

“Reality’s Rough Edges”

Steve Luxenberg, Keynote address

Pure Sea Glass, Writers at the Beach conference

Rehoboth Beach, Delaware

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Thanks, Maribeth, for that wonderful introduction. If it’s true that we should quit when we ahead, I think I’ll go back to my table now.

Isn’t this an amazing conference?

You might think you have some idea of how much work goes into it, but unless you’re been involved in organizing this sort of gathering, you probably don’t have any true concept of what it entails, of the months and months of planning that rests beneath those pieces of pure sea glass on the tables. This is Maribeth’s labor of love, and we are all her beneficiaries, just as the Nemours researchers working on mitochondrial disease are her beneficiaries.

Did you notice the scent of the shampoo and hand soap in your room?
Extract of orange. Maribeth, I don't care if it's a coincidence. How do you
do that?

We're lucky to be a part of this, and we're lucky to have Maribeth and
her army of volunteers to thank for creating a space that allows us to come
together, as writers, to learn from each other and about each other. Thank
you, Maribeth.

You know, I almost didn't make it here tonight. Yesterday, I got a
phone call from New York. It was Conan O'Brien.

He wanted my time slot.

He's still looking for one.

I said, "Only if you're willing to volunteer your time."

Maribeth, he hung on me, but I promise, I'm working on him for next
year.

By the way, for those purists out there, the ones who attended the panel discussions on truth in memoir writing: That was a joke. As that great philosopher Dave Barry would never say, I AM MAKING THIS UP.

Actually, Conan was very sweet when he called. So I don't want anyone sending out texts or tweets about Conan's attitude problem.

Speaking of tweeting, one announcement before I go on:

Cellphones, BlackBerries, other electronic devices . . . No, no, please leave them ON. You have my permission to call, text, tweet, BlackBerry anyone you like. Tell them that you're at a great conference, listening to a brilliant speaker, who's written a wonderful book called *Annie's Ghosts*....

You like that little marketing ploy? My father, the furniture salesman, would be very proud of how his son, the writer, has gotten in touch with his inner marketer.

You see, Dad worried that I wouldn't be able to make a living as a writer. I reassured him – I was bound for the world of journalism, I would get a full-time job on a newspaper. I wouldn't have the instability that characterized his working life. He worked on a commission, but I would have a salary, and health insurance, and a pension plan. A newspaper was something solid, something you could hold in your hands.

It took 30 years, but Dad, I made it! I'm a senior member of a profession that has no clear idea of where it's going, and even less of an idea how to get there.

So my career move? To diversify, to keep my feet in journalism and also take a leap into book writing, which works on ... well, a kind of commission, except publishers dress it up with a fancy term known as "royalties." Dad would be right at home in the publishing industry.

Well, that's not entirely fair. There are all kinds of benefits to become a book author, beyond the thrill of seeing your book on the remainder table. As a journalist, I can't join any groups; I have to stay neutral to protect my impartiality. But as a book author, I've finally found a community of people

with one overriding purpose, a shared goal that binds us together: Which is to check our Amazon rating every hour. And you may not know about this new benefit, but the Writer's Guild offers an emergency hotline for writers who check more often than that.

Don't worry: I've only called twice.

Now, you're here this weekend to spend time with people facing the same challenges, and you're hoping to pick up a few tips about writing that will help you. This conference offers something for everyone: Great workshops, great people, great inspiration, spectacularly chilly weather, too many sweets in the hospitality suite. But what you're really hoping to learn, the two burning questions that you want to ask every workshop leader, is: How do I get my work – my poetry, my novel, my baby – published? And if I'm fortunate enough to get published, how do I get the book buyer's attention?

A friend of mine told me after he finished his first book, his editor called him. After congratulating him, the editor gravely said, "Your book is

now in the hands of the Book Gods. . . And they are very cruel Gods, indeed.”

As someone who just been through the delightful process of bringing a book to an already saturated market – we writers have a lot in common with farmers who grows corn – I could write a book about what I learned. It’s a universal experience, one that nearly all first-time authors share, and I know there’s a market out there for this story. I already have the title: My Last Book.

When Maribeth invited me to give the keynote address, I have to say I was a bit daunted. All these wonderful writers, all this talent in one ballroom! But as soon as I walked into the conference yesterday morning, I felt right at home. I could spot the writers, otherwise normal people wandering the hallways muttering to themselves “write what you know” and “chronology is a nonfiction writer’s best friend” and “what is the arc of my story?”

As for story arcs, we just left the “joke” part of my talk, and we’re now moving into the “serious” part, followed by the ending flourish.

