

Humour in Memoir

Finding the funny stuff

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HUMOUR IN MEMOIR

The weirdest, craziest and funniest things happen in real life. As non-fiction, a memoir is a great place for humour. As we look back at our life we can think of absurd situations and unexpected outcomes – fertile ground for a laugh and a shake of the head.

Flawed or wacky characters are funny, like Jim Carrey, Steve Martin or Woody Allen. No doubt there are some off-beat characters in your life who come to mind.

The Brits have a culture of self-deprecation, mocking themselves and authority. Hallmarks of English humour include frequent use of puns and irony, using words with a double meaning. Or dry, deadpan delivery and lightheartedness in the face of tragedy.

Perhaps the two most common features of the British sense of humour are self-deprecation and absurd behaviour – lovable qualities. Think: Rowan Atkinson, Monty Python, Sean Lock, Sarah Millican, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore.

Some words are inherently funnier than others. The quirkiest the better. A few examples: wackadoodle, flummox, hodgepodge, bamboozle, noodlehead, pelican, wombat, goose, rigmorole, zany, higgledy piggledy, ruckus, blustering, waddle, twaddle, splat, dork, goofball, wobble, whoopadoodle. You can easily make up your own by joining two silly words together. Inventing a new word is always fun – kids do it. (When she was 5, my youngest daughter, referred to a foot-rub as a ‘foot message.’)

You may recall some of the funny things your kids came out with in the past, because they get words mixed up, or use the wrong context or pronunciation. They say the darndest things: “Why do they call them waiters? We are the ones who wait?”; “Guess what mummy? Daddy has a tail!”

Humour has a magical quality. It engages and entertains, and if you sprinkle it into your story, your readers will relish it. Humour is also a great lightener when the going gets heavy as we discuss tough times and dark days in our story. It provides relief and a breather for our reader.

This booklet sets out to explore various ways to engage our audience through humour. It's about finding the funny stuff and looks at how other writers have injected humour into their memoir. It's a subject that has arisen in my work as a life story ghostwriter and editor as I guide people through the memoir writing process. This work led to the book, *How to Write Your Memoir*, which is a detailed guide to help people with autobiographical writing. From this book, much of the material in this booklet has been drawn and then elaborated upon.

But writing humour is not easy. Ask any professional comedian. What if you are not even practised at telling a joke? Don't worry, here are a few tips.

Be yourself

Just be you. Not taking yourself too seriously and being able to laugh at yourself is a tremendous start and will endear you to your reader. It's a nice way to be and shows a healthy perspective on the little mishaps of life. Seeing the funny side is an excellent antidote to life's struggles.

We are sometimes encouraged to 'relax and let it come naturally.' The suggestion is not to try too hard when telling a funny story. If it doesn't generate a giggle, it's just a story.

Try to recall funny moments and tell an anecdote that you found amusing. If it doesn't come off, it's no big deal. Comedian Carl Barron recommends this storytelling approach as a safety net, to save embarrassment in case a joke falls flat.

One of the best ways for non-comedians to introduce humour is to be ourselves. As Robin Williams said, 'You have to be yourself; everyone else is already taken.' (Ironic, coming from the hyper-zany improv master, now sadly missed.)

We are all special in our own quirky way, and our readers will appreciate our honesty – no doubt this is why comedians often talk candidly about their private lives, spouses, or idiosyncrasies.

You're free to embellish

A life story is non-fiction, so we do not want to stray from the truth, but a certain amount of embellishment is often called for. There are many grey areas, and the truth depends on your perspective, so there will often be an overlap between fiction and non-fiction. Some writers even argue that there is no real distinction between the two!

For humour, look for something interesting or fresh, not something your readers have heard many times before. It should also be appropriate for your audience.

Try to amplify a mishap or silliness. As the author, you have artistic licence to colour the details and elaborate if necessary.

