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The (Un)Finished Memoir: Process as inspiration for the aspiring memoir writer

In his 2012 introduction to the genre, Courser writes, “for better or worse, we are living in an age of memoir” (2012: 142) and if memoir’s 21% share of The Sunday Times’ 50th anniversary list of 100 bestselling books (2024) is anything to go by, the age has yet to wane. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, after a period of Significant Life Change in my early 30s, I too found myself armed with grand literary delusions and a terrible memory, setting out to write a memoir.

Memoir as a finished product

Many of the memoirists whose fame endures today were published during the so-called “memoir boom” of the 1990s, like Frank McCourt with *Angela’s Ashes* (in at number five on The Sunday Times list) and Mary Karr with *The Liars Club*. This “boom”, though not unique in memoir’s history, is often marked as a turning point for the form due to the significant increase in memoirs written by normal people and the greater freedom writers experienced in exploring tragic subject matter (Yagoda 2009: 243). A sibling genre emerged during the same period, the memoir writing handbook, which gave detailed advice for aspiring writers on how to write memoir, straight from the pens of authors who’d successfully done it. The handbooks share many features with their fiction-focused counterparts, urging writers to show not tell, asserting the importance of a unique voice and exploring how to shape plot from your life story. There is, of course, one additional piece of advice, unanimously echoed across all handbooks: the memoir writer must tell the truth, at all costs. Karr, in *The Art of Memoir*, is clear, if you have a bad memory, you should, quite simply, “give it up [...] get a real job” (2015: 28). Though perhaps discouraging for me and my terrible memory, this advice makes sense in the context of the memoirs in vogue at the time, perhaps best explained by another handbook writer, Cohen, who describes memoir as “a story you remember that ties together a series of life events into an understandable and glittering package” (2014: 138). What Karr and Cohen are advocating for is the archetypal 90s/00s boom memoir, where the memoirist is the definitive authority on their life, a reliable narrator, weaving an infallible narrative that stands up next to the literariness of fiction. Memoir as a finished, “glittering”, product.



Memoir as (un)finished?

However, memory, the very stuff that memoir is built from, simply does not operate in such a neat and glittering way. Indeed, the narrative detail and fictional techniques these handbooks call for is often beyond what we're realistically able to remember (Yagoda 2009: 109). This places us in a writing conundrum. Writing today, with the looming possibility of a journalist publishing an exposé on the real truths behind your writing (as happened recently to number 37 on the Sunday Times bestseller list, Raynor Winn with *The Salt Path*), increasingly memoirists must find ways to reconcile the fallibility of memory with the memoir imperative to tell 'The Truth', all while producing a compelling, publishable narrative. Contemporary memoirists have responded to this challenge by expanding what we mean by 'memoir', taking the glittering package and introducing layers of self-reflexivity which expose the writing process. In *You Could Make This Place Beautiful*, for example, Maggie Smith tells both the story of her divorce and the story of writing it, weaving the two threads into her poetic and fragmentary narrative. She directly references her writing process - "I've been testing out so many metaphors in this book, trying to find the perfect imagistic shorthand for this heartpunch of an experience. [...]" (2023: 170) - and draws attention to what she chooses to leave out, challenging standard writing advice. "There were tears in our house at bedtime" she writes in one chapter, "is it enough to tell you this, or do you want me to show you? Reader, ask yourself: Why would you want to see someone else's children crying?" (215). By doing so, she invites the reader into a dialogue with her story. This is what I would call an "(un)finished memoir", 'un' parenthesised to highlight the paradoxical nature of these narratives: they are finished in their unfinishedness. This process-led approach invites multiple versions of the truth to emerge, rather than making claims to The Truth.

Jenn Ashworth does similar in the opening to *Notes Made While Falling*. She says: "A beginning is a cut in the onward flow of things. It is a lie too: we section out the story, slashing away what came before and after." (2019: 7). This exposes the writer's decision-making process, that the 'beginning' of a memoir will always be an artificial starting point, because it comes amid a life still being lived. It is an example of what Couser calls the fictive element of memoir writing, because whatever we write is a reconstruction from memory, not a perfectly mimicked replication (2012: 74). In a later chapter, Ashworth weaves two timelines, the present, on a train to give a talk at a literature festival, and the past, about her father and maternal grandfather's factory work when she was young (2019: 35). This mimics how memory works, writing the interplay between the self who is remembering, now, and the links the brain makes to past remembrances. Again, we might call this text "(un)finished". While this is a completed, published, version of the story, the text itself makes clear that this is by no means the only way it could have been told.

