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Writing the shy body: A textual immersion in social anxiety

Abstract:

The impulse to write often comes from the desire to express our corporeal history in words. In his memoir *Winter journal*, Paul Auster says ‘[w]riting begins in the body, it is in the music of the body’ (Auster 2012: 224). His words echo those of cultural theorist Elspeth Probyn in *The affect theory reader*: ‘Writing is a corporeal activity. We work ideas through our bodies; we write through our bodies, hoping to get into the bodies of our readers’ (Probyn 2010: 76). Testifying to the lived experience of shyness in a work of personal narrative nonfiction involved an immersive exploration of the corporeal features of shyness, and an interrogation of the ways in which our emotions are experienced and inscribed in our bodies and our temperament traits are manifest in our emotional and physical responses to being in company. How, though, might we go about writing the shy body, and how do we write our bodily experiences ‘into the bodies of our readers’? My memoir-in-progress, *The Shyness Lists*, endeavours to meet these challenges by weaving together narrative and non-narrative knowledge, employing metaphors of alienation, pathology and metamorphosis, and using suspense as a narrative strategy to mimic the socially anxious person’s experience of dread.

Biographical note:

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Imagine this

Imagine you are about to deliver a conference paper to a room full of peers. Perhaps your palms are sweating, your face slightly flushed. Perhaps your heart rate has increased. Perhaps there is a slight tremor in your hands as you shuffle the pages of your conference paper, anxiously checking that they're in the right order.

Imagine yourself imagining that everyone in the audience is staring critically at you, waiting for you to stumble over the first paragraph of your paper.

Imagine yourself standing in front of that critical audience, wishing that you were invisible.

Imagine feeling like this every time you find yourself in a social situation with people you don't know intimately, because you are shy.

Imagine trying to write about how that shyness might feel in your body, in moments, or for hours, or over years, or throughout decades.

Imagine using that writing as a way of tracing how a life lived in a shy body might profoundly shape your sense of identity.

In Paul Auster's memoir *Winter journal*, the author states 'Writing begins in the body, it is in the music of the body' (Auster 2012: 224). As Auster observes, the impulse to write often comes from the desire to express our corporeal history in words. In *The Affect Theory Reader*, Australian cultural theorist Elspeth Probyn asserts that '[w]riting is a corporeal activity. We work ideas through our bodies; we write through our bodies, hoping to get into the bodies of our readers' (Probyn 2010: 76). Probyn's and Auster's statements are both accurate descriptions of the initial impulse behind my 'writing shyness' project, which began with a desire to express how my body felt as I endured an acute bout of shyness at a party.

This project – now a memoir entitled *The Shyness Lists* – aims to testify to the lived experience of shyness (or social anxiety), and to generate empathy in the *non-shy* reader and self-recognition and self-understanding in the *shy* reader. To achieve those aims, I contend, it is necessary to convey to the reader the very particular corporeal features of shyness; to interrogate the ways in which our emotions are experienced and inscribed in our bodies and our temperament traits are manifest in our emotional and physical responses to being in company; and to explore how the socially anxious body manifests the shy self. As Paul John Eakin argues in his essay 'What are we reading when we read autobiography?', the self 'is first and last of and about the body; to speak of the embodied self would be redundant, for there is no other' (Eakin 2004: 126)

So how might one offer the reader an insight into the corporeal experience of shyness, and how might the reader's body respond when he/she is reading an autobiographical narrative about a shy body? Phillip Lopate, in the introduction to *The art of the personal essay*, refers explicitly to the reading and responding body when he analyses what makes a successful personal essay. If the essayist

stays at the same flat level of self-disclosure and understanding throughout, the piece may be pleasantly smooth, but it will not awaken that shiver of self-recognition –

equivalent to the frisson in horror films when the monster looks at himself in the mirror – which all lovers of the personal essay await as a reward.’ (Lopate 1995: xxv-xxvi)

What we learn from Lopate’s description of the reading body is that readers often long to feel what the writer has felt; that reading is at times a search for the visceral experience of empathy. In *The made-up self*, Karl Klaus uses a similar metaphor in referring to the physical effect of the ‘voice-print’ of a personal essayist: ‘even when I’m silently reading an essay, I often find myself resonating with something that’s hauntingly akin to the sound of a person’s voice, as if another person inside my head is talking to me’ (Klaus 2010: 45). Both Lopate and Klaus judge the quality of personal narrative nonfiction writing, in part, by the effect (real or imagined) it has on (or in) their bodies as they read.

