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Blind truth: The reality effect in non-fiction

Abstract:

French theorist Philippe Lejeune considers autobiography as a collaborative genre involving several people behind the writing persona...how the reader responds to the experiences of the narrator seems to be what matters. Lejeune also discusses the notion of an author's pact with a reader, a pact which I aim to 'unpack' in this paper. As part of my PhD studies on narrative, memory and truth, I am writing a creative non-fiction book about growing up in Broadmeadows. What started out as a biography about two blind brothers has become a memoir of a time and place and community. I am interested in the telling of stories, theories of voice, identity and agency and by focussing on these narrative strategies as part of my practice-led research I hope to address them in the wider context of writing and literary studies.

Biographical note:

Caroline van de Pol is a lecturer in Media and Communication at RMIT. She is a journalist and occasional editor of the international design magazine, *Curve*. She has worked both as a journalist and in public relations for the *Herald Sun* and as a freelance writer for *The Sunday Age*. Caroline has published two non-fiction health books, including her most recent book, *Handle With Care* (2008), which she co-authored with Evelyn Tsitas.

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Memory—Narrative strategies—Practice-led research—Truth—Voice

Introduction

This paper arises from my exploration of narrative strategies used in both fiction and non-fiction to achieve what Roland Barthes calls the ‘reality effect’ as discussed by James Mitchell (2003) in a paper on the popularity of Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes*. Other writers of autobiography, memoir and fiction will also be discussed as I explore those stylistic techniques used to give shape to stories, to bring truth to both fiction and non-fiction. Through my literary study and interaction with various scholars and creative writers I am attempting to address problems in my own autobiographical writing and identify those fine lines of blurred fact and fiction that exist in what might be collectively called life writing. At the same time I am proposing that all forms of autobiography involve a creating and shaping that adds to its fictive form. A life told is not the same as a life lived, and in the writing of memory or the narrating of story the relationship between fact and fiction becomes fluid. I will make reference to my own creative work to further explore these ideas and the concept of a writer-reader pact.

In reflecting on novels by Carson McCullers, Tim Winton and Harper Lee I am not attempting a detailed critique but more importantly I’m looking to identify and analyse those narrative strategies such as voice, identity and agency, alongside literary considerations of point of view, language and place, to provide both verisimilitude and authenticity as Barthes illustrates in ‘the reality effect’ (1986). Studying how and for what purpose memoirs make use of narrative strategies borrowed from these other genres can grant us significant insights into the practices of life writing (Mitchell 2003: 608).

The pact

Mary McCarthy, in her book *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957), begins with a rather long note to the reader, acknowledging the relationship that exists between writer and reader whenever a book is opened. The writer offers up a pact and takes the reader on a journey into unknown territory, behind closed doors to uncover something new. Whether it’s fiction, memoir, or an academic paper, a reader comes to the work with experience, expectation and hopefully, excitement. It is the role of the writer, the researcher to deliver through a rigorous selective process around genre, content and technique.

In his theory of the autobiographical pact, Lejeune integrates a concept of ‘both implied and actual (flesh-and-blood) readers into the meaning-making of autobiographical writing.’ (Lejeune, P. in Smith&Watson 2001: 140). As we know from Umberto Eco and his theories in *The Role of the Reader* (1979) these actual or ‘flesh and blood’ readers, who come to a text with experience and knowledge of their own, provide model or ‘possible’ readers for whom the author selects a specific linguistic code or a certain literary style (Eco 1979: 17). Gary Radford illustrates Eco’s ‘model reader’ theory with the advice that ‘authors do not really matter, only texts’ (2002: 1). Within this ‘pact’ or writer-reader relationship (and perfect marriage of strange bedfellows) exists the role of

storytelling, the things that drive some of us to record stories and events, experiences in our lives. And the desire/curiosity that drives us to read these narratives and study both creative writing and literature.

I would suggest that all memoir (autobiography, biography, blogging), is fictionalised in some way—‘ficto’ comes from the Latin, to shape, to create. And it is in this way that life becomes art, the creation is in the retelling. Every story we narrate, from our earliest experiences of language, is fictionalised. And much of the communication, the interpretation of the story is dependent upon the listener, the reader or observer. Josie Arnold extends this relationship to include the ‘sub-voice’ of autobiography and describes an ‘unintentional interaction with self, text and reader’ (2009: 1). Arnold also argues autobiography provides facts in a fictional as well as non-fictional way and raises the questions of the reliability of the narrator in the same way that McCarthy does with her note to her readers:

These memories of mine have been collected slowly, over a period of years. Some readers, finding them in a magazine, have taken them for stories. The assumption that I have ‘made them up’ is surprisingly prevalent, even among people who know me (1957: xi).

