

Review: "Having the Last Say"

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Are you interested in writing a 500 to 1,000 word personal story? A composition that might serve as a life review: just for yourself? Or that could be shared with family and friends? Or that could even be made available as a eulogy at your own funeral or memorial service?

If so, there is a book for you by author Alan Gelb: *Having the Last Say: Capturing Your Legacy in One Small Story*.

Gelb is a writer and writing coach who is addressing his fellow baby boomers. "I am," he says, "looking toward the future with as much fortitude as I can muster and looking toward the past in order to gain insight into what my life has been about."

Various avenues led to the concept of composing a short story as a "last say." One is to write a story that could become a "legacy letter" (formerly called an ethical will), which is a message to the next generation. Another is a way to start the writing of a longer memoir. Still another is a way for you to have a literal "last say" at your own funeral or memorial service.

Yet another is for the writing of your own life review: an integration of various concerns and questions that you might have. One's own life review, Gelb says, "can take place on paper, in the context of formal group discussions, in conversations with friends and loved ones, or within a person's own head." The advantage of writing it down, Gelb points out, is that "the act of writing can go a long way toward helping people gain greater clarity about their life experiences."

The length is Last Say important. Gelb specifies 500 to 1000 words. This is long enough to be able to express something meaningful, but short enough to be manageable. As well, if spoken out loud, it is a good length – about five minutes. (For reference, this book review is 675 words.)

We should pause here to note that these possible goals can be in conflict with one another. If you write such a life review story, then clearly make your intentions known. Is your finished work to be kept private? Shared with family members and / or friends? Or, made available as a eulogy for your funeral or memorial service?

If one were to write a story, how to get started? "I started thinking about my whole long complicated life," Gelb recounts as he wondered about how to compose his own story. He reflected on "which incidents might lend themselves to being turned into the kind of narratives that would pass along a value, impart some kind of life lesson, or otherwise show something about myself that I would want others to know and remember."

The book has many suggestions that would be helpful for any writer and any writing situation: avoiding procrastinating, developing a narrative through several drafts, and other tips like using metaphors and parts of speech. Gelb brings to the book a lifetime of writing – both fiction and non-fiction. As well, he has worked as a writing coach, especially for high school students writing college

admission essays. He is the author of the book *Conquering the College Admissions Essay in 10 Steps: Crafting a Winning Personal Statement*.

Like the process described in *Writing an Obituary Worth Reading*, *Having the Last Say* is enlivened by the author's helping friends to compose their own narratives, and then including the finished stories in the book. There are 10 actual "last says" of individuals whom Gelb worked with. Most were not experienced writers beforehand.

"Let us not forget the pleasure and even joy that can come out of the act of writing," Gelb concludes. For those whom he has helped write their own stories, Gelb says, "there is something miraculous in the way that a solid narrative structure can lead them to places they could never have imagined they would visit."

"They shock themselves with the power of their expression and the elegance of their phrases."