

How to Write a “Memoir with a Message”

By Greg Johnson

So you want to write a book using your story. You’ve lived some years and things have happened to you that are unique and unusual. And now . . . you’ve got a story to tell. In fact, perhaps people have even been telling you for years that you should write a book.

For instance, maybe you have . . .

- overcome a remarkable handicap, had an amazing experience or succession of experiences, and you think others could learn from your journey;
- gone through an incredible trial by way of a health crisis, family crisis, or general life crisis, and you’ve come out the other side stronger and more alive;
- led a magical “Forrest Gump” or “fairy-tale interesting” type of life and you know people would be fascinated by the intricacies of your story.

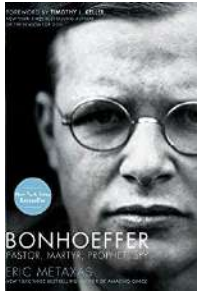
If your story fits one of the above points, then you might have a book in you.

But here’s the big question: How do you go about writing—or having a professional write—your story? More specifically, which style and category should you choose to see the greatest success?

Traditionally, there have been three types of books with people’s stories that publishers will consider: *autobiography*, *biography*, and *memoir*.

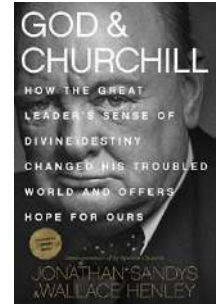
Autobiography comes at a key point, usually late in someone’s life, where they want to get their whole story down on paper. Good examples are Billy Graham types (those whose life has been on public display for decades), any president or political person whom people like or want to emulate, or any famous celebrity (actor, musician, sports star) at the height of or on the back side of their career. The category of autobiography in its fullest form is rare because few readers will sit through the intricate details of someone’s life story unless they’re truly fascinated by that particular person. And that means they have to have been very well known to millions of people for years, likely decades.

Biography is when someone writes about another person: someone newsworthy, famous, or whose life or actions were so incredible that it deserves a whole book. *Bonhoeffer* by Eric Metaxas is a



great recent example. War vets or other types of heroes also fascinate the reading public. Anyone notable from history would be a great candidate, as long as it is well researched. A big key for success in this category, however, is *name recognition* of the subject you're writing about. In essence, you're using *their fame* to sell your well-

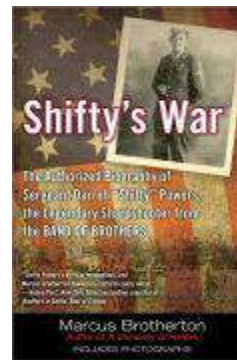
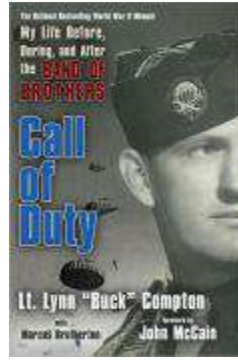
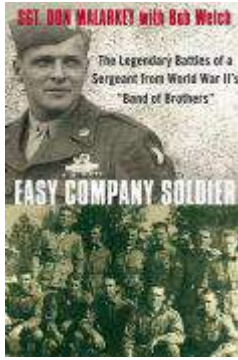
researched and well-written version of their story. The late Jonathan Sandys, the great-grandson of Winston Churchill, wanted to write a full treatment of his famous relative's brushes with, comments on, and thoughts about God. So he wrote *God and Churchill*, a very thorough treatment of a subject that had never been written about before.



Memoir is when you write—or again, have someone else write—your own story by highlighting key vignettes within your life without having to throw in every boring detail that only your close friends or family would care about. It's the perfect avenue for most people's stories. But it comes with a big, practical caveat: will it sell?

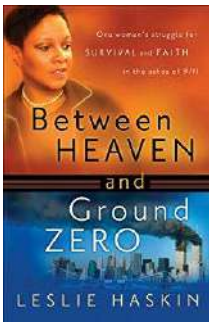
Will thousands of readers lay down \$20 to \$35 to read about big vignettes of your life? Possibly, but with exceptions, and only if it fits the criteria below. A successful memoir in the public arena—those that sell well in bookstores—typically has a few specific elements going for it that help insure good sales. These elements include:

1. **It's written by someone "famous."** The person writing the memoir already has a strong platform and name recognition in order to help the publisher create awareness and sell books. Celebrities, politicians, and sports stars that go beyond local or regional fame fall into this category. Sometimes, people in the news whose name recognition is high for a short period of time can also get their memoirs published with fair success. When HBO did the 10-part "Band of Brothers" series, books like these sold well:



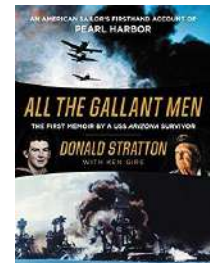
2. **It's written by someone who lived through a time or date in history that makes it easy for a publisher to capitalize the book on an anniversary of the event.**

In 2006, Leslie Haskin, one of my authors, wrote [*Between Heaven and Ground Zero*](#), her memoir of



surviving 9/11. Even 20 years later, it's a title the publisher can continue to promote.

