

Latrobe University

Judyth Keighran

Into the Badlands: countering false shame in memoir

Abstract

The risk of writing about our ex-lovers and family relationships is foregrounded in non-fictional memoir in which the writer claims to be writing an honest account of his/her life. Can she allow fear of recrimination to stop her from expressing her own truths? What is it that drives her to tell this story despite the very real fear of being ostracized or even being sued for libel?

A writer of non-fiction needs to devise a personal code of ethics to forge a path between the self-serving fabulising that Huckleberry Finn described as ‘stretchers’ and the aesthetic approach of Emily Dickinson’s advice to ‘Tell all the truth but tell it slant’. My personal code is an initial assessment of the risk of revealing stories involving vulnerable subjects. I am guided by the need to do the least possible harm to my subjects without compromising the need to tell my story. The question of what makes the memoir more valuable than the predicted consequences is an important consideration.

This presentation draws on the work of autobiographical theorists Claudia Mills, Tristine Raynor and others. It is motivated by the ethical dilemmas I encounter in writing my memoir, and by the questions raised above about the consequences of writing about relationships. Passages from my own memoir will be used to illustrate these situations and the way in which I confront them in my practice-led research.

By considering techniques of creative non-fiction employed by writers such as Helen Garner and Joan Didion, this paper looks at the aesthetics of truth telling suggested by Dickinson’s poem.

It argues that the writer’s code of ethics is developed through openness to the challenges the writer faces in any given situation so that ethical principles and human actors are fully in dialogue. It is based on the core belief that identity is continually formed through relationships with significant others in our lives and the actions we take in response to others. Consequently we cannot write our own story without including the actions of others.

I theorize that the process of writing an unguarded memoir is a necessary precursor to and initiator of the writer’s personal response to the dilemmas she encounters. Another core belief is that voices that counsel her to remain silent are often powerful voices from her past that represent master narratives and prohibitions that have the power to marginalize her story. Finally I argue that the dual practice of research and of writing creative non-fiction ultimately allow the writer to lessen the impact of sensitive material and—perhaps—to avoid the law courts.

Biographical note:

Judyth Keighran is a graduate of the Masters in Creative Writing from Melbourne University. She is currently a PhD student at La Trobe University. Her research is in life-writing and she has a particular interest in the personal writing of nurses in World War One.

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‘If you write about me I’ll get my lawyers on to you’. These are the words from my ex-husband that suddenly made my life-story more risky — and yet more compelling. I ask myself whose story is it? And what makes it more valuable than the consequences of revealing personal information about others? Answering this question requires crossing into the ‘badlands’ of ethics, a contested field where writer, subject and reader jostle for position on the moral, literal and literary ground of story, each debating the representation of history, memory and truth.

The writer of a non-fictional memoir such as the one I am writing aims to write an honest account of his/her life. But Adams (1990) asserts that ‘all autobiographers are unreliable narrators’ (ix). In trying to reconcile my life with the self I have become, my account may not be described as historically accurate but as metaphorically authentic. But can the writer justify telling her truth about ex-lovers and family members who are intrinsic characters in her life-story? Up until now I’ve made a few attempts to write about the early years of my marriage, but even before my ex’s threat of litigation I found it a difficult story to write. Is it because of an instinctive code of ethics? A learned ethical perspective? Or is it false shame engendered by the voices of others from my past?

My argument proposes the principle of a personal code of ethics that guides my choice of subjects and events in my memoir, and, secondly, a practice that includes life-writing and research so that wherever possible ethical principles and human actors are fully in dialogue. These decisions are based on the core belief that identity is continually formed through relationships with significant others in our lives and the actions we take in response to others. Writing about one’s relationship with others is part of this identity formation process, and the less inhibited the writing, the greater the understanding of our own behaviour is likely to be because it allows space for a more complex version of self. This ‘self’ might be theorized as a metaphorically authentic self (Adams 1990: ix). Adams quotes from the work of psychoanalyst Donald Spence in order to make connections between autobiographical stories and narrative truth. ‘Narrative truth has a special significance in its own right...making contact with the actual past may be of far less significance than creating a coherent and consistent account of a particular series of events’ (Adams 1990:12). The concept of narrative truth is not without its danger as Gaita acknowledges in a chapter on truth and truthfulness in narrative: ‘the book [‘Romulus, My Father’] is written in a narrative genre that is shaped by a perspective determined by my father’s values; it is a genre in which we cannot see Christine as fully alive’ (Gaita 2011:112). He questions Modjeska’s justification of her use of a fictional diary written by her mother ‘in the spirit of being true to, indeed of deepening the truthfulness of her biography’ (91). Gaita does not rule out a hybrid blend of fiction and non-fiction in autobiographical writing but in his opinion ‘it must be done within clear conceptions of truth as they apply to both genres and, ...in fear and trembling’ (91).

