‘LOOK! I WROTE ABOUT YOU!’

What are we *really* looking for when we share creative nonfiction with our subjects?

BY DANA SHAVIN

A few months ago, there was an article on the foodie site thekitchn.com that caused quite a stir. It said that baking a beautiful birthday cake for someone, far from being kind, is actually an act of self-centeredness, a veiled attempt to draw attention away from the birthday celebrant and onto the baker. It suggested giving only ugly cakes as a way to avoid turning the focus on oneself. Not surprisingly, the article drew a range of responses, most of which were of the, “Are you kidding me?” variety, and a few of which suggested the writer, Ariel Knutsen, might have a point.

I was firmly in the AYKM camp. Loads of years ago, I dated a man whose family was in the baking business. He had grown up baking and decorating all manner of cakes, cookies, and pastries for every milestone event in his small North Dakota town. For my father’s 60th birthday, my baker boyfriend made a sheet cake, then decorated it to look like one of the books my father had authored, complete with title, byline, and a bookmark. We were excited to present it to my father, as we knew he’d love it (and he did!). But no way were we in it for the accolades we knew it would accrue. Were we?

Recently, I wrote an essay about a profound moment in my life, a lunch date with a young man (I’ll call him Stuart) on whom I had a crush. I was struggling with an eating disorder at the time, just out of the hospital, and hadn’t allowed myself anything like a real meal in four years. But with his gentle encouragement (not to mention sizzling good looks), I was moved to take a huge step forward: I ate a sandwich. It turned out to be a breakthrough in my recovery.

At some point during the writing of the essay, it occurred to me that I might like to share the finished product with Stuart, to whom I had not spoken in over 30 years. Although the essay was, in the end, a commentary on my father, Stuart’s compassion and the unexpected impact it had on me figured prominently. Sharing it with him would be a kind of belated thank you.

But I had some concerns. I worried about the wisdom of dropping into a life unannounced. Would Stuart think I was looking for something more than to express overdue gratitude? What if my essay brought back unwanted memories? Or made him long for happier times? Or what if he simply didn’t like the idea of showing up in my

literary spotlight, no matter how flattering the glow? A few months earlier, my brother had shared a short essay he'd written about me, and while it was not at all insulting or hurtful, I found myself squirming under the magnifying glass.

I sought counsel. And everyone I asked, including my writers' group, thought I should share the essay with Stuart.

"It's never wrong to tell people they made a difference in your life," they said. And so, after the essay found a home in a literary journal, I friended Stuart on Facebook and sent him the link. I assured him my intent was not to worm into his life, that I only wanted to tell him he'd had a big impact on mine. I said I hoped the essay would not weird him out (it included lines like, "Stuart is 24, and along with glittery auburn hair and eyes of ache and longing, he also has thighs that cannot scissor past one another without swinging out in a small arc to accommodate their heft, making his walk an intoxicating display of brawn at work") and assured him the essay was not entirely about him, that it was, in the end, about my father.

And then I waited. And I waited. And while I waited, I recalled that my ex-boss and my ex-therapist, both of whom had heroic roles in my memoir, *The Body Tourist*, never even acknowledged my sending the book to them. Still, the idea that Stuart would not respond – brimming with gratitude and the egoistic thrill of having been immortalized in print in such a positive light – did not occur to me. Not until I found myself compulsively checking Facebook messenger at a rate of approximately 10 times an hour for 48 hours, many of them consecutive, did I start to wonder: Did I perhaps have outsized expectations of what my essay might mean to him?

By the time Stuart responded, two very long days later, I was moments away from consigning the essay to the Graveyard of Unappreciated Things, along with the maritime diorama-in-a-shoebox I made and gave as a birthday gift to my father when I was 7 that ended up on a shelf in my bedroom.

"Yes I remember you," he wrote. "Fondly and with respect." He also remembered something I'd written years ago about someone we both knew. "You're a fine writer," he added.

But here's the thing: I couldn't tell if he'd read my essay, which had gone through many agonizing revisions. I had carved away at its essence alone and, later, with the input of readers, my writers' group, and my writing mentor – off and on for two years.

So I wrote him again. I reiterated that the essay was about his past kind actions, in case I hadn't made it clear in my first note. (Some people, I knew, would not read something I wrote unless they thought it was about them.) And I offered to re-send the link on the off chance he hadn't been able to open it.

And this is where the Kitchn article comes in. About the beautiful birthday cake you should never bake for another person, because the presentation takes the focus off the celebrant and turns it on you, the amazing baker. At some point as I was attempting to clarify with Stuart whether or not he had, in fact, read the essay, I began to feel that I had perhaps baked a lovely cake that I was now shoving down the throat of my celebrant and demanding to know, in no uncertain terms, exactly how delicious it was. That I had somehow gone from saying "thank you" to saying "thank me."

