

# Breaking Your Silence

Writing your Truth in Memoir



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## **Introduction to the Anthology *Dancing at the Shame Prom*** **Amy Ferris**

Co-edited by Amy Ferris and Holley Dexter

*The anthology is a collection of searingly honest and brave pieces from women who write about their shame, and how they came to find their full self in spite of it. This meditation that can help us all to think about shame and the possibility of letting it go.*

**"We live in an atmosphere of shame. We are ashamed of everything that is real about us; ashamed of ourselves, of our relatives, of our incomes, of our accents, of our opinions, of our experience, just as we are ashamed of our naked skins."**

**- George Bernard Shaw**

It's THE BIG one - that big, bad, ugly little (or big) secret we don't want to share.

It keeps us from being intimate, truthful, fearless.

It keeps us *oh* so small.

It's the sad, funny, joyous, difficult, liberating, humorous, and HOLY SHIT... enlightening stories.

It's life changing, and life altering.

It's there, in the back of the drawer, hidden next to the sexy lingerie that is never, ever worn.

It is a companion, an unwelcome visitor.

It comes at the wrong moment.

A destroyer of dreams, a pervasive darkness; an enabler.

It arrives in the form of anxiety attacks, cold sweats and sleepless nights.

It has brought down countries, damaged political careers, upended the financial world, shaken religious and spiritual communities.

It is a stoic face in public, a tearstained face in private.

Aretha sang about it.

Ted Swaggart prayed to almighty God about it.

Elizabeth Edwards wrote and spoke about it.

Angelina Jolie had it tattooed to remind her of it.

Newt Gingrich begged forgiveness because of it.

Tiger Woods lied because of it.

Oprah Winfrey did seventeen shows on it.

Bill Clinton addressed the nation three times in the name of it.

Laura Nyro wrote lyrics about it

Ruth Madoff lives in hiding because she is filled with it.

The shame we carry from our mothers, our fathers, our siblings, our friends, our co-workers.

The shame we hide, the shame we pass on to our children; the shame full, the shame less. The shame on you and the shame on me.

It comes in all colors.

All sizes.

All shapes.

All religions.

It prevents us from loving, giving, sharing, holding, touching, kissing, opening our hearts, and souls.

It is worn by men and women and girls and boys, alike.

It does not discriminate.

It is heart breaking and funny and scary and enlightening and oh my god, a COMMON BOND that connects us, just like dots.

The shame of ... dropping out of school

Of kissing a girl.

Of kissing a boy.

Of loving the same sex.

Of going to jail.

Of having AIDS or HIV or STD.

Of loving the wrong skin color.

Of shop lifting.

Of stealing.

Of bankruptcy.

Of lying.

Of wearing briefs, not boxers.

Of having no money.

Losing a job.

Losing your virginity.

Losing your home.

Losing your mind.

The shame of sex.

Drugs.

Small breasts.

And yes, big breasts.

The shame of selling out.

Selling off.

Selling, period.

The anthology *Dancing at the Shame Prom* is all about sharing/writing our deepest shame, and in the process offering a hand, a shoulder, a box of Kleenex, tremendous hope, a bit of enlightenment, a bucket of wisdom, and unyielding courage so others who have lived with their own shame realize they too have the option to leave it behind, move on, and yes, YES... let it go.

Amy Ferris is an author, screenwriter, essayist, playwright and editor. her memoir, [marrying george clooney, confessions from a midlife crisis](#) seal press) was adapted in an off-broadway play in 2012. she has written films (*mr. wonderful*, anthony minghella, director and *funny valentines*, julie dash, director), tv, and has contributed to numerous anthologies, including the one she co-edited, *dancing at the shame prom* (seal press). she was guest editor-in-chief for two magazine, glossies, where she created the annual *all women's* issue. amy lives in pennsylvania with her husband and two cats. she is very content on most days.





## **Buried Sorrow**

**Amy Friedman**

Most of us grow up believing something about us or our story is shameful and ought to be kept hidden away. Our shame might arise from our ancestors, our place of birth, our looks or our accent or our clothes or homes; we might be shamed by what we think or what we desire, by what we've done or wished or we could do or something we've imagined we've done. We might be drowning in the shame heaped upon us by social mores that instruct women to keep our legs together or for men to man-up, that tell us who to love and how. We learn from our parents, from teachers and doctors, from priests, ministers, rabbis, and church elders, from bosses and neighbors and yes, even friends. Most of us have encountered at least someone who told us to shush, to keep things to ourselves, not to let "it" show.

