Once Upon a Time: Australian Writers on Using the Past

Chapter 12
'Genre is a minimum security prison': Writing a life
Betty O'Neill

'Complete the sentence: "The day I met…" and write for twenty minutes' were the instructions given on day one of a Memoir and Life Writing workshop I attended in 2010. Nothing sprang to mind immediately but I typed in the beginning and what followed surprised me:

> The day I met my father, I was nineteen.

I stared at these nine true words on the screen and the blank page that followed. I was unsettled. This realisation of how little I knew about my father was the catalyst for a search that culminated in the writing of a hybrid memoir-biography-history, and reflection on this form of writing.

My father disappeared, without warning one night, when I was one year old. I grew up fatherless. I didn't see him again until he made contact with me eighteen years later. Adding to that opening sentence of my homework could only be done by writing about that first meeting and recalling snippets of stories from my mother. The gaps were cavernous and prompted a desire to find out who *was* this man who was my father. What had happened in his life that led him to disappear, reappear and then disappear once more?

The drive to understand an absent parent is particular and intense, propelled by the desire for some felt sense of knowing, understanding, broadened context of lineage, a core issue of identity. Thomas Couser describes writing the father, which he terms 'patriography', in the following way: 'our fathers beget us and then we beget them... I think in my own memoir I am… doing my share of constructing who my father was.' My mission was also one of construction. The foundations were minimal, building supplies were scarce. But I began, relying on the tools of a historian in search of primary

source materials and the fervour of a detective, hot on the cold trail of a missing person, digging up clues and following leads. The Argentinean writer Patricio Pron's proposition resonated with me: 'One day, I suppose, at a certain moment, the children feel the necessity to know who their parents were, and they throw themselves into finding out the truth. The children are the detectives of their parents.'[1]

After the Memoir workshop I began the detective work in earnest, writing the story as it emerged. I started with two photographs of my father, Antoni Jagielski, and three documents with his name on them: his Polish army demobilisation papers, my parents' marriage certificate and my birth certificate. From these, I knew that he was born into a Roman Catholic family in Lublin, Poland, in 1909. The marriage certificate stated his father was a banker. In 1941 Antoni was arrested as a political prisoner for his activities as a member of the resistance, two years after Hitler's troops invaded Poland. He was imprisoned in Auschwitz and then Mauthausen-Gusen until liberation by the Americans in May 1945. After making his way to Italy in 1946, he somehow ended up in England. In 1953 he met my Australian mother in London. She was in England on a two year working holiday. They married, I was born and we came to live in Australia.

When I was fourteen months old my father disappeared. I didn't see him again until 1974. He had stayed in Australia but wanted to return to Poland as he told me he was dying. Like many survivors of the trauma of the concentration camps and other experiences, he did not speak to me or my mother about his life before, during or after the war. He also said little about his eighteen years in Australia. I was reluctant to ask, my mother wasn't interested and so we remained ignorant of all but a few years of his life. He returned to his homeland in October 1974. I never heard from him again.

From the life writing course I developed a compulsion to reconstruct my father's life. I went to Poland in 2013 in the early stages of my research. By detective work, pure chance and unexpected connections, I inherited the locked up Lublin flat to which my father returned in 1974. Unbeknownst to my mother or me, he had reunited with his first wife, Helena, and other daughter, Janina, and the three of them lived together in this 36.52 square metre flat. I was to discover that Antoni died in 1996: he lived for another twenty-two years after his return to Poland. Helena died in 2003 and when

Janina died in 2011, just two years before I got there, with no will and no children or other known relatives – no-one in Poland knew about my mother or me – the flat had been secured and left empty. As the only known living relative, I inherited a private, domestic, inter-generational archive of photos, official and unofficial documents and artefacts. I spent two months sifting through the lives of the people who had inhabited this flat, getting to know them and letting them go at the same time. This archive was a historian's treasure trove, a time capsule that helped explain some of the decisions my father made. It contained ordinary people's everyday belongings: clothes, books, glassware, jewellery, furniture; remnants of lives lived over a period of more than sixty years.

The full length narrative I have now completed encompasses the search for my absent father: the memoir component; the story of my father's life: the biography; within the context of pre-war Poland, World War II, post-war England and Australia, the Cold War and the fall of communism in Europe, resulting in the restoration of democracy to Poland in 1989: the history. Still alive, my father finally experienced the freedom for which he had fought as part of the resistance movement against the totalitarian regimes of Germany and Russia in World War II.

