

What Am I Writing and When Will I Finish?

It has been five and a half years since CavanKerry, a small, New Jersey press, selected and published *Primary Lessons*, the first of what I hoped would be a memoir-trilogy. I got lucky with P/L when I stumbled upon the voice that unites the 12-year period of my life in a small South Carolina town during the late 50s and early 60s. It is the voice of a five-year-old child who's trying to make sense of the segregated world in which she is suddenly thrust. Time and again, readers and reviewers have said that that technique is what's so intriguing about P/L: the child's voice draws the reader in, letting them discover the distasteful world of segregation, just as the child discovers it.

Sales have been steady, as have book talks and speaking engagements. Readers constantly bombard me with one consistent question: When is the sequel coming out? I'd expected to be finished with the sequel by now. After all, I know the story and have chosen *On My Own* as its title. But recalling the story and writing it down are two different challenges.

P/L ends when I've matured into a recently orphaned 17-year-old, so I thought it would be simple enough to just move forward with the next phase of the story. How wrong I was! The people at the core of my early life were all dead when I began P/L, so I had no fear or restrictions in re-creating the world I had inhabited in childhood. I simply told it like I saw it happen. In fact, my editor (Baron Wormser, a brilliant editor), asked that I remove all adult ruminations on the events I described in the original P/L manuscript and stay in the perspective of the child I was at the time of my experiences.

In writing *On My Own*, I tried to remain faithful to that technique. My desire was to be as open and honest about myself in my sequel as I had been about my mother, father and siblings in P/L. I wanted to lay bare the flesh that sought solace. I wanted to be like the Phoenix rising from the flames of lust and longing, cleansed and unscathed. I pursued that fruitless path, haunted by southern sensibilities about how young ladies should act. For years, the demon of self-censorship kept me from exploring truths that were central to my development. I tried, and failed, at making *On My Own* faithful to the image symbolized by the photo of me at my debutante cotillion that adorns the cover of P/L.

The events of my life during the 60s and 70s were hardly debutante material, or even close to the path my mother had worked so hard to steer me towards. I wrote this caveat and posted it near my computer to help calm my inner critic.

If, after reading this story of the framework upon which I have built my present life,

you no longer feel a fondness for me, it is because you were never fond of ME,

You were simply fond of the illusion you created around the image I presented to you.

I also was haunted by the fact that the people who comprised the next period of my life were alive and well - and probably willing to defend themselves against incorrect dialogue and events they might think transpired differently than the way I remembered. I also thought some of them might be shamed by the truths of our youthful, ill-fated interactions during the turbulent 60s and 70s when I was adrift in a rudderless boat, grasping for solid ground. And, I feared their responses to the harshness of my judgement of their best behavior.

Finally, I lay down my white gloves and survivor's guilt and poured onto the pages everything I could remember about the years when I was a lonely orphan trying to make my way in a world far from home with no adults to reprimand or comfort me.

A year ago, I was elated when I completed what I thought was a final draft. I nervously sent the 425-page document to Baron, afraid I had revealed too much, and had tried to cover too much ground. A week later, in a forty-minute phone consultation, Baron asked me to break out the draft's themes, narrow the number, delete parts that were unimportant to my chosen themes, and shape the work to address the meaning of the events that had occurred. In essence, he wanted me to do the opposite of what he asked me to do in P/L!

For months, I was distraught, unsure what to do. So, I did nothing except market P/L. When asked how book two was coming, I quipped, "I'm too busy living book three to finish book two."

I began to read current memoirs, along with Judith Barrington's *Writing the Memoir* which had been a source of guidance when I was writing P/L. Slowly, I began to understand that just telling the story of everything that happened in my life wasn't enough. I had to ferret out the most important aspects of my life story and weave them into whole cloth.

I narrowed the 12 distinct themes in my original manuscript down to two: the loneliness and alienation I felt in the years following my parents' deaths, and how that led me to do things that cut against the grain of my upbringing. I immediately excised a hundred pages – pages whose sentences I had lovingly labored over. Pages whose stories had entertained the members of my writers' group. Pages that now sit in a computer file, awaiting another spotlight.

I think I've done what Baron suggested: given the book thematic cohesion and extracted the meaning of what happened to me. Insightful culling has pared the manuscript to 325 pages, allowing me to finally see the material that supports my primary themes. I also now see how my journey is responsible for the person I've become. As I near the finish line, I'm excited by many of my self-discoveries and marvel at the manuscript's smoothness. I'm still adding segments where I muse about meaning.

I hope to be finished with my final draft of *On My Own* by spring, 2019; then, I'll send it off to Baron for his edits. I hope he doesn't send me back to the cutting room!