Here is a description of home improvements from Sally Morgan's highly regarded autobiography, *My Place*. It's about putting up wallpaper, but the home improvement proceeded rather less professionally than had been hoped:

I often found myself sandwiched between Nan's cantankerous nature and Mum's strange approach to home improvements, like the night I helped Mum remodel our lounge-room.

From a bin of specials in a wallpaper shop, Mum had purchased eight rolls of chocolate-brown Paisley print wallpaper. It wasn't nearly enough to cover all the walls, but Mum reasoned that it was better to have one feature wall of Paisley print than none at all. It would give our place a bit of class.

Having paid out for wallpaper, she wasn't about to pay out for glue, buckets, rollers or a ladder. Instead, she dragged out a large tin of glue from the laundry, which she mixed up in the bath. Our ladder was three pine crates piled on top of one another near the wall, and as for rollers, well, as Mum so succinctly put it, what were hands for?

Unfortunately, Mum wasn't one to admit failure. She urged me on with comments like 'It's beautiful, Sally, you're so clever with your hands' and, 'We'll have the best house in the street after tonight!'

At one stage, Nan came in and, seeing us balancing on top of the crates completely obscured by the wallpaper, which had somehow flopped backwards over our heads, commented, 'I'm livin' in a nut house! You two are the silliest buggers I know.' Mum blew her top and Nan left, chuckling. She was always pleased when she upset someone ...

Nan was right, the pattern was all mixed up. Mum salvaged some pride by muttering, 'We can say we did it that way deliberately.'

Wonderfully described. And with a touch of embellishment? We can all relate to starting a job using glue or something sticky like wallpaper and finding ourselves out of our depth and lacking the skills required for the task. Life presents so many mishaps and mistakes – what can we do apart from laugh at ourselves?

Exaggerate

You can do more than just embellish. Exaggerate! Indeed, exaggeration will work well to enhance humour in your memoir. It's one of the hallmarks of comedy.

Clive James relates a tale from his early childhood in *Unreliable Memoirs*, when he fell into a pond of water. He uses exaggeration and overstates the action to great effect:

At the bottom of the back yard lay an air-raid trench full of rain-water. I fell into it within minutes of arriving. Hearing a distant splash, Aunt Dot, who was no sylph, came through the back door like a train out of a tunnel and hit the lawn running . . . Aunt Dot was attired in a pink corset but it didn't slow her down. She covered the ground like Marjorie Jackson, the girl who later became famous as the Lithgow Flash. The earth shook. I was going down for the third time but I can distinctly remember the moment she launched herself into the air, describing a parabolic trajectory which involved, at one point, a total eclipse of the sun. She landed in the trench beside me. Suddenly we were sitting together in the mud. All the water was outside on the lawn. Usually my mother was first to the rescue. This time she was second. She had to resuscitate both of us.

You can see how the exaggeration generates humour. It heightens the sense of silliness and creates a laugh from a crazy situation.

Find a new twist

Finding a new twist to an old saying is a common way to create humour. Here's an old joke from Spike Milligan which is newly relevant since Donald Trump's election wins: 'You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all the people some of the time, which is just long enough to be president of the United States.' (Twice.)

Another clever Milligan twist: 'Contraceptives should be used on every conceivable occasion.'

Some anonymous examples of old clichés with a fresh twist:

We're always told to face our fears. But what if your greatest fear is whatever is behind you?

No one ever wakes up and says, 'I think I under drank last night.'

Always a bridesmaid, never the bride – which is fine given today's divorce rate.

Love can cause you to overlook anything about a person. Sometimes everything.

If your writing drifts into cliché, it's worth looking for an over-the-top simile, wacky comparison, or a twist in the tail.

Jerry Seinfeld came up with any number of ironic contradictions, such as 'I'd give my right arm to be ambidextrous.' He's an expert at finding a new twist for an old saying. One of his trademarks is to use a play on words in the form of a question.

Some Seinfeld examples:

If the cops arrest a mime, do they tell him he has the right to remain silent?

If a parsley farmer is sued, can they garnish his wages?

Do cemetery workers prefer the graveyard shift?