The hybrid nature of my work is not unusual in 'life writing'. The term encompasses memoir, autobiography, biography and history. However, in recent times, these classifications have become less and less meaningful as authors interweave aspects of each through their writing. As David Shields observes, 'Genre is a minimum-security prison.'[2]

These various genres are all classified as non-fiction but often use what are considered to be fictional devices of scene, character development, dialogue and plot. In relation to history, Anne Curthoys and Ann McGrath write: 'Most history books are in narrative form. They tell a story.' They go on to discuss the lessons history writers can learn from fiction writers in the use of narrative arc , action and suspense, character and emotion, style, rhythm and metaphor. As a distinguishing feature they note that histories offer both analysis and description.[3]

Curthoys also offers the following as an explanation for a shift from the restrictions of history writing:

> Very often writers and historians find the rules and protocols governing history-writing – such as detailed citation, careful acknowledgement of relevant work by others, limited use of speculation to 'fill in the blanks' in the record – to be limiting, leading some to prefer historical novels or perhaps memoirs where such constraints do not apply.

Memoir and autobiography are usually written in the first person, biography in the third person and history, traditionally, in the third person passive voice. The subject is predominantly the self in memoir and autobiography but can include family and others, places and events. In biography, an account of a person's life is presented by someone else. The idea that in writing someone else's life it is impossible to completely exclude writing one's own has led to the composite term auto/biography, a further acknowledgement of the blurring of classifications.[4]

Elaine May describes history and memoir as 'goalposts marking the extremes of non-fiction' and what separates and connects them is 'the vast playing field of memory'. She goes on to suggest that 'they reverse each other – memoir being personal history, while history offers a kind of public memoir.' Thus one could imagine a continuum between these goal posts from history through biography and autobiography to memoir. Authors slide backwards and forwards along this continuum without the imperative or perhaps even the ability to name a single location for their writing. As a consequence, booksellers struggle to decide where various titles should sit on their genre-categorised shelves. However, there are further distinguishing characteristics that can be teased out in order to consider some of the strands of each genre and the ways in which they may or may not be braided together.[5]

At one end of the continuum, we have the strands of history and biography. Some critics, including Kate Brown, suggest that biography is too personal for the historian as it can 'lead the scholar, who is supposed to be detached, to over-identify with the subject' and also that it cannot tell us much about the larger world. I disagree, as does American

historian Alice Kessler-Harris who has observed that 'an individual life might help us to see not only into particular events but into the larger cultural and social and even political processes of a moment in time.'[6]

Penny Russell offers this distinction between biography and history: 'In biography, the context is important where it illuminates the life. In history, the life is important where it illuminates the context.' The foregrounding and back grounding of the private and the public, the person and the events, is a point of differentiation, with the best biographers contextualising their subjects by including the economic, political and social circumstances and the events and ideologies of the times and the best historians populating their writing with people. A model for this is Ian Buruma in *Year Zero: A History of 1945*.[7]

The writing of history has changed significantly in recent decades. It was once considered that history writing should be detached and objective, grounded in public life, recording the chronology of important events, trends, institutions or people, mostly 'great men'. Ian Buruma includes biographical elements of the personal – his parents and grandparents – demonstrating that we now have approaches that are rich and diverse with the boundaries blurred. In terms of classification, Barbara Caine describes the impossibility of separating history from either biography or autobiography in the ways that were so important to positivist historians across much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and Buruma and others are testament to this.[8]

Moving along the continuum from history and biography, we come to autobiography and memoir, terms that are sometimes used interchangeably. Phil Cohen differentiates memoir from autobiography by describing them as 'essentially different projects in this respect, one privileging thematics, the other chronology.' They are both usually first person accounts of the life of the author, with autobiography being about one's own life, usually from birth to the present time, and memoir typically writing about a part of one's own life. The key focus of the autobiography and the memoir is on the personal and they are important not just as source material, but as history itself. With reference to memoir, Paula Fass adds:

> Whereas histories try to reconstruct large views of the lived experience of the past, memoirs can only contribute small splinters to that reconstruction. These splinters provide each of us with a personal past and allow our memories to become part of what constitutes the history we pass forward.

