



READING GROUP GUIDE

Writing Out Loud: What a Blind Teacher Learned from Leading a Memoir Class for Seniors by Beth Finke

Introduction to the Book

She's never taught a class in her life. But when the City of Chicago calls on blind writer Beth Finke to teach a memoir-writing class for older adults, she reluctantly agrees. What she learns about her students, their stories, and herself will move and inspire you.

Written the way Beth hears life, you will come to know and love Minerva, Wanda, Hannelore, and the whole colorful cast of characters who build a community around Beth's classes.

Generously sprinkled with excerpts in her students' own voices, Beth's book will convince readers to get their own stories down on paper while there's still time.

Writing Out Loud includes senior writers' first-person accounts of a railroad trip to Mississippi in the "Jim Crow" car, a mother-in-law hiding from the Nazis in a Viennese wood, and gang mischief in 1940s Chicago, along with Beth's own adventures getting around the city with her Seeing Eye dog.

If you've ever felt frightened by what life asks of you, if you've ever had to find your way in the dark, if you are over the age of 60 or love someone who is, this book is for you.

Books you'll want to read, written by people you'll want to meet.

goldenalleypress.com/writing-out-loud

Discussion Questions

1. As with any great story, the growth of the protagonist is one of the most interesting aspects of *Writing Out Loud*. Contrast Beth's demeanor in the early chapters with her behavior in chapter 84, "Your Dog is Too Skinny." What evidence of growth do you see? How does this relate to Beth's statement in the Preface that "living blind is a lot different from becoming blind?" (p.xi)
2. In chapter 4, when Sylvia reads an inappropriately long essay, Beth describes her own internal conflict about whether or not she should intervene. Could you relate to Beth's conflict? How do you evaluate her handling of the situation? How did Beth later capitalize on this opportunity for growth?
3. Alice follows up her harrowing story on page 30 with the statement, "Otherwise I probably would have never written about that." There are many other instances in the book of writers sharing something they wouldn't have remembered or shared without Beth's prompting. Why do you think Beth's methods and the class setting are so effective at bringing memories to light?
4. In Beth's essay "Group Home," (p.56) she shares an NPR essay about her son, Gus. Was this an effective way of giving backstory? Did the content of the essay change your impression of Beth? Why or why not?
5. By page 63, the writers are already showing signs of forming community. Why has this happened? What other evidences of it do you see as the book progresses?
6. When Minerva tells her friend Wanda about the memoir class, she never mentions that Beth is blind; Wanda doesn't discover that fact until she meets Beth in person on p.84. What does that tell you about Minerva, about Beth, and about the class?
7. Minerva's essay on p.117, "Protest," gives us a window into what it's like to be a senior using public transportation in the city. What else can we learn from Minerva's experience?
8. In chapter 32, "On the Air with Hannelore and Wanda," two very different Depression-era essays are printed side-by-side. Compare and contrast the two women's sense of relative wealth or poverty and how it affected their outlook on life.
9. There is a moment in chapter 36, "The Turn of the Key," which makes Beth's blindness frighteningly concrete. Have you experienced a similar moment? How did you react to Ron smiling when he found out that his play had made Beth more susceptible to fear?

10. Beth seems very determined to care for her mother in chapter 43, "94 and Counting." Yet there is a moment on p.176-177 when she finds herself wondering if she is in over her head. Why is Beth so determined? How does her birth order affect her thinking? Have you found yourself in a similar situation?
11. We meet Beth's grand-niece Floey on page 231. What is the significance of the role Floey plays in Beth's book?
12. It's easy to see that being part of a large family has had a profound effect on Beth's life and the choices she has made. How have family dynamics affected you? Do you have self-awareness of them and the part they play in your own decision making?
13. Hanni, Harper, and Whitney, Beth's Seeing Eye dogs, play a major role in *Writing Out Loud*. How did you react to their stories, and the cycle of attachment and loss that they bring into Beth's life?
14. List some of the effects that both writing and listening to each other's stories week after week have on Beth and her writers. Does your book club enjoy forming some of the same types of bonds?
15. Whenever Beth visits schools, the children have remarkable questions. Some of them are funny ("Did that dog write the book by itself or did you help the dog type it into the computer?") and some are poignant ("How can that dog keep you safe?"). What are your favorites? What can we learn from the children's questions?
16. The story of Doretha's early life (p.296-301) is astounding. Audrey's simple gift of friendship and encouragement brings Doretha out of her shell and connects her with the rest of the class. How does this affect the end of Doretha's life? What do you sense about the dynamic of the downtown class that encourages friendships like this to form?
17. In chapter 76, "Grace Place II," Beth shares her experience with the Center for Life and Learning class, warts and all. Why do you think she decided to include this episode? What part does it play in the overall story arc?
18. Mike and Beth have been married over 30 years. Reading between the lines, what do we learn about how her blindness affects their marriage in chapter 78, "Mike & Gus – The Sequel?"
19. The events in the epilogue happened just weeks before *Writing Out Loud* went to press. How did you react to them? Do you think it was a good idea to add an epilogue to the end of the book? Why or why not?