If a mute swears, does his mother wash his hands with soap?

If someone with multiple personalities threatens to kill himself, is it considered a hostage situation?

Where do forest rangers go to get away from it all?

Isn't it a bit unnerving that doctors call what they do 'practice'?

When sign makers go on strike, is anything written on their signs?

Borrow from others

Over the years, there has been an incredible amount of 'joke theft' and comedians have found it difficult to combat this or sue for compensation. Comedian and comedy-writer John Cleese has made a lifelong quest of writing humour and strongly suggests borrowing from others. 'Steal', he says in his memoir, *So Anyway . . .* He suggests reproducing someone else's idea in a setting you are familiar with:

It will become sufficiently different from the original because you are writing it, and by basing it on something good, you will be learning some of the rules of good writing as you go along.'

Even if you have changed it or adapted a joke, if it isn't 'sufficiently different' as Cleese suggests, you should still give credit to the source. For simple courtesy and ethics, attribute the original author, even if there is little likelihood of any legal action.

As Cleese looks back at his life, he's a strong believer in not taking ourselves too seriously, as he explained in an interview with Devon Ivie about his autobiography, *So Anyway . . .* :

It's very much all about growing up and school and this kind of stuff, which I think I'm able to be funny about. Because I see it all from a relaxed point of view of a 75-year-old man who realises that very little really matters. When I look back to my twenties, when I was sitting in despair when my latest girlfriend had dumped me, I now kind of laugh at it because I realise how unimportant it was . . . Humour is about things going wrong and people behaving inappropriately. In that sense, humour is critical. We often make fun of ourselves; it's very healthy to laugh at ourselves.

Some people see 'Fawlty Towers' and Basil Fawlty as being all about anger. And that's really not an explanation. You see, when he gets angry and beats a car (with a tree branch), which people find very funny, it's funny not because he's angry but because it's an absurd thing to do.

I think humour is incredibly positive, I think it is life advancing. There's medical research to show that it improves your antibodies. It's all about sense and perspective.

Cleese maintains that your thoughts follow your mood. Anxiety will produce anxious thoughts, and likewise, a playful mood lends itself to humour. Funny stuff is often about the absurd. He adds, 'If God did not intend for us to eat animals, then why did he make them out of meat?' (How's that for left-field ludicrous?)

Be self-deprecating

I have a good mate who says he has a great face for radio. You can't help but like him. Perhaps the most endearing quality one can have is self-deprecation. When we have a dig at ourselves, we're not putting anyone else down, but we are being open about ourselves.

A few well-placed anecdotes will do wonders for your writing, especially if you can relate something funny that has happened to you. Maybe it's just a dumb mistake. Our failures and foibles are just as noteworthy as our successes, and our audience will relate to us as real human beings.

Comedian Peter Cook used wacky comparisons, silly repetition and self-deprecating humour to marvellous effect in this short monologue from a 1961 skit called *Sitting on the Bench*:

Yes, I could have been a judge, but I never had the Latin, never had the Latin for the judging. I just never had sufficient of it to get through the rigorous judging exams. They're noted for their rigour. People came staggering out saying 'My God, what a rigorous exam' – and so I became a miner instead. A coal miner. I managed to get through the mining exams – they're not very rigorous. They only ask one question. They say 'Who are you?', and I got 75% for that. And what is more, being a miner, as soon as you are too old and tired and sick and stupid to do the job properly, you have to go. Well, the very opposite applies with the judges. So all in all, I'd rather have been a judge than a miner.

Humour in dialogue

Dialogue lends itself to humour. If you've written about a humorous episode and it doesn't quite come off, try converting it into a conversation between two people, especially if they are at odds with each other. Guaranteed, it'll be funnier.

Here is an example of hilarious dialogue from Denise Scott, in *All That Happened at Number 26*. She surprises herself when she realises her reluctance to relinquish her 'matriarchal crown'. 'Who would've thought I'd hang on to it,' she says, 'with all the tenacity of a highly agitated pit bull terrier?':

'What's wrong with the fruit I buy?' [Her husband says.]