Ander Monson, in his essay ‘Voir Dire’, imagines the memoir-reader’s experience as a kind of ‘habitation’ of the writer’s corporeal experience: ‘inhabiting their experience allows us to share it, know it. This is called *collective knowing*’ (Monson 2010: 13). Part of my project has been an attempt to induce a kind of ‘collective knowing’ about shyness in the bodies of my imagined readers, and to convey how the corporeal experience of shyness has impacted on the construction of the ‘self’ whose unfolding consciousness is traced in this memoir.

Why does the body matter?

Before the question of *how* to write the shy body, however, there is another question: *why* is the body particularly relevant when writing about shyness?

According to psychologists Ronald Rapee and Richard Heimberg, shyness is a temperament trait that exists on a spectrum, with the most shy amongst us being situated on the withdrawal end of the ‘approach-withdrawal’ continuum (Rapee & Heimberg 1997). They describe the manifestation of shyness as a form of social anxiety (or, at its most extreme, social phobia) that usually provokes a range of physical symptoms from blushing, trembling, sweating, hyperventilating and feeling physically stiff to hyper-vigilance and hyper-awareness of one’s physical presence in social environments (Rapee & Heimberg 1997: 744). Shyness induces intense physical self-consciousness; a perpetual state of performance anxiety when in company. The shy person’s mental preoccupation with how they are being perceived (and judged) by others stimulates the physical symptoms listed above via the autonomic nervous system. The visible aspects of arousal (blushing, trembling, etc.) can in turn increase a person’s feelings of self-consciousness. In social situations, the shy body can easily become caught up in a distressing feedback loop of awkwardness and discomfort. Over years, even decades, these repeated experiences of anxiety-related distress (and the mere anticipation of these experiences) can become inscribed upon the body. In the process, they can become part of the construction of a life narrative and an identity.

Other examples of writing the shy body

Other self-described 'shy' memoirists have referred to their bodies when trying to convey the experience of social anxiety. New Zealand author Janet Frame, in her autobiography *An angel at my table*, describes herself as being 'too shy to sit with Aunty Isy in the small dining room by the fire' and 'smiling my shy smile which was more close-lipped than usual' (Frame 1987: 21-4). Self-described shy American opera singer Renee Fleming writes in *The inner voice* about the physical inhibitions that impeded her stage performances early in her career:

My extreme inhibitions prevented me from displaying any of the sass and sway needed for a seductive Musetta [...] 'Just walk across the stage and swing your hips.' But I couldn't manage even that. Musetta, of course, is a legendary coquette, and I was a famously shy girl from upstate. (Fleming 2004: 36)

Fleming perceived her shyness as a series of physical and emotional hurdles that had to be overcome before she could achieve self-actualisation as an opera singer. On the other hand, in the Australian memoir *In my skin*, author Kate Holden describes how sex work offered her an escape from shyness by allowing her to inhabit the professional persona of 'Lucy' the prostitute (Holden 2005). As a shy teenager, though, she writes, 'I faltered. I withdrew behind my long hair, lowered my face. I could never quite understand what my new friends saw in me, gauche, try-hard, blushing with my gummy smile' (Holden 2005: 7). All of these writers use descriptions of their body parts or their physical activities to convey the impact of shyness on their lives.

Many fiction writers have also acknowledged the relevance of the body in writing about shy characters. In the novel *Closed for winter*, Georgia Blain's main character repeatedly describes herself as shy; someone who feels 'faint with dread' when she has to speak in public, and for whom, when she looks in the mirror, 'it seems there is no definition to my face [...] no lines to mark where I end and the air begins' (Blain 1998: 32-33). In Sue Saliba's young adult novel *Something in the world called love*, the shy main character Esma 'was not surprised to realise she was bloodless, for she was often like that, lost and vacant, all the blood running somewhere else when she was in the presence of someone' (Saliba 2008: 10-11). Likewise, in Deborah Robertson's novel *Careless*, the body of the shy young protagonist Pearl is described, this time in a dialogue between two other characters:

Have you seen her dance?

Oh, awful.

Frozen. Just frozen.

Compared to the other kids

She doesn't put herself forward, does she?

(Robertson 2007: 5)

The shyness of Robertson's young character is quite evident to the adults observing her because of the awkward physical self-consciousness she exhibits in social situations.

