



# 10 Essential Books for Learning to Write Memoir

*Compiled by Jennie Nash, founder and CEO of Author Accelerator*

“You want to write and publish a book? Start here. Nash’s *Blueprint* will get you to the finish line.”  
– Brooke Warner, Publisher of She Writes Press

“A masterful guide to thinking about how, and why, your book will be read.”  
– Tabitha Carvan, author of *This is Not a Book About Benedict Cumberbatch*

“Jennie Nash blends warm encouragement, essential writing craft, and up-to-date industry knowledge into a book that’s a must-read for the aspiring memoirist. If you want to get your memoir out of your head, onto the page, and into the hands of the readers, you need this book.”  
– Rachael Herron, internationally bestselling author of *Fast-Draft Your Memoir*



*Blueprint for a Memoir: How to Write a Memoir for the Marketplace* is a book about laying a strong foundation for writing an engaging memoir, including defining your intention, your audience, the frame of your story, and its structure. These are essential questions a memoir writer should answer *before* they start to write. However, *Blueprint for a Memoir* is not a book about the craft of writing memoir—how to actually get the emotion on the page in scenes that engage the reader, how to write about people you know in a way that will not ruin your relationships, and how to deal with the slippery nature of memory when writing dialogue. There are already so many excellent books that address these questions, and it is my pleasure to share with you 11 of my favorites.

## 1. *Fast Draft Your Memoir in 48 Hours* by Rachael Herron

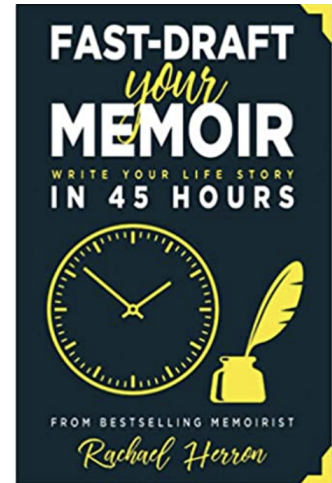
This book is approachable, practical, and enormously helpful to anyone writing memoir. Herron lays out a plan to “fast draft” and revise a memoir, and touches on all the big issues related to craft with simple suggestions you can put to use right away. If you have finished your *Blueprint* and are ready to write forward, this book would be a great first step toward understanding the craft of writing memoir.

Herron is the author of more than two dozen novels and a knitting memoir. She writes with the authority of someone who deeply knows her craft. She is also hilarious with a charming way of describing the work of writing memoir. You will probably find that you wish the book didn’t have to end.

I want to say something about Herron’s title and the idea that you can quickly write a solid draft of any book. I am not a fan of any system that suggests you can just sit down and slap words onto the page and create something worthwhile. This is because, for the vast majority of writers, that process leads to a terrible draft that can’t easily be salvaged but that the writer loves because they made it; it’s the road to frustration and heartbreak. I am also not a fan of any system that tries to convince writers that creating something worthwhile can be fast and easy. For the vast majority of writers, that just isn’t the case. But Herron is a very savvy teacher and writer and what she is doing in this book is not any of those things! She is sneaking vegetables into the brownies! She does indeed present a plan for fast-drafting your memoir in 48 hours, but it is built on a foundation of doing some solid, deep thinking about the book first, understanding key concepts about memoir, and knowing that what will follow this work is more work.

Here are three powerful lessons on memory and honesty from *Fast Draft Your Memoir in 48 Hours*:

- ❖ **Your reader expects nothing less than honesty.** “Readers are incredibly intelligent. The moment you gloss over something because it feels uncomfortable, they’ll notice. I guarantee it. A reader who thinks you’re covering something up will have zero motivation to get to know you better. There are a million great things to read out there—she’ll touch the Home button on her Kindle and open

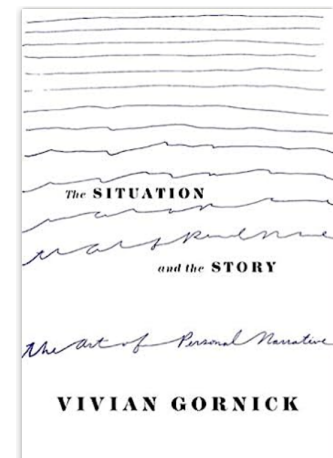


something else, leaving you forever. You have to be honest with your intelligent reader, and you have to keep her engaged.”

