

The truths we tell

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The truths we tell: that's a daunting topic to start the day with. Especially, I think, the truths we tell about ourselves. What we know, or think we know, about ourselves is so much more complex than what we can discern about anyone else. When we swerve from the truth, we know it. Writing in the third person, with a sense of distance, and perhaps a comfortable degree of ignorance, is easier.

And yet, in spite of all the complications of writing about ourselves, we're all doing it. Memoir seems to have the edge on biography. And it is more often than not the memoir of self, a book, or a story, about Me, in which the voice is first-person singular, and memory is allowed to take control.

There is also, now that we talk of memoir, another form that once was very popular, and now has lapsed a bit. This is the memoir in which the writer commemorates another person from a particular, deliberately limited, viewpoint. It stops short of biography. It often has a modest title: 'X as I knew him'; or 'I was Field Marshal Montgomery's Batman'; or even, as we know too well, 'Princess Diana: what the Butler saw'.

Then there are the fraudulent memoirs, those based on an invented persona, and so really fictional. These exploit our instinctive trust in a first-person narrative. I am thinking of that recently exposed story of honour killings, *Forbidden Love*, by Norma Khouri; and there are others. Indirectly, these concocted identities show how much the truth matters to the reader. Once they're exposed, their value and their sales take a sudden drop, as does the author's reputation. With the notable exception of the Ern Malley poems, which were a hoax rather than a fraud, the inauthentic author scarcely outlives the scandal of exposure. The text is the same, but the necessary trust has been destroyed.

Truth matters, then, obviously. Not the whole truth of a life of course, not the whole experience. Joyce's *Ulysses*, one day in the life of Leopold Bloom, demonstrates that it can't be done. The memoir, which usually takes a particular focus, a theme, a

particular time and place, can select without falsifying, and keep the reader's trust because the claim is a limited one. Writing in the first-person singular, the author tries to explore and expose the self, or to understand the self. So, what are the truths we tell about ourselves?

Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, from a secluded small town in New England, Emily Dickinson remarked: 'Our private theatre is our selves.' Dickinson also described her period as 'the century of the first person singular'. And thinking about that idea, I wonder about the 'private theatre'. Is that what we are creating when we write a story of self? We call up images and scenes in which our younger selves appear, and setting these in motion, we observe, describe, dramatise. And in this twenty-first century, there is a tremendous interest in the first-person narrative, as if it is only through direct testimony that we can connect with authentic, unmediated experience.

Authentic and unmediated—these are slippery terms. Even the diary, in which the self speaks to the self alone, is mediated. And with a memoir, which has a readership in mind, the mediation is conscious. 'A spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings?' Not really.

Memoir is selective. It's different from autobiography, and more modest in what it attempts. An autobiography aims at telling a whole life story, up to the point of writing. It usually observes chronology, though some do play around with time, perhaps beginning in the present and moving backwards, or taking a thematic structure rather than a linear one. But to write an autobiography is a big statement: an assertion that, for whatever reason, this is an important life.

Memoir does not claim so much. Some are what might be called 'period pieces' in which the individual is there to represent a time and place and way of life. These are often quite gentle and nostalgic. At the other end of the emotional scale are those which seem impelled to lift a burden, to release anger that has been repressed since childhood, and so perhaps to get a new freedom. Some are punitive. There's the unhappy, deprived or abused childhood, like Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, or that very fine mother-daughter story by Andrea Ashworth, *Once in a House on Fire*, which is set in the working-class north of England, and is among other things about a

struggle to get an education against seemingly impossible odds. Inevitably, these stories of growing up are also social histories. Or, since they're stories of struggle, they read like reports from the front line in a war zone.

I suppose that most memoirs ask the question: who am I? Though many quite hastily drop that direct question and get on with the narrative, which may or may not answer it. Australians are inclined to relate the 'Who am I?' question to national identity, as Clive James did in *Unreliable Memoirs*, or, like Sally Morgan in *My Place*, look[ing] for a way to understand what it meant to grow up on the margins, having to find her own history as an Indigenous Australian.

Memoirs are not whole lives. They don't encompass as much as biography or autobiography, though they may have more emotional truth than either of those other forms of life-writing. Equally likely, they may be more evasive. A good biography might get closer to truth—I don't say '*the truth*'—than a self-censoring memoirist.

But it is an illusion to think that a biography is objective. It gives the facts of a life, and it fails badly if by poor research it gets these wrong. If the facts are wrong, the feeling will be false. But we no longer say that this or that biography is THE life of somebody famous, nor think that once a life story is between covers we can all go home. Life stories are constantly being rewritten, not because the biographer got it wrong, but because there are new ways of seeing and understanding.

Here is a figure worth pondering. On a recent count there were over 200 biographies of Lord Byron. Queen Victoria has notched up nearly as many and it is a safe bet that Napoleon would have even more.