Many of these writers of both fiction and nonfiction depict the shy body as being without agency, ambushed by the debilitating symptoms of social anxiety, and their characters are intensely critical of their own body's apparent treachery. The self-image of Saliba's character Esma is so unstable, even her form in the mirror is threatened with erasure. According to social anxiety experts these characteristics are all typical of the shy person's experience of their body. These writers of both fiction and nonfiction have all chosen to foreground the corporeal experience of shyness in constructing a life narrative for their characters.

Why choose nonfiction?

When I decided to embark on an investigation of the writing of shyness, the option of doing so through fiction was available to me. I could have chosen to write a novel with a shy main character, drawing on my own experiences. In planning the practice-based research project for my PhD in Creative Writing, though, I chose instead to embark upon a work of narrative nonfiction, employing what Vivian Gornick in *The situation and the story* calls an 'unsurrogated persona', writing with a first person voice that 'must identify openly with those very same defenses and embarrassments that the novelist or the poet is once removed from' (Gornick 2001: 7). In part, this decision was based on an intuitive understanding that to interrogate the writing of the shy body I needed to immerse myself, both emotionally and physically, in the subjective experience of shyness. Psychologists contend that key features of shyness are intense self-consciousness and anxiety about how you are perceived by others, at the heart of which is a fear of self-exposure and of negative evaluation (a loss of 'defenses' and a risk of 'embarrassments'). Self-consciousness is not only cognitive but also affective and emotional, as in self-feelings, and the quest to understand and convey shy self-consciousness involves a quest for a kind of body-knowledge (Barbalet 2005).

In order to fully explore this state, and as a way of engaging in self-reflective practice, it became apparent that the most appropriate research methodology was to immerse myself in this state while I was writing; to literally write from inside the shy body. I needed to simultaneously inhabit and reveal the shy narrator, unprotected by a fictional version of the self, risking critical judgement from an imagined audience with every sentence. Both the act of writing a confessional memoir about shyness and the act of imagining it being read by invisible readers could therefore be seen as forms of physical immersion in the symptoms of the anxiety that lies at the heart of shyness: the pervasive fear of negative evaluation by others.

Narrative vs. non-narrative knowledge

To discover how to write shyness into the bodies of my readers, I needed to understand exactly what it was. The first step in the research process involved an investigative immersion in the area of interest. I began reading the work of a range of shyness experts, including psychologists, psychiatrists, anthropologists, sociologists, cultural theorists, linguists and evolutionary biologists. Many of these experts

specifically reference the shy body in their published texts, public speeches and in interviews I recorded with them. American psychologist Jerome Kagan, for example, writes extensively about the physical symptoms of shyness (Goleman 1996). Kagan studied so-called ‘timid’ and ‘bold’ children and concluded that timid children have a neural circuitry that is highly reactive to even mild stress. They sweat more and their hearts beat faster in response to new situations. They are anxious to the point of paralysis in company and ‘they treat any new person or situation as though it were a potential threat’ (Goleman 1996: 217). How best, then, to illuminate for readers the ‘facts’ of shyness? Should one of the goals of the book be to discover and translate into lay language the causes and manifestations of this common temperament trait? Should I write a kind of detective story, following a trail of clues left by the experts leading inexorably to an ‘aha moment’ when the accumulated facts finally produce a complete mental picture of shyness?

If I had simply described what the ‘experts’ had discovered about shyness and the body, I would have risked producing what Lopate describes as writing that is merely ‘pleasantly smooth’, failing to achieve that visceral ‘shiver of recognition’ he contends the reader of personal narrative nonfiction craves. In her memoir *The shaking woman, or a history of my nerves*, American writer Siri Hustvedt refers often to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), the psychiatric manual used to explain and diagnose recognised psychiatric conditions, including social anxiety and social phobia (Hustvedt 2010). As Hustvedt points out,

[t]he DSM does not tell stories [...]. Its mission is purely descriptive, to collect symptoms under headings that will help a physician diagnose patients [...]. The fact is that all patients have stories, and those stories are necessarily part of the meaning of their illnesses. (Hustvedt 2010: 63)

In other words, the information contained in the DSM about social anxiety and social phobia could be described as non-narrative knowledge. Rita Charon, in *Narrative medicine: honouring the stories of illness*, defines non-narrative knowledge as attempting to ‘illuminate the universal by transcending the particular’ (Charon 2006: 9). In contrast, she states, ‘narrative knowledge, by looking closely at the individual human beings grappling with the conditions of life, attempts to illuminate the universals of the human condition by revealing the particular’ (Charon 2006: 9). With the notable exception of Charles Darwin (Darwin, 1872), most of the information contained in the texts I read by shyness experts (most of them social scientists) could also be described as non-narrative knowledge. The language of these texts is steeped in the careful, clinical jargon of their respective fields, employing generalisations rather than anecdotes.

