

# Author & Journalist...

## Elaine Marie Carnegie-Padgett

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A Writer's Journey-Write Everyday


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Elaine Marie Carnegie 4 days ago 4 min read



## KEEPING HISTORY ALIVE

By Katrina Shawver



**Katrina  
Shawver  
with  
Keeping History  
Alive**

*Guest Author of the Writer's  
Journey Blog*

Please welcome Katrina Shawver to the Writers Journey Blog this week.

I am an author, lifelong history geek, and accidental writer. In 1998, I submitted a letter to the editor of the *Arizona Republic* and offered to write for them, despite no previous experience. Imagine my surprise when, six months later, they called and invited me to write a regular column in a new community section. That gig lasted for eleven years a



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other writing assignments. I learned I could write publicly and thrived seeing my byline in print.

I write because I'm a communicator and have something to say. Nonfiction calls to me and always has. Real life is often crazier than anything I could dream up. From my newspaper days, I loved to highlight little known stories or people in the community. My favorite reactions from readers were "Gee, I didn't know that" or "So that's why ..."

I became passionate about the power of the written word to influence opinion, provoke discussion, and inform folks of interesting people and organizations. My words impacted the community, and I heard from readers. People remembered me, and I highlighted people and topics who deserved to be recognized. My writing grew tighter and stronger as I learned from my editor and wrote a lot of columns through the years.

In 2002, the direction of my life changed with I met Henry Zguda, an eighty-five-year-old Polish Catholic who survived three years in Auschwitz and Buchenwald during World War II. He lived a mile from my house. He was eighty-five-years-old and slowing down. I was in my forties with three school-age children, a mother with health issues, a part-time job with little free time. Yet, I sensed from the very beginning his story was unique, significant, and one I would never find again. But how to find the time?

A wise friend encouraged me to make time and get his story right away, even if I wrote it later. At eighty-five, how many more years did he have left? After one interview, I called him and offered to write his incredible story. I am not Polish, Jewish, or Catholic, and knew little of Poland or Polish history when I began. The move was bold, naïve, and based solely on gut instinct. I somehow knew that if I didn't get his story, no one else would.

Henry and I 'clicked', and I treasured this unexpected and special friendship that came into my life by saying yes. My friend's advice was spot-on. Henry died unexpectedly one year after we met. The chasm in my life when he passed yawned wider than I ever expected. I remained extremely close with his widow, Nancy, until she passed ten years later. I look at their photos every time I sit down to write and smile.

My friendship with Henry changed the direction of my life and gave me keen insight into the plight of Poles, both Jewish and Christian, during World War II. It became clear I could not write with authority without a ton of research, and eventual translation of the many documents Henry had and I found in archives. My husband and I visited Poland and Germany to retrace Henry's steps through Kraków, Warsaw, Auschwitz, and Buchenwald in 2013. How else could I truly verify someone's memories of sixty years ago?

## Writing a book is a marathon, not a race.

When I began, I did not know what I did not know, and the project continued to multiply in size and complexity.

At various times, I set the project aside as life interfered and self-doubt invaded thoughts. Who was I to write the story? How would I ever research and fact-check



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to get everything as accurate as possible? A book? What was I thinking? I was great at framing ideas and stories in 600-900 words. But compile and plot out an 80,000-word historical biography?

My marathon began with a passion for history and perpetual curiosity about interesting people. Motivation increased as I learned more of Henry's story and realized the far broader story his life represented. Thousands of memoirs and books exist on the Holocaust. I believe the inspiring stories of Poles and other victims of Hitler and Stalin deserve equally widespread recognition.

Divine providence continued to validate and propel the story forward. The right people and opportunities came into my life at the right times.

Publishing with credibility and accurate details required a ton of research, translation of documents in German and Polish, and a trip to Poland and Germany to retrace his steps. Over a hundred original documents and photos validated the memories of sixty years ago. The story became far more than one man's memory. I had documented proof.

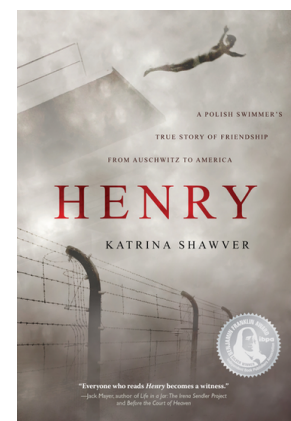
There is a quote at the beginning of the book that summarizes this sense of purpose. "The past actually happened. History is only what someone wrote down."

Fifteen years later, *HENRY: A Polish Swimmer's True Story of Friendship from Auschwitz to America* was published to high acclaim. I am no longer the sole keeper of his story, and my words will outlive me.

Today it is available in English, Polish and Czech, and I love receiving emails from readers in Poland and the Czech Republic relating how they love the book. I raise a toast of good Polish vodka to Henry with each success. Cheers! *Na zdrowie!*

**Bio:** Katrina Shawver holds a bachelor's degree in English, and

advanced degrees from the School of Trial and Error. She is the recipient of 2018 Polish Heritage Award from the Polish American Congress - Arizona Division and served as the Writer in Residence two years in a row for Glendale Public Library in Arizona. In previous lives she worked as a project manager in software support, a paralegal, tax preparer, answered phones for a forensic psychiatrist and has hiked the Grand Canyon three times. Katrina lives in Phoenix, Arizona. Connect with her at [katrinashawver.com](http://katrinashawver.com).






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