

Drafting My Memoir

BY DELIA LLOYD

In her bestselling book *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott shares one of her now-famous secrets of good writing: shitty first drafts. “Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts,” she writes. So true.

But Lamott has another piece of advice about first drafts which, while less well-known, is equally on the nose. In a chapter entitled Finding Your Voice, she invokes the metaphor of a closed door: “If there is one door in the castle you have been told not to go through, you must ... the writer’s job is to see what’s behind it, to see the bleak, unspeakable stuff, and to turn the unspeakable into words.” In other words, as she puts it, “Your anger and damage and grief are the way to the truth.”

I was reminded of this guidance during a recent meeting with my writing group. We were discussing some excerpts from a memoir I’ve been working on over the past couple of years about my family. Although the group had some positive things to say about the chapters I’d submitted, the consensus was that my tone was too judgmental.

“Remember that the reader is smart,” one observed. “Don’t tell them how to feel about the characters. Let them come to their own conclusions.” The others nodded in agreement.

When one person tells you something’s wrong with your writing, you can potentially dismiss it as sui

generis. But when five smart and thoughtful people concur, it’s probably time to listen. So, when the session was over, I sat down to reflect on what they’d said.

At first, I was disappointed and embarrassed. Like so many memoirist wannabes before me, I was clearly too close to the material. How could I have succumbed to such a rookie mistake?

Until then, this memoir had been practically flying off of my fingertips. But for the next several days, I froze. I couldn’t even open the folder where my writing sat. I wondered if it was time to try my hand again at fiction, something I’d flirted with on and off over the years. Or to resume churning out chirpy, inspirational blog posts exhorting people to make the most of the second half of life.

But then I remembered Lamott’s metaphor about the door. Behind my own door lay a treasure trove of dark family secrets: substance abuse. Hidden pregnancies. Mental illness. All laced together with the punitive moral overlay of Catholicism. I’d kept that room carefully locked throughout my adult life. Now, I’d kicked it open and was rummaging around the shelves, pulling down each and every item to turn it over in my hands and examine it in the cool light of day.

And guess what? I am angry. And sad. And ashamed. And yes ... judgmental. But I’m OK with that.



Because in finally writing about this stuff, I am confronting my own “unspeakable.” And in so doing, I am writing my way to my own truth.

When I finish this first draft, I’ll take Stephen King’s excellent writing advice and put the manuscript down for a few months. I’m confident that when I come back to it with fresh eyes, I’ll have the requisite distance to edit my story in a way that isn’t as directive for the reader or as clouded by my own judgments.

But that’s not where I am right now. Right now, I’m just getting it all down on paper. As I do that, I’m judging the hell out of my childhood and the people inside it. And you know what? That feels pretty good.

I’m embracing this shitty first draft. **WD**

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