Section 6, Unpack Your Memory Attic: Creating Your Event or Personal Memoir One Dust-Free Word At a Time

Write-by-the-Lake Writer’s Workshop & Retreat
June 15-19, 2015
9:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. each day
Pyle Center, 702 Langdon St., Madison

Instructor: Sue Roupp

Can I turn memories into a book? Sure you can. How do I muffle the noisy critic inside my brain? You will figure it all out and much more in our week-long daily classes.

YOU ARE THE HERO OF YOUR MEMOIR whether it is an about an event in your life or about your entire life. In our classes you will enhance your writing skills while unpacking your memories in a safe environment. Learn about the characters (major and minor) in your life. Learn how to craft scenes that contain dialogue, conflict, challenges, good times, surprises, (wow! or I have to do what?) turning points. At the end of the week you will have three things: a blueprint for your book, you will know how to write about characters and how to create scenes—leaving with writing skills you can use anywhere.

DAY ONE/ELEMENTS OF A MEMOIR and CHARACTERS

We will explore the general elements of a memoir:

• characters
• scenes
• conflict/challenges
• happy/sad times and much more...

CHARACTERS: Our daily quick in-class writing exercises sort out the characters (friends/family/acquaintances) in your memoir. There are major and minor characters in your life that helped or hindered you. How do we describe them? What details are important about them? What are your and their likes/dislikes? What is your relationship to them? Why are they important or memorable?

We will address:

• who should I include/exclude in my memoir
• what if someone in my family/friends say “that is not the way I saw it happen…”
• defining major/minor characters

Homework: bring in a list of major and minor characters by filling out a provided chart.
DAY TWO/ SCENES

Every day we are either in a scene, witnessing a scene, telling someone about a scene (and the characters in it). For example: you see an argument between family or friends. You either call, email or text a friend describing:

a) who was in the scene
b) where the scene took place
c) details of the scene

Elements of a scene:
• beginning
• middle
• end

Emotional content of the scene as shown by those in the scene:
• anger/frustration
• mistrust
• happy
• funny
• violence
• other...

How to begin the scene:
• dialogue
• action/urgency
• surprise/shock
• information received or delivered

Middle of the scene:
• discussion
• action/inaction
• conflict
• heightened tension

End of scene
• resolution or not
• and then...

HOMEWORK: create a list of 10 scenes you want to include in your memoir filling in the name of the scene, characters in it and in a couple of words what happens in that scene in the provided chart.

DAY 3/CONVEYING INFORMATION

How do characters convey information to move our scenes forward? Remember every scene in a memoir has a purpose and that purpose is to get our readers to turn the page – to want to see what
happens. In meeting the challenges of life—did you succeed or fail? It doesn’t matter—readers want to know how you handled failure as well as your successes.

We convey information through:
- dialogue
- story telling
- text/email/Facebook/tweeting
- photographs/Instagram

Dialogue:
- Listen to what you say to others and what they say to you
- Write your dialogue the way people speak
- Dialogue carries the emotion of what is being said
- You NEVER use adverbs: example—he said dryly

Storytelling:
- We tell stories every day to each other
- Categories of stories include: remember when, illness, good times, children, jobs, vacations, discovery, education, business, climate, dwellings, military, and much more.
- In a memoir stories are told in the same way scenes are: beginning/middle/end

Text/email/Facebook/Tweets:
- Abbreviated storytelling
- A few words to tell a story
- Information can be misunderstood
- Sharing photos with friends/family along with stories
- Good or bad info can be directed at someone

Photographs/digital/film/video/Instagram
- Old or new photos can stimulate remembering an event
- Discoveries of one’s past can be made through photos
- Seeing a digital photo/video can be enlightening or surprising
- Posting photos on Instagram where family/friends can see them

HOMEWORK: In chart provided fill in a list of 15 stories you want to include in your memoir. Write the story names, who is in the story, when/where it occurred.

DAY 4/CONFLICT AND CHALLENGES

Writing about conflicts and challenges that have happened in your life are often the most difficult part of writing your memoir. In my classes we approach this part of unpacking our memory attic with great compassion. What is revealed in our class, stays in our class, we do not discuss it with others outside of our class.

Why do readers want to read about the conflicts or challenges you have had in your life? Because readers identify with your struggles. Worldwide people meet all kinds of challenges—big and small. Unexpected things that are often turning points and can lead to other situations. Maybe there were
times you doubted you could do something but did it anyhow. Or times others you trusted became untrustworthy.

CONFLICTS AND CHALLENGES CAN BE:
- unexpected – a betrayal, a loss, an abandonment
- being given a chance to do something
- solving a problem you didn’t know you could solve
- discovering a strength within your self
- overcoming fear
- rebellion

HOW TO WE WRITE ABOUT CONFLICTS AND CHALLENGES?

We write about these issues from our own point of view. We describe what happened to us in that situation avoiding an angry diatribe against others. We are the hero of our life our event story and are entitled to describe any situation that happened to us. We can describe the situation in emotional detail because this is your personal history.

HOMEWORK. Fill in the table provided with 10 challenges and/or conflicts you want to include in your memoir.

DAY FIVE/BLUEPRINT/Beginning/Ending

We have discussed and defined our characters (major and minor), scenes, conveying information, and conflicts/challenges. These are the elements of your memoir.

We are now going to think about how to begin your memoir and what wisdom you want to impart to others at the end of your memoir. In class, as always, we will do a short writing exercise to stimulate your writing to see how you want to begin and how you want to end your memoir.

BEGINNING
- in the middle of the action
- with dialogue
- not chronologically
- you can begin your memoir in the middle of your life
- you can have flashbacks to family/friends/acquaintances/challenges
- or...

ENDING
- you have lived your life – or gone through an event – and now you may want to impart some wisdom to others
- what did you discover after facing challenges and conflicts?
- what or who has helped you through your life when you didn’t know what to do?
- do you have any laments?
- what or who gets you going every day?
YOU succeeded in living your life despite mistakes and misgivings – in a few words how did you do it?

or...

Sue Roupp has worked teaching writing for 25 years. For the last 2 years she taught Memoir, Creative Writing for GrownUps: Write Your Life in 8 Lines, 24 Words at a division of Wind Ridge Publishing called the Writers’ Barn in Shelburne, VT. Prior to that she taught 10-week fall/winter/spring classes on the north shore of Chicago. She has given workshops in 5 states, was guest editor on literary magazine East on Central, was on the board of the League of Vermont Writers, was President of Off Campus Writers Workshop in Winnetka, IL, taught at the prestigious artist's community at Ragdale in Lake Forest, IL, worked with Billy Collins and Mark Strand at Dodge Poetry Festival Workshops, for 2 years hosted smalltalk etc., a TV show on the north shore of Chicago, attended Maui Writers Conference, is a graduate of Piven Theater School in Evanston, IL, and is a certificated National Speakers Association professional speaker. Learn more at sueroupp.com

Credit Option: Participants earn 1 credit by attending class and completing the assigned work for the week: daily reading, writing at least five pages of original work, and critiquing of own and others’ work. To earn 2 credits, participants submit an additional five pages of their work. Participants earning 3 credits complete all of the above requirements supplemented by another five to 10 pages of creative work or a short paper synthesizing how the material covered during the week applies to their own creative projects and/or teaching. The work must be handed in within two weeks of final class date.