Through my creative work I am now turning my memories into stories. In the writing of memory, like McCarthy, I examine the veracity of my own memory, and I too may come under examination by my readers for the truthfulness of the stories. These stories are a collection of memories, some of which I know to be true, others are what I have been told to be true and the rest are what I think to be true. Is this enough? And what do I mean when I say I know something to be true? Is this knowledge based on historical documents...registered certificates of birth and death? Photos? Do I seek for myself, and provide for the reader, other evidence? Or, in taking a real story of a real time and place with real characters and retelling the story in my words, in my way, am I in fact creating a work of fiction? Is my memoir becoming more like a novel?

Critical discussions around the blurring of fact and fiction are not new. Many writers grapple with the question of reliability and authenticity. According to Sidone and Smith in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001), life writing is understood to be a general term for diverse kinds of the writing that takes a life as its subject. ‘Such writing can be biographical, novelistic, historical, or an explicit self-reference to the writer.’ (2001:3). Again, McCarthy raises the fluidity of fact and fiction:

Many a time in the course of doing these memoirs, I have wished that I were writing fiction. The temptation to invent has been very strong, particularly where recollection is hazy and I remember the substance of an event but not the details—the colour of a dress, the pattern of a carpet, the placing of a picture (1957: xi).

I have struggled with the same challenges in my own writing, challenges of reliability and authenticity. I have worked hard, over a number of years and a number of drafts, to avoid the categorisation of autobiography. ‘It’s not about me’ I have wanted to scream ever since someone asked me ‘What’s so special about your life?’... Somehow, like a lot

of the writing I'm drawn to, I prefer the idea of the narrative being seen as 'quasi-autobiography'—a genre that reaches across fiction and non-fiction. And yet I feel I must still honor the pact with my reader, that this is a 'true' story, a pact that Lejeune suggests exists in autobiographical writing.

The reality effect

As my reading and research widens I am drawn to themes of style and technique in memoir and fiction; the way language and sentence construction achieve a reality effect, that is, to infuse stories with a deeper truth. Barthes' discussion of verisimilitude and the distinction between what historians do and what novelists do provides a framework for my research. In *The Rustle of Language* (1986), Barthes examines 'concrete reality' and the need to authenticate the "real" through photographs, immediate witness alongside what might be called the other 'real' through referential illusion and interpretation of reality: '...the reality effect is produced, the basis of that unavowed verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity (1986: 148). Carmel Bird in *Dear Writer* (1988) calls it 'making the reader believe things' and reminds us of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's view with the following quote from Marquez: 'A novelist can do anything he wants to so long as he makes people believe in it' (1988: 49).

In discussing Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, Mitchell suggests there exists a disjunction between self and text and goes on to explain how McCourt employs a disembodied adult voice to introduce his memoir while drawing on Barthes' reality effect. Mitchell notes:

the unproblematic way he relates the family history preceding his own birth does offer insight into McCourt's methods for constructing a past through narrative...what is patently missing from the resulting autobiography, however, is any reflection on the *process* of his assembly (2003: 614).

Reading and writing memoir and fiction and being part of workshops and conversations with Chloe Hooper, Catherine Cole, Robert Dessaix, John Tranter, David Carlin (and most recently Nam Le), I have been drawn to the wider context of literary studies and its relationship, or 'marriage', with creative writing studies. Discussions on the writing process and product emerge as I consider questions of authenticity. Who owns stories? Who tells them best? Who has the right to relate collective or individual memories? I am influenced to some extent by the contemporary debate dubbed 'history wars'. In this discussion Kate Grenville says she does not claim to be 'writing history' as has been suggested. Grenville (2005) says her justification for taking history and making it into story is that it enables readers to consider ideas they might not otherwise want to deal with. One truth, according to Grenville, was distorted but another was revealed.

