



# 10 Ways to Structure a Memoir

By Catherine Stover

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For those who ask, “*How do I structure my memoir*” and “*How do I decide what to include?*” here is a list of memoirs with interesting designs. These 10 pieces are from *A Fine Line*, my blog about books. Each 100-word post includes links to additional information.

### Contents:

1. A collection of reviews of ideas and objects, written as a memoir: *The Anthropocene Reviewed* by John Green.
2. A political memoir that combines memos to his staff, observations, flashbacks, interviews, and commentary: *To the Castle and Back* by Václav Havel.
3. A two-in-one memoir: half about the author’s life and the other half about his process of writing: *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* by Stephen King.
4. A list of the lessons learned from great heroines in novels: *How to Be a Heroine: Or, What I’ve Learned from Reading Too Much* by Samatha Ellis.
5. A lecture that became a best-selling book: *The Last Lecture* by Randy Pausch.
6. An award-winning memoir that the *New Yorker* says “defies every genre:” *H Is for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald.
7. A collection of one-page reflections written by an author who Stephen King calls “the Emily Dickinson of memoirists:” *What Comes Next and How to Like It* by Abigail Thomas.
8. A metaphysical memoir, which the *Boston Globe* says is “marked by exquisite insight:” *An American Childhood* by Annie Dillard.
9. One of the first memoirs in the world, written in the 1500s, in which the author wrote about his questions instead of his accomplishments: *The Essays* by Michel de Montaigne.
10. A letter written about his grievances with his father, which was never sent, published posthumously: *Letter to Father* by Franz Kafka.

# 1. “When people write reviews, they are really writing a kind of memoir – here’s what my experience was eating at this restaurant or getting my hair cut at this barbershop.”

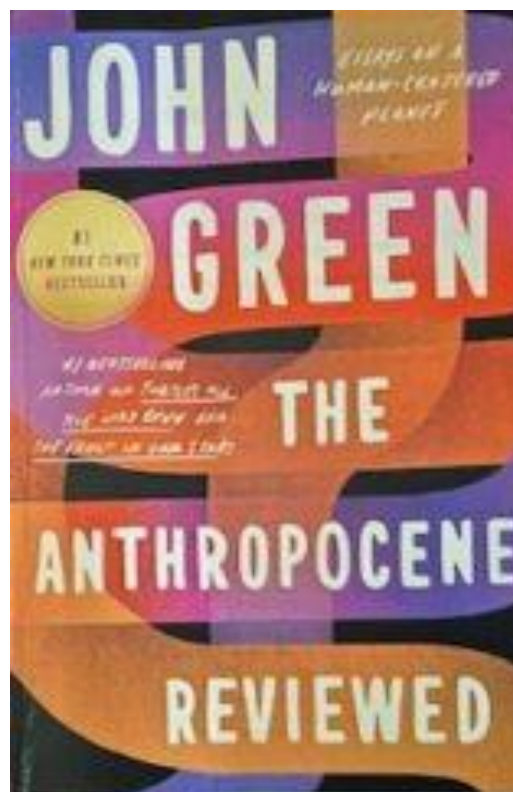
Posted on February 29, 2024

Is this book a memoir? The title – *The Anthropocene Reviewed* and the subtitle – *Essays on a Human-Centered Planet* offer no clues. However, in the introduction, [the author](#) says that he wants to tell us stories about his life so that we can see how he has formed his opinions. The titles of his essays – Diet Dr. Pepper, Velociraptors, Sunsets – tell us his topics, but not his subject. His subject is how he experiences and then interprets these things. So, yes, this is a type of memoir because [we get to know the author](#). I find his creative candor entirely appealing.

Green, John. *The Anthropocene Reviewed: Essays on a Human-Centered Planet*. Dutton, 2021, pp. 5-6.

