# On finding your story



## Memoirist Zoë Bossiere discusses balancing truth and privacy, writing about blurry memories, and staying safe while writing about trauma.

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As told to Natalie Villacorta, 2518 words.

Tags: Writing, Creative anxiety, Inspiration, Beginnings, Mental health.

**When we were in grad school at Oregon State, you were working on a different memoir, one about your parents' times in a circus. Can you talk about how you came to shift your attention to *Cactus Country* and how you know when to stop working on a project and start working on something else?**

So I fell in love with writing in undergraduate, and, in particular, nonfiction writing, though there were still a lot of aspects of my life that, as a young person, I hadn't had time to really reflect on, because there hadn't been a lot of years between them. And I, in many ways, wasn't really ready to look back on Cactus Country, look back on my childhood and make sense of it. And so, I was casting around for like, "Well, what interests me in the world? What are some things that I would like to write about?"

My parents have this amazing story where they, as young people, met and fell in love and kind of immediately went away to Europe where they found themselves traveling around communist Hungary with these sea lions and performing in a show where they didn't even speak or understand the language being spoken over the loudspeakers. So I immersed myself in this world because I was very fascinated by it. But, at the time, what I didn't realize was that I was doing that, maybe, in order to not think or write very much about my own experiences.

And when I got into grad school and I was writing about the circus all the time, I would bring these drafts into workshop, and I got the same kind of comments over and over again, which were like, "Oh, your prose is very clean and I can see the sea lions very clearly and your parents as characters, but where are you in the story?" And that was the question that I just didn't know how to answer ever, and I was very resistant to answering it, and I felt like, "Well, if the story is written well enough, why does it matter if I'm in it or not?" I didn't want to be the focus of it, but the whole book that I was working on, the circus book, really fell flat. It just didn't work. There was an element that was missing, and that element was the personal element.

I spent a long time trying to get that book to work, trying to make it fly, but it just was not going to happen. And I got so far as to almost get it published. It was very close to being published. There was a publisher that was looking at it and very interested in it, but then when they asked for reader reviews, I got the reviews back and they were requesting more of this personal element that I wasn't able to provide. And so, in the end, that didn't work out. That was a failure, and I felt pretty sad about it, at the time, because I was like, "Ah, all I've ever wanted was to publish this book and to be a real writer," whatever that means.

By then, I was in a different grad school, pursuing a doctoral degree, and I started to think about Tucson a lot more. I started to kind of miss it almost, because I'd been away from home, by that point, for like, gosh, five or six years and I hadn't really spent a lot of time there, in all of those years. I started to look at pictures that were taken at that time, and I started to talk to my parents about what they remembered about Cactus Country and all these things started to come back to me, and I started to write about them.

I started writing, first, these little short vignettes about things that had happened in the park, and those became these longer stories that examined some of the really big questions that I had never really answered for myself, like, "What does it mean that, for so many years, I lived as a boy? Cut my hair short, wore boys' clothing, used he/him pronouns, was a boy, and what did that mean for me now?" And so, this book became a way into answering all of these questions, and I found that the more I leaned into that, instead of avoiding it, the better I was able to write a story that people wanted to read.

I think that [before] I was very much writing what I thought others would find interesting, instead of really thinking about what are the things that I really want to know, just for myself, about the world that I grew up in, about the things that I've observed, about myself? And I think that everybody, on some level, has questions like those, so interrogating those makes for a much better story than even the most fascinating circus story, if it didn't happen to you.

**How do you balance the blurriness of memory and the need for specificity and vivid detail?**

That's like the number one question of memoir, right? The thing that everybody has on their mind, every writer has on their mind, but is supposed to be completely invisible when readers open the book. I hadn't thought about my childhood in a long time, by the time I sat down to write *Cactus Country*, because it's something that I had been avoiding. And I think that when I sat down to start writing, the way in and the way past all of what I didn't remember was to really focus on the things that I did [remember] very well. And, for me, what I remembered the most, and most clearly and first, was the desert surrounding the trailer park where I grew up.

I started by writing what it felt like to be in the desert, how my skin felt, because I went barefoot everywhere as a kid, to walk on the gravel, to walk in the desert, to step on a cactus needle, to burn your foot on the asphalt, because the sun is so hot. And through that exercise of writing these things, I began to remember some of the people who populated the landscape, so some of the boys and the men in the park and the kind of things that we would do in the desert to pass time or for fun or the kind of things that we did that we weren't supposed to be doing. The mischief we got into. I feel like I was able to access things that I didn't remember and people and relationships and stories through this kind of slow reintroduction into all of it. This slow walk backwards through my memory.

**How do you decide who you're going to write about and how you're going to write about them? How do you balance remembering these really great nuggets about people, and people's desire for privacy?**

There are a lot of people in [*Cactus Country*], and there are a lot more people who could have been in the book, but aren't, and those people aren't in the book, because even though I did some writing about them, ultimately, I felt, for one reason or another, that their stories weren't, maybe, central enough to my own to have the right to write about them. So I was very careful about telling stories just because they were an interesting story.

