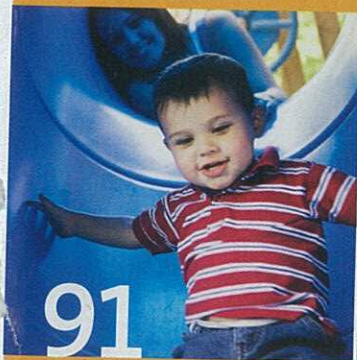


# life

“Writing down our stories validates our experiences, gives us confidence and reminds us that there is a reward in the struggle. It helps us feel less alone.”

– Cori Howard



91

Your Kids



96

Save on Summer Fun



98

The Story of Your Life

# The Story of YOUR LIFE

Learn how to memorialize special events or key passages of your life in your very own words.

BY LISA BENDALL

**E**rin MacNair has her hands full. Between raising her young children, making meals and taking care of household chores, the Vancouver mother of two barely has time to breathe. But when Erin, 36, saw an ad for a memoir-writing class, she jumped at the chance. "Joining this class was like a lightbulb going off. It felt right," Erin says. Now she has reason and opportunity to pour her thoughts onto a page every other week. At the same time, she's creating a permanent record of what she believes are significant experiences in her life.

Like many women, Erin used to enjoy keeping a journal. But her writing gave way when she started a career as a jeweller, married and had children. Putting pen to paper became a low priority. Yet, she says, motherhood is a momentous part of life and it's worth documenting. "There's a lot of rich material there." She thrives on the evening sessions, held once every two weeks at a local coffee shop.



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Memoir writing doesn't have to be a massive project detailing a long life's history. Memoirs often focus on specific highlights or moments anywhere along your lifeline. Unlike journaling, memoir writing contains elements of storytelling, such as setting and plot, and may offer interpretation or resolution.

No matter where you are on your journey, chances are your life is packed with inspiring moments. That may be what drives so many women to try their hand at memoirs, writing life stories that focus on themes or periods and are often reflective and emotionally charged.

Karen Schofield, 48, of Toronto, is writing a memoir about her family history that she hopes will be a legacy for her 10-year-old daughter. She was motivated to start the project when her parents entered their 80s. She needed to nail down some background before it slipped through her fingers. "There's a lot of letting go of stuff I didn't realize I was carrying," she says. For instance, Karen regrets not wanting to hear about her late grandmother's difficult early life because she was uncomfortable seeing her grandmother sad. But as she recalled happier moments in their relationship while she was writing, Karen understood that they actually had discussed many other things that were important to her grandmother.

## GROWING IN POPULARITY

Across the country there are scores of memoir workshops, classes, writing groups and retreats, as well as popular how-to books and instructional websites. "It may be like the scrapbooking phase people went through, wanting to set up a visual record with notations for a family heirloom," says Helen M. Buss, professor emerita of English at the University of Calgary and author of *Memoirs from Away: A New Found Land Girlhood* (Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1999). "The memoir is perhaps a more complex version of that desire to document, one which often yields not only a personal and family history, but also considerable personal growth and insight."

Some women say memoir writing is a kind of therapy that helps them heal from or understand difficult

events, such as divorce. And, for many, it's illuminating.

A memoir is not the same thing as an autobiography, though, says Claudia Cornwall, who teaches a memoir-writing course at Simon Fraser University in B.C. "With a memoir, you don't have to start with your great-grandfather and go through the history of the family. Your story can capture a few key years in your life, or memorialize a pivotal event."

Though women in their 40s, 30s and even 20s may have less time to work on their memoirs, they're still making their way to it in droves. Perhaps they find value in that self-exploration aspect of memoir writing that they don't get from juggling jobs and babies. Erin says her memoirs have helped her reclaim her identity as someone other than Mom. "Writing doesn't have anything to do with changing diapers or wiping noses. It's just for me," she notes. Karen agrees. "It's very self-indulgent. It's similar to sitting down with Godiva chocolates!"

That may explain the proliferation of blogs, currently numbered at a staggering 35 million. Memoirs, however, are usually more intimate. And unlike blogs, they might never be seen by anyone's eyes but the author's.