In order to write shyness into the bodies of my readers so that they would ‘resonate’ with my experiences, however, real stories were required. At the same time as I was investigating the work of shyness experts, I began excavating layers of memory and mining specific personal anecdotes – the lived, the remembered, the mis-remembered and the performed – to write about my own life as a ‘shy person’. These anecdotes became the narrative knowledge with which I could attempt to convey to my reader how the body feels when it is in the grip of social anxiety. In the process, I began

finding new connections between my explicit and my tacit knowledge of shyness (Colbert 2009), connections that helped me to re-trace my own process of identity formation and identity narrative-making as a shy person (Eakin 2007). Through this iterative process, *The shyness lists* began to emerge as a series of eccentric lists and loosely chronologically ordered personal essays.

Shyness and metaphor

How, then, to address the ‘problem’, as Jeanette Winterson terms it, of ‘translating autobiography into art’ (1996: 105)? Drawing on my own memories, I began to explore in text the *loss of physical agency* that often accompanies shyness; the *sense of alienation* from one’s own body when one’s autonomic nervous system goes into overdrive; the *hot flush of shame* that is so often produced in the body of the shy person as they recognize the all-too-familiar symptoms that are overtaking them. What emerged was a series of metaphors relating to agency, alienation, pathology and shame.

In the following paragraph from the first chapter of *The shyness lists*, for example, the first person narrator (as I will hereafter describe myself) imagines shyness as a kind of poison being administered to her body by an unknown enemy:

It began with me standing outside of me, watching as I stood silently on the fringe of a group of strangers. A familiar sensation was seeping through my body. It was as if someone had spiked my drink so that instead of a glass of sparkling mineral water I was now sipping a kind of effervescent concrete mix. My limbs were growing rigid and my smile was a rictus grin... (Prior 2014)

Later in the memoir, the idea of shyness as poison is broadened to include other metaphors of affliction and pathology. In one of the last chapters, the narrator (in conversation with herself) draws a direct comparison between her social anxiety and a psychiatric condition called body identity integrity disorder to explain why she has tried to extricate herself from her shyness:

People with this condition sometimes try to hack off one of their own perfectly normal, functioning limbs because they are convinced that limb doesn’t belong to them. Perhaps shyness has been for you like one of those unwanted limbs. It’s a perfectly normal, natural part of your identity that you’ve been unable to acknowledge belongs to you, and you’ve been trying to remove it for decades. (Prior 2014)

This metaphor directly acknowledges the experience of acute social anxiety as a physical affliction (though often an invisible one) as well as a form of psychological distress.

As my research revealed, at times the pathological impact of shyness on the body is literal rather than figurative. The symptoms of social anxiety can have the effect of a slow-working poison on the digestive system. How then to convey the long-term impacts of shyness on the narrator’s health? In some sections of the memoir, the connections between shyness and pathology are interrogated through a series of fragmented narratives in which personal anecdotal material is woven together with

‘expert’ content, a creative process that draws on both on experiential knowledge and on external, researched sources of information. In a chapter on the effects of social anxiety on the human digestive system, for example, information gleaned from a talk by an expert on the so-called ‘brain-gut axis’ is braided together with anecdotes about the history of the narrator’s own digestive problems.

In the following example, the narrator describes the expert, Melbourne psychologist Dr Simon Knowles, giving a public talk in which he lists the risk factors associated with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), a condition from which socially anxious people frequently suffer. (Note that ‘Ms Butterflies’ is a third-person description of the narrator):

The IBS symptoms he described exactly mirrored my digestive torments, including butterflies in the tummy, the result of ‘the gut reacting in a protective, survival response’: 1) Genetic pre-disposition (Ms Butterflies remembered her grandfather Lloyd sitting up to dinner at exactly the same time every evening, fingers drumming nervously on the dining table, his meals a limited rotation of easy-to-digest dishes invariably chased down by an over-ripe banana – she could never throw out one of these flaccid specimens without thinking of him). (Prior 2014)