For over 25 years I've taught creative writing—mostly memoir and personal essay—and I've taught thousands of students. In all those years, I've met maybe five people who have never felt shame. In most of the courses I teach, students have chosen to be there. This means that they have climbed at least one hurdle. Even those who fear if they write their truth that someone they love might never speak to them again or that society might vilify them, or that everyone will know they're demented or evil or disgusting, that they ought to be banished to a deserted island, have made a decision to come to class to try to write this shameful story.

But I work with one group of people who walk into the classroom where I'm working not because they want to write memoir. Most don't want anyone to know their stories. Most are drowning in shame. These are kids I see every Wednesday afternoon in a dingy high school

classroom at Venice High School. They come to the room for myriad reasons, but not because they want to write. They come to a club my husband and I created, a club called P.O.P.S., for high school kids whose lives have been touched by the Pain of the Prison System. I created the club because I had fallen in love and married a man in prison. We spent seven years married—most of those years he was still inside, and I was running from or raging against the shame others cast upon him, upon me, and upon his children. After we divorced, I spent ten years trying to write the story, and it took ten years because of all the secrets I had kept. I had to overcome the rage and the sorrow that came in the wake of our divorce. I had to overcome my desire to make everyone love him, and me, and his daughters whom I helped to raise. I had to tell the story true, and that meant I had to let go of any longing to prove anything to anyone.

In those years I learned how difficult the life of someone who loves a prisoner is, how many secrets are buried deep, how much sorrow and shame there is. And so I created a place where these kids could unburden themselves. But the kids mostly come at first because they're hungry (we serve lunch); some of them come out of curiosity (they've heard "weird" stories...); some show up because their friends are there or because they're lonely or because they've smelled fried chicken or lasagna.

And then, most weeks, we ask them to write.

Most of these kids know someone in prison—a dad, a mom, a sister or brother, an uncle, a godparent, a beloved friend. Some of the kids have done some time themselves. Most of these kids learned when they were little kids never to talk about *that*. Most of them learned this connection was a shameful one, that people would judge them and find them wanting if they knew.

Now be honest. You're thinking, "Jeez, I have/had a loved one in prison, but I would never want anyone to know." Or you're thinking, "Oh, those poor kids, how sad. Most of them are likely to become another statistic." Or you're thinking, "Wow, who'd want to hang out in a room with a bunch of people who are prison adjacent?" Or you're thinking, "Why would they let anyone know about such a thing?" Or you're thinking, "These must all be poor kids of color." Maybe you're thinking something I haven't heard—and if you are, I hope you'll write to me and tell me—without feeling ashamed for thinking that. Because you're not alone.

The first thing the kids learn in that room is that they're not alone, and the moment any of us discover that someone else shares our experience, our fears, our beliefs, our ideas, some of the weight of carrying all that lifts. I have always sensed that, always believed that. I felt my own pleasure and relief at confessing that sometimes during those years of marriage I did feel and act crazy, that sometimes he was a loving, lovable man, sometimes not. And too, I've seen the light go on in students' eyes after they've unveiled a secret.

And then along came a girl I'll call Cherish (because I cherish her), and she proved it to me. Many weeks we offer the kids some prompts for writing—"Where I'm from," or "What I've never said," or "Something an elder once taught me," or "something I wish I could teach my friend/brother/sister/mom/dad."

But Cherish never seemed to find anything she wanted to write, so one day I asked her to come out into the hall to talk to me, to see if I couldn't maybe spur her on so that she would have a story for the anthology we would be publishing.

Looking at her, I understood why the boys were always vying to sit beside her. Tall and shapely, her hair was a silky mane, her skin so perfect it seemed airbrushed. Though always

poised and polite, she couldn't keep from rocking back on her feet as she looked down at the filthy linoleum. I didn't want her to feel ashamed for not having yet found a story, so I gently said, "It's okay. Sometimes things just don't come easily, but let's see if we can find a story inside you."

"Okay," she said.

The prompt I gave next was blind luck. "Do you have any special possessions?" I asked, and immediately her doe-like eyes brimmed with tears.

"That's it," I said. "That's probably what you should write about."

She shook her head. "I can't." The tears began to stream down her face.

"Can you tell me what the object is?"

"A ring," she choked. "From my dad."

"Does your dad live with you?" I figured he didn't.

She shook her head. "I haven't seen him since I was six."

"That's the story you need to try to write," I said.

"I'm scared to. It makes me too sad."

