

## Write Your Life History

*Lewiston native Denis Ledoux helps Mainers turn memories into memoirs.*

BY KATHLEEN FLEURY

In 1988, then high school teacher Denis Ledoux was reading to a group of senior citizens from his recently published collection of short stories called *What Became of Them*. His listeners' eagerness to share their own stories was palpable, and soon he found himself teaching a workshop to a very similar crowd on how to write memoirs. Twenty years later, Ledoux is now the owner of The Memoir Network (previously the Soleil Lifestory Network), a worldwide group of certified "lifewriting" teachers based on Ledoux's guide *Turning Memories Into Memoirs/A Handbook for Writing Lifestories*, published in 1992. Here Ledoux offers some advice for those contemplating a trip down memory lane.



**How do you account for the popularity of memoir writing today?**

There are many reasons. Telling stories has always been a big part of most family cultures, but with families being so scattered, telling is not reaching entire families. Memoir writing bridges the storytelling gap — especially since the general level of education of the population is higher and many people now have sufficient literary skills to write a memoir. In addition, today there are professionals who serve as guides in the memoir-writing journey.

There are possibly two other factors. One is the extreme transformation in the writing and publication experience. Home computers make writing less tedious — no more retyping manuscripts. Technological advances in printing have also reduced the work (and the costs) of printing a book. My Memoir Network (previously the Soleil Lifestory Network) can produce a memoir cover whose look competes with that of any memoir cover published in New York. Without design software, that did not use to be possible. A second additional factor is television, with its “tell all” talk shows that have possibly stimulated people to tell it all in a memoir.

**“Memoir professional” is an interesting concept. How did you get started in this work?**

Early on, I was writing fiction and was naturally drawn to using autobiography in the way that Kerouac’s writing was autobiographical. My stories won a couple of Maine literary awards, but I was still teaching high school and not living as a writer.

In 1988 — more than twenty years ago — when my collection of short fiction, *What Became of Them*, came out, I read for a group of senior citizens, and I was surprised by their eagerness to share their stories with me and each other. The director of the program asked me to create a memoir workshop and that workshop series (eleven sets of workshops in all) was twice granted by the Maine Humanities Council. That’s how I began working with memoir writers and stopped teaching adolescents. I developed the writing workshops that led to writing and publishing *Turning Memories Into Memoirs/A Handbook for Writing Lifestories* in 1992. At the same time, I crossed from writing fiction to writing memoir. I felt more satisfaction and stimulation in telling the story of my life.

**Was all of this happening in Maine?**

Yes. I started in Lewiston and Brunswick and spread out from there. I was born in the Franco community in Lewiston and have lived most of my life in southern Maine. This is home. My clients, however, come from all around the country — and from other countries.

**Not everyone wants to write a memoir. What compels people to do so?**

First of all, telling a story is a pleasure — it’s a natural way to communicate. So, some people choose to write for their own pleasure. Just listen for the storytellers next time you’re at a party or gathering. They often laugh at their own tales!



There is also a human compulsion to record the past, to preserve a culture or a way of life that’s changing, and to celebrate personal accomplishment. This is obviously not a drive that everyone has. In my workshops, I often ask, “Who was the kid in your family who sat with the adults to hear their stories?” Well, it’s the people sitting around me — my workshopers. We sometimes think that kids only want to go out and play, but at a certain age the kids who will be storytellers crave — and need to hear — adult stories in the same way that their brothers and sisters need to go out to play. I myself loved to sit with my father and uncle as they spoke about their lives. Even today this is a warm memory. My workshopers often can identify one of their grandchildren who is already this kid.

Finally, many of us feel a need to find the meaning in life — of our lives. Writing is a vehicle for exploring the what and the why of life and making sense of it. Lifewriting can be very enriching. Some begin knowing this; others discover it in the process. If you tell your story with honesty and with detail (detail is very important), you will experience a combination of healing, growth, and peace.

**Do you have more clients of a certain age or gender? If so, why do think that is?**

Most of my clients are fifty years old and counting. By nature, reminiscence is a function of age and so one rightly expects young people to be immersed in their lives — raising kids, launching careers — while older people are usually on the other side of all of that and are given to reflecting on what was. At this stage of life, “what was” is longer than “what will be.”

My workshops are about seven-to-one women. Broadly speaking, women tend to be more relational and so group activity appeals to them more. Men tend to be more do-it-yourselfers. All the other services I offer — coaching, editing, co-authoring, and book production — are evenly divided between men and women.

**Are there any themes that you see repeatedly in Maine memoirs?**

When I started out in 1988, Franco-American writers often wrote of the rough edges of assimilating into Yankee culture, of learning English. Both groups and in-migrants wrote much about poverty and hardships that my generation did not know.

