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## ***Four Months on a Tank of Gas***

### ***The Secret Life of a New Memoirist***

**This revealing glimpse into Barbara's life as an author tells how her first memoir grew from the gleam of an idea to a published book in hand, with insight on the many different hats she had to wear as both author and publisher. It also discusses the challenge of writing a personal memoir to which readers from diverse backgrounds can relate.**

by Barbara Brabec

Author of *The Drummer Drives! Everybody Else Rides*

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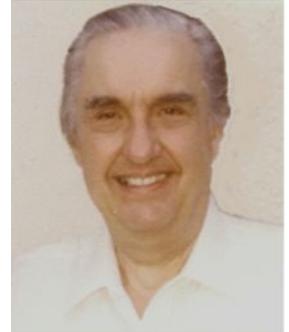
[2021 Postscript](#)

**MARCH 30, 2010** marked the end of the most intense period of my writing life, one that had begun six months earlier when my muse suddenly struck and I wrote the first words of my first memoir. By then, I'd been a professional home-business writer for three decades with several trade books published between 1979 and 2006. But so much had changed since I'd self-published books for sale by mail in the early eighties that writing my first memoir for self-publication and sale on Amazon required a lot of study beforehand.

Reconstructing one's own life for a personal memoir would be difficult for anyone, but I quickly learned that reconstructing the life of a loved one when they're no longer around to answer questions is more than just a challenge. For me, writing this book was like trying to put a 5,000-piece jigsaw puzzle together while learning how to become a detective.

### Reconstructing Someone's Life for a Book

**I HAD NO IDEA** what I was in for when I decided to write a biography of Harry Brabec, the legendary Chicago drummer I'd been married to for nearly 44 years. I thought I knew him better than anyone else in the world, but reconstructing his life five years after his death was more difficult than I thought it would be. I had a wealth of material to work with and planned to base the book on both Harry's letters and scrapbooks and my own lifetime collection of letters, journals, and scrapbooks. Deciding what content to include in the book involved a huge amount of research and study of more material than I'd ever worked with before. There was so much paper in different forms that it literally took over my office. By the time I was deep into writing I could hardly walk around in it. Everything was spread out on my other desk, on shelves, a small table, and all over the floor because I found that to be the best way for me to have quick access to specific information when I needed it.



All of this—and especially Harry's letters and music-related scrapbooks—included details critical to my story. He'd kept programs for every concert, opera, and show he played, along with important letters related to his career, newspaper clippings about events he'd played, and photos of musicians he knew or performed with. Studying his seven scrapbooks after he was gone was like stepping back into a world I'd taken for granted as his wife.

As I pondered how to tell his life story as a professional musician in a way that would be of interest to a vast audience of readers, I found there was a lot about his life before we met that I didn't know. Harry didn't like to talk much about his past, which was tragic in some respects, so I soon found myself wearing the hats of both a journalist and detective as I began to track down some of his old music buddies, school chums, and students. In speaking to one person, I'd get a lead to another, on and on, until I was soon swimming in a sea of names, phone numbers, and email addresses. I spent hours on the phone with men and women who knew or had worked with Harry through the years. It was then that I began to hear a lot of stories about him that he'd never told me, which gave me unique insight into his life before we met. These conversations were life-changing for me because I suddenly began to see Harry through new eyes, and what I saw made me see myself differently too.

### A Book with a Mind of its Own

**I BEGAN WITH A TITLE** I knew would immediately put my book on page one of any search engine the minute it was published. "The drummer drives. Everybody else rides!" is a quote by famous rhythm and blues drummer Panama Frances that hit me dead center when I accidentally stumbled across it on the web one day. It seemed to sum up Harry's life in a nutshell. The first three words were showing up on three million web pages, but I couldn't believe my luck when I realized that theDrummerDrives.com domain name was still available.

After the book was titled and its domain name registered, I worked on the subtitle until I had successfully incorporated a number of keywords that a prospective reader might type into a search engine or look for on Amazon, finally settling on *The Musical Life and Times of Harry Brabec, Legendary Chicago Symphony Percussionist and Humorist*. And then I began to write with a passion I'd never had before.

