

Another round? On writing a second memoir

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Essays

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There must be a good metaphor. A fresh one. No food comparisons (soufflés never rising twice, cakes you can't have and eat, multiple bites of the cherry.) I hate cooking. Grooming, perhaps. I think of a comb running through hair, each stroke gathering up a different combination of strands, tackling a different series of tangles. This metaphor has its limits too. Still the same head.

Mirrors are an obvious choice of metaphor. My first memoir was full of them. Is it a different mirror I'm looking into? No, it doesn't quite work. Mirrors can't encompass the temporal. They only capture you now. And now. And now. Not then. And after then. And before then.

I've written a second memoir, everyone. Another sad one. Happy stories are boring. This is what I tell my writing students. Find the thing that troubles you the most. The knot you can't untie. Write about that.

But – again?

Writing multiple memoirs is not new. Think of Karl Ove Knausgaard pumping out millions of words about himself. Think of Deborah Levy, Vivian Gornick, Joan Didion, all producing multiple slim volumes examining their large lives. Think of Michel de Montaigne and his personal essays, scratched and re-scratched in ink, a man examining and re-examining every fleeting thought he has over a lifetime.

I am no Knausgaard. My first book, *Shy: a memoir* (Text Publishing 2014), took five years to write. It felt longer. For a while now I have been convinced that I only have two true stories to tell in memoir form, and then it will be done. But why re-trace the same steps, the same years, with variations on the same themes? Why tell this story? And how to justify – to potential readers and to myself – what could look like an act of monumental egocentricity?

When I was researching for my creative writing doctorate, I came across an Australian psychologist Peter Raggatt who had re-visited the theory of ‘the dialogical self’ and had written specifically about dialogical selves in storytelling. Raggatt asks: ‘Can one’s life be captured in a single, grand, synthesizing story? Consider your own response to a request to “tell your life story.” Taken seriously, the question might prove impossible to answer satisfactorily.

Part of the problem, he says, ‘is in the singularity and finality of the phrase ‘your life story’- as if there could be a definitive account. The phrase ‘your life story’ ‘presupposes a ... linear, integrated, and coherent (tale), with all the facts about your life neatly tied together with a golden thread, a single narrative voice.

But as Raggatt reminds us, ‘the story you tell will probably be but one story from a number of possibilities, and therefore the life story could never be encompassed by a monologue.’ The life story, he says, ‘is really more like a conversation of narrators, or perhaps a war of historians in your head.’

In my first memoir I took this idea of the dialogical self and named several of these ‘selves’ or ‘personas’ inhabiting my head. Most of the time they were called either Shy Sian or Professional Sian, and they had a long conversation in the final pages my memoir. They were two possible versions of me as I saw myself eight years ago, and they were mostly interested in debating the topic of my shyness.

But because identity is mutable and ever-emergent, and because hindsight is a process rather than a momentary epiphany, and because understanding shyness was never going to provide me with a complete picture of myself, I’ve been at it again, asking who am I, and why? This time, shyness will barely rate a mention.

The second memoir is about my long, complex and ultimately unsuccessful quest to have a child. These events were evolving during the same years I wrote about in the first book, but it was never mentioned. As American writer Vivian Gornick explains, every work of literature has both a ‘situation’ and a ‘story’. How I came to be childless wasn’t the story I wanted to tell in *Shy*.

In writing a new memoir there have been new problems to solve. Given I have published a memoir already, how much do I need to tell again? What can I assume the reader knows, doesn't know, needs to know, or doesn't need to know about my life? If I re-visit some of the same territory, will it be annoying for those readers who've read the first memoir? If I don't, will it be baffling for those who haven't?

Other challenges are already familiar. For example, who did I need to consult before I felt ethically comfortable writing about them in my book? What would I have done if they were not happy – take them out, disguise their identities even further, or learn to live with their discomfort?

To tell this story I have had to write – again – about an earlier relationship with a high-profile person. When the book is published the same questions will be asked about why I've chosen not to reveal the identity of that person in the book, when a simple Google search will reveal their name. My answer will be the same. If everyone else has a made-up name to protect their privacy, using that person's real name would be weirdly inconsistent.

I've made some new discoveries. In the first draft of the new memoir I had to revert to using real names, because when I changed them, there was a strange temptation to change other small details. Distorting the truth for ethical reasons felt like a gateway drug to unethical distortions. When the book is ready to be printed (Text Publishing, 2022) I will swap those real names for fake ones, secure in the knowledge that everything else I've written is true to my memories.

I've also discovered that, although the subject matter is completely different in the second memoir, the emotional territory is essentially the same. Fear, loneliness, grief, and unfulfilled desires are all back in the frame.

What both memoirs have had in common is their transformative effects. Researching and writing the first book enabled me to recast my shyness as an inherited temperament trait rather than a character flaw. I am still shy, but I am no longer ashamed of my shyness.

And writing the second memoir has enabled me to transmute deeply buried grief into self-compassion. My infertility led to three miscarriages, contributed to two relationship failures and produced a motherlode of sadness. Somehow, when that sadness is transferred to the page, it has less weight. Absence mutates into presence. I haven't made a baby, but I have made something that will go out into the world and take on a life of its own.

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