

Forays into Memoir

Recently I travelled 6000 miles to my mother's deathbed, where she promptly refused to die. It felt almost rude - I'd scheduled a three week break from my commitments in order to be a good grieving daughter. I'd anticipated not only the death, but the funeral, the post-funeral reception, the clearing of a house my parents had lived in for sixty years. I'd mentally rehearsed making decisions on every item – bin, charity, keep. I'd timetabled private weeping sessions which never ran over the time slot. I'd noted down pseudo-clever observations on mortality, childhood and motherhood. In short, I'd mourned my mother thoroughly, accepted my new orphan status, but here she was: eating pizza and watching Sound of Music. I almost left. Instead, I hunkered down and had different kind of visit. I didn't have to do anything or talk much. My mother was excellent company. She napped on and off all day, and when she was awake she was soothing. Spending time in the presence of someone who thinks you are a genius if you can tie your shoelaces, is hard to beat.

Within a day, I was at my dead father's desk, writing the truth about my distant past. I had not planned to do this but the instant I began I was hooked. My tone of voice was simpler than my fiction tone. Deadpan and sincere, like a non-lapsed Catholic at confession. My childhood home, the suspension of my mother's death, the abeyance of my grief, the deeply familiar neighbourhood, the unexpected gift of time – all these conspired to produce my first memoir-writing experience.

It centred on a night in 1972 in San Francisco, when a song heard on the radio impelled me to hitchhike to the house of a man I liked. I'd always remembered that event as proof I was adventurous and romantic. The reality, I began to understand, was I'd been insecure and lonely and irresponsible in terms of personal safety. What had I been thinking, hitching in the middle of the night? I'd thought it was a grand gesture, but it wasn't. Grand gestures are only grand if they work. I had expected a declaration of love. What happened instead – and what I'd conveniently forgotten - was something much more interesting than romance.

But almost immediately, although I was stumbling across some home truths, I realised I was not telling the actual truth. I was editing, omitting some boring bits, embellishing the interesting bits. Surprisingly, I was inclined to keep the unflattering bits – that is where the heart of the memory lay, and I wanted to stay true to it. But my memory was simply too vague to remember everything accurately. I needed some dialogue, so I imagined some.

What kind of truth rings truest? Literal facts or plausible reality? How to relate – not create – one's own reality? Neil Young once said his novelist father gave him this advice: *Use the personal stuff you're not proud of. Basically, people want to not feel weird, to not feel they are the only ones.* For me, fiction is always about telling this kind of truth. The characters have to ring true, which means some unlikeable facets are inevitable. I can tell, viscerally, if a story begins to feel contrived or a character one dimensional. I feel a loyalty to the truth, no matter how imaginary.

Making stories up is not easy, but telling the truth is harder. Like riding a bike for the first time, it requires different muscles. I re-wrote the midnight hitchhiking story many times,

deleting what jarred, paring back the artfulness to get at the raw nub of the experience.

What had it really felt like? I was brutal with my ego. What was the point in anything else? I wrote as if no one would read it, much as I might skinny dip but only if no one was looking. I aimed to tell the naked truth. Or a particular naked truth, because of course there are many versions of the truth. It occurred to me that numbers – dates, amounts of money, phone numbers - are things you could not mess with. Everything else seemed up for grabs. When I was pleased with a draft, I sent it to friends for comments. Oddly, I did not feel exposed. I could skinny dip in public!

I wrote other memoirs, each of them focused on times which had stuck in my mind, but which made me uneasy to recall. Uncomfortable times. I was interested in the moments in which I did not particularly like myself. When I bewildered myself. Times I had told no one about, perhaps because of a disappointment I felt complicit in. Could these events have made good fiction? I could have used third person, altered circumstances, invented cleverer endings. But the particular time I was in (deathbed house, sitting at dead father's desk) seemed to lend itself to the rigorousness of memoir. And not making things up was a relief, somehow.

I do not like biographies in general. They often seem like protracted fan letters, when all I want to know is whether the subject had regrets, doubts, times of self-loathing or unmet expectations. Memoirs are better, but only if the author avoids bragging. The braggers miss a trick. They learn little from considering their own lives, being too concerned with impressing readers.

Jennie Erdal is a fine example of a memoirist who seems genuinely curious about what makes her – and the world – tick. Not navel gazing, which denotes a lack of detachment, but thoughtful and quirky observations. The much translated and highly reviewed *Ghosting* is a memoir of being a ghost-writer. Erdal describes how it feels to efface herself: ‘You have to do a kind of disappearing act. As the years passed, I moved sideways and took another sort of invisible presence, one that also tried to catch the voice of the ‘author’ and be a conduit for his creation.’ By the end of *Ghosting*, the reader understands this disappearing act – to some extent - happens in her memoir too. Pride and ego had to step out of the way, to produce a degree of objectivity about her own experience. Perhaps this is the main way in which a good memoirist is rarely self-indulgent. She lifts her own experience into a universal realm, one where readers can recognise aspects of their own lives.

With this in mind, I’ve kept an eye out for self-congratulatory half-truths. It’s tempting to tidy up one’s past with a literary flourish. Strange patterns have revealed themselves, and yet there has been a kind of recognition, as if I already knew of their existence.

Unacknowledged truths are strangely satisfying to acknowledge. Writing about my past has been mysteriously revealing. Apparently we can excavate our own archaeological sites to find, not simply the bare bones of our lives, but our interiors. Things we knew, but did not know we knew. How we really felt about Uncle Ted, or our sister Sally. Why we did what we did, over and over. Self-awareness rarely leads to change – it sheds light, not answers. But this light is so exciting to write about.

One other thing is clear – for myself, memoir-writing only has appeal when focused on the distant past. I suspect this is not just because my perspective is better in long range, but

because I find writing about my recent life too exposing. It's not just myself I need to protect, but my family and friends. The recent past is far better suited for fictionalising. The night I drove my husband back from hospital after his knee operation and didn't feel a shred of sympathy – that has been happily buried in a fiction, and I hope the fictional wife finds resonance with some readers. We all have selfish insensitive moments.

I am an enthusiastic novice; if I write about memoir-writing in ten years, it might be a very different essay. Nevertheless, as a novelist I feel I can confidently make this comparison: Fiction offers escape, but memoirs invite readers to slip into the skin of another human in a much more brazen way. The reader is invited to judge, if they wish. To feel glad they have their own lives, or not. There is an implied contract that literal truth will be told in memoir, but there is no law that forbids a memoirist from adding a romantic brushstroke or two, when the reality was less dramatic. Or adding people to circumstances, or subtracting them. Provided the result serves the truth at the heart of the experience, I am not sure these distinctions matter to the reader. They certainly do not matter to me. Meanwhile, my mother died three months ago and I have not found a pocket of time in which to properly consider this loss. Perhaps this pocket will pop up one day in some equivalent of her death-bed-which-wasn't, and I'll write a memoir titled: *The History of Me and My Mother*.

Cynthia Rogerson Nov 2018