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Writer first, mother second: the politics and ethics of motherhood memoirs

Abstract:

In 2009 when Julie Myerson published her creative non-fiction book *The Lost Child*, Minette Marrin wrote in the Times: 'Her son was betrayed because she's a writer first and a mother second.' This was clearly meant as a damning indictment of Myerson, as was much of the press coverage of the book's representation of Myerson's teenage son and his drug habit. I compare this response to the positive reviews received by *George and Sam* by Charlotte Moore. Like Myerson, Rachel Cusk received a negative press when she published her 2001 motherhood memoir, *A Life's Work*, with reviewers accusing her of irresponsibility, selfishness, and lack of love for her children.

The public discourse used about these motherhood memoirs raises significant political and ethical issues around mothers writing autobiographically about their children. As the mother of a child with a disability who is also a memoirist, I explore how mothers writing about their children must navigate challenges to do with the construction of motherhood, the public/private split, and the archetypal splitting of mothers into good and bad.

At the same time that writers such as Cusk and Myerson are condemned for exploiting their children, there has been a growth in published motherhood memoirs, including those about children with disabilities, and the so-called 'mommy blogs'. Many of these receive positive reviews and avoid the kind of public controversy caused by Cusk and Myerson. I suggest that the reason for the negative responses to Myerson and Cusk may relate more to the seriousness with which they discuss loss and motherhood, rather than the ethical issues of writing about their children. It is this seriousness and the ability to give voice to otherwise unarticulated aspects of motherhood that is of value in the work of Cusk, Moore and Myerson.

Biographical Note:

Dr Rachel Robertson teaches Professional Writing and Publishing at Curtin University. Her academic interests include life writing, motherhood and critical disability studies. A set of her autobiographical essays will be released by Black Inc in 2012. Her work has been published in *Life Writing*, *Westerly*, *Island*, *Griffith Review*, *Australian Book Review* and *Best Australian Essays*. Her latest publication is a book chapter, 'Sharing Stories: Autism, Motherhood and Culture', in *Disability and Mothering* edited by Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson & Jen Cellio, published in September 2011 by Syracuse University Press.

Keywords:

Motherhood—Memoir—Autobiography—Ethics—Life Writing

To describe a female author as ‘writer first, mother second’ is damning in a way that describing a male author as writer first, father second is not. The phrase comes from journalist and novelist Minette Marrin, writing in the *Sunday Times* about Julie Myerson’s 2009 book, *The Lost Child*. Part memoir and part biography¹, *The Lost Child* is a strange book, in which the story of the author’s own struggles with her teenage son are somewhat clumsily juxtaposed with her research into Mary Yelloly, a Victorian painter who died young from tuberculosis. The memoir aspect is the more compelling part of the book, and tells the story of Myerson’s son, Jake, his growing addiction to skunk and the consequent destruction of his relationship with his parents. As Jake’s behaviour moves from erratic to violent, his parents become anxious about his influence on his younger siblings, find it hard to cope and eventually throw him out of the house, taking what they describe as a ‘tough love’ approach. Myerson’s love and concern for her son and her anguish about the actions she takes are conveyed with detail and power. At the end of the book, there is a scene where Myerson shows her son the manuscript and gets his reluctant permission to publish it, including incorporating some of his poetry.

Several days before serial extracts from the book were due to be published in the *Daily Telegraph*, Jake Myerson gave an interview to the paper which was written up as ‘Jake Myerson brands his mother “obscene” over drug addict claims’ (Wardrop 2009: n.p.). The following day he was interviewed by the *Daily Mail*, resulting in an article headed ‘Mum, what you did is obscene: The son Julie Myerson kicked out for smoking pot tells his side of the story’ (Weathers 2009: n.p.). Jake is quoted as saying,

What she has done has taken the very worst years of my life and cleverly blended it into a work of art, and that to me is obscene.

I was only 17, I was a confused teenager, I was too young really to know who I was or what was happening.

What she describes in her book are a series of incidents, it’s not who I am and I find it very sad that she feels the need to tar me with the ‘drug addict’ brush. (Weathers 2009: n.p.)

He points out that his mother has been writing about him for years in an anonymous column called ‘Living with Teenagers’ for the *Guardian*. In reference to giving her permission to publish, he says:

After they kicked me out, I would meet up with my mum every now and again for lunch, and about a year and a bit ago, she gave me a copy of the manuscript of *The Lost Child* and told me to read it.

She wanted my approval; the problem is she would have published it regardless. After reading it I said: ‘There is no way to stop you publishing this, is there?’ (Weathers 2009: n.p.)