This highlights the productive tension between the big picture and the small scene, the individual and the collective, which ignites the engine of history.[9]

The most significant recent contribution to the collective memoir is the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2015, Svetlana Alexievich, a writer born in Soviet Ukraine and raised in Soviet Belarus. The prize was awarded to her 'for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time'. Her books are based on thousands of interviews with children, women and men who experienced World War II in Russia, the Chernobyl disaster and the Soviet war in Afghanistan. Her accolade is a rare example of non-fiction being awarded the prize for literature. Announcing the award, the Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, Sara Danius, credited Alexievich with inventing a new literary genre, which she called 'a history of emotions – a history of the soul, if you wish… it's not really about a history of events [these] are just pretexts for exploring the Soviet individual and the post-Soviet individual.'[10]

In this form, events are used to interrogate the experience of the individual which illuminates the history of the Soviet regime at particular points in time. Alexievich presents a body of work in which her own voice is not in the foreground.
In her work, individual life stories and memories reflect a bigger history, biographies and memoir capture the essence of a period or event in history, traversing the length of the history-biography-autobiography-memoir continuum.

Movement up and down this continuum and overlaps between the genres are not recent phenomena. Julie Rak gives the example of Jean Jacques Rousseau's 1782 *The Confession* which includes 'the genre of religious confession, the story of the growth of the artist, the road narrative, and the polemic.' David Shields quotes a writer in the *New York Globe* in 1851 who criticised the writing of *Moby-Dick,* saying that Herman Melville had not 'given his effort here the benefit of knowing whether it is history, autobiography,

gazetteer, or fantasy.' More recently, Susan Wyndham, literary editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, reported Jacqueline Kent, chair of the judging panel for the National Biography Award, as saying: 'an extraordinary range of history, biography, diaries and memoir comes under the heading "biography" and Australian authors are making good use of the hybrids'.[11]

Authors are also expanding definitions and forms. For example, traditionally memoir has been narrative prose utilizing many fiction writers' techniques to create an engaging story. But need it be prose, or in a book? What of poetry, or six word memoirs on Twitter, or cartoons, or collage, or cyberlebrities and autobiographical avatars, blogging an online diary or digital storytelling? Some have even suggested that the ubiquitous 'selfie' is a form of life writing. Clearly there are many forms currently available that could be considered memoir, challenging the purist or elitist view of narrative prose in book form.[12]

An additional challenge held up to life writing is the criteria of a 'factual account'. A number of authors, for example James Frey and Helen Demidenko, have failed to meet this criteria, raising significant issues about the relationships between memoir, memory and history, the integrity of the author and publisher – who promotes a book in a particular way – and the contract between writer and reader. Couser argues that memoir has

> a kind of traction, leverage or force that purely imaginative writing, like the novel, may not have. And that's an ethical concern. While the notion of a contract (or pact, per Lejeune) may overstate the scenario, I think writers of memoirs are in a different relation with readers. There are opportunities, as well as obligations, implicit in that generic relationship.

This contract with the reader is based on a range of expectations and in memoir, these include a truthful exploration of the author's life. Gillian Whitlock agrees: 'Life narrative… signals to the reader an intended fidelity to history and memory'. The facts do matter to readers and they have an expectation that life writing is a truthful portrayal by the author.[13]

We know and accept that memory is selective and influenced by many factors including the focus of attention at the time, the level of trauma associated with the memory, the social mores of the era and those of the time from which the past is viewed. Carolyn Steedman describes the historical account as 'indeterminate and speculative' stating: 'Nothing ever, ever can possibly have happened as we tell it.' The reader of memoir must trust that the writer's intention and craft is to provide a 'truthful exploration of an actual life' and to produce the most faithful representation possible. These controversies over fact and fiction, truth and memory keep life writing in the limelight of literary discussion, as do the debates over definitions, genres, subgenres and merging of genres as discussed so far, and still the demand for authentic stories from readers continues to grow, as does the desire to write them.[14]

Blake Morrison suggests a reason for the popularity of 'real' stories, coining the term 'fiction fatigue' with readers tired of novels with made up characters, plots and scenes. This links to Shields book *Reality Hunger* in which he contends that part of the reason for the increase in the demand for memoir is our current obsession with reality in a range of media. This 'obsession' is evident in the growing social media readerships of personally oriented weblogs and networking sites such as Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter and in the increased demand for reality television. In 2008, more votes were cast for the reality singing program *American Idol* – 97 million – than were cast for Barack Obama for president on election day – 70 million. There has been a shift in television viewing from drama to a myriad of reality programs, mirroring a swing by readers and writers from novels to life writing, suggesting that contentions about this intrigue with representations of reality are well-founded.[15]

