



## Write Your Memoir in Six Months

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### The Craft of Memoir: *Wild* as a Guide to Becoming a Better Writer

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#### Week Three: Flashback & Memory

**Brooke Warner:** This is class number three of our *Wild* course on the craft of memoir, and today we're going to be talking about flashbacks and memories in writing—specifically, in writing memoir. Hi, Linda Joy.

**Linda Joy Myers:** Hi, Brooke. This is a wonderful thing to end up talking about because it's such an important part of the skill of writing. I think it's a little scary to some people; they're afraid to use it. And other people, they use it so much that it's hard to follow the now story. I think we're going to talk about some of that.

**BW:** Exactly. Last week, we talked about scene and transition. I know when we were prepping for this call we were talking about the importance of reiterating a couple of points on last week's call only inasmuch to describe flashbacks and memories a little bit. In some ways, they can be inextricable from scene and/or overlap with scene a little bit. I'm just going to briefly touch upon what we're going to get into today and then Linda Joy is going to do a little bit of recap in talking about flashbacks and memories in a sort of broad way. And then we're going to move into how to use them—the ways in which they function in your book, how they can be thematic, and so forth. We're going to give some good examples from Cheryl's book because I think those are very powerful, so get your pencils out to mark down those pages. Then we're going to talk about flashback and memory in the context of the present storyline, if you have one, and how to make that work. So lots of good material to cover today.

**LJM:** Let's just start with reminding you—just going over briefly what a scene is. A scene takes place in a certain time and place, meaning location in the world. It's grounded on the earth in time and place. It has specific people in it. In a scene, there are people doing something. Usually there is some kind of action. It may be mostly dialogue or it may be movement of some kind. In many scenes, there isn't dialogue but there is movement, and there is something significant happening. The other detail about

scenes is that what brings a scene alive is the use of what we call sensual details, which is the sound and smell and taste and the feel of the world and what it looks like in color—full, living color. If you go through *Wild*, it's helpful to mark the places—maybe your first time through or maybe your second—where you're noticing where there's reflection, where there's a scene and then—she's pretty subtle about using the transitions we were talking about last week. We feel that especially when you're early on writing a book—writing a memoir—making double-double space line breaks is a good idea because it guides you as much as it guides your reader for now. But you'll notice that pretty much Cheryl doesn't do that. Anything to add about scenes, Brooke?

**BW:** No. I'm going to talk about it a little bit when I move into the value of using flashbacks and memories in scenes, so I think I'll let you give your examples and then move into that.

**LJM:** We're going to talk next about the definition of a flashback and a definition of memory. We both have examples of this. A flashback is a full scene—a new time and place where something is happening that takes you away from the time and place moment in the scene where you were. Last week we talked about transitions, so there will be a transition line or a sentence, even, that gets you out of where you are and into the idea that you're going through time and you're going somewhere else. One example is on page 131 in the hardback version of the book. There's a scene where Cheryl is on the trail and she's talking to some of these men, these friends that she's made on the trail. She uses this transition phrase at the bottom of page 131. She says, “reluctantly, I met his eyes. ‘Is this the part where I tell you about my father?’ I asked, laughing falsely.” Next line: “It had always been my mother at the center of me, but in that room with Vince, I finally felt my father like a stake in my heart. ‘I hate him,’ I'd said during my teens. I didn't know how I felt about him now.” She very cleverly weaves a current scene into her transition about when she is going back to talk about who her father was and leads all the way into it with “‘I hate him,’ I used to say in my teens.” That's an example. That flashback goes for several paragraphs and then she comes back out on page 133 and connects the transition with the end of the flashback. “Someday he'd get us all, he'd promised. Someday, we'd pay. ‘But we didn't pay,’ I said to Vince in our second and final session together.” This is a therapist she's referring to. In any case, in the front story, she's connecting where she is with where she just came from. That's a full flashback because it's a couple of pages and she stays in this alternate time and place and takes us through something we wouldn't know about her. The effect of a flashback is that it deepens the front story. It occurs to me that we are in this scene that I took you to, which I didn't realize I was doing, but I'm actually taking you into a nested flashback. I don't want to confuse anyone, but a nested flashback is a flashback in a flashback. You can read it for yourself and see—she goes through two layers of time, not just one there. Did you notice that, Brooke? I missed that the first time around.