So we had that conversation—the one I've had hundreds of times. It begins with my saying that sad isn't so bad. Sad won't kill us. Sad is rife with the kind of gold writers forever seek. Letting ourselves cry—really cry—can wind up feeling better than any cleanse. Sad is full of stories. Sad and scared, dismantled, often takes us to that secret we've buried, the one that has created the lumps in our throat, the throttle on our heart, the fury in our eyes. Sometimes unearthing sad and scared carries us to a place that feels less sad, less scared.

“Just try to write it, okay?” I said. “And you never have to show it to anyone. You don’t even have to show it to me. You can wad it up in a little ball after you’re finished and throw it away. You can burn it. Just try...”

Maybe it was peer pressure. Maybe she didn’t want to stand out in the hall with me ever again. Maybe something I said struck her as true. Maybe she wanted her work in the anthology. Maybe a friend said something later that made writing possible.

Whatever it was, a week later, Cherish handed me two pieces of paper. “I wrote it,” she said. “It’s a mess,” and she hurried back to her seat.

And then I read the most extraordinary thing, beginning, middle, end, beautiful prose, brilliant connections. It was a jewel of a story that began on the eve of her sixth birthday when her father called to say he promised to spend her birthday with her. In the first scene, she is sitting on the front stoop with her mom, sitting beneath pounding sun, waiting for her dad. Weary from the heat, she falls asleep against her mother’s shoulder. In the next scene she’s in her room, in her bed, waking to see the fading light outside. She notices her bed surrounded by presents. She wants none of them. All she wanted was her dad, and he failed her. Again. Then she hears footsteps padding towards her room. She crawls under her blanket. She hears knocking, his voice, “Forgive me. Can I come in?” She doesn’t answer. “Please,” he calls. She crawls deeper under her blanket, crying, furious, broken-hearted. She’ll never let him in, she swears. Finally she hears his footsteps walking away.

The next morning when she opens the door to her room, she finds a box with a beautiful ring inside and a note. Cherish included his original note in her story, a note about how sorry he

was to let her down, how much he wants her to have this ring that belonged to his mother. He wants her to wear it and always remember him.

After the note came this line:

“I never saw him again. I still have the ring but I never wear it because it reminds me of my sixth birthday.”

I asked Cherish if we could read it aloud to everyone. She smiled and nodded, “Yes,” and asked her best friend to read it. The kids applauded. We praised her. We published it right up front in the anthology.

And a few months passed.

One day I was invited to be a chaperone for high school kids at a special event at the Geffen Playhouse. There amidst hundreds of kids, we chaperones spread ourselves out, and by chance I sat just a couple people away from Cherish. She was giggling and gossiping with her friends when I spotted her.

“Cherish, hey,” I said. “How’re you doing?”

“I’m good,” she said brightly, looking me right in the eye.

“Did you ever share that story with your mom?” I asked. She hadn’t been sure if she would. She didn’t want to hurt her.

“Oh yes,” she said. “She liked it. And you know, a funny thing. I always used to be depressed, but ever since I wrote that story, I’m not.”

“You’re not depressed?” I asked, wondering if I’d imagined her words.

“No,” she said. “I guess I had to tell that story.”

Amy is an author, editor, ghostwriter and creative writing teacher whose most recent books include **Desperado's Wife: A Memoir**, a book that led to her appearance on the Katie Couric show and ultimately to her co-creating, with her husband Dennis Danziger, the nonprofit POPS the club ([www.popstheclub.com](http://www.popstheclub.com)), for high school students whose lives have been touched by prison. *Desperado's Wife* is currently being developed as a television series, and Amy's most recent book, *One Souffle at a Time: A Memoir of Food and France*, co-authored with Anne Willan, will be released in paperback in 2014. Amy's articles, essays and stories have appeared in magazines, newspapers and numerous anthologies, and since 1992 she has written *Tell Me a Story*, a weekly story for children syndicated by Universal Press Syndicate that has spawned three books and three award winning CDs. Amy teaches memoir at UCLA Extension, The Skirball Cultural Arts Center, Idyllwild School of the Arts and in private workshops. For more see her website [www.amyfriedman.net](http://www.amyfriedman.net).



## **Weaving Truth and Shame in My Memoir**

**Linda Joy Myers**

When I began writing the stories about my grandmother, mother, and myself for what would become my memoir *Don't Call Me Mother*, I wasn't writing a memoir. I was writing a novel about three generations of women who loved each other in highly conflicted ways. I wanted to show the complicated relationship between the grandmother, who was raising her daughter's child, and her own daughter, whom she had left behind in Iowa as a little girl so she could go to work in the big city of Chicago after a divorce. I wrote about the loneliness of the plains landscape where I grew up in the Midwest, and the observant girl (like me) who even in her twenties was trapped in a painful triangle with these two women. Behind the veil of fiction, I wrote about what it was like to witness terrible scenes of conflict, verbal sparring, and outright war between my mother and grandmother when Mother came to visit every year. Each fight was basically the same, and ended in a cliff-hanger moment when Mother threw her things in her suitcase and ran off. As I wrote these scenes even in fiction, I would be drenched in sweat and burning with shame. But I was comforted by the fact that if it ever was published, I could deny any connection to my own life.

