

FAMILY HISTORY MEETS MEMOIR

If you've been researching your family's history, but aren't sure where to go from there, take heart. These 5 techniques will help you use your findings to bring your family's story (and your own) to life on the page.

by **Rebecca McClanahan**

S

o, you're writing your family history?" someone asks. "Not exactly," you answer. Although you've been researching aspects of your family's past, you can still envision all the gravestones you've left unturned, and your scraggly family tree with all the missing branches. You know you're not exactly a genealogist, and you're probably right that you're not writing a family history. Most likely, you're writing a family history memoir.

Here's the difference: The allegiance of a family historian is to the facts themselves—to gathering, organizing and recording as much information as possible. When you write a family history memoir, however, your allegiance is not to the information itself but to the larger story you discover *through* the information, a story that in some way connects to your own. This does not mean that research is not important, or that you play loose with the facts, but rather that you use the knowledge you've gained through research to create a text that is more than a "just the facts, ma'am" report, and one that might even appeal to a broad audience of readers.

How do you do this? How do you use research to enrich your memoir and create an artful, lively text that combines your own story with the story of your family or ancestors? Some writers do little or no formal research, relying on their memories of past events or stories passed down. Others conduct extensive searches involving archival documents, site visits, interviews, library and online records, and other sources. But whether you have inherited a trunk-load of ancestral documents or only a few family anecdotes, you can use that research to create an engaging memoir. The following techniques will help.

1.

Organize your findings around your main character.

In a family history memoir, your main character can of course be a particular person—such as an ancestor or family member or even (in rare cases) you, the author—but it can also be any other central focus that drives your story. You may decide that your main "character" is actually a place, event, time period, relationship, physical object, image or recurring question. It could be 1930s Detroit, the 65-year marriage of your grandparents, the forest you played in as a child, the specter of alcoholism throughout generations, or, as in the case of my book *The*

Tribal Knot, a physical artifact that embodies your memoir's main themes.

To uncover your main character, look for clues in the research. What seems to be rising up from the details? What extension cord of meaning connects the people, places, time periods or events of your family's history? Is there a design hidden in the Rorschach inkblot of facts?

Once you identify your memoir's main character, you can begin to give shape to both your research and your writing, organizing the facts you've gathered so that the character takes center stage. For instance, if the theme of childlessness surfaces in the lives of all three of your great-aunts, you can select events from family documents that illuminate this theme, conduct interviews centered on child-related questions, write about your own feelings and concerns about childlessness, or consult sources that provide historical and cultural context.

2.

Look for concrete, character-defining details.

Many personal history memoirs, regardless of their focus, succeed primarily because the author transforms real people into compelling, fleshed-out characters on the page. At first thought, such bristling-with-life characterizations seem natural outgrowths of the memoir genre. After all, the characters really lived (or still do), so it follows that they will spring to life on the page, right? Not necessarily. Memoirists must work as hard as fiction writers—perhaps harder—to create believable, memorable characters. Fiction writers are neither bound by fact nor limited by a lack of available information; they can construct characters from imagination's whole cloth. And, as tailors and home renovators will tell you, it is usually easier to construct a new garment or house than it is to alter what is already in place. To transform real people into characters, the family memoirist must work with the material she has gathered. Here are some places to begin:

- **Firsthand observations:** Start with physical, sensory descriptions, zeroing in on distinguishing characteristics that reveal personality: gnarled, arthritic hands always busy at some task; a habit of covering her mouth each time a giggle rises up; a lopsided swagger as he makes his way to the horse barn; the scent of coconut suntan oil, cigarettes and leather each time she passes your chair. If your research is limited to photographs, study them carefully, focusing on significant details. Perfectly creased trousers, or an Army jacket that has seen better days? Half-closed eyes, a pouty mouth or arms crossed tightly across his chest? Where is she positioned in relation to others? If you have access to home movies, videos or audio recordings, mine them for even more details.

- **Secondhand inventory:** Comb through research with an eye for anything that provides a clue to a family member's private life: the tools that filled his garage, the items listed on the auction sheet, his last will and testament, inscriptions in his books, peculiarities of his handwriting, the names he gave his hunting dogs, stories told about him, important documents gone missing. Don't discount anything, including your dreams. Mikal Gilmore's *Shot in the Heart* opens and closes with descriptions of dreams in which his brother, convicted murderer Gary Gilmore, appears. These dream sequences work alongside the fruits of the author's research—interviews, letters, school records, tape recordings, site visits, etc.—to flesh out his brother's character so that Gary emerges as a three-dimensional presence on the page.

- **Context:** To place the character in historical, social or cultural context, draw an imaginary circle around him, filling the circle with every outside force that touched him. If you want to flesh out the life of your great-grandfather, your circle might include the jobs he held, the North Dakota landscape where he was raised, the global events that affected his childhood, his ethnic or geographic roots. Who was president on the day he was born? What was the average life expectancy? If you discover that the 1918 influenza pandemic is an important factor in his history, you could include an imagined scene or provide background information or a personal reflection on that fact, thus supplying a broader context to your grandfather's personal story—a context that will, in turn, enlarge the circle of your memoir to invite more readers in.