**BW:** Only because I didn't realize what the earlier scene was, but she does a lot of nesting, actually. If you follow her timelines in that example that I gave last week, too, where she brings us back to Portland hanging out with her drug addict boyfriend, she does layers and layers of time, but she does such a good job of giving very clear indicators about when she's moving. She does that with transition, and then she moves and does the memories and the flashback scenes so seamlessly that—I mentioned this last week—you're never lost. That's the hardest thing with flashbacks and memories—writers very often don't give really clear signposts to say, now we're going back in time. It can feel a little bit repetitive with transitions that do this thing of opening up, when I was younger, when I this, or whatever these time

indicators are. So you have to find ways to do that sometimes more creatively, but they're fundamentally important.

**LJM:** I think when we're reading, if it's done well we seamlessly go on into the next place. I didn't realize I'd been led into yet another layer—I had to go back two more pages to see that we were in a nested flashback. It's so seamless that it just moves through time and space. This also helps relieve you from the "this happened and then that happened and then after that that happened" kind of construction, which is really deadly. I'm working with a woman now who wanted to give a significant scene as kind of a prologue or first chapter—I don't know what it's going to be. But instead of doing the significant scene moment and then getting on with the core of her book, she wrote five thousand words about her whole, entire life, at which point I was screaming and jumping up and down. Not really. But I was trying to say to her, everything that you wanted to put in here, A., we don't need all of it, but B., if there are two or three significant points you want to make in the now time, we can use a flashback. We can use a flashback to take you so it deepens like you want, and you can include some of what you want, but it's not this deadly and then that and then that and then that, which makes you just feel like you're drowning. I think that's an important thing for everyone to realize. Flashbacks and transitions such great techniques.

I have an example of a memory—at least I'm calling it this. These are subtle things, but we want to have you think about all of this and read it and see what you think yourself. On page 66 in *Wild*, she is definitely on the trail. She says hello to a lizard and she starts talking about time. She runs her finger over a bruise. She says, "I ran my finger delicately over blisters and the bruise the size of a silver dollar that bloomed on my ankle. Not a PCT injury, but evidence of my pre-PCT idiocy. It was because of this bruise that I opted not to call Paul when I'd been so lonely at that motel back in Mojave," something she's already referred to. "This bruise at the center of the story I knew he'd hear hiding in my voice—how I intended to stay away from Joe and the two days I'd spent in Portland," and so on. She goes on to talk about how she'd ended up shooting heroin and we're briefly—two lines—we're in this scene where she's shooting up heroin. There's a line break, "and then I spent the day at Golden Oaks Springs with my compass." Now, we're calling this a memory because it's like five, six, seven lines, and it's true that it has a quote and it has a little dialogue in the five to seven lines, but it is not a full scene. It is a brief sketch of this one memory about when he shot heroin in her ankle and that's why she had the bruise. Do you want to add anything to that, Brooke?

**BW:** No, I think it's great. This is just thematically what we're moving into. Are you ready for me to move into my sequence here?

**LJM:** Yes, why don't you go on and follow up, because we've given these examples and then you can go on with what you have and we'll come back and if people have questions they can ask.

**BW:** What I wanted to move into here was just—Linda Joy prefaced the class today by reminding you all about last week and what scenes are. All of you understand what a scene is and they vary in length. Memories also vary in length. The memories tend to be more narrative, and I think this is kind of broad in some ways, and Linda Joy just said it was nuanced. It could also, hypothetically, be subjective to some extent. But I think the best way to think about it is that memories are more narrative in form. They tend to be times when you experience something and think about something—Linda Joy gave some examples

and I'll give some examples as well—while flashbacks bring you into that moment and really paint a scene. They could be fairly short and punchy or they could be an entire few pages.