For a session at my creative writing workshop at Mills College in 1991, I wrote one of those fight scenes, a true war of words between the grandmother and mother in the novel. I felt safe behind my wall of fiction. The many dozens of fights between my own grandmother and mother were engraved on my brain as I spun out pages and pages of dialogue for that scene, and because it had really happened, I figured the fight would have the ring of truth in my novel. (I was a beginning writer and didn't know that you shouldn't have pages of dialogue!).



We were allowed to read for 10 minutes during our turn at the workshop, so I read the fight dialogue for those ten minutes. When I looked up, people's eyes were glazed as if they were in shock, and all ten students looked as if they'd been blown against the wall.

"What's wrong?" I asked, surprised to see their reaction.

"You can't do that to us," someone whispered.

"Do what?" I had no idea what the person was talking about. My heart was still pounding from reading the scene and I felt extremely vulnerable and ashamed, but it was for a good cause—I wanted to learn how to be a writer.

"You can't just barrage the reader with such terrible stuff. Besides, it makes no sense. People don't really act like that." This was said kindly.

"But it's all true." I was stunned with how this discussion was going.

"It doesn't matter if it's true in a novel—you're writing fiction. The work has to function well as fiction. If people act implausibly, it doesn't work. Fictional characters have to be believable," our teacher chimed in.

I sat and thought about this for a moment. "But they really did act that way. I know they seem crazy, but they really did have that kind of conflict." The group nodded solemnly, clearly not budging from their stance. The look on the faces of the group members told me that indeed no one else in the world acted that way, just my family. The room seemed to grow warmer.

The teacher added, "You have to ask yourself—is the story you are telling powerful because of the writing, or is it powerful or important because it's true, because it really happened?"

I sank down in my seat, the heat of overwhelm and embarrassment burning my cheeks. I knew that my story was made more meaningful because three generations of mothers did abandon their daughters, decisions that left seeds for decades that still had to be resolved, which I was trying to do as I raised my own daughter. Perhaps there were others in the world who had suffered in a similar way. I had been inspired by fictional stories all my life. I would even say that literature saved my life because I saw myself in the stories.

Memoir? Shaking a little, I whispered, "Well, I guess this is a memoir."

For a while, I pulled back from my writing, trying to find nicer scenes, happier moments. What "really" happened behind those closed doors of my house was simply too revealing. What did it reveal about me? Did I inherit their crazy genes? What would people think? And worse, my mother was still alive, and hovering in my mind criticizing every sentence. Though my grandmother was dead, in my head she still howled her objections when I wrote "the truth" about our family.

In the early 90s, there were few memoirs in the current literature. Mary McCarthy's *Confessions of a Catholic Girlhood* was one, and *This Boy's Life* was another. These were by well-known writers. The memoir revolution hadn't started yet. "Real" literature was a novel. If you were writing what was "true" it was not considered artful. Art happened when you made stuff up. So to think of writing a memoir was to enter a lonely unpopulated planet.

I had to deal with the fact that I couldn't hide behind "the fictional wall." I couldn't cop out to say, "I made it all up." Yes, fiction writers get in trouble with family and friends too when some of their characters are thinly veiled real people, but most readers don't know what's fictionalized and what is true. Fiction offered some kind of barrier and boundary to hide behind, even if semi-transparent.

Memoir writers are naked. We have to stand up in front of everyone and say, "Yes, this happened, it's true. This is about me. This is my testimony, this is my life." What a tough assignment. To write memoir, we have to be willing to be vulnerable and reveal personal details, including some of the worst moments in our family and in our lives, but this kind of vulnerability creates an "authentic" memoir and provides an emotional connection with the reader. This is our task: to be real and to breathe the truth of our lives onto the page. We have to be careful of those shaming voices in our heads, and not let them win.

For years, I struggled with the shame of my story. I didn't want my history and my family to be the way they were, but that was the legacy I inherited. What I tried to do in my memoir is to transform that legacy into a story that would give hope to other people who had been abused, and who had undiagnosed mental illness in their family—something I discovered as I wrote. As I wrestled with my story over the years, stopping and starting, I found my way to forgiveness and love for my mother and grandmother, I understood them and myself better. It was a healing journey to keep on writing despite the shame, which was always with me.

