Club Ed Conversations

Editing Memoir

Judy Gruen answered questions about editing memoir. The transcript has been edited for typos and clarity and to remove some of the “Hi, how are you?” conversation that happens in a live chat.

Judy Gruen is a writer, essayist, humorist, and editor whose essays and features have appeared in the Wall Street Journal, Chicago Tribune, Woman’s Day, New York Daily News, and many other major media outlets.

She’s a regular contributor to the Jewish Journal and writes the “Chasing the Byline” blog on her website, [http://www.judygruen.com](http://www.judygruen.com/). Judy edits nonfiction books, including memoir, offering both developmental editing and writing coaching services. Reach out to her at [judyrgruen@gmail.com](mailto:judyrgruen@gmail.com).

**Question** *(Jennifer Lawler): Judy, I have a question from someone who isn’t sure how to advise a writer who is hesitant to write about people who are still alive. It doesn’t sound like the legal issues are the concern, but more how the people will react. I know this is a huge question not easily answered in a paragraph, but what are some suggestions you might have for editors dealing with clients who are hesitant to tell the whole truth for this reason?*

**Answer**: Yes, the question about writing about living relatives or friends is HUGE! It depends on how important the relationship is, but that is not more important than considering how accurate the writer’s view of the situation is as well. We all view our history through a very personal lens.

It’s also possible to cover up the person a bit as well as their actual behavior, though it makes it hard to have the memoir aspect as authentic as good memoirs need to be.

There is no easy or simple solution to this, I’m afraid. You might also ask: how important is it to include this person in my story? Can I make the same point by referring to an unnamed person who did X and it had Y impact on me?

**Comment** *(JL): Judy, I’ve written personal essays where I haven’t named a person but described their behavior – and in one case, the person I was describing couldn’t believe that a person would do such a thing! And in another case a person I wasn’t describing thought I was describing them, so . . . it is fraught!*

**Answer**: I once wrote a humor column about a casual friend who was super skinny but neurotic about even eating carrots for the carb content. I knew that she would never recognize herself in the column, and yes, I exaggerated a bit. People don’t realize how revealing they are, but still, one must be careful.

**Question** *(JL): Judy has a great post on the differences in how two different memoirists approached the writing and revision process – well worth a read:*[*https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:6902491356070060032/*](https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:6902491356070060032/)

*And I think this is a very interesting article on the “speculative memoir”:*[*https://electricliterature.com/why-adding-monsters-and-fairies-to-a-memoir-can-make-it-even-more-real/*](https://electricliterature.com/why-adding-monsters-and-fairies-to-a-memoir-can-make-it-even-more-real/)

*Jane Friedman has a great piece on common problems with memoir:*[*https://www.janefriedman.com/memoir-wont-sell/*](https://www.janefriedman.com/memoir-wont-sell/)

*What are some other good resources for people interested in editing memoir?*

**Answer**: One of my favorite books about memoir is called *Inventing the Truth*, edited by William Zinsser, which includes long interviews with very famous memoirists. It’s well worth a read to understand how different successful memoirs were focused on various periods or aspects of a person’s life, as well as dealing with such vital issues as the reliance on memory.

**Question** (*JL): Judy, you mention that memory is not reliable. I once talked to a friend about a trip to Korea that we took and she was adamant that she wasn’t on that trip! And I had to really think about it. She was part of a friend group of about ten people, five or six of whom went on the trip. And my brain inserted her into scenes in my memory because she was normally part of that friend group! That was an almost-frightening example of the unreliability of memory.*

*So, I guess the question is, how can we help writers be more accurate in their recall? Or do we just shrug and say it is what it is?*

**Answer**: Yes, great question. This is dealt with in the Zinsser book, and I got a lot out of that. When I was writing my memoir, *The Skeptic and the Rabbi: Falling in Love with Faith*, I was writing about many things that happened decades earlier and I did not trust my memory on certain details. When possible, I checked with the person I was writing about who was there, but the most important thing to keep in mind is: what is the larger truth I am trying to convey?

For your trip, for example, your major point might have been a new understanding of another culture, in which case the exact people who were there is secondary. So, think about how confident you are about that “larger truth.” Does that make sense?