3.

Re-enact history for your readers.

Reconstructed or imagined scenes can enliven your family history memoir, filling in the blanks that remain after the research is complete. Consider these possibilities:

- **The telling of the tale:** This type of scene grows out of an interview or conversation between you and another family member or informant. Whether you transcribe the conversation word for word or rely solely upon memory, your goal is to give the reader a sense of the storytelling moment itself. As in most effective monologue or dialogue scenes, the words spoken are often not as important as the manner in which they are delivered. As you write, include details such as pauses, voice inflections, repetitions and gestures. When you asked your uncle about his duty in the Vietnam War, did he look out the window, light another cigarette and change the subject? These clues are part of the telling of the tale, as are details about the interview environment. Was it a stormy afternoon? What song was playing on the radio? When the phone rang, did your uncle ignore it, or jump up to answer it? Was your uncle's ancient dog sleeping across his lap? Put the reader in the moment with you, any way you can.

- **Reconstructed or imagined events:** Just because you weren't present at an event—for instance, your great-aunt's 1904 wedding—doesn't mean you can't write a scene based on the research material you've gathered. Build on what you have, whether it's a photograph of her wedding dress, a letter or newspaper clipping, the weather report from that January day (easily accessible from archival sources), pages from that year's Sears catalog, or memories of your conversations with your great-aunt. Create the scene that might have been, should have been, or even—if you enter the territory of negative space—what could *never* have been. As you write, create as full a scene as you would for a fictional story. Describe the sights, sounds, smells and textures you encounter. Let us hear the voices of the characters, watch them move through the room. Just remember to supply navigation tools for the reader. Phrases such as “I imagine” or, “In my mind, the French doors open into a parlor,” alert the reader that you are moving into reconstructed or imagined scenes.

4.

Draw upon your personal connection to the facts.

Ask yourself: “Why am I drawn to this subject *at this particular time in my life?*” Quite often, events in the

author's life trigger an interest—even an obsession—with family history. Perhaps you recently received a cancer diagnosis or gave birth to your first child, or your parents are entering an assisted-living center. Although the author's life is not usually the central focus of a family history memoir, his story often intersects with those of the family members or ancestors in the spotlight.

If you decide that a current situation in your life relates to your family history, you can weave that situation into the larger narrative, as Terry Tempest Williams did in *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*. You can also create a double-strand text, alternating your present-tense story with your ancestors' histories. Your personal story can even form the narrative timeline for the book, with family research details carefully selected to illuminate your own account.

Yet even if your personal story remains in the background, your stake in the proceedings should be clear, or, to paraphrase Rust Hills in his discussion of the peripheral narrator in fiction, you must be “the one moved by the action.” You are the reader's guide through the text, and he will probably sense your personal connection through your selection and arrangement of research details, your voice and tone, and even the rhythm and sounds of your sentences. Here are more explicit methods for revealing your connection to the research:

- **Talk back to the material:** When you have a personal reaction to the research, include that reaction in the text. If during your tour of the ancestral cemetery, you wondered why your great-great-grandmother was not buried beside her husband, let the reader overhear your thoughts. Weave your questions into the factual reporting. As you study the photograph of your father, what are you thinking? Does the photo reinforce your firsthand experience with him, or suggest a different identity altogether? Speculate about the circumstances surrounding the photograph: Who held the camera? Who is missing in the scene? What might have happened right before the camera clicked, or right afterward? Use all of your literary muscles, not just description and reporting. Argue. Imagine. Extrapolate. Reflect.

- **Slip through the seams of time:** Use research as a form of time travel. Step into that 1965 Vietnam battle scene you've described so carefully. Tap your uncle on the shoulder and tell him not to worry, that he will survive, that he will go on to father three children and six grandchildren. The young soldier can't know this at this point in his story, but you, the author, do. Your research has provided you with a longer timeline, a broader context, and more knowledge of both past and future events than some of the characters whose stories you are telling. Use that knowledge to enrich your memoir.

- **Reveal your journey of discovery:** The process of researching and writing is a narrative in and of itself; think of it as a mystery story. Beginning with unanswered questions, take the reader with you on your research journey as Ian Frazier did in *Family*, letting the clues accumulate meaning as you proceed.

5.

If you get lost, look through a small keyhole.

This advice applies not only to those of us who have inherited an attic filled with documents, but also to writers who labor mostly in memory's rich soil. When you become overwhelmed by the material and can't seem to focus your attention, stop for a moment. Remind yourself that a family history memoir isn't the

Congressional Record; your job is not to include everything but rather to use the research to inform the story that only you can write. Trust that the research you've done will come to your rescue. Go back to the small things that caught your attention. Put your eye to the imaginary keyhole. There it is: one 60-second event that changed your family's life forever. Three green cars your father owned. Your great-grandmother's wedding ring, wrapped in a handkerchief and placed in an envelope marked "recipes."

Take a big breath, stretch and go back to the writing desk. Only there will you discover how your family history memoir will turn out.

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