

Book Review

Box, H. & Mocine-McQueen, J. (2019). *How Your Story Sets You Free*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books. (112 pp., hardcover \$12.95).

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In early June 2020, as Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality took place across the U.S. and worldwide, NBC's *Late Night with Seth Meyers* opened four consecutive shows with segments from writer Amber Ruffin. Ruffin, a black woman, shared stories of being accosted by police on her own porch, while skipping down an alleyway, and in cars. The ethos she has built as a regular, likable presence on the show made her stories particularly resonant with *Late Night's* audience and others who came across the segments on YouTube. Personalized through this relatable central character, the stories Ruffin lays out are powerful evidence of the widespread mistreatment of black people by police. Ruffin's June 2020 segments demonstrate the persuasive potential stories hold. Storytelling coaches Heather Box and Julian Mocine-McQueen argue, "Personal storytelling—the kind that reveals who we are and what we care about—is the most potent and effective way to connect with the world around us. Personal storytelling is at the heart of creating and nurturing a more empathetic world" (p. 23). Their short book *How Your Story Sets You Free* offers encouragement and guidance for presenting personal stories with activist impact.

Box and Mocine-McQueen's mission for *How Your Story Sets You Free* is to "serve as your pep talk and as a loving reminder that, with courage and willingness, your story will set us all free" (p. 107). The text explores basic story elements, orienting

the right story toward those that will benefit most from hearing it, the Public Narrative method, and emotional management and best practices for public speaking. While Box and Mocine-McQueen include practical advice, much of the text consists of assurance the reader's story should be told, will affect others, and has the power to inspire positive change. For communication center professionals, this book is a great resource to use with writers reluctant to delve into the personal, activist writers, public speaking students, and writers of college application essays or graduate school personal statements.

Box and Mocine-McQueen begin by introducing their background as consultants with the Million Person Project, "a storytelling company for change makers," through which they help clients utilize stories for a range of personal, professional, and activist purposes (p. 8). The authors assure readers, "Right now there is someone out there—it may be a friend, a cousin, or a stranger across the world—who needs to hear your specific story" (p. 25). The authors then shift toward technical storytelling advice, covering basic story elements, choosing a personal story, and identifying the appropriate audience. While these topics are not new to communication center professionals, Box and Mocine-McQueen's concise overview is helpful for working with writers learning to shape stories for public rather than academic audiences.

About halfway through the book, Box and Mocine-McQueen introduce Marshall Ganz's Public Narrative technique, which "is organized around three parts: Story of Self, Story of Us, and Story of Now" (p. 67). The authors utilize this method in their consulting work and recommend it as a straightforward organizational strategy that begins with a personal story, relates to and draws in the audience, and calls listeners to action with a message of hope. Their overview of this technique includes a particularly strong example from Mocine-McQueen and can provide direct guidance for writers struggling to transition from the personal to their wider point, connect with their audience, or organize their piece.

Following their discussion of Public Narrative, Box and Mocine-McQueen offer strategies for emotional management when preparing to share, presenting, and responding to feedback about a story. This is an especially worthwhile section going beyond usual public speaking advice and focusing on often-overlooked aspects of presentation, like managing feedback. The authors acknowledge, "Lots of people who hear your story will say things to you that you probably won't expect" and they provide short scripts for responding to such comments (p. 81). This advice is particularly relevant for today's public presentation contexts, which often involve Internet circulation and the potential for ongoing feedback. Box and Mocine-McQueen also offer specific ways to find an audience, which is especially helpful for activist writers. In the final pages of *How Your Story Sets You Free*, Box and Mocine-McQueen compile practical public speaking advice into two pages of "Story-Sharing Rules to Live By" (pp. 101-102). These tips are a strong close to a text that condenses the authors' years of speaking and consulting

experience into a readable, well-designed book. Box and Mocine-McQueen's "Story-Sharing Rules" stand out as a polished list of tips that can aid both tutors learning to consult on presentations and students with public speaking assignments.

Box and Mocine-McQueen's practice-oriented perspectives based on their work with the Million Person Project is a major strength, as examples from clients directly illustrate real-world applications of storytelling concepts. Unlike textbook-format writing and speaking resources, this book's advice is not tailored to academic presentations, and the writing style is accessible and encouraging. Box clarifies the book's orientation is not toward narrative therapy or writing for well-being but rather public writing. Telling a personal story in this context is not "a confession or a 'coming clean,'" but an impetus for the audience to understand the issue at hand and take action (p. 29).

This is a text designed for an introductory audience not already accustomed to or comfortable with publicly sharing personal narratives. For a communication center professional, much of the advice, though concisely and engagingly presented, will be familiar. However, for activist groups on campus and students reluctant to delve into writing about the personal or doing so for the first time, this is an empowering resource and thus a worthwhile addition to communication center shelves. This book offers positivity alongside best practices for public speaking and includes examples that make applications for each piece of advice clear. As social media makes platforms for public activism increasingly accessible, *How Your Story Sets You Free* can enable more writers to utilize their personal stories in calling for social change.