My decision to write about significant others from my past does not mean that I am oblivious to the possible consequences of the writer’s truth-telling on unwilling subjects and family members who are no longer alive to challenge my representations of them in a public space. My personal code of ethics is based on Hippocrates’ model of doing least harm, but more than this, I would argue that writing a memoir has the potential to prevent harm by exposing

damaging family dynamics. Memoir at its best can be an aesthetically delightful text which leads to a sharing of insights gleaned from experience. In my work I endeavour to practice a constant negotiation between the negative (harm minimization) and the positive (good maximization) whether the good means ‘the beautiful’, ‘the pleasurable’ or ‘the truthful’. Like most decisions that involve morality this is not a black and white issue, particularly as I write in a genre that relies on a biased view of people and events. It is my story, even though other people participate in it. Consequently my moral code is continually evolving in response to ethical challenges that emerge in my writing practice.

The second part of my argument is to explore these beliefs about the power of life-writing to expand our understanding of self and others. I will do this through the approach of Practice-led-Research (PLR) which incorporates writing practice, reflection, and the insights of other writers, including theoretical and philosophical thinkers on subjects related to creativity. Excerpts from my life-writing practice will be used, including recollections of a trip to South Australia during which my intended husband and I told my parents we planned to marry. My intention is to employ this multi-levelled approach in my consideration of the ethics of life writing.

My reason for telling my story, even in the face of resistance from my subjects, is my belief that there are cogent reasons why hitherto marginalized subjects, including women, need to contextualize what they may consider to be ordinary lives. Between Christian commandments to ‘honour thy father and thy mother’ and the Western tradition that privileges the white European male, it is possible that I have internalized these voices of power to the point where I doubt my right to speak against the voices of authority from my past. In this paper I choose to weigh the voices of autobiographical theorists such as Mills and Eakin against the voices from the past. If I allow past voices to dictate my writing, the memoir I write will be ‘a sanitized, syrupy version of [my] own [life]’ (Mills 2004 :105).

In order to avoid the hurdle of unconscious motives of revenge for the wrongs that I consider may have been done to me in my past I take counsel from autobiographical theorists who address the danger of a memoir filled with hate. In her review of Eakin’s book (Eakin 2004), Montello refers to some biographies as ‘bloodsport’. (Montello 2006 :46) I acknowledge that it cannot be an easy path to find between the desire to punish the lover or husband who has spurned you, and the motivation of the writer who wants to write an intensely personal story in order to place the years of a former marriage into perspective. However I do not claim to be writing an objective account of anyone else’s life or character. I can only aim for a transparent negotiation of events when the lives of others intersect with mine. Brien advocates the ethical stance of being honest about lying: ‘Ethical biographers and autobiographers work with veracity as their aim’(Brien 2002). I agree with her emphasis on the importance of a sincere intention as one of the basic conditions of the genre, an honouring of the writer’s pact with the reader.

Mills claims that ‘there are special dangers in kiss-and-tell memoirs, for all lovers scorned are unreliable witnesses to the true character of those who have scorned them’ (Mills 2004: 118). Rainer too sounds a warning note: ‘it is so difficult for children to accept their parents as autonomous individuals’(Rainer 1997: 307). I would argue that writing my life story

without including these significant relationships would be avoidance on my part, and a reader would feel cheated. Moreover I consider that I am covered by Mills's caveat that 'we probably shouldn't tell these (stories about parents and ex-lovers) until time has given us some perspective and healing distance and some ability to forgive' (Mills 2004 :118). More than two decades have passed since my divorce and the death of my parents, allowing for opportunities to reassess these relationships in the light of later events in my life. There is still a danger of course that it may be impossible to remember the relationship before it soured.

In the process of PLR it is the practice of writing which leads decisions about how to overcome new challenges and which encourages me to study the way that other writers resolve ethical dilemmas. But there is not a 'one size fits all' solution to the writer's dilemma of what to conceal and what to reveal without causing pain to others. My strategy is to explore my own version of the line from Emily Dickinson's poem, 'Tell all the truth but tell it slant' (Dickinson 1968: 241).

I interpret this in two ways, firstly avowing that my narrative is my own interpretation of events i.e. my 'slant'. Secondly I explore 'slanted' ways of telling my story in an oblique way with sensitivity and awareness of my own motivations and my own subjectivity as a middle class white female whose upbringing was shaped by a Catholic education in which I learned that marriage is a sacrament and divorce is sinful. Whether I am a good enough writer to transform my experience into something deeper and richer that can touch the reader is something that I can neither predict nor promise. I can only tell my story and trust that in the writing of it something worthwhile will emerge.

In order to illustrate this 'slanted' approach I will start with some extracts from my narrative of events surrounding the visit that my future husband Brendan and I made to my parents' home in South Australia. Brendan and I were in our early twenties. This incident from my story shows how the voices of my parents and from my Catholic girlhood held sway under my parents' roof in the 1960s.

My mother had prepared two separate rooms with single beds for us. While I was unpacking my bag, Brendan came into my room and shut the door firmly behind him. One minute later, my mother knocked on the door. Before I could reply, she opened it and handed me a freshly laundered white towel. Brendan shut the door again. Another knock. My father. 'Your mother and I would prefer it if you left the door open'. He spoke in his "there will be no further discussion on this" voice—the voice he had used when he forbade me to go ice-skating at St Kilda in my early teen years. Even the sworn promise of a ring on my finger did not lead to my being treated as an adult in my father's house.