I soon realized that the book needed a Preface to explain why I'd chosen this famous saying as its title. I also felt it important to tell readers that this book wasn't the result of an old widow's fuzzy memories, but an historical and unique view of a colorful period of Chicago's musical entertainment history that was gone forever. But writing the Preface made me realize that my original thoughts about what to include in the book had to be altered. As every author soon learns, books have a way of taking over once you get into them. Every book I've ever written began to lead me in a new direction as soon as I'd finished a few chapters. Before I knew it, I found myself including chunks of content that wasn't in my original plan for the book.

### **When the Simple Becomes Complex**

**WHAT I THOUGHT** was going to be a light-hearted and humorous book revolving around Harry's work as a percussionist gradually flowered into a serious and revealing biography of a complex and extremely gifted musician. Harry had more than his share of disappointments and heartbreak in his life, but he always managed to spread laughter wherever he went, so I quickly realized that Harry's original humor had to be an important part of the book. About the same time, I also realized I couldn't tell Harry's story without also telling at least part of mine. That fact required me to change the Preface to say this book was "an autobiographic narrative and biography" instead of a simple "biographical memoir."

For the first time in my long career as a writer, I realized I had an opportunity to include philosophical statements in this book about my about life, work, faith, love, and marriage. I'd shared some personal life stories in my home business books, but they were written with the idea of impacting and changing the lives of my readers. Now I wondered if perhaps I could use this book for similar purposes.

It was at this time that I happened to form a new friendship with Jay Rankin, an author who had just published a memoir, *Under the Neon Sky*. In email messages and phone chats, we talked about the joys and agonies of writing memoir, and he was the one who reminded me that my book couldn't be just about Harry because I was part of his life. "Your voice has to be strong throughout the book," he said, "because everything Harry did impacted you and your marriage."

That's when I began to see that I could speak not just to musicians interested in the music-oriented content of the book, but to many individuals in other fields of endeavor who might be in a difficult place re work, job loss, a marriage in turmoil, being a caregiver, those without faith in God, etc., topics that were important parts of my life with Harry. That insight changed the direction of my writing, making it all the more personal, complex, and challenging. I struggled with how much of my private life I wanted to reveal to an audience of readers who had always seen me and my husband in my business books as having a perfect marriage, with him being nothing short of perfect and always a wonderful helpmate to me. In truth, we had many difficult days when I was forced to become the breadwinner, and especially when his health began to fail and he couldn't work at all. Harry was a decade older than I, and it didn't help that my career as a writer was going up as his musical career was going down. As is true

in many marriages, there were times in our life when we struggled to stay happy individually and as a couple.

### **Writing without Regard to Time**

**WHEN THE REAL WRITING** actually began, it was as though my muse was cracking the whip, because I couldn't stop writing. Being a widow with no family in the area, I didn't have to report to anyone, so I almost became a hermit, living only to write. Few may believe it, but I bought a tank of gas (20 gallons) at the end of 2009 and still had some gas in the tank at the end of April. During this period, I left the house only to go to church, pick up necessary groceries, make a run to my local postal sub-station.

I often found myself writing for twelve hours a day with only short breaks for meals. My lunch and dinner hours were irregular because I was paying no attention to the clock. I'd look up and be amazed to find it was 2 o'clock and I hadn't eaten since seven. Or that it was 7:30 p.m. and I didn't have a clue about what I was going to fix for dinner. I've always been a cook-from-scratch person, but I had more than a few microwave meals during this period of time. I rushed through meals and often left dishes in the sink until I ran out of essential items, because washing dishes just seemed such a waste of time. Now in 2021 with a second memoir under my belt and a third in progress, little has changed. I still live to write and never look at a clock when I'm writing; only stop when I find a good place to do it.

When I stumbled across this quote by Norman Mailer, I knew exactly what he meant when he wrote, "Writers don't have lifestyles. They sit in little rooms and write."

### **Content Editing and Rewriting**

**IN JANUARY**, after a week's Christmas vacation to calm myself down, I wrote like a madwoman until I had a completed first draft of the book. With a printed copy in hand, I donned my content editor's hat with pen, notepaper, and coffee at hand. During the long-hour days of editing that followed, I was remembering Samuel Johnson's great advice to writers with big egos:

"Read your own compositions, and when you meet a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out."

I suddenly saw that some chapters were not in the right order, and sections of other chapters needed to be relocated. I found timeline problems I hadn't seen before, and other changes were necessary because I kept turning up additional bits of information in my files or from friends who had worked with or gone to school with Harry. When I saw places where additional content would add color and excitement to the book, I put my writer's hat back on and did some more rewriting, which naturally changed content already written and sometimes required adding whole new sections to one chapter or another.