‘Those apples you bought yesterday were bruised.’

‘Only a couple of them; anyway, they tasted good.’

‘I thought they were disgusting.’

‘Alright then. At least let me get some food for tonight’s dinner. You do like the food I cook don’t you?’

‘Yeah, I guess so but . . .’

‘What?’

‘Does it always have to be such an event? Last night that Moroccan feast . . .’

‘Didn’t you like it?’

‘It was great, but John, the kids need to eat before midnight.’

Then there was the way John hung out the clothes.

‘Are you saying that I don’t peg the clothes on the line the same way as you and therefore I should change my method?’

‘No, John, I’m not saying that at all. It’s the way you do it, with all that pomp and circumstance, the way you parade through the house huffing and puffing and drawing attention to yourself: “Oh, look at me, I’m carrying another basket of washing to the line. Aren’t I amazing?” Can’t you just do it quietly like I do?’

‘But Scotty, I am not you. I do things differently.’

‘Well, how about showing me some respect for the fact that I’ve been hanging out the clothes for the last five years and asking me for advice on the best way to do it?’

Here is a piece of humorous dialogue from Bill Bryson’s Australian travel memoir, *Down Under*. He’s visiting Manly Beach and asks his guide to explain about boogie boarding. For the sake of humour, he’s probably employed artistic licence and embellishment to recreate this scene:

‘But what does it entail exactly?’ I persisted.

‘You take a kind of miniature surfboard and paddle out into the sea, where you catch a big wave and ride it back to the shore. It’s easy. You’ll love it.’

‘What about sharks?’ I asked uneasily.

‘Oh, there’s hardly any sharks here. Glenn, how long has it been since someone was killed by a shark?’

‘Oh, ages,’ Glenn said, considering. ‘Couple of months at least.’

‘Couple of months?’ I squeaked.

‘At least. Sharks are way overrated as danger,’ Glenn added. ‘Way overrated. It’s the rips that’ll most likely get yer.’ He returned to taking pictures.

‘Rips?’

‘Underwater currents that run at an angle to the shore and sometimes carry people out to sea,’ Deirdre explained. ‘But don’t worry. That won’t happen to you.’

‘Why?’

‘Because we’re here to look after you . . .’

‘. . . If you’re caught in a rip,’ Deirdre was saying, ‘the trick is not to panic.’

I looked at her. ‘You’re telling me to drown calmly?’

‘No, no. Just keep your wits. Don’t try to swim against the current. Swim across it. And if you’re still in trouble, just wave your arm like this’ – she gave the kind of big, languorous wave that only an Australian could possibly consider an appropriate response to a death-at-sea situation – ‘and wait for the lifeguard to come.’

Two totally different mindsets are operating, which creates a funny disconnect. It’s a beautifully recreated piece of dialogue. Our best recollection and memory are the tools at our disposal, under the benevolent umbrella of artistic licence.

Anh Do’s extended family came to Australia as refugees on a small, overcrowded fishing boat in 1980. Between starvation at sea and pirate attacks they almost didn’t make it. Here’s an excerpt from his memoir, *The Happiest Refugee*:

‘What a great country!’ my parents said to each other. One of the first things that happened was two smiley nuns from St Vincent de Paul came and gave our family a huge garbage bag stuffed full of clothes. No charge. For Free! . . .

The new arrivals tried on their new clothes, including jeans (a luxury item) and remained flabbergasted. They would soon be in for an amazing surprise when they discovered that St Vincent de Paul ran a ‘second-hand heaven’ called an Op shop where you could ‘go and *pick your own clothes*’ at rock-bottom prices:

Uncle Dung, one of Mum’s younger brothers, and the most smiley of all the uncles, stumbled onto the clearance table and shouted out to the whole shop that he had struck gold. He was literally shaking with excitement and disbelief that such a thing could even exist.

‘Everyone come quickly!’ He yelled. ‘This table . . . even cheaper!!!’