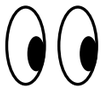
As nonfiction writers (and sometimes even as fiction writers) we write about real, live people, and it's always possible that those real, live people could see our work – even if we don't hunt them down and send it to them. Much has been written about protecting the identities of our subjects – changing names, altering identifying information – i.e., fictionalizing them to some degree, which we all know is important when we are writing material that could potentially indict or embarrass or reveal the secrets of others. But what about when we believe our depiction of someone will interest and/or flatter them? What is our responsibility, as writers, to *those* people, and what should we be considering before we fire off the link to that essay or send them that book?

Sue William Silverman, who teaches writing at the Vermont College of Fine Arts, recalls that, at some point before publication of her memoir, *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You*, she realized she wanted to send the finished book to her high school boyfriend, Christopher (not his real name), who had been an island of safety and comfort during her adolescent years. It took some time to find his contact information, but when at last she did, she emailed him. She said she'd written a book, that it was about her father's sexual abuse of her throughout her childhood, and that he, Christopher, was in it in a very positive way.

"I really wanted him to read it," says Silverman. "But I did not have the courage to ask him to directly."

Christopher wrote back and said he was so sorry about her difficult childhood and that he wished he'd known what she was going through. They exchanged more emails after that, each of which Silverman would examine for evidence that he'd read the book. When the Associated Writing Programs conference announced it would be held in Florida, where Christopher lived, Silverman told him she would be in town for it and asked if he'd like to have lunch. He said yes. At that lunch, he admitted he had not read her book.

"I think maybe he felt guilty that he did not know what was happening to me back then," Silverman says. "I reassured him that his presence had helped save me, that he had been this oasis of safety in my life." It felt good to tell him, she says, but it was still important to her that he read the actual book. Why?



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"Because the way we convey something through written word is its own truth, and it's more tangible than just telling someone something. I wanted Christopher to see that I could take my experience and turn it into art. I also wanted him to know that I had celebrated him in this very public way."

Did she have any concerns about showing it to him?

"No," says Silverman. "When I wrote *Terror*, it was in the first wave of memoirs to come out, and no one was having conversations about whether to show people what you wrote about them. So I wasn't worried."

In other words, she had no reason to think that her literary celebration of Christopher would be received as anything other than how it was intended. Which is why his reluctance to read it was so surprising to her. Eventually, Christopher did read it, and his response to the way he was portrayed was overwhelmingly positive.

Unlike Silverman, Chelsea Biondolillo, author of *#Lovesong*, a book about love, loss, heartbreak, etc., told though old love notes, photos, and found text, doesn't want contact with any of the people she's written about.

"I wrote a chapbook that included snippets from old love notes I've been given over the years, and I heard from one person I quoted. It was during the #metoo movement, and he wanted me to know he was sorry if he was one of the 'bad guys' from my past." ("He wasn't," she says, adding "Leave it to the good ones to be the only ones who ask that sort of thing.")

Biondolillo says she didn't expect to hear from anyone else she'd quoted, and "…would have been deeply uncomfortable with the conversation" had

any of them contacted her. Several other writers I reached out to said a variation of the same thing. Some said they did not think of their writing as a vehicle to reconnect with people from their past, and others went further, saying that the very idea of sharing their writing with their subjects would interfere with the writing itself.

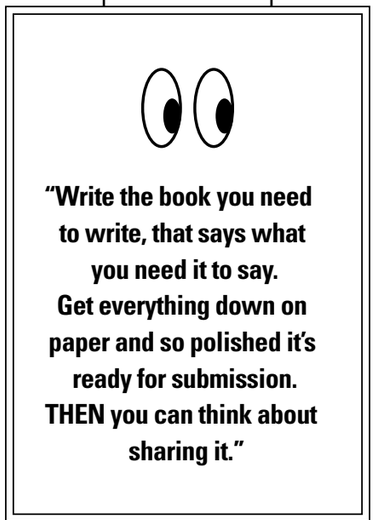
Even Silverman said she advises her students not to think about their audience during the writing process. "I always tell them, don't think about anybody (an agent, your mom, etc.) when you're writing. Write the book you need to write, that says what you need it to say. Get everything down on paper and so polished it's ready for submission. THEN you can think about sharing it." To do otherwise, she says, is to risk someone telling you they don't like how your story is going, or how they are portrayed, or arguing with you about facts. And that will almost certainly alter your story at best or stop the flow of words at worst.

"The more you can shut the world out while you're writing, the better," says Silverman.

There are cases, however, when we owe it to our subjects to *not* shut out the world when we're writing. For the past 27 years, Mark Kennedy has written a column called "Life Stories" for the *Chattanooga Times Free Press*. Writing about "ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances," Kennedy always takes into consideration the reputation of his subjects before going to print.