After the publication of these interviews with Jake, a flood of opinion pieces, articles and reviews were published about the book, the majority of them highly critical of Julie Myerson and her book and many of them written without reading the book itself. Janice Turner suggests that the book ‘looks like her most recent act of incontinent

exhibitionism' (2009: n.p.), referring both to Myerson's *Guardian* columns and a previous autobiographical novel. Libby Purves, writing in the *Times*, says that 'the idea of exposing a living, fragile boy of twenty like young Myerson to an account of his bygone misbehaviour is frankly monstrous.' (2009: n.p.) She goes on to suggest that the problem is that 'Julie Myerson is a compulsive writer and that once lovely phrases begin forming in her head her self-control evaporates', likening Myerson's writing 'habit' to her son's skunk addiction (Purves 2009: n.p.). Minette Marrin's opinion piece in the *Sunday Times* is headed, 'Her son was betrayed because she's a writer first, mother second' (2009: n.p.). Arguing that 'a mother should above all protect her children, not least from her own ambition', Marrin says that clearly Myerson doesn't love her son enough 'not to publish – the real test of the heart for a writer' (2009: n.p.).

This is the crux of the debate around Myerson's book: is it acceptable for a *mother* to publish a memoir about her child? It appears, on the surface, to be a question solely about ethics. But in fact the question is also one of politics and culture; Myerson has transgressed not just ethical boundaries but also the boundaries of our cultural constructions of motherhood. I'm interested in the way these discussions about Myerson's book (or at least about the idea of her book) foreground the nature of our constructions of motherhood and create a series of dichotomies: good mother/bad mother, public/private, mother/writer, ethics/betrayal.

All relational life writing is subject to ethical dilemmas around representation, power relationships, ownership and privacy. Indeed, Eakin has stated that ethics is the 'deep subject' of all autobiographical discourse (2004: 6). For memoirists writing about those who are either 'vulnerable' (Couser 2004) or dependent, the issues are more complex and entangled. In writing a life narrative that includes a focus on a child or dependent young person, these ethical issues become central. Couser makes the point that parents writing about young children are always unauthorised or self-authorised (by the parent) (2004: 57). Parents have privileged access to their subject, knowing things about their child that the child does not know. The power that lies in representing another's self becomes, for Eakin, the central ethical dilemma of life writing (2004).

As McDonald points out, 'there is surprisingly little in the academic literature about the ethics of writing nonfiction about one's own children' (2010: 3). The exception here would be Couser (2004) and Frank (2004), who have both examined parental memoirs about children with a disability. Couser argues that a 'cure or kill' response to disability is evident in many parental memoirs of disabled children (2004: 150). When it appears possible that a disabled child might be improved or cured, their condition is tolerated. However, once this possibility is denied, the hostility that is initially directed against the disability or illness may now be deflected onto the disabled child. Frank, however, takes a more positive view of parental memoirs, describing such life writing as 'moral non-fiction', offering a form and forum for personal reflections on questions of value (2004: 184). He suggests (as do Barbour 2004 and Parker 2004) that writing a relational life narrative is 'moral' work, resulting in the re-valuing of vulnerable people (such as children and people with a disability) and enlarging the scope of cultural stories told.

It is instructive here to compare the furore over Myerson's *The Lost Child* to the response to Charlotte Moore's 2004 book *George and Sam*. George and Sam are the older two of Moore's three children, and the book is about her experience as mother of two autistic boys. Like Myerson, Moore previously wrote about her children in a column for the *Guardian*, and then expanded that material into a book, which she is planning to update and reissue soon. Moore doesn't appear to censor herself: she writes about the full gamut of her teenage sons' unusual behaviours, including smearing faeces, climbing on the roof, eating mints for breakfast, running naked along the river bank and pulling everything out of her cupboards and onto the kitchen floor. She writes that she needs to lock her youngest son's door once he is in bed to protect him from his older brothers. Like Myerson, she writes with love about her sons. She also notes how relieved she is that her third son is not autistic and how much pleasure he gives her. The book received overwhelmingly positive reviews, with most reviewers commenting favourably both on her honesty and on her matter of fact, 'no-time-for-moaning-attitude' (Osteen 2008: 21). I could find no references to questions of ethics in any reviews or commentaries about this memoir. There was no suggestion that Moore had commodified her children by writing about them or that she failed to love or protect them. Indeed, most reviewers commented (perhaps with surprise) on her love for her children. *She* was not categorised as writer first, mother second.

There are likely to be a number of reasons why Myerson's story about her son and drugs caused controversy and Moore's story about naked teenagers smearing poo on the walls did not. The cynic may suggest that Myerson and her publishers courted controversy in order to sell a flawed book. It is also the case that Myerson's post-publication claim that she wrote the book in order to raise awareness of the dangers of skunk appears more than a little disingenuous. But perhaps the real reason is that commentators and reviewers were more concerned over harm to Jake Myerson than they were to George and Sam Moore. While George and Sam are clearly more vulnerable than Jake, the extent of their vulnerability has muted any discussion about their rights and potential harm to them. It is unlikely that either George or Sam could give an interview about how angry they were their mother had written a book about them. Does this mean that their privacy doesn't need to be protected?

