

Behind the Scenes: The Making of a Life Story

In early 2007, Joyce Bryant CM, BEM, contracted with lifewriters.ca to help her write her memoirs. In the following letter (used with permission) she explains how it all came about.

October 15, 2008

My dear Sheila,

Thank you for the letter and your kind comments about my memoirs, *Slender Threads*, which I much appreciate. You asked me to tell you a little bit about what it was like writing *Slender Threads*, so I'll do my best.

Several years ago I wrote a draft of about one hundred pages of a memoir, but I realised that I had absolutely no knowledge as to how to go about having my manuscript published. So the pages of much-amended scribbles (I still don't have a computer!) stayed in a drawer. Then fate took a hand in the form of Philip Sherwood, who is an editor and personal historian. He lives in western Canada, but often visits family members who live nearby and are my good friends. On one of his visits he showed me a biography, or life story, that he had co-written and privately published. The quality of his work impressed me greatly.

So over tea one day we talked at length about the possibility of me embarking on a similar project. The more Philip explained how these projects come to fruition, the more excited I got at the prospect of something actually developing from my early scribbles. In due course a tentative deal was struck with a handshake and a short time later Philip sent me a detailed letter explaining how the project could proceed and an explanation of the costs involved. These included Philip's fees, the expense of transcribing the tape-recorded interviews between Philip and me as well as all my handwritten material, the book designer fees, and of course the cost of printing and shipping the finished product. At the time the figures seemed quite high, but as time went on I saw how much dedication and professional expertise goes into the production of a first-rate publication. (And when it comes to our life stories, do we want anything but the best?) I realised that every penny I spent was more than worthwhile.

Now to the actual writing of *Slender Threads*. First I have to tell you how important it is to establish a good rapport with your editor. It makes all the difference if you are on the same wavelength and in this regard I was so fortunate. Philip and I initially discussed everything at length (usually late at night, as I am a night owl and the West Coast is three hours behind Ontario) and were able to address and iron out problems as they arose.

A short time later Philip came to interview me, along with another client of his. Over the next two weeks we had 10 one-hour interview sessions in my apartment. These were quite relaxed, as Philip prodded my memory with intuitive questions while recording the conversation on a small, unobtrusive tape recorder. The results turned out well, but in the following weeks I found myself wanting to write more and more and so I did, sending Philip weekly handwritten instalments. We would discuss these on the telephone (on Philip's dime) and from time to time he suggested that certain aspects of my life — for example my faith — needed a little more depth, and could I write about them. He constantly was looking for more than just a mechanical recitation of my life's events. All invaluable help and advice.

I was fortunate in that I have a large collection of photographs and memorabilia from my life, and once the manuscript was finalised, we went through them and chose about 75 for the book. The number later rose to over one hundred, as friends contributed some and Philip took additional photos. Philip also wrote excellent captions for them all and working with the book designer, he placed all the material at appropriate places throughout the manuscript. I was particularly pleased with this approach, as I have never liked biographies where all the photos are clumped together in one section, forcing the reader to go back and forth as she reads the story. Going through the photos also brought back yet more memories and anecdotes, which we incorporated into the manuscript.

Philip had told me that the process of writing a memoir or life story is not a static one, but transformational, and early on I discovered the truth of this. Early in my marriage I had started keeping a detailed daily diary (I still do) and I based a lot of my writing on these entries. As I read through them, I realised that before my husband Bert had fallen prey to Alzheimer's, we had had many happy times together. Reliving and writing about those special years helped me put the few unhappy last years of his life in perspective. This revelation was one of the most rewarding parts of writing the book.

Early on in the process, we decided to ask my dear friend, adapted grandson, and superlative author, Christopher McCreery, to write a forward. He graciously agreed and the resulting comments are most flattering, as you will have already realised.

Once the manuscript was finalised, Philip suggested that I ask three friends who know me well but are not mentioned at length in the book to read an advance copy and make any suggestions as

to how it could be improved. They kindly accepted this task and ended up allowing us to reprint some of their comments on the back cover — something I really appreciated and which gave the book a more professional look.