Link:

<https://www.catherinestover.com/when-people-write-reviews-they-are-really-writing-a-kind-of-memoir-heres-what-my-experience-was-eating-at-this-restaurant-or-getting-my-hair-cut-at-this-barbershop/>



## 2. “So I decided to fashion a special kind of collage.”

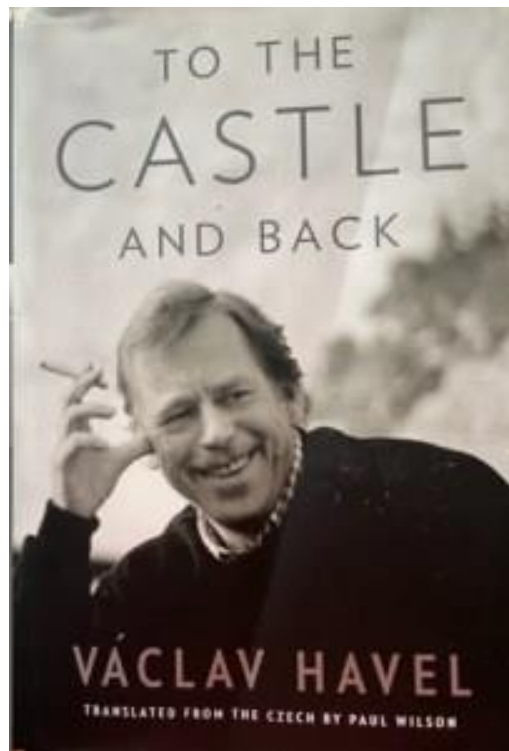
Posted on March 21, 2023

How would a dissident playwright, who spent five years in prison before becoming the first president of Czechoslovakia, construct a memoir? If you imagine a [creative architecture](#) not seen before, you are right. It’s an engaging mix of observations, flashbacks, interviews, commentary, and memos to his staff at Prague Castle. The [New York Times](#) calls it an “an artful, sly and touching self-portrait, cleverly and neurotically disguised as an artless heap of dry scribbled notes and wastebasket throwaways.” Those interested in the art of memoir will appreciate the way this book’s inventions, texture, and spirit help us enjoy Václav Havel.

Havel, Václav. *To the Castle and Back*. Translated by Paul Wilson. Alfred Knopf, 2007, Preface.

Link:

<https://www.catherinestover.com/so-i-decided-to-fashion-a-special-kind-of-collage/>



### 3. “I believe large numbers of people have at least some talent as writers and storytellers, and that those talents can be strengthened and sharpened.”

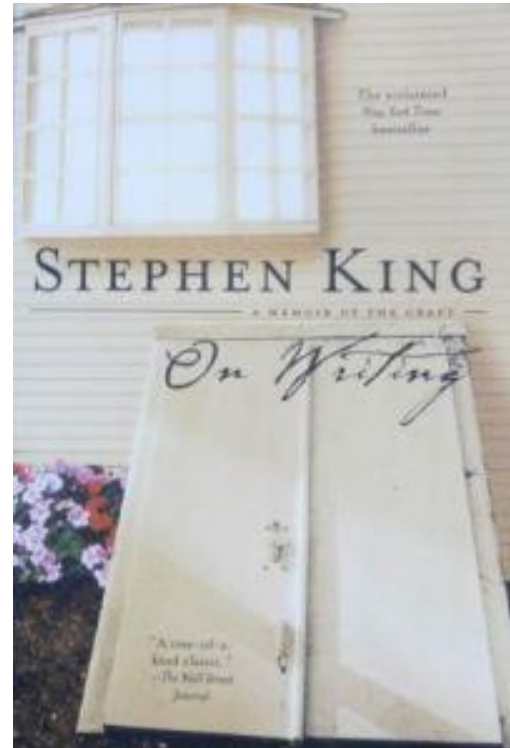
Posted on [July 22, 2021](#)

I nearly fell off my chair when I read this statement in [Stephen King's](#) book *On Writing*. It provides such a sharp contrast to the 20 other books I've been reading on the subject of writing memoirs. Because I'm working on my own book on this subject, I've been looking at the assumptions the authors of these books make about their readers. King – clearly one of the [best-seller authors](#) of our time – holds the “average person's” story telling abilities in higher regard than other authors do. This is part of the appeal of this sharp, directive, readable book about writing.

King, Stephen. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. Pocket Books, 2000, p.18.

