

## Practical Tips and Insights into Writing Life Stories

from

### *My Words Are Gonna Linger: The Art of Personal History*

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*The stories in this anthology are gathered in three sections—one on why we create personal histories, a second on how we put the pieces together, and a third on the many voices and approaches to life story writing. Following are brief excerpts from introductory material. The background for each story also sheds light on the process a personal historian experiences helping someone else with their life story.*

First, we must choose a voice for the story—first person (I was born), second person (you were born), or third person (he or she was born). Catherine Munson speaks for herself in “Sand Hills Murder Mystery,” a first-person narrative drawn from an oral history interview conducted by Trena Cleland. Oral history transcripts are likely to stick pretty close to the interview as it was recorded, editing out only repetitious and throat-clearing phrases such as “Well, then...” and “you know.” The personal historian is more likely to edit an oral history interview for narrative flow.

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The point in a first-person story is to capture the narrator’s voice and viewpoint. Because voice is so essential to our identity, especially within our families, changing someone’s words to sound better grammatically sometimes strips the story of its original energy.

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Sometimes we tell our stories as a legacy for future generations, offering them a window into worlds they otherwise would never know. Nellie Nakamura’s son asked Shizue Seigel to record Nellie’s oral history, combine it with family photos and some historical Japanese background, and create a book. Flavia Fernandes’s daughter commissioned a personal history of her mother as a gift in honor of Flavia’s eightieth birthday, including the excerpt herein that describes the arranged marriage of Flavia’s parents in Mangalore, India, in 1925. Susan Rothenberg found Johnny Wilson’s story so compelling that she offered to create an oral history for his family.

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Sometimes one person does the research for a personal history, and another puts the material together.

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Like many personal historians, Stephanie Kadel Taras got her start by interviewing members of her family. “The Runaway,” based on an interview with her seventy-seven-year-old grandfather, was a story he previously had shared only with his wife. Cynthia Wright’s uncle told such fascinating tales of his days as a Moravian missionary in 1930s Alaska that she brought him a hand-held tape recorder and promised to transcribe the tapes if he would record his stories. The resulting four tapes and Cynthia’s transcribed stories are family treasures now that her uncle is gone.

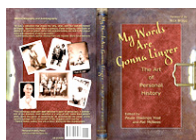
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Typically, creating a personal history is a voyage of self-discovery—a way to make sense of our lives and the past while reflecting on lessons learned.

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*“This anthology sings with Walt Whitman’s spirit of democracy, a celebration of our diversity. Each selection is a song of self; some have perfect pitch, some the waver of authenticity. All demonstrate the power of the word to salvage from the onrush of life, nuggets worth saving.”*

~Tristine Rainer, author of *Your Life as Story*



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