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Ever since Angelaâ€™s Ashes hit the scene (some sixteen years ago), the Memoir genre has been hot. And I get a lot of them, especially in this day of POD and e-books, where self-publishing is so easy, and so inexpensive. But oneâ€™s life story, no matter how tangled with twists and turns, how fraught with trials and tribulations, does not necessarily make for a compelling memoir. The genre itself is about something different.

Now, a disclaimer here: If youâ€™re already a famous celebrity, then your autobiography (and I term it that, as most hot celebrities these days arenâ€™t old enough to write memoirs. And, of course, the book is not written by them anyway, but by an actual book author!) will sell a lot of copies. So, this doesnâ€™t pertain to you.

But if youâ€™re someone whoâ€™s seen a bit of life and wants to tell your life story, then you need to understand clearly what a memoir is all about.

So first, letâ€™s talk some about what itâ€™s not. A memoir is not a diary. It is not a journal of this happen and then that and then finally, this. It is not a calendar of the events of your life, and a listing of friends/relatives in it. Even if you believe that the sageness of your years brings wisdom to impart, you still donâ€™t have a viable book.

A memoir, to be commercial, is not a family history, or a scrapbook of family lineage. The commercial market doesnâ€™t care if Uncle Joseph married Aunt Irene and had fourteen kids, five of whom died in childbirth with one succumbing to scarlet fever in his teens. Now, YOUR family might care. And if thatâ€™s your final marketâ€”i.e., youâ€™re self-publishing a genealogy for your family aloneâ thatâ€™s fine. But if you want to sell this to the public, unless Josephâ€™s family had real impact on the point of the memoir (i.e., this is a family of cops, and one of the siblings became a serial killer), then all of that backstory pretty much needs to be left out.

And thereâ€™s the crux: a memoir, as with any full-length book, has to have a point. Although I stop short of Fran Lebowitzâ€™s take: â€œYour life story will not make a good book. Trust me,â€• some truth c exist there. We all have stories to tell. If you want the general public to read yours, it must run the same gamut as in book development.

Just that you survived being molested as a child is not enough. Just that you fled oppression from a third-world country to settle in freedom is not enough. Just that your ship turned over in the choppy Atlantic and everyone died but you, really isnâ€™t enough. Of course, if you then ate the other folks . . . now weâ€™re getting somewhere. Or if you survived being molested and lobbied successfully to enhance victimsâ€™ rightsâ€™ laws. Or, if you fled that third-world country and became a brilliant scientist discovering the cure to the disease du jour . . .

Sounds suspiciously as though Iâ€™m back to the disclaimer, right?

Well, yes and no.

A huge recent success in this genre is of course Eat, Pray, Love. What did it do? Told a tale of universal truths, beautifully. And what is still one of the most successful books of all time is Angelaâ€™s Ashes. And you know, McCourt didnâ€™t really have a terribly unique tale. But here is what he did do:

1). He honed in on his story. In other words, he found a theme, stuck to it, and developed it

beautifully.

2). The writing itself is spectacular. In other words, he honed his craft for decades before penning the book.

3). His characters were as compelling as those in finely crafted fiction. In other words, he learned the skills to write real people onto the page.

The big threeâ€"those elements that make up a good book, whether weâ€™re talking Mystery, Fantasy, Womenâ€™s Fiction, Memoir . . . well, you get the picture. Again, you have to HAVE a story to tell. One that has meaning. One that ties into a larger theme. I was the book editor for a wonderful family memoir called In the Boat with LBJ. John Bullion had a story to tell. But rest assuredâ€"this WAS a family memoir. He just tied it into a much larger story of Lyndon Johnsonâ€™s rise to and fall from power. And the writing is spectacular. And the characters jump off the pages. And the book has done quite well.

So, if you aspire to write your memoirs, and believe they will enrich mankind, by all meansâ€"do so. But find the theme. Focus sharply upon that. Hone your writing skills so the prose sings. And learn to create vivid characters. Use a good book review developer. Develop the book into something real.

Sounds suspiciously like all the good writing of which I know, which is, of course, Rocket Science!

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