

**Title of Session:** WriteTalk - Memoir Writing

**Moderator:** Sandra Shattuck

**Guest Speaker:** Kate O'Neal

**Title of File:** 20070412writetalk

**Date:** April 12, 2007

Room: WriteTalk Group

**FredK:** I am a literacy Tutor in SE Oklahoma

**BjB:** please tell Sandy where you are located and your interest in writing

**JenniferER:** I am an 11th grade English student teacher at Austin High School in Sugar land, Texas

**AmyKH:** I am a student teacher in Pearland ISD and hope to teach Kindergarten

**AmandaEM:** I'm a student teacher in Cy-Fair ISD (Cypress, TX)

**MaureenB:** hi I am a fourth grade teacher in Putnam County NY

**DavidBa:** I teach Creative Writing, Humanities, and 11th grade English in Fredericksburg, VA

**DavidWe:** I'm David Weksler. I lead a math education and technology discussion in Tapped In. I'm in New Jersey, close to New York City

**BjB:** I teach remedial communication in Pennsylvania

**KateO:** I am a graduate student at the University of Alabama in Huntsville working on my Masters in English

**SandraS:** I teach literature & writing in Alabama

**BjB:** . o O ( looks like you have a wonderful group here, Sandy! )

**SandraS:** Absolutely!

**DavidWe:** . o O ( and a fellow Alabaman )

**JoseMH:** I'm a graduate student from San Antonio, Texas. I am interested in creative writing for all ages.

**DavidWe:** . o O ( Alabam-woman? )

**SandraS:** yeah...creative writing for all ages...

**KateO:** Alabaman is fine!

**DavidWe** smiles

**SandraS:** I usually start our WriteTalk sessions with a quick introduction to the National Writing Project

**SandraS:** some of you will have already hear this, so please bear with me

**SandraS:** but the NWP is a professional development organization founded at Berkeley in 1973

**SandraS:** we now have about 195 sites all at colleges and universities that serve primarily k-12 folk

**SandraS:** great bridges across levels of education and the centerpiece of each site is the Summer Institute

**SandraS:** NWP is nationally funded

**SandraS:** the April meeting in D.C. is coming up

**SandraS:** NWP has to lobby for their budget each year and when there's no increase, programs get cut back

**SandraS:** there are three basic tenets

**SandraS:** teachers are the best teachers of other teachers

**SandraS:** no canned professional development

**SandraS:** tenet 2 -- teachers teach writing better when they improve their own writing

**SandraS:** and 3

**SandraS:** writing is a powerful learning tool across all disciplines

**JoseMH:** I agree. As long as you teach, you continue to learn.

**SandraS:** I agree, Jose

**SandraS:** ok, so any questions so far?

**DavidBa:** none here

**SandraS:** we'll take a quick look at the website and then on to our wonderful guest speaker

**SandraS:** the website has lots of resources

**SandraS:** be sure to check out the Quarterly

**AmandaEM:** sounds like a plan

**SandraS:** NWP's journal

**SandraS:** which is searchable

**SandraS:** and there's a great little pamphlet with 30 Ideas on how to teach writing

**JenniferER:** Is NWP similar to the New Jersey Writing Project?

**SandraS:** you can find a map and see if there's a NWP site near you

**AmyKH:** handy

**SandraS:** I'll give you the URL

**SandraS:** you can go check it out for a couple minutes

**JenniferER:** Ok

**SandraS:** then please meet back here

**DavidWe** believes there are many local versions of NWP

**SandraS:** <http://www.writingproject.org>  
JeffC joined the room.

