

# BOOK MARKETING MENTORS

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## BOOK MARKETING: How to Use Personal Stories to Help Connect with Your Target Audience Interview with Melanie Brooks

Susan Friedmann: Welcome to Book Marketing Mentors the weekly podcast where you learn proven strategies, tools, ideas and tips from the masters. Every week, I introduce you to a marketing master who will share their expertise to help you market and sell more books.

Today, my special guest is a lover of words and playing with words on the page, Melanie Brooks, a freelance writer and college professor living in Nashua, New Hampshire with her husband, two children and a yellow lab. She's the author of *Writing Hard Stories: Celebrated Memoirists Who Shaped Art from Trauma*. She teaches college writing at Northeastern University in Boston Massachusetts and Merrimack College in Andover, Mass. She also teaches creative writing at Nashua Community College in New Hampshire. Her recent work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *Bustle*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *The Huffington Post*, *Solstice Literary Magazine*, *Modern Loss* and many other literary publications.

Unpacking experiences of life and loss is at the core of Melanie's writing. Her almost completed memoir explores the devastating impact of living with a 10-year secret of her father's HIV disease before his death in 1995. Her writing is the vehicle through which she's starting to understand that impact. Melanie, welcome and thank you for being this week's guest expert and mentor.

Melanie Brooks: Thank you, Susan, for having me.

Susan Friedmann: As you said earlier as we were discussing, you're not my typical mentor, but I love it because I know that our listeners can learn so much from your style of writing and what you bring to the world. What does it take to write an honest memoir? Let's start with that.

Melanie Brooks: Well, I think it takes the willingness to look at our stories honestly, which is a hard thing to do. That's why the title of my memoir is *Writing Hard Stories* and it should have a secondary title that says *Writing Hard*

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Stories is Very Hard Work because I think one of the things, when it comes to memoir writing and the kind of memoir that other people are going to connect to is they want to see a level of honesty and authenticity from the writer. It takes a lot of emotional soul searching and deep diving into our memories and our experiences in order for us to reach that place of authenticity and really discover what the authentic story is behind our experiences.

Susan Friedmann: If we decided to embark on this kind of a journey, what can we expect to happen to us in terms of our feelings? What goes on when you go through writing about a traumatic event?

Melanie Brooks: Well, I'll say that that is primarily the impetus behind writing hard stories, is that I had no idea what to expect. When I actually started diving into my own personal story, I was completely sideswiped by the emotional impact that it had on me. In many ways when we're writing about traumatic experiences, there's a sense of being retraumatized. There is a sense of finding ourselves in kind of some dark emotional spaces. Because I didn't anticipate that that's what would happen, I found myself very paralyzed by the experience and wasn't sure that it was normal, that I was actually going through that.

I wanted to talk to these other writers who had all written through their hard stories and basically find out that I wasn't alone, find out that my experience was connected to their experience, that I was experiencing something similar that they had experienced. It was very comforting to me in the process to find out that, yes, sitting in front of your computer and crying about the memories is a normal thing to have happened. Finding yourself feeling like it's too much is a normal thing to happen. The fears and insecurities that come up when you start revealing yourself on the page, all of those fears and insecurities were normal. That, for me, was very encouraging.

Susan Friedmann: In other words, you become your own therapist.

Melanie Brooks: You sort of do, in a way. I let all of these people in the sense become my therapists. The more people that I talked to who were saying, "Yes, this is normal. This is okay. This is expected," I found with each person who told me that I felt a little bit stronger. I felt a little bit more like, yes, I can do this then.

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- Susan Friedmann: There's one thing about writing a personal story, tragedy, a loss, but there's a whole different thing when you're going to share that with the rest of the world. Could you comment on that, please?
- Melanie Brooks: Absolutely. I often talk to my students and I talk to other writers who are deciding to venture into telling their stories, that I think that you have to separate the two things in terms of the writing of the story and then the decision to publish the story. If you're writing with the idea that people are going to read this or people are going to see this, then automatically, I think you are setting yourself up to be less than honest on the page.
- I think when you enter into the writing process, you just have to start with, "I'm doing this because I need to do this," but then when you move into the publication process, then there are different factors that come into play. What I want to urge your listeners if they're thinking about writing their stories is try not to think too far ahead beyond the page of what's going to happen with that story and tell you're at a place where you feel like you've told the story as honestly as you can.
- Susan Friedmann: If I'm hearing you correctly, what you'll actually start with is just writing the story for yourself, maybe almost like a journal entry and you write it out, get it all out there on the page and then you start massaging it. Is that correct?
- Melanie Brooks: It is. I don't want to say that all of this writing begins almost in journal or diary form because I don't think that it does. Many people begin certainly wanting to shape and create art on the page in terms of their language but I do think that we begin to write a story, what pulls us to write personal stories is that there is something about that story that we're trying to discover, that we're trying to understand, something about that experience that we're looking to piece together. I think we have to do that for ourselves first before we can take that and shape it into something that other people are going to connect to.
- Susan Friedmann: What about the motivation for your personal story now that you are almost complete with, the one about your dad? What was your motivation for writing that story?
- Melanie Brooks: I think initially, it was because it was a story that wouldn't shut up in my head in a way. It wouldn't let me be. I denied that for quite a long time and told myself that story is behind me, and that experience is behind me. There's nothing else I need to say about it except what I started to