**Question** *(JL): Oh, yes, I like the idea of focusing on the larger truth. And of course verifying information is helpful – looking at past journals I see that my memory has often elided together distinct events, and so on. What are some other issues to keep in mind when editing memoir?*

**Answer**: One thing that keeps coming up in discussions about good narrative is the issue of “intention versus obstacle.” For memoirists, it’s important to keep that in mind as you craft your narrative. To keep people interested, ask yourself: what am I up against now, and how will I achieve my intention? It’s a short little question that can really help with the strength of your storyline.

**Comment** *(JL): That’s interesting! It is sort of like goal/motivation/conflict that we discuss in editing novels.*

**Answer**: Goal/intention/obstacle isn’t *as* critical in memoir but some dramatic tension must be there. For example, I’m now reading Carl Bernstein’s new memoir, *Chasing History*, about his journalism career. It’s a narrative that takes us through his first copyboy experience at 16 and through a 50+ year career, but still, I notice that even in the first chapter when he’s first exposed to the newsroom (of 1960), there is energy, drama, excitement from the deadlines and sudden emergencies in the news business.

**Question** *(JL): Normally I would say a book that spans fifty years is probably more autobiography than memoir, but would you say that the theme being his journalism career lands it more squarely in the memoir camp?*

*What is the difference between memoir and autobiography?*

**Answer**: Jennifer, even though Bernstein was one of the Watergate reporters (with Bob Woodward) so his career rocketed into the stratosphere when he was very young, apparently this memoir really only focuses on his earliest years in journalism–the 1960’s–pre-Watergate. I think it’s a shame–it’s quite long for covering such a short period in a long career.

The main difference between memoir and autobiography is that memoir really focuses on a particular aspect of a person’s life: a time of change or evolution; or a time of growth and experience. *Angela’s Ashes* only covers a year or so in McCourt’s life, if I remember correctly, but it’s so incredibly rich.

Autobiographies are more suitable to well-known people or people whose lives really would have broad interest for the public, in which case, we might really be interested to know the name of their elementary school and what musical instrument they played when they were eight. For the rest of us more average folks, this level of detail will not be important nor will it have any historical or societal relevance.

**Comment** *(JL): Thanks, Judy. I used to read a lot of biographies and autobiographies when I was younger because I was so curious about those minute details! But for most writers it is more about the story they are telling versus that they are telling a story about themselves.*

**Question** *(Kendra Olson): Do you have any advice on how editors can help writers to tease their story out? For example, I once edited a travel memoir that seemed to mostly be “I did this, then I went there, then I did this [insert exciting adventure that doesn’t seem to link to the overall narrative]”. While he’d done lots of interesting things, it mostly read like a series of linked vignettes without a cohesive narrative tying them together.*

**Answer**: Kendra, another great question. The writer, after getting the whole story out of her system, needs to ask herself: what do I want the reader to come away with? Am I trying to educate and entertain? Show what I learned about myself through my travels? A good editor should help the writer clarify her intention for the book. If it is to have any chance at all of actually selling, it has to be compelling, and “I went here, then I went there and ate the best pineapple I ever had” doesn’t cut it. Help the writer discover the message of the book, and that should help decide what scenes go, what stay.

**Comment** (*Lee Hornbrook): It’s fortuitous that this month’s chat is about memoir, as I just finished a memoir 3+ years in the making in January. I’ve started pitching, signed up for a writer’s conference, and now I’m going back to do a next (last?) round of cuts because it’s still too long.*

**Answer**: Lee, congratulations on completing (or nearly completing) your memoir. It’s a huge achievement and I wish you every success with it. You didn’t ask this but I’ll dive in and recommend as much editing as possible; most memoirs written by less experienced writers are too long. Have you tried to get some beta readers to give you feedback?