**SandraS:** OK, everybody back?

**AmyKH:** I am here

**SandraS:** Any questions before we continue?

**AmandaEM:** yes ma'am

**JenniferER:** Sandra- can you tell me more about the writing retreats?

**JoseMH:** Yes

**SandraS:** Jennifer, the writing retreats are wonderful!

**SandraS:** You do have to have gone through a Summer Institute at one of the sites in order to participate...

**SandraS:** I participated in one in Santa Fe

**SandraS:** editors are there

**SandraS:** we work with response groups

**SandraS:** I also co-facilitate the writing and technology retreat, which takes place in Nebraska in July

**JenniferER:** What kind of writing is it? Creative?

**MaureenB:** yes

**SandraS:** professional...so you are writing about how you use writing in our profession of teaching

**MaureenB:** my local site is my daughter's college

**SandraS:** now, many of the local sites have writing retreats

**SandraS:** and usually you can do any kind of writing

**AmandaEM:** do schools offer professional development hours for those who participate in such institutes?

**SandraS:** we had a great marathon here at the art museum, for instance

**SandraS:** most schools do

**JenniferER:** Oh, nice.

**SandraS:** many offer graduate hours

**JenniferER:** Is it a weekend long event?

**SandraS:** the national professional writing retreats are 3-4 days long

**SandraS:** over a weekend in the summer

**SandraS:** local sites will vary

**SandraS:** but they're often on weekends

**JoseMH:** How much \$ to attend?

**JenniferER:** That sounds wonderful. Yes, how much?

**SandraS:** for the national ones, you just need your site to pay airfare

**JenniferER:** And what does that include?

**SandraS:** then NWP pays for room and board

**SandraS:** local sites have different prices

**SandraS:** some offer stipends for you to go write!

**JenniferER:** Oh, okay

**SandraS:** I'm going to segue into Kate's section of this evening....

**JenniferER:** Well thanks for the info Sandra

**SandraS:** if you have any more questions about NWP, don't hesitate to email me

**SandraS:** Sure, Jennifer.

**JoseMH:** Thanks.

**SandraS:** I've been teaching a grad. class in writing pedagogy at the University of Alabama in Huntsville

**SandraS:** and Kate has been in the class

**DavidWe** . o O ( Kate has been FORCED to login to TI, I see )

**DavidWe** winks

**KateO:** not forced, just encouraged

**DavidWe** smiles

**SandraS:** we're in the same response group, so I've been able to learn from her journey with memoir writing

**DavidWe:** We're glad you are here, Kate

**JenniferER:** Nice to meet you Kate

**JoseMH:** Write on!

**KateO:** thanks, it's great to be here!

**SandraS:** Kate is courageous! She's writing her own memoir!

**KateO:** The memoir project is not something that I would ever get to do, especially for a class

**BjB** cheers for Kate

**SandraS:** So I asked her to come talk to us....please take it away, Kate!

**SandraS** applauds Kate

**AmyKH:** Amy claps

**KateO:** Thanks!

**KateO:** Well, I'd like to start by saying that I am not a memoir expert

**MaureenB** clapping

**KateO:** Just the opposite, I'm learning something new about the process of writing one everyday

**JoseMH:** Modest.

**KateO:** I read two great books. The first is Writing About Your Life by William Zinsser

**DavidWe** . o O ( great book )

**KateO:** The second is a compilation of conversations with famous memoir writers such as Frank McCourt who wrote Angela's Ashes

**KateO:** That book is titled Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir

**JenniferER:** I love that book

**KateO:** Yeah, they are great and they have both been extremely helpful in starting to write my own story

**KateO:** So, I basically began by reading these two books and looking at the strategies that they suggest

**JenniferER:** So, how do you know if you are interesting enough to warrant a memoir?

**KateO:** Well, I didn't. In fact, I was sure that I'd start writing and then would have to stop because even I would be falling asleep

**SandraS** chuckles

**KateO:** Then I realized "Hey, my family is really messed up!" and things got better

**AmyKH:** sounds familiar

**BjB** laughs

**AmandaEM :** I second that, Amy

**DavidWe:** Remember, dysfunction includes "fun"!

**JenniferER:** Oh yes, I always say my family puts the fun back in disfunctional

**DavidWe** wins

**KateO:** Yeah, it's amazing the kind of stuff you remember too as you sit down to write; things I never thought had much impact are now in the memoir