This interrogation of the pathological impact of shyness on the narrator’s digestive system details how decades of social anxiety have left a corporeal inscription more permanent than an ink tattoo. Other chapters of the memoir reference more fleeting and unpredictable pathological symptoms of shyness, including ‘globus hystericus’, a spasmodic sensation of tightness in the throat that afflicts the narrator’s body in periods of intense shyness, in particular when anxiety has led to a loss of verbal or emotional agency. In a chapter entitled ‘The Lump’, the narrator writes

lying on my hostel bunk in the middle of the night I would feel it resting there, nuzzling thickly at my vocal cords, teasing me with the possibility that it might spread over the entrance to my lungs while I slept, barring the way to all oxygen. (Prior 2014)

This medical condition is anthropomorphized and characterised as having power over the shy person’s body, power that the shy person herself lacks.

Pathological physical symptoms such as these are examples of how shyness can lead to a loss of corporeal agency. At times, however, the psychological symptoms of shyness, such as awkward self-consciousness, can also manifest as physically disempowering. Psychologists Peter Saunders and Andrea Chester describe chronic shyness as debilitating: an ‘inhibition that interferes significantly with participation in desired activities’ (Saunders & Chester 2008: 2651). How, then, to convey this ‘inhibiting’ symptom in language less clinically detached than the jargon of behavioural psychology; in narrative language that might ‘illuminate the universals of the human condition by revealing the particular’ (Charon 2006: 9)?

Shyness and metamorphosis

In the chapter entitled ‘The Lump’, the narrator of *The shyness lists* refers to the marble blocks from which Michelangelo carved his religious sculptures, drawing a connection between these imagined, immobilized figures and the physical rigidity of the shy body. Like the as-yet-unrevealed figures awaiting the artist’s chisel to free them from their solid rock casing, the shy person is imagined as physically entrapped, longing for metamorphosis and for the chance to escape her casing of awkward self-consciousness and to emerge fully formed into the waiting world as a ‘true self’.

While this metaphor renders shyness as a form of solidity, other physical metamorphoses described in the memoir reference liquid states, including: the visceral sensation of liquefaction that can accompany an anxiety reaction; the shy body temporarily liberated from anxiety through the liquefying sensation of sexual desire; the socially anxious person longing to be limpid, a liquid state defined as ‘absolutely serene and untroubled’; the shy body frozen solid by fear and self-consciousness; and the way the shy body’s experience of being weighed down by anxiety can be temporarily assuaged by the relative weightlessness of immersion in liquid, through swimming and surfing.

Other imagined metamorphoses in *The shyness lists* play with the idea of Otherness: the shy body in front of the mirror transformed into an insect, scuttling around like Kafka’s character Gregor; the shy body in front of the camera transformed into a slow-blinking tortoise; the shy body imagined as a human body surrounded by the bodies of threatening aliens, or an alien body surrounded by threatening humans. All of these metaphors are attempts to convey to the reader the sense of dissociation that can accompany the physical experience of social anxiety.

The invisible body

In the opening to this paper, I described how the anxious public performer in front of an audience at an academic conference might long for invisibility. My research into the psychology of social anxiety revealed that the concept of audience is critical to the experience of shyness, with many socially anxious people describing ‘concerns that people are watching and evaluating them [...] because there exists [...] the potential for negative evaluation by the audience’ (Rapee & Spence 2004: 744). Could invisibility provide the solution to the problem of imagined critical scrutiny?

The longing for disembodiment, or for the erasure of the shy body, is examined in a chapter of the memoir entitled ‘Invisible Me’ where the narrator (then a teenager) describes attending a music camp and imagines the physical freedom invisibility would bestow:

If I had been invisible I could have floated silently across the pool, past the dive-bombing trombonists and the dog-paddling flautists, slithered up onto the hot concrete and lay there eavesdropping as the trumpeter chatted to the oboist with the long curly hair and the perfectly filed fingernails. (Prior 2004)

A later chapter examines the potentially benign effects on the shy body of corporeal ‘invisibility’ in the context of internet dating. This longing for invisibility is also traced through the narrator’s professional career, when she describes working as a radio broadcaster, a profession in which she could be ‘invisible me, hiding [...] using my voice, preaching for my cause, [...] for an] invisible audience of radio listeners’ (Prior 2014). The narrator’s professional invisibility on radio is contrasted with her acute physical self-consciousness in front of cameras.

Engendering dread

When in company, the socially anxious body operates in a near-constant state of dread. In storytelling terms, the closest analogy to that sensation is *suspense*. How, then, to immerse the empathetic reader in this physical experience of dread? In part the answer emerged from the decision to incorporate suspense as a narrative strategy in *The shyness lists*.