He got pats on the back from his siblings: ‘What a find!’ In this wonderful incredible shop where everything is already a bargain, Uncle Dung has found the table that is bargained again . . .

Uncle Dung's hands were shaking as he quickly sifted through the mountain of clothes and suddenly felt an unfamiliar softness. He pulled out a fur jacket. A beautiful luxurious thick down, made of some kind of animal that must have been rare and exotic.

'Hien! Come over and try it on!'

Mum darted over and tried to squeeze into it. It didn't fit.

'I'll buy it for my girlfriend,' Uncle Dung said.

'What are you talking about? You don't have a girlfriend,' Uncle Than responded.

'If I have this I'll be able to *get one!* . . . One day I'm going to meet a girl and give her this.'

'Put it back you idiot.'

'No!'

'What if she's fat?' Mum asked. But Uncle Dung had made up his mind.

'Nah. I'm going to buy it. It's only fifty cents.'

So funny and well-told. Great dialogue. And an Op-shop revelation for Vietnamese refugee 'boat people' as they were called at the time.

A funny situation

Here is an amusing episode from Albert Facey's well-known memoir, *A Fortunate Life*. It's a funny family anecdote with a splash of dialogue to engage the reader:

. . . we heard Mum let out a terrible scream. She came running out of the lavatory holding up her dress with one hand and clutching her bottom with the other. She was yelling out loudly, 'I've been bitten by a snake!'

. . . they set out to get Mum to the doctor . . .

After they had gone I got a nice handy stick, about four feet long, and went into the lavatory after the snake . . . A bag was hung onto the back wall to cover the hole . . . I noticed some feathers, and as I lifted the bag further, more feathers came into view . . .

Mum's snake was a hen. The hen had made a nest close to the pan to lay eggs and Mum hadn't noticed her . . .

When they came home Mum seemed jolly and didn't show any ill effects from the shock she'd had. She asked if I'd looked around the lavatory for the snake and I said that I'd found the thing that had bitten her . . .

We went to the lavatory and I lifted up the bag. She looked under and exclaimed, 'Good God. No!' . . .

She said, 'Did you have any visitors while we were away or see anyone?' I said, 'No.' 'Well,' she said, 'don't you say anything, not even to Frank or anybody about this. If you do I'll be the laughing stock of the district.' She said, 'Bert, I love you, but if you tell anyone about this I'll kill you.' I promised not to tell anyone. Nothing more was said about the 'snake bite'.

It's the sort of laconic humour and clipped dialogue that reminds us of Henry Lawson's stories. One assumes that the lavatory was originally called a 'dunny'.

Several memoir examples where humour has been employed to good effect (which you may like to explore) include:

The Glass Castle by Jeannette Walls, has some fairly heavy material from an eccentric family background which is lightened by humorous anecdotes of her childhood. Her humour provides relief from more serious subjects.

David Sedaris recounts funny stories from his life in *Me Talk Pretty One Day*. He engages the reader by sharing his experiences learning French with great comic effect. His use of pun and wordplay provide a memorable read.

Tina Fey's memoir, *Bossypants*, is loaded with comedy as she relates personal stories from her life and working on 'Saturday Night Live'. Her observational humour and self-deprecation make for plenty of laughs.

For your memoir, you will relate anecdotes about funny situations, and the ridiculousness of life. It's a time for reflection on weird and wonderful events. How strange and unpredictable life can be.

Just be you, be authentic, tell it straight or embellish if you wish. Exaggerate, be absurd, find a new twist, borrow from others, self-deprecate, or use dialogue. These are tools for humour.

You might like to reflect on how you have aged, the weirdness and foibles of having an older body yet still feeling young inside. Or silly habits and obsessions, compulsive behaviour, routines, quirks.

Finding humour in your memoir is about the odd and funny things that always pop up in our lives. It's about taking a light-hearted look at the absurdities of life.

Enjoy your story and cherish the funny stuff. It's a bit of fun.

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Sex in Memoir: Navigating a tricky topic (booklet)

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