



KIDLINGTON LIBRARY
Thursday 9th May 2024
5.30pm to 6.30pm

Life Writing — a talk by Local Writer Sylvia Vetta.

Writing Your Memories

Sylvia writes: I'm looking forward to talking at Kidlington Library in the early evening of Thursday 9th May 2024 (5.30pm to 6.30pm) and hopefully to encourage all of you — and persuade some of you — to record your memories or use them to tell stories.

LIFE WRITING — HOW I BEGAN

*“In my book *Oxford Castaways*, I invited interesting people with links to Oxford to take objects or books to ‘Oxtopia’ and tell me about their lives.”*

Memoir doesn't have to start with your birth and include all your life experiences. Writing can be about one aspect of your life that you are passionate about such as a hobby, travelogue or a career.

My first experience of life writing was accidental. I was the art and antiques writer for *The Oxford Times*. I wrote series in *Oxfordshire Limited Edition* and decided to write a 'Castaway' series rather like Desert Island Discs but without the music. I invited interesting people with links to Oxford to take objects or books to 'Oxtopia' and tell me about their lives. The ten-year castaway series was a cross over between biography and

auto-biography. I invited the Castaways, including my fellow founder of the Oxford Indie Book fair, Ray Foulk, to tell me their life stories. Ray went on to write two memoirs. He founded the Isle of Wight Festival. His first book was called *Stealing Dylan from Woodstock*. It's much longer than my memoir and yet it spans only two years in his life!

Castaway is a magic word. Hardly anyone said 'No'. Even Lord Patten of Barnes, the last governor of Hong Kong and Chancellor of Oxford University, let me send him to *Oxtopia*. I tried to engross my castaways in subjects that interested them so I rarely needed to interrupt. I added supplementary questions and sometimes needed to clarify my understanding. For example, Colin Dexter the author of the *Inspector Morse* series, had got to the point in his life where because of increasing deafness he resigned from teaching and took a post at the Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations. He launched into how he went about writing. In this case I apologised and interrupted him saying, 'Colin, have I understood you correctly? You wrote nearly all the Morse books while working full-time at the Delegacy?'

'Yes,' Colin said.

Surprised, I asked, 'But how? How did you do it?'

'Well it was like this. *I came home and had supper cooked by my wife Dorothy, listened to the Archers, and went to the pub for a pint or two. But I'd worked out that there are 365 days in the year and if I wrote a page a day I had written a book.*'

That's brilliant advice for a new writer. I went on to study for the Diploma in Creative Writing at Oxford to give me confidence that I could write fiction. Some fellow students went on to be published but most haven't. Colin had the answer: you have to write and write every day if possible.

You may prefer to do life writing only for yourself and your family but if you are serious about publishing it, my advice is *just do it*. The rebuilt Bodleian Weston Library mounts wonderful exhibitions. Before typewriters and computers authors wrote by hand. Some work displayed in their exhibitions was so crossed out and overwritten as to be almost illegible.

Technology has made life easier. I get my ideas down on my computer screen and I don't worry if it isn't well written. A day or so later I read it out loud and sigh. I notice the repetitions and the sentences which would work better in a different place, identify what

needs cutting and much more. That is when I set about improving it. Some writers are geniuses and can get it right first time. I'm not that. I write and rewrite many times.

My novel *Sculpting the Elephant*, set in Oxford and India, was informed by my own life experiences but it is not about me. Drawing on your experiences can give authenticity to your book. I wrote the novel *Not so Black and White* with the founder of the Nasio Trust, Nancy Mudenyo Hunt. It's not her biography, but is inspired by her life experiences.

If you have a story to tell drawing on your own life experiences, then I look forward to speaking with you at my talk due in May 2024 at Kidlington Library. In the meantime, if you would like to make contact with me, or to read more about my books, then please visit my website at:

<https://www.sylviavetta.co.uk>

Sylvia Vetta

APRIL 2024