Everyone here is a storyteller, and I want to talk a bit about stories and how we tell them. I'm going to take a risk, and wander into and out of various writing genres, even screenwriting, so I ask your indulgence as I weave my way through the worlds of fiction and nonfiction.

Every story has to begin somewhere – but the storyteller decides where, and how, a story begins. We often say that stories begin at the beginning, but that's not true. Sometimes, they begin in the middle. Sometimes, they even begin at the end. That's because storytellers bring a shape to their stories, a purpose.

How do we begin our stories? Often, we begin with an emotion, or a motivation, or a justification or a revelation.

Every storyteller has to begin somewhere, and I think it's a sign of the sad state of nonfiction writing that interviewers often ask me why the story of *Annie's Ghosts* doesn't begin in anger.

They come to this story about my mother's life-long secret, about her decision to deny the existence of a mentally and physically disabled sister, with the presumption that this book must be one of judgment. They expect that I'm settling a score, that I must be motivated by fury. They seem surprised, even disappointed, to learn that this is a book that seeks to understand my mother's motivations, to recreate her world as she saw it, to look at her through 1940 eyes, not the eyes of someone living in the first decade of the 21st century.

Anger, it seems to me, comes from that quadrant of our brain that feels betrayed, or treated unfairly, or wronged.

My mom created her secret long before I was born. At the outset, it had nothing to do with me. To twist that story into one about me, and how I feel about my mom's decision, would be to engage in an act of self-indulgence, not in the art of writing.

Until I was in my forties, I knew three things for sure about my mom: Her name was Beth, she was an only child, and she always told me to tell the truth.

Well, I now know her name wasn't Beth. She wasn't an only child, and her relationship to the truth, like her relationship with her family, turns out to be, well, complicated.

There's a saying in journalism that's meant to underscore the importance of accuracy. "If your mother says she loves you, check it out." I never dreamed that my mom told me she was an only child, as she told everyone, that I would need to check it out.

When people ask me what *Annie's Ghosts* is about, I often say, I've lived every journalist's dream. I've investigated my own mother.

Of course, when I made that joke at a mental health conference recently, a psychiatrist came up to me afterward and said, "You investigated your own mother?" Apparently, he had a couch waiting for me in his office.

Reinterpreting my mom's life, trying to discover her motivations for creating a secret that she nurture until her death, led me to a few people who

knew my mom's secret, including some who knew Annie before she went to the psychiatric institution where she spent 31 years, her entire adult life.

They told me stories about my mom, and in some cases, about her secret. Some started those stories with anger. Some with surprise. Some with shame. They rarely started their stories at the beginning.

I'm often asked: Is *Annie's Ghosts* a true story? Did you invent any scenes, create composite characters, to fill the holes in the story, to account for what you could not find out about your mom and Annie?

I guess nonfiction writers can thank James Frey for those questions. And maybe Truman Capote, creator of the nonfiction novel. Or Norman Mailer. Or maybe, just maybe, we, writers and readers alike, share the responsibility for this blurring of the line between fiction and fact. Maybe those of us who accept the term "creative nonfiction," a discipline now taught at so many of this country's esteemed universities, might want to reconsider the inherent contradiction of that particular coinage. We have a perfectly good and honorable name for such writing: It's called the novel. I wish I were talented enough to write one.

I know this is a complicated issue. Like most issues of importance, there's more than one point of view. We had a terrific panel discussion this afternoon debating just how far a memoir can go and still be called nonfiction.

For me, it comes down to trust. If readers don't trust me, than I'm the loser.

Why are we having this discussion? Why do some memorists insist, with all post-modern sincerity, that nonfiction and true stories can venture into the novelist's realm in service of "a greater truth"? That it's not necessary to alert us in some way when the narrative takes a flight of fancy?

Because it works. Because of the power of calling something a true story. Because, despite our protestations, we're in love with the idea that truth isn't just stranger than fiction, it's also more dramatic.

An example: The movie "Chariots of Fire," about the 1924 Paris Olympics, which tells the story of the British runner, Harold Abrahams,

determined to redeem his loss in the first of two sprint races to his charmed rival, the golden boy from America. The film shows how Abrahams, portrayed as an outsider running not just for his own country Britain but for his Jewish faith, overcomes his own demons to win the second race.

I was so enthralled that I went to the newspaper library to read, on microfilm, the coverage of the 1924 Olympics. Imagine my surprise, and disappointment, and finally betrayal, when I read that Abrahams had won the first race, and lost the second.

All that tension, all that drama, all a fiction.