There is a paradox here that any parent writing about a child with a disability must confront. You may write about your child in order to show others that he is not just the sum of his disabilities, that he is a complex and valuable person who should be respected as much as any other individual. And yet by writing about this child, you risk exploiting him for your own agenda, even while that agenda may be about improving the rights of people with disabilities. I don't know whether Charlotte Moore was aiming to write 'moral non-fiction' which re-inscribed value to her sons in the way Frank discusses, but if she was, then perhaps the best response to her book would have been as much outrage on behalf of George and Sam as there was for Jake Myerson.

But of course no one is going to criticise a mother like Charlotte Moore. She is the loving and infinitely patient parent of two sons with complex disabilities and high level needs. As Landsman (1999) has noted, as soon as you are the mother of a child with special needs, you become a 'special mother': either you are very bad and have

somehow caused their disability or you are very good and the child was 'given' to you because you are an exceptional person. Moore falls into the exceptional mother category. Her uncomplaining, unemotional and matter of fact tone elicits admiration. Here she is, talking about having two sons with autism:

People have often asked me, why have you got two? And the only accurate reply is, I don't know. In a way, it doesn't really matter. I've never raged against fate, or cast about much for explanations. Nothing in my own childhood experience led me to expect that anything would be 'wrong' with my children, but then there they were, and – well, you just get on with it. (2004: 16)

Compare this with Myerson's agonising over asking her son to leave home:

So, it's a cold and bright February morning and, though I frequently tell myself that it could have been either of us, it isn't his father, it's me. I'm the one who tells him to go. His mother. The one who carried him and loved him and felt him move and grow. The one whose skin stretched once a long time ago to make room for him. She's the one who decides it would actually be preferable to live without him. (2009: 14)

I wonder if it is the fact that Myerson takes her own suffering seriously that alienates readers, especially other mothers? Her pain is seen as narcissistic, where Moore's lack of emotional connection (which I read to be a kind of lack of intimacy with the self) is seen as bravery.

Amanda Lohrey wonders whether the response to Myerson is an example of 'misogynistic mother-bashing', asking: 'Are we dealing here with a kind of primal rage directed at a classic archetype from fairy tales, the witch mother who appropriates her child's beauty/inheritance/story to feed her vanity?' (2009: n.p.) The archetypal splitting of mothers into good – loving, selfless mothers – and bad – devouring, narcissistic witch mothers – may be linked to the split between public and private spheres. When a woman writes a memoir about mothering she is moving the mothering role from the private to the public domain, and consequently challenging the archetypal good mother role, even as she writes about this role. Julie Myerson was understood by many to be sacrificing the good mother role in order to succeed in public as a writer. She was judged, not by those actions as mother that are recorded in the memoir, but by the act of recording itself. Moore, on the other hand, has been praised for both the way she mothers and the way she makes this public in her book.

Kellaway (2009) has suggested that most parental memoirs are written about children who are unable to respond, either because of their age or their cognitive ability, and that this lessens the likelihood of negative reviews. But the critical response to Rachel Cusk's 2001 memoir *A Life's Work* suggests otherwise. Subtitled, *On Becoming a Mother*, Cusk's book is an account of her experience of the psychic impact of childbirth and early motherhood. Her book is full of the confusion, pain and doubt of motherhood, as well as a scathing antipathy towards the cheery patronage of 'how to' motherhood books. For this, Cusk was savaged, accused of narcissism, cynicism, not loving her children and being an incompetent mother. Like Myerson, Cusk takes the emotional damage of mothering seriously. She has no time for idealism and allows expression of her grief about the huge change she has experienced and her ambivalence about the role of mother. She is overtly questioning the contemporary

ideal of motherhood which is both romanticised and demanding (see Douglas and Michaels 2004), that constructs motherhood as woman's most desired and 'true' occupation whilst also expecting mothers to perform other roles as such volunteer, wife and (part time) paid worker. Like Myerson, Cusk struggles with the public/private split and even makes of it a kind of black joke when she says that her husband has given up his paid job to look after their children so that she can write a book about looking after their children.

Even though Cusk is writing about her children as babies and very young toddlers, her book was still criticised by many reviewers. This contrasts with the responses to some of the many recent motherhood memoirs (see, for example, books by Lisa Belkin 2002, Susan Cheever 2001, Anne Enright 2004, Kate Figs 2000, Faulkner Fox 2000, Lauren Slater 2002 and Noami Wolf 2001) and the so-called 'mommy blogs' (that is, blogs by women that focus mainly on daily stories about mothering). Lopez (2009) cites research from 2008 that shows that within the 133 million (then) online journals or blogs, 36% of women were focusing on family updates (729) and that the most popular mommy blogs can attract more than 50,000 hits a day (930). Lopez argues that mommy blogs work, as a group, to 'expand our notion of motherhood' and the mother's place in public life (2009: 744).

