. Boston: Beacon Hill, 2007.

Hesse, Margaret. *Milk & Tides*. Minneapolis: Nodin, 2015.

Homes, A.M. *The Mistress's Daughter*. New York: Viking, 2007.

Kerr, Mary. *Liar's Club: A Memoir*. New York: Penguin, 2005.

Klempnauer-Miller, Amie. *She Looks Just Like You*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2010.

Lauck, Jennifer. *Found*. Seattle: Avalon, 2011. (See also *Blackbird*.)

McElmurray, Karen. *Surrendered Child: A Birthmother's Journey*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006.

Mewshaw, Michael. *If You Could See Me Now: A Chronicle of Identity and Adoption*. Lakewood, CO: Unbridled, 2006.

Saffian, Sarah. *Ithaka: A Daughter's Memoir of Being Found*. New York: Dell, 1999.

Schein, Elyse & Paula Bernstein. *Identical Strangers: A Memoir of Twins Separated and Reunited*. New York: Random House, 2007

Shapiro, Dani. *Inheritance*. New York: Knopf, 2018.

Trenka, Jane Jeong. *The Language of Blood*. Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2005.

Trenka, Jane Jeong, Julia Chinyere Oparah & Sun Yung Shin, eds. *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoptions*. Boston: South End Press, 2006

Vogl, Kate St. Vincent. *Lost & Found: A Memoir of Mothers*. St. Cloud: North Star Press, 2009.

Winterson, Jeannette. *Why be Happy When You Can Be Normal?* New York: Knopf, 2012.

WRITING EXERCISES:

To Warm Up:*

Write two pages of something you can't deny.

Write two pages of what got left behind.

Write two pages of something you wrote or did that you no longer understand.

Write two pages of apologizing for something you didn't do.

Write two pages on a physical characteristic you're proud to have inherited or passed on.

Write two pages of what you had to have.

Write two pages of humiliating exposure.

Write two pages about a time when you felt compassion unexpectedly.

Write two pages of what you have too much of.

Write two pages of when you knew you were in trouble.

Write two pages in which someone is inappropriately dressed for the occasion.

* For more like this, see www.abigailthomas.net/getting-started

Freewriting Exercises:

List your absolutes, the things you are sure about in this life.

What do you feel strongly about? What's important to you?

Why are you afraid to write this current project?

What disturbs you? What troubles you? What do you fear?

What have you not been willing to speak about?

List the things you don't know but wish you did.

Who do you admire? Why?

What do you want?

Describe a family meal. First, do one that stands out in your mind. Next, an ordinary one.

Now, do a quietly profound moment that was part of an ordinary meal.

What have been your rituals in life? As a child? As a grown-up?

What's the significance of these? Pick one and write a story about it.

Write about the first time you were silenced.

The first time you were betrayed.

The death of a pet. Or someone close to you.

Moving. Or your friend moving.

Your parent's divorce. Or yours.

What really changed you?

**first three exercises by Carol Bly, rest by Judith Barrington

Substantive Considerations:

What life lessons can others learn from your life?

What family secrets do you plan to tell? How will this help you find the essential truth you seek to discover about yourself in writing your story?

What would you never tell anyone about yourself? Why isn't that an essential part of exploring the essential truth about yourself in writing your story?

Structural Considerations:

What is the moment when you knew life would be different? What did you do about it?

Why must you tell your story now?

What means of telling best reflects what's happening in the story?