

## Soul Searching in the Archives: How to Research A Memoir That Sells

**Event description:** A good memoir tells a story with universal appeal. Today, many editors request writers do this by adding research to create “hybrid memoirs.” In our panel, three authors and one editor from a major imprint will discuss how to use research to turn the story of one into the story of many. How do you comb through archives and conduct interviews? How do you stay true to your story as you juggle citations? We’ll discuss how we did our research and folded it into our work, and the lessons we learned.

**Event Category:** Nonfiction Craft & Criticism

**Event Organizer & Participant:**

**Shalene Gupta:** is the author of *The Cycle: Confronting the Pain of Periods and PMDD* and coauthor of *The Power of Trust*. Her work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *ESPN*, *Fast Company*, *Fortune*, *Harvard Business Review*, and *Time*. She is a Fulbright scholar and has an MS from Columbia Journalism.

**Event Participants:**

**Lee Oglesby** is a senior editor for Flatiron Books at Macmillan. She edits idea-driven nonfiction in the areas of science, the environment, food and agriculture, health and well-being, and transformational justice. Previously, she’s worked with Milkweed Editions and Oxford University Press.

**Marian Schembari** is the author of the memoir, *A Little Less Broken*, about her late in life autism diagnosis. Her essays about travel, friendship, money, and love have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Marie Claire*, and *Good Housekeeping*.

**Michelle Bowdler** is the author of *Is Rape a Crime? A Memoir, an Investigation and a Manifesto*, longlisted for the National Book Award for Nonfiction (2020). Bowdler has been published in two anthologies, *Literary Hub*, *New York Times*, *Ms. magazine*, *Psychology Today*, *Cognoscenti*, and other journals.

**Event Moderator:**

**Susan Shapiro** freelances for *The NY Times*, *Washington Post*, *WSJ*, *Newsweek*, *Salon*, *The Cut*, *Oprah*, and *New Yorker* online. An award-winning writing professor, she’s the bestselling

author/coauthor of several books her family hates like *Five Men Who Broke My Heart*, *Lighting Up* and *The Forgiveness Tour*.

### **Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements:**

A good memoir tells a personal story with universal appeal.

But since the pandemic, the publishing climate for memoirs by non-famous authors seems to have changed.

Sometimes a book that merely recounts an author's first person story might not be enough to attract a top editor anymore. However, adding topical research and using other techniques from different kinds of popular nonfiction can expand a book's audience and make a project more appealing to publishers. This panel with Flatiron editor Lee Oglesby and acclaimed memoirists Shalene Gupta, Marian Schembari and Michelle Bowdler, will discuss how to add research to expand a book's reach and appeal without interfering with the literary narrative.

### **Participant Initial Remarks:**

**Lee:** When I'm considering submissions for new books, I see a pretty wide range of proposals, including a lot of memoirs. I don't acquire many of those myself, but I am often drawn to the ones where an author is able to expand outside of their own story and show how they are part of a larger cultural or political moment. I'm thinking about the story itself, and how the researched context can help readers connect and see the depth of an author's experience. But I'm also thinking about how the publicity team will be able to pitch the book and author to media, how the marketing team can present the book to readers, and how the sales team will convince booksellers to place large orders. All of this is made easier when we can say this author's experience is connected to a larger moment and to conversations that readers are engaged in. I'll talk about the values of hybrid memoirs from an editorial and publishing perspective.

**Marian:** When I started working on *A Little Less Broken*, I thought it would be a straightforward memoir about getting diagnosed with autism in my 30s. But as I worked with my agent, we realized my personal story alone didn't fully capture the larger cultural moment neurodivergence was having among women and other marginalized communities. So I started exploring intersections—gender bias in healthcare, motherhood, societal expectations—and let the research scaffold the book. As someone who struggles to enjoy nonfiction, I worked hard to make the memoir "read like a novel" and keep the emotional tension that makes a book a page-turner. Today, I'm excited to share how I decided where to weave in research and when to let my personal story stand alone, how I found sources for topics that haven't been widely studied, and how I worked to keep the pacing tight—all of which helped the book evolve from telling *my* story to telling *our* story.

**Michelle:** *Is Rape a Crime? A Memoir, an Investigation and a Manifesto* was my debut book. Two interested publishers asked whether I would add some research to it. I was more than willing and rewrote the book – needing help from my niece on how to do an endnote in the Chicago Manual of Style. I was a novice but found my way. People ask me questions about how I did it and look forward to talking more about that today – my sources, what I learned, and the ways it helped make the larger case of how rape and sexual assault are minimized and neglected in our society – which, frankly, is what reviewers mention first when covering the book. It did not compromise my memoir; in fact, it helped to make a stronger narrative.

**Shalene:** Early on, my agent mentioned my personal story might not be enough to fill a book, and I agreed. Moreover, I knew my own experience with PMDD did not represent the plurality of other experiences. I also wanted my book to answer the question: why haven't more people heard of PMDD? To do this, I conducted over a hundred interviews and ensconced myself in the library. I'll discuss my approach to finding and interviewing other people with PMDD, as well as my strategies for finding experts to answer my questions about PMDD. I'll also discuss the strange power and responsibility of constructing a narrative about an overlooked topic for a marginalized audience that hasn't had many answers.

#### **Moderator Questions:**

- **Why did you choose to include research in the memoir?**
- **What kind of research did you do for your book? How did you do it?**
- **How did you go about researching your own self?**
- **How do you go about crafting a writing style?**
- **How do you be fair to yourself and to other people in your life as you write and research?**
- **How do you deal with trauma that gets unearthed when researching and writing your own life?**
- **How did your identity change as you did the research and writing?**
- **What is your responsibility to the community once the book is published?**