Biographies, autobiographies and memoirs: these would not flourish as they do if they were just matters of fact, or cases that could be regarded as closed. Just as in life, those we know best can still do things that surprise us, so it is with the famous.

One example: some years ago, I reviewed two new biographies of Jane Austen, which appeared almost simultaneously. Both were asking the same question about a period of Austen's life when she wasn't writing anything.

One biographer interpreted the silence of Jane Austen as depression at being removed from her quiet home in a country village. The other said that she was having too good a time in the sociable centre of Bath. The question was the same—why were there no novels in this period—but the answers were diametrically different. And they followed from different readings of Jane Austen’s personality.

That sort of thing makes nonsense of any idea that THE LIFE can be buttoned down and tidied away for ever. Different times, different biographers, take you from a placid cosy, dear old Aunt Jane Austen all the way to a repressed, edgy feminist, or a social being who couldn’t resist a party. Perhaps the best of all possible biographies would have accommodated these apparently contradictory selves.

Thinking about biography, after I had written four of them, brought me, rather to my surprise, into memoir. I started out to write a set of essays on the experience of biography—on the encounter between author and subject. And I did this, in the book published last year, called *Life Class: The education of a biographer*. But as I was working on it—quite early on—I realised that I wanted to understand the question of choice, and to ask why I had chosen these people to write about—these and not the almost limitless alternative lives I could have chosen.

I wrote these biographies in the third person, and I didn’t build in the process of choice and search, uncertainty and rethinking. That’s what I looked at in my memoir. And I began by asking: why these people, and what kind of invisible connections drew me to them?

Life Class was also a reflection on a career which went in an unexpected way: I didn’t consciously set out to be a biographer. As an academic working in a department of English, I could have stayed with literary criticism or literary theory, which was more usual. Biography in my time as an academic in mid-career was not usual in English departments: we left that to the historians; it didn’t seem quite to fit into literary studies.

That was more than 20 years ago; things have changed a lot. But looking back on my move from literary studies to biography, I thought there were some questions I wanted to ask.

I'd got used to interviewing other people: interviewing the self was a different matter.

There's an experience nearly everyone has from time to time. Passing a shop window with well-polished reflecting windows, or getting into a lift which happens to have a mirror, you catch a surprise image of a person you didn't expect to see. It looks like a stranger for one second, but it's not. It's the self that other people see. I always hope that the mirror does not get it right—but let's be realistic: that probably was me as others see me.

The self on the page will never be quite right, so far as the writing self can judge.

But that's no reason to give up, any more than we give up trying to understand those we know best. We have to forget about omniscience, or at least leave it to the novelist.

Looking back on my own early self for the memoir I called *Life Class*, I had the sense of momentary disbelief, before beginning to think about that distant, half-forgotten and at times inconsistent person I call myself. And trying to make sense of it all—and giving up on that—and accepting the fact that nothing is quite predictable—certainly not the zigzag path that brings me here today, to talk about memoir, and mirror images and confrontations that take me back to suburban Melbourne of the 1930s and 1940s, an academic career I never expected to have, and a second career as a writer and a biographer, which is still going, even in my seventies. Unimaginable old age, I would have said: I can remember thinking that after my thirtieth birthday, everything would be settled. I could not have envisaged standing here today—nor that in my seventies, I'd be preoccupied with my next book.

One of the reviewers of my new book, *Life Class*, said that I had made the dangerous leap from biography to autobiography. Was it really a dangerous leap? It certainly had its difficulties and only time and readers can say whether or not I made a safe landing.

But I never thought of it as an autobiography. It is something much more modest: a memoir, quite narrowly focused, in which I retrace my steps as a biographer, look again at the lives I have written, and ask some questions about the kind of life experience and education which led me in this direction.

This book, *Life Class*, ought to have been the easiest of all to write, since it is about myself, walking in my own footsteps as I did the research and the thinking and the writing of other people's lives. In writing this, I didn't have to defer to authorities, I didn't have to look anything up, I could forget libraries and document searches.

With a small amount of checking, it was all here, in my memory, which is my private portable archive. I can take my memory for a walk, consult it while I am doing the ironing, or sitting in the car waiting for the lights to turn green.

All the same, it wasn't easy. The same problems of selection are there to be faced: what parts of my own life have helped to make me a biographer—something I never planned to be?

Writing someone else's life, you have the problem of ignorance—maybe a big gap of years in which you simply don't know what your subject was doing. Writing my own life, that is not the difficulty. I can't remember everything I ever did—obviously a lot has gone into the trash compartment of my unreliable computer memory—but there is plenty to choose from, too much, really, and the real problem is what to choose: which moments in time could be said to be significant in shaping my career as a biographer?