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understand was, I don't think I'd ever really look at that experience closely and there was a lot in that experience that was impacting my life at the time that I decided to start writing about it. I started to realize I need to do something with this. I need to take this story out of me in a sense and look at it and then figure out how do I reintegrate it into my life in some way so that it's not quite as heavy a burden. That was my initial motivation.

To be honest, I think, part of my initial motivation was thinking that if I were to write about it, then it would disappear. I'd be able to let it go. What I've discovered in the writing process is that's not what it's about at all. It's about taking it and learning to carry it in a different way.

Susan Friedmann: Yes. Certainly, if you're going to publish this for the world to read, it's not going to go away in a hurry. That's for sure.

Melanie Brooks: Exactly.

Susan Friedmann: Then, how do you see what you're writing to help other people since you are going to be publishing this?

Melanie Brooks: Well, I do think that at some point, when we're writing memoir, we move the story from this personal lens on our experience to understanding that there is something in our experience in a way that we are shaping our experience for other people. That's the whole reason, I think, that we move into the publishing realm. I would venture to say that most memoirists would not say that they publish their memoirs just because they wanted to and they wanted everybody to know their stories. I think what most of them felt was that there was something that they had learned in examining their story that might open space for other people with other stories and bring them together in some way.

In a sense, we start recognizing that there are readers out there who might benefit from the insights we've gained through our experiences and we hope that those readers through reading our stories will find something meaningful in their own stories.

Susan Friedmann: Let's take this into, let's say, the business world because so many of our listeners have written nonfiction business books, let's say on leadership or sales. Let's say you were speaking to a business community, how do you feel your stories or your personal stories can help your audience?

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Melanie Brooks:

I would say that we did talk about it earlier that I'm not your typical expert in terms of ... I'm not necessarily a marketing guru, but I do feel like I've come to a place where I understand how to connect to other people. I think that the human species as a whole were searching for connection. I believe that's why social media platforms and all of the marketing tools that are out there are there because people are looking for means to connect. I will say that I truly believe that when we share something about ourselves in an honest and authentic way, that does create that connection. It's like we're reaching across the aisle and saying, "Come and join me here in my space and bring something of yourself with you."

I think if we're business leaders then that's exactly what we want. We don't want to be separated from the people that we're trying to lead or the people that we're trying to impact. We want there to be a sense of connection. That's what I would market to those particular audiences and say, "Look, you want people to connect to you. The way that they're going to connect to you is if you're willing to give them pieces of yourself in that process."

Susan Friedmann:

I'm very involved with the National Speakers Association and one thing that was told to me many years ago was if you're going to tell a personal story from the stage, that you don't use that as a therapy platform and that you've dealt with your real grief beforehand so that you're not standing in front of everybody with floods of tears. Yes, you've got the emotion and maybe a couple of tears may form but you've got it under control. Can you comment on that in terms of your own experience talking about your tragedy and loss?

Melanie Brooks:

I can. Since I've published *Writing Hard Stories*, because so much of my own personal narrative is at the core of the journey to talk to these writers, inevitably when I stand in front of audiences, they're asking me about my personal story as well. Had I tried to talk about that story before I had tried to shape it, before I had come to a place where I really understand it and I had taken some sense of control of it, I don't think I would have been able to be effective in the way I spoke about it because there probably would be a lot of crying from the stage. There would be a lot of unresolved emotion.

I don't mean to say that there aren't going to be moments when anybody shares anything personal where they're unexpectedly overcome by the emotion of that experience and I think if people recognize that it's an authentic moment of emotion, I don't think that

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they're going to be uncomfortable in that. As long as they feel like you're not looking to them for support necessarily or for some kind of therapeutic practice.