20. The back cover of *Writing Out Loud* refers to it being “written the way Beth hears life.” There are few, if any, visual cues in the entire book. Did you notice that as you were reading? If so, did the absence of visual cues or pictures impair your ability to form vivid mental pictures of the characters and events? Was the author successful in “writing out loud?” Why or why not?

Enhancing Your Book Club

1. To see an interview with Beth and get additional insight into how she navigates life, watch this 7-minute YouTube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FiWKuV0svI>
2. Consider asking each member of your book club to write a paragraph or short story on one of the prompts that Beth assigns, such as “1968.” Read your stories aloud to each other. Some writers may want to turn them into full-fledged essays.
3. Use *Writing Out Loud* as a starting point to discuss the subjects of accessibility, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and our attitudes toward people with disabilities. What can we learn from Beth’s story?
4. The essays written by Beth’s students often open new avenues of communication between generations. Consider how that could benefit you, your parents, or your children. Discuss ways to add this dimension to your family relationships.
5. It’s not always easy to adapt a memoir to the big screen, but here are some of our favorites:

Angela’s Ashes, based on [Angela’s Ashes](#), by Frank McCourt

The Pianist, based on [The Pianist: The Extraordinary True Story of One Man’s Survival in Warsaw, 1939-1945](#), by Wladyslaw Szpilman

Born on the Fourth of July, based on [Born on the Fourth of July](#) by Ron Kovic

My Left Foot, based on [My Left Foot](#) by Christy Brown

The Miracle Worker, based on [The Story of My Life](#) by Hellen Keller

October Sky, based on [Rocket Boys](#) by Homer Hickam

Author Q & A

A Conversation with Beth Finke

1. So you've joined the two-memoir club. Do we sense a touch of self-consciousness about that in your preface, or are you over that now that the book has come out?

I am not over it – I'm still very self-conscious about it. I almost hate to say it's a memoir. Originally it was going to be stories about the writers in my classes, how the classes went each week, followed by a "now it's your turn" prompt, then a sample essay.

When I sent it to someone with publishing expertise for his advice, he told me there are enough books on the market about how to write a memoir. What's interesting about this book is that you're blind, and you're leading the class. Since he was objective, I took his advice seriously. I decided that's what I needed to write.

2. There are only four pictures in the book, and three of them are of your family. Why so few pictures?

I've been saving pictures of my classes for years, so we had plenty of photos to send to my publisher. But then, as we were going through the editing of the manuscript, there's a point where I give one of my writers, Minerva, a hug. That's the first time I'm learning a little bit about what she looks like. My editor and I thought about that moment, and wondered if maybe we should not use a lot of photos in the book, so people can imagine what the writers look like, just like I do. It's almost like a little experiment, an effort to get readers to think like a blind person.

I really admire all the writers, I think of them as beautiful people. So part of me wanted to have their pictures in the book. I had to think hard about what would be lost by leaving their pictures out.

But as I answer this question, the book has been out about a month, and very few people have mentioned to me that there weren't any photos of the writers. So I guess we're getting away with it.

3. Your mother, Flo, is a major character in *Writing Out Loud*. You obviously loved her very much. When you wrote about her death, what was it like, returning to those years and writing about them? In a way, that is what you ask your writers to do every week. Did it increase your empathy for them?

I was working on the book already when Flo died. So I was writing about her in real time. I wrote about her death in real time, too, but I didn't want to dig deep then. I just reported the information. I'm in a writers group, and when we got to that part of the manuscript, my writers

group said I had to tell people how I felt. So my group and my editor finally convinced me to do it. It was difficult, but important, and I'm glad I did it. It was important to honor Flo and her life, to have me be sincere about her death. Flo was over 90 years old, and we are very, very grateful that she lived a long time, but since we had a longer time with her, she left quite a vacuum.

My editor felt bad asking me to relive the experience again so I could write about it, but she made a point of giving me just a week to finish that part. Having a deadline to meet helped, I couldn't linger on it. I just had to get it done. Maybe that's how my writers feel about their weekly deadlines, too.

It was difficult to write about Flo's death, but now it's not painful for me to read. And in the end I hope it helps other people who are grieving. I preach to classes that it can be very cathartic to write, if you are working through something that you don't really want to think about. Writing about Flo dying was like that.

I give my prompts in a way that doesn't force people to write about sad things. I make them more vague. Just this week I gave the topic "Not What I Expected." Writers could go in different directions with it. Wanda wrote about how much she loved going to the circus as a kid and how disappointed she was that Ringling Brothers is closing. Another wrote about a volunteer job going better than she thought. But then one woman wrote about her husband, who's had Alzheimer's for 10 years now. She thought old age would be nice, like the fall, her favorite season, but life didn't go the way she expected. Winter came too soon for them. So yes, it does make me appreciate what she did, because I know how hard it can be to write about difficult times in life.