Link:

<https://www.catherinestover.com/i-believe-large-numbers-of-people-have-at-least-some-talent-as-writers-and-storytellers-and-that-those-talents-can-be-strengthened-and-sharpened/>



## 4. “We have to keep making choices, keep transforming.”

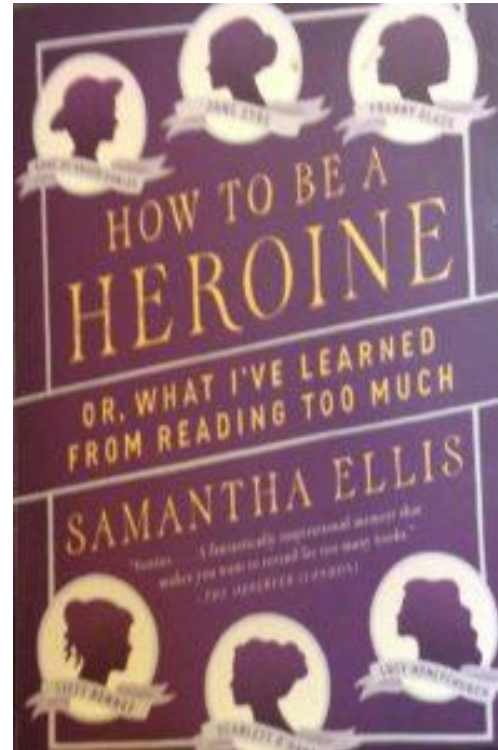
Posted on May 11, 2017

Some memoirists see themselves as products of their times. Others see themselves in terms of the obstacles they surmounted or movements they created. [Samantha Ellis](#) measures herself against the strongest women who live between the covers of novels. Her approach – which the *Guardian* calls “[biblio-autobiography](#)” – is a unique blurring of the lines between fiction and memoir. After all, do we know *for sure* if what she tells us about herself is “true”? I love discovering new ways that contemporary authors challenge us to decide whether their books describe events that actually happened, could have happened, or might yet happen.

Ellis, Samantha. *How To Be a Heroine: Or, What I've Learned from Reading Too Much*. Vintage Books, 2015, p. 244.

Link:

<https://www.catherinestover.com/we-have-to-keep-making-choices-keep-transforming/>



## 5. “It’s interesting, the secrets you decide to reveal at the end of your life.”

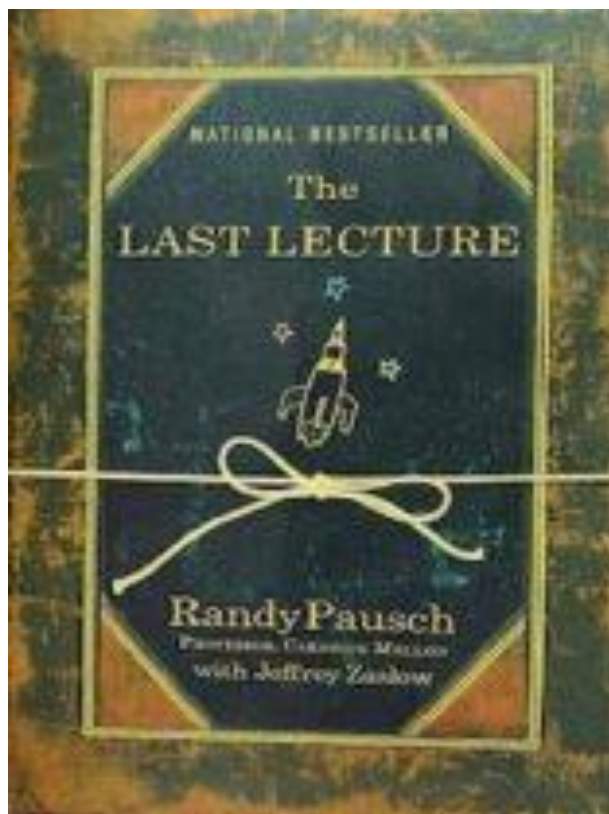
Posted on February 18, 2016

Until Randy Pausch got on stage at [Carnegie Mellon University](#) to deliver his [now-famous “Last Lecture.”](#) he hadn’t told students or colleagues that Carnegie Mellon had initially rejected his application to go to graduate school there; it was only after his professor at Brown intervened that the decision was reversed. Knowing that he had only months left to live, he regretted keeping that information a secret because he often encouraged people to “never give up.” He wrote that he was afraid that they’d think that he wasn’t smart enough . . . an astounding secret, given his level of accomplishment.

