

IDENTIFYING THEMES

in Your Memoir

WHAT IS A THEME?

Themes exist in every piece of fiction whether an author knows it or not. But what *is* a theme and how do you identify it?

In a nutshell, a theme is a pervading idea that taps into the shared human experience. It conveys a fundamental truth or an experience relatable to all of us because it is a truth about human nature.

THEMES IN WRITING

Fiction, whether long or short form, usually has a guiding theme, and often more than one. Usually more than one!

The same is true for memoirs. In every traditionally published memoir, the stories center around a theme. That theme (or those themes) may be explicit or implicit.

One of your goals as a memoirist is to hone in on your central theme (and/or themes). What is the thread that ties your stories together? Is this theme going to be understood without you having to say it explicitly? If so, how do you imagine implying it so readers get what your message is?

Some of this will come naturally because the major themes of your stories are probably the driving force behind them. The trick is to strike a balance between preaching your message and being too obscure with it.

LIFE LESSONS

The themes in memoirs act as glue, binding your stories together and creating cohesiveness.

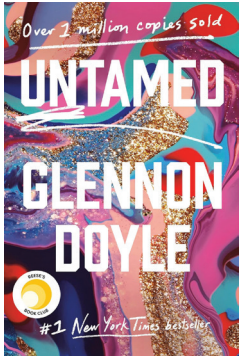
Additionally, the memoirist often (hopefully) has had personal growth they've undergone—a life lesson learned. Just as in fiction, we want to see that the hero—and in a memoir, that hero is you—has changed. They have life lessons they've learned and are imparting through their stories. That life lesson is essentially a takeaway offered to the reader. "Learn from my experience," the author is saying.



THEMES

from Published Memoirs

HERE ARE A FEW EXAMPLES OF THEMES IN PUBLISHED MEMOIRS:



Glennon Doyle: In the first chapter of *Untamed*, she identifies the theme of her book:

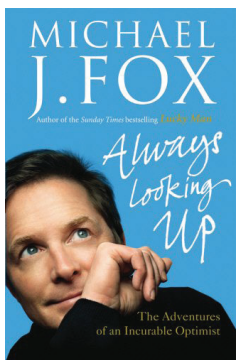
“Ten is when the world sat me down, told me to be quiet, and pointed toward my cages:

*These are the feelings you are allowed to express.
This is how a woman should act.
This is the body you must strive for.
These are the things you will believe in.
These are the people you can love.
Those are the people you should fear.
This is the kind of life you are supposed to want.”*

She begins with a prologue telling about seeing a confined cheetah at the zoo and how the animal was caged.

The title of her book is *Untamed*, completing the metaphor she begins with by implying that she will not be caged—or tamed.

THEME: *Be free to be who you are and make your own choices.*



In **Michael J. Fox's**, *Always Looking Up*, he's very explicit about the theme of his book. He says,

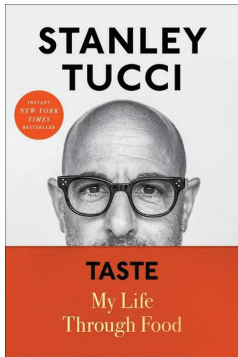
“I've made the most of the head start one gains from being underestimated. And that's more to the point of it—Always Looking Up alludes to an emotional, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual outlook that has served me throughout my life and, perhaps, that I don't feel the aching pain of loss.”

At the conclusion of the prologue he explains the structure of the book:

“... it is thematic rather than chronological. Work, Politics, Faith, and Family. These are the struts of my existence. These are the critical supports of my life... The story is a testament to the consolations that get me through and find meanings to every area of my life.”

THEME: *How being optimistic and looking at the positive side of things can help you redefine the challenges and get you through.*

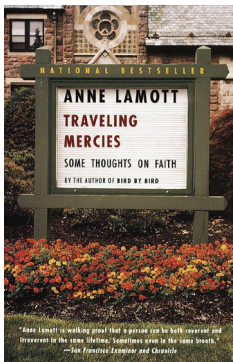




Stanley Tucci's memoir, *Taste: My Life Through Food*, gives the theme overtly in the title. In chapter one, though, he expands on the importance of food in his life:

"It should be obvious by now that when I was young, my mother spent most of her waking time in the kitchen, and she still does to this day. Cooking for her is at once a creative outlet and a way of feeding her family well. Her cooking, like that of any great cook or chef, is proof that culinary creativity may be the most perfect art form. It allows for free personal expressions like painting, musical composition, or writing, and yet fulfills a most practical need: the need to eat. Edible art. What could be better?"

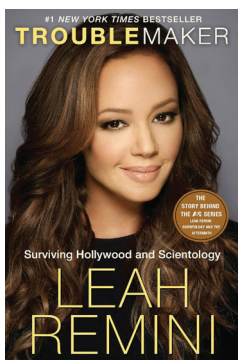
THEME: *How the preparation and eating of food nourish the body and soul.*



Anne Lamott's *Traveling Mercies* is a memoir about Anne finding and learning to believe in herself, told through the unfurling of her faith. At the end of the first part, she puts the importance of faith succinctly:

"And that is why I have stayed so close to mine—because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their tawny voices, I can always find my way home."

THEME: *How faith helped her understand herself, which is a metaphor for home.*



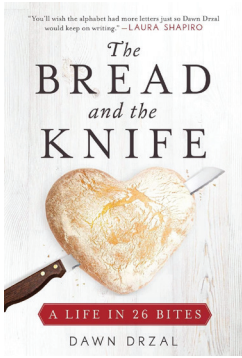
Leah Remini is honest and real in her memoir, *Troublemaker*. She dedicates the book to her fellow "nonconformists," i.e., Troublemakers. The book is about her journey with Scientology. In chapter one she says,

"I understood that Scientology was about following the precepts, laid down in the policy by the leader, L. Ron Hubbard. If you did that, your life would be good. But if you committed overt transgressions, and didn't talk about them, didn't take Scientology courses and auditing, then you would receive something bad back from the universe. And the only way to really do things right for yourself, and the universe, was to stay connected to the church."

She starts out believing it was "us" against "them."
By the end of the book, "it's her against them."

THEME: *Be honest with yourself, even if it means you're a troublemaker.*





The final example looking at theme is from *The Bread and the Knife* by Dawn Drzal. She works her way through the alphabet, connecting each letter to a food and that time in her life. In her Author's Notes she says,

"... food is the metaphor shaping how I view the world and what (or even whether) I remember.... you can see why the gastronomical story of my life is the only one at my disposal."

THEME: *Food and its impact on memory and life.*

As you read memoirs by others, pay attention to the themes the memoirists embed into their stories. Pay attention to the life lessons, as well, because that is what you want readers to take away from reading your stories.

Matthew McConaughey's *Greenlights* is ALL about life lessons. That's what the term "Greenlights" refers to. Those are the instances when he had an opportunity and he chose to take it. So one of the pervading themes is: Say YES to opportunities, The life lessons are what he took away from each of the opportunities he embraced.



Remember, a theme is a theme because it taps into a shared experience and our human nature.

As you write the stories that make up your life and your memoir, you will begin to see some common themes emerge, and you will also begin to put names to some of the life lessons you have acquired through the years.

THEME EXAMPLES

There are so many possible themes. Here are just a few to get you thinking:

- Good vs. evil
- Finding true love
- Losing love
- The pain of war
- Coming of age
- The power of redemption
- A faith-driven life
- Fighting for freedom
(from any number of things)
- Coping with death