One explanation for this is the search for role models, mentors, people both famous and not, who can provide inspiration and guidance to a life well lived. Through the life of the author, readers can connect to events both personal and public provoking reflection and consideration of the self and its relationship with others, society and culture from which they can learn. This examination of where one sits and how one relates to ever-expanding circles of connection is often what interests life writing readers. Julie Rak

supports this educational agenda of memoir writers as 'they faithfully report experiences from which others can learn'.[16]

One folding of the memoir end of the continuum back on the history end is Beth Yahp's *Eat First, Talk Later*. It has the subtitle 'a memoir of food, family and home' on the front cover while the back cover blurb notes that it is a story of 'corruption, censorship of the media, detentions without trial, deaths in custody... protests are put down, violently, by riot police.' Yahp describes the recent past and present Malaysia. She uses the device of taking her ageing parents on a road trip around Malaysia retracing their honeymoon of forty-five years ago. It is history disguised as memoir.[17]

With the displacement of millions of people after World War II and subsequent wars, and the fallout from famines and other disasters, mass migration has become a feature of the second half of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries. Various cultures and ethnic backgrounds make up the population of many countries. These citizens don't necessarily share a common history of places or events. Feeling connected to a new culture or community can be difficult. Diasporic and lost-in-translation memoirs of immigrants attest to this. The desire for a greater engagement with each other has prompted an attempt to create a sense of belonging by sharing personal stories and finding common ground in themes rather than events. Anna Poletti argues that:

> the universality of themes such as "life, loss, belonging, hope for the future, friendship and love" (Burgess 2006, 212)… are presented as the common historical experience shared by the participants. However, it also offers something much more affecting than this, an experience of inclusion and community building… This promise occurs at the level of defining the site of life storytelling as authentic, powerful and dealing with universal themes that unite the community.

Memoir is one obvious vehicle for the recording of such stories and an avenue for understanding and connection for multicultural communities and nations interested in exploring the meaning of citizenship.[18]

Memoir has also been bolstered by the emerging field of family history and genealogy, which reportedly accounts for the largest use of the internet after pornography and online shopping. This increased interest in the researching and writing of family histories, and aspects of family histories in memoir, in the last thirty years or more is clear. However, if there was no interest in reading these, if there was no market outside family members and polite friends, these manuscripts would remain in bottom drawers and family archives. Instead, they constitute a burgeoning subgenre of life writing. Fass argues that memoir's 'contemporary popularity is in the deepest sense an expression of the widespread engagement with history in the contemporary world.' As Nancy Miller has put it, 'however hellish the lives, told in memoirs they give you just what your unrecorded history lacks and that the novel used to offer: a narrative through which to make sense of your own past'. This sense making and relationship to history applies both to writers and readers of memoir and other forms of life writing, as lives are thrown onto the screen and the page for analysis and consideration.[19]

Mine is such a story. My engagement with my own family history, my journey from two photos and three documents through the diversity of historical sources in the archives of a family flat in Lublin, of Auschwitz and Gusen, of the Polish Underground Movement Study Trust and Polish Institute in London, led to information about my father that enabled me to reliably describe him as a brother, husband, father, Catholic, Pole, resistance-fighter, patriot, hero, liar, prisoner, killer, survivor, imposter, bigamist and Australian. These pieces have come together to form a picture of a man whose story is a micro-history that reflects the larger macro landscapes and times he inhabited. These acts of constructing and remembering my absent father, as I fathomed the depths of intergenerational memory and transnational historical discourse, have taken place within a broader narrative of war, exile and immigration. My story is of one family amongst millions whose lives were fractured by World War II. It is unique, but similar to a whole generation of children of Eastern European, and other, migrants to Australia and other countries.

In researching, reflecting and writing, I have come to appreciate human complexity: not good or bad but layered by circumstance and context. By unearthing a family archive,

uncovering secrets, facts and lies, I have been able to solve the case of a missing person and shine a light on a dark period of personal and world history. It's a story of moving from one end of the continuum to the other to reconstruct, make meaning of and write about a fascinating life.

