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Family Time



 Eleanor Norford looks for inspiration in real life tales

While researching your family tree you find some great stories. Can you turn these into a book for your loved ones?

Anyone who has dabbled in genealogy will know that family history can be rich in memories, scandals, triumphs and tragedies. There are some fascinating and inspiring stories already in print, as well as those waiting to be discovered. Investigating then documenting – while labour intensive – is extremely rewarding. But unless you publish your work to preserve it for future generations, valuable research could be lost.

This is where the ability to self-publish can turn what starts out as a hobby into a book – a record of your family's struggles and triumphs through the ages.

Turning that research into a book will provide cherished memories for generations to come. Not only are you preserving your family's history, but also documenting past times – a rich tapestry of stories, portraying how people lived in bygone eras.

Self-publishing has enabled many would-be authors to see their work in print without breaking the bank or struggling for years to secure an illusive book deal. While the idea of starting a book may be somewhat daunting, it is achievable with a little research into the process, a lot of hard work, a good editor and proofreader. And, if you are hoping to get a book deal in the

future, you will have a professionally finished book to show a prospective agent.

TAKING THE FIRST STEP

That first step is to think about the format it will take. Will it be in narrative style, talking in the first person? Or perhaps it needs a more formal approach, documenting facts in chronological order? Whichever format you decide, always consider the impact on your reader. While fascinating to the researcher, family history can be boring if the work isn't brought to life with anecdotes, some narrative and background. Every family has an interesting tale to tell, but it is the writer's job to bring that story to life.

Beverley Hansford self-published *Roots in Three Counties – A History of the Hansford Family of Dorset, Kent and Lancashire*. He felt that it was important to include all the basic information such as dates of births, marriages and deaths as well as some background. "I also decided to include a bit about the surroundings of where they lived and worked. Family trees are an absolute must. Without them the average reader will become lost in a mass of names and dates," explains Beverley, adding that he also included as many photographs as he could.

However, Beverley advises getting permission to use material from those involved. "When publishing a photograph or picture – unless produced by a family member – these will be subject to a copyright, so permission will have to be obtained from the owner. I encountered this several times. Sometimes permission is willingly granted, at other times a fee will be required. Also, if living persons are involved in the story, the writer must let them see what they have written and obtain their permission or respect any alterations they request. Even sons and daughters can object to what has been written about their dead parents."

Writing a book is daunting, but this can be overcome with careful preparation. Good planning underpins any book. Successful

texts are carefully structured at the start. Each stage must be completed before leading on to the next.

Start by deciding on the number of chapters you need, then come up with a heading for each one. This will provide the basic framework. Next, organise your notes. One of the best ways to do this is to use a lever arch file with numbered dividers, which can be assigned to each chapter. Organise your research according to the relevant chapters. Make notes on each one to give you a starting point, include a few sub-headings to keep you on track and help to avoid writers' block.

Also think about the number of words in each chapter. On average a book contains around 70,000 to 80,000 words, with around 12–14 chapters. This equates to roughly 5,000 words a chapter. Discipline is the key. Set two deadlines – one for finishing each chapter and one for the book.

For Beverley one of the most difficult aspects was reproducing family trees. "I failed to find a computer programme which would produce the required style of tree. Fortunately, my publisher was extremely helpful and turned my home-produced ones into the professional trees, which appear in the book."

Do look at other people's work to

get some ideas. "Getting an idea of how to tackle the job is essential. Most family history society libraries will have some examples," says Beverley.

But before you start writing, investigate the self-publishing packages. Budgeting is essential, particularly if you are planning to recoup your costs. Beverley advises thinking about how you want your book to look, the quality of the covers and inside pages, then deciding on how many copies to print before getting quotes.

"These factors will all influence the end price. *Roots in Three Counties* cost around £1,500, but that figure did not include proofreading and editing. This could cost an extra £500–800, depending on the work involved." If you have begun a dialogue and found a self-publishing company you like, then you will be more motivated to finish the book.

AN EXPERT'S VIEW

Sharon Carmack is a professional genealogist, freelance writer, non-fiction mentor and editor based in the United States. As well as hosting *Roots Books*, a talk show on *RootsTelevision.com*, Sharon teaches non-fiction writing for *Writer's Digest University* and lectures on genealogical research for *Family Tree University*.

Having read numerous family histories she states that storytelling is the key. Quoting screenwriter Robert McKee, she says: "Story begins when an event, either by human decision or accident in the universe, radically upsets the balance of forces in the protagonist's life. That

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SHARON CARMACK'S TOP 5 TIPS

- Find conflicts and universal themes in your ancestors' stories.
- Study the craft of writing family histories by reading family histories and biographies written by a variety of writers – genealogists, historians, literary writers, memoirists, biographers, and journalists.
- Draft, revise, revise and revise.
- Find readers who will offer honest, constructive feedback on your draft.
- Revise, revise, revise and revise some more.

protagonist, of course, is one of your ancestors. The story then unfolds as the ancestor seeks to restore balance. The upset can be the decision to emigrate, forced military conscription, divorce, the death of a child, or any number of life problems people encounter."