On the other hand, I do think that it is important for us to be able to have come to a place of understanding what it is in our story that we want other people to recognize or share in before we can stand up and talk about that in a way that's going to be effective for our audience. I do think it's really important when you've come to that place of being a speaker that you're not saying to yourself, "All right, this is all about me. This is what I want to share. I need to do this. I want to do this." Rather, we're saying, "What does my audience need from me? What are they looking for from me?" In a sense, when we're thinking about our stories, when we come to that place of putting them out into the world, we're asking ourselves, what is my story going to do once it leaves me and enters the world?

Susan Friedmann: I grew up in England and the British are more reserved than the Americans.

Melanie Brooks: I grew up in Canada so we have some of that background as well.

Susan Friedmann: There you go. You understand the fact that it doesn't come naturally to share personal stuff. In fact, it was frowned upon. You just didn't do it. Here in the States, we're very open. We're much more open than I was used to and obviously, coming from Canada, you've experienced some of the same because there's a lot of British influence over there. How do you go from being reserved and not self-disclosing in any way to having the courage to self-disclose?

Melanie Brooks: Well, I think that it comes with time. One of the things I do want to emphasize, Susan, is that I am not saying that everybody is equipped to perhaps put their stories out there publicly, or to share deep personal things about themselves in a public setting. I don't think that everybody is equipped to do that or necessarily needs to do that. If it's something that you do desire, if you want people to relate to you on a closer level, then I do think that part of finding that courage is when you start to see the results of it, when you start having people come up to you and say, "Your story made me think of a time when this happened to me," and then they shared their story with you. There's something that's so incredibly rewarding in that to find that you, by sharing something ... I keep saying that opening in the space, but you do. You open space for

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others to enter in. I think the more you do it, the more courageous you become.

Susan Friedmann: That's so true because that happened to me and the first time I self-disclosed with a story of mine, I was overwhelmed with the response that people came up to me afterwards and like you said, "They shared their story and they had somebody who they connected with and that word connection that you used earlier that we want that connection, that engagement is there using the buzz word at the moment. That's so important.

Melanie Brooks: What's interesting, I would say also, Susan, is we talked about American culture as being very opened but there are still areas that we back away from. We still have these boundaries and these rules that we set up of we only want you to talk about certain things about yourself. Those things kind of suck the breath out of a room, so we don't want that. On the other hand, I think that when people start sharing particularly traumatic stories or stories of grief and loss more authentically, I think we're kind of challenging that cultural perspective that these are things that we should keep under cover. I think we're making for a healthier society when we do that.

Susan Friedmann: The other thing that struck me too is that I often said early on, "I don't have any stories," and a speaker came back to me and said, "Of course, you've got stories. You're living your life. You've got stories." It's realizing that I was equating stories to something traumatic, something [crosstalk 00:17:26] that you've lost a limb or like you said, somebody who died or it's realizing that even your little stories can have meaning to other people.

Melanie Brooks: Well, right. I often tell audiences when I talk to them, obviously, writing hard stories is specifically about people who have written memoirs about trauma. However, you don't have to have necessarily endured some great trauma to tell a good story. We inevitably are all fascinating in our own realms in terms of what we're doing in the experiences that we have and the lens that we bring to those experiences is what fascinates people, the way we think about them, the way we interpret them, the way we create some kind of relational connection. Those are the ways that people are going to connect. It doesn't have to be necessarily that you've endured some great trauma if you're going to be able to connect to people, because ultimately, it's that you are sharing something of yourself in a way that other people can relate.

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- Susan Friedmann: It is that relationship, excellent. You're sharing such great information and I'm sure our listeners would want to know how to get hold of you, how can they?
- Melanie Brooks: They can go to my website at melaniebrooks.com and there's a way that they can contact me through my website. They can also follow me on Facebook or they can follow me on Twitter and my Twitter handle is @melaniejmbrooks.
- Susan Friedmann: If you were to leave our listeners with a golden nugget, Melanie, what would that be?
- Melanie Brooks: I think I would go back to that idea that we as human beings are looking for connection. We're looking for a way to relate to one another and the more we can find ways to do it authentically in a world that has created these false scenarios of relation that don't necessarily seem as authentic, the more we can find ways that are authentic and honest and people are actually really connecting versus just pseudo-connecting. I think we create better people. We create a better space for people to be a part of and that ultimately, we're finding ways for ourselves to benefit from it and for other people to benefit from it.
- Susan Friedmann: Fantastic. Thank you so much for sharing your wisdom. Listeners, if you want to take your author marketing to the next level of success, make sure that you go to [bookmarketingmentors.com](http://bookmarketingmentors.com) and sign up for a 15-minute complimentary coaching session with me Susan Friedmann and most of all, thank you for taking time out of your precious day to listen to this interview and I sincerely hope that it sparked some ideas you can use to sell more books. Here's wishing you much book marketing success.