"In many cases, they are sharing intensely personal stuff," he says. "To them, an interview may feel like a conversation between friends. I try to help them understand that it's more formal than that. I feel an equal weight of responsibility to the reader and to the source… to protect them from over-sharing."

Mary Karr, on the other hand, took a very different approach toward her subjects. The author of several memoirs, including *The Liars' Club, Cherry*, and *Lit*, she once said in an interview that when she wanted to write about her mother's past psychotic break, she first asked her mother how she would feel about it.



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"Hell, go for it," was her mother's response. Karr also checked with her sister before writing about her.

Most writers I have talked to over the years, however, agree with Silverman, that writing with an audience in mind, or seeking out subjects' permission before publishing, can deal a deathblow to the writing. It can interfere with our ability to truly deep-dive into our experiences and put too much pressure on our attempts to craft those experiences into something larger. In short, the clear-eyed detachment necessary for exploration and narrative distance can too easily be compromised when we let our subjects into our writing headspace.

Much personal writing these days, including my own, explores difficult past relationships as a way of understanding present emotional challenges. Like many other personal essayists and memoirists, I've had to defend my right to tell my hard stories. But what about when we believe that what we've written would give someone in our life comfort, someone, perhaps, who gave of themselves on our behalf, whose influence altered the course of our life or even saved it? What could possibly be wrong with firing off a link to your celebratory essay or a notice about your book in which they feature prominently to your celebrant?

It all comes down to expectations, says Silverman.

"If your expectation is to get the positive response I got from Christopher, but you're willing to risk *not* getting that response, then go for it. If you aren't willing to take that risk, don't do it."

Of course, writers, like everyone else, are imperfect humans. We don't always grasp our expectations, even when we think we do, and we have this pesky little thing called ego that isn't easy to keep in check, even when we think we're doing just that. The moment before I hit send on my essay link to Stuart, I was awash in the joy I felt about finally sharing with him the impact he'd had on me. I knew he'd be surprised to find out I'd carried our story with me all these years, and I assumed he'd feel honored that I'd turned that story into art.

After I hit send, however, I was awash in anxiety. Suddenly, I was obsessed with thinking about the moment Stuart would see my message come through. In the fantasy rapidly building in my mind, the memory of our time together would come flooding back to him, and he would read what he'd meant to me with tears of gratitude brimming in his "eyes of ache and longing." I even carried the fantasy forward, into Stuart's unknowable days ahead, when he might tell his friends about the essay, hoot with them about my portrayal of him (again, "muscular heft"), maybe even let them read it. So when his initial response was days of silence, my brain spun off into a vortex of desperation and confusion. This was my first tip-off that I had expectations. That I was not simply celebrating my celebrant but that I needed something back from him.

So what is this drive that makes many otherwise professional writers needy for feedback? Often, a sense of having been ignored in childhood leads to the overpowering desire to be heard as an adult. For many of us, it's why we became writers in the first place. And most writers aren't content to write a book (or an essay or a short story) and stick it in a drawer. For my part, I used to force my husband to read every new paragraph that snaked its way onto a page. But that was many years ago, and these days the most I ask for is a cursory read before assignments get turned in.

But there is another kind of neediness as well, postulates Silverman, one without negative connotations. It is the need to know we are doing some good in the world.

"I still get emails about my books," she says. "People who have never gone through what I've gone through write to tell me they were affected by my story." This is the power of metaphor, she says. "When you write metaphorically, your story becomes universal." And when your story is universal, it has the power to touch – and to potentially transform – a universe of people. There are worse things to need than the power to connect with a world of people in a positive, transformative way.

When at last Stuart wrote and said he had read the essay, and that it meant so much to him to have been remembered so kindly, it was profoundly satisfying. My celebrant had, in fact, felt celebrated. I felt I had fulfilled that need, articulated by Silverman, "to do some good in the world."

It takes years of writing practice to develop the objectivity necessary to write exploratory nonfiction. Even then, we can find ourselves at the mercy of expectations we didn't know we had until we find ourselves caught in their grip. Like trying to bake a cake that neither insults nor outshines, we are always seeking balance, always writing in that space where objectivity and ego coexist. We owe it to our subjects to know our own mind, and to be as clear as possible about why we are writing, for whom, and to what end.

Dana Shavin's essays and articles have appeared in *Oxford American, Psychology Today, The Sun, Bark, Fourth Genre, Parade.com,* and others. She is the author of a memoir, *The Body Tourist*, and she is an award-winning lifestyle columnist for the *Chattanooga Times Free Press*. A complete list of her publications is at danashavin.com.