**Comment** (*LH): Yes, I’ve sent it to about fifteen readers. It’s too long, too complex, too demanding. It’s tied tightly to Eliot’s “The Waste Land” – that kind of demanding. It’s not a first draft. It’s heavily edited. I’ve had initial response from an editor connected with the writers conference I’m attending in May on a query letter/synopsis/first 19 pages of my book. It’s the query and synopsis that need work. She had high praise for the writing.*

*But she gave me some good suggestions for making the next series of cuts. It was at 203,000 words. I cut it to 168,000 (10,000 was notes and appendices). This round I’m shooting for between 90K and 100K words.*

**Answer**: Wow, Lee, that sounds like a very serious undertaking. Good for you for seeking out these other readers and for listening to the advice of someone with expertise. Further cuts may really hurt when you are making them but you’ll be glad afterward when you see the results.

I have edited a few memoirs where the word count was well over 100,000–way, way, way too long. A problem many memoirists have is that they are detailing too much in terms of conversations and other details that do not move the story along.

Cut dialog to the essence–what was important in this conversation? This will really help. It’s fine of course to get it all out there in a first draft, but that’s your draft for you to keep, the one that helped you get it out of your system.

After that, it’s time to think about how to keep the readers’ attention. The same thing with scenes: don’t make them too long, or too numerous. You aren’t writing a travelogue, you are telling a life story in which you grow, change, overcome obstacles, achieve a goal.

**Comment** *(JL): Judy, you’re describing a lot of similarities with fiction and I think that’s important for editors to keep in mind. Just as in fiction we help authors ensure that scenes accomplish something (or are left out), show them where to trim back on the unnecessary dialogue, and end at a place that will keep them turning the pages, we can use those same methods for memoir.*

*You mentioned cutting back on unnecessary dialogue – what do you say about editing faithfully recorded dialogue to get to the gist of it? As editors, can/should we recommend that dialogue be revised to be more engaging? Or does that cross a line? Or maybe it would be better to say, when does editing dialogue cross a line?*

**Answer**: Even faithful dialog can become tedious, even if it’s in an important scene. And yes, Jennifer, the more I myself study memoir as a memoirist, memoir editor, and essayist, the more I appreciate the link between this nonfiction genre and fiction. In terms of how much dialog is enough–too-much, as long as the essence is faithful to the point, you need not go on and on. If it’s really dramatic, say, it’s a long argument and more emotion or hidden information is being revealed, then go for it.

My background is in journalism and feature writing so my training and emphasis is on getting the story told as succinctly as possible, while not skimping on dramatic, comedic, or other satisfying impact. Of course it will vary from memoir to memoir. But very few memoirists can successfully pull off a memoir with 100,000 or more words.

**Comment** *(JL): I like that you mention comedic impact. We often think of memoir as a very serious undertaking but often humor can create an even bigger impact. I remember reading Jenny Lawson’s* Let’s Pretend This Never Happened *and howling with laughter on one page and crying on the next. Bringing the reader through the whole range of human emotion, not just the tragic, is such an underrated skill.*

**Answer**: Jennifer, I cannot agree with you more. Much of my writing career has been humor writing, and humor writing also has a serious purpose. I worked very hard to infuse my memoir, which was about an unintentional spiritual search, with as much humor and laughter as possible, because those kind of “I found God and boy am I glad I did” stories can be overly serious and even a drag.

There’s so much humor in life, and it’s true that you can make serious points with humor. You can also just offer the gift of laughter, which we all need in every generation and in every season. Now, for example, during this awful war over in Ukraine, I am redoubling my efforts to offer humor columns to the paper where I publish regularly. In a way it’s hard because the news is so awful, but people need the emotional break.

**Question** *(JL): Judy, let’s talk memoir revision. I think it’s pretty common for the first draft to be a fairly un-artful mind dump – here’s what happened and here’s how I felt about it. So, revision is next! But do you have recommendations for what different revision passes should focus on?*

**Answer**: Jennifer, I recently discovered and became a fan of Allison K Williams, who does a lot of workshops and has built quite a large following in terms of editing. I bought her recent book called *Seven Drafts*, which takes writers of both fiction and memoir through her recommendations of what you should be focusing on in each revision.

