

Grab the Lapels

"Life's a bitch. You've got to go out and kick ass." –Maya Angelou

Meet the Writer: Susan Hodara

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[\(http://www.susanhodara.com/\)](http://www.susanhodara.com/)

It was a pleasure talking to Susan, and I want to thank her for taking the time to answer my questions! Please check out her website and her new book, co-authored with three other women, by clicking on the images below.



On your website, the pieces you have included in anthologies and literary journals seem to follow a theme: children, girls, mothers. Can you tell me a bit about where you get your ideas for stories?

I work in two genres: memoir and journalism. My memoir writing is sparked by either vivid memories of my past or poignant present-day experiences that are deeply moving to me for one reason or another. In the case of memories, they are usually isolated images or short scenes that become the starting point for a piece that seeks to understand why that particular event has stayed with me. In the case of current occurrences, they are situations that I recognize as somehow transformative, even as they are happening.

How might your work in journalism influence your memoir, or vice versa?

As a journalist, I am as concise, clear, and accurate as possible. Writing memoir is in some ways very different because memory is subjective and often sketchy, with lots of missing pieces. However, the

act of translating what I remember about what I experienced and how I felt parallels journalism in that my goal is, again, to find just the right words to say what I want to convey as concisely, clearly, and accurately as possible.

I see you teach memoir writing workshops. What are some of your goals during those workshops?

My workshops provide an arena where people who want to write their stories can share their work and get feedback from the others — something that is hard to come by because writing by nature is a solitary venture. So first, I try to create a sense of community.

Second, I help writers who have run into the inevitable obstacle and lost track of how to continue, or sometimes how to start. Often just having a deadline and a place to show up is enough to get people unstuck.

Third, I insist on the truth. There are writers who feel that their true stories are too boring or banal and need ‘sprucing up’ with fictional elements. In my workshops I explain that the essence of memoir is the truth of personal experience, and that in the truth lies universality. One of the most rewarding parts of teaching is to witness again and again how one person’s story resonates around the table.

Does your work as an editor influence what you try accomplish with participants during these memoir workshops?

Yes, in fact sometimes as I’m listening to participants read their writing, I’m editing in my head. The goal of editing is to find the best way to communicate the message, and that is also the primary goal in my workshop: to help people communicate in the best way what they want to say. Which, as writers know, is a lot easier said than done!

(<http://www.stillherethinkingofyou.com/>.) **What would you like readers to know about the new book, *Still Here Thinking of You: A Second Chance With Our Mothers*?**

Still Here Thinking of You: A Second Chance With Our Mothers (Big Table Publishing, 2013) is a collaborative memoir written by me and my three co-authors, Vicki Addesso, Joan Potter, and Lori Toppel. It's about our relationships with our mothers; we each have a section, and in each section, the relationship evolves from our early childhood through our mothers' later years. Each story is different, and many readers have told us how much they could relate to one or another of them.

The four of us met in a memoir workshop that Joan taught. We formed a writing group in 2006 and wrote the book over the course of many weekly meetings. We are still meeting today. To have other writers whom you trust and with whom you can share your work is invaluable.

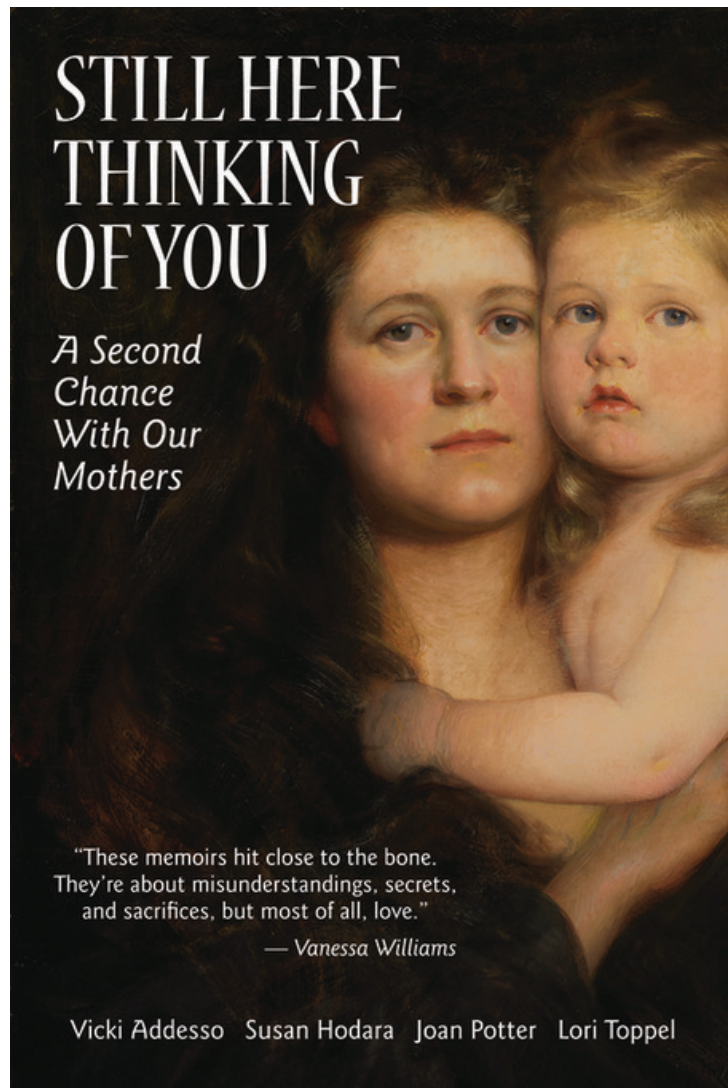
What happens at that writing group meetings? What are they like?

Here's what it's like: we gather around my dining room table. We may chat about our lives briefly, but we soon get to our writing. We go around the table, each one reading aloud what she is working on and the others responding with suggestions and questions.

When we were writing "*Still Here Thinking of You*," we were all working on our individual chapters about our mothers. Now we are each working on different things: Joan and I have been writing more short memoir pieces; Vicki has been revisiting older stories that she wants to revise; Lori is working on a novel.

When we discuss one another's writing, I think I speak for all of us when I say that we truly listen to what the others think. Sometimes we don't agree: one person likes the pacing, another doesn't; one person didn't understand a particular scene; another thought it was perfectly clear. Ultimately it's up to the writer. But we each value what the others have to say.

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