One of the examples that I had of a flashback was—because I mentioned this last time—I probably mentioned it in the previous two classes because it just stuck with me so much and I think with some of you too. It's the scene with Lady the horse. Now, I'm not going to go into the whole thing because it's many pages. It starts on page 157—this is, again, the hardcover. It's a lot of memory and scene. The whole thing starts on page 157 and ends on page 163. So it's six-plus entire pages of this thing about Lady, which is just so powerful. She in essence has to put her mother's horse down. The entryway—I talked about the doorway, the transition into talking about the horse is that she has a horse tattoo. So she's sitting on the trail—well, in this case she's not on the trail; she's actually at one of these brief interlude stops she makes where she stops at someone's house and has something to eat. But all of a sudden she notices her tattoo and it says, "it wasn't just a horse, that tattoo. It was Lady." From here on, for six pages, it's all about Lady. Many of these pages are memories. There's a lot of narrative. Lady wasn't her real name; it was what we called her. She was a saddle-bred, her official name, and she goes on. This is all wonderfully written, but it's memory and it is this scene that begins on page 160. "The ground was so deeply frozen that burial was impossible. 'Leave her,' he instructed. 'The coyotes will drag her away.'" This is the top of page 160. And I'm not going to read all of this, but I want you all to notice how much you fall into the sense of being in the now with them even though this is clearly a flashback scene. And like I said, it goes on for three full pages of dialogue between her and her brother. What Linda Joy emphasized last week about sensory details—"Leif crouched, kneeling on one knee. Lady pranced and scraped her front hooves on the ice and then lowered her head and looked at us. I inhaled sharply and Leif fired the gun. The bullet hit Lady right between her eyes, in the middle of her white star, exactly where we hoped it would." I actually cried when I read this scene; it's so powerful and all of you should re-read it. You're there with her. It's gripping, and it is very much a flashback scene—a very powerful one at that.

The point that we want to make is that you want to use both of these. Too much flashback or too much memory makes you—it basically keeps you, I think, in a place that is not really present to the reader with what you are going through in the moment. What's going on with Cheryl is that she has a framed memoir, as we've discussed. She is writing over the course of her Pacific Crest Trail as the experience, and then she flashes back to all of these moments in time. What you see in the flashback is that we're very much with her. She's showing something that doesn't require a whole lot of reflection. All she says at the end is, "that was the worst thing I'd ever done." We don't really need her insights beyond that. It's pretty self-explanatory.

There are going to be other times, and next week is going to be a really important class, when we talk about takeaways, where reflection and takeaway are very important to the scene because we, the reader, need to know what you make of something or we're looking for a universal instance of something that we can relate to. This, we're not particularly relating to—most of us have not been in a position of having to put down an animal like this. Maybe some of you have, but for the most part, all you're relating to is this sort of gut-wrenching situation that she finds herself in and the agonizing over this life and it's connected to her mother in that it was her mother's horse. So in this case, the point that I'm making is that sometimes you are going to need takeaways and other times you're not. By no means do you have to have

a takeaway—a very powerful and obvious takeaway—at the end of every flashback or at the end of every scene.

And this does kind of morph into what we're going to be getting into next week, but it's important to understand the use of flashbacks and the use of memories in your memoir because they just add a lot of depth. They add a lot of layering. Some of you, I can anticipate a question that might come up at the end of the session here, which is, well, what if my whole book is memory? What if everything is in the past? That is the case for Cheryl. This whole book does happen in 1991, I believe. So in fact, if it's 20 years ago, the book, in essence, all of the Pacific Crest Trail is a memory. But the fact of the matter is that it's the present timeline. And every one of you has to have a present timeline where the book opens. And if you're writing chronological memoir, the book opens at point A and ends at point B and that is your chronological-now memoir. You still have the freedom to be pointing back in time.

And if you're doing a framed memoir—one of you asked a question on a previous call that this theme that you're working with spanned your entire life and how are you supposed to not write your entire life—not write what we were calling an autobiography instead of a memoir. I suggested, OK, why don't you think about writing from age 40 to 50 or age 50 to 60 and do the frame where you open the book at point A, which is a later point in your life, close the book at point B, which is a continuation of that later point in your life, and then periodically, like Cheryl does, jump back to weave in childhood memories of your parents or flashback scenes from something that happened in your childhood. This is a really common device, but you all have to be very clear on what your present timeline is, even if it's a past time, and what the entry points are. Where are those doorways that are going to let you go through the wormhole? Linda Joy mentioned at the beginning of the class, let's get ready to time travel. And it is that. You get to look for those little opportunities where you open the door and you jump through, and that's what Cheryl does in this moment when she looks at her tattoo, she's in the present moment, she sees it, there's the horse, and then all of a sudden, boom, we're with Lady. It's brilliant. She does it all the time throughout the book—little moments, little things she sees that are these doors—these little wormholes—and boom, we're gone, we're in the past. And you really, like the first time I read through the book, I didn't even notice it. You're not truly paying attention; you're just swept away with her story. Once you start analyzing, you can start to use these devices for yourself.

