



‘What’s at stake?’

How an agent’s key question about characters improved the quality of a published memoir

Four years ago, while searching for an agent, I stepped off the train at Grand Central Station and hurried to Greenwich Village, where a well-known agent had agreed to discuss a manuscript of mine.

I assumed he’d invited me to his office to sign a contract and open a bottle of champagne. Instead, he sat across from me with my worn pages. He ran his fingers through a shaggy mane of hair, then said, “I’m not understanding what’s at stake for your characters in this story.”

“What’s at stake?” I frowned at him, confused. “What do you mean?”

He explained patiently—pulling down books he’d agented to prove his point—that on each page and in each paragraph, the reader must be aware of what’s at stake for every character.

“Every character?” I repeated. “Not just the protagonist?”

“Every character,” he said.

Then he gave me some advice I carried all the way back to the West Coast, where it guided me to the successful completion of a manuscript, and eventually another agent and publication.

His suggestion? Write the words “What’s at stake?” on a sticky note and affix it to my computer monitor.

Characters with something at stake are in danger of losing something if they gamble on a particular action—say, trying to cook every recipe in Julia Child’s *The Art of French Cooking* or bringing that adorable but destructive puppy home. “What’s at stake?” is another way of asking “What’s at risk?”

Writing with this question in mind helps authors to define each character’s motivations, hopes, anxieties and fears. Readers given a solid sense of what

characters risk on every page can’t help but become immersed in a story.

Four years ago, as I reconsidered the draft of my manuscript with the agent’s question as my guide, I saw that I’d approached the book with considerable myopia. My problem began in the third chapter of what would eventually become my memoir *Gringa: A Contradictory Girlhood*. It’s a story of growing up Anglo and seemingly devoid of culture in multicultural Los Angeles with a lesbian mom, a brother with Down syndrome, and a deep desire to be Mexican-American.

My third chapter described the dissolution of my nuclear family, and the gradual reorganization to include my mother’s new girlfriend and my father’s new wife, along with the bewilderment my sister and I felt at these drastic changes. I wanted to show the differences in my parents and their lifestyles by illustrating two meal scenes. Often, my siblings and I found ourselves expected to eat an early dinner at our mother’s house on Sunday afternoons, then a 6 p.m. meal at our father’s house.

It’s easy to succumb to navel-gazing when writing a memoir, and in the first draft I did a fine job of describing in vivid detail what I myself risked in navi-

gating my mother’s bohemian backyard picnics, and then a 90-minute drive south to my father’s tense and lavish upper-class dinner table. But I neglected to explore what was at stake for the other people in my family.

For instance, what did my brother risk as a child with a developmental disability, trying to comprehend the abrupt switch from one parent’s house to another every other weekend? What was at stake for my stepmother, who spent hours preparing multicourse dinners—meals her new family didn’t always appreciate and eat? What was at risk for my father, who tried to deal with a vastly altered family dynamic, plus his own anger and resentment about my mother coming out of the closet, and who found himself getting panic attacks triggered by dinner hour?

These were difficult questions. I went over journals I’d kept since age 10 and studied their dialogue and observations. I talked to my sister and mother for insights, and petitioned my brother for memories. My father and I are estranged, and my stepmother and I have little contact, so their characters were harder to flesh out.

My process of examining each family member’s risks involved filling note-



THE WORK: *Gringa: A Contradictory Childhood* (Seal Press, 2009)

THE PROBLEM: Most characters felt flat, and readers had no sense of what anyone besides the author risked. Result: The memoir lacked tension.

THE SOLUTION: Consider the question “What’s at stake?” for every character in every scene, so that actions and dialogue offer readers a clear sense of motivation.



books with self-created freewriting assignments. I wrote 10 minutes at a time on questions like “What was my little sister afraid of?” and “What did my mother love?” These freewrites helped me craft complex characters and improved my understanding of my family and its dynamics.

I realized, after extensive rewriting, that what was at stake for my father was pride—a pride that goaded him to sue for child custody and malign my mother. I understood that my stepmother had courted her new family with her delicious, painstaking meals, trying to show care for three children newly separated from their biological mom. Her new

position as a maternal figure was at stake. And I realized that my mother’s backyard picnics of potato salad and hard-boiled eggs, punctuated by thumping 1980s music, represented her attempts to infuse our weekends with relaxation and fun. What was at stake for her? Her role as mom, along with the well-being of her children.

At times, exploring what each character risked felt emotionally exhausting. I cried when revising the chapters about my mother—a woman who’d been so idealistic and so weary of her volatile husband that she unknowingly risked everything to move in with a female lover. The possibility she might lose cus-

tody of her three children never occurred to her, and I ended up examining what we both risked and lost.

The Oregonian’s review said my “well-balanced” memoir “forgoes blame in favor of poignancy.” I attribute these virtues to that agent’s advice years ago. When a writer thoroughly examines what’s at risk for every character—real or fictional—she offers readers a complex, compelling story. Today, I wouldn’t dream of writing a piece without “What’s at stake?” on my computer.

Melissa Hart

Contributing editor Melissa Hart teaches journalism at the University of Oregon. Web: www.melissahart.com.

BEFORE AND AFTER

A passage with more to lose

Problem

In a passage from an early draft of my memoir *Gringa: A Contradictory Girlhood*, my stepmother, Elsa, cooks for us, but I don’t give a sense of what’s at stake for her. Likewise, I don’t show what my father risks as head of a fractured family.

Elsa courted us with her food. The agony of loss that gripped me as I left my mother every other weekend after our allotted twice-monthly visits could sometimes be assuaged by the aroma of fresh apple pie or poppy seed biscuits.

Elsa flattered us with meals four hours in their preparation—dinners which came with a price. “I wonder which of us chews the loudest?” Elsa said. “Katie, I can’t hear you at all.”

My sister showed little interest in food, but she basked in the praise. Too anxious to eat, I stretched my arms behind me and twined them between the rungs of my chair. Sometimes, they got stuck. Then, I panicked at the thought of being trapped in my father’s mounting rage.

He often cursed in alphabetical order. He ran out of expletives only when he got to the letter i, and then resorted to maligning my mother.

Solution

I clarify how my stepmother risks her emotions to create a celebratory atmosphere. As well, I show how my father’s position as head of a happy family is at stake when he realizes his three children long for their mother.

Candlelight danced across a white cloth, syncopated with Spanish guitars drifting over from the living room stereo. In the center of the table, my stepmother placed a platter stacked high with golden packages, the likes of which I’d never seen before.

“Chimichangas!” she cried. “They’re fun to eat, and fun to say!”

“Kids, what do you say?” my father said. “Elsa’s been cooking all day.”

“Thank you,” we murmured.

“Really, it’s just a matter of chopping vegetables and frying tortillas.” My stepmother ducked her head so that her shining blond hair nearly brushed her plate. “Girls, how was your weekend?”

“We had a picnic at Mommy’s house, and it was really cool!” Katie piped up. “We had potato salad and chicken and ...” She looked to me for help. “I forget.”

“Me, too.” I wanted to ponder my stepmother’s piquant salsa flecked with green onions and cilantro; how it tasted of backyard fiestas and trumpets and roosters. But across the table, my brother raised wistful blue eyes from his plate.

“I miss Mommy,” he said.

Beside him, my stepmother winced and closed her eyes as if he’d struck her.

My father sat silent for a moment, his eyes studying each of us in turn. Then he scraped his chair back from the table and leapt up. He flung the basket of tortillas across the table and they fell to the floor. ...

—M.H.