- ❖ **Telling the truth doesn't mean you have to tell *all* of the truths.** “Anne Lamott famously said, ‘You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories. If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should have behaved better.’ This has been taken by some new memoirists to mean they should write all of it, despite everyone’s feelings. But most don’t know Lamott also said, ‘I know I’m not going to publish anything that anyone I’m close to would be hurt by or would hate. And I know how much I’ll end up taking out. Telling the truth in memoir isn’t telling *all* the truths. It’s not spewing. Anything I’m writing will be completely crafted and edited before it’s published.’ Every memoirist handles the problem of family differently, and I don’t have the best answer for you. This is something you’ll have to figure out, but the key is: *you figure this out later*. Right now? Right now, you write as if every single person involved were dead.” (Herron cites Meredith Maran, *Why We Write About Ourselves*, Penguin Publishing Group, 2016) for this Lamott quote.)
- ❖ **Capture the emotional tone of each memory.** “Two Tools for Honesty...I like to look at a room tone from an emotional standpoint. Even if I can’t exactly remember everything that happened the afternoon when I learned my friend Eileen had been killed by sharks (true story), even if I can’t remember exactly what my best friend’s father said, or how we mourned Eileen’s death that afternoon, I can remember the tone of the room. It was quiet. Scared. Crushed. When I recreate dialogue and action, I try to honor the room tone. When I write this scene, what I put on the page must match that tone...The second thing that I advocate doing when writing down memories, be they dialogue or action, is to consider my 80 percent rule. If you have a memory or a conversation, even if you’re not sure word for word what was said, you get to recreate it IF you can be 80 percent (or more) certain that the person saying it would have said it the way you write that they did.”

## ***2. The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*** by Vivian Gornick

This book offers the most lucid explanation of what we mean when we talk about voice, and explains the difference between the interior and the exterior of a story in a way that makes more sense every time I read it. Even if you only read the opening anecdote about the best eulogy at



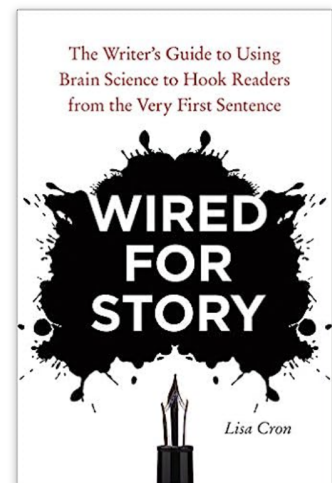
the funeral (and why one woman’s presentation made everyone cry when no one else’s got close), you will become a better memoir writer.

Gornick teaches this salient point in *The Situation and the Story*.

- ❖ **You must master both the situation and the story.** “Every work of literature has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context or circumstances, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say. . . . A memoir is a work of sustained narrative prose controlled by an idea of the self under obligation to lift from the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience, transform events, and deliver wisdom. Truth in a memoir is achieved not through a recital of actual events; it is achieved when the reader comes to believe that the writer is working hard to engage with the experience at hand. What happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the large sense that the writer is able to make of what happened. For that, the power of a writing imagination is required. As V.S. Pritchett once said of the genre, ‘It’s all in the art. you get no credit for living.’”

### ***3. Wired for Story: The Writer’s Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence* by Lisa Cron**

I had the immense honor of coaching Lisa on this book. It’s a foundational text for understanding what a story is and what it does to the reader’s brain. Cron shows you what you need to do to create a believable character and to give your readers the experience they crave. Her focus is on fiction but everything she says applies equally to memoir—you just have to remember that when writing memoir, you are the author, the narrator, and the protagonist.



