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My Generation

Finding Their Voices | It's never to late to take up writing, where age may actually create some advantages. | *By Mike Rosen-Molina*

For years, Robert Jacobs, 61, a sales and marketing consultant from Oakland, had the perfect idea for a book kicking around in his head. The story was one he'd experienced in his own youth—about his life as an African-American man working in the entertainment industry in the '80s and '90s, while maintaining a long-distance relationship with a British woman whom he would eventually marry. Among other things, Jacobs managed an all-Asian, all-female R&B band in a time when record labels were still reluctant to sign minority talent. But something always held him back from putting pen to paper. For one thing, he never seemed to have the time. More so, for a long time, the experiences were too recent in his mind. Now 30 years later, he feels he has the perspective to turn the events of his youth into a compelling read.

"Writing was always one of my life's goals," says Jacobs. "I think I can help educate people about race relations in this country; being an African American in that business, I've experienced things that not many people have. That was the reason I started writing. I've just got this story to tell."

Jacobs started writing when he was laid off from an old job as a national sales account manager for Ilford Photo five years ago; he finished the first draft of his fictionalized memoir this year. Like many hopeful writers, he looks forward to the day when all his hard work pays off, and he finally has finished book in his hands—maybe even one he can see on store shelves.

It's no accident that "writing the Great American novel" has been a staple of so many bucket lists; there's something exciting about putting your thoughts down on paper to share with the world. The written word is a way to leave a legacy for kids and grandkids, a way to tell the world and the future what the lives were like. And while media attention on child authors and wunderkind prodigies might make it seem as if a passion for writing is an exclusive monopoly of the young, the urge to write can strike people at any age. Around the Bay, older writers aren't letting a late start deter them from making the effort.

Older writers come to their craft for a variety of reasons. Some, like Jacobs, find that their additional years give them the maturity and



Telling stories: Creative coach Beth Barany and Robert Jacobs chat at Piedmont Avenue's Owl & Company Bookshop. Photo by Lori Eanes.

perspective to handle topics that they would have been too fresh to tackle in their youth. Some have always dreamed of writing, but only found the time to put pen to paper after retirement. But others only find the desire to write later in life, after something inspires them.

Dorothy Seeger, 82, an Ayurveda coach from Oakland, never even liked writing. "Writing a book was the last thing I wanted to do," she says. "I couldn't imagine why anyone would want to do that." For eight years, Seeger worked as an assistant to energy healing mentor Rahul Patel. When Patel died in 2012 without finishing his own book, Seeger knew she had to do something to help share Patel's philosophy with the world.

"Then I had a reason to write," she says.

Ken Waxman, 64, a trauma surgeon in San Francisco, was inspired to write a book after working in a Doctors Without Borders clinic in South Sudan. JoAnn Smith Ainsworth needed to supplement her Social Security income when she retired, so she turned to writing historical romances and paranormal suspense novels. And Barbara Gilvar, a retired educational consultant in Berkeley, always wanted to transcribe the 700 pages of letters left to her by her aunt, New York City Mayor Fiorello La Guardia's secretary during World War II, into a book.

"Once they decide to write a book, they've already made the biggest decision," says Beth Barany, an Oakland-based creative coach who helps authors write, publish, and market books. "The only requirement is that you have the right level of commitment, and that's something people can come to in their 20s, 30s, 60s, or beyond. It's different for each person why you decide to start writing. Maybe something happens in their life and they want to write about it. And some retire and finally have time to write. And others have the maturity that comes with age. For some, time feels precious, and they want to leave a legacy."

Former Oakland resident Eva Merrick, 63, remembers how turning 60 gave her the push to get started on her writing career. Merrick now writes science fiction and thrillers under the penname Marquita West.

"I turned 60 and had a mini-nervous breakdown," she says. "It's a tough age for women. When you're 30 or 40, you think, 'I'm only 30 or 40.' Fifty has its own energy, so that's a powerful age to be for women. But 60—suddenly, it's 'Oh, my God, I'm 60! I'm never going to marry Colin Firth, I'm never going to do XYZ!' It was hellish, but out of this came an incredible impetus to write."

"Once you start writing, it's like opening Pandora's box—but in a good way," she says. "It's like letting the genie out of the bottle. You know what your wishes are, but he has his own ideas."

Although the marketplace is becoming more crowded with hopeful authors, experts say that there's never been a better time to get started writing. The Internet and self-publishing services provide more avenues for new writers to get their work in front of an

audience, and many older writers are taking advantage of these new technologies. What's more, age can be an advantage for writers in some arenas. For example, a person who's writing in their area of expertise will have a lot more credibility if they're writing when they're 60, with a lifetime of experience under their belt, than they would if they were just starting out at 20.