Many years ago, my agency sold a memoir from Donald Stratton who, at the time, was one of the five remaining survivors from the sinking of the Arizona on December 7, 1941.



Because 2016 was the 75th anniversary of the disaster, the book, [*All the Gallant Men*](#), was able to garner a lot of media attention. The publisher needs a “hook” to bring the book to the attention of the media, and anniversary dates can do that.

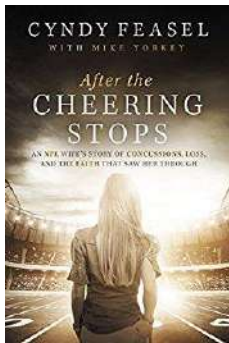
In fact, every book must have a hook; something that helps build media and consumer curiosity about the story. Without it, the story won't get near the media attention it needs to have.

3. **The story is media-worthy because it's so incredible that it will more than likely get word of mouth attention.**

Books like [*The Devil in Pew Number Seven*](#) by Rebecca Alonzo and [*Terror by Night*](#) by Terry Caffey were both written by “no-name” authors, but the stories were so incredible that Dr. Phil picked it up both books for his show.



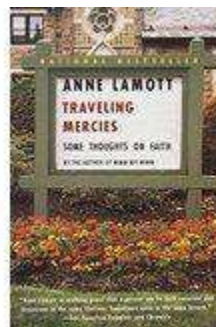
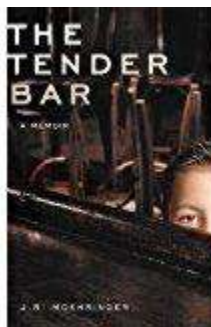
4. **The book hits a cultural issue** that allows a publisher to get you on TV or radio because



people are talking about the issue and you have something to say.

Cyndy Feasel, the wife of former NFL player Grant Feasel, wrote her story on what concussions and CTE did to both her husband and family in [After the Cheering Stops](#). It's a wonderfully written though heartbreaking story of going from the top of the world of professional sports to having your family completely torn apart. Because this topic continues to stay in the news cycle, Cyndy is able to speak to the issue and finds opportunities to generate interest in the book.

5. **The narrative is so incredibly written**—whether poignant, laugh-out-loud funny, or both—that even if the person isn't famous it will get word of mouth attention because it's a page turner. These books would be great examples:



So what do you do if your story doesn't fit in any of these categories?

That's where the concept of a “memoir with a message” might be right for you. Though you might struggle to get a large number of readers to sit still for your long-form or even short-form book, if your life has some key elements that align with the reader's life, you might have something that could sell. In other words, your memoir might work for some readers if it meets one of their “buying conditions.” You see, people buy books for five reasons: *entertainment* (fiction or life stories by people they want to know more about), *reference*, *gifts*, *decoration* (admit it), and *felt need*.

Felt need is when your story has elements that both meet the reader right where they live (they can relate to your struggle/story)—and it helps them meet a felt need by providing concrete answers

to their situation. You don't have to be overtly or overly proscriptive in your advice, you just need to help the reader see that *there ARE* answers. This is what makes your book a "must read." So the "message" part of your memoir may be just the thing that puts your book over the top with an agent or publisher.

Publishing is in an odd place these days. "Discoverability"—being able to find your book easily, and usually online—is the Number One key element in the entire book world. In decades past, a great book, an intriguing story, a captivating cover, or fabulous writing would often win the day to help a book fly off the shelves. But there's the problem: there are about 70 percent fewer shelves for people to browse today than there were just ten years ago. In today's publishing environment, the question is "How are we going to make sure people find out about this book?"

This is what makes selling books a tough proposition for publishers and authors.

And this is also why having an added advantage to your story will often make the difference in a "buy" or "won't buy" decision (for both the reader looking for books to purchase, and an agent or editor if you're trying to get a traditional publisher). So having a book that meets a broad felt need might be your key to success.