In instances where the story very much was mine to tell, but it involved other people, I was conscientious about how I was portraying that person. And what I mean by that is, being very generous with their characterization, and trying my best to present them in the best possible light, even when they were doing something that was terrible.

People know that they're not perfect. People know that they've done things that other people might judge them for, people have done things that they're ashamed of, and we can't necessarily forget those things. But when we portray them in art, we can do our best to write it in such a way that is representing as full as possible scope of humanity. So for each of these people, I tried my best to remember, this is a human being with an entire life and an entire book of their own that isn't being represented here, so I have them for 10 pages or 20 pages, so I'm going to do my best to make them feel like as full a character as I possibly can.

There are a lot of people that I shared the book with when it was almost going to be published, just so that they could get a sense of how they were going to be portrayed, just so there was not a surprise. I think that having that time to sit with the pages and kind of have a reaction to them and talk to me about it made a huge difference, and I found that most people were very at peace with the way they were portrayed in the book, and the

folks that I knew that would not be at peace with that or folks that maybe I'm not in contact with anymore, I did my best to protect their identity, so that they would not be recognizable to somebody, maybe, who knew us both.

**There's some characters who definitely exposed you to some traumatic experiences, and in the acknowledgements, you thank a friend for the trauma writing doula service. Can you talk about how you wrote about those traumatic memories, how you balanced your need to protect your mental health and revisiting those experiences?**

I had been kind of humming along, writing *Cactus Country* for a while, and I was moving in, more or less, chronological order, where I was kind of dealing with childhood first, before I delved into adolescence. And when I got there, when I got to some of the traumatic things, I had a real trauma response, where I wasn't able to remember things that had happened very well. The strategies that I normally employ to try and remember weren't working. I found myself feeling very raw. I found myself emotional, not being able to get the words out, not being able to explain why I felt the way that I did. It was clear to me that I would not be able to write about anything that happened in my teen years without help, without support, I mean.

I was very lucky to have had a prior contact with Katherine Standefer, who is just an excellent writing coach, on top of everything, but also has certifications from the Arizona Trauma Institute and has worked with many writers on writing out traumatic events in ways that don't retraumatize. We would talk about what my goals were. Then, she would give me assignments to do while I was away for the week, then we would check back in about them, and throughout the entire process, I was talking to a counselor about how it was going and what I was learning, and feelings I had, and stuff like that. So both, together, were essential, because the doula couldn't do that work, just like my counselor would not have been able to give me writing prompts about this.

The doula was also able to be like, "Which of the places feel too raw? There are things that you do not have to share with the reader. You do not owe anybody and you can present this information in whatever way feels most organic to you." And so, ultimately, what I chose to do was to write as much as I could about the context and lead up to some of the things that happened, and then to sort of write my way around what happened, so that the reader can intuit without having to be there, because I feel like that's also really intense for the reader. I don't know that the reader necessarily needs to go into the experience in the same way that I experienced it, in order to understand the impact of it.

**I remember, in grad school, talking to you one night after a workshop. I think we were drinking milkshakes and I remember that you told me that all you wanted to do was to be a writer, that's all you could do. And I was so struck by that comment, because I also wanted to be a writer and still have that ambition, but I didn't have that certainty that you had. I am just curious about that confidence. Does that ever waver and, if so, how do you keep yourself on the path?**

I put the idea that I might fail kind of out of my mind. And that has served me very well. I just kind of behave as if I'm just going to keep improving and all this writing is going to go somewhere, and I'm sure luck has something to do with it, too, but I also think that no matter what you're doing, if you stick with it, you're going to see results. It may not be as fast as everybody. I remember when I graduated from MFA and a couple years out I was doing my doctoral degree, and folks from the program were starting to publish their books that they had worked on during the program. And I remember feeling like, "Oh, I hope I'm not falling behind. I hope that I am able to write a book and publish it one day, and that I succeed in this way."

And I did, but it took me longer, and I just had to kind of be at peace with that, and to tell myself, "You're on a different path, a different time schedule. Whatever happens with you will work out the way it's meant to happen," and I just had to trust that. So that's what's carried me through to now, and I'm at the end of this huge project, and so I've been just doing lots of publicity and readings and that's been really exciting.

And I haven't done a ton of other writing, and sometimes when I'm in bed and thinking about it, I'm like, "Gosh, what am I going to write next?," and I get a little nervous, because I have some ideas, but I don't really know. And then, I try to remind myself, "Just do what you've always done. Just work at it, just keep getting better, keep reading, keep writing, and the rest will fall into place."

**Zoë Bossiere recommends (five albums that remind them of Tucson):**

AJJ's *Good Luck Everybody*

Ramshackle Glory's *Live the Dream*

Days N Daze's *Show Me the Blueprints*

K. Flay's *Life as a Dog*

Neutral Milk Hotel's *On Avery Island*

Name
Zoë Bossiere

Vocation
writer, memoirist