As I am by nature a procrastinator, it was very good for me to discipline myself to meet deadlines. I drafted and redrafted many of the passages and loved checking and rechecking the galleys — all the while finding it difficult to accept that it was actually my work and not someone else's that I was proofreading! (In all of this, the fact that Philip and I lived thousands of miles apart did not present any huge obstacles. The staff at The Edinburgh allowed me to receive and send faxes, and receive the occasional email on their computers. That, along with the postal service and our telephone conversations, was more than adequate.)

The day came when a proof copy of the book arrived for a final inspection before it went to press. As I looked through it for any possible spelling errors, I saw the ISBN and realised that I was actually publishing my own book. An extraordinary feeling.

One of the last decisions we had to make concerned the number of copies to print. We had discussed this several times over the months. Not having any family, I had initially thought that three or four might suffice. However, interest in the project had mounted and we finally decided to go “the whole hog” and print three hundred. (I was paying for the printing, and the more copies printed, the cheaper the cost is per copy.) I was quite apprehensive about such a large amount and remember nervously looking at the shelves in my small apartment and wondering where I was going to store all the unsold copies. I needn't have worried. We sold out within three weeks and ordered a further one hundred copies, which also went over the next several months. I have just reprinted another one hundred copies, for a total of five hundred!

Once the books arrived, I had to decide what to do with them. Philip encouraged me to sell the books rather than give them away for free, explaining that people expect to pay for a book and if they do, they will assign more value to it and read it, rather than discarding it somewhere. We settled on a price of \$15.00, which many people later told me was quite reasonable, given the quality of the book.

Philip also assisted me with some modest marketing efforts, which included organizing two book launches, one at The Edinburgh and another at St. Bartholomew's Church. The book designer made some beautiful small colour posters that we put up in all the local shops. And Books on Beechwood, our lovely, cosy local bookstore, agreed to take some books on consignment. Philip also did some promotion on his website, *lifewriters.ca*.

Both launches turned out quite well. On each occasion Philip and Christopher spoke briefly; Philip about his experience as my editor, and Christopher about our friendship. At The

Edinburgh launch, I then read a few excerpts from the book after which we got down to the business at hand — selling books! I heard afterwards that it was a great party — the staff had done an excellent job in arranging for refreshments, and many of my friends from the larger community were also there — but at the time I didn't really notice as I had my head down, signing books, while Philip collected the money. We sold about 80 copies that day. It was wonderful to see my friends from outside The Edinburgh mixing with the residents and staff. An unforgettable day for me.

The next day we repeated everything at the church in the hall after the morning service. The minister even made a plug from the pulpit! I didn't feel bad selling my wares on church property, as I had decided to give half of the proceeds to the church. Some of the parishioners had kindly made delectable edibles for everyone to enjoy and one had even baked a cake in the shape of an open book! Again, we sold about 80 copies.

Meanwhile Books on Beechwood was selling copies, thanks to a favourable review in the community newspaper. Just before Christmas we were down to 30 copies and decided to reprint.

In the following months Philip continued to promote the book, sending out press releases and promotional copies to various libraries. These resulted in a favourable article in another community paper as well as a lengthy review in the newsletter of *The Monarchist League of Canada*. I continued to sell a few copies each week and by September of this year, it was time to print another hundred copies.

I am more than satisfied with how things have turned out, as I didn't set out to make money or even break even. I only wanted to leave a modest legacy of my life for my friends, and I think I have accomplished this. However, I ended up having a much wider readership than I could have imagined. The warm and flattering letters and phone calls — sometimes from people I have never met — have been quite overwhelming, and surely a reward without price.

But perhaps an even more important outcome of this venture has been learning about myself — warts and all. And last but not least, the pleasure that I have received in working with Philip — thank you, friend!

Sheila, I'm so sorry that this has become such a long screed — it seemed to grow like Topsy, but there it is. I hope it has been interesting to you.

Much love,

Joyce