

Secrets, Lies, and Scandals—Issues with Truth and Family

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- You're writing a memoir! For heaven's sake, why must you air the dirty family laundry?
- Why are you doing this to us?
- Don't you dare write any of that while we're alive!
- That's simply not true—it never happened like that.

Writing a memoir can easily seem threatening to the family. Sometimes our “truths” are other people’s “lies,” beliefs they need to have about themselves, or mythic views of the family that are skewed or downright wrong. And people see the same situation differently. People in a family are like slices of a pie, each with a different perspective, seeing events through a different lens. Families often fight over what “really” happened. Some fights are maintained for generations. To write, you need to put the family dialogue out of your mind.

Suggestion: keep the fact that you’re writing a memoir to yourself! Unless your family lives next door, the fact that you are writing about the past or your childhood probably won’t be discovered unless you tell them. It’s a long road from conceptual idea to publication. Protect your creativity and your story!

For now, your focus needs to be finding YOUR voice, your story, and your point of view. Memory is subjective always. Your brain and emotions put together events to create a narrative memory. Since we are all unique, your narrative memory will likely be different from someone else’s, though it’s always great when someone says, “Yeah, it happened just like you say!”

When we write the family stories, especially if people behaved badly or were abusive or unkind, we still may want to protect them for various reasons, but yet we want to tell our truths. Somehow the need to tell the truth as we see it is bursting us at the seams. But we hesitate. I don’t need to get fancy and call this “writer’s block,” but you need to resolve what is holding you back so you can write.

Sometimes anger or revenge can fuel the desire to write, which is okay if you need to get something on the page so you can heal. Just don’t expect that version to be publishable. We go through

various stages when writing a memoir, and various conflicts arise. We need to work with that material, and move forward in our story. Eventually as we keep writing, we begin to feel more distance from the emotionality of the material, and we are able to see the universal aspects to our experience. The reader should resonate with your experience, and identify with it—that's a successful story.

Checklist: What stories would your family object to?

Do you want to write about subjects that your family doesn't know about? What secrets are revealed in your memoir that you want to write yet feel conflicted about anyone else knowing? Are there secrets and scandals that only you know about? Secrets, lies, and shame are intertwined, so if you enter that territory, it's fraught with conflict—internal for the writer, but also freedom from guilt or shame is possible as the secrets are revealed, if only to yourself.

Write about these here:

Just because we believe our point of view is correct, and because we feel that our story is just and should be exposed and shared, doesn't mean it's a good idea to put it in a public venue. But, how much can you leave out and still have your story be truthful?

In the final stages of writing, you need to decide whether to include potentially damaging or upsetting material in your memoir to be read by anyone and everyone.

Wave these conflicts out of your head by making a list.

- My family will disown me if I write about...
- It would give grandpa a heart attack if he knew I was writing...

- I could never write about...
- I'm so ashamed of...
- If only I had never... or (If only I had...)
- What I regret most about my relationship with _____ is:

Creativity and Your Memoir

Write your story—stick to your point of view. Write the whole thing, and then, after you write another draft, and even another, you can make some final decisions about what you want to include and leave out. Remember, your view of events is unique. No one sees the world through your eyes, or has lived your experiences.

In France recently, I viewed many Impressionist paintings—wonderful! Many of these artists painted together, worked on the same scenes—the “reality” setting, but none of the paintings were the same, each was unique. Each artist saw the world differently. Give yourself permission to be an artist. Allow yourself to see the world through your own eyes without flinching or doubting yourself. Later, if you change your mind about things you wrote, that is fine. You can change everything until it's published!

List some of the ways you see the world uniquely, differently from your family. This could include certain events, how you feel about people in the family or community, or even differences between you and your siblings. List the events and situations where there is conflict. Just air this out so you can see your life more clearly. This will help you write with more objectivity.

Writing Prompts

1. Now write a scene about something you feel is secretive, shaming, or scandalous—in your eyes—that you’ve never written about before.
2. Write about how you were different from other people in your family re: a certain controversial topic.
3. Write a story that your family insists is not true.
4. Write a story they believe is true but you disagree. Write both sides of it.
5. What truths do you want to write about that you feel are unacceptable to put into print? List them.
6. Write a scene that is true, even if hurtful to others, so it does not have an edge of revenge or current anger in it. You might need to write it two or three times.
7. What secret has been passed through the generations? Why was it kept a secret? Who did it protect? What will happen (or did happen) when the secret was revealed?
8. What secrets do you know about that no one in the family realizes you know? List them here.
9. How did you become the keeper of secrets?
10. Now write a story about how you found out any secrets and scandals, and the significance of this information to you. What would it mean to the family members if they knew? (This is about trying to understand it, trying to sort it out.)
11. What is the family –or you—most ashamed of?
12. Fictionalize one of the stories about secrets and shame. Then journal about how it feels to write in fiction vs. memoir (truth.)