

Evaluation #3 At Your Service

Hello Mike!

Congratulations on completing your manuscript and thank you for sharing it with me. It must feel good to have written down your thoughts and feelings about all the good you have done for people so far in your life, with plans to continue doing more despite now having some physical limitations.

I enjoyed reading this manuscript. Your life story is incredibly rich and you have so much material here for readers to be inspired by. Here are some of my thoughts on where your strengths lie and what areas can benefit from revision.

Strengths:

The most compelling part of this book is the story itself. As I already mentioned, you've had an immensely rich life, full of incredible experiences, and this is what will keep readers reading. You give the reader a general sense of your interest in helping people from a young age and we get to see how that evolves over time. The story becomes more compelling as it carries on, building as if in a novel despite this being non-fiction. Each new venture you tackled seemed to increase in difficulty and rewards, in terms of the scope of the aid you helped to provide. It is inspiring, and hopefully you will achieve your goal, which is to compel people to find ways to help improve other people's lives: essentially, paying it forward.

That being said, there are some issues with how the book is laid out and how clearly you convey your message.

Potential Areas of Improvement:

I will address only a few of the structural issues here. There is more, but I don't want to overwhelm you, and it would take too long to explain all of the suggestions without commenting directly in the manuscript. I also want to add that any of the changes you make based on the comments below may help resolve some of the other issues I have not addressed.

The biggest issue I have been able to determine is the way the book is organized. I think you must know this as you have already purchased a developmental edit. Though you have most of the bones all written up, the way they are laid out is difficult to follow at times.

Though this is not a hard and fast rule, autobiographies tend to be written in chronological order. The reason for this is that autobiographies, unlike memoirs, are a more straightforward fact-based account of someone's life. Because it spans a person's life, it is quite challenging to write it clearly without it being done chronologically.

Evaluation #3 At Your Service

That being said, I had a lot of questions about your timeline while I was reading this manuscript. You seemed to jump back and forth between time periods and it became difficult to follow. The way the book is organized seems to be in three major chunks: education/teaching, the PSOS, and the Belize Children's Project. The problem is, from what you wrote, it seems as though the two latter programs would have overlapped in some way at some point and yet you wrote them completely separately. This caused confusion. For example, you mentioned retiring at one point, but then you talked about running the Belize Project for several years. It wasn't clear in that moment whether you started working on the project after you retired or whether you were working on both projects at the same time and then retired from both at the same time. All of these important details need to be addressed in the next stages of the editing process. It begins with a new look at the structure of the book.

Structure

The first thing I think you should try doing is writing a timeline for all the major events in your life and reorganizing the book accordingly. If things overlap, let them. That is part of life. We don't live in neat boxes and the story shouldn't be organized that way either. I realize you probably intended for it to be clearer this way, but it actually makes things a bit more complicated. Here are some examples of where the timeline became confusing:

1. Pgs. 14-15: Your father's progress with his career jumps back and forth in time; it's best to keep it in chronological order for clarity
2. P. 20: You mention the many people who come to stay at your home in order to pursue schooling, but that doesn't happen for several years to come. You do revisit it later, but it might be best to go into that at that later time so the reader has a better understanding of the chronology. For example, on p. 43, you mention that Jorge came to live with you and your mom, but it seemed as though you were still living in Belize at that time, so it wasn't clear what was going on or how the timeline was adding up.
3. You rarely mention a year or an age in which something happens. It'll be easier for the reader to follow the story if they have time references. Both a year and an age would be great, but they don't have to both be mentioned in the same sentence.
4. On p. 87, you took the reader back to the 1970s in Belize. Then you talked about starting the project, but it wasn't until p. 89 that you mentioned starting the project in 1975. Then you wrote that you thought Ian was going to be the only one you helped, so it was confusing that you would have started a whole project around one person. There is a lack of clarity on the chronology of that whole section. At that point in the book, you've already covered all the years you worked with the PSOP, but it sounds as though the two programs didn't overlap whereas they must have

Evaluation #3 At Your Service

since you started this project very early on in your career and the PSOP came along much later (or so it seems).

Can you see how some of these things can cause confusion for the reader? These types of issues need to be addressed throughout the book, but your editor can help in more detail in the next stage of editing. I do recommend that you do as much of this reorganization on your own before resubmitting the book so it's as close to the actual chronology—and the ideal manuscript you have in mind—as it can be. Your editor can then steer you in a direction where you can best achieve your goals.

Table of contents

As part of a good structure and as part of a non-fiction work, a table of contents (TOC) would be a good addition. Memoirs don't typically have a TOC, but because an autobiography spans a much longer period of time and is more fact-based, it helps to have a TOC that readers can use to orient themselves. It's particularly important in your case because you have a whole section about other people's stories that you need to let readers know about. After you review the major life events in your life and reorganize the structure, you can write the TOC to fit that new organization. Again, it would be important to have a TOC written before you resubmit the manuscript so your editor will have a reference point to work with.