In this story my ex's name has been changed, not just as a device to protect his identity, but to begin the process of making him a character in my story— a story that relies on historical events but which over the years has acquired additional layers of understanding. In writing the next part of my story I needed an incident and a concrete object that could convey the energy of the taboo that I was challenging. In choosing the pudding basin as the focal point for the emotional content of this scene I am drawing on T.S Eliot's use of the 'objective correlative' in which external facts and sensory experience are allied with a particular emotion'(Cuddon 1999: 605).

I waited until we were sitting down to a roast dinner before I found the courage I needed. Mum was loosening the edges of the Yorkshire pudding from the green enamel basin it had been cooked in. 'That smells delicious', I said, and then in a breezy tone, 'Brendan and I have changed our plans. We're going back early tomorrow. Do you know of a good motel near the border?'

My mother dropped the pudding basin on the table as if she had burnt her fingers. The pudding flipped out and fell upside down on the green linoleum. My eyes followed the web of spidery markings on the bottom of the basin, lines etched from exposure to the heat of the oven over the many years when my mother dutifully cooked the food that my father loved. In my mother's flurry of retrieving the pudding with the tongs, removing invisible specks of dirt with the tea-towel, and finding a suitable dish to put it on in order to cut it into portions, my unanswered question evaporated with the steam of the pudding.

In my account of this incident Brendan was a silent witness but I saw that his presence and my desire to be with him had emboldened me to flout conventional ideas about hospitality and to speak up against my parent's wishes. I clearly remember the shock value of my speaking the word 'motel' which had strong emotional overtones in the 60s. In order to portray this as a 'hot' topic in our household I imagined my mother dropping the pudding. Again this is my 'slant'. In writing this incident I recognize that my mother was my real adversary, not my ex-husband who is on the margin. There is always a temptation for the autobiographical writer to write herself as a heroic figure and there are unanswered questions here about my relationship with Brendan that this scene evokes. Was I using him in my own battle with my mother? I was attracted to his courage but does this mean I loved him less?

My mentors here are Garner and Didion who frequently use domestic settings to portray turning points in a narrative, or scenes of intense emotion. Didion describes a very ordinary scene on the night her husband died. She writes:

I lit the candles. John asked for a second drink before sitting down. I gave it to him. We sat down. My attention was on mixing the salad. John was talking, then he wasn't. (Didion 2006: 10)

The information about the events on the night her husband died is very restrained, creating tension in the writing. Didion simply juxtaposes the ordinary salad-making next to the extraordinarily sudden death of her husband and allows the reader to discern the impact of her grief.

In an interview with Garner, Ramona Koval discusses Garner's ability to place objects and events together to great emotional effect in her book 'The Spare Room' (Koval 8th April 2008). Garner tells her:

I always like to work with the material world a lot... I don't feel comfortable unless I've got a lot of objects on the page and they seem to do an awful lot of work if you can arrange them in the right configuration.

Like these writers I create scenes that show aspects of the characters I am writing about and often something emerges in the process of writing, just as the well-etched lines in my mother's pudding basin showed me the importance she placed on traditional home-cooking and family values, and perhaps also something of her hopes for me in my coming marriage. Montello (2006) believes that when it comes to life writing :

we're drawn to stories that develop the characters with respect for the integrity—or wholeness—of the person, whether that person is good or bad, real or fictional...stories that give us valuable ways of understanding each other, and that have the power to transform our sense of who we are.(Montello 2006: 47)

In writing about these incidents I was able to find some emotional or narrative truth about this time in my life. I have also used the writer's imagination to create a likely scene to show the power of the parental and religious voices of my girlhood. But have I given a fair portrait of my mother? In my ongoing memoir I will need to continue to question my portrayal of her. These events from early in my relationship with Brendan were relatively easy to write, but later events that changed my perception of him and ultimately led to the failure of our marriage are more confronting because of the memories of shame that they engender. 'In autobiography,' writes Nancy Miller (Miller 2002: 210), 'the acts –performed and witnessed –that might beg not to be revealed are the very ones that produce writing.' 'Secret knowledge,' she continues, 'becomes public shame ... As you tell the secrets of others, and violate family codes, you separate yourself from their power over you, even as you return to them in memory.'

Whether my goal of producing the best writing I can, with as much self-awareness and sensitivity as I can manage, is enough to make my memoir good enough to avoid unpleasant consequences is ultimately for others to decide. Trying to resolve the needs of writer, subject and reader is not an easy task and in the end the competing tensions may be too restrictive for me to resolve in the way I would like to. Overcoming my ex-husband's objections may also be impossible but I cannot allow these to overshadow the early drafts of my work. I have a story to tell. If I tell it with integrity and awareness of the needs of others, without compromising the craft of storytelling, that may be the best I can manage. Like most writers of autobiography I will add a disclaimer about my intention to tell the truth while acknowledging that it is told from my memory of events, and that others may have a different point of view. My story does not shy away from the tension that exists between the competing demands of writer, reader and subject and their claims to interpret history, memory, and truth. These are the paradoxes that coexist at the very heart of life writing.

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