

Teachers Writing Short Memoirs

Gregory Strong

English Department, Aoyama Gakuin University

In an earlier piece for this website, I wrote about writing personal essays and in this piece I will discuss a second form that employs personal experiences, the memoir. I distinguish between them by contrasting their purposes. A personal essay usually includes more of the observation and discussion that one expects from an essay. In contrast, a memoir presents more experience, usually chronologically. A skillful writer evokes the physical details and the emotions behind an experience enabling the reader to participate in them vicariously.

One strategy in writing a memoir is to describe a big event in which you participated. During the terrible earthquake and tsunami of March 11, 2011, friends and family members all wrote to me asking for news and I found very little news coverage that accurately reflected my experiences. So, within a day or two of the event, I e-mailed the newspaper editors at a number of Canadian newspapers and pitched the story idea for a memoir of my experiences. In the end, the news desk editor of a large Canadian daily, *The Ottawa Citizen*, was interested, and I wrote an account, confining myself to the events that I directly experienced.

I described the moments leading to the quake, and how the disaster impacted me personally. I avoided complex abstractions or observations and employed simple and direct language: “The house shook so long and violently that I raced down the stairs and out the front door.”

Given the terror of the event, I tried to use a subdued tone. The horror would come from me describing the house shaking or the

emotional and physical exhaustion that my wife and I felt that night during the aftershocks following the earthquake:

That Friday night, more tremors followed. We hurried outside the first few times. Soon the effort exhausted us. We just lay in bed in the shaking room. I turned to her, 'It's just not going to let us go.'

Most recently, I've experimented with suspense in memoirs. In "The Day I Nearly Died," a memoir for the "Facts and Arguments" section of Canada's national newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, I described almost drowning while on an afternoon sailing trip. "We had planned a two-hour trip, three middle-aged professional men with safe, comfortable lives, on a boat we called 'Charley.'" Dramatically, I mentioned almost dying in the title and later used irony by referring to our "safe, comfortable lives." At the climax of the piece, I described how I was struck by hypothermia.

The boat kept slipping further away. Thirty, then forty metres. Suddenly, my limbs seized up. I very nearly passed out. With stunning clarity, I realized that it was not fatigue, but hypothermia.

In my most recent memoir, "I Walked My Own Family's Field of Sacrifice," a piece for Canada's second-largest national newspaper, *The National Post*, I explored family history and remembrance. I wrote the piece for "Remembrance Day," a national holiday in Canada which commemorates our fallen soldiers, particularly those of W.W.I in which 60,000 people died. I personalized that remembrance by describing what happened to two of my relatives during a famous battle in the final months of the war:

On August 8, 1918, at 4:20AM on the morning of the Battle of Amiens, three men waited anxiously in the darkness – my

grandfather, Ernest, a lieutenant – Leonard, his batman or orderly – and in another unit, his cousin, George, a private.

I sketched the outlines of the battle and I described my efforts to find one grave among the thousands of soldiers buried in northern France. The suspense in the piece would be as to whether or not I found the man's grave in the short period of time I had left to explore the countryside.

Poor directions, and my halting high school French made it hard to find George's grave at Vrèly. It was my last day in France. Anxiously, I drove back and forth through the village.

These examples of short memoirs show how to approach writing by drawing on personal experience. At the same, the writing employs such fictional techniques as scene setting, dialogue, and the use of irony and other literary devices.

Everyone has a few very memorable experiences in their life and these are prime material for writing memoirs like mine.

References:

Strong, G. (2 Aug 2010). The Day I Nearly Died, *The Globe & Mail*. Retrieved from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/facts-and-arguments/the-day-i-nearly-died/article4325323/>

Strong, G. (10 Nov 2015). Gregory Strong: I Walked My Own Family's Field of Sacrifice, *National Post*. Retrieved from <http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/gregory-strong-i-walked-my-own-familys-path-of-sacrifice>