Endnotes

[1] Stephen Mansfield, 'Fashioning Fathers: An Interview with G. Thomas Couser', *Life Writing*, vol 11, no1, 2014, p5 (Online) Available: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rlwr20 (Accessed 27 June 2016); Patricio Pron, *My Father's Ghost is Climbing in the Rain*, Vintage Books, Random House, 2014, p12.

[2] David Shields, *Reality Hunger: a manifesto*, Penguin, London, 2011, p70.

[3] Ann Curthoys and Ann McGrath, *History as Literature* [online]. *Agora*, vol 45, no 2, 2010, pp25-30. Availability: http://www.academia.edu/12876452/History_as_Literature_Historians_can_learn_a_lot_from_novelists_and_screenwriters (Accessed 27 June 2016).

[4] Ann Curthoys 'History as a form of literature: EP Thompson's The making of the English working class', in Camilla Nelson and Christine de Matos (eds), *Fictional histories and historical fictions: Writing history in the twenty-first century*, *TEXT, s*pecial issue, 28 April, 2015 (online). Available: http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue28/Curthoys.pdf (Accessed 29 June 2016).

[5] Elaine May 'Confessions of a Memoir Thief', in Patricia Hampl and Elaine May (eds), *Tell me True: Memoir, History and Writing a Life*, Borealis Books, Imprint of Minnesota Historical Society Press, Minnesota, 2008, pp83-95.

[6] Kate Brown, 'A Place in Biography for Oneself,' *American Historical Review*, June 2009, pp596-605 and Alice Kessler-Harris, 'Why Biography?' *American Historical Review*, June 2009, pp625-630.

[7] Penny Russell, 'Life's Illusions: The "Art" of Critical Biography', *Journal of Women's History,* vol 21, no 4, 2009, pp152-156; Ian Buruma, *Year Zero: A History of 1945*, Atlantic Books, London, 2013, p19.

[8] Barbara Caine, *Biography and History*, Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke, 2010, p84.

[9] Phil Cohen, 'Recognizing in the Inferno That Which is Not: Reflections on Writing a Memoir', *History Workshop Journal*, no 74, 2012, p176 and Paula Fass, *Inheriting the Holocaust: A Second-Generation Memoir*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 2008, p5.

[10] Svetlana Alexievich, Nobel Lecture 'On the Battle Lost', 7 December 2015, (Online) Available: https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2015/alexievich-lecture_en.html (Accessed 26 June 2016).

[11] Julie Rak, *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*, Wilfred Laurier University Press, Ontario, 2013, p5; David Shields, op cit, p17; Susan Wyndham, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 July 2014.

[12] For poetry, see Ann-Marie Priest, 'The Malleableness of Memoir', *Australian Book Review*, June-July 2014. Available: https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/abr-online/current-issue/117-june-july-2014/1998-tangential-lives (Accessed 7 June 2014); Anna Poletti my six word memoir (online) #iaba2014 pic.twitter.com/XpQmk9GL26, 31 May 2014. Available: https://twitter.com/poletti_anna (Accessed 26 June 2014); for cartoons, Art Spiegelman *Maus: a survivor's tale*, Penguin, London, 2003; Art Spiegelman, *Meta Maus* Pantheon Books New York 2011; Will Eisner, *Life, in pictures: autobiographical stories,* W.W. Norton & Co, New York, 2007; for 'cyberlebrities' see GillianWhitlock , *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2010.

[13] Thomas Couser in Stephen Mansfield, op cit, p5; Gillian Whitlock, op cit, p12.
[14] Carolyn Steedman, 'Intimacy in Research: accounting for it', *History of Human Sciences*, vol 21, 2008, pp20-21; Patti Miller, *The Memoir Book*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2007, p3.
[15] Blake Morrison, 'Reality Hunger: A Manifesto by David Shields', *The Guardian*, Saturday 20 February 2010. Available: http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/feb/20/reality-hunger-david-shields-review; (Accessed 3 July 2014); David Shields, op cit, p109.
[16] Julie Rak, op cit, p189.
[17] Beth Yahp, *Eat First, Talk Later*, Vintage Books, Sydney, 2015.
[18] Anna Poletti,' Coaxing an intimate public: Life narrative in digital storytelling', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, vol 25, no 1, 2011, p81.
[19] Paula Fass, op cit, 2006, p108; Nancy Miller, op cit, p430.