4. Although the book spans a decade, you wrote it almost entirely in present tense. Why? And what do you mean by writing "out loud?"

Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* has had a huge influence on my writing, and it is written in the present tense. I hope present tense makes readers feel like they're in the moment with me.

About what I mean by writing "out loud," after I went blind, I had to start listening to everything, and my writing style changed. Sometimes people say my writing sounds like someone is across the coffee table, talking to you. I like that. I'm hoping I've developed a style of my own. And most of the book is about the classes I lead, where everyone reads their essays out loud. So there's that.

5. There are several times in your memoir when you are clearly self-critical. Many authors like to keep those details to themselves. Why did you choose to share them?

When you have a disability, you get put on a pedestal. People are apt to think we're so brave, we've overcome so much. Look at her, she is so brave, so nice, even though she is blind, that

kind of thing. So I chose to share those thoughts because I want people to understand that blindness may have helped me be more empathetic, but it doesn't mean that I'm an angel.

When I meet people, sometimes it takes a while for them to get to know me because the blindness is really interesting and they're really curious about it. But I want to get past that with my readers, to let them see the real me so we can get the relationship on a more real basis right away.

6. Growing so close to your senior writers over the last decade, you've lost some very good friends. Has that caused you to be tempted to stay aloof when you first meet new students?

Not at all. I don't think like that, that any of them are going to die. I'm still surprised when it happens. I like to get to know the new writers.

When we have new writers in the classes, I have to protect them a little bit from the others because they've never done this before, and the other writers all know each other and are used to writing and having people hear their stories. So I need to encourage them and connect with them, especially until they feel part of the group.

7. You've experienced some pretty rough times in your life, yet we don't sense self-pity. Why is that? Is it a side benefit of being part of the Finke Nation?

It's definitely a benefit of being part of the Finke Nation, and especially of being a daughter of Flo, who did not wallow in self-pity. I learned a lot by modeling myself after her. All my brothers and sisters are the same way.

Our family did have its way of dealing with sadness, with the death of our dad. When I was growing up, a kind of unspoken grief was in the air. Flo didn't talk about our dad, which was sort of how people coped back then. Flo and my brothers and sisters would answer questions about my dad when I asked, but talking about him made them sad, so I didn't ask much. As a little girl, I thought I had it easier than my brothers and sisters; since I hadn't known my dad, I didn't miss him. I didn't realize until I was an adult that I actually grew up in grief. One time I asked Flo, do you miss our dad? She said, "I miss him every day." That was all she said, and I didn't ask her for more.

8. There are some very funny moments in your book. Do you have a favorite, one that still makes you laugh every time you think about it?

I laugh every time I read the story about what happened when I gave my writers a pouch of loose change instead of Scrabble tiles to see what order they would read, and then to write about the date on the coin they chose. I tried to write it so we're not laughing at them, we're

laughing with them. And I'm laughing at myself, too. Even if you weren't in the room that day, you've been in a situation like that. It's so human. So funny.

9. Your first memoir, *Long Time, No See*, was divided into only nine chapters. *Writing Out Loud* has 87. Why did you decide to use such a different structure?

For this book, we wanted the little stories to each stand on their own, even though one leads to the next to make a broader story. My publisher encouraged me to think of the chapters like potato chips – you always want to read just one more.

10. We could infer the answer to this question from reading your book, but can you rattle off a list of how taking memoir classes benefits older adults?

Oh, there are so many. How about I come up with just a few here.

Many of my writers are lonely. At their age, their friends and cousins and siblings are moving away to assisted living centers or to live closer to their children. That, or these people they love are moving away permanently: to the Great Beyond. It can be extremely difficult to get to know new people when you are older, especially if you live alone. Sharing short life stories week after week allows writers to get to know a lot about each other quickly and decide who in class they might want to get to know better. And really, just making the effort to come to class every week offers companionship.

Then, from the prompts and essays they write, they are learning about themselves and each other. This is a positive, growing experience at a time in life when it can feel like so many other things are going away.

They can say "I'm taking a class" and "I'm writing" or "I'm a writer," which gives them something new and positive to talk about.

Another thing I've seen happen over and over is that the class itself forms an identity over time, giving the writers a sense of being part of something larger than themselves. When the writing becomes secondary to the gathering, you know you've really hit pay dirt. And the class gives them a reason to get up and out of the house.

There are so, so many benefits to taking memoir-writing classes, those are just a few that come to mind right away.

11. You've written three nonfiction books now, and are a trained journalist. But you're also a good storyteller. Do you imagine you'll ever try your hand at writing fiction?

No, definitely not. When you write fiction, you have to come up with a plot, make it intriguing, keep it moving along. That's way too much work. I have no skill at that. I love reading fiction, but I have absolutely no interest in writing it.

On the other hand, reading and appreciating fiction has helped me be a good storyteller, and write better nonfiction. Mike sometimes says I don't let the truth get in the way of a good story. So I guess from that standpoint, there might sometimes be a little fiction in the way I tell my stories.