However, there can be some pitfalls using this method. "Their so-called story ends up reading like a 'this happened, then that happened' narrative, rather than one that focuses on conflicts and universal themes," explains Sharon. "As V. S. Pritchett said about memoir writing, which applies here, too: It's all in the art. You get no credit for living. You get no credit for researching and writing about your ancestors. It's all in the art of storytelling."

So what is the best method of storytelling? "This depends on what type of family history a person wants to write, the intended audience and if the person is writing it for themselves

or someone else," explains Sharon. "Obviously, it wouldn't be appropriate to use a first-person narrative when writing someone else's family history. But when you're writing your own, there is more latitude. Some writers aren't comfortable putting themselves in the story.

"You also have to consider the purpose for putting the writer into the story. If the writer decides to pen more of a memoir, where the author is in the story to share the search and ponder outcomes and motivations, then it would be appropriate to use first person."

Sharon prefers first-person narratives because she likes to know what's going on in the author's mind as they're searching. "It makes me feel like I'm on the journey with them. I also like to know how they are interpreting someone's life. But other readers may prefer a more objective form of storytelling. Bottom line, as writers are often advised, write the story you want to read."

AN AUTHOR'S STORY

Michael Greening wrote his first family history book, *Greening*, in 2000. His follow up, *A Family Story*, provides a series of snapshots of the Greening family and the times in which they lived. The book is illustrated by photographs from the Victorian era onwards, plus family documents, wills and private correspondence. Michael tells the story behind the books.

"The catalyst for writing my first book on family history, *Greening*, was my wife's death in September

2000. I had been researching our history for many years and had always intended to produce a book. Thoughts of mortality prompted me to write it before my own demise scattered my research to 'the four winds'.

"My second book, *A Family Story*, self-published in 2006 evolved from the amount of correspondence generated from my first book – which to my surprise had sold sufficient copies to cover the cost of production. Also I had been given a journal, written in 1847 by Sir Edward Elgar's uncle, that I felt certain should be available to the public.

"As soon as I started writing the first book, I realised that a number of people with my surname (or descended from it, but not closely related) might be interested and decided to publish. I found a small, local, 'working from home' publisher to advise me. The research took many years. Putting the information together and writing the book took about three or four months. I wrote the second book in about three months. The process involved dividing and listing the various blocks of information I had accumulated into stories. I wrote these as separate chapters then assembled them. These were in no particular order – I was usually working on two or three chapters at the same time.

"Although genealogy is researched backwards, I realised it would read more easily if written forwards. The book starts in the 17th century with Nathaniel Greening, baptised in 1679. He was the ancestor of most of the Greenings in the book.

For more details on Michael and his books visit www.michaelgreening.com

"I chose the publishers of my second book for no reason other than that they were based in the Midlands, not too far for me to drive. The whole publishing process took about four months.

"Deciding on the cover price was quite difficult. The first book was small so I guessed that £10 (£9.99) was the right price. The second book was much larger. I thought that £12.99 would be about the price buyers would be happy to pay.

"I marketed both books myself, mainly through writing to

Greenings listed in telephone and other directories. Almost everyone who purchased the first book bought the second one. I was quite surprised that the numbers I sold more than repaid my publishing and marketing costs.

"Anyone planning to self-publish their family's memoirs should have a go at selling it when the book first gets published. Do this before you allow the publishers to release it to Amazon and other retailers, which sell at a discount. You will not recoup your research costs, this is your hobby. However, you should get back your outlay for

publishing and marketing. When you have done this you can leave it to the likes of Amazon.

"I found the whole process life enriching – and still do. I receive emails and letters from all over the world, and have almost enough material for another book, if I ever get round to writing it.

"What would I do differently? Have the book proofread by a professional before it went to press, as well as reading it through several times myself. Also, index the book – or get someone to do that for you."

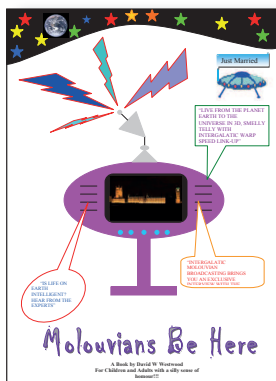
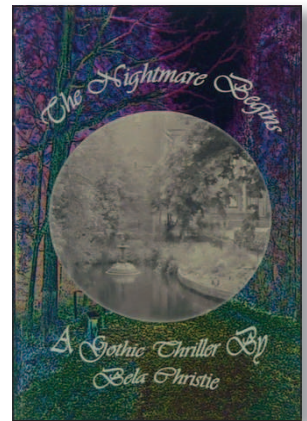
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