

## How To Write A Memoir Like Robert Graves, Author Of *I, Claudius*

The form of nonfiction easiest to misjudge—and so satisfying when it succeeds—is the memoir. To write a good memoir, you must decide what's not interesting and leave it out. That's not so easy to do when writing about yourself. How do you know what to cut?

Let's talk about one of the greatest memoirs ever written, *Goodbye to All That*, by Robert Graves, the English poet and author of *I, Claudius*. *Goodbye to All That* is a good example of an author being selective. Written in haste in three months, watered down for republication 25 years later and restored in a 1995 edition, the book's power remains great.

At its core *Goodbye to All That* is an account of trench warfare that conveys the dismaying loss and waste felt by the World War I generation. Although today its battle scenes and sexual content would be considered rather tame, Graves' frankness proved almost shocking at the time it was published in 1929.

Several qualities make the book absorbing. Graves jumps from one interesting subject to another in roughly chronological order, leaving out or minimizing subjects that aren't quite as interesting or didn't interest Graves. For example, Graves writes about his parents betraying him by forcing him to attend a private academy where he is persecuted by other boys; the romance between older and younger boys at the school; ghastly experiences in the trenches during the war; the drastic physical punishment handed to a disrespectful enlisted man who dared address an officer by his first name; Graves' shell-shock.

Now let's think about what you don't find in *Goodbye to All That*. There are no long, introspective digressions, no tormented inner dialogues. There is little self-exploration. Rather than confiding his personal psychic torment, Graves relies on his descriptive powers of life and the war, which are considerable.

Here's one example:

"As I went towards company headquarters to wake the officers I saw a man lying on his face in a machine-gun shelter. I stopped and said: 'Stand-to, there.' I flashed my torch on him and saw that his foot was bare. The machine-gunner beside him said: 'No good talking to him, sir.' I asked, 'What's wrong? What's he taken his boot and sock off for?' I was ready for anything odd in the trenches. 'Look for yourself, sir,' he said. I shook the man by the arm and noticed suddenly that the back of his head was blown out. The first corpse that I saw in France was this suicide. He had taken off his boot and sock to pull the trigger of his rifle with his toe; the muzzle was in his mouth."

Graves uses the same detached style when referring to details of his personal life, even his courtship of his future wife, Nancy Nicholson. "I began a correspondence with Nancy about some children's rhymes of mine which she was going to illustrate. Then I found that I was in love with her, and on my next leave, in October 1917, I visited her at the farm where she was working, at Hilton in Huntingdonshire."

Even mystical aspects of war and death receive matter-of-fact treatment, such as when Graves stays with Nancy Nicholson's family "at a big Tudor house near Harlech" and finds it the "most haunted house that I have ever been in." A little yellow dog, Graves wrote, visited the house. "Nancy saw it one day."

By sticking to a limited number of subjects, Graves preserved the power of his core narrative. No matter what you think of this book, or whether you prefer the more inward-looking memoirs of today, *Goodbye to All That* remains a classic of the form.

Here's what I recommend for your memoirs:

1. Keep diaries, written or recorded in audio or video, and remember details. The straining buttons on the front of the man's shirt. How the springs complained in the overloaded Toyota. Show what happened and how things looked and felt rather than telling about them. Generalized recollections don't captivate readers as much as interesting stories.
2. Don't discard heirlooms, newspaper clips and photos that will help you remember.
3. Tell a true story that is also a well-paced and trim narrative; a story with a beginning, middle and end. Where possible emphasize conflict and character development and resolution. Use digressions, to be sure, when they add meaning.
4. Think about the way language, time and memory will interplay in your description of events. Should you use streams-of-consciousness? Or should

you write with the reserve of Robert Graves?

### About the Author

Want to write a great memoir? Go to [confidentwriter.com](http://confidentwriter.com), where journalist and author Richard Korman offers help based on his 25 years as a writer and editor. His new CD is Write to Influence: Unlock the Hidden Power of Your Words and his biography of Charles Goodyear was voted one of 2002's best. Richard Korman's freelance writing has appeared in BusinessWeek and the New York Times.

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