When it came time to publish my memoir, I had panic attacks, shame attacks where I'd wake up shaking and thinking, "I can't publish this!" By then my mother had died, and at her

deathbed we had a powerful, though nonverbal, connection where all I could feel was compassion for her and my grandmother. Once the book was out, I felt a sense of completion and courage. When I gave my first talks at bookstores, I saw how people connected with the human, and true, elements of my story. As I revealed the story that once shamed me, I saw it touch the audience and connect with their own family story, their pain and their shame. When I saw the power of telling my truth and the rewards for fighting against all that shame, the inner critic began to diminish until one day, poof, it was gone! Well, nearly gone. It was much less powerful.

We must surrender to the process of encountering ourselves on the page to find the story that calls us, and work through the layers of silence and resistance that get in our way. Give yourself permission in each writing session to write one more true scene, a true moment that helped shape you. Scene by scene your story and your truth will be revealed. It is an act of courage that you accomplish each time you write.

Our motto at the National Association of Memoir Writers: *Be Brave, Write Your Story!*

Linda Joy Myers is president and founder of the [National Association of Memoir Writers](http://www.namw.org) and a therapist for 35 years. Her memoir *Don't Call Me Mother—A Daughter's Journey from Abandonment to Forgiveness* is a finalist in the ForeWord Book of the Year Award, a finalist in the IndieExcellence Awards and received Honorable Mention in the New York Book Awards. She's also the author of three books on memoir writing: *The Power of Memoir—How to Write Your Healing Story*, *Journey of Memoir*, and *Becoming Whole*. Linda co-edited the anthology *The Times They Were A'Changing—Women Remember the 60s & 70s*, a ForeWord Review Book of the Year finalist. Her fiction, non-fiction, and memoir pieces have been published in literary journals and online. She writes for the Huffington Post, and co-teaches the program [Write Your Memoir in Six Months](http://www.namw.org). Linda is a speaker about memoir, healing, and the power of writing the truth, and offers editing, coaching, and manuscript evaluation for writers. [www.namw.org](http://www.namw.org). <http://memoriesandmemoirs.com>



## **The Courage to Write and Publish Your Story: Five Reasons Why it's Important to Write Memoir**

**Sue William Silverman**

I'm frequently asked why I write memoir. Why reveal intimate details about my life to total strangers? Why put myself, or my family, through the pain—some would even say shame—of telling family secrets? Why not just be quiet, keep personal information to myself?

Here is how I answer:

Growing up, I lived a double life. On the face of it, my family seemed normal, happy. My father had an important career. We lived in nice houses and wore expensive clothes. But all this seeming perfection was a veneer, masking the reality that my father sexually molested me, a reality never spoken aloud.

Later, as an adult, I continued to live a double life—this time as a sex addict. Again, in public, I appeared normal, with a professional career and a seemingly good marriage. No one knew that the shiny façade hid dark secrets: I cheated on my husband; I was close to emotional and spiritual death.

Before I began to write, I didn't fully understand the effects of the past on the present. For years, the past appeared in my mind's eye like faded black-and-white photographs in which no one, especially me, seemed fully alive.

Then I started putting words on the page. Finally, I chose to examine my past. Through this exploration, it was as if I slowly began to awake after living in a state of emotional suspension. I wrote my way into the darkness—not to dwell there—but to shed light on it. My entire life changed, all for the better. I no longer lived a lie.

I encourage you to explore, through writing, your life, as well. Whether your childhood was traumatic or not, whether your current life is in disarray, chances are you have a story to tell. Whether, say, you're figuring out a divorce, finally coming to terms, perhaps, with an alcoholic mother or an absent father, struggling to repair a relationship with an estranged sibling or battling a physical disease, we write memoir to better understand ourselves, as well as to bring a reader with us on our journeys.

Here are five reasons why your life will be enhanced by writing a memoir, by telling your own story.

### **1. Writing Memoir Helps You Overcome Fear**

Most memoirists I know are scared to write their stories. Sometimes the fear evolves from the material itself, the fear of facing events from the past, painful episodes that have remained dormant for years. When this is the case, remind yourself that you've already lived through, survived, the actual moment—whatever it was. Now, tell yourself, you're “only” writing about it, figuring out what it meant.

Other times the fear concerns revealing a family secret. Will family or friends judge your story, judge you? Will your mother get angry? Will your father threaten to disown you? As scary as possible judgment or rejection might be, remember: You can't control anyone's reactions. All you can do is write your truths, refuse to continue living in silence, or living a lie.