At that time, I heard a lot of Depression and World War II stories. I also had many stories from men about public things they had done in their lives and from women about the personal relationships they had had. I used to give the men the assignment of writing about their love story and asked the women to write about a time they participated in history (first woman in their town to do this, or that).

Now, that is no longer necessary. Today the level of education of the people I work with is much higher, and I would say the writers are more sophisticated.

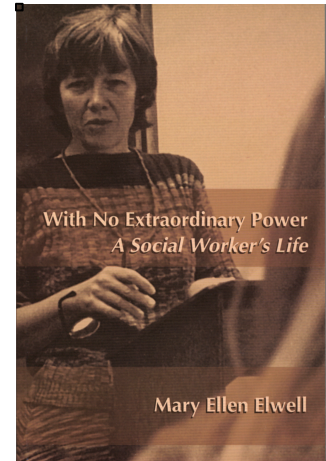
**Do you have any great success stories?**

At the risk of being a “Susie Sunshine,” let me say I consider every story that gets written to be a great success. I work with three sorts of clients. The first are those writing for their families and their communities. Their publication experience is a very personal one. After Jack Hargreaves published his memoir of growing up in Kingfield and working as a lumberjack and school bus driver (*Panning for Gold*), he sold eight hundred copies to locals. Emily Foster of Norway wrote *The Legend of Barjo Restaurant*

and went on to sell 2,200 copies to an audience drawn from the community. Not bad for a person whose writing experience had been taking orders as a waitress.

Other writers are reaching for a larger audience: Sy Myers' *From Coal Fields to Oil Fields* records his rise from poverty in West Virginia to directing a multimillion-dollar consulting firm in D.C. Marylander Mary Ellen Elwell's *With No Extraordinary Power* is a story of her social work career that culminated in leading a national social work organization – and perhaps more importantly the story of a pioneer woman who chose both career and family.

Still others have worked with me to produce memoirs that could be used to launch or bolster a career. These books obviously highlight the competence of the writer. Several manuscripts that I have worked on have won prizes, and I am pleased for the authors/clients, but these are not greater successes than the books that have reached only family, friends, and the local community.



**What are some of the most important things people ought to keep in mind when turning memories into a memoir?**

As with most true things, my suggestions are quite simple. Make a memory list of everything you remember about your life (or of the life of the person you are writing about). This list includes all the relationships and events in your life. It might have hundreds of items: births, deaths, illnesses, friends, failures, successes – anything and everything, so take your time. You'll refer frequently to this list. (We offer a free memory list booklet on our Web site: [TheMemoirNetwork.com](http://TheMemoirNetwork.com) Just follow the links for "Free Stuff" on the left-hand menu of our opening page.)

Using the memory list, write one story at a time – even one part of one story at a time. Don't sit down to write your memoirs. Sit down to write a vignette today and another one tomorrow. Eventually, these can come together into a coherent whole, and you will have your memoir. But, first, you must not be defeated by the seemingly lengthy task of writing a whole book! Remember: yard by yard, it's hard; inch by inch, it's a cinch.

Start the writing process anywhere you feel like starting it. Remember that the beginning story of the book is not necessarily the story you started the writing process with. Start anywhere that interests you.

Also, write stories about the ten most important items on your list – items without which your life could not have been what it was. Set the realistic goal of writing three-to-five-page stories around each core memory list item. Later on, short pieces can be



expanded. Your manuscript will add up page by page, story by story. Don't worry about chronological order yet.

I could go on (my workshops do extend over a number of days, after all!), but let me suggest only one more step. Always write in detail – the more the better. Replace vague words with precise setting, dialogue, or action. “She was poor” is vague but “Her living room had a linoleum rug, tattered at the edges, that barely reached from the vinyl couch to the folding chairs” shows a setting that gives a strong sense of “poor.” Likewise, “She was nice” is vague but “She listened with her head turned to catch my every word” portrays a definite “nice.” Cut out vague adverbs, too, words like “angrily” and “beautifully.” They mean different things to different readers. Imprecise words don't convey much meaning! A useful exercise is to replace half – yes, half! – of your adjectives and adverbs with setting, dialogue, or action. This almost always makes your text more forceful and informative.

### **What about painful memories?**

Painful memories come with the territory, but writing about an experience may relieve pain. Give yourself permission to take it slowly. Like peeling an onion, eventually you'll arrive at the center of your grief – and you'll often find insight and acceptance, too. The process is difficult, but it can be healing. Pay attention to the feedback your emotions give you.

It's also perfectly okay to decide not to write about difficult experiences – at least for a time. Writing happy memories first may give you the confidence to tackle the painful ones later, but don't put it off forever. In my workshops, I have repeatedly seen participants discover that it takes more energy to avoid a memory than to write about it.

