

What We Learn When Writing a Memoir

Recently, when a neighbor's son started medical school, he told me he would have to learn 15,000 new words in the next four years. What I found most interesting was that as a college graduate, his vocabulary already consisted of approximately 15,000 words.

Although I don't have a precise number of new terms, skills or techniques I mastered during my memoir writing process, I mention this young man's experience because it reminds me of the steep learning curve I climbed while writing my book.

Most people take a few years, maybe even ten, to write a book. My memoir *Sugar Hill: Where the Sun Rose Over Harlem* describes growing up in Harlem from approximately 1952–1962. I first started working on the book in 1974 when

my memory of Harlem's mid-century transitions, and mine, were still vivid. I finally finished it in 2011. *Sugar Hill* was published in 2012.

That's exceedingly slow, but years of delay worked in my favor because I had a story to tell but needed to learn how to write it. I took writing classes and workshops, attended conferences and joined writers groups so I could get critiqued. Then I had to learn how to accept the criticism. I read as many books as possible, especially memoirs, and took notes on what I thought worked well and what didn't.

In 1995 two memoirs were published: Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club* and James McBride's *The Color of Water*. Karr's growing up around East Texas oil fields, honky-tonk saloons and insanity couldn't have been more different from mine, yet

we had much in common. I admired her honesty, identified with her vulnerability and above all, this resilient, tough-talking, Texas kid reminded me of Harlem. She also made me realize that I needed to come up with the right voice for my *Sugar Hill* story. At the same time, McBride's unique and entertaining story about his quirky Orthodox-Jewish-mixed-race Harlem heritage reassured me that I too had a tale worth telling.

Finally, around 2005, I stumbled across a phrase in Stephen King's book *On Writing* that was first coined by William Faulkner, who said, "In writing, you must kill your darlings." King elaborated by saying, "Kill your darlings, kill your darlings, even when it breaks your egocentric little scribbler's heart, kill your darlings."

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ABOUT OUR PANEL



Terry Baker Mulligan



Kathleen Finneran



Rick Skwiot

Terry Baker Mulligan is the author of *Sugar Hill: Where the Sun Rose Over Harlem*, which won the 2012 IPPY Award for Adult Multicultural Nonfiction and two 2013 Benjamin Franklin Awards for Multicultural Writing and Autobiography/Memoir Writing. Her novel and second book, *Afterlife in Harlem*, was published in October 2014. She has studied fiction and non-fiction writing at Washington University's Summer Writers Institute and the Iowa Summer Writing Festival. A former writing center Instructor at St. Louis

Community College, Terry was born and raised in Harlem and frequently gives talks on Harlem's history and culture. She now lives in St. Louis, where she was named one of the city's Top Fifty Authors by a government committee.

Kathleen Finneran is the author of the memoir *The Tender Land: A Family Love Story* (Houghton Mifflin, 2000; Mariner Paperbacks, 2003) for which she won the Whiting Writer's Award. Her essays have been published in various anthologies, including *The Place That Holds Our History* (Southwest Missouri State University Press, 1990), *Seeking St. Louis: Voices from a River City* (Missouri Historical Society Press, 2000), *The "M" Word: Writers on*

Same-Sex Marriage (Algonquin, 2004), and *My Bookstore: Writers Celebrate Their Favorite Places to Browse, Read, and Shop* (Black Dog & Leventhal, 2012). She has received the Missouri Arts Council Writers' Biennial Prize and a Guggenheim Fellowship. She is currently the writer-in-residence for creative nonfiction at Washington University.

Rick Skwiot is the author of two memoirs: the critically acclaimed *Christmas at Long Lake: A Childhood Memory* (2004) and *San Miguel de Allende, Mexico: Memoir of a Sensual Quest for Spiritual Healing* (2010). His four published novels include the St. Louis-based mystery *Fail* (2014), which depicts corruption and malpractice in urban politics and public education. He also works as a feature writer, writing coach and editor. He has taught fiction writing at Washington University in St. Louis and served as the 2004 Distinguished Visiting Writer at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. He lives in Key West.