"Age is not a factor in getting your book published," says Michael Larsen, a San Francisco literary agent. "Quality of work is. Writers need to know their literary goal: Do they want to make a best seller? They need to be clear about their goals. A big part of that is reading. If you want to write a mystery, read 100 mysteries first. If you want to write a memoir for the family, that's easy enough. Read a lot and write a lot, if you want to be professional about it. You have to do a lot of drafts and get honest feedback. Reading, writing, and sharing—that's the holy trinity."

The hardest part, for many, is simply finding the time to write. Even older writers with time on their hands after retirement can easily become distracted by the mundane details of life—the little petty annoyances that make it so easy to ignore their muse. Most make up a strict schedule, setting aside a particular chunk of time every day or week for writing, and only taking extended breaks from the writing desk between drafts. That's the all-important cooling-off period, when they keep away from their writing long enough that they can view it with a dispassionate and critical eye when they sit down to do edits and rewrites. Older writers find that a writing group is especially crucial at this stage—you need to have a group of people that you can share your draft with, whom you can trust to give you honest feedback.

In addition, having regular deadlines to share with a group encourages them to keep to a schedule and avoid slacking, and the constant feedback helps new writers improve every draft. Feedback is especially important, because these writers are essentially learning a whole new way of communicating.

That can be a challenge for older writers, who are used to a certain way of thinking and writing. They want their writing to appeal to readers across generations, but sometimes the world that they're most familiar with—and most comfortable writing about—isn't the same one that younger readers know. Burlingame consultant Joe Gurkoff, 64, co-authored *How Can I Help*, a book about how ordinary people can help counsel friends, colleagues, or relatives with problems. In writing, he and his co-author worried that their cultural references might be too out of date for younger readers.

"You need to find a voice that's consistent and readable," say Gurkoff. "When we started writing, we mentioned apps in the book and wondered: Will people know what that word means? Of course, now everyone knows that word. Or sometimes we referenced something that we then think the audience might be too young to remember, like *Seinfeld*. You have to remember that what's readable changes over time."

Bruce Shigeura, 64, a retired high school teacher in Berkeley, is finishing up his third book, a post-apocalyptic science fiction story.

His first two books, he admits, weren't his best work; he wrote them to exercise his writing muscles and to practice writing. But he hopes that third time is the charm—and now that he's finished this book, he's starting to look for an agent.

When he started writing for himself, Shigeura started to see the invisible skeleton that holds novels together, the subtle tricks and quirks in writers' styles that have become so part and parcel of modern novels that we barely even notice them when we're reading. We notice when an inexperienced writer forgets to include them, even if we can't put our fingers on what's missing. Shigeura realized that certain stylistic conventions that he was familiar with from reading novels in his youth, works by Saul Bellow or John Steinbeck, had fallen by the wayside. Their writing was episodic, with third-person narrators who hovered just above the action, shifting perspective from one character to another as the plot required. But today's novelists prefer to cling tightly to a single protagonist, following him through his travails and only revealing to readers the thoughts in his head. It gives books published today a totally different, more intimate feel, one that Shigeura found himself learning from the ground up.

"When I started, I didn't even know there was a format for the American novel," says Shigeura. "There is one, but we're so used to it that we don't notice it. When I first started writing, I'd shift viewpoints constantly and my writing was much more episodic. I grew up reading Saul Bellow and John Steinbeck, and had to become conscious that there was a different way of writing now. Dickens was more omniscient; then it got more personal with Hemingway and Fitzgerald; now it's even more so. Everyone starts out saying, 'I'll write from the heart,' and you absolutely have to, but that might not necessarily communicate with readers. You can compose a pop song from the heart, but you can't write a symphony without understanding music theory."

Someone starting their writing career at 50 or 60 will have a lot more life experience to draw from than their younger colleagues, and that can breathe vivid life into their writing. But no matter what age you start at, the foundations of good writing remain the same: creativity, hard work, and dedication to see a project through. And even though it might be harder to remember it all at an older age, some writers still see a silver lining.

Thirty years later, Robert Jacobs still remembers the major events of his years as a band manager, but the small details have faded over time. That's not a problem—he has drawers full of photos that he can look at, photos of his old band or the vacation he took to Egypt where he first met the woman he would eventually marry.

"When I look at them, the memories come whizzing back," says Jacobs. "But it's been a long time, and I don't remember all the details. That lets me be creative; I'm not locked in my head every step to what really happened. It gives me the freedom to conjure up some more fantastical ideas."

Mike Rosen-Molina is an East Bay writer and frequent contributor to The Monthly. He is author of the comic book adaptation of the

1/17/2014

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the monthly. He is author of the comic book adaptation of the medieval witch-hunting manual, Malleus Maleficarum.

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