As I continue to reshape, create or make-up what Barthes calls 'concrete details' (what was the weather like in November 1961, what did my mother look like when she thought she was pregnant for the ninth time?), I wonder if I am changing the story. Or, the

reality? Or am I simply bringing one human being's interpretation of it to achieve what Ernest Hemingway describes as 'truer than true'. As I grapple with stylistic issues like voice and agency, I am attempting to locate my work in a genre. Or am I, like many other writers, simply attempting to turn lives into fiction?

Through the journey I am witnessing an unraveling as biography becomes autobiography, becomes memoir, becomes creative non-fiction, becomes fictionalised memoir, becomes novel. I would argue here that I am pushing the boundaries to some extent. And in looking at the way I am addressing some of these issues I have discovered other writers, scholars who have grappled with similar issues, endured the same struggles. It's what David Lodge (1982) calls the art of fiction. A book takes on a life of its own and what it becomes is not always what you thought it would be. Lodge explains:

Henry James, the first truly modern novelist in the English language, did not believe that ultimate truth about human experience could ever be established, but developed a fictional technique that loaded every rift with the ore of information (1992: 29).

To illustrate this point, I recall how my first draft would have more aptly fitted the biography genre. I, as narrator, was missing from the initial chapters of the story. This resulted in a rather clunky, journalistic mode of reporting and led to correspondence from Peter Bishop, Creative Director of Varuna Writers' Centre, noting the following:

For me, the vital missing element at present is the writer: the narrator is absolutely self-effacing: as a reader I want to know: who is the narrator? What interests her in the story? Why is she telling it to us? (2006).

While I could see value in what Bishop was saying, I struggled—and still do—with writing about the self. In a sense, I was being asked to perform a complete backflip on all that I had learned and attempted to perfect as a journalist, that is to keep myself out of the story, to deliver the story through other people's eyes—to be the reporter. As a journalist there were always decisions to make about what to include, what to leave out, who to quote, where to place the facts. My determination to present both sides of a story to only deal in the facts before me and to have no part in the story has been a hard rule to break. But I also knew if the story was to have the vitality that it deserved I had to dig deeper. I took the advice and I began to put myself in the story. At the same time I retained multiple points of view to ensure 'this was not all about me'.

So if it's not about me, what *is* it about? On one level, the story is about two brothers, the Gleeson brothers who were my neighbors for the first nineteen years of my life. We lived side by side (with only one house between our kitchen tables). Our families shared everything from sugar and cigarettes and long neck bottles of VB for nearly twenty years. The two brothers both became blind after tragic and separate childhood accidents. Maurice was twelve when he ran into a kid at school and, just over a year later, Nick, who was seven, was hit on the back of the head by a swinging supermarket door. On another level, the story is about Broadmeadows (or more specifically, Dallas), a place that makes some people cringe. It's a working class suburb described as one of the

poorest suburbs in Australia. It's in the north of Melbourne and is characterised by large industrial sites, government housing, low incomes and high unemployment. My dilemma is, how do I retell our stories, the tragic accidents and experience of blindness, mental illness, grief and suicide (and survival) with the vitality they deserve? With the toolbox of the novelist, the stylistic techniques used to set place and time and draw out characters, I hope I am moving closer to my challenge.

Tim Winton's Sam Pickles in *Cloudstreet* (1991) would have called it the shifty shadow of luck lurking over the house at Number Eight McIvor Street, Dallas, where Maurice and Nick Gleeson lived. But Sam and the rest of the Pickles and the Lambs are fictional (at least that's what we as readers believe when we read Winton's classic work as a novel). The Gleesons at Number 8 and my family—the Egans—at Number 4 are real. Perhaps that's why I still struggle with the notion of the work as fiction. I have loosely renamed the work in progress '*Angela's Ashes meets Cloudstreet in Dallas 3047*'.

In an early draft of the creative work I attempted an approach, a structure similar to author James McBride in his memoir *The Colour of Water* (1996) where alternate chapters are written by McBride as the narrator and his mother in first person (with McBride as the ghostwriter). In my early work I was telling the story and alternating with the 'memories' of Maurice and Nick. Nick's email to me provided his memories:

At school we played all kinds of games with balls with bells, and I could still run, as long as I followed the voice of someone calling directions for me. I learnt that I could take myself from a b, to run and walk around my house, our front and back yard. In my first week at boarding school I needed to get to a toilet and I got disorientated. The nurse found me crying. I'd wet my pants (2009: 25).