I tried to answer the question: why biography? Why am I interested in other people's lives? Interested enough to spend several years in the company of someone who perhaps died long before I was born?

So I took a backward look at the biographies I have written, and speculated as to the choices. These people didn't choose themselves—not directly anyway—so there must be some common feature.

One of the common features, I soon discovered, was that all four books were stories of displaced people. I started with the restless expatriate Martin Boyd, the novelist member of the Boyd family of artists. I moved on to Georgiana McCrae, the colonial painter and diarist, who came to Melbourne in 1841, was always homesick for Scotland, and thought of herself as an exile.

Then I wrote *The Boyds: A family biography*, which is a five-generation study of a family whose founding fathers included a convict, and whose lives, even to the

present day, include many, many crossings back and forth between Europe and Australia.

Then, following these exiles and expatriates, I found myself writing the story of a refugee, the Hungarian Jewish painter Judy Cassab, who made a new life in Sydney, having lost her mother, grandmother and others of her family in the Holocaust. Unlike Georgiana McCrae, who dreamed of a return to Scotland, Judy Cassab told me that she never had the luxury of feeling homesick, because her home and family—almost all the Jewish people in her home town—were killed and the way of life she remembered was not there for her to revisit.

Displaced people, and creative people—these themes recur in all my biographies.

In *Life Class*, I have revisited these biographies, pondered on the relationship between me as author and these, my chosen subjects. I can't claim to have resolved these questions, which I think must always have an element of mystery. But in my rather unexpected, zigzag career, in which I turned from academic to biographer, I think that I can see certain patterns and themes emerge. These include an interest in women's lives and choices, and a concern for displacement and loss of homeland.

I should add that I don't believe biographies should be written to prove a point. They are about individuals; they say implicitly that people matter, and that each one of us is an individual with a distinctive story—which, if the biographer listens hard enough and carefully enough, will come to life on the page and engage the reader.

Life Class is a backward look at some aspects of my life as well as some retracing of my footsteps as a writer, as an academic, and before that, as a child in the 1930s and 1940s growing up in a particular milieu—one which today seems pretty remote. And as a young woman in the 1950s, lacking direction, with no idea of career planning, eventually finding my way in the 1960s to a satisfying career as an academic, and later as a biographer.

Although it's a small book, *Life Class* covers quite a lot of time: my whole life, in fact, though only in quick glimpses, and in stories that seem to me to have personal and representative meaning for myself as a biographer. Like most writers of memoir, I looked at family, childhood and schooldays. And because of the time and viewpoint

from which I approached those early days, I chose memories which have resonance for the present self.

Biography, which is about individuals, and can do nothing worthwhile unless it responds to individuality, is in a way a reply to uniformity, labelling, reducing to type—and it's possible that in remembering my childhood as one where everything was predictable, everything in its known and proper place, I have been prompted to see how the world looked from different windows.

So I went back to beginnings, as biographers always do, and looked at my own, which was a childhood in the small and sheltered world of the Melbourne suburb of Kew. This was the 1930s, a time when that suburb had a very high proportion of fairly prosperous Catholic families, drawn there partly because it was close to the Jesuit schools of Xavier College and its preparatory school, Burke Hall. And also to my own school, a convent which was run by an enclosed order of French origin, where I had 12 years of what must seem to new generations a pretty eccentric schooling: we were all going to be either nuns or mothers, and the idea of careers was not given any serious thought.

An example: something I retrieved for *Life Class*. The most vividly recalled story of early schooldays was the time, when aged seven, I was cast as the smallest angel in the nativity play, and had to produce a pair of wings at short notice. This was done—not without great effort at home (we were not wing-makers)—and I was very proud of the result. Magnificent wings: I took them to school, expecting Mother Mary de Sales to be as pleased and impressed as I was.

And in one way they were a success. But they were too good, too splendid, for the smallest angel, and so I was asked if I would be a good unselfish child and give them to the Archangel Gabriel, who was rather badly served in the matter of wings. She was the tallest girl in Grade 4 and I was the smallest in Grade 3. I can see now the viewpoint of the nuns; aesthetically, the best thing to do was to swap wings. And that was done. But I got no pleasure at all from being unselfish; it felt like blackmail—a word I would not then have known. And I wonder about the Archangel Gabriel: how did she feel about having her wings being declared a failure for the star part?

That story, comical now, does have meaning in the context of the times, then, and of course for me as I was looking back to seek reasons for a career which had a late and uncertain start. For better or for worse, and probably both, the little girls of my time never said ‘no’ to authority, never asserted rights of their own. Submissiveness was praised; the general good came first by a long way, and any expression of dissent, or even questioning, was cut short pretty smartly. The emphasis on giving in and holding back was good to some extent, but it had a price, in that when there was a need to assert oneself, we didn’t have much practice.