**LJM:** I agree. God, that horse scene is—I'm so upset.

**BW:** That's a really majorly powerful scene.

**LJM:** It's also about her mother, and so her mother's death is back again. But the history that they had with her mother before she was sick as well as what has happened to the poor horse after—it's a real thing that happened, but it also had the power of metaphor because it was about another loss. It was about something that she and her brother had to do on their own. They felt like orphans. It was about how cold it was—again, when you write something real but it's a very powerful moment, it has the power of what a metaphor has, which makes it more than real. I think that's why the horse story is so powerful, because it includes the history of them when they were together as a family before her mother died. It also includes death again and loss again and everything. It is beautiful. People are always asking me about metaphor, and some people kind of force it. I think metaphor—it's a little bit like a loaded gun, in a way. If you're

not quite sure how to use it, just pause and wait and see if it can flow naturally to you. Otherwise, it becomes a little awkward, whereas here, when you read it, all the layers of the sensual detail and everything add up to something greater than the sum of the parts. What are we doing next?

**BW:** I think we're going to move into doing how do you do this well. I think both of us have more examples that we can share, and I actually have a couple of client stories to share. Go ahead and we can kind of transition into that sharing.

**LJM:** I think the important thing is to know that you're writing a flashback when you're writing a flashback—to define it and decide "am I going to do a fairly good-sized scene where I'm going to take the reader back with me in scene or am I going to have a memory right now—in my now timeframe, whatever the now is." If you have that consciousness—that thought—then you'll be deciding. You can change your mind. You might just start to write a memory and you go, wait a minute, this is way too important. I really do need to bring the reader there. And then you will—you can change it. You can go into a full-on flashback. What I would do, and what I tell my students to do, is to make a list of exactly where we are, what is the significant thing that you're going to show the reader that you need a flashback, timeframe, where, who's there, and all that—to make an actual list so that you can just be grounded.

I'm working with someone right now—most of her book is really good, and she weaves back and forth in time a lot, but she unhooked herself from the earth in one section and she was reflecting a lot. Not that it wasn't important reflections—they were—but I had no idea when she was thinking these things. Was it before her boyfriend left town or after he left town? Was it before this other thing happened or after this other thing happened? I couldn't tell. So I felt like I was floating. I wrote her a note and I just said, you need to tie this reflection down. When did you have it? Memory reflection—it was a little bit of everything. Really chart out when you're leaving the now timeframe and traveling back in time, where you land, how long you're there—maybe it's a page of one minute. If something is stretched out in time, like a traumatic event or a surreal event, you could write a whole page about it but it's still just one minute that happened. It's fine. That's how we experience things. Or it's a whole day or a week or a month in this flashback that you chart out certain significant moments that are really important in your story. You make the transition, as we talked about last week.

You enter and you put these in—I think it's helpful to put them in different colors. I highlight the last sentence of where I was in red and the first sentence of where I'm going. Then when I had a full draft, I could check where did I leave current timeframe—you also want to have this in your outline that we talked to you about, in your scaffolding. But you can also see it in the text. Then you're not going to get so lost. The memory—you're in the now, you're walking along and you see something and then you suddenly have the memory of another time and place with this object. Maybe it's a house or it's a moment with a person, but it is not long. It's not a long thing. You're thinking about them or you're remembering something significant that happened. The other thing you're going to run into with all of this, since the memoir is all about memory anyway, is what memories are you choosing and why are you choosing them? Are they about your theme enough? Not every memory is going to be exactly right on the nail of your main theme, but there are layers of themes. There are layers of your story. Is it just because you had the memory that you want to put it in or because you're going to be showing the reader something significant? Again, it's about making craft choices as you go.

