

“Start Writing with a Manageable Project” (appeared Oct. 14, 2019 at agelessauthors.com)

You are aching to write the great American novel, or the life and times of a famous person you knew, or the definitive answer to the climate crisis, but can't get started? Try a smaller project first. The big one, I promise, will not waste away; it'll gather momentum as it hibernates.

How small, you ask? How about the bedtime reading you shared with a child, or a story you heard after you were sent off to bed, or a joke told by the water cooler at work? Relate the incident as briefly as you can. Then add the background story, which concerns how you came to know of it—or not: If the office atmosphere was too fraught with upheaval to allow water-cooler banter, write about that. To be brief takes effort, but it's a way to get a handful of words on paper.

Still drawing a blank? Try this thought experiment: You see an ad on Craigslist or eBay, “For sale: Baby shoes, never worn.” Write down what the shoes were made of, what material, what color, what soles. Then compose the background story: Why was the ad placed and by whom? How many years did the individual or the couple hesitate before deciding to place the ad?

After you have written the synopsis of your fictional concoction, try your own story, a sketch for family members. Later, as details come to you, you'll expand what you have written.

As with the baby-shoes story, begin with an object that can be visualized. If I were to tell my father's story, my initial focus would be a rusted plow that, along with the hose that pulled it, once belonged to his dad. When my dad, born in 1905, was preteen, his dad was drafted into a war and the horse confiscated for the war effort. My dad's mother fell ill planting potatoes in the drizzle of a German November when her five children ranged from thirteen to seven. Only the youngest was a girl, who shouldered household duties while her brothers tried working the fields. In January 1918 their dad was excused from soldier duties—too late for his wife, who died that spring. My dad was twelve.

If I were to tell my mother's story it would begin with the sole surviving memento from her dad, a ship in a bottle he constructed while serving at sea during the above-mentioned war. A sepia photograph survives of my mother's baptism that pictures the grandparents I never knew, the uncle I never knew—in the photo, the three-year-old brother next to her crib. The ship (U-boat?) that held their dad was blown apart in the Baltic before war's end.

Details, details. Every story hinges on detail.