

Family History Meets Memoir (excerpt) by Rebecca McClanahan

“So, you’re writing your family history,” people said when I mentioned the book I’d been working on for over a decade. “Not exactly,” I answered, not sure of what to say next. Although I’d been poring over hundreds of century-old ancestral letters and artifacts in my search to understand my family’s past, I knew I could not claim to be a historian or even a genealogist. I kept envisioning all the gravestones I’d left unturned, and the scraggly family tree with all the missing branches. No, I finally decided. I am definitely not writing a family history. What I’m writing is a family history memoir.

Here’s the difference: The primary allegiance of a family historian is to the research itself—to gathering, organizing and recording as much information as possible. When you write a family history memoir, your primary allegiance is not to the research itself but to the larger story you discover through the research, 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 to create a text that is more than a “just the facts, ma’am” report, a text that might 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 trunk-loads of ancestral documents, as I did, or only a few family anecdotes, you can use that research to create an engaging memoir. Here are five principles and techniques that helped me while researching and writing *The Tribal Knot: A Memoir of Family, Community, and a Century of Change*.

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 shape 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.