

WRITING PERSONAL NONFICTION

by Elaine Ingalls Hogg

“What is your story?” The question came from a writing friend with whom I was sharing my secret dream of becoming an author.

His words gave me a starting place—write about something derived from my life’s experience, a familiar topic—a piece of personal nonfiction.

Now, with permission to draw on the familiar, I began by writing some of the stories of my ancestors. I particularly liked the story of how the first settler in my family arrived at our island after several weeks of sailing on a man-o’-war across the Atlantic. When he reached Grand Manan, he jumped ship and made his way to shore, only to be met by a fine young lady hoeing potatoes in her garden. It wasn’t love at first sight; instead, she took her hoe to beat off the advancement of this scary, scruffy stranger. Later they married. This story, and others like it, was published in a local paper. I was a writer at last. But instead of being satisfied, someone moved the goal posts. I found I had more stories to tell.

I joined a writing group, and our instructor gave us a challenge: write on the word “kindness”. My thoughts flashed back to a precocious seven-year-old whose mother encouraged her to give her favourite toy to a neighbouring child who had nothing at Christmas. The story was entered in a writing contest and won a place in an anthology. I was to discover that writing contests and anthologies provided great opportunities for marketing my stories.

A friend sent me an advertisement asking for submissions for the upcoming book *Chicken Soup for the Volunteer’s Soul*. “Write about your experiences as a palliative care volunteer,” she said. I did. One story, “Little Changes,” about how my neighbour who was confined to a wheelchair raised \$30,000 for her favourite charity, was included in the anthology. Since then, a number of other stories have been included in this series.

Gradually, I discovered other places for my writing. Websites, a radio program, educational magazines for children, and newspapers accepted my devotionals, essays, and personal stories.

My adventure into writing a nonfiction book came as a result of another personal challenge. After sharing meaningful ways to become a palliative care volunteer at a workshop, an attendee challenged me to write a story to help children talk about death. I’d seen young children pushed aside as the adults grieved, and I began to pray how I might do this. The award-winning picture book, *Remembering Honey*, based on how my own children coped with the death of their pet was published by Nimbus Publishing in the year 2000. My connection to this publisher led to more opportunities to collect and compile people’s stories for two more books and later to write two local history books.

My tips for those of you wanting to create personal stories:

1. Write in a manner that will appeal to your reader.
2. Use humor, truthfulness, and fairness in your article. If you write truthfully, you will show both sides of your character's behavior and personality.
3. Stick to your topic.
4. Use tried and true fictional techniques, such as a hook, to capture your reader's attention.

C.S. Lewis said, "We read to know we are not alone."

RESOURCES:

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Elaine Ingalls Hogg is an award-winning author and inspirational speaker. Besides speaking at women's events, libraries, service clubs, and schools, she also shares inspirational thoughts through her writing. In addition to her books, her stories can be found in more than two dozen anthologies, magazines, CBC radio, and websites.