

## Thanks for The Memoirs

*There has never been a better time to write the story of your life.*

BY EMILY MITCHELL

We all have a story to tell. And more and more, we are starting to tell it, speaking into a tape recorder or writing with pen on paper or at a computer. The act of writing about our past, says Kate Hays, a Toronto clinical psychologist, offers valuable “self-reflection, exploration, continuity and discovery.” Most important, memoirs are true; they tell what



happened. Frank McCourt's 1996 best seller *Angela's Ashes* kindled interest in the memoirs of ordinary people. Says Adam Sexton, dean of New York City's Gotham Writers' Workshop: “People read McCourt and think, ‘I could do that.’” Maybe everyone won't equal his success, but to your family and friends the story you write will be prized above all others.

I'm a kisser, I'm a joke teller, I'm a dancer. I'm a somewhat everything and nothing big. I'm not stuck-up. I don't have none of that thinking that you're better than anybody. I didn't go to college. I didn't have no big great job. I haven't had anything big. I was just down-to-earth and I got along fine. I'm my own person, that's what it is and I'm still

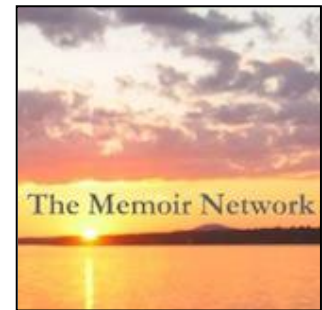
moving.

These are the words of Freddie Mae Baxter, born into a poor family in the rural South 75 years ago. When her mother died, the teenage Freddie Mae left for the North, seeking work as a domestic. After a lifetime of caring for others—children and old people—she started talking into a tape recorder at the behest of a writer friend named Gloria Bley Miller, recalling what it was like to grow up in a big family in a little house with no indoor plumbing; to pick cotton; to live in “jivey” 1940s Harlem. Miller edited the reminiscences, and Baxter's unique voice so impressed editors at a major publishing house, Alfred A. Knopf, that next month it will bring out her exuberant memoirs, *The Seventh Child: A Lucky Life*. “I'm the seventh child, so I know I'm lucky,” says Baxter. And what better proof than Knopf's literary stamp of approval? That in itself is an extraordinary tale—and a telling one.

Today, more than ever before in modern times, the era of confession is upon us. Vast numbers of people are eager to spill the most minute details of their lives on television talk shows, in poetry, in comedy clubs, in monologues for the theater and, most of all, in books. The range is astonishing, from best-selling works by the celebrated—like the just-out memoirs of Henry Kissinger—to two different views of growing up Irish by brothers Frank and Malachy McCourt, to the modest, self-published stories meant only for a handful of friends and relatives.

With so many people putting their lives on paper, workshops and college extension courses have sprung up from coast to coast to help them with the writing craft. Anyone can start. Looking at old pictures or magazines, remembering the way things tasted, sounded and smelled, and recalling a specific incident, such as the first day of school or the first family car, can bring a flood of memories. Some people write in solitude, while many prefer working with a group. Others want a gentle guide. Along their journey through the past, people discover that what may have seemed an unimportant event has value. They may write to exorcise terrible experiences, complete the grieving process or just give dignity to an everyday life. For most, there is a desire to create a permanent record of their experiences and leave a legacy for their family.

At the University of Wisconsin-Superior, psychotherapist John Kunz directs the International Society for Reminiscence and Life Review, working with older people to put their oral histories on tape. He finds that “as baby boomers age, they say, ‘Gee, we want people to value what we’ve done with our lives.’” Since 1988, [Denis Ledoux](#), an author who lives in Lisbon Falls, Me., has led workshops around the country, helping thousands of people get started on their [memoirs](#) through [The Memoir Network](#). He argues that a sense of continuity between generations has been lost, geographically and emotionally, and that the oral tradition of story-telling has diminished. As an alternative, if children and grandchildren are out of reach, says Ledoux, “you can [write out your story](#).”



Allen Greenstone, 75, of Hollywood, Fla., wanted to put his story on paper so that his daughter Adrienne, 50, would know him as more than just her father. The retired Navy fighter pilot was on a training mission in 1943 and watched his wingman's plane go into a tailspin and crash. For half a century, he carried a poem in his head that he had composed about the tragedy:

"Spinning, twisting, hurtling down.  
Faster, faster, towards the ground.  
Wires screaming,  
standing taut.

Metal groaning, anguish wrought.  
...Victim trapped in metal womb  
resisting, wrapped within his tomb.”

After joining a weekly workshop at a local community center, he finished the poem and began writing the stories that eventually turned into 40 chapters of memoirs. Each week one of the nine students in the workshop reads aloud from a work in progress, and the others comment. Says Greenstone: “We determined early on that we're all grownups. We're critical in a positive way.”