



The Beacon

Your guiding light for writing and publishing

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Memoirs and Autobiographies: A very popular category these days....

Once the domain of celebrities, more and more writers of lesser notoriety 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.

Beginning writers should know the difference in the two forms. Autobiographies cover a whole life from birth to death; memoirs focus on a period surrounding a life-changing experience in the writer's life, or they focus on a subject derived from that life-changing experience.

Both categories **must** have a *unifying theme* running through them (just like fiction) to make them interesting and meaningful to the stranger reading them. 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. Both categories are written in the 1st person; if you choose to write in the 3rd person, you are then writing "fiction based on fact," not a memoir or autobiography. The personal experience category refers not to books but to essays.

Recent advice from experts makes it clear that, to get accepted for publication, memoirs and autobiographies must contain outstanding writing and voice. Writers need to be able to demonstrate much practice, membership in critique groups, participation in courses, and previous publication credits in (page 2)

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From the editor's desk

Last year was a banner one for me; all the stars lined up and everything went just the way I planned. So far, this year has been just the opposite. The writer's life has its ups and down just like any other business and whoever solves the dilemma of too much work versus too little will make a million.

Amongst other losses, my publisher, with whom I had had a contract for 2 ½ years, decided not to publish my second book at the eleventh hour. Too late to find another publisher for my book that was to launch at the same time as Canada's new submarines arrived, I had to accept the kill fee and move on. It was a bitter pill. Starting book three has moved up and I am marketing more than I was.

There's a lesson here for all of us. As writers, we simply cannot ease up on our production and selling tasks, especially when we think everything is "in the bag." I should have known better....

Julie H. Ferguson

Publishing myth #3: You have to be an expert...

The most unlikely individuals write non-fiction and succeed. I am living proof that writers, without the prerequisite qualifications, can publish in subjects in which they are not experts. As a female who cannot serve in submarines, I wrote *Through a Canadian Periscope: the Story of the Canadian Submarine Service* (Dundurn, 1995). I didn't have a degree in English or a Masters in history either!

How can it be done? Immerse yourself in the subject, surround yourself with experts, or get the education anyway you can—you get the idea. Once that's done build a portfolio of published works on your subject and start making speeches or give presentations in your field. Then make the fact that you are not an expert an advantage: I built on the idea that I was an impartial observer without an axe to grind and that I could translate naval jargon into language any landlubber could understand. I underpinned all the above with a glowing foreword to my book by the leading submariner in Canada who was also the head of the Canadian navy at the time. This guaranteed my credibility to any publisher. And it worked!

Upcoming events in spring of Y2K

- April 6-16** Port Moody Festival of the Arts.
- April 20** **Get Published on Your First Try!** starts at Douglas College. 8 Thursdays at 7:00pm. Register with Continuing Ed. 527-5472
- April 28** **A Writers' Workshop** for teachers of K-4 students
- April 29** **Get Creative with Power Words!** Secondary teachers' Professional Development Day at Douglas College.
- May 12** **Get Creative with Power Words!** Three sessions for Grade 6 students at Meadowridge School.
- May 26** Keynote for Naval Officers' Association of BC.
- June 2** Special **Creative Writing Workshop** for selected Gde 6-8 students from School District 43, Winslow Centre, Coquitlam.

Memoirs/Autobiographies

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magazines, etc. Placing in a contest or two, also encourages editors to read your proposal.

Submission requirements are changing too. Your **query letter** to agents/editors needs to have a one-page synopsis attached, just like a fiction query. Nowadays **proposals** for memoirs or autobiographies need to have half the manuscript enclosed, not just two or three chapters (as in the past), to prove the writer can sustain the theme.

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. Good luck!



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