**DavidBa:** Do you ever worry about how others in your family will react to what you've written?

**KateO:** YES!!! Especially my mother

**DavidWe** smiles

**JenniferER:** Gotta love those moms... Ya' Ya's ??

**AmyKH:** haha

**DavidWe** laughs

**KateO:** The hard thing is that I am writing about my relationship with my father who died when I was 15 and I have to rely on my mother for a lot of the detail that I don't remember

**KateO:** It's hard to ask her to drudge up the good and the bad memories

**DavidBa:** What was mom's reaction to the project?

**JenniferER:** Sorry to hear about your father

**KateO:** Thanks

**KateO:** My mom was, of course, supportive, but she didn't understand why I was asking about my parent's wedding and their lives before me

**KateO:** She was like "I thought this was your memoir, not ours"

**SandraS:** I love the way you begin your memoir and how you've figured out a unifying structure...

**KateO:** But I have realized as I've gone along that their lives before me are an anchor in the text; it explains a lot about who my father was and who I came to be

**JenniferER:** Yes, but have to know where you came from

**KateO:** Exactly

**DavidBa:** Did you get any "well...I don't remember it like that!"

**JoseMH:** true

**KateO:** What Sandra is talking about is that I have grounded/unified my memoir around the day of my wedding - a year and a half ago

**JenniferER:** Congrats!

**KateO:** Not yet, but I'm not going to let my mother read it until I finish...then, I'm sure I'll get an "Oh, you have to take that out"

**DavidBa:** So how do you even begin such a daunting task?

**AmyKH:** YaYa Sisterhood!!

**KateO:** You begin it scared to death

**KateO:** I've always had a hard time with introductions and this was no different

**AmandaEM:** I bet

**JenniferER:** Kate-- how old are you, if you don't mind me asking?

**KateO:** It took me a week to finish the first page, but now, it's like I can't stop the information and ideas from coming

**KateO:** Now I'm at the point where I'm reducing - asking myself what really matters and what makes the story

**KateO:** don't mind at all, I'm 24

**AmyKH:** I would have the same problem

**JenniferER:** Wow... that is an amazing feat for someone so young.

**DavidBa:** you mention "make the story" -- what defines the story?

**KateO:** Well, I'll let you say that when I finish...I probably won't be so young then

**JenniferER:** You are certainly ambitious.

**JenniferER:** Ha! That's true.

**KateO:** To me, the story is about a girl and her father, examining the affects of both his presence and his absence

**KateO:** But that's just my story

**JoseMH:** Young at heart

**JenniferER:** I'm 25 and could not imagine taking that on

**AmandaEM:** so it will include flashbacks?

**AmandaEM:** for the bulk of the story?

**KateO:** One thing that Zinsser talks about is making yourself the central character in your own story - I had to start thinking about my life like a novel

**SandraS:** I couldn't imagine taking it on either, but Kate has made me believe it's possible!

**KateO:** Three months ago I couldn't have imagined taking it on; now I'm planning to take a year off after my Masters to complete it - life is funny that way!

**KateO:** yes, the bulk of the story is in flashbacks

**AmyKH:** that will be interesting

**KateO:** I'm telling it from the perspective of my now, 24-year old self - even the wedding day stuff is past tense

**KateO:** For me that works best, but I've seen others write from the childhood persona and do really well with it

**JenniferER:** Do you still feel your father's presence?

**KateO:** At certain times I do, but more so since I've been writing this; it's also helped me to understand him more as a person

**KateO:** When you're young, you don't understand the trials that your parents have undergone; it's also helping me understand my mother's position when he died

**JenniferER:** I've heard that can be a very powerful feeling

**AmyKH:** what inspired you to write a memoir?

**KateO:** I think what inspired me was angst; that may sound funny but for years I haven't felt closure with his death; I had a hard time grieving because I was fifteen and, sadly, was embarrassed that I lost my father

**KateO:** It gave me attention I didn't want and made me different and to a 15 year old that's the worst thing in the world