Pausch, Randy. *The Last Lecture*. Hyperion: 2008, p. 174.

Link:

<https://www.catherinestover.com/its-interesting-the-secrets-you-decide-to-reveal-at-the-end-of-your-life>



## 6. “Looking for goshawks is like looking for grace: it comes, but not often, and you don’t get to say when or how.”

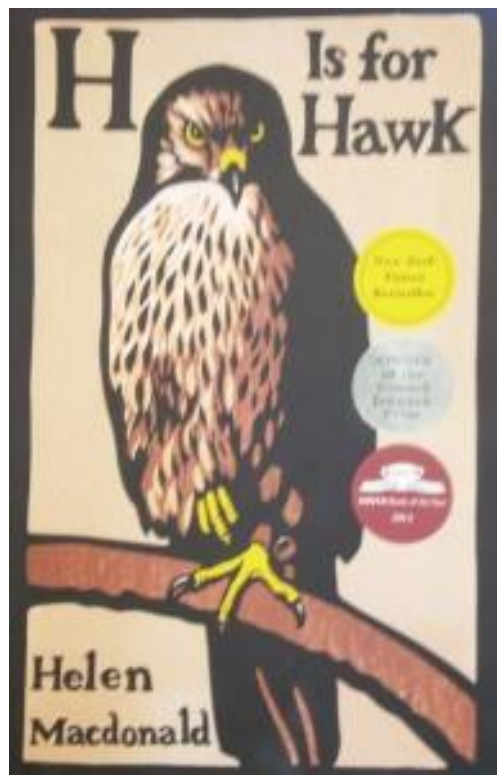
Posted on [February 11, 2016](#)

Simultaneously a “[breathtaking memoir](#)” and a “[small instant classic of nature writing](#),” this book juggles multiple themes and techniques. One often-used technique is metaphor: we meet a fellow who is as “serene as a mid-ocean wave” and see the deer “ankle their way out of the brush to graze” and watch her cup feathers in her closed fist as if she “were holding a moment tight inside itself.” Of the many reasons to read this wonderful book, the strongest for me is to see how Macdonald keeps her balance while developing themes and strokes of art that somehow work together.

Macdonald, Helen. *H is for Hawk*. Grove Press, 2015, p. 3.

Link:

<https://www.catherinestover.com/looking-for-goshawks-is-like-looking-for-grace-it-comes-but-not-often-and-you-dont-get-to-say-when-or-how/>





## 7. “My memory is an archipelago.”

Posted on July 31, 2015 by Kate Stover

Arranging everything in chronological order in memoirs can be, well, boring. The challenge is finding an alternative structural method that doesn't bewilder readers. The author of this memoir takes a bold approach: she gives us many tiny stories/reflections/anecdotes as stand-alone chapters, and she lets us draw our own conclusions and connections. It looks to me as if she selected this structure because it reflects the way her memory works. She says that her memory is like an archipelago — “thousands of small islands forming something whose shape I could not determine.” I find it creative and authentic, rhapsodic, and moving.

Thomas, Abigail. *What Comes Next and How to Like It*. Scribner, 2015, p. 184.

Link:

<https://www.catherinestover.com/my-memory-is-an-archipelago/>



## 8. “I had to live on the lip of a waterfall, exhausted.”

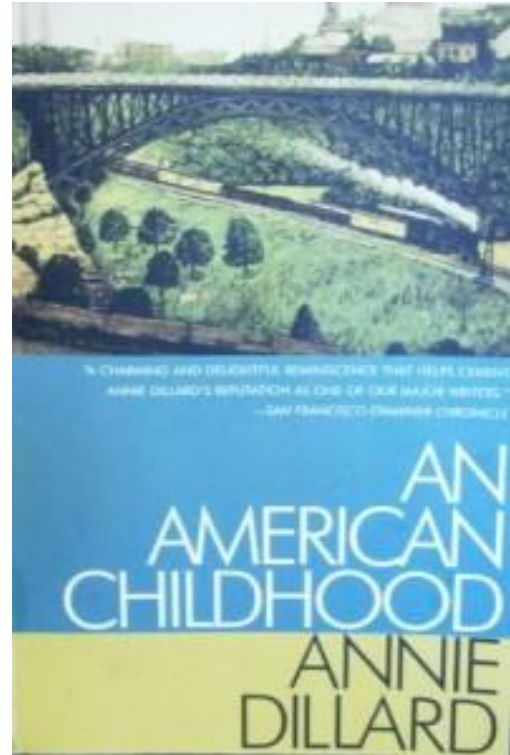
Posted on [April 23, 2015](#) by [Kate Stover](#)