Despite my own experience, I am certainly learning from this book. One thing she does encourage is to go for that first, spill-your-guts first draft, everything and anything you need to say. This is cathartic and probably needs to get out of your system. She also discusses dialog and so much more. I would say that once a writer feels she or he has a “pretty good” draft to try to recruit a couple of carefully chosen readers for their input. Based on that, more editing should be done, and I believe beta readers should be saved for what you feel is a REALLY, REALLY almost finished draft.

Do you agree?

**Comment** *(JL): Oh, yes, I agree that beta readers should be saved for near the very end, when you are looking at the ms and you don’t know what else you can do to make it better. If you already know the ending needs work, then work on the ending. It’s when you feel like you’ve done all you can that you want to bring in beta readers to see if the ms is provoking the kind of reader response you intend.*

*In some cases there might be an argument for bringing in a beta reader earlier, such as when you want to find out if an entirely new direction makes sense for the ms before committing to it for the next six months.*

*But I think “a couple of carefully chosen readers” is key – I get emails all the time from authors who have gotten feedback from ten or twenty readers and it leaves them overwhelmed and unsure of where to go next.*

**Question** *(Patty Neufeld) I’d like to better understand the tell-tale signs that a memoirist needs coaching as opposed to a dev edit. In my (limited) experience editing memoir, these new writer clients have needed intensive support and more content (too few words), and I have been coaching them as part of the developmental service, which has been exhausting. At what point do I put the edit on hold and focus on the coaching? Sometimes, it seems as though they want both services in one fee, and the amount of guidance I provide a memoir writer, so far, has been way more than my novel writers.*

**Answer**: Gosh, that is such an important and relevant question, Patti. I have been in your shoes, and it is exhausting and confusing. It’s hard because a true dev edit needs to have reviewed the entire mss so far, but that’s a big commitment of time and money (for the client).

If, though, you’ve read through just a few chapters and see that this writing is so below par, you might want to suggest the coaching service first.

A dev edit would be useless without more craft in place. But the lines can indeed be blurry. Another thing is that if you have done just a dev edit on a few chapters and see the same problem, to gently recommend coaching.

To clarify: I realize I contradicted myself, saying that a dev edit needs to have reviewed an entire mss and then saying you might have only done it on a few chapters; both options are possible but the client won’t know (nor will the editor) what other major issues are coming ahead in later chapters. . . Still, an editor will know pretty fast whether the writer needs remedial help versus editing advice.

I do find that these days, so many writers are unhealthfully sensitive, and are unable to take tactfully, supportively given feedback such as this. They are in the wrong business.

**Comment** *(JL): Judy, I often recommend that editors take a little time to review the first few chapters of a completed mss before agreeing to take on the project, which I think is what you’re referring to here. Usually you can tell if the writing is up to par, though you won’t know all of the dev problems from a brief review.*

*I have found that even though I’m careful to do this vetting before taking on a dev edit I am sometimes halfway through the edit when I realize the dev problems are so overwhelming that the author really needs coaching, not DE. And then I have to figure out how to gracefully give them the DE and some coaching without overloading myself.*

*I find myself asking authors a lot more questions about their ms before I take the project on than I used to! So, for memoir I might ask specific questions about their intention, and what they think the takeaway is for the reader, and so on. That helps me figure out if they’re still at the brain dump stage, which probably requires something more like coaching or ms critique than DE.*

**Question** *(JL): Judy, I’ve definitely run into novelists who are extremely possessive of their words and reject feedback or take it too personally, but this can be exacerbated in memoir, because the writer is talking about themselves, so our feedback can be experienced as an attack on them (though of course we don’t intend that).*

*Do you have any tips for either helping writers accept the feedback or weeding out clients who are going to be too sensitive to work with effectively? Can you tell (or \*how\* can you tell) before taking on the project?*

**Answer**: I learned a painful lesson recently about this, and wrote about it in that Linked In post you shared above. This woman clearly had emotional issues and she was relitigating her past in the manuscript. This was obvious early on, but she was very defensive about it.

In retrospect, I should have told her I didn’t think it would be productive to continue working together, but for some reason I hung on. She was clever and a bit manipulative, and while the ultimate responsibility is mine and mine alone for slogging on, by the end, when she sent me a copy of her published book which thanked me in the acknowledgements, I actually was so sick of the experience I threw it in the trash!