**BW:** To that point, I love what you said about feeling like you're floating. I'm sure all of you have had that experience as readers. Probably not as often as Linda Joy and I, because we're reading earlier drafts of things, but it's such a common thing. I talk to my clients about how I have an experience—or the reader has an experience—of feeling unanchored and/or untethered and that you really have to give these markers—these very clear points. When did something happen? You have to pay attention to sequencing. Sequencing in memoir is critical and because you lived it, it can be really easy to fall off a little bit, like when something happened or something happened before something else. I work with clients and I would say that on a daily basis, this kind of thing comes up where people just forget to put things in. Sometimes I ask people, was this a conscious omission? Because I want to understand. If you're not consciously omitting it and you're just not putting it in, the issue there is that you probably, when you're ready—it's great that you're taking a course like this, but you probably are going to want to seek out a coach like one of us or a writing partner. You sometimes lose objectivity where you kind of can't see where those doors are—where those wormholes are for you. I have a client who asked me to go through an entire chapter and just indicate places where I thought a wormhole existed. There are so many places when we're reading manuscripts that we go, oh, you could deepen here, you could go back in this moment, because it's right for it. It's really training your eyes to see where those moments are.

I think I've talked in a previous class here—certainly, we teach this in the longer course—this idea of planting seeds and then harvesting them later. Flashbacks and memories allow you to do that because you're planting seeds. Like in Cheryl's case, we're getting to know her, of course, but she's the protagonist. It's not just her. It's also little things about her—her relationship with her mother, her ex-husband, these people who stay with us over the course of the Pacific Crest Trail experience who keep resurfacing. Her mother is dead by this point, so the only way she is going to resurface is through flashback and memory. It is this idea that she plants the seed of her mother's death very early on and she keeps returning to it because it's a pivotal thematic question that she tackles in this book. Similarly, as all of you are identifying your themes and thinking about this book that you're writing, you are responsible to harvest those seeds that you plant early on. Sometimes you're harvesting and re-harvesting and re-harvesting and re-harvesting because it's a critical through-thread of your book.

By through-thread I mean something like Cheryl planting the seed of her mother and then she pulls it through the entire book. We never have a sense that we don't know how she's feeling about it or that she doesn't reach some sort of resolution. She goes on a journey—Linda Joy called it the internal journey—that really mirrors this external hike. The internal journey is just this rollercoaster that she takes us on with her mother, with grief, of lashing out, of anger, of sorrow, of regret. It's all over the place and it's so impactful. She really does do this using flashback and memory, but to do the thing of pulling this as a through-thread and/or the similar metaphor that we're using is the planting and the harvesting of the seeds. She's paying attention, and to Linda Joy's point of color-coding and thinking about things, and to my point of why put takeaways in your chapter summaries. Similarly, why not put the transitions and everything that can help you, because one thing for sure it that if you're writing over the course of many months—which is inevitable, and for most of you years—you're forgetting.

There's no way to keep present all of these many ideas and themes and things that you've dropped, so you have to find devices to be able to keep these things present and to remember what it is that you've planted

so that you can harvest in future chapters. Sometimes that means if you've taken too long of a break from your memoir that you need to go and read everything that there is to date. And it's why I'm so adamant about the scaffolding, because if the scaffolding is keeping pace with you and changing as you go, it's your Cliff Notes. It's the thing that you go, oh, I took a month off, hold on, I'm going to read this and my scaffolding and see where I've been and where I am. Especially if you've written many drafts or your book has changed, like oh my gosh, people whose books change and they've written five or six drafts, they can't remember what's in the book anymore. They go, oh, is that draft two or did I take that out? What happened? Just do yourself a favor—again, I was talking last week about using this as a support. We're not talking about scaffolding today, but clearly when the flashbacks and memories are part of your scenes, you just write them as that. If you have a scaffolding that's identifying four scenes in one chapter, it would be really easy just to go, this scene is a flashback. Great. I'm harvesting the seed of X scene. It's a great way for you to, again, do yourself some favors by giving yourself some signposts.

**LJM:** I love the image of scaffolding because really, just all of the things you're talking about, all of the support structures, like when people are building a house. They leave this support structure up over here and they have a ladder over there and they've got a bunch of cement over here. I take a walk most days near where I live and these people have been building a house for a year and a half. They're building it themselves with their own hands. It's been so interesting to walk by—it's been my little project to walk by and see what is holding up what, what is a temporary structure, what became permanent, when did they take something down and turn it into the real house that they're living in. What kind of transformations did it go through? For the longest time, you're going to have things propping up you writing this story and your scaffolding, your notes, your red things in the margin, your different color-coded things. Also, the other thing—you talk about this in other classes, I think, Brooke, about keeping correct files. Do you want to say a little bit about that here? It's part of keeping track.

