

Creating a Narrator Readers Love

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You might have a fabulous story to write, but if you can't create a voice people want to hang out with, your story will never be read.

Let's begin with some simple lists. I suggest you print these out and post them near your writing table. Add your own ideas, too, from your experiences as a reader and writer:

What are qualities readers love in a narrator of memoir?

- spunkiness
- emotional honesty—clear-eyed vision of what happened, how it affected the narrator's emotional life, and the lives of others
- willingness to look behind events into meaning
- willingness to make meaning that is substantial and transformative
- willingness to accept personal responsibility in life events
- can-do spirit
- joyful attitude
- authenticity, or walking one's talk—SHOWING a life lived that mirrors opinions, attitudes, and values expressed
- sense of humor
- vulnerability about still not understanding events
- fearlessness
- lust for life/adventure
- willingness to try against the odds

- silliness
- willingness to make mistakes

What are qualities readers dislike in a narrator of memoir?

- victim mentality
- blame—pointing fingers at characters for things that have happened in the narrator’s life
- refusal to accept responsibility
- woes-me attitude
- arrogance—untransformed holier-than-thou attitude
- narcissistic behavior—no consideration of other players in the story; they exist only to prop up the narrator’s dissertation
- unwillingness to make meaning from events that teaches something bigger than small-spirited personal obsessions.
- dishonesty about events critical to the heart of the story. If a writer is making a larger truth that resonates for the story as a whole, and he has changed details of the life experience, most readers will overlook this in the name of story / literature / art. But if you say you survived an airplane crash in the Andes, go on to write a story about the power of faith, and you’ve never even been out of Memphis, hmmm . . . readers aren’t going to be too happy.
- long-winded, boring iteration of material only marginally pertinent to the story action—but then that’s just bad writing

How do you avoid one of these voices and beckon the other?

You get honest with yourself. You do the hard work of looking inside. You stand in the place of compassion. You get over having to be right.

This is work that has little to do with the craft of writing, but for the writer of personal stories, it must be done to find an authentic voice readers will return to again and again. That's one of the things that makes memoir such a hard form of literature to write; the author must do the personal work it will take to create a narrating voice that doesn't turn readers off, either with immature behavior, like blaming everyone else for his sorry life, or woes-me/ victim mentality, both sure ways to lose an audience.

As a writer of memoir you have to get inside your experience and come to terms with it, see other people with compassion and accept responsibility for your part in the larger drama called your life.

When really horrible things happen, we are challenged as writers of memoir because they force us to find deep, soulful ways to come to terms with how we may have participated in the event, or what that event means in the larger picture of who we were, who we have become. We are pushed to write in ways that pull back the facades and expose the rawness of humanity.

This is hard work.

In addition, as writers of memoir we need to:

- lighten up where possible and make fun of ourselves
- find meaning in random events and learn to communicate that meaning in such a way that the reader opens his eyes to the world in new ways

The most important lesson for the writer of memoir, hoping to create a narrator readers love, is to remember that readers automatically identify with the protagonist, the key character, of a story. It's part of the fundamental role of story in the human psyche. By identifying with the protagonist, we have the opportunity to live events outside our own experience (or sometimes events that mirror our own experience) and grow in ways guided by the writer's wisdom, illumination, and direction.

That's why it's critical that the writer of memoir be authentic and emotionally honest. As writers of memoir, as artists, we have the responsibility to help readers transform their own existence, whether it be with laughter or pathos.

When the protagonist of a piece of memoir—the narrator—is someone NO ONE would want to be, the reader immediately turns off, closes the book and takes a hike to . . . the Laundromat, for gawds sakes! Anywhere but here with this whiny, blaming, pitiful, weak-spined crustacean . . . mumble, mumble, mumble . . .

Readers want heroes to identify with, people who overcome the odds, so when you cast your life as story, you will need to step up to the task of casting yourself as the hero of your life. That is the kind of narrator who will win readers allegiance and love.