Yes, memoirists will be more sensitive, and one thing we can do when we make comments especially in the documents is to avoid “the accusatory ‘you,'” as in, “You are using this phrase too often,” etc. Instead, we can soften the blows by saying, “The reader will probably appreciate if you could add such and such.” However, if a client is really getting overwrought by even the most tactfully given feedback, consider if you can handle working with them.

I had another memoirist who became angry with me after asking me to read her completed book and give it an Amazon review. I wanted to like it but found it too problematic and she has never forgiven me for not having written the review. We can’t control for other people’s issues.

**Comment** *(JL): Oh, yes, I love the point about the accusatory you! It is very helpful to put the focus on what the reader wants or is looking for versus what “you” the writer is doing wrong. “You should” can come across as hostile, however well-meaning it may be.*

*Yikes about those stories! I agree that it is best to heed those red flags, but I think we all wind up overlooking them from time to time and then we get to learn a new lesson.*

**Answer**: One more thought on this: ask the client what their purpose is. Is this for a personal sense of achievement, and to share with family and friends? Or is the intention to try to sell it, get reviews, etc.? They need to understand the bar will be much, much higher if their intention is more professional than personal.

**Comment** *(JL): Judy, yes, good point about the audience and publishing expectations. I know someone who works primarily with memoirists who are writing for their families and he is a very kind and encouraging presence for them who almost never pushes back very hard on anything. But if a writer is seeking traditional publication, they have a much higher bar to clear!*

**Comment** *(PN): Thank you. I just wish the memoir writers I knew valued the writing craft as much as the fiction writers. I think the temptation to think that because it’s their story, it will automatically have as much impart on readers as it had on them. And we all know this is ridiculous.*

**Comment** *(JL): Patti, I remember being a part of a writers’ group where we would read our work aloud, and one novelist used to read her work with all of the dramatic intonations she was imagining in her head, few of which made it on to the page. We finally had to give her work to someone else to read so she could “hear” that the drama she was imagining was missing.*

*I think it is very common for memoirists to have something of the same feeling about their work, as if just writing down what happened is enough to capture the experience – \*they\* see all of the dramatic intonations, but we don’t!*

**Comment** *(PN): Such a great idea! I had one client who would upload her manuscript into her audio books somehow, and Alexa would read it aloud. Maybe I should recommend this to all my clients. Hearing it back (apart from the robotic pacing) might save the day.*

**Comment** *(LH): One article I read about memoir length almost tongue in cheek implied that memoir writers are protective of their work because “these things really happened!” On the young memoirist’s behalf, they’re merely trying to be authentic to their lived lives. And that’s why memoir drafts run so long. Practice with writing fiction and editing can help them, of course.*

**Answer**: Lee, you can be authentic and yet have some self-discipline in writing! The news happens, but we don’t read every detail about every news item. Judicious choosing of how much of a story is worth telling is important. Maybe these young writers are overcompensating for feeling repressed by Twitter limits!

**Comment** *(LH): Actually, in all seriousness, I don’t think they’re overcompensating at all. I think editing for a lot of young writers/memoirists is akin to lying, when they’re trying to tell their story. By being selective, they’re cherry picking. I think they’re erring on the side of truth, not story-telling. That’s not necessarily a fault, though it’s not going to serve telling their story as well. They’re trying to tell the whole story, all their truth. They don’t have a background in writing and craft, as we do, where selectivity is important.*

**Comment** *(JL): Lee, I agree that this can sometimes be a form of trying to tell the truth. I remember one editor telling me that a memoir I was working on (this was many years ago) felt like just one terrible thing after the other and it all started to sound the same, and my reaction was, “Well, it was one terrible thing after the other! Pretending otherwise would be a lie!”*

*But – and this is what that editor was driving it – being more selective about what I included would have had more impact. But that lesson took me a few years to learn!*

**Comment** *(LH): I think finding that line between “telling the whole truth” and telling what’s needed to be said – is difficult for newer writers. And even for many experienced writers!*

Thanks to Judy for spending time with us!