You might expect a coming-of-age book to have a plot, to describe the who-what-when-where-how-and-why. But [Annie Dillard](#) is not a typical person, nor is her book a typical memoir. She concentrated on describing how she wanted to [notice and remember](#) everything. Her goal was to “break up through the skin of awareness a thousand times a day, as dolphins burst through seas, and dive again, and rise, and dive.” (250). Hyper-aware, daring, stimulated, with a talent for passionate metaphors, she wrote, “Who could ever tire of this radiant transition, this surfacing to awareness and this deliberate plunging to oblivion?” (17)

Dillard, Annie. *An American Childhood*. Harper Perennial: 1987, p. 223.

Link:

<https://www.catherinestover.com/i-had-to-live-on-the-lip-of-a-waterfall-exhausted/>



## 9. “Reflection is a mighty endeavor...no occupation is more powerful or more feeble, depending on the soul”

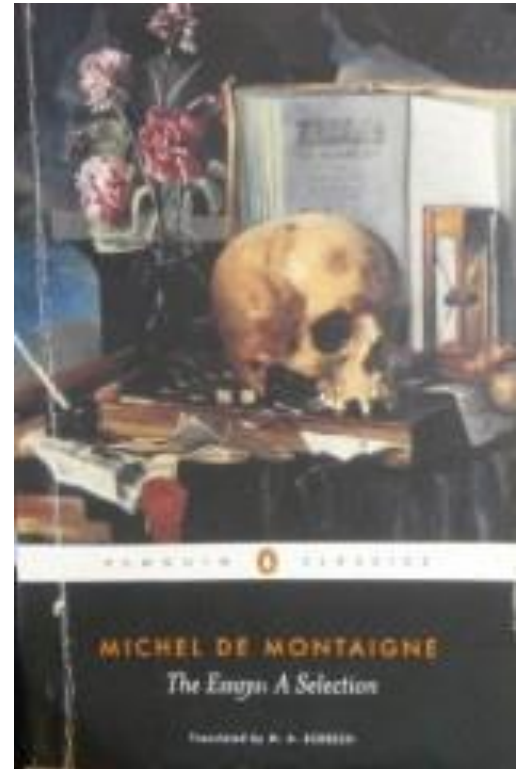
Posted on March 20, 2014

How come some people who write about themselves are bores, and others are fascinating? Michel de Montaigne, an inventor who lived in the 1500s, is fascinating. Instead of keeping a record of what he did, he recorded what he was thinking about. He wrote: “I am not portraying being but becoming...This is a register of ...ideas which are unresolved.” He looked at things from many perspectives with a “decent, careful spirit of inquiry about everything.” He said, “A straight oar looks bent in the water. What matters is not merely that we see things but how we see them.”

Montaigne, Michel de. *The Essays: A Selection*, translated by M.A. Screech. Penguin Books, 2004, p. 248.

Link:

<https://www.catherinestover.com/reflection-is-a-mighty-endeavor-no-occupation-is-more-powerful-or-more-feeble-depending-on-the-soul/>



## 10. “I had lost my self-confidence where you were concerned, had traded it for a boundless sense of guilt.”

Posted on [September 14, 2023](#)

I've been thinking about Kafka's story about [turning into an insect this week](#), and why he would write a story about a young man who shamed his family by turning into a useless cockroach. A Czech bookstore had a book-length letter that [Kafka wrote to his father](#), which was never sent. Is it fact or fiction? I don't know. It describes a young man whose father frequently threatened to beat him. Sometimes he would stop with the strap in mid-air, and other times he would strike. The boy was supposed to feel gratitude when spared, but instead he felt ashamed.

Kafka, Franz. *Letter to Father*. Vitalis, 2022, p. 42.

Link:

<https://www.catherinestover.com/i-had-lost-my-self-confidence-where-you-were-concerned-had-traded-it-for-a-boundless-sense-of-guilt/>