**DavidBa:** Is the plan to eventually publish or is this more of a personal challenge (or both?)

**JenniferER:** Huh. That's one thing I had never thought of before, but I can see why you would say that.

**KateO:** I'm kind of hoping for both. I hope that it's good enough to publish, but no matter what, it will be a personal victory

**DavidBa:** Absolutely!

**JenniferER:** That's great attitude to have Kate

**AmyKH:** how long to plan to write before you publish

**JoseMH:** Inspiring

**KateO:** I think it will take at least 6 months of solid writing...I've been surprised at how long it takes to put everything down on paper. There are so many possible directions to take that just choosing the path can be very time consuming

**KateO:** After that I'm sure I will have to spend a good deal of time rewriting and revising - I expect to go through 3 or more drafts

**AmandaEM:** At what point in your life do you know when to stop?

**AmandaEM:** couldn't you just continue writing as things happen

**JenniferER:** So, are you wanting to be a writer as a long-term career, or is this more of a hobby?

**KateO:** That's a question I haven't quite answered yet. I think I use the flashbacks to write about the time until I was about 17-18 (this way I'll cover the years immediately after his death); then I will use the wedding to anchor things in the recent present, but not go into a chronological detail about my early twenties and college years

**KateO:** I would love to write as my career, but I also plan to pursue a PhD after completing my Masters and will probably end up a college English professor doing writing on the side

**SandraS:** a venerable course of action...

**JenniferER:** So do you want to focus on creative writing on the college level--- as a professor?

**JoseMH:** excellent

**KateO:** That's ideal...everyone makes fun of me for my so-called "life plans" though because you can't predict everything

**JenniferER:** Well, no one can, but you have to have goals

**KateO:** Actually I want to become a Victorianist, concentrating on nineteenth century English writing, but I would love to teach a creative writing course as well

**SandraS:** I'd like to throw a pedagogy question in here...as you've been doing this writing, have you imagined ways to apply what you've learned in the classroom?

**DavidWe . o O ( good pedagogy question, Sandra )**

**KateO:** Yes, I have. First of all, peer response has been great. I don't think I would have done that without the class and I plan on continuing it with my English major friends after the class so that I can continue to get feedback

**JenniferER:** Interesting. As a newlywed, I'm just curious about how much of your time is the memoir taking up and how does your husband feel about it?

**KateO:** Another thing I've learned is just to write; give yourself permission to write; if it's crap, write it! you can fix it later. The writing is what's important

**JenniferER:** Do you think this would be something I could do on a smaller scale for my high schoolers?

**AmandaEM:** True...you have to get those ideas down on paper.

**SandraS:** great advice!

**SandraS** nods to Jennifer

**SandraS:** We've got a lot of elementary teachers here tonight, and I think you can apply memoir writing at that level, too...

**AmandaEM:** I was wondering what advice you have for a teacher of elementary school...as far as memoir writing goes, would daily journal writing be considered a good start?

**KateO:** He's extremely proud; Since I'm a full time student and he's also working on his Master's, he understands that school is my life. He also understands that writing will be my life so he's been really supportive. I think he just wants to make sure that I don't write anything bad about him in it

**JenniferER:** Funny!

**SandraS** chuckles

**SandraS:** Amanda, I think another good start is using great children's books

**KateO:** The time I spend on it varies, depending on my other classes. In a good week, I spend 5-10 hours writing, rewriting, deleting icky sentences and starting over - like I said, it's a long process

**AmandaEM:** do you have any recommendations?

**JenniferER:** Yeah, my fiancée would get very nervous if I told him I was writing a memoir!

**JenniferER** smiles

**AmyKH:** are you writing about your dating experiences in the memoir

**KateO:** Your fiancé, your cousin, your mailman...as soon as they find out, you start getting gifts...it's actually worked out for the best