Here are three powerful lessons for writing well from *Wired for Story*:

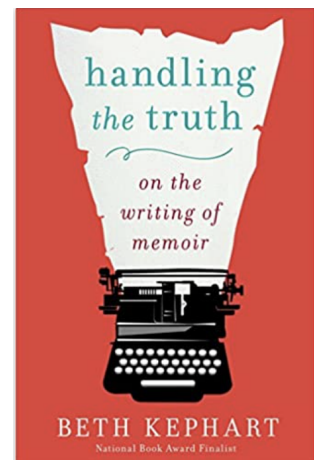
- ❖ **Write an opening scene that grabs the reader.** “Don’t just set the stage for later conflict. Jump right in with something that will affect the protagonist and so make

the reader hungry to find out what the consequences will be. After all, unless sometimes is already happening, how can we want to know what happens next?”

- ❖ **Use body language to show what people are feeling.** “...body language is the first thing we humans learned to decode, because even back in the Stone Age we know that what a person grunts and what he really means might be two very different things... In a story, the goal is to show us how a character really feels—especially when there’s a big discrepancy between what he *wants* to say and what he *can* say—through his body language. the most common mistake writers make is using body language to tell us something we already know.”
- ❖ **Your story cannot be vague.** “The story is in the specifics.” In Chapter 6, Cron shares six places where the specific often goes missing. These are the headlines:
  - The specific reason a character does something.
  - The specific thing a metaphor is meant to illuminate.
  - The specific memory that a situation invokes in the protagonist.
  - The specific reaction a character has to a significant event.
  - The specific possibilities that run through the protagonist’s mind as she struggles to make sense of what’s happening.
  - The specific rationale behind a character’s change of heart.

## ***4. Handling the Truth: On the Writing of Memoir*** by Beth Kephart

I have loved this book from the moment it came out in 2013 and have never stopped recommending it. The most difficult skill in writing memoir is getting the emotion on the page in such a way that the reader can feel it and recognize it as being true, and that starts with feeling that emotion yourself, or handling your own truth. It’s easy to recount things that happen, to describe things, to write dialogue; it’s very hard to pin emotion to the page and create an experience for your reader that feels like real life. Kephart’s book is the single best way to understand what any of this means and to learn how to do it.



Kephart taught memoir writing for years at the University of Pennsylvania and has read broadly and deeply in the genre. She is also the author of several award-winning

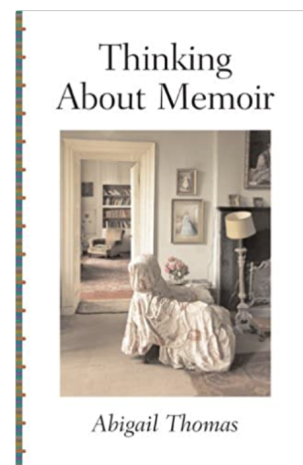
memoirs herself and has written everything from novels to a celebration of a river, to picture books and poems, so she brings a storyteller’s sensibility to her academic frameworks. Her book is lyrical and beautiful, and she cares so much about writing good memoirs that she will inspire you to care, too.

Here are three powerful lessons on writing memoir from *Handling the Truth*:

- ❖ **Don’t write from the moral high ground.** “If you want to write memoir, you need to set caterwauling narcissism to the side. You need to soften your stance. You need to work through the explosives—anger, aggrandizement, injustice, misfortune, despair, fumes—toward mercy. Real memoirists, literary memoirists, don’t justify behaviors, decisions, moods. They don’t ladder themselves up—high, high, high—so as to look down upon the rest of us. Real memoirists open themselves to self-discovery and, in the process, make themselves vulnerable—not just to the world but also to themselves. They yearn, and they are yearned with. They declare a want to know. They seek out loud. They quest. They lessen the distance. They lean toward.”
- ❖ **Consider the emotional toll of writing a memoir.** “To write memoir is to enter, as we have seen, a war zone—with yourself, with the ones you love, with the critics you may never meet. It is to lay your life on the line, on several lines. You may be ridiculed, harassed, taken down in the court of public opinion. Worse, your Aunt Matilda may never speak to you again... Think you’re ready?”
- ❖ **Writing without empathy isn’t memoir writing.** “Memoirists who lack empathy produce flat, self-heralding stuff; I hope I’ve made that clear. They demonstrate no skill for listening, no eye for nuance, no tolerance for opposite points of view... To write without empathy is to drone; it is to lecture; it is to be the only person talking in a crowded room. It is to accuse, and is therefore not memoir.”