Any momentous experience – even a painful one – can spur a desire to write a memoir. Elaine Gribbin, 36, of Morrisburg, Ont., lost her husband, Scott, last year to a rare cancer. They'd been high school sweethearts, together

for more than 17 years. When he was diagnosed they had just become parents to Emily, now three. The letters and e-mails Elaine wrote after Scott's death were poignant. She freely shared lessons she'd learned about living your purpose, messages that resonated with her friends and family.

With their encouragement, Elaine is writing a book-length memoir that she hopes to publish one day. "It's been healing just to write things down," she says. "On those days when I think I'm not getting any further, it's helpful to go back and read things again, and see how far I've come."

## GETTING STARTED

You don't have to be a professional writer to write a memoir. "It's amazing what people will produce," says Cornwall. Here are some tips to help.

**Make time.** Considering the biggest challenge for many is finding the time, you may need to shoehorn regular writing time into your schedule. Elaine, a speech-language pathologist, has stepped up her writing for the summer months, while she's off work. She also writes when her daughter is in bed, or is sleeping over with grandparents.

**Size doesn't matter.** Roberta Buchanan, who facilitates a memoir group for the Memorial University of Newfoundland Pensioners Association in St. John's, says success can be found ▶

## PUTTING PEN TO PAPER

### How to Find a Workshop

The best way to get involved in a memoir-writing course is to contact community colleges, universities or writers' groups in your area. You can find out more about local groups by browsing through newspapers, and visiting your local library and bookstores. Courses and workshops range from a couple of days to 15 weeks, and are priced anywhere from \$75 to \$500. Here are a few examples.

- ▶ Humber College's Lakeshore campus in Toronto offers an introduction to memoir writing that runs once a week for 15 weeks. [www.humber.ca](http://www.humber.ca)
- ▶ The Quebec Writers' Foundation holds eight-week-long courses and one-day Saturday workshops. [www.qwf.org/workshops](http://www.qwf.org/workshops)
- ▶ Brian Brett, a Canadian journalist and former chair of the Writers' Union of Canada, holds five-day Write for Your Life workshops at the Metchosin International Summer School of the Arts in Victoria. [www.missa.ca/writing.htm](http://www.missa.ca/writing.htm)

in writing shorter pieces that hone in on specific experiences. "Three or four pages are much easier to do," she points out. "To labour on a book it takes a lot of concentration and years of work."

**Look for resources.** There are a number of current how-to books and blogs (see "Helpful Resources," this page) to get you started. Taking workshops or joining groups that meet weekly or monthly can also be a terrific motivator, says Buchanan. "It gives you a deadline to work for. It gives you that impetus to write something."

**Start your own club and get feedback.** If you can't find a memoir-writing group in your city, with a little outreach, you can start your own. There may be others in your area who are interested, and even if your group has no teacher or leader, there will be a ready audience for your stories. Readers, especially if they're not family, can give you valuable feedback, such as identifying confusing or unclear passages.

It's also gratifying to witness the emotional effect your pieces can have on others. "That's actually quite encouraging to a writer," says Buchanan. When members of her group circulate their stories, they often end up inspiring one another to write more.

**Think about privacy.** Some family secrets and scandals may not be meant for public consumption. "Even if you're writing for the family, sometimes there are things that one member of the family doesn't want somebody else to know," says Cornwall. You should ask permission before including personal letters, diaries or even photos.

Whether you're hoping to top a bestseller list or just planning to leave a few notebooks for your kids, memoir writing can be exceedingly rewarding. As for Erin MacNair, she'd eventually like to publish her memoirs. "To know that you may touch someone deeply, make them feel connected to the world, is powerful and fulfilling." ●

## HELPFUL RESOURCES

- ▶ Stephen King's book *On Writing* (Simon and Schuster, 2000) guides you through his personal memoir and acts as a textbook on penning your own.
- ▶ The online writers' support group [www.writers.meetup.com](http://www.writers.meetup.com) will point you to a group in your area, operating anywhere in Canada. Writers meet once a month with people in the industry as well as other local writers. There is no fee and sessions are ongoing.
- ▶ Download a copy of Canadian author Cori Howard's e-book *The Memoir Workbook* at her website, [www.thememoirproject.com](http://www.thememoirproject.com). Howard also runs online classes.

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