Researching Your Family History: Local Genealogical Research Resources

If you're interested in starting to research your family history, the number of tools available to you can be overwhelming, so we've put together a quick list of the best local resources you should look into:

1. **Missouri History Museum:**
 - a. Library and Research Center Family History Resources: <http://mohistory.org/lrc/family-history/get-started>
 - b. Genealogy Workshops: <http://mohistory.org/genealogy-programs>
 - c. Monthly Newsletter: <http://custapp.marketro.com/Form/wSndc9Fn4d/Signup>
2. **St. Louis Genealogical Society:** <http://www.stlgs.org>
3. **St. Louis Public Library:**
 - a. Online Genealogy Indexes: <http://indexes.slpl.org/Pages/Index.aspx>
 - b. Obituary Search: <http://www.slpl.org/slpl/gateways/article240117800.asp>
 - c. Genealogy Database Subscriptions (HeritageQuest & FamilySearch): <http://www.slpl.org/slpl/library/article240241387.asp>
4. **State Historical Society of Missouri Genealogy Guides:** <http://shs.umsystem.edu/research/guides/genealogy>
5. **Missouri Secretary of State:**
 - a. Missouri Death Certificates: <https://sl.sos.mo.gov/records/archives/archivesdb/deathcertificates>
 - b. <http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives>
6. **St. Louis County Library History and Genealogy Resources:** <http://www.slcl.org/genealogy>

Upcoming St. Louis Writing & Publishing Events

- ◆ Mar 9: **Accounting for Self-Publishing: Tax & Accounting Tips for Authors and Publishers from Carolyn Thomas.** 6:30pm – 8:30pm at The Heights: Richmond Heights Community Center.
- ◆ Apr 13: **Publishing Resources Panel Discussion.** 6:30pm – 8:30pm at The Heights: Richmond Heights Community Center.
- ◆ May 7: **St. Louis Indie Book Fair.** 10:00am – 5:00pm at the St. Louis Public Library Central Branch.
- ◆ May 11: **Working with a Local Small Publisher: Informative Presentation by Kristy Makansi, Donna Essner, and Lisa Miller.** 6:30pm – 8:30pm at The Heights: Richmond Heights Community Center.



Coming up: SLPA's annual vendor's showcase

(Memoir continued from page 1)

King is referring to those parts of a manuscript that we fall in love with, even if they're killing the story instead of helping it. Sometimes it's a character, a phrase, an image, a joke, a chapter, etc. When I killed my darling passages and a mostly irrelevant chapter that had been hanging around for some twenty-five years, I finally produced a workable manuscript.

The path to writing a memoir can be more reflective and not so long and circuitous. The award-winning writer Rick Skwiot describes his process as follows:

"One central thing I sensed as I wrote both my memoirs is how malleable our lives are. When you write a memoir you realize there are two first-person characters in the book: you at the time of the action and you as the narrator. And they are two different people – as you can see in *Two Years Before the Mast*, *Out of Africa*, *Angela's Ashes* or, in my case, *Christmas at Long Lake*. As you start to see the shape of your experience and how others helped make you who you are, you also see how you would have been a different person had you been influenced by other people in other ways. We are all walking history books, a compilation of all those experiences and influences, always working to write the next chapter..."

THE BOOK CORNER

The Tender Land: A Family Love Story by Kathleen Finneran

A superb portrait of family life, *The Tender Land* is a love story unlike any other. The Finnerans – parents and five children, Irish Catholics in St. Louis – are a seemingly unexceptional family. Theirs is a story seldom told, yet it makes manifest how rich and truly extraordinary the ordinary daily experience we take for granted is. In quietly luminous language, Kathleen Finneran renders the emotional, spiritual, and physical terrain of family life – its closeness and disconnection, its intimacy and estrangement – and pays tribute to the love between parents and children, brothers and sisters.



This book is available through Amazon.

SLPA Meets on the Second Wednesday of the Month

RICHMOND HEIGHTS
COMMUNITY CENTER (THE HEIGHTS)
The Angus Room
8001 Dale Ave.
Richmond Heights, MO 63117
(Child care available at The Heights)

Doors open for networking at 6:30 p.m. and the program begins at 7 p.m. The meeting concludes about 8:30 p.m. with networking until 9 p.m. Regular meetings are free to members. Guests—\$10, at the door.

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