In one of my email exchanges with Jay Rankin (*mentioned earlier*), we were discussing all the rewriting we were doing and how frustrating it was to keep finding new errors every time we proofread what we'd written. I knew exactly how he felt when he wrote:

*"I cannot remember how many times I re-wrote a line, a paragraph, a page. Every time I looked at a piece of my writing I saw or felt something*

*differently than what I had previously written. It was maddening! And then (finally) it was time for the final proof-reading. Not that each chapter hadn't been gone over 10 times by two or three sets of eyes. Even when it was time for the interior designer to go through the galley, she saw a typo! I feel primal just remembering how OCD I felt, and at the same time so anxious to put it out there,"*

Sister Mollie, who patiently listened to me blather about the book writing for weeks, finally agreed to read its very sensitive personal chapters when I said I was simply too emotionally close to this material to be objective about it. She made several tactful suggestions for comments I might want to add, delete, or subtly change so as not to annoy, confuse, or offend any readers, and she also found a couple of typos I hadn't yet spotted after several read-throughs.

"This editing is tough stuff," she said on returning the manuscript with her comments. "It's like insulting someone's newborn. Even though they may be unattractive you can't say so . . . and yet when I thought it necessary, I did." I will forever be grateful to her for all the help and encouragement she gave me with this book.

When all the content editing and rewriting was done, I counted the words, estimated the page count and cost to print the book, and decided the book was needlessly long and pulled several sections (some 3,000 words) for possible use on the book's website. The rewriting wasn't done yet.

*As Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel once said, "There is a difference between a book of two hundred pages from the very beginning, and a book of two hundred pages which is the result of an original eight hundred pages. The six hundred are there. Only you don't see them."*

### **The Copy Editing Phase**

**WITH THE MANUSCRIPT** finally rewritten and content-edited to the nth degree, I donned my copy editor's hat. I had no hesitancy about being my own copy editor because I've been doing this since I first began to publish a newsletter and write books back in the seventies. Granted, a lot of typos and some grammar and punctuation errors got past me over the years, especially when I was still learning my craft, but I was frankly surprised by how many errors slipped by me in this book, especially considering the number of times I'd read the book in several formats—on the computer, in raw manuscript form, in final edited form, then the printed copy after it was typeset. Each time, I found an error here and there, often in the area of missing periods and closing quotation marks or parentheses, or additional words I'd failed to delete after changing one. I found I often made a new error in trying to correct one I'd found.

**Remember this:** *If you've written and typed all the words, you can't do an effective job of editing or proofreading that writing because your mind knows what you meant to say, and when you read what you've written, your eyes will see only what your mind tells them to see.*

The next week was spent looking for punctuation, spelling, and grammar errors, wrong-word usages, unnecessary words and words that weren't there, plus mistakes in people's names,

times, places, dates, numbers, website references, and so on. When the copy editing was done to the best of my ability, I printed a new copy of the manuscript and then gave it another intense proofreading.

In between writing, editing, and proofreading, I had to take care of other tasks related to the self-publishing process, such as getting an ISBN number, Library of Congress CIP Control number (cataloging-in-publication), and designing the book's cover as I wanted it to look. I selected and optimized the photos for the front and back covers, picked fonts I liked, purchased a photo for the book's background color, and designed the layout of all elements in my simple graphics program. Then I hired a book cover designer to drop all these design elements into the template required by my POD printer, LightningSource, and do the required PDF conversion.

I will always have a vision for how I want the cover of a new book to look, but I don't have the software to do these jobs, nor is this something I ever want to do. I like to be in complete control of everything I do, but I also believe we should stick to doing what we do best and leave the rest to experts.

### **Typesetting with MS Word**

**IT SEEMED PROVIDENTIAL** that earlier I had discovered Aaron Shepard's helpful book on how to do professional typesetting in *Word* 2003. It was so detailed that I decided I could design and typeset my book using that software. My husband often quipped, "I'll see you in the spring if I can get through the mattress," and it was at this point that I felt like I was still working my way through the mattress, trying to get to the point where the actual publication process could begin in the spring.