## 5. *Thinking About Memoir* by Abigail Thomas

This book is short and sweet. It’s full of exercises and suggestions for remembering the stories of your life. The prompts all begin: “Write two pages about...” I am not usually a proponent of prompts for writers who are serious about writing books, because they disconnect the writing from everything that matters. They are great for people who want to build their writing muscle or build a





writing habit, but not so great for people developing stories for others to read. That being said, one of the challenges of writing memoir is that it's hard to remember stories and hard to remember the specific elements of stories. Thomas's prompts can be enormously helpful if you feel blocked or want to brainstorm a list of scenes.

Here are some examples (which I found on Thomas' [website](#) because this book now seems difficult to find and purchase.)

- ❖ Two pages in which someone is inappropriately dressed for the occasion
- ❖ Two pages in which someone obsesses over something meaningless
- ❖ Two pages looking for something lost in the bedroom
- ❖ Two pages in which you run into someone you hoped never to see again
- ❖ Two pages in which someone keeps her temper in check
- ❖ Two pages that take place a funeral
- ❖ Two pages in which someone can't make up his mind
- ❖ Two pages of lies
- ❖ Two pages of uncomfortable truths

## ***6. The Memoir Project: A Thoroughly Non-Standardized Text for Writing & Life* by Marion Roach Smith**

Smith tackles some of the big issues of memoir writing in this little book, including how to pay attention to your own memories, how to choose the right details to write about, how to quiet your voices of doubt, how to get a first draft on the page, and how to write about your kids and your family. She is smart, no-nonsense, and a great teacher. Smith's website ([marionroach.com](http://marionroach.com)) is full of helpful information and insights too.

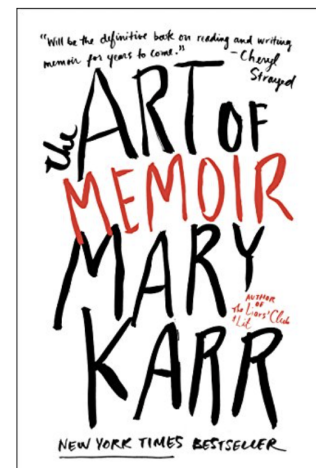


Here are three powerful lessons on truth and memoir from *The Memoir Project*

- ❖ **Don't try to make yourself sound clever.** “Rarely are we witty on demand. We all wish we'd said some clever thing when we got dumped. We didn't, not out loud and at the time, and when writing memoir we're not allowed to make ourselves sound more snappy than we are... If I don't know exactly how something was actually said, I tell you that a conversation went `something like this,' but never alter the intent of the exchange. If there is a moral responsibility in writing nonfiction, it favors the intent of life's actual circumstances.”
- ❖ **Your version of the truth is only one version.** “‘Here's how I see it' is a powerful phrase to keep in mind, as is ‘Here's how it happened to me,' or ‘Here's how I felt.' Make no claim that your version is the only one. If you do not shoot for the whole truth and nothing but the truth, we're going to get along just fine. Understanding the difference is essential to your success.”
- ❖ **Tell the truth by homing in on small moments.** “I don't want to be lied to. I want to be told the truth so I can negotiate this life with some degree of accuracy and honor. For that, we need to look at the small moments... It's in the small moments that life is truly lived. Lessons from the `large moments' are hard to absorb and rarely learned. Consider a quarreling couple coming back together. Only in movies does the lavish trip to Paris or the uber-bracelet rejoin an exhausted pair of people. In real life, one night someone laughs again at another's joke, another passes the peas and includes a touch of fingertips, and life together begins again.”