The first half of *Life Class* is a memoir of childhood, school, university and career as an academic. A convent schooling in the 1930s and 1940s, Melbourne University, no special ambitions, no direction—and in this matter of no direction towards a career I was pretty much typical of young women of my generation.

As I have said in the book, it really was a surprise to have any career at all, let alone the double one of academic and biographer. At school, we were programmed to be nuns or mothers, and if you were filling in time for a few years before marriage, ‘a nice little job’ was all you expected.

My first memories go back to the mid-1930s, to the time when my parents were building the house in Studley Park Road, Kew, where I grew up. It’s still there, that house I grew up in, and when I was starting work on *Life Class*, I did a walk of memory.

Walking up Studley Park Road, past our house, towards ‘Raheen’—the red-brick mansion now owned by Richard Pratt—I remembered the well-known and dramatically striking figure of the Archbishop, Dr Mannix, in his top hat and flowing cape, looking as if he’d stepped out of a Victorian novel. And round the first corner, in Howard Street, lived Robert Menzies, who even as prime minister kept his home base in this modest house. It says something about the times we lived in that he could live there so quietly: no minders, no press or camera ambushes, no power walks.

We had only one encounter with Menzies, which was the time when someone did an anti-Menzies exercise in graffiti on our fence, which [was] a high one, dark brown, a great surface for white paint, and very visible to passers-by on the bus route to the

city. The slogan was 'Keep Czar Menzies out'. My father, never a handyman, let it stand for a few days, during which a neighbour complained. 'If you don't remove that, people will think you're in sympathy with it.' Next came Menzies' daughter, Heather, on her way home from school. Armed with white chalk, she wrote in large letters underneath: 'Hooey!' Mr Menzies called in and apologised for his daughter but was probably proud of her and amused, as my parents were.

Menzies, who must have been in Canberra a lot, was not often seen: he didn't do power walks. But our other famous neighbour was out and about every day.

Archbishop Mannix walked every day from 'Raheen' to St Patrick's Cathedral, in East Melbourne, until he was 90 years old, regally distributing pennies and threepences on his way. There are any number of stories about these encounters. There was the Collingwood child who took the black-cloaked top-hatted figure to be an undertaker, who had somehow got detached from his funeral. And there was the boy on his way to school, meeting the archbishop, who greeted him in a friendly way. This small boy, not a Catholic and unused to the height and splendour of the Mannix presence, could only gasp: 'I'm not allowed to talk to strangers' and run as fast as he could.

That was the Catholic-Protestant divide of the period: it was Us and Them in that period; Our people and Theirs. I don't remember any sense of hostility, but we had such a secure, complete and sheltered world that we never saw the need to seek out difference. Those we met at school and at church—these seemed enough, and it made for easy sociability that we could all assume the same beliefs and attitudes. I didn't make a non-Catholic friend until I was at university, and even there the Catholic students kept together.

Was this a good start for a biographer? I certainly would not say now that it was a good thing to live in a cocoon, as I did, but the degree of shelter and sameness that went with a Catholic childhood and convent education in middle-class Melbourne did, I think, make me ready to see difference when at last I emerged. Firmly fixed as I had been, I had a heightened awareness of what displacement might mean, and a wish to understand it.

As for the choices of biographical subject, I am beginning to think that the stories I have written, about expatriate, exile and refugee lives, are really exemplary Australian stories.

Perhaps without my intending it, my set of biographies and others like them may go some small way towards understanding our Australian history, a reminder of how much we owe to displaced people, from the convict great-grandfather of the Boyd family to Jewish refugees like Judy Cassab, and the boat people and asylum-seekers whose stories still trouble us—or should do so. And the Indigenous people whom the European settlers displaced.

As for myself—someone who grew up in that small, sheltered world—I think that I did need to look out of windows that showed me more than I could see from mid-twentieth-century Catholic suburban Kew, and that my life as a biographer is an attempt to understand experiences quite different from my own.

My first title for *Life Class* was ‘Other People’s Lives’. I dropped that pretty quickly because it sounded a bit forlorn, as if I hadn’t any life of my own. But, more important, I was beginning to see more clearly that the division between my life and the lives of the biographical subject was not at all clear cut, not sharply defined.

The people with whom I have spent so much time—the Boyd family, Georgiana McCrae, Judy Cassab—became part of my own experience.

Writing about them has changed me, and if I were to write them over again the result would be different—not drastically so, perhaps, because the basic facts, the chronology, the essentials of each story, would remain the same, but in tone and point of view there would be changes, because I have changed.

And, of course, having written my own memoir, in *Life Class*, I am even more alert to the inevitable entanglements between self and subject. Writing in the first person has made me more aware of the space between autobiography and biography, between self and subject, between first person and third person. And that space is not as big as I once thought it was.