If you're struggling just to set words down on paper, I suggest that you try not to think about "others." I, at least initially, pretend I'm writing just for myself, ignoring as much as possible the fact that friends, family, even strangers might one day read my story. I pretend no one else will ever see my work; and, in any event, it's my choice whether I'll ultimately share it with anyone or not.

Of course, this can be easier said than done. Therefore, on particularly scary days, I tell myself I only need to write one page today; I don't overwhelm myself by thinking I'm writing a whole book! If you need to break it down further, tell yourself you'll write just one sentence this morning. Or, on very tough days, one word before lunch.

But never give up! This sounds obvious, but the only way I know to work through difficult material is to do just that—write straight through it—focusing on one word at a time. Learn to sit in the dark places. To skirt an issue, to sidestep it, is to remain in an emotionally vague or unfeeling place.



Once the words are down on paper, you'll feel as if a great weight, the weight of the past, has been lifted—not just off your shoulders—but from your psyche. Now, the past barely haunts me. It's as if I extracted it, and now it dwells between the covers of a book. I feel lighter, freer, as if I can truly breathe.

## **2. Memoir Helps You Understand the Past and Organize Your Life**

I gain clearer insights about my past when I write it, rather than simply sitting around thinking about it in the abstract. What was the relationship, say, between my sexual addiction and being molested by my father? How did the past cause such emotional devastation? I discovered the answers to these important questions through the written word.

Writing is a way to interact with—and interpret—the past. It helps us make sense of events whether they are traumatic, joyful, or just confusing. Writing sharpens our senses so that images and details from the past emerge in a new context, one that illuminates events for ourselves as well as for our readers.

Living my life day by day, I never stop long enough to question events. There are errands to run, meals to cook—to say nothing of emotional clutter! Who has time to stop and think about events swirling around us?

Only when I put my everyday life on hold, so to speak, sit down at my computer and write, can I even begin to see a pattern to the rush-and-tumble of life.

Memoir writing, gathering words onto pieces of paper or on a computer screen, helps us shape our lives. By discovering plot, arc, and metaphor, we give our lives an organization, a frame, which they would not otherwise have. Memoir creates a narrative, a cohesive life story. It gives your life a previously undiscovered structure and theme.

### **3. Memoir Helps You Discover Your Life Force**

Before I wrote, while I kept secrets, I didn't feel as if I were really living my life. I didn't have a clear grasp of who I was. What, and who, was the essence of "me"? Even when I first considered writing a memoir, I went, by turns, thinking that no one would understand or care about my story, to believing that, since there are thousands of other incest survivors, my life story wasn't unique. My voice wasn't special. I didn't matter.

Just the opposite is true.

When writing, if I forge even one good sentence on any given day, I have discovered a kernel of emotional truth. In that sentence, I feel that life force of "me," as if it's my pulse. To write is to give birth to a more complete self.

There is only one of you. Your voice is unique. If you don't express yourself, if you don't fully explore who you are, that essence of you will be lost forever.

Remember: you're writing your book, first and foremost, because you must. The act of writing is where the spirituality of artistic endeavor resides. Focus on the words during the creative process: what do they reveal about you?

In order to be creative and fully engage in the process, writers must give themselves permission to set aside the fears. Ultimately, the more I challenge myself, the more courageous I become.

#### **4. Memoir Helps You as well as Others to Heal**

In an online interview in *Chronogram*, Mindy Lewis explains that during the writing of her memoir, *Life Inside*, she confronted her mother for confining the teenage Lewis in a mental hospital for twenty-eight months in the 1960s. A terrible fight between mother and daughter ensued, her mother not understanding why, in her opinion, Lewis hated her enough to write a book about her incarceration.

Afterward, Lewis went into a clinical depression that was “set off by the guilt and terror about writing the book. I felt my values were so screwed up that I’d rather write a book and hurt my mother.” It was through the support of others who’d gone through similar situations that she continued writing.

Ironically, it was ultimately the book itself that brought Lewis and her mother close. Lewis sent her mother four chapters-in-progress and received a return letter in which her mother provided her own perspective of events. Lewis’ mother, by acknowledging her daughter’s story, chose to

put her daughter's "success and happiness above her own, putting aside her fear and anxiety about being seen as a bad mother." Lewis says, "Our relationship became transformed; I realized how much I love my mother."

I myself learned that writing about my experience not only helped me, but helped other women, complete strangers, still struggling. For example, after I completed a reading at a library in Athens, Georgia, one woman waited until everyone else had departed. Approaching me, she was so scared she began to cry. She confided that I was the first person she'd told that her father had molested her. She was too traumatized even to tell a therapist. Why did she confide in me, trust me? Simply because I had written my story. Through this meeting, both of us were empowered.