**SandraS** laughs

**DavidBa**: Do you have a working title for your memoir?

**JenniferER**: Oh, bribe gifts!

**AmyKH** Amy chuckes

**SandraS**: Amanda, Mem Fox's works

**AmandaEM** : Koala Lou

**AmyKH**: ahhhhhhh

**AmyKH**: my favorite

**SandraS**: Winifred ....the one about the woman in nursing home who's lost her memories...

**KateO**: I think I will talk about dating some...when my dad passed away I had my first steady boyfriend, but I didn't tell him that my dad had died until two days later - I didn't know how and didn't want to make a big deal...that's got to go in cause that's just weird

**KateO**: I don't have a title yet.....yeah, that's going to be hard

**SandraS**: Kate, would you be willing to copy and paste your first sentence here?

**KateO**: Sure, let me grab it

**SandraS**: ooh, thank you!

**KateO**: It was the perfect dress. Cream colored lace with champagne accents, an antique-brooch at the middle of the waist and a floor-length veil that made me feel like a princess.

**KateO**: Those are the first two sentences, the first was pretty short

**AmyKH**: if you don't mind me asking, did your dad pass away from natural causes or did you have to experience a tragedy

**SandraS**: Thank you for sharing those sentences, Kate.

**DavidBa**: Yes, thank you

**KateO**: he died from cancer due to basically a life-time of smoking...he was first diagnosed when I was 11, had his voice box removed when I was 12 and then died three years later

**JenniferER:** Oh, your wedding dress!

**SandraS** nods to Jennifer

**AmyKH:** I am so sorry to hear that

**KateO:** Yeah, it was a vintage style dress; he would have loved it, so that's where I started

**JenniferER:** I'm so sorry. I can imagine your big day was bittersweet.

**KateO:** it's okay, but thanks

**DavidBa:** Walk us through that line - was it a "no brainer" or did you struggle finding the right words?

**SandraS:** Kate's start also illustrates one way to make memoir manageable....focus on a section of your life

**KateO:** it was and that's why I think it is so important to join the two (the past with him and that day without him)...my final chapter will revolve around me walking down the aisle alone (I didn't want a replacement and I thought in a way, that he would be walking with me in spirit)

**KateO:** The first sentence was no problem. It hit me in the car (it's always that or in the shower) that I should start with the wedding and the dress; the second sentence took more work and it will probably be tweaked many more times until I consider the memoir done

**SandraS:** What I love about the first paragraph, too, is that it talks about the dress being preserved and in the attic with other memories...just as Kate is in the act of preserving memories by writing about them...

**AmandaEM:** how often do you have someone read over your draft?

**JoseMH:** Memoir of a daughter

**JenniferER:** I would struggle with every word. I would die before I ever got a chance to finish anything

**SandraS:** ooh, Jose has a title!

**KateO:** yeah, that came about because my mother recently gave me my father's bronzed baby shoes...both in the attic together seemed fitting

**JenniferER:** Ha! Good job Jose!

**BjB** . o O ( our time is almost up )

**KateO**: My response group reads my draft (when I have something new) every week, which is great

**JenniferER**: Quick, write it down Kate!

**AmandaEM**: nice to have that feedback

**BjB**: the next WriteTalk discussion will be on May 10

**KateO**: I hope that I can keep that up with a willing volunteer after the class ends

**SandraS**: thanks BJ....I hate to bring this to a close....but we're at the end of the hour

**DavidWe** looks at the clock on the wall

**DavidBa**: Thanks for sharing Kate..I have to run...my 14 mo old is sick and mom needs my help!

**SandraS**: Thank you so much Kate

**KateO**: Hey, that's a good title. I can work with that!

**AmandaEM**: Thanks Kate!

**SandraS**: Thanks to everyone for participating

**AmyKH**: Thanks Kate..Best of luck to you

**KateO**: Thank you for having me; I really enjoyed it

**KateO**: Thanks

**JoseMH**: Thank you Kate for sharing a part of your life

**DavidWe**: Good luck, Kate

**FredK**: Thanks Kate

**DavidWe**: Thanks for talking about your memoir

**JoseMH**: bye

**KateO**: Thank you guys, you had some great questions

**JenniferER:** Thanks Kate!