

# Memoir Plus

Add a bonus to your personal narrative for a marketing boost.

BY JENNA GLATZER

I like this proposal,” the editor said, “but can you draw out the lessons a bit more?”

As a ghostwriter who specializes in memoirs, I became accustomed to this request. A client would come to me wanting to tell a personal story, and agents and editors would kick it back to us with the note that it would be more marketable if we could root it in something else: self-help, history, leadership ...

Fifteen years ago, pure memoirs were easier to place. Noncelebrities with uniquely interesting or relatable life stories had a reasonable shot of finding homes with publishers. But nowadays, for marketability’s sake, it’s much more common for editors to ask for memoirs to have a second genre element—what I’m calling “memoir plus.” And that can be good news if you’re willing to put in the work because it opens up what you can write about. It can also create a stronger book. Or you might hate it. But let’s explore.

## Why Does Memoir Need to Be Anything More?

In general, the reading public isn’t clamoring to read personal stories by people they’ve never heard of.

Celebrity memoirs? Sure—they’re huge and regularly occupy significant space on the bestseller lists. But to get buzz behind a “regular person” story, it’s often helpful if you promise to teach them something: the history of hip-hop, how to start a business, how to advocate for yourself in a medical setting. This “something extra” can be primarily educational (like multiple memoirs from people who’ve escaped from Westboro Baptist Church), instructive (like *Bringing Up Bébé* by Pamela Druckerman, a personal story that teaches techniques for parenting “the French way”), or mission-based (like *Know My Name* by Chanel Miller, which aims to inspire cultural change by illuminating the way we improperly handle sex crimes).

Agent Sorche Fairbank of Fairbank Literary Representation ([FairbankLiterary.com](http://FairbankLiterary.com)) says one reason it’s harder to sell pure memoir is that authors are no longer competing just with other memoirists, but with online platforms: “We’re so used to getting other people’s stories in short bits for free now ... it used to be that someone would read a book to get a glimpse into someone else’s life or feel less alone, but now we only have to look on social media.”

As for why it works to combine memoir elements with instructive or educational elements, research shows that readers have a growing preference for personalized angles. They'd rather hear from someone who's "been there" instead of getting a lecture from an expert who's removed from it. Your lived experience can be a valuable form of expertise.

That doesn't mean pure memoir can't still break through—it can, particularly if the writing itself is outstanding or if the author has a large platform—but consider if there's a larger story you can tie it to, or related lessons you'd be unusually qualified to teach or research.

## You're Shelving It Where?

Most recently, I wrote the book *Southern Fried Sass* with Ginger Minj of "RuPaul's Drag Race," combining traditional memoir with photography, recipes, and tips and advice about topics ranging from makeup to self-esteem and relationships. We sold it to Atria, where our editor pushed us further into the lifestyle genre than we had planned, taking clues from Reese Witherspoon's bestselling *Whiskey in a Teacup*.

In our original proposal, this was a memoir about a bullied young, gay, and genderfluid kid who went through the wringer with depression and grew up to be a famous drag queen, with a few recipes from his youth here and there. In the end, I was stunned to find it shelved in the cookbook aisle at Barnes & Noble! The idea was to capture an audience who wouldn't just be interested in an LGBTQ+ story, but also southern cooking.

Along the way, we lightened up the subject matter considerably. It still rang true to the story Ginger wanted to tell, but in more of an R-rated *Better Homes and Gardens* sort of way. It took compromise. Once we understood that the editor's vision was more of a colorful coffee table book style, we recognized the storyline was no longer going to get too dark. Mental hospitals and abuse were scaled back while drag beauty pageants and tips for throwing a potluck were highlighted.

Several other books I've worked on have taken paths that surprised me. News anchor Kyra Phillips originally planned to write a memoir about her infertility journey, but then her agent suggested bringing in her fertility doctor to comment throughout the book. Eventually, it morphed into a research-based fertility book with her

own stories leading off each chapter. I worried she'd be offended that her stories were no longer the main point (a few clients have balked at that), but she was happy to serve what publishers felt would be most helpful.

Collaborative writer Ellen Daly ([EllenDaly.com](http://EllenDaly.com)) has had the same experience. She frequently writes books with CEOs who want to tell the story of how they built their companies. "Everybody wants to write *Shoe Dog*," she says—referring to the *New York Times*-bestselling memoir by Nike co-founder Phil Knight. "But that was a moment. That story really was captivating and most business stories are not quite that interesting. Almost across the board, either when it gets to an agent or certainly by the time it gets to an editor, it gets turned into more of a hybrid memoir/leadership book with lessons."

Those lessons may be called out explicitly at the end of chapters in boxes, or they become the structural backbone and the narrative gets integrated and organized around it, Daly says. Whichever genre winds up more prominent is usually where it gets shelved—which is less important online, where a book can appear in multiple categories' searches, but more important in physical stores and libraries.

## New Angles on Common Topics

The industry hit a point of saturation with certain types of memoirs—grief, divorce, illness. Fairbank says that even though everyone's story is meaningful to them, she might get five other memoir queries on the same topic that month. Selling her on the idea of a grief memoir (arguably the hardest to place) is tough, and yet she's shopping one to publishers right now.

