

SAY IT ALL IN SIX WORDS

by Lizzie Widdicombe

The New Yorker, February 25, 2008

Brevity: a good thing in writing. Exploited by texters, gossip columnists, haikuists. Not associated with the biography genre. But then—why shouldn't it be? Life expectancies rise; attention spans shrink. Six words can tell a story. That's a new book's premise, anyway. "Not Quite What I Was Planning." A compilation of teeny tiny memoirs. The forebear, it's assumed, is Hemingway. (Legend: he wrote a miniature masterpiece. "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." Slightly sappy, but a decent sixer.)

The book's originator: *SMITH* online magazine. It started as a reader contest: Your life story in six words. The magazine was flooded with entries. Five hundred-plus submissions per day. That's two, three words a minute. "We almost crashed," an editor said. Memoirs from plumbers and a dominatrix ("Fix a toilet, get paid crap"; "Woman Seeks Men—High Pain Threshold"). The editors have culled the best. And, happily, spliced in celebrity autobiographies: "Canada freezing. Gotham beckons. Hello, Si!" "Well, I thought it was funny." "Couldn't cope so I wrote songs." (Graydon Carter, Stephen Colbert, Aimee Mann.) Mario Batali makes a memorable appearance: "Brought it to a boil, often." So does Jimmy Wales, of Wikipedia: "Yes, you can edit this biography." Still, there are not nearly enough. Where's Eli Manning, and Katie Couric? ("Little brother; big game; last laugh"? "Morning girl goes serious at night"?) And what of the Presidential candidates? ("From Ill.; met Bill; iron will.") Something from Obama would be nice: "Hope is stronger than dope, kids!" A Canadian minister has done Jesus: "God called; Mother listened; I responded." Quieter lives can be condensed, too. The editors offer a few guidelines. "Try not to think too hard." That's from *SMITH*'s editor, Larry Smith. It's impossible, of course, to follow. There's the temptation to be ironic: "Born in California. Then nothing happened." Or to blurt out something angry: "Everyone who loved me is dead." "Try to use specifics," Smith added. ("After Harvard, had baby with crackhead.") That doesn't rule out dazzling nonsense. "Eat mutate aura amateur auteur true" (Jonathan Lethem's nesting-doll-like memoir). Wistful recollections work; so does repetition: "Canoe guide, only got lost once." "Birth, childhood, adolescence, adolescence, adolescence, adolescence . . ." You could spend a lifetime brainstorming.

The book party: Housing Works, downtown. Cookies and beer on a table. Sticky notes and markers up front: "Write your memoir on your nametag!" In back, Alex Cummings, twenty-six ("Arab hillbilly goes to New York"). He's Egyptian, born in West Virginia. He'd come with his wife, Saira. She did not wear a nametag: "It's hard to summarize your life." Nearby was the author Maryrose Wood ("Divorced! Thank God for Internet personals"). She reminisced about a Sondheim show. She had been a chorus girl. She sang a lyric about divorces. "My career has come full circle." Next, Justin Taylor—reddish hair, beard ("Former child star seeks love, employment"). A onetime child model in Miami. He'd posed for German fashion magazines. "You wouldn't know, looking at me." The writer David Rakoff was there. He wasn't wearing a nametag, either. "I'm not really a nametag guy." He said he liked his memoir: "Love New York; Hate Self (Equally)." It was similar to his books. "The same sort of glib persona." Julie Goss had driven from D.C. ("Inside suburban mom beats urban heart"). She was talking to Anthony Ramirez—a Metro reporter at the *Times*. He had submitted a memoir, too. The *SMITH* editors hadn't used it. Ramirez said his feelings were hurt: "I desperately wanted to get in." There was Summer Grimes, twenty-five. She's a hairdresser in St. Paul. She had written the book's title. It took "two minutes," she explained. She had forgotten all about it. Then *SMITH* sent her an e-mail: "Your contest entry has been chosen." She thought it was a scam. Then she saw the book—Amazon. She answered the next *SMITH* e-mail. They told her about the party. They sent a free book, too. Grimes opened it to her memoir: "Not quite what I was planning..." She wasn't sure about the ellipsis: "Now I'm totally second-guessing myself."