March winds were blowing when I donned my typesetter's hat and began to select fonts for chapter titles, sub-headings, sidebars, and text. Earlier I had struggled to find a font that would work on both the cover and for chapter headings, finding that many that looked good in the cover design didn't lend themselves to text, and vice versa. I finally settled on ParkAvenue BT for both the main title on the cover and for the book's chapter titles, with Franklin Gothic Book for the book's sub-title. Georgia proved to be the best font for the body text because I could easily control the rivers of white space one often gets when justifying text. (Hyphenation was turned off so I could add manual hyphens where necessary.) I used Trebuchet MS for sub-headings and opening chapter quotations, and a couple of other companionable fonts for sidebar content and letters quoted in the book.

With fonts selected, I spent a few hours experimenting with the size of the text font to get the right line spacing for easy reading. Then I set up a style sheet that reflected this and other text elements I wanted and then spent a few days trying to figure out how to do headers and get right and left pages to flow properly. After printing test pages to make sure everything looked good, I finally began the actual process of typesetting the book. This was surprisingly easy and enjoyable and didn't take long, even though I often had to rewrite a sentence or strike some words here and there to avoid widows, orphans, and blank pages at the end of a chapter. (I found it better to control this myself, rather than use *Word's* format settings.)

After finishing the interior design of the book, I printed another copy of what was now 178 pages (the original manuscript being 298 pages), and once again read the book from start to finish. Now I was checking to be sure the pages properly flowed to the right or left as

designed, that the page headings, page numbers, and font faces and sizes were correct—plus other little things I had on my checklist. Of course I had to make a few changes, a couple of which affected the pagination, which in turn affected the Index I had to do next. (*I developed my own system of doing this as using Word's indexing system would not have given me what I wanted.*) Then I had to print a new copy of the manuscript so I could read through it again to decide what I needed to include in the Index, which turned out to be seven pages. (I didn't want to think about the cost of all the inkjet cartridges I'd gone through with all this printing.)

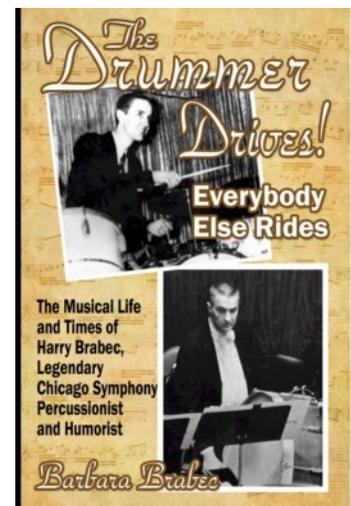
The hardest thing for me to do is find the point where I can finally let go of a book. At some point every author has to say “that's enough,” because one could nit-pick a book to death otherwise. When I finally thought everything was as perfect as I could make it, I sent it out for the required PDF conversion and submitted *The Drummer Drives! Everybody Else Rides* for publication on LightningSource.com in mid-March, pending my approval of the proof copy. (See the [book's page on my website](#) for information not on Amazon, including links to reviews and the Table of Contents.)

### Waiting for the Proof Copy

**I WAS EMOTIONALLY** and physically wiped out by this time. I have no children, but that's when I understood how a new mom must feel when she's overdue and chompin' at the bit, waiting for the birth of her child. When the proof copy came, I was so nervous I was afraid to open the package. I slit it open and then left the room to look out the window, go to the bathroom, and pet the cat before I could find the courage to actually look at the book. Even then I took it out of the package with the cover side down and carried it into the living room and sat down before turning it over. Years of experience in sending countless things to the printer told me I'd surely find something wrong with the book as soon as I took it out of the package and started turning pages. And I didn't think I could deal with that after so many months of intense work trying to perfect what I thought was the most important book I'd ever write.

I had never before been so nervous or excited about holding the first copy of one of my books—and, counting all editions of my trade books, I'd gone through this process twenty-one times. I almost cried from relief when I saw that the cover looked exactly the way I wanted it to look, that my typesetting looked beautiful, and the quality of the printing was every bit as good as any of my trade books. A couple of nights later, I sat down and began to methodically read the book from cover to cover, this time with a new pair of eyes.

Sure enough, even after more than a dozen readings of the book, I found a couple of typos, comma errors, and worse, two embarrassing wrong-word usages. Fortunately with POD printing, fixing such little things involved nothing more than correcting the typesetting, making a new PDF file, and uploading it to the publisher's website.



I've learned that no matter how many people you ask to read your book, none of them will see every error, and only one or two may actually pick up on the same error, as was true in the case of this book. I'm not going to tell you the wrong word usages I ultimately changed in the

final version uploaded to the publisher, but suffice it to say I'll never make those mistakes again.