People buy felt-need books because a particular topic has become so important to them at a key point in their life that they **MUST HAVE** it. For example, they're having trouble in their marriage, so they go on Amazon.com, barnesandnoble.com or Christianbooks.com and type in their specific felt need using key words such as "books on communication in marriage," or "books on sex in marriage," or "books on raising kids and keeping your marriage close" and . . . *voila!* Up come dozens of books to pick from. **The felt needs in their life makes them search for a "must read" book.**

The hard part in telling your story is taking it from a "nice to read" book to a "must read" book. It takes more than having God doing something miraculous in your life for people to lay down money on your story. Yes, even if you had a near-death experience and got to take a tour of heaven, you saw Jesus, or a host of angels, or E.T.'s cousins, or you grew back a full head of hair overnight—it doesn't mean people will automatically want to read about it.

Think about your own book buying habits. Are you spending \$25 on "nice to read" books . . . or "must read" books?

You see my point.

Few buyers spend money on “nice to read” books anymore. They don’t have time, and there are a million other ways to spend your hard-earned dollars. But they *will* take the time and spend the money if they have a strong enough felt need and your book helps meet that need.

Does Your Story Have a Message?

The hard part is figuring out whether your story has enough of a message (and likely enough of *something new* to say) that people would benefit by what you’re trying to communicate.

To discover whether your life has enough key elements to make for a “memoir with a message,” try following these steps:

1. Write down all of the vignettes in your life that you’d want to include if you were to write a memoir. A few words or a sentence will suffice. Don’t edit yourself, just brainstorm anything and everything that is unique or interesting about your life. If you’ve lived long enough, you will likely come up with a list of 50 to 100 of these vignettes.
2. Determine whether your life has a “big theme” to it. For me, my big theme would be about having mentors. Everything I am I owe to people in my life who have invested in me, mainly in short two- to five-year bursts. I’d write about looking for mentors, knowing how to glean everything you can from them, and then offering advice on how to become a mentor to others. Sounds great, right? Well, it’s not. For most people, having mentors is not a felt need that would carry a whole book. Yes, it’s a “real need”—something self-evident over time (like exercise, eating right, saving for retirement, etc.) that most would agree with—but people rarely buy books because of the “real needs” they have. And this is why I’ll never write my memoirs (unless I grow back that full head of hair overnight). So, determine what your big theme (or themes) are, and then evaluate whether they represent a true felt need. If not, you need to find a different theme that does.
3. Determine whether each vignette might fit your potential life themes. Give it a number on a one to ten scale. Judge whether each high point vignette taught you something about living, or faith, or overcoming a problem, or improving your business, or helping you understand leadership . . . whatever truth moved you forward that hits the theme or themes you’ve identified, make sure it gets strong consideration for your book. If it’s just a

good story but doesn't provide a solid point to help a reader, then perhaps it doesn't belong in this particular book. Try to make each chapter emphasis unique. Things like "*I found strangers to be my mentors.*" I wanted to know how to enjoy my job so "I went to a retirement village and interviewed 30 men who stayed on the same job for more than 25 years and asked them their secrets to longevity." Or, "*I wanted to know how to keep a cheerful attitude through my bout with cancer.* So I posted something on Facebook that put me in touch with fifteen people who had cancer and I asked them how they coped." Of course, for any of these felt needs you could say, "*I read the Bible two hours a day.*" Or "*I prayed on my knees for an hour a day.*" Or "*I fasted one day a week for a month,*" but people have heard these things before. If indeed these things were the key, tell the reader more specifically why this was so essential for your breakthrough.

4. Be ruthless about your stories. If a vignette doesn't have a noticeable lesson, then it should be deleted from the narrative or relegated to a sentence or gaggle of paragraphs within a story that *does* make a point. In fact, you can go one step further. Have a couple of other people who know you well look over your list to see if they have anything to add to your own conclusions.
5. Count up your unique points and stories. Determine if you have enough vignettes with lessons that say something semi-unique to make it into a book. For a "message" book, having at least **four to twelve points** will help you decide whether you should go to the time and effort to write a memoir with a message.

The Hard Part: Part 1

Preparing a book proposal and sample chapters is the next step in the process.

Here's where I need to say something about collaborators. If you have a story, and you have a big theme and unique chapters—and IF your book hits a broad felt need—and you *can't* write, then it's likely time to consider getting professional editorial or writing help. Not everyone can do everything well. Collaborators come in all skill levels and price ranges. At WordServe Literary, we have a fairly large bank of collaborators who are proven to deliver what publishers and readers want. Just email us at admin@wordserve.com and someone will respond quickly. Yes, there is a cost to using a

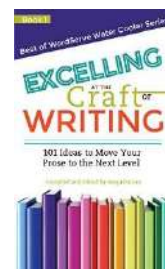
collaborator, and that cost is all over the map by way of fee or percentage, so there is no “one size fits all” type of collaboration compensation. But keep in mind that a well-written book will likely sell more copies and reap more royalties than an amateurishly written book by a novice writer. In short, having a collaborator may pay for itself in the long run.

