

Thinking of Writing Your Civil Rights Memoir? Things to Consider

Many Civil Rights Movement 50th reunions were held in 2015. Most of us are 65-85 years old and have not yet preserved our experience for posterity. At the SCLC SCOPE Reunion in Atlanta this Fall, civil rights veteran, author and editor Constance Curry and I consulted with a few vets who plan to write memoirs. This essay draws on recommendations from Connie and Bruce Hartford as well as my own experience of publishing with a university press.

Begin by asking these questions:

1. Is your story unique? Would it be interesting to produce a composite memoir or collection of individual stories with others from your project or county? If you are in touch with your co-workers, or locals who remember you, you may be able to develop a richer narrative than by relying solely on your own notes and memory.
2. Who is your audience? Friends and family? Teachers and students? General readers? All our stories are important and you can reach thousands of readers by posting your memoir or stories on www.crmvet.org.
3. If you want to get published, are you a good writer or will you need a co-author to produce a readable book? Some will prefer to develop a memoir with a ghostwriter, like John Lewis's *Walking with the Wind*.
4. Will you need a developmental editor to help you shape your memories and notes into something understandable and interesting to others? If you do not want to self-publish, you must do this before contacting publishers. At the very least, write an outline and rough draft. Prior to submission, you will need to develop a proposal which argues why your book deserves to be published. Each proposal must be based on the requirements of the specific editor or agent that you plan to query.

After you have answered these questions, it's time to decide if you want to attempt to secure a contract with a commercial or educational publisher, to publish short stories online at www.crmvet.org or on your own blog, or to use an online publishing service that can produce on-demand copies as well as electronic downloads, e-books.

You might also want to consider taping or videotaping your story to post online, rather than writing a book. An excellent example of a videotaped memoir is *Stand for Freedom: The Life and Times of Wazir B Peacock* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcBfHAdtM4Q>.

Considerations for Seeking Commercial and Educational Publication

- **Thorough Research:** Research everything available about your intended project to discover what you have to add to the subject. Read a good sampling of books that might be similar to yours. Are you able to write a compelling narrative or engaging series of short stories? Can you develop your memoir to make it unique and refreshing?
- **Strong Proposal:** Develop an argument-proposal for why your work adds to the field of knowledge about the Civil Rights Movement. Will it generate interest and excitement? Research “pitches” for commercial publishers and “proposals” for academic presses online. Study them and write several drafts before submitting them.
- **Draft Manuscript:** Write a strong working draft before you submit your proposal. You may be asked, as I was, to send the full draft right away. Publishers expect you to invest serious effort into your project before they get involved.
- **Influential Connections:** Allies are essential to secure a commercial publisher. Someone inside or respected by the press needs to champion your manuscript. Do you have friends, former classmates, or more well-known civil rights veterans who can open doors for you? Can you get an advance review/blurb from a well-known civil rights veteran or historian? Due to the huge number of submissions, it is almost impossible for a manuscript to be considered for publication without strong allies.
- **Academic Research:** For an academic press, you must carefully research and integrate factual history with footnotes or endnotes. You must follow specific detailed formats for footnotes and endnotes. Study the editors' selections in depth and get to know which editors might read your proposal.
- **Required Revisions:** After you sign a contract you will be asked to revise your book to fit their guidelines for length, tone, grammatical usage, images and other requirements. This may require a complete rewrite.

The editor may like your concept but not your working draft. This is another point where you might consider a co-author or developmental editor to help you rework the manuscript.

- Independent Marketing: Commercial and educational publishers are efficient distributors to libraries, bookstores and other venues. However, you are responsible for marketing your own book. Publishers will likely require you to tour, give talks and to hold book signings. They are unlikely to assist you with travel and other marketing expenses.

Publishing Online

Online Publication is faster, cheaper and more accessible for most authors. However, if you self-publish online all promotion is your responsibility, there is little or no bookstore distribution or sales, libraries will not carry your work and universities will not use it as a textbook. In all but the rarest cases, far fewer copies will be sold compared to a commercial or academic published book.

Here are some insights from working on my memoir, *This Bright Light of Ours: Stories from the Voting Rights Fight* (University of Alabama Press 2014). Conversations with other authors indicate that my experience with an academic press is fairly common.

Some challenges of working with university presses are that they commonly will:

1. Care primarily about textbook and library sales, so do little to promote the book's popularity to a wide audience.
2. Have their own styles for everything from photo captions to formatting. No two university publishers are alike so you cannot produce a final manuscript until you have a contract, but you must have a strong working draft before you can approach them.
3. Work on a school year calendar and may cancel publication of your book if you miss any of their deadlines.
4. Select peer reviewers to critique your manuscript. You will not get to choose these experts and are unlikely to learn who they are. The academic reviewers (also called readers) may recommend substantial changes or even recommend that the book not be published.

5. Ask you to cut or expand the length of your manuscript to fit their guidelines. When I began serious work on my manuscript in 2008, 350 pages was considered a good text book length. Due to the cost of publishing and competition to get books into the classroom, 175 pages is now standard. Before you submit your proposal, write your working draft to meet the press's standard length.
6. Require you to cover expenses for copy editors, licensing fees for historic photos and documents, and to develop a professional table of contents.
7. Require you to secure permissions to quote, to verify your sources, and to indemnify the publisher against lawsuits.
8. Additionally, most contracts require you to surrender copyright and legal rights to re-print, translate and to develop in other formats such as plays, television and film. Read your contract carefully.

Despite these cautions, there are advantages to publishing with a university press:

- Students and scholars may read and discuss your book, possibly for many years.
- Academic books stay in print longer than in any format except self-publishing. Only 10% of commercially published books sell more than 500 copies; most are remaindered after the first printing.
- Library and bookstore distribution makes it fairly easy to get readings which give you the potential to develop a popular market.
- University presses offer a “halo of importance” and legitimacy. For me, there was also the joy of being a channel for Black contributors’ voices directly to the primarily white academy.
- Academic presses usually publish beautiful print and online editions.

Your civil rights memories are important, in whatever format you choose to preserve them. Kathy Nasstrom of USF reminded us a few years ago that if we don't tell our stories, they will be lost and forgotten. Don't delay - pick up that pen, hit the keyboard or turn on the camcorder and begin today. After you write or record your memoir's first draft, your path to publication and distribution will become much clearer.

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