



MEMOIRS AND AUTOBIOGRAPHIES: A very popular category these days....

by Julie H. Ferguson

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Once the domain of celebrities, more and more writers of lesser fame are turning to the category of memoirs and autobiographies in the hopes of getting published. This non-fiction category has skyrocketed in popularity over the last five years and editors report that the competition is fierce, especially at regional presses.

Writers should know the difference in the two forms. Both written in the 1st person, autobiographies cover a whole life from birth to death and memoirs focus on a period surrounding a life-changing experience in the writer's life. Memoirs can also focus on a subject derived from a life-changing experience: for example the story of Queen Victoria's personal physician. If you are writing in the 3rd person, your category becomes "fiction based on fact." The personal experience category refers, not to books, but to essays.

Both categories must have a *unifying theme* running through them (just like good fiction) to make them interesting and meaningful to the stranger reading them.. Themes can be as simple as "love conquers all" or "honesty is the best policy," but be sure you have one and that it is well articulated in your manuscript, query letter, and proposal. A clear universality, which transcends your life, makes readers relate to your story. It is not enough to simply recount the events in your life as you might for family members, however interesting they might be.

Experts at the Surrey Writers' Mini-conference in February 2000 advised writers that, to get accepted for publication, memoirs and autobiographies must contain outstanding writing and voice. They also insisted that writers must be able to demonstrate much practice, membership in critique groups, participation in courses, and previous publication credits in magazines, etc. Placing in a contest or two, also encourages editors to read your proposal.

Submission requirements are changing too. **Query letters** to agents/editors must have a one-page synopsis attached, just like a fiction query. Nowadays **proposals** for memoirs or

autobiographies should now have half the manuscript enclosed, not just two or three chapters (as in the past), to prove the writer can sustain the theme, pace, and interest.

Writers should remember that more and more editors and agents are accepting short queries via email these days, so make sure you know who wants what and don't send your query the wrong way. That's a sure-fire recipe for rejection. Most publishers' websites will tell you their preference and you will find out how to submit the query about your memoirs or autobiography correctly, thus giving your work a fair chance. Good luck!

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