**BW:** It's part of my process and my coaching and I'm so adamant about file naming for a very specific reason, that anytime you work on something, you change the name of your file. If you've done significant work, you really do want to go ahead and update it and you may want to keep older versions. When I was writing my own book, I just kept a document inside my—I'm very into descending files, naming chapter one, chapter two, chapter three, so when you open it up in a folder, it's descending and you can see all your chapters. And then, because I like things to be in descending order, I label something and I call it "Z\_OldFiles," and then it comes at the bottom. It's always underneath chapter whatever, even if you have 20 chapters, because it says "Z" and it does it alphabetically. And then you dump all of your old stuff into the old chapter file in case you need to reference it at some other point or you think to yourself, oh, I know I wrote that thing. You can do a quick search to find it. But your most recent chapters that you're working on are happening in the present time and the present folder. It's up-to-date and you're not writing your entire book in one Word document. This is another thing about keeping yourself sane, that you're always writing your book in chapters. Chapter One.doc, Chapter Two.doc—I have a tutorial on this on YouTube, so I'll send it over with the update for the call. Organizing yourself is another really huge aspect of writing a good memoir. It's like your thoughts—these are memories and things, so it's absolutely a big component of it and a lot of people who get frustrated and lost and overwhelmed, sometimes it really is just a matter of figuring out a good system.

**LJM:** One of the things that we're going to send you is called "The Power of Imagination and Memory." The reason we're talking about all these grounding tools is because also in memoir, as you probably all know, we spend a lot of time in this foggy little misty area in our heads called memory. We use our imagination to help us write as much or more than we can possibly nail down anything called a fact, although we can do research and bring facts in and be as accurate as possible and all of that. When we spend so much time hanging out in this sort of mystical realm, we really need the tools of grounding and clarity and the front part of our brain to help us stay focused. I think it's appropriate to talk about it as a both and. There are times when you just want to unleash the creativity and wander in there and do some of your creative writing, but stay grounded too. Come back out; tie things down.

**BW:** For sure, yeah. Should we move into our Q&A?

**LJM:** Yes, let's do. You guys know the drill by now. Hit \*6 to come on the line and after you ask your question or make your comment, please mute yourself again so we can get a good recording. You guys have been wonderful, so thank you. Does anybody have a question or a comment? Hit \*6 and then say your name and we'll call on you and we'll go from there.

**Evelyn:** This is Evelyn and I just have a request. I have the e-book version of *Wild* and so if you could just name the chapter that you're reading from, that would help me find it. The pages aren't the same.

**BW:** Sure. How about I send that out—I'll make a note to myself to send it out in the recap e-mail for those of you who are dealing with a different version. I have that all mapped out and I don't want to necessarily flip through the pages right now. So I'll send it out in the follow-up e-mail.

**Evelyn:** Thank you.

**BW:** Thanks for asking.

**LJM:** Anybody else?

**Nancy:** I'm Nancy.

**Linda:** And Linda.

**BW:** Great. So go in order—Nancy, then Linda.

**Nancy:** I was wondering, when you were referring to files, are you talking about digital files or paper files?

**BW:** I was talking about Word files or pages, if you use Pages. Some of you are probably using Scrivener—whatever you use. But whatever you use, don't write your whole book in one huge document. That's all. And then when I was talking about organizing your files, I meant organizing your Word document or whatever you use, but let's just for the sake of simplicity talk about Word documents. You can also use folders. So when you create a folder, you put a folder on your desktop. I'm a big advocate of

using folders for chapters. So chapter one, chapter two, chapter three, has a folder, and then put the working document inside that folder that is actually chapter one. If you have snippets of memories or flashbacks or things you think you want to include that you don't necessarily know where they belong, you can create a new Word document that says, for instance, "horse scene." Let's just say Cheryl wrote this scene but she didn't know, initially, what chapter she wanted to drop it into. So then you can keep those things separate and maybe move them around. It just gives you some flexibility to start to—it's like using index cards on your computer, basically. It's a file management system that I think is very straightforward and simple for people who are maybe bent toward being a little bit disorganized.

**Nancy:** So when you say keeping these snippets, they're related snippets to the subject of that chapter?

**BW:** Or just the book in general. I just know, because I've seen this happen before, where people—here's a different kind of wormhole where you get sidetracked. It's like you're writing and you're following your scaffolding and then all of a sudden, here's a scene—something that happened to you in childhood or something—it doesn't necessarily belong right there. It doesn't mean you shouldn't write it, especially if it's present and it's coming up for you, but you might want to write that scene and then keep it in a separate Word document and just kind of ask yourself where is that going to belong. Then you can drop it in later. Some of you are going to have a fine time just writing in a linear way, but not all of you are. So there are options for some of you who have more of a bit of a monkey mind for organizing your files and keeping on track.

