

Waterville Times Column

April 8, 2020

By Laura Stoll

Back on March 8, B.P. (before pandemic), writing coach and author Linda Lowen visited the Kirkland Town Library to teach a workshop on how to write a micro memoir. Micro memoirs, she explained, are 200 words or less and written in a style that is “short, tight, and meaningful.” As an example, she cited Ernest Hemingway, who is credited with having written this six-word story: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.” With just a few words, Hemingway ignites our imagination and evokes deep emotions.

During her workshop at the library, Linda invited participants to think of a significant object in their lives that contained an emotional charge and then encouraged them to write a micro memoir about that item. Participants thought of a variety of objects including a babydoll that looked human, a profane bumper sticker, and a dusty humidifier. The stories written about these objects took class members to a variety of places in space and time, each providing a unique perspective.

Linda’s workshop came at a fortuitous time. We are living through a historic time that will be remembered for generations to come. Because we are all experiencing it with our own unique perspectives, we should take the time to document our stories. Our recollections could include our feelings (fear, uncertainty), our experiences (working from home, learning to video conference), or the basic facts (the library was closed to the public, I did not see my extended family for weeks).

Psychologists have said that writing a memoir can help the writer share a secret, make sense of a situation, search for their personal identity, or heal from a traumatic experience. Readers can gain a new perspective from a memoir and find a common experience or learn about another way of life. One of the participants in Linda’s workshop wanted to recall important stories from her childhood to share with her grandchildren and future generations.

There are many great memoirs that are available in the Mid York system. Some of my favorites are:

*Encyclopedia of an Ordinary Life* by Amy Krause Rosenthal. Written as short, encyclopedia-like entries, Rosenthal captures the moments, observations, and emotions of everyday life. Rosenthal reminds us that not everyone’s lifetime is marked by brushes with fame or trauma. Sometimes it’s the small birthmark on an arm or the joy of eating a butterscotch that gives life its rich flavor.

*Hey, Kiddo* by Jarrett Krosoczka. This graphic novel recalls how Krosoczka’s grandparents raised him while his mother battled addiction. With expert drawings and minimal dialogue, this book makes you empathize with the uncertainty and fear Krosoczka felt as a child and teen.

*Maybe You Should Talk to Someone* by Lori Gottlieb. This riveting story is about a therapist’s time in therapy. We learn (anonymously) about some of Gottlieb’s clients as well as the lessons she learns about herself and how therapy can help just about anyone.

*Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* by Anne Lamott. This book is half memoir and half writing guide. With humor, Lamott tells stories of her own journey as a writer while offering helpful tips and writing exercises.

You don't have to be a writer to tell your story. Your message might take the form of a photograph or a song or even a grocery list. I think my grocery list says a lot about the times we live in: ice cream and juice are crossed off but butter and flour have a question mark next to them.

No matter what format you choose, it is important to tell your own story not just for history's sake, but for your own.