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Thought Leadership

How Families tell their Stories

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We recently had a conversation with Scot Griffin, a long standing friend and supporter of the family office, about his company, Chapterville. It's a fascinating business that compiles and presents life stories in beautiful handmade books.

The power of storytelling has been evident since the dawn of humanity, but the act of recording, reflecting on, and sharing one's own life story, for the benefit of posterity has never been more attractive. We thought it would be interesting to share our interview regarding his take on the concept and how it's delivered.

What is Chapterville, can you introduce us?

Put simply, Chapterville exists to help people tell the stories of their lives in the most fulfilling and illustrative way. We work on private commissions, writing up lifetimes and journeys, that we present in autobiographical form. The stories are set and styled expertly amongst supporting photographs and other materials in a unique and luxurious handmade book.

Chapterville curates each of the contributing elements over a defined period, liaises throughout, and ultimately presents a spectacular volume as a perfect commemoration of the story it holds. Engagement with our clients is often prompted by significant birthdays, landmark moments, or simply as part of family governance and succession planning. Whatever the motivation, each project is as individual as its subject, and the result is a deeply personalised volume; an illustrated legacy that will be cherished and enjoyed for generations.

So what makes Chapterville different to other ghostwriting services?

Looking at those that offer (auto)biographical products, they fall into two main categories. There are companies that provide captioned photographic records in book form, and those who create text stories. The latter presented as ghostwritten, are usually chronicled, and edited skillfully by writers who are matched, as far as possible, to their prospective subjects.

Chapterville has a different approach, and as a result can take the concept, and the end product much further. Firstly, we are looking beyond the chronological capture and record of lifetimes and journeys, and into the preservation of voice and character. The narrative tone on the finished pages will resonate with those that matter most, so that the voice of the subject emerges as recognisable to



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them. When all the supporting elements are expertly combined and set perfectly to create the finished book, the result is a more personalised, more impactful, and ultimately more durable record.

Aren't there other technologies better suited to this? why a book?

We believe that our books are the finest possible way to tell, present, and preserve these legacy stories, whilst being faithful and true to the characters that live them.

There is certainly a case, and a market for recording and preserving story and personality in state-of-the-art formats. New technology is always attractive, but that unrelenting progress can also be detrimental. From home cine-film, through VHS tape, digital video files, then high-definition DVD, and Blue Ray®, these platforms have fallen from the forefront of technology to almost obsolescence well within the span of a single lifetime. We would submit that a book isn't just a more satisfying and tangible item, but also one that will endure as an appreciable possession of record for generations.

It's worth noting that our clients are given all their original audio (and video) interview files and transcripts from our entire process, so you might say they have the best of both worlds available to them.

So, these are one-off works, the finished article is a unique item?

For the larger 'opus' pieces yes, that's right. Second, third, or more copies can be added, but the point is that these works are not created for mass publishing. We are in most cases producing a handmade single item that might be, for example, a 300-page 37cm x 28cm volume with a very contemporary appearance, or it may be something more traditional like a leather or fabric bound edition with marbled end pages and a gilded finish. Of course, we have many other commission options with a limitless variety of book style and size available.

Tell us about your process, what might your client prospects expect?

The first client meeting is where we want to understand the motivations of the moment and the potential scope for the project. There will always be questions for us, and with so many variables at play, we are able to prompt ideas and lines of consideration that advance the process and provide the beginnings of an essential rapport with our subject. There will be discussions about content, expectations, schedules, and of course the finished product, but so much more. That initial meeting presents our clients with a wealth of new information, so it's typically at the second meeting that we start making decisions that will define the project. What follows is interviewing, transcribing, drafting, editing, compiling, composing and so on, but we don't need to explore all of that here. Of course, each client and each encounter are different, but that's at least a reasonable illustration of how the process begins.



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What do you think is the most surprising part of the process for your clients?

Apart from the wonderful reactions at the final presentation, it's probably the interviewing sessions that prove to be most surprising. At that point we are beyond most of the practical considerations and there follows a sense of acceleration. The interview process quickly becomes a comfortable and enjoyable one that brings a sense of purposeful progress and sometimes relief. Interviews are not without moments of unscheduled memories, reflections, and even emotions, but it's fair to say the process can be unexpectedly rewarding.

Can you say something more about the projects you offer other than the major autobiographical pieces?

Of course. We can tell any story retrospectively, but there are instances where clients might be embarking on a transformative real estate development for example or have commissioned a project such as a yacht build or a classic car search that we can chart as it develops and progresses. Whatever the central subject or the timeline, with a simple mandate we can create terms of liaison with project managers, that allow us to record and narrate these events faithfully and regularly as they develop, without interference or disruption. The result is a reliable and illustrated reportage of a journey envisioned and then realised.

Chapterville can also produce a commemoration of an anniversary for a business or brand. Such projects might have multiple contributors.

In the field of philanthropy, we can tell the story of family foundations or other charitable initiatives from their origins through to the work they carry out, the impact they have, the people involved and their ambitions for the future. We can also serialise the work so that each project, or each year, makes up a volume as part of a collection of finished books. The objectives and the details of requirement are led by the client, but these are our most discussed examples.

Can you be commissioned by a third party?

Yes. Our commissions make an inspired gift. In all cases, the subject needs to be willing of course, but our books are worthy additions to a variety of project profiles. There is also opportunity for a broker, developer, or financier, to offer a Chapterville commission to a key client, and in the process add a unique, and possibly exclusive element, to their own value proposition.

Who does the authorship of the books belong to?

In all cases, the author and owner of the finished work is the client, or in the case of a gifted or arranged commission, the subject.



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Tell us about your pricing and the end product?

This is a difficult one to answer because the scope of a project is so individual with multiple elements that each inform commitments of time, resource, and application. In each case we put together a project file that addresses the objectives, requirements, and circumstances for each client as a result of our initial meetings. That will include the principal objectives, our access to the subject(s), supporting materials such as photographs, schedules, deadlines, and any other special considerations or conditions. Service fees and costs quoted are dependent on those factors and more, but to give you some idea, an 'opus' work which is the top of the tree in terms of our service offering will be a 3-9 month undertaking that can in some cases run up into six figures. Having said that, our smaller commissions cost a fraction of that sum. It really all depends on the project.

The books themselves again vary according to commission. They are each handmade and the result of choices expressed by the client. The 'opus' works are heavyweight centre-pieces, that can also be presented in any number of styles and finishes to suit the subject and the stories they hold. Aside from the impact of its appearance, the book itself is such a concentrated and substantial outcome, that possession of it feels very special.

Is there a typical profile to Chapterville clients?

There certainly isn't a typical client, no. There is an inevitable similarity of attributes about aspects of our client profile, but to date our projects have been wonderfully varied. The nature of every client story or project story is of course very individual and therefore very different. Each subject will have their own reasons for wanting to record their story in this way, and although there is that commonality of achievement and success, these are only features or consequences of the stories we're asked to tell.

Any final thoughts?

The cosmologist and author Carl Sagan said, "to read is to voyage through time." I've always liked that quote and I think it's especially appropriate for what we are doing at Chapterville.

As can be seen from all of the information above, this is a fascinating idea, so if you would like any more information, please do contact us or Scot direct.

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