

Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

www.ellencassedy.com

Who Cares About Your Family Story? Ten Tips to Ensure Readers Will Care



I love books based on family stories – especially those that provide me with an intimate perch from which to experience a larger culture or another era.

For me, the vibration between the ordinariness of everyday life and the sweep of history is not only a pleasure but also a political and a moral matter.

Observing what happens from the point of view of unfamous people, we learn that human history is made not only by generals and kings but by each of us.

That said, *who cares* about your family story, or mine? Here are ten ways I've found to keep readers engaged with the story that engages you.

1. Step back.

When my book first began to take shape, what was foremost in my mind were my own feelings. On my roots trip to the land of my Jewish forebears, shivers went down my spine in the old Jewish cemetery, and tears overtook me in the now-empty market square.

I was powerfully in touch with what *I* cared about. But that – simply that – was not a story, and certainly not a book.

Paradoxically, what enabled me to shape my raw experiences into a narrative was detachment. When I stepped back, I was able to place my family story within a broader context.

My particular family story came to illuminate a *nation's* encounter with *its* Jewish past. And *that's* what made it a book.

I came to be motivated by my responsibilities to my readers – which led me to my next point.

2. Take care of the reader. A diary can help.

Put yourself in your reader's shoes. Telling a *true* story, rather than inventing one, can make it harder to see what *you* know that your reader doesn't.

As my journey progressed, I kept a diary, writing down everything I was seeing and learning and thinking day by day. That way, even after I knew

how the story would end, I could look back and see what my readers would be wondering at any given point along the way.

3. Give the reader a home, or homes.

In the difficult moral and historical terrain into which I ventured with my readers, I realized we needed places to catch our breath – familiar touchstones to hold onto, places to rest.

The classroom at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute, with its rows of battered wooden desks, became one such place, and my kitchen table in Vilnius, with its knobby cucumbers and its loaf of black bread, became another.

These recurring images gave my narrative a rhythm, like the refrain of a song.

4. Create vivid characters.

With a first-person narrative, that means creating *yourself* as a character. Ellen Cassedy, the reader's trusty first-person guide, has to be just as vivid as Uncle Will with his grizzled chin and his secret past, or Ruta, the passionate young woman driving a Holocaust exhibit around the country in her truck.

5. Create vivid scenes.

Just like a work of fiction or a play, a memoir needs places where the narrative slows down and draws the reader in close.

In addition to jotting down in my diary everything I could see, hear, and smell, I took photos with my camera.

Later, at my desk, when I was conjuring up, say, the old man in my ancestral village, I could see his green cap, his aluminum cane, and the blood-red gladioli that framed his front door.

6. Focus.

In writing a story from life, I found I was less a builder than a sculptor, carving away everything not needed.

My side visit to Poland had to go. The amazing yoga class had to go. Even my discovery of my great-grandfather's grave had to go. Deeply moving though it was, it didn't advance what had become the real story.

7. Create suspense.

In my first draft, I revealed Uncle Will's secret on page 3. In the final version, I made the reader wait till page 51 for even the first clues.

8. Blend the personal and the historical.

Break up what Ursula LeGuin calls "the lumps in the oatmeal." Instead of requiring the reader to swallow background information in big chunks, find ways to stir them in. Make them go down easy.

9. Be honest.

It's been said that "writing begins with taking notice." That means noticing what's going on *inside* you as well as *outside*.

In writing my book, I trained a microscope on the minutest details of how I was began letting go of some of the fears and hatreds I'd absorbed as a child.

10. Pay attention to every word.

It goes without saying that I rewrote and rewrote and rewrote. Because I cared – and I wanted my readers to care.

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.