## 7. *The Art of Memoir* by Mary Karr

This book offers excellent help for understanding when and how to approach the people you write about, as well as some really good lessons about what Karr calls “carnality” (or making sure that you are showing an embodied person in your pages) and “interiority” (or making sure the reader feels like they are in your head). It's a fantastic book to learn the craft of writing memoir and to get a sense of how it felt for Karr to write her bestselling memoir, *The Liars' Club*.



Here are three powerful lessons from *The Art of Memoir*:

- ❖ **Writing memoir will change the writer as well as the reader.** “No matter how self-aware you are, memoir wrenches at your insides precisely because it makes you battle with your very self—your neat analyses and tidy excuses.”
- ❖ **Pay attention to the rhythm of your story—the ups and downs.** “It's the disparities in

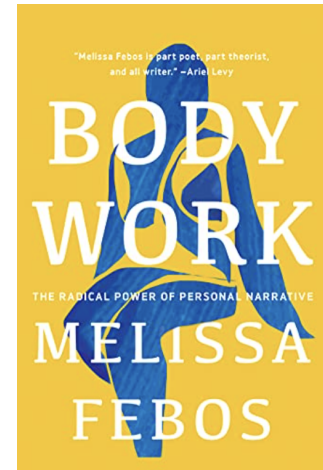


your childhood, your life between ass-whippings, that throws past pain into stark relief for a reader. Without those places of hope, the beatings become too repetitive—maybe they'd make a dramatic read for a while, but single-note tales seldom bear rereading.”

- ❖ **Don't make things up.** “Truth may have become a foggy, fuzzy nether area. But untruth is simple: making up events with the intention to deceive.”

## 8. Body Work: The Radical Power of Personal Narrative by Melissa Febos

Cheryl Strayed calls this book “ferociously intelligent” and that feels exactly right. Febos explores the costs of writing your truth and of not writing it. This is the best book to read if you are writing about something traumatic in your life, if you need to learn how to write about other people and not piss them off, and if you need a way to get brave before you write. Febos instructs us to develop our own moral compass, an ethical code, around our work. This book also offers an excellent lesson on the reality of reliving trauma while you write your story.



Here are three powerful lessons on writing memoir from *Body of Work*:

- ❖ **Writing about trauma is powerful.** “Listen to me: It is not gauche to write about trauma. It is subversive. The stigma of victimhood is a timeworn tool of oppressive powers to gaslight the people they subjugate into believing that by naming their disempowerment they are being dramatic, whining, attention-grabbing, or else beating a dead horse. By convincing us to police our own and one another’s stories, they have enlisted us in the project of our own continued disempowerment.”
- ❖ **The characters in your memoir are figments.** “The most common question that I have gotten over the years at readings, in classrooms, and from friends is how I deal with the fallout of including living people in my work. I usually first respond by telling them that there are no living people in my work, only characters, which are figments animated by imagination plus a small number of qualities shared by the person on whom they are based. They are a process and a product of radical reduction. The trouble is that almost no one likes to be reduced, even to their most cherished qualities.”
- ❖ **Writing is the act of decision-making.** “Writing, like gender or dominatrixing, is a kind

of performance. But the craft of writing is primarily an art of making decisions. I often like to terrorize my students by insisting that every single notation—every piece of punctuation, every word, every paragraph break—in a piece of writing is a decision. You know when something is done, I tell them (they always want to know how to know when something is done), when you know the argument for every single choice, when not a single apostrophe has slipped by uninterrogated, when every word has been swapped for its synonym and then recovered. I don't mean to take the fun out of creation, or even to impose my own laborious process on them, but I actually believe this. Not in the first draft, or even the fifth, but by the end, I want to have stripped as many tics and defaults, as many blind choices as is in my power. I want to be awake to all my choices.”