### **Is it the process, or the product, that your clients value most?**

I would say both. At first writing is difficult but, after a few months, the writer gets into the process and begins to really enjoy it. “I can't wait to get up and write,” I hear all the time from my coaching clients after two or three months of work together. But, there's no gainsaying that having a published book in hand is gratifying. Because South Berwick author Cindy Doucette's *It Can Happen to Any Family* recorded the story of her daughter's drug-induced death, it was difficult to write. But Doucette was able to understand many things in the process of writing. Now, she has used her book to speak about the dangers of teen drug use. Having the book in hand is very satisfying.

Many writers begin a book thinking that it is about one thing, and then after a while they realize that their story really has a different theme than they had originally thought. This makes the process exciting (even if discouraging at times). Harlem writer Hastie Lowther took ten years to write her husband's memoir, but now reports, “I'm

having so much fun speaking about and selling the book.”

### **Is being a good writer when you start important?**

Yes and no. Of course, effective writing is important. For one thing, we derive more pleasure from doing things well than from being held back by lack of skill. Writing is communication, so clarity counts. But you’re not born with writing skills; they can be acquired — at any age.

At first, many new writers are intimidated by their lack of skill. The cure is simple: write frequently, critically, and voluminously. Truly, practice makes perfect. Don’t worry about whether your first draft is “good enough.” Stifle that censor who sits on your shoulder judging every word you write. No one else expects you to win a Pulitzer with your first draft!

Re-writing is a key step later on. That’s when you fix the grammar and spelling, check the imagery, review the development of theme, etc. That, too, you can learn.

### **Do you have any suggestions besides the memory list for jogging your memory?**

[Turning Memories Into Memoirs](#) includes a whole chapter on this subject. Many people are surprised that they can remember things they had not thought about for years. Here are a few activities that really work:

- Analyze your family photos, historical photos, and paintings of the time.
- Refer to journals, letters, yearbooks, and newspapers.
- Make lists about yourself and family members: favorite foods, sayings, pastimes, or songs (be serious or frivolous).
- Talk about the past with people who were there.
- Write time-capsule descriptions of yourself or others.
- Read a book or see a film set in the same era.

### **What role do research and interviewing play in lifewriting?**

Memory can be self-serving or misleading. Research and interviewing will either corroborate or correct your memory. Drawing on other sources also widens your perspective and gives your stories authentic detail. Researching a period may uncover clues to the puzzles of your past: you can learn a lot by relating personal and family history to events — local or national — that you were unaware of.

### **What does the final product look like when you undertake to write your lifestory?**

Packaging your stories like a “real” book is a satisfying reward for your hard work. The

Memoir Network (previously the Soleil Lifestory Network), of course, handles the entire publication process for a client. We've produced both paperback and hardbound in professional-looking editions. When you include photographs, maps, photocopies of documents, newspaper articles, etc., your lifestory becomes a treasure not only for your children but also for the larger community.

Quick printers can do comb- or spiral-bound individual copies at a low cost. These are almost always more amateur-looking, but that may just fit the bill for many writers.

I caution writers not to be in a hurry to see a final product. After all the work, what a disappointment it would be to see, too late, what you left out, or could do differently. Linger with the work, put it away for a while, and then re-read it as a reader, not a writer. Ask others to do the same.

### **What about the person who has a story to tell but does not want to do the writing?**

That person needs a co-author. A [co-author](#) writes the story and the subject of the memoir provides corrective feedback. It works this way: the co-author conducts phone interviews to gather information to incorporate into whatever written material – manuscripts (at various levels of polish and organization), newspaper clippings, etc. – that the client has provided. Internet research will often yield valuable information. The co-author weaves these together to create a coherent and interesting narrative.

In *Down Over Normandy*, I was able to find much filler information from squadron blogs and Web sites. Additionally, I drew from books on the Normandy invasion and the B-17 bombers. The result was a tribute to my client's uncle that she had desired for years.

### **Besides workshops, what sorts of services can people take advantage of to write a memoir?**

Many people with a story to tell can yearn to record their story but have little or no sense of how to go about it. [My Memoir Network](#) (previously the Soleil Lifestory Network) provides services that take an individual from book idea to book publication. I offer both introductory and intermediate residential memoir workshops and tele-classes.

Other people want to work one on one. I offer them coaching, editing, and co-authoring services. I've co-authored many books since 1988. My goal is always to give the manuscript the "voice" (sound) of the person who has commissioned me to write. I love co-authoring. Over the years, I've written the stories of World War II aviators, IBM executives, Maine lumberjacks, Greek churches.

The most important thing: Do it. Sit right down and start writing today. You'll be glad you did.

*Turning Memories Into Memoirs* (Soleil Press, Lisbon Falls; 272 pages; \$24.95) can be ordered through any bookstore or directly from Soleil Press, 95 Gould Rd., Lisbon Falls, ME 04252. 207-353-5454. [TheMemoirNetwork.com](http://TheMemoirNetwork.com)