**Nancy:** So if you had a snippet come up, you would make a separate file and a separate folder for that snippet and name it?

**BW:** I don't recommend using a separate folder, but I do recommend using a separate file and naming it. Like I said, let's say it was this Lady scene, labeling it Lady.doc, and then it would be very easy to find because it's the name of the scene.

**Nancy:** Thank you.

**BW:** Thanks for the question. Linda?

**Linda:** Hi. I've hesitated asking this because it may be more of a consulting to you question—like hiring you to answer this. But I think I'm starting to get the idea. I wrote a memoir and it's more of an autobiography, just on a blog. I didn't really understand framework or anything like that until I took your course right now. I know another caller asked this question a couple weeks ago, where what if your whole memoir is your whole life because there are so many amazing or odd or changes to write about. There is a theme, but I'm wondering if I were to start with something amazing that happened not that long ago and make that the basic framework and then use flashbacks to go back and tell the story, is that what you're saying? Does that make sense or does this need to be more of a—?

**BW:** Basically, yes. I'll just preface this by saying that anyone here can contact Linda Joy or I to talk about the possibility of coaching with us for more of a consult, so that's available and I think you guys know that. But in terms of what is this, you probably want to be thinking about a frame. It is reminiscent

of the caller previously—it's not wrong, the way that you're going about it, it's just overwhelming. As Linda Joy and I have been saying all along, readers lose interest when you just start from age two and move forward to however old you are because it's kind of like the frame is just your life and that's not a frame. The post that I did, actually, on our Write Your Memoir in Six Months, I posted last night this question of autobiography versus memoir. Those of you who are doing "it's my life," you're doing an autobiography. You need to reframe the idea so that you're actually doing a memoir. So I point to some of those things, like what makes a memoir and how to think about it. The thematic and/or framed and/or contained conversation we've been having is really—those are the key points to the memoir. And then all of the things that we're talking about—the craft of memoir—in this class, without any of the things that we're talking about in these four classes. So structure and then scenes and transitions and then this week flashback and memory and then next week transitions—if you're missing any of those components, you're also not doing a memoir. We could talk more, but you can start by just thinking about for yourself what frame would you choose. I know Linda Joy and I, when we coach, we help people think about structure. You're back in structure, thinking about what the structure of your book needs to be.

**Linda:** If you're trying to find ways to bring in other things that happened in the past, if you make any of that up—like I had a conversation and then suddenly you're in a flashback or you're in a memory and that conversation didn't really happen within the framework, then that's not a memoir either? That's just fiction?

**LJM:** If you make it up and it didn't happen, it's not actually a memoir.

**Linda:** Right. Not that it didn't happen, but that in order to bring it into the story—do you know what I'm saying?

**LJM:** The literalness of when did something happen is another whole conversation. Can you create a composite—maybe we can talk about some of that next week.

**Linda:** Yeah, I thought this was kind of a complicated question, so that's OK.

**BW:** Let's do that. Let's talk about it a little bit more next week. But you bring up some really good points. What you're talking about, I think, points to what we were talking about earlier about sequencing and what happens if you have to move something out of sequence to make it work for your memoir. Purists are going to say no way, no how, you can't do that. I think Linda Joy and I think you can fudge it a little bit as long as it happened, but that's different than fictionalizing.

**Linda:** Exactly, yeah, and that's what I meant, but I wasn't sure how much you could—we'll talk about that.

**Nancy:** This is Nancy. I've found that question came up to me in reading *Wild*. In particular, the one with the horse tattoo. I wondered if that really was a device to transition into the story about the horse.

**LJM:** Did you think she made it up?

**Nancy:** It may not have happened that way, actually. She found a way that was altogether possible that it could have happened that way, but she may not be totally sure it did. But it worked.

**BW:** I completely think that's the case, and I'm sure she actually has that tattoo, but was she sitting in that exact moment musing over her tattoo in that house? Who knows?