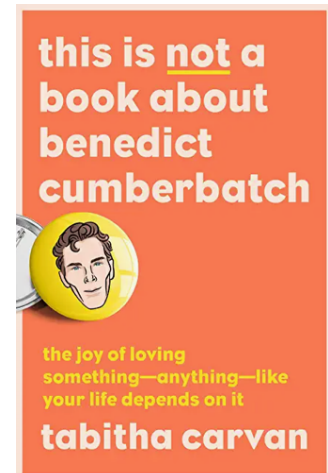
## 9. This Is Not a Book About Benedict Cumberbatch by Tabitha Carvan

This memoir is an excellent book about writing memoir—about finding your courage and finding your voice. These are lines from the first page of the book: “I am writing this between thoughts of Benedict Cumberbatch, and I am writing this under photos of Benedict Cumberbatch, including that *Vanity Fair* cover where he has one arm behind his head and the other tugging at the waistband of his trousers....”

Carvan begins by talking about writing. Throughout the book, she returns to the room she was writing in and to this act. One such scene is the moment when she decides to go into the room and start writing because she realizes she has something to say.

Close to the end of the book she writes: “Benedict Cumberbatch took me where I needed to go: the spare room.... It's what I needed most: a space free from the demands of others, and some time all to myself. I needed to be able to peel back the corner of the motherness, just enough to remind myself what was underneath—what I wanted. And it turned out to be the same thing I always wanted: to write about the things I love.”

You can see that Carvan has been trying to figure out what her book is about, and why she's writing it, and what it means, and who would care. She is trying to find a way to raise her voice about the things that she loves: Benedict Cumberbatch, yes, but also writing a book about



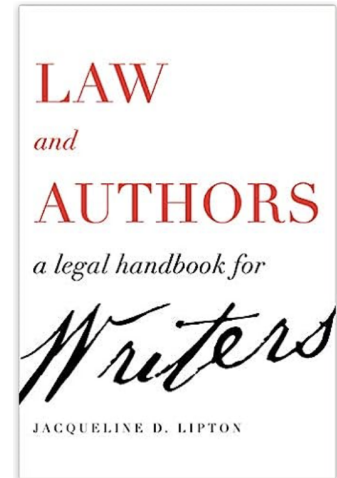
Benedict Cumberbatch. I have long believed that writing well is not really about narrative structure and chapter organization and getting emotion on the page—the tactics and craft of the work. That’s where it starts, but that’s not where it gets excellent. It gets excellent when you understand that it’s about raising your voice. It’s about claiming space and giving yourself permission to write—when no one is waiting for your pages, when you have no assurance that your book will make any sort of impact, when you may have people in your life who believe it is a complete waste of time and energy and money.

If you need to give yourself permission to write your memoir, read this memoir. Here are three instructive lessons on writing memoir from *This is Not a Book About Benedict Cumberbatch*.

- ❖ **Define what you love and what moves you.** “Tell me, do you know what it is that you love? Not who—I already know you love the most important people in your life—but what. And if you didn’t have to explain or defend it, would that change anything for you? I’m not implying you’re harboring an unspoken passion for something deeply embarrassing, although if you are, then you’re in the right place. But have you made yourself available to love the full suite of things that might move you? Or has the soft animal of your body been cut off at the pass, diverted toward things that seem more important? If, like the nurse in Elizabeth Caplice’s blog post, I told you it was okay, that not everything needs to be about making meaning, that not everything has to be justifiable as a good use of your time or mind, could you then let the soft animal of your body find its way toward loving what it loves? And what would that look like for you? It’s not that easy.”
- ❖ **Consider how you want to cast yourself in your story.** "I need to recast myself in this story as someone who is doing what she wants because she's just as entitled to it as anyone else. And who should have started a lot sooner."
- ❖ **Memoir requires fierce unrelenting devotion to what you love.** "You just have to live something - anything - like your life depends on it. Maybe it does?"

## 10. Law and Authors: A Legal Handbook for Writers by Jacqueline D. Lipton.

There are legal implications in writing about other people. The laws around libel, slander, and defamation are complex, and in this handbook, Jacqueline Lipton gives an overview that is approachable and digestible. It will give you confidence about what you are writing and point you in the right direction should you need specific questions answered.



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