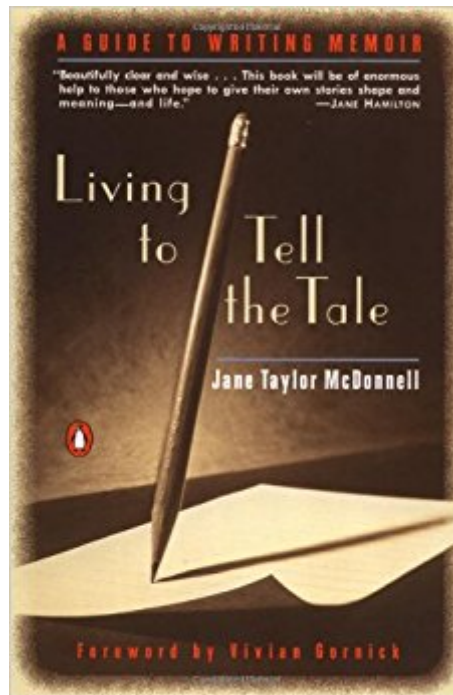




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Living To Tell The Tale: A Guide To Writing Memoir



Synopsis

"Writing is a second chance at life," writes Jane McDonnell. "I think all writing constitutes an effort to establish our own meaningfulness, even in the midst of sadness and disappointment." In *Living to Tell the Tale*, McDonnell draws on this impulse, as well as on her own experiences as a writer and teacher of memoir, to give us what should become the definitive book on writing "crisis memoirs" and other kinds of personal narrative. She provides specific techniques and advice to help the writer discover his or her inner voice, recognize—and then silence—the inner censor, begin a narrative, and develop it with such aids as photographs and documents. Citing many landmark works such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, as well as unpublished writings, McDonnell shows how writers can recreate past experiences through memories, and imaginatively reshape material into the story that needs to be told. Each chapter concludes with exercises to help the writer grapple with particular problems, such as trying to write about experiences that are only partly recalled. McDonnell also offers a list of recommended reading. Memoirs, such as Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club* (Penguin) have hit bestseller lists nationwide during the past year, and are of great interest to aspiring writers.

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Customer Reviews

Has anything drastic ever happened to you and you couldn't find a way to deal with it? Or you were so hurt from an experience the only way that you saw fit to overcome it was to write about it? That is what Jane Taylor McDonnell's book, *Living to Tell the Tale* is about. It is a book to help a writer

overcome a bad experience from the past. This book is set up in a way that the reader will find all the proper and necessary steps in writing a book about memoirs easy. Memory is the key part in writing about an experience. Her suggestions for trying to remember details include making lists of all the things that the writer can and cannot remember. Think of the little details that are important in the story. Another way to get the memory working for writing your book is to use pictures and legal documents such as wills, divorce papers, and receipts to help remember things from the past. McDonnell uses language that is easy for the reader to comprehend, no matter what degree of education the reader may have. I would highly recommend it to anyone who is going to write a book or a paper about a past experience that was very painful.

"Memoir writing shares with fiction writing the obligation to lift from the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience, transform an event, deliver wisdom," Vivian Gornick states in her foreword to *Living to Tell the Tale*, a point McDonnell (who teaches memoir writing classes) proves in what follows. In the first few pages of the book we see she's a formidable talent in command of her subject: "It isn't enough just to live a life; we must be continually explaining it to ourselves, sorting, remembering, casting out the less important stuff, interpreting, sometimes justifying ourselves to ourselves." The first half of the book offers strategies (such as "learning to remember") designed to help generate material, while the second half provides techniques to use in shaping your story, complete with examples from published and student memoirs. Describing the rich content of photographs - in particular, the material gleaned from a photo from her own past - McDonnell notices, "Only after I had written and rewritten this passage did I discover that I was at least three selves within it." She goes on to describe the value of other documents and provides insight into what to tell - and what not to tell - in writing memoir. In the end, McDonnell lends an artistry to her understanding of the form that is nothing less than sensational.

Writers often work alone, winding their way through often-dark passages of memory. With Jane Taylor McDonnell's warm, wise book as a guide, writing is less lonely, less frightening, especially when one is writing about a difficult obstacle life has thrown their way, be it a friend's suicide, a child with autism, or the too-often-neglected childhood traumas, which has rightfully come into its own alongside literature of the Vietnam War and now the war in Iraq. You may not think you can write like Tobias Wolff (*This Boy's Life*) or Mary Karr (*The Liar's Club*), but McDonnell offers her supportive counsel like a hand held out to guide us. In this, the only writing how-to book to cover exclusively crisis memoirs (Vivian Gornick, McDonnell's mentor, has written a terrifically useful book

on the wider issue of autobiographical writing). McDonnell warns against the most common traps the crisis memoir writer can fall into: too much self-focus, self-indulgence, or overt emotionality, and offers the instruction every writer needs to give their own work universal appeal. Ethical topics are covered efficiently and closely, such as the use of recalled dialogue and compressed memories. Above all, McDonnell teaches writers to be searchingly honest, using photos or interviews if necessary to recall key elements that may not have come to the forefront of consciousness. McDonnell is the teacher you always wanted, at times funny, always caring, and her own writing is exemplary. She emphasizes that especially when writing about an emotional topic, the writing must have distance and clarity, while evoking the feel of an event. Gornick's introduction nearly takes over the stage, but McDonnell steers a clear course, offering a flashlight for the dark parts.E. Brinkley, Seattle

I plan to recommend McDonnell's guide to students in my memoir writing workshops. It's clear, simple and I think having some suggestions for writing exercises is particularly helpful to instructors and individuals alike. The simplicity and straight-forward organization of *Living to Tell the Tale* seems to work beautifully both with experienced writers and those new to the genre. I'm adding it to my blog, marlenesamuels.blogspot.com as a recommended source in my free downloadable reference bibliography for writers. GREAT and very practical!

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