The brain works in strange ways at times, and as I age I find that my fingers do not always receive the signal my brain is sending to them. Either that, or they simply have a mind of their own after decades of working on a keyboard and typing the same words over and over and over again. There's one mistake I habitually make, so I generally check my writing for the use of "now," since my fingers often automatically type "now" when I really mean "not"—a typo that can really mess up a sentence's meaning.

Proofreading is very intense work, and a good proofreader must also have an excellent grasp of grammar, spelling, and punctuation to do a good job. Frankly, I can't afford the prices professional proofreaders charge, even though I'm sure they're worth it. So I feel blessed to have some sharp-eyed friends and family members who have agreed to read my book manuscripts before they are typeset. (If you belong to a writer's group or are involved in social networking, you might find many eager pre-publication book readers in your midst.

**I UPLOADED THE FINAL MANUSCRIPT** to LightningSource on March 24, but it didn't show up on Amazon until the first of April, by which time I was fully involved in promotional work and trying to get the book's companion website going. It opened a couple months after the book was published and I published an eBook edition on Amazon and Barnes & Noble after that. The Drummer Drives website was populated with rich content that attracted many visitors. It featured book excerpts, historical music photos and stories that could not be included in the book, plus articles by other musicians who knew or worked with Harry and shared colorful backstage stories about those days. Reviewers called the site "the chronicle of an entire musical age," but as the months passed, it generated no sales I could track and took more time than I wanted to give to it. I later decided I'd put so much fascinating content on the site that those who found it decided they didn't need to read the book. So, with regret, I closed it after four years and kept the domain name, which I could sell if I ever need extra money.

## 2021 POSTSCRIPT



**WHEN I SUGGESTED** to Harry that we ought to write a book together about our crazy life, he quipped, "Who's going to read a book about an old drummer and a home business writer?"

I knew from the start that this book would never be a bestseller, but writing and publishing it was never about making money. My heart simply called me to write it. What was important to me was that the people who mattered to me *did* read the book and loved it. I got my money back quickly, made a small profit, and still sell a few copies every year, so I'm happy. I often pick up the book and read sections of it as a way of bringing Harry back into my life for a little while, and it's comforting to see the book on my bookshelf.

All I knew for sure then and now is that Harry was a different kind of man and certainly a different kind of drummer, and I was the only one who could tell his story. This writing was the best thing I could have done for myself and or for him.

For the record, while I once thought my *Drummer Drives* memoir would be the most important book I'd ever write, it turns out that [my second memoir](#) became that book when it was published, because it became my legacy to my family. And now I see another book in the not-too-distant future that may become my most important book of all time, so maybe this is something that all authors experience—that our current book will always be the most important to us, at least for a while.

I hope this story of one of my memoirs will be an encouragement to you to write your own story or that of someone you've loved and lost. You'll find other helpful articles in the Writing/Publishing area of my site, and remember that I'm here to offer personal help by phone if you need a little push to get started, either with the writing or the self-publishing process.

I can't say enough good things about writing the story of one's life . . . but give me time.

## Related Articles

[The Book that Changed the Direction of My Writing Life](#). An example of how taking just one step in a new direction can be life-changing

[How to Write a Good Memoir](#). How the book, *Your Life as Story*, helped Barbara write a better memoir.

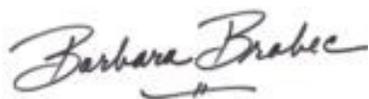
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[The Writing of Marcella's Secret Dreams and Stories](#). What Barbara learned from researching and writing her second family memoir.

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**IF YOU'D LIKE TO** comment on this writing, I would love to hear from you. [Email me here](#). If you have a message you'd like me to share in an upcoming blog post, be sure to include your phone number when you write, along with your time zone. I'd like to have the opportunity to call you if I want to continue the discussion.

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A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Barbara Brabec". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned at the bottom center of the page.

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**BARBARA LAUNCHED** BarbaraBrabec.com in 2000 and quickly began to populate it with home-business articles and resources. Over the years she added hundreds of articles on several other topics related in one way or another to the larger topic of LIFE.

Now, LIFE itself is Barbara's focus. Unlike her original website, her new domain launched in 2021 features only her own writing—new content and an archive of timeless and relevant articles in fourteen life-related categories, all updated and reformatted for republication on the all-new "Barbara Brabec's World." It reflects Barbara's current writing interests, latest books, and professional services.

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