Title

Your current title, *Uncle Gene Returns to Belize*, evokes a warm feeling—which is compelling—however, it sounds more like the title of a novel than that of an autobiography. That being said, it would still have been fine had it not seemed to represent only one part of your life. Because this is an autobiography, think about having a title that represent the totality of your life, not just one part. You accomplished so much in your life and spent quite a bit of time working with the elderly and building quite a program there, for which you received several accolades. Your title completely ignores that very significant part of your life. It also doesn't acknowledge the earlier parts of your life, when you were a teacher. This title, as is stands, would be more suited as the title for a memoir than this autobiography. I would recommend that you think about a title that encompasses all of your accomplishments or the life path you have taken. That being said, you're only referred to as Uncle Gene in Belize, correct? People in the states didn't/don't call you that unless you are blood family?

It might be difficult for you to consider a different title if you are particularly attached to this one, but I ask you to try and see if something else can represent you and your life better. You can always convert the current book title into a chapter where you do return to Belize. As it stands, the current book title makes it sound like you returned to Belize to live out the rest of your days, whereas it seems as though you are living in the states now, no?

Evaluation #3 At Your Service

Consider the idea that readers may have a certain expectation about the book with a title like this. They may be disappointed if they see that two-thirds of the book addresses things other than you working with the children needing medical aid in Belize.

Your mind, body and soul

As fascinating as the things you have done in your life are, I realized after I finished the book that I didn't really have a deep sense of who you are as a person. I have a good understanding of what you've done and how others perceive you, but there is little information about Eugene, the human being who may have doubts and feel lonely at times or have regrets etc. I had a better sense of who you were when you were a teenager, but as you got older and took on more projects, the essence of who you perceive yourself to be kind of got lost.

You wrote a very short paragraph on being celibate and how that was challenging at times, but I think it's that humanity and that vulnerability that needs to shine through more. It sounds like you never got married or had kids. I think the readers would want to know why. You chose not to become a priest for various reasons that you touched upon, but people of faith can still fall in love and have families and still be fully ensconced in their passions or religious convictions. You never really addressed any of that. Why did you not go down the "normal" family path?

An autobiography is an opportunity to share your inner self, the parts of you that most people don't know. It feels a bit like you have held back on sharing yourself with the readers, choosing to focus on what you have accomplished. There is the saying, "you are what you do," but one can also say, "you are who you are." You cover the first saying very well, but I don't feel like I know you by the end of the book.

I recommend that you think for a while about inserting more of your emotional self in the book and decide whether you feel comfortable revealing more of who you are—internally and emotionally—to the reader. I think the book will be that much richer for it.

Another thing you might want to think about is where the conviction came from to do what you have done. Is it all based on your religious faith? You talk a bit about it early on in the book, but you don't really address it again later. How much did your religion affect the decisions you made in your life? Has it always been present in your life or did you go through different periods of increased or decreased faith? How much of a driving force has it been? If the driving force wasn't religion but was something else, can you put it into words for the reader? You did share that written piece from when you were a teenager about what you wanted to do when you grew up, but more of an exploration on that from you at your current age looking back on your life will give the reader that much more perspective and that much more richness to add to your story.

Evaluation #3 At Your Service

Flow

Also connected to the overall structure of the book is the flow. In addition to jumping back and forth between timelines, there are many paragraphs that do not naturally flow from one into the other. What I mean by this is you might have four short paragraphs, one after the other, and they all talk about different things that are not really connected. It feels disjointed in those moments. They seem like they have been cut and pasted into place. For example, on p 12:

Ex. For Christmas, we would go to midnight mass, usually around 10:00 pm on Christmas Eve. Before mass, my mother and sisters would cook something to serve afterward. Everybody, including the priests, would come back to our house for a light meal. We'd then open a few presents before going to bed and wake up early on Christmas Day to open the rest.

Mom and Dad loved to dance, and both were very good at it. Often, our entire family would go dancing at the Mexican Hall club in Fairmont City on Saturday nights.

Every summer, our family went to the Ozarks and rented a cabin. We all loved to fish and swim.

My brothers, sisters, and I were very close to one another. We would almost always have dinner together as a family on Sundays, even as we grew older. A local priest would usually join us. Mom and my sisters would cook a big meal every Sunday.

There was a city park across the street from our house, and we enjoyed playing baseball and soccer with neighborhood kids.

If you look at the paragraphs above, they don't flow from one paragraph to another. Instead, they each talk about a different thing, as if they are random memories you remember from when you were a child. It feels very choppy to the reader. Find ways to both combine some of the paragraphs and provide transitions between one event or memory and another. For example, you mention that your parents loved to dance. Did they ever dance during Christmas? That might be a way to combine the paragraph about Christmas with the paragraph about dancing and so on. There are many instances of this type of flow issue throughout the book. The information is interesting, but it doesn't always seem to belong or feel connected to the other paragraphs in that chapter. I recommend you go back and look at how you combine ideas. Sometimes you have several one-sentence paragraphs, whereas they could be combined to flow better. Another example I can provide here is to look at p. 52-53. There are several short paragraphs that could be combined to flow better.

Evaluation #3 At Your Service

While there, my mission was teaching and doing social work. I traveled to several parishes with bible study films and taught religion to children. I spoke Spanish well enough, which helped me communicate with the kids.