In *The Colour of Water*, McBride evokes an unforgettable picture of growing up with eleven black siblings and a white Jewish mother. I was especially drawn to the 'I' narration of his mother in the alternate chapters and the way her voice 'her own words' drew a portrait for me. I tried it over countless lunches and coffees with Maurice as he remembered and I took notes. Maurice remembers:

I went home from hospital, after the accident, with no training, no orientation, no mobility classes. I spent most of that time alone in my room. I was in denial and thought this isn't really happening. I thought it was like a bad cold, it would soon be over and I would be able to see again (2009: 42).

As the creative work began to take shape I took on the suggestion to insert myself in the story, attempting the early part of the work as a child narrator with the camera lens hidden behind half-closed doors. From there I am currently exploring third person point of view.

Agency and voice

As the narrative continues to take shape, I am questioning aspects of agency, voice and point of view. My research questions have led me to read more widely in the search for what works and why. The child's point of view of Scout in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) is one of the most memorable and impressionable I have read. I am currently revisiting the novel in my research to further explore the strategies fiction writers employ to achieve what I have already described here as the reality effect. Lee captures it through dialogue between Scout and Atticus, Scout and Jem, Atticus and Jem.

‘Are we poor, Atticus?’

Atticus nodded. ‘We are indeed.’

Jem's nose wrinkled. ‘Are we as poor as the Cunninghams?’

‘Not exactly. The Cunninghams are country folks, farmers, and the crash hit them hardest.’

In searching for voice, I have moved from the missing narrator to first person and now to third person. Because much of the work is set in early childhood and around coming of age, I have explored the voice and character development of the fictional Scout. Again the perfect marriage of literary studies and creative writing is illustrated in my research and my reading of other writers like Carson McCullers, who evokes a powerful child voice in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding* through characters like Mick and Frankie on the threshold of adolescence, searching for identity. At the same time I am attempting to maintain the voices and point of view of the main characters—in particular, the voices of the Gleeson brothers.

Finally the bandages are off. Maurice can see. He looks at the pretty get well cards on the table by his bed, the green and yellow balloons, a vase of red carnations. But it's a false alarm, a terrible trick. The boy in the bed has a few minutes of vision before his world withdraws again. A second operation is arranged. Be brave, his Mum whispers, squeezing his hand tight.

When he pulls at the heavy cloth over his eyes and the bandages are unwrapped, Maurice can't see. It's dark, but not black. The colour he does see is a dirty cloudy grey, like a TV screen with lights flickering on it.

Even the holy water from his Grandma didn't work (2009: 28).

As outlined in the introduction of my paper and discussed throughout, I am interested in not only in the art of storytelling but in the role of the reader and the imperatives that drive us to read and to write, to study literature and to study creative writing. Growing up in Broadmeadows, where we had bookshelves but no books and there was no local library, meant my early reading was relatively limited (mostly free newspapers which my older brothers brought home after doing the daily dawn delivery on their pushbikes). I got my first grown up book when I won a prize for English at school and my teacher (a visiting teacher, most of them were only ever visiting in Broadmeadows) gave me a copy of Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*.

Conclusion

As my paper suggests, there are various research questions flowing from the creative project that are beginning to influence both my exegesis and creative non-fiction. When someone tells us a story how do we know it's true? Each of my seven siblings could tell a different story. And, if a writer, a storyteller calls their work a novel do we consider it to be fiction, ie, 'made up' and false? If instead they tell us it's autobiography or biography do we then accept it's ALL fact. How does a writer encourage a reader to take their hand and allow them to walk through a story, to take them behind those closed doors and sometimes to dark places unknown? What proof does a reader want that the story is true if it claims to be so? As critic, Daniel L Schacter suggests, memories are records of how we have experienced events, not replicas of events themselves. He suggests we construct our autobiographies/memoirs from fragments of experiences that change over time (Smith & Watson 2001: 16). Mitchell argues that the process of remembering one's life is revisable and 'subject to incessant reevaluations of particular lived moments' (2003: 608). This supports my earlier statements about truth in retelling events, about the reworking and shaping of those events and stories around them. What Barthes might call the distinction between realism and verisimilitude, or one human being's interpretation of reality. I am guilty of this incessant reevaluation and I accept the idea that life, if it's to be turned into a story, must be reworked, rearranged, using a range of narrative strategies (harnessed within literary and creative writing studies) that sharpen the telling and may blur the lines of fact and fiction in a kind of hybrid writing.

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