

Thank you for sharing *The Long Shadow* with me. Let me begin with a personal congratulations. Winding up as a writing coach for 12-steppers seems like a heroic journey from a life spent tangling with the really big questions without a lot of support. I suspect readers of the complete work will feel a similar sense of struggle and accomplishment – the stuff of memoir.

You asked if this might work as a stand-alone essay. I assume you are speaking of the part beginning with “Enter Jehovah” thereby excluding the foreshadowing prologue section about the bad dream and subsequent call to a therapist. My answer is that, with some adjustment to the ending, it would work. That is not a bad thing. A chapter ending should compel a reader to turn to the next page – which your current ending does. A personal essay, however, should motivate the reader to sit back, digest it all, and ponder its resonances.

A pre-published excerpt is a strong strategy to bolster the odds of eventual publication. I encourage you to continue to craft it so that it may achieve its best level of publication, perhaps even entering into a few competitions. Some of the state writers’ associations include a nonfiction category in their annual contests and I think this piece, with its focus on religion and childhood, might do well in these. Don’t worry about your essay having a different ending than the chapter you ultimately publish.

Now to the work as it stands. You begin with a three-paged prologue. This is a popular technique that promises a complementary bookend section later, usually at the end. It offers the reader a peek towards what we might look forward to.

In this case, the scene is a dream, as is made explicit in this line:

But this time, the dream was more than a fantastic story.

You then move to italics, which are really not necessary as we have just been told it’s a dream. Using a colon:

—it grabbed me like a boa constrictor squeezes tighter, tighter:

would accomplish the same thing and be less distracting. Plus there is the switch back and forth with unitalicized text which I, personally, found confusing.

Another choice would be to hold off revealing to the reader that this is a dream until:

What happened next? I can't say. I woke up, heart pounding.

If you chose to open your memoir on this dream, you might think about starting with:

*Larry was reaching up to the chandelier above our dining table*

as your opening line. Immediate suspenseful action, no interpretation or contextualizing, boldly reaching out and grabbing the reader.

You do run the risk of disappointing that reader when they find out that it is just a dream. Is this a trick? A device?

The dream leads quickly – very quickly – to the notion that help is needed and that – phew – someone just down the street will return our narrator's call in a few hours. Is this resolution too quick? Where is the struggle, say the frequent tortured dreams, or the irrational spill-over mistrust of Larry, or the self-doubt and questioning of one's sanity, or the mental reexamination of what the chandelier might mean – in other words, the story – that needs to occur between the danger (the dream) and the path to safety? I understand that such a broad sweep is not generally part of a prologue and so I would ask, is a prologue the best technique for this particular memoir? It is a long jump to the material that follows, which is quite compelling within its own right. While it is not always, or even often, true that the best point to enter a memoir is at the beginning, in this case, especially with its sixty-year span, it might be.

While I personally like the line, "For pure drama, you can't beat Jesus' baptism," as an opening to either the book or a major section, I question it. It promises a theological subject matter that is beside the point of this text. The point, if I am correct, is that, at 10 years of age, while living with an unstable father, your mother, as you knew her, was profoundly changed. How confusing. How enraging. Sad and scary both. Put another way, as interesting as the Jehovahs are, the subject of the book is you, not them. How did you react to losing the mother you knew? How did it feel to be

“caught” by Cathy?

It is important to leave room for the reader to participate in the narrator’s discovery. If you don’t take the opportunity to examine the narrator’s responses at the time they occurred, you run the risk of the story feeling oft told as opposed to freshly shared.

The scene with Cathy provides good example. I get a little of Cathy’s response (surprised, confused) but none of what the young you felt at being confronted. A confrontation between young girls like this can be so multi-layered as they examine one another’s clothing and hair, and assess the other’s social status. Was their shame or bravado? Defensiveness or haughtiness? What were the age-appropriate observations the young you had in this moment? Allow the reader to feel that discomfort with you and you will significantly raise the stakes.

Before I go on, I do want to be sure to say that you have done a great job of capturing age-appropriate real-time responses regarding Brother Tindall. More of that, please.

So now I have counselled against your current opening and questioned the opening of the main section. You’re probably saying, thanks a lot right now,

Never fear, I have a recommendation for you that will not only give you a dynamic beginning that will hook the reader, but it will also freshen the telling and give you room for more of that real-time detail.

Try going through the text and asking of each paragraph, “Are you my beginning?” Here are a few lines that call out to me as potentials:

- Why did my mother open the door
- In a photo taken of us when I was seven, my mother smiles her Carol Lombard smile
- I was baptized two years after my mother in the basement of the Kingdom Hall in Trenton

- Sometimes I got caught.

- The Yankee Stadium convention

I'm sure that you can see that starting with any of these will force you to reframe and tell your story anew. In the best case, especially coupled with those real time, age-appropriate responses, it may help you make some new discoveries within the story. The reader will perceive that process; the excitement of it will translate. It's the stuff that memoir readers come for.

You have a terrific start here. You tell stories well and bravely. I think this has wonderful potential. Just remember your reader at every step. Find ways to let the see and feel the events as you go along.

I appreciate you trusting me with your work. I hope I have given you an idea or two that will help you revise this already strong piece into a piece that gives a reader a truly memorable experience.