### **5. Confessing through Memoir is Good for the Soul**

Telling family secrets—any intimate secret—can be scary. Ultimately, however, I reached a place where not telling the secrets was worse. I felt heavy, weighted down. Finally, then, it was more a relief to write my life than ignore it. So even though at times I felt uncomfortable during the writing process, in the end, I felt a sense of release.

In short, with every word I wrote the pain lessened. It was as if I exorcised it, one word at a time. As you challenge yourself, you'll feel more courageous every day. Writing memoir energizes your psyche, nourishes your soul.

Only by writing my story can I be an emotionally authentic woman, an emotionally authentic writer.

Whatever the reaction of family members, our job as writers is, first and foremost, to tell our stories. Our job isn't, after all, to make people feel settled, calm, or comfortable. And even if we ourselves initially feel uncomfortable about shaking things up, we become empowered. If we use this power—not out of a sense of revenge—but to understand our narratives—then we bear witness to honest human experiences and emotions, thus freeing our souls.

And you never know: the reaction from family might not be negative. It might be soulful for your friends and family, as well as for yourself. In an interview in *Fourth Genre*, author Kim Barnes suggests we not automatically assume that friends—or even close family members—will get angry if we write about them. “If you...treat people...with complexity and compassion, sometimes they will feel as though they’ve been honored, not because they’re presented in some ideal way but because they’re presented with understanding.”

In short, whatever the roadblock—real or imagined—write anyway! To do so is to feel your horizons expand within yourself, as well as outward toward friends, family, community.

Writing is a way to remove the muzzle and blinders from childhood. Writing is a way to take possession of—to fully own—our lives. Only you own your memories. As sole possessor of them, you are free to write them. By doing so, you will feel your own power.

Sure, the writing forced me to examine my life in ways that were scary. Was it worth it? Yes!

Writing my first memoir, then going on to write a second and now a third, are the best gifts I ever gave myself. Fearlessly writing memoir allows all of us to claim our voices, be heard, and understand our own life narratives.

Through telling my story, listening to the stories of others, I am empowered—even as I still, at times, get scared. But I try not to allow fear to preclude me from writing. After years of silence, I have a voice.

Start writing! The universe is waiting for your words!

*(This article first appeared in Numero Cinq Magazine)*

Sue William Silverman's new memoir is *The Pat Boone Fan Club: My Life as a White Anglo-Saxon Jew* (University of Nebraska Press). Her two other memoirs are *Love Sick: One Woman's Journey through Sexual Addiction* (W. W. Norton), which is also a Lifetime TV movie, and *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You* (University of Georgia Press), which won the Association of Writers and Writing Programs award in creative nonfiction. Her craft book is *Fearless Confessions: A Writer's Guide to Memoir* (UGA Press). As a professional speaker, Sue has appeared on various national radio and television programs such as "The View," "Anderson Cooper – 360," "CNN-Headline News," as well as the Discovery Channel. She teaches in the low-residency MFA in Writing Program at Vermont College of Fine Arts. For more information, please visit [www.SueWilliamSilverman.com](http://www.SueWilliamSilverman.com).



## **Writing Trauma with an Eye toward Publishing**

**Brooke Warner**

During my years as an acquiring editor at Seal Press, I received countless manuscripts over the transom focused on writers' traumatic pasts. These were books about dysfunctional families, sexual abuse, domestic violence, and all the fallouts that stemmed from these situations: eating disorders, bad relationships, drug addictions, prostitution, suicide attempts, severe depression—the list goes on.

Seal Press publishes books for women, by women (just like my current press, She Writes Press), and so it had a reputation for publishing books by women who'd journeyed their way out of horrible life situations. They all had something important to impart to their readers. I felt then, and maintain now, that these stories need to be told. Almost every woman who's ever written a book with trauma at its core, who wants the book to be published and read, feels their book will help others in some capacity. So how do you truly help others when you're still writing through your own pain and immersed in your own healing journey?

If you want to publish and help others, keeping your sights on your readers' experience is key. And the fact of the matter is that your first draft—or even your third or fourth—might not be able to attain this objectivity. Sometimes the early drafts need to be where you work out what happened and make sense of your experience. I have witnessed writers being often too eager to push their early drafts out into the world for feedback from agents and editors. This usually stems from wanting to get some validation around their work, but it can result in disappointment, which can trigger old wounds and set writers on various paths of paralysis or

self-defeating behaviors around their writing.