In order to mimic the shy person’s experience of dread, I incorporated into the memoir’s narrative the narrator’s sudden immersion in the experience the shy person perhaps fears the most – social rejection – when her partner announces he is leaving her. This plot development is hinted at in the memoir’s prologue, when the narrator returns to her former home to retrieve a mirror from beside the bed she used to share with her partner and reveals that she is no longer to be found reflected in that mirror. Ideally this scene leaves the anxious reader *waiting* – suspended in dread – to find out if, how and when the parting will happen.

As established, shyness is a temperament trait that exists on a spectrum and therefore afflicts some more than others. One of its key attributes – the fear of negative evaluation – is an almost universal human experience, though usually experienced more acutely by shy people. Fear of rejection by a loved one is possibly one of the most common forms of dread experienced by humans, and in part the decision to include this particular narrative fragment was an attempt to engender in the reader Lopate’s previously mentioned empathetic ‘shiver of self-recognition [...] and] the frisson [of horror]’ (Lopate 1995: xxvi).

Exposure therapy: writing from the shy body

Elsbeth Probyn asserts that ‘writing affects bodies. Writing takes its toll on the body that writes and the bodies that read or listen’ (Probyn 2010: 76). How might the act of writing a confessional memoir about shyness affect the shy body? And how, in turn, might that influence the storytelling in the memoir? Monson contends that ‘telling is performing, even if it seems effortless’ (Monson 2010: 13). The memoirist writes for an imagined audience, performing (in text) a version of themselves they wish to present to the reader. The social anxiety experts contend that the shy person’s body endures something akin to a state of constant performance anxiety, as she imagines scrutiny from a critical audience. To write a first person memoir *about* shyness for an imagined critical readership could therefore be viewed as a strategic act of deliberate

immersion in the very same feelings about which you are trying to write: shame, self-consciousness and fear of negative evaluation.

Theorists including Gornick, Klaus and Monson have posited that when the memoirist writes for an imagined audience, they are ‘performing’ in text a version of themselves – a persona – that they wish to present to the reader. Gornick says the memoirist needs to ‘first figure out what the experience is, then pull from one’s ordinary, everyday self the coherent narrator (or persona) best able to tell the story’ (Gornick 2008: 9). Sometimes, though, perhaps the persona (in this instance the shy persona) comes *first*, and it is only when that voice has been established, and that character has been inhabited, both mentally and physically, that the experience can be fully revealed. In order to convey the corporeal experience of shyness, it was necessary to ‘perform’ (or inhabit) the voice that most authentically embodied that experience: the shamed, confessional, self-critical persona anxiously anticipating negative evaluation (including from the reader) and ineffectually longing to escape the confines of their shy body.

The critical reader is literally given their own voice towards the end of *The shyness lists*. In a chapter entitled ‘The Final Interview’, the narrator imagines herself being grilled by an invisible interviewer, an anonymous ‘character’ who questions the veracity of some of the personal anecdotes that have been related in the memoir and accuses the author of being passive, vengeful, melodramatic and even unoriginal. This disembodied persona could be interpreted as an alternative version of the narrator and/or as the embodiment of the shy author’s imagined critical reader. At one point in the dialogue, the narrator is described as blushing in response to this grilling, her invisible body betraying her shame and self-consciousness in the midst of this inquisition. This narrative strategy is aimed at engendering empathy in the reader for the lived experience of shyness.

Thus, the memoir that begins with a true story about a physical immersion in feelings of anxious self-consciousness at a party ends with a self-prescribed (imaginary) immersion in that very same state; exposing the writer/narrator to those same anxious feelings in order to provoke a visceral empathic response in her audience – a ‘shiver of recognition’, a ‘collective knowing’ – a writing of shyness into the body of the reader.

Conclusion

Shyness usually manifests itself in a range of distressing physical symptoms, as described in the psychology literature and as evidenced in works of fiction and nonfiction by writers like Frame, Holden, Fleming, Saliba, Blain and Robertson, and in the author’s own memoir-in-progress, *The shyness lists*. By identifying the key features of the corporeal experience of shyness, employing relevant metaphors and narrative strategies to evoke those key features, and by exploring how shyness might be written into the body of the reader, this investigation seeks to testify to the lived experience of social anxiety and to contribute to the broader discussion about life writing.

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