Now, you might say, Steve, c'mon, lighten up, it's a movie. What did you expect?

Well, I didn't expect that the central tension in the film, the psychological underpinning for Abrahams' behavior, would be fiction. You want to make a movie about an Olympian who loses a race and comes back to win? Fine, go ahead. But why choose a real Olympic event, with a known outcome, and fool us into thinking that you're showing us "a true story?"

Because, I would argue, that's what we want. We not only want to feel good, we want our heroes and their heroics to be real. Several writers, at panel discussions earlier today, described the power, and burden, of telling true stories. They talked about how readers ask, and sometimes, assume that every event described in a poem, and even in novels, must be autobiographical -- how readers feel betrayed to find out that novelists and poets make up stuff. What's the line from Casablanca? I'm shocked, shocked to hear that fiction writing is going on in this establishment.

The nonfiction writer has a different burden. True stories often aren't neat. True stories have ambiguity and complicated motivations and people who don't speak in perfectly crafted sentences that move the narrative forward.

I prefer reality's rough edges. I like what one reviewer wrote about Annie's Ghosts: "This is a true story that actually reads like a true story."

Telling that true story wasn't easy. Recent changes in privacy laws have put even higher fences around medical records. These laws do

something quite rare in American legal history—they confer rights upon the dead, rights with few limits, and these rights have created a serious imbalance between our understandable desire for privacy and our desire to be able to know and tell our own history.

Like many long-time journalists, I have had more than a little experience in dealing with recalcitrant government bureaucracies. I wasn't deterred by the high walls that often exist between the governed and their government. But that's not true for most people. When they encounter hard-to-understand restrictions and unhelpful public officials, they usually retreat. Some never try at all.

I'm not usually in the habit of quoting German philosophers, but there's a quote from Hegel that nicely captures the issue. "Genuine tragedies in the world are not conflicts between right and wrong," Hegel once observed. "They are conflicts between two rights."

For now, we have chosen to exalt privacy over history. This can't last. In coming years, as researchers learn more and more about the genetic and neurological basis for physical and mental illnesses – I hope that

mitochondrial disease is one of them – governments will come under more pressure from families who will want clearer and less complicated access to their ancestors' records.

Recently, I received an email from a woman who wanted my help in finding records on her great grandmother's institutionalization. "There is no one alive today, anywhere on the planet, who knew my great grandmother," she wrote. "But state law makes it almost impossible to legally access medical records for long-deceased ancestors."

Think about it: Doesn't this shroud of secrecy merely serve to extend the very stigma that we're working so hard to eliminate? By putting medical records of the long deceased off limits, aren't we saying that there's something about mental illness that needs to be hidden, forever?

Every generation creates its secrets. Those secrets often traumatized the secret keeper, and that trauma can ripple outward affecting those around the secret keeper. But because of the secrecy, no one understands the source

of the trauma. That's why I now say that family secrets are a mental health issue.

We cannot be afraid to tell these stories, to write these histories, to reveal our pasts. My mom was afraid of her past.

Now back to home turf, that of telling stories. We also cannot be afraid to tell these stories honestly, to plumb the drama that exists rather than create the drama that doesn't.

Readers are smart. They don't like to be fooled. But they are also forgiving. They understand about reality's rough edges, and they will give us a lot of leeway to create our stories.

Someone complimented me, at a recent talk that I gave, about the clever foreshadowing that she had detected at one point in the book. I thanked her, and then told the following story, from the actor Dustin Hoffman:

A few years ago, Hoffman spoke at a university gathering, one of those parents' weekend events. Hoffman's son was a student there. An audience member rose during the Q&A, and asked about the wonderful scene at the end of "The Graduate," when Hoffman's character comes to the church to stop Katharine Ross's character from getting married.

That scene occupies a special place in the pantheon of movie making. Critics have discussed, dissected, described it – how Hoffman approaches the church, bangs on the stained glass doors, his arms raised in the manner of Christ on the cross.

Hoffman said, "Here's the real story. When I banged on the door, I had my fists in front of me, I'm panicked, furious, wanting to break down the doors to get in. We're filming on location, and the minister of the church, the real church, is watching and he rushes over, saying, "No, stop, you're going to break the stained glass."

"So Mike Nichols, the director, sighs wearily and says, 'Dustin, just spread your hands and pretend to be banging hard, but tap gently.'"

If the story is good, if the characters are interesting, the viewers, the readers, will fill in the rest.

And now, you can fill in the rest. I don't have to make up a thing.

Thanks for listening, you've been a great audience. Enjoy the rest of this wonderful event. Good night, write well, and most important, tell your stories.