In memoir, the topic of trauma shows up frequently. The human experience is such that many, many people have experienced trauma in some capacity. Sometimes it's the trauma itself that drives us to the page. Perhaps the shame and silence bound up in the trauma longs to be released and becomes a force that urges writers to set it free. This is all good! But you must learn to manage and restrain what you have to share with your readers. When it first comes out onto the page, trauma can be gooey and sticky and scary and unwieldy. Your reader is not prepared to read about it in that state. It's something that takes time, that you need to massage into shape before it's ready for a wider readership.

I wrote a blog post a couple of years ago called "Memoir Is Not the Trauma Olympics" in which I cautioned writers to treat their traumas delicately. Parading them around feels exhibitionistic and off-putting to the reader. Being too dispassionate about your painful past makes you seem disconnected. This is why it's important that you spend time figuring out the right balance in your own writing: so the reader does feel there is something in your memoir for them. Remember, memoir is about tapping into universal truths. You must figure out what yours are, even if your story is riddled with traumatic memories.

When it comes time to start thinking about publishing, consider that the agents and editors you're sending to have seen every iteration of the traumatic memoir that exists. Do your best to counter the doubts and questions that will invariably arise about your book's potential to sell by doing the work in your proposal to make the case for why your book should be published. The last thing you want to do at this stage of the game is make the case that



there are no other books like yours in the marketplace. While some publishers might emphasize the point that they want stories that are unique or unusual, part of what you simultaneously and perhaps paradoxically need to hold is that publishers also want formulas and tropes that have a proven track record. So you need to show how your book is unique, but also how it's like other books that have performed well. Agents and editors need to know what other books like yours exist to help them make a case for your book's readership.

Next, start to think about what might happen to you when you publish your book. Are you prepared to talk about your experience, however traumatic, with others? Are you ready and available to do interviews, and to talk publicly about what you're writing about? If writing your book is breaking the silence, publishing it is shattering the silence. Hopefully you will have been immersed in the writing for long enough that you'll be ready for what's in store for you, but the publishing journey itself is not something to be taken lightly. If getting criticized is a trigger point for you, you need to brace yourself for negative reviews and people who won't love your book; this is par for the course where publishing is concerned, especially in book-length form.

Today's publishing climate is such that the tell-all confessional memoir is expected to push the envelope. Readers expect you to bare all, and holding back too much can make or break your chances to get published—and yet you as a narrator also have to be someone your reader feels they can trust, who's reliable and grounded and self-aware. If your reader is worried about your state of mind, they may feel worried about you, think that maybe you didn't pull through the traumas you're working through intact. In memoir, you must show all that happened, and you must show some redemption and resolution—not an easy task when

you're talking about having suffered long-term abuse, or incest, or growing up in a cult. You may well not be "healed," and yet a memoir in the end begs you to make sense of what happened, and to write about what happened as if you were on the other side of it. Sometimes writers in the midst of their memoirs realize they are not yet healed, and thus the early drafts might need to be treated more as therapy. Sometimes writers discover that the memories are too hard, and they have to let go of the work in order to thrive in their lives.

No matter what happens on your own journey, be gentle with yourself. Find ways to take care of and honor yourself during your writing journey—even if the path is long and meandering and hard. Take it a day at a time, and remember that you can only start with where you are. If your sights are set on publishing, then allow yourself to point your compass in that direction and take small and measured steps, little by little. And good luck!

**5 tips for writers working through traumatic stories:**

1. Take classes. Hone your writing skills through online or brick-and-mortar memoir classes.
2. Join a writing group. This can be a way to get the everyday support you need to work through your tougher scenes.
3. Read other memoirs in your genre. See what others have done and how much they show the reader what really happened. Figure out what the right balance is for you by reading others.
4. Treat yourself. Set up little rewards systems for your accomplishments. Give yourself a

little something—dinner out, a massage, a mani/pedi—for every chapter you complete, even if it's just a first draft.

5. Remember to give yourself breaks from the traumatic writing. If you hit a wall, write something fun and upbeat, even if it ultimately doesn't go in your memoir.

Brooke Warner is publisher of [She Writes Press](#), president of [Warner Coaching Inc.](#), and author of *What's Your Book?* and *How to Sell Your Memoir*. Brooke's expertise is in traditional and new publishing, and she is an equal advocate for publishing with a traditional house and self-publishing. She sits on the board of the Independent Book Publishers Association (IBPA) and the National Association of Memoir Writers (NAMW). Her website was selected by The Write Life as one of the Top 100 Best Websites for Writers in 2014. She lives and works in Berkeley, California.