I also did social work at a local prison located just a few doors down from the church. I delivered Bibles, catechisms, and other religious items to the inmates.

Working there was fascinating in many aspects.

The facility housed about 80 prisoners. When you walked into the double doors in front, there was a big courtyard. All around the yard were cells containing army-style cots.

Commented [LB1]: These three paragraphs can be combined in some way. It feels choppy the way they currently stand.

Stories from other people

Including stories written by other people is a tricky choice for an autobiography. I understand the reason for it: You want to give the people you mention in the book a voice. Nonetheless, it presents a dilemma on a couple of fronts. Firstly, where would they be best placed in the book? At the moment, you have the majority of the stories at the back of the book, but you also have a few scattered within the bulk of the text. Secondly, it will be difficult for your editor to know how to edit those sections or even whether they have permission to edit them. If your editor thinks a story should be cut down by one quarter the length, how would they get permission to do that? This is something you need to discuss with your co-author as well as, potentially, with each of the individual authors of these stories. Then you will need to speak with your publishing specialist and determine some clear directives for the editor in the next stage of editing.

Outstanding questions after having read this book

I had many questions that I wanted answers to as I read the book. This will be shared with you in more detail at the developmental edit stage, but I wanted to share a few with you here so you can think about or start to make those changes right away.

1. How old were you when your dad died? I never really got a sense of that impact in your life in terms of how it affected you at the age you were and later.
2. Was your grandfather targeted or was his death an accident? What happened to the people who set the fire? These were immediate questions that came up because you went to the trouble of sharing this shocking and traumatic thing, but you didn't write about the aftermath. When someone dies in such a way, surely the family and the community would want answers and justice, no? I imagine the incident was in the news and the police were involved. How did the fallout affect your family? How did your

Evaluation #3 At Your Service

father and uncle react? How would that experience have affected your life moving forward?

3. Do/did you speak Spanish? You mentioned that your dad didn't want you to speak Spanish at home, but you went to Belize and Guatemala as a youth. How much Spanish did you speak? Where did you learn it, if not at home? This is something that should have been addressed either right at the beginning when you mentioned your dad's thoughts on it or right when you went on your first overseas trip. You mentioned that you did speak Spanish around p. 50, which is so much later in the book that it doesn't quite sate the reader. These types of details are best presented earlier.

Grammar

For the most part, your writing is grammatically accurate. There are a few stylistic and grammatical things I noticed, which you could resolve fairly easily.

Fragments: Fragments are when sentences are incomplete; they are missing one or more of the main elements sentences need. There are of few of these sentences in the book.

Ex. I've always tried to make sure I get to know the right people and build relationships.

Making sure I made personal contact with people.

Ex. I also made sure I got to know the Mayor of Belleville, who at that time was Charles Nichols.

Ex. We had ~~so~~ few possessions, and suffered plenty of hardships, with little or no money to our names.

Awkward sentences: These are sentences that may be grammatically correct, but they are organized in such a way that it sounds like it's wrong or something is missing or badly placed.

Ex. Most of the time, for transportation, we drove around in a VW Beetle. Occasionally, we traveled by horseback, or we would walk.

Long or incomplete sentences: This can make a simple idea more complex merely due to its length. If a sentence is longer than two lines, it is likely too long. Try breaking these sentences down; this will help you get your point across more easily and will not bog the paragraph down.

Commented [LB2]: This could possibly work if this sentence is between two other sentences and follows a thought process. It's still not recommended because there is no real subject there. What makes this a bigger issue is that this is the first sentence of a new paragraph. The first sentence of a new paragraph needs to set up the paragraph so you need to make the sentence really clear.

This sentence would be best suited as part of the previous paragraph right above it. Here is what it could look and read like:

I've always tried to make sure I get to know the right people with whom I can build relationships. Part of that building process was making sure I had some kind of personal contact with them.

OR

I've always tried to build relationships with the right people. I did this by making sure I had personal contact with them.

Evaluation #3 At Your Service

Ex. I arrived in the big metropolis of Guatemala City on (date), ~~with~~
Guastatoya ~~—~~, a small rural town seventy miles away and in the region of El
Progreso ~~—, seventy miles away, as was to be our~~ the final destination.

Editorial Service Recommendation:

If some of the comments I've made above resonate with you and you see merit in my recommendations or the questions I've asked, then I would recommend a **developmental edit** followed by a **copy edit**. It is important that we tackle the structure in a first round. This would allow for a clear vision of how the manuscript can be better organized to maximize on your goals for the book. Then, once the structure has been sorted out, we can do a second round, which is to go back and do the copy editing. This two-pronged approach will give you an opportunity to see how the book looks with a new configuration before the copy editing begins.

Conclusion:

Thank you for entrusting me with this first look into your book. I would be happy to work with you on the next steps if you choose to move forward with us. The topic is a fascinating one and I would love to help you present your ideas and feelings in the clearest and most effective way possible.

I hope this evaluation has helped in some small way. I wish you all the best with bringing ***Uncle Gene Returns to Belize*** to the public.

Sincerely,
Your Editor