It's by Carin Clevidence, whose father was an anthropologist studying death beliefs and rituals around the world. For 37 years, he worked on his big magnum opus—and then he died suddenly, with no will or instructions. The author didn't want to leave his work unfinished, and the resulting story is interwoven. It's about the grief Carin is working through about this wonderful man as she also studies his research.

"Why do I think it's an extraordinary work? It has a meta appeal," Fairbank says. "It's bigger than just 'I feel terrible, and I don't know who I am with my father gone.' There are excerpts from her father's work, where you learn something about grief around the world, and it helps Carin make sense of grief in her own world."

That’s an example of the “something extra” she looks for in memoir. She’s not interested in prescriptive books but is interested in memoirs that cross over to narrative nonfiction—books that teach you about the history of Detroit (like *Detroit Hustle*) or falconry (*H Is for Hawk*) or fringe survivalist culture (*Educated*) while they also hit on more common themes like relationships, mental health struggles, and coming-of-age.

## Consider What Else You Might Accomplish

For many memoirists, the initial thought is to share a personal journey that other people might relate to or find interesting. But for some, the story could inspire a larger goal. That was the case with *Take Care of Them Like My Own* by Ala Stanford, M.D., a book Simon & Schuster calls a “memoir-meets-manifesto.” Stanford is a board-certified pediatric and adult surgeon and the founder of the Black Doctors Consortium, despite having few role models who looked like her or much encouragement as a young Black girl growing up in Philadelphia. Her story became newsworthy as she grappled with racial health inequalities during the early COVID days: The virus disproportionately affected people of color, and she started a grassroots movement to help people in her community get educated, vaccinated, tested, and treated.

But her agent says the process of defining the book took a long time, and the proposal went through multiple iterations. “Was it going to be a message book? Was it going to be about her past? Was it going to be a book about trauma and overcoming it?” asks Jennifer Weis of The Weis Agency ([TheWeisAgency.com](http://TheWeisAgency.com))—who was also a longtime executive editor at St. Martin’s Press. She says what was essential was “finding that kernel of salability that we felt represented her, made it special in the marketplace, and was something she could take into the future that would deliver inspiration and hope.”

What they workshopped together was a proposal that told Stanford’s personal story while also educating people about the research into racial health disparities, and then attempting to galvanize readers into action in their own communities. When you think about your memoir, consider whether it can put you in a position to similarly address issues that matter to you. Think bigger picture about one or two elements of your story that feel the most meaty, then work to find angles that aren’t already over-exposed.

## Platform Benefits

A benefit of adding these elements to your memoir is that you can often build a clearer platform around it. You’re not just asking people to become fans of your striking personality; you’re looking for people with common interests. It’s far easier to book speaking engagements and media interviews if your topic is “How to Keep Your Mind Sharp After Age 50” and not “My Journey Through Menopause.” Very often, the media and venues for speaking engagements seek out content that’s audience-focused (what’s in it for them?) beyond author-focused.

And if you’re not brand new to this, you’ll already have heard that platform is king. It is, sorry. Agents and editors are absolutely going to Google you, look at your social media numbers, and see where you’ve been quoted. Whatever you can do to get those numbers up and show that people listen to you about something is wise. It can not only help you sell your book but also influence your advance considerably.

Another nice part is that the book can help you to come up with additional revenue streams this way. Once you’ve put in the work to hone your message and research your topic, it’s usually pretty straightforward to come up with talks, courses, articles, podcasts, and so on that either come directly from the book or are spinoffs from it.

## Follow the Story

Daly says it’s important to stay true to what the story calls for. Sometimes there’s a natural synergy between genres, where a writer can include how-to or educational content. In those instances, she says outlining is an essential step: She and her clients work through the storyline first, and decide “What lessons can readers learn from this part of the story?” You may have to cut down pieces of the narrative that don’t have appropriate tie-ins.

But it’s not always appropriate to shoehorn lessons or research into a personal tale, and every now and then, a client has walked away from a bigger publisher that didn’t share the memoir vision in favor of an independent press or self-publishing so they could tell the story the way they intended it.

“You can lose some of the momentum and structural integrity of the story when you have to add in a lesson,” Daly says. You don’t want the reader to be engaged in an emotional scene and then get pulled out by a jarring “10

Ways to Deal With Trauma” list that you had to stick in there because it had been too many pages without a call-out box.

### Maybe It’s Not a Memoir

Consider your goals up front so you’re not wasting anyone’s time if you end up in a situation with agent or editor push-back: Are you comfortable letting your book become narrative nonfiction, self-help, business, etc. through a memoir lens? Or is it important to you to keep the focus squarely on your story? There aren’t any wrong answers, and industry professionals who decide what to publish are making guesses based on how they’ve seen previous books perform. Those guesses may bear out or may not—so it’s worthwhile to consider any advice you receive and then make educated decisions that take into account not only what might be most lucrative, but also what will align with your plans and interest.

It’s possible that you’ll believe adding an expert co-author, more research, more advice, or more recipes might sell better—but that it still isn’t the book you want

to write or the way you want to brand yourself. It’s a valid choice, but might limit your publishing options.

### The Bottom Line

“It’s not pure memoir or bust,” Fairbank says. Your story may be useful in many ways, and figuring out how it might work as a “memoir plus” book can take time and mental percolation. Stay open to the journey and you may end up with a stronger book than you realized you could write. **WD**

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