

Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

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What's in Your Family Story Toolbox?



One day I rolled out a piece of butcher paper on the dining room table and asked my mother to draw me a family tree. She couldn't have been more surprised. When she was growing up, her parents had referred to all those Levines and Singers, born in small towns in Lithuania and Belarus, as "pitseles." Little people. Little nothings. My mother couldn't believe I wanted anything to do with them.

Grudgingly, she picked up a pencil and filled in the names, along with notes in the margins, many of them unflattering. “Emotional cripple,” read a typical example. “Collected neckties.”

Neckties and all, it was the glimpses of those ordinary people in a bygone world that got me hooked on telling my family story. Years later, the result was a book.

History – with a capital H – used to be about generals, presidents, and kings. Today, the stories of unfamous people matter, too.

“Where does documentary authority reside,” asks Patricia Hampl, a writer about memoirs and family stories -- “in the footnote or the footprint?”

More and more, she answers, we’re making room for the footprint – in all shapes and sizes.

Some of us are writing about several generations, others zeroing in on a single individual. We’re also seeing the rise of the family quest story – a first-person narrative in which the journey to find answers is woven into the story.

Regardless of the scope or format, the job of every family chronicler is to tell a story.

“It doesn’t matter whether you write fiction or nonfiction,” says Ursula Le Guin, the late master of science fiction fantasy. “All storytellers work with the same box of tools.”

So what’s in the toolbox?

Vivid scenes, vivid details. Sights, sounds, smells. If your story takes place in another era, a time before you were born, where do those details come from?

“Learn your way into the role,” advises Samuel G. Freedman, a renowned teacher of creative non-fiction. Read history books, encyclopedias, and novels about your target time period. Study photographs to gather specifics about houses, streets, clothing, hairstyles.

Vivid characters. Like a novel, a family history must enable the reader to distinguish each character from the others.

Plot and theme. Whether fiction or non-fiction, says Le Guin, “narrative goes. It moves. Story is change.”

Can you describe the plot or theme of your family story in a sentence or two? What are your characters’ goals? What obstacles stand in their way? Does your story include suspense? A mystery?

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This post is adapted from a talk I gave at the Grub Street “Muse and the Marketplace” conference in Boston in May, 2013. See the whole talk, called “Up Close and Universal: The Balance of Big and Small in Memoir Writing”, including a list of resources by Patricia Hampl, Ursula LeGuin, and others.

Ellen Cassedy is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2012). To see all of her Writing Tips, visit her website at www.ellencassedy.com.