Now", I thought, "*this* is the kind of memoir I'd like to write". Though both Ashworth and Smith employ many of the handbook techniques to tell compelling, narratively sumptuous, scenic and detailed stories, the "(un)finished" memoir approach allows the writers to explore additional ways of interacting with their stories, to adopt different roles within their own narratives. Two key roles are that of 'rememberer' and of 'researcher'. In the role of rememberer, the memoir writer acknowledges within their text that they are writing from imperfect memory. They draw the reader's attention to non-linear connections, like Ashworth's literary festival and factory-working relatives, identify contrasts between 'now' and 'then' and relay non-visual experiences, such as bodily feelings, which cannot be told

through scenic detail. In the role of researcher, the memoir writer invites the reader into a dialogue with their text by showing them the writing process, drawing explicit attention to the narrative choices made, like Smith's multiple tested metaphors or Ashworth's choice of where to start. A memoir which allows the writer to fulfil different roles within their narrative allows for inspiration not only from the past, at a safe, glittering distance, but also from the life ongoing.

So, how might we embody these roles in our writing? For advice on how to write your reliable narrator, I will defer to the countless memoir writing handbooks which cover this material far more comprehensively than I could: Cohen's *The Truth of Memoir* (2014); Karr's *The Art of Memoir* (2015) and additionally Zinsser's *Inventing the Truth* (1999), which includes reflections from multiple "boom" memoirists, like Frank McCourt and Annie Dillard. For the remaining roles, here are some quick exercises to help us embody the roles of rememberer and researcher.

Stepping into different roles

To adopt the 'rememberer' perspective, we need to treat our memories as material, and interrogate them from our position today. In his book on the psychology of autobiographical memory, Kotre describes an experiment in which he considered all the places in his memory connected to a particular object, the titular "white gloves" (1996: 9-10). The exercise is to trace the "lineage" of the memory, to think of all the things, people and places that would remind us of that object.

Exercise 1: Pick an object or event from your life that few people know about. Write a brief paragraph outlining your initial memories of it. Now, make a mind-map or a list of all the connections to this item in your memory. Ask yourself: who knows about this object or event? What general knowledge do I have relating to it? Where is this thing recorded? What happened as a result? How was I changed by it?

Generally, this process unearths countless connections between the object and the writer's life, different paths you might take in your memoir writing, both illuminating and challenging the initial perspective. A variation of this is to interrogate the material of your memory based on what you don't remember, which can similarly create new connections.

Exercise 2: Choose an unclear memory, something you wish you could remember but simply don't. Make a list of all the things you don't remember. Details, like what colour your clothes were, who else was there and what they said. What do you learn about yourself from what is missing? Try this with a few different memories and see if you can spot themes. What are your memory blind spots?

To become researchers of our own lives, we can begin to interrogate our process instead of our memories. It will start to become quite 'meta' (think: memoir about writing a memoir), but if you bear with it, these exercises can bring new insight into our writing selves and add texture and depth to our narrative voice. If, like me, you have an untrustworthy memory, these activities can also help make sense of incomplete memories on the page, and bring that incompleteness into the story, instead of editing it out.

Exercise 3: If there are things you don't want to write about, try writing about why that is. Don't tell us *what* you're avoiding, focus on the reasons *why*. At first, this is simply for your own eyes. What are your fears and hesitations?

Exercise 4: Try to observe yourself in the writing process and write down the observations. This takes practice. Sit down to write a scene. Pay attention to your thoughts before, during and after you write it. Try to capture them as they come up. It could be things like "I'm not sure if this is what actually happened" or "it makes me think of another occasion when". Try not to force your mind, let it wander, and capture the wanderings.

So much of writing memoir is about the person writing *now*, reflecting on their life experiences. Positioning yourself as a researcher of your own life allows you to consider your motivations, your fears and your process in a way that enriches your own storytelling, but also the reader's experience. Whether you choose to leave these reflections in your final narrative, to leave it "(un)finished" or you edit them out, to make it glitter, your text may well be more expansive as a result.

Writing the "(un)finished" memoir

So, though I am certainly not calling for an end to the glittering memoir form the handbooks encourage and that has proliferated during this ongoing memoir age, I am offering a provocation to memoir writers to expand the roles we play in our work. To introduce the messiness of the writing process onto the page, and to let it bring light and shade to our narratives. The (un)finished memoir might allow us to say to our readers: "I don't know all the answers yet, and I might never know them all, but I'm taking you with me as we try to find them out".

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Biographical Note

Harley E. Ryley is a Creative Writing PhD student at the University of Sheffield. Her thesis will develop an innovative approach to memoir which exposes language constructs, challenges concepts of truth and unwrites genre rules. She is also Business Manager for, and runs writing workshops with, The Writers Workshop in Sheffield.

Headshot

