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By [Stephanie Chandler](#) July 25, 2018 [2 Comments](#) [Read More](#) →

[Bringing Someone Else's Story to Life by Katrina Shawver](#)



Crafting a compelling narrative of a real person that leaps from the page, invokes images of a live-action movie, and creates a strong connection for the reader remains easier said than done. The nonfiction genre of biographies and memoirs continues to rank high in adult nonfiction for book sales and library circulations so many authors continue to write true stories and take on this challenge.

Discover a fascinating person

As the author of a nonfiction biography published in 2017, I realize just how hard it can be to bring someone else's story to life in writing. The road begins when the writer meets or discovers someone with a compelling or unique story that calls to them.

My story began in 2002 when I met Henry Zguda, a neighbor who had survived Auschwitz and Buchenwald as a Polish Catholic during World War II. Immediately captivated by what I believed was a unique story I would never encounter again, I offered to write his story. I reasoned that if I found the story worthy and interesting, then others would as well. I began with two essential elements: curiosity, and a belief in my character and his story. Based on reviews and feedback – the story has indeed been worthy of recording and sharing.

Writing tip: In nonfiction, it helps if the writer identifies their relationship to the other person and motivation for writing their story. This is easily done in a Foreword or Author Notes at the end. The reader becomes vested and interested in the author's connection. Planning ahead, a frequently asked question in author interviews is "Why did you write this book?" Consider it already answered.

Think like a journalist. Research and Verify

I wrote for a newspaper for eleven years. A good journalist is always curious and asks why? They verify everything with at least two sources, even what someone else says in an oral statement. A journalist has to walk the middle road, seeking opposite, or multiple points of view. Most people like to present themselves in the most favorable light or tell only part of the story. Or, in my case, I had to check the veracity of memories from sixty years ago. Even the most likable characters are flawed in some way. It can be hard for a writer to step away from their viewpoint, but doing so is the key to a multi-faceted and more interesting story. Nonfiction also carries a high burden of proof and accuracy, which can extend the time and amount of work in the narrative beyond fiction where the author creates a character or world.

Writing tip: Whenever possible, look for primary sources, such as public records, photos, correspondence, journals, maps, or even site visits if possible. Good secondary sources can include the testimony of others, industry-specific manuals, similar accounts, and more. The internet is powerful, but I made sure to use multiple search engines (Google, Yahoo, Bing, and DuckDuckGo). Every search engine returned different results on the same search criteria. While I never relied on Wikipedia or websites, even those that ended in .edu or .gov, they often yielded issues or tips of information I had not yet discovered but could go research further.

Give the reader the gift of friendship and of something memorable

A narrative that reads like a resume, timeline or chronology of events, or a list of facts may serve as a great research paper for a university press. However, a story that captivates the reader and converts the narrative to a page-turner will be far more memorable. Words and data by themselves are easily forgotten. Conversely, scenes and stories created through powerful writing and vivid imagery are what readers will remember. I believe that readers remember people. When a reader comes to know someone, they have met a new friend.

Writing tip: The writing skills of "Show don't Tell" and including all five senses are especially key when bringing someone else's story to life. Try to envision your character in a movie. Action and dialogue truly bring someone to life. Taking the movie analogy one step further, if any writer can write the text of a short movie trailer, they have just mastered an intriguing and winning synopsis.

In closing, people fascinate me, inspire me, and I continue to find that real life is often more incredible than fiction, and better than anything I could create. I have always been a reader of nonfiction since I was young. I learn something from every story.

In the front of my book, I included this quote by A. Whitney Brown: "The past actually happened, but history is only what someone wrote down." This quote speaks to the heritage of documented history, which occurs one person at a time. For many writers like me, we willingly take on that challenge. The power of story and a compelling narrative that brings someone else's story to life can create a timeless gift of friendship for the reader, who may happily introduce this new friend to others.

Author Bio:

Katrina Shawver is an experienced writer, blogger, speaker, and the author of *Henry – A Polish Swimmer's True Story of Friendship from Auschwitz to America*, an award-winning nonfiction biography released in 2017 to high praise. She began her writing career more than twenty years ago by writing hundreds of newspaper columns for the Arizona Republic. For more information visit katrinashawver.com where she blogs regularly.

Katrina will be presenting on this topic during the [weekly teleseminar August 8, 2018](#).

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1. [Deana Marcia](#) says:
[July 25, 2018 at 7:03 pm](#)

I need assistance bringing my story to life. I HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY!

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- o [Katrina Shawver](#) says:
[August 6, 2018 at 10:26 am](#)

Hi Deana,

Sorry for my tardy response. Feel free to email. I love your response. I may have some ideas for you. Also, don't miss the podcast on August 8 – it will be different than the post above.

All the best,
Katrina

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