**Nancy:** But it's still legitimate, right?

**BW:** It is.

**Nancy:** I think that's part of the question that you're discussing, isn't it?

**Linda:** That's exactly—you just asked my question, so thanks. That's what I was really wanting to know.

**LJM:** Like what I was talking about last week when I would dress my grandmother—we would go to the train and I'd have to put clothes on her. Do I know that when, on that particular day—and I do choose a certain day, which we're going to go to this train and pick up my mother—I choose a day and a time and everything, but did she really wear that dress on that day? I don't know, but who cares? She has to wear something and I'm using it as characterization. So that's where—maybe that's not as good an example as the whole tattoo thing, but let's say she did sit and reflect on her tattoo. Did she reflect on that day in that moment? She might have; we don't know. But did she connect the tattoo with the memory? I believe she did. Does that make sense?

**BW:** It does to me.

**Nancy:** I wonder about that tattoo, because she did mention that tattoo in the very beginning.

**LJM:** We're getting off on is she telling the truth, I think.

**Nancy:** For me, it was like, oh, right, she did mention that tattoo. It made it more authentic for the story about it to come out. In my mind, that story was about the tattoo.

**LJM:** It felt authentic, which is what we're after—for all of you to do your best to create—obviously we're creating something that doesn't exist. We're creating a memoir stitched together with our imagination, our memory, of some research that we can do about specific things, and you know it kind of hangs out in that area of art—of creation. It is something we're creating. All of these are really terrific questions because they're the questions that we all have about how to do this. Thank you.

**BW:** We have plenty of time for another question. We're going to let someone edge in here who has something else.

**Celine:** Hi, this is Celine. I had a question about takeaways. I know in a previous session you discussed the importance of a takeaway in every chapter, but I wasn't—you mentioned something in this session today about using takeaways in scenes, memories, and flashbacks. Not all the time, necessarily, but

whenever useful. That was something that I hadn't realized that was a possibility, although sometimes it happens naturally. I just wondered if you could talk more about that in terms of how important that is to memoir.

**BW:** Good news for you is that next week, that's the focus of the entire class. It's one of my favorite topics, in fact, so I'm very excited about next week. I'm not going to answer the question just because we're doing a whole hour on it, but thank you for asking.

**Celine:** Thank you.

**LJM:** It's very important and we'll look forward to that.

**BW:** One more? We have a few more minutes.

**Tina:** Hello, this is Tina. When I was going through some of my own rough outlines—scaffolding—we were talking about what is true and how these themes come together. I think sometimes you don't know that they are really there until you start writing them. I was going through timelines and my turning points and I keep journals, so I was kind of looking at something and there was something that had happened in my life that I had kind of forgotten about. And then after that, there were a lot of different things that happened that I decide were related to that. I don't know if that's really—I had a change of feeling about relationships and things like this. In my mind, I'm like, this may be exactly—this forgiveness I had for somebody may help me in the future, but it's not necessarily something that I would have thought of until I would have started writing it. Sometimes I think we kind of create that as we go. I don't know—I might not worry about it until I start the editing. It's more of a comment than a question.

**BW:** Linda Joy, you can weigh in on this too, but I feel that that's exactly what the scaffolding does for you. Rather than worrying about it in editing, as these things make themselves apparent, you put them into the scaffolding. I've said sometimes the scaffolding leads and sometimes the writing leads. Lots of times, writers will come up and be like, wow, chapter two was totally not what I expected but I just followed my truth. We absolutely advocate for that. Instead of being like, well, I'll just wait until chapter 20 to deal with that, once you finish writing chapter two and your inspiration, then you turn to your scaffolding and you just jot down what happened.

**Tina:** That's helpful for me to visualize it. Thank you.

**LJM:** You don't want to throw away these wonderful moments of creativity, but sometimes you don't quite know what to do with them so you keep track of them. Like Brooke said, you can create a file with a whole idea and name it and save it—a Word .doc file. You put it in your scaffolding—maybe you put it in a different color, maybe you put a question mark beside it, but don't throw it out.

**Tina:** I've started a mind map and I haven't used that a lot before, but it seemed to help me get it on the page. I just don't know how to print it very well. Thank you.

**LJM:** Let's let those flashes come. That's part of what happens when we write—when we are creating. I think we're done, is that right, Brooke? Today we had a wonderful discussion and I want to thank all of you for being with us. We'll look forward to talking about reflection next week and also answering some of the questions that you all had today. It's been such a wonderful class to be with all of you.