Back to YOU writing your own book and proposal.

Frankly, I’d rather write a whole book than craft a book proposal to send out to agents. Most writers feel this way. However, preparing a book proposal is the tough but essential part of discovering whether you have what it takes to be an author. The proposal is the “business plan to show a publisher (and agent/editor) how they’re going to make money.” Don’t let that line offend you. Publishers, agents, and editors have to be profitable to stay in business, so they must make priority decisions based on good business practices on who and what they acquire.

Your book proposal is what communicates to industry professionals that you’ve “come to play.” Whether you self-publish or traditionally publish, preparing your book proposal is a good exercise to go through in order to determine whether you are “all in” or not with your book. If you’re not, save yourself months and years of your life and do something more productive with your time. The proposal portion of the process will help you quickly determine if you should invest the effort to write the book.

There are lot of great books on writing, craft and putting together book proposals. My agency has 100+ authors who at one point contributed two to three times a week to a blog you can sign up for free at www.wordservewatercooler.com. In 2016, we put together their best advice in a book called [*Excelling at the Craft of Writing: 101 Ideas to Move Your Prose to the Next Level*](#). You should at least check it out.



There are other books just on writing book proposals you can find on Amazon by simply typing in those key words. Get a couple of them and then start putting your proposal together. If you need a fill-in-the-blank template for fiction or nonfiction, we’d be happy to send you the one WordServe Literary has developed for six different genres. You can email us at admin@wordserveliterary.com.

The Hard Part: Part 2

Promoting your book.

Gone are the days where you could write a book in your pajamas, send it off to an agent or publisher, and then start collecting royalty checks a year or two later.

Long gone.

Again, whether you publish traditionally or independently, you MUST have a plan to promote your work. You are likely reading this short article because you're not someone famous with an already established way (called a "platform" in the publishing industry) to create the necessary awareness to sell books. But that doesn't mean you can't get a publisher's attention—and a contract—by your own excellent marketing plan. You just have to be creative, thorough, and you must capture this truth: Book proposals that fail to throw in the kitchen sink—put in every creative marketing idea that realistically can be done—are the ones that DON'T get sold.



As you can imagine, there are a few dozen books on book promotion that you ought to read. My recommendation is check the reader reviews on Amazon and buy three of the best reviewed books. One that should be at the top of your list is [Overachieving Your Platform: 95 Ways to Find to Embrace Your Inner Sales Marketing Genius](#). This book is another book we've compiled from WordServe Literary authors

and it's chock full of proven ideas from seasoned authors.

Take your three books and, as you read, underline ideas that are doable; ideas that fit your time, life space, and personality. You can't afford or find time do them all, but you can do more than you think. Most of the ideas in our WordServe book are ones you can do at no cost. Fill your proposal with these doable ideas in three categories: Before Launch, First 4 Weeks of Launch, Ongoing Promotion. Be thorough, be creative, but be realistic. Don't promise what you're not willing to do. Done correctly, you'll impress whoever is reading your proposal. Perhaps so much that multiple publishers will start throwing contracts at you! (I've seen it happen.) And don't forget to ask your favorite AI platform. You can get hundreds of potential PR outlets just by asking what podcasts, substacks/blogs, and radio shows might interview you about your book. Give them your book idea and storyline, and watch the magic happen.

Make no mistake, YOU are the primary marketer of your book, whether you're able to find a traditional publisher or whether you self-publish. If you're an introvert and hate the idea of marketing your book (a common trait among authors), you still have to find ways that will show a publisher

you're serious about the message of your book. If you're unwilling to do the marketing to get your book in the hands of readers, it's fair to ask if you really believe in the message of your book.

There are always exceptions to the rules I've mentioned in this article. Books come out of nowhere, written by nobodies, that go onto sell a million copies. Conversely, books by famous people can flop. As much as we'd like that magic formula, there really are only educated predictions based on past experience. After 2300 books that I've personally represented, including about 400 of these written by collaborators, you've just read the best I have to offer as you seek to get your story and message into a book someone can benefit from and/or be entertained by.

I believe in the power of story. But I also know the obstacles ahead that will prevent your story from getting published or read. My goal here has been to save you weeks and months by helping you craft your book in a way that has more potential to be read or conversely, helping you come to the conclusion that you should put behind you that fleeting dream of getting your book published. So I hope this article has been a win-win for you, one way or the other.

Greg Johnson is president of WordServe Literary Group, based near Denver, Colo. ©Greg Johnson, 2026