**The Difference Between Autobiography and Memoir**

One of the most common mistakes I see folks making is mistaking autobiography for memoir. This is a critical mistake that leads to lots of rewriting. So let’s take a moment to unpack the difference between the two in order to get you off on the right foot and streamline the process.

**Autobiography**

Autobiography is the story of your life. It’s often told chronologically, from birth to death, with events highlighted in the order they occurred.

If you’re famous, folks will want to read your autobiography. Otherwise, these are usually written as legacy projects, intended for family members and loved ones.

**Memoir**

Memoirs cover a particular time, theme or transformative event. They’re shaped, molded and rewritten into story form so that the reader undergoes her own journey in the reading process, learning something along the way.

The best memoirs read like novels, with fully fleshed-out characters, dialogue and scenes unfolding in a compelling manner. They’re built around a central question, with something needing to be solved, figured out or transformed.

**Why this Matters**

If your goal is to write a book that appeals to larger audience, then you might consider writing a memoir.

If you want to share your story with your loved ones, then an autobiography probably makes more sense.

It’s important that you decide which path you’re taking early in the writing process so that you can shape your writing appropriately.

Let me be frank: a legacy autobiography project will also be easier to write. What matters to your family is going to be different than what matters to a stranger on the street. And as far as craft and technique go, our loved ones tend to be more forgiving.

If you want to reach a wider audience with your memoir, then it’s important that you learn the proper craft and technique of writing memoir. (This isn’t as easy of a process as it might seem. More on this in my next post.)

On a final note, the distinction between autobiography and memoir also holds true while writing essays. I recently had the opportunity of meeting a couple of NY magazine editors. Both espoused shaping your piece in an enticing way.

Just because it happened to you doesn’t make it interesting. A good piece also needs to be well-crafted.

If you can do both, then you’re on your way to writing a story with teeth.

**POST for JULY 2**

**Do a different post about expectations, then link to this**

**Yes AND put this into the Cornerstone piece**

\* This isn’t an easy process. We often assume it will be, though. I mean, heck we’ve been writing our entire lives, right? How hard can it be?

Except that memoir is a completely different form, with specific rules, one that takes practice to master. And the easier it looks, the harder it probably was to write.

That’s why it’s important that you check your expectations when you start writing memoir. Kind of like preparing a TED talk. They look easy, right? Polished, fluent, potent. Well, that’s because the speaker put hundreds of hours into that 15 minute speech. Plus years and years of research and education before that.

Memoir is similar. Nobody knocks it out of the park on the first try. The best memoirs have been rewritten and edited over and over again. It’s not uncommon to hear an author say that they’ve written 10 drafts of their book.

This includes characterization and character development, pacing, structure, setting, dialogue, tone/voice, showing v. telling, conflict development, etc. Think of your favorite memoir. I’ll bet it reads like a novel, right? Take E*ducated* for example. Holy smokes, right?! The tension of that book… Same with Cheryl Strayed’s *Wild*, Elizabeth Alexander’s *The Light of the World*, Caroline Knapp’s *Drinking: A Love Story* or Paul Kalanithi’s *When Breath Becomes Air.* These are all built around a central conflict (mother loss, love letter to her deceased husband, alcohol, a physician grappling with this impending death).

By the way, this distinction also holds true if you’re writing shorter essays.

There’s an old joke I’ve seen circling online, about a famous writer chatting with a doctor at a cocktail party. When he hears she’s a writer, he tells her that he’s planning on writing a book in his retirement. She replies that she’s planning on taking up brain surgery in hers.

That’s why I often encourage folks to check their expectations when they start working on a memoir.