Morrison (2011), discussing what she terms 'personal mommy blogs', suggests that the writers of such blogs are deliberately participating in a form of social engagement and community development as well as self expression. Morrison also notes that such bloggers often protect their families' identities, using pseudonyms and avoiding any specific details about their children's lives. It is common for bloggers to start reading blogs when they are pregnant and then start writing one as they adapt to motherhood for the first time. Writing about babies and young children allows a more generic approach, so that they are less likely to be accused of exploiting or exposing their own children.

Lopez (2009) notes the tendency for bloggers to use humour in their blogs. The tone is often light hearted and challenges are discussed with irony and self-deprecation. This kind of 'chicklit' tone is far from the agonised tone of both Myerson and Cusk. While other writers may contravene the rules of the idealised mother using humour, Myerson and Cusk do so with high literary seriousness. Is this, in fact, their crime – the serious consideration and aesthetically captivating representation of the loss that is inevitably a part of mothering?

They write about two very different losses, but this is where Myerson and Cusk articulate what Moore fails to express. Myerson's book is really a version of the 'empty nest' story, as she struggles with the pain of watching her adorable young boy turn into a troubled teenager. As Linklater wrote, 'one detects...a deep need to reclaim children', to 'internalise what has been lost' in *The Lost Child* (2009: n.p.). Cusk is writing about the loss of her old self, her certainties and her sense of being a cohesive and singular being. In her review of Anne Enright's book *Making Babies*, Cusk identifies the work of reconstructing the self that she feels motherhood demands. She says of Enright:

Her real triumph, as she plots her slow transformation into the mother of two children, is to capture the delicate sense of parenthood as something that, for all its frequent impositions, stems so profoundly from the self that it is almost an act of reading, of self-interpretation. (2004: n.p.)

In contrast, Moore's distanced and distancing tone and refusal to discuss the full emotional impacts of mothering two autistic boys leaves the reader to work out for herself the transformation that Moore may have experienced. Is it perhaps the very extent of change in identity that parenting children with a disability requires that results in this silence?

These are issues and questions that engage me deeply because I, too, have written a memoir about mothering a child with autism (Robertson 2012). Now the book is finished and about to be published, I can see that it is, in part, a book about the necessary losses of motherhood and, in part, a reinterpretation of the self. I can see also that the dichotomies I mentioned earlier – good mother/bad mother, public/private, mother/writer, ethics/betrayal – form a kind of subterranean layer under the work and occasionally erupt into the text. Like many other memoirists, I write not just for self-expression but also for political and cultural change. Nancy Miller proposes that memoir 'can serve to help us escape from the strictly personal, to contemplate the bigger picture' (2002: 25), and this is my goal. But the desire to change people's views about autism does not negate my responsibility to protect my son from harm, including from harm I may cause by writing about him. There is always hanging over me the spectre of the witch-mother devouring her child.

The ethical issues around mothers writing about their children are complex and compelling. The public discussion aroused by the books of Myerson and Cusk suggests that some mothers at least are asked to make a choice between love and memoir. The motherhood memoirs I most value are those that question assumptions about what it is to be a mother, that express the losses of motherhood as well as the gains, that expose parental ambivalence, that identify the dilemmas of negotiating the split between public and private domains as a mother. Cusk does all this in her book *A Life's Work*, both through her challenges to the sentimental rhetoric of early motherhood (exemplified by the 'what to expect' type of preparation manual) and through her precise and scouring descriptions of the changes wrought by motherhood. The seriousness with which she explores the experience of mothering is far from the light-hearted irony of many contemporary motherhood memoirists and bloggers. I would argue that this is the strength of her work and why it endures and was reissued in 2008, seven years after its first publication.

I do not want to make a case for the value of all motherhood memoirs, but merely for the importance of works which give voice to aspects of the role which are denied or suppressed in public discourse. Julie Myerson's book is unsuccessful overall, for a range of reasons, but she is able to articulate powerfully the pain of her teenage son's distance from her. Charlotte Moore conveys an experience of mothering that is unusual and challenging in a way that is humorous and honest. Rachel Cusk has written a beautiful book about an everyday experience – motherhood – that is rarely

explored with such precision and nuance. Her work demonstrates a woman who is not writer first or mother first but rather mother *and* writer *and* memoirist.

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Endnotes

ⁱ I use the term memoir as Smith and Watson do, to refer to 'life writing that takes a segment of a life, not its entirety, and [focuses] on interconnected experiences' (Smith and Watson 2010: 274). In contrast, in biography a scholar will 'document and interpret' someone else's life 'from a point of view external to the subject' (Smith and Watson 2010: 4).