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Rewriting truth in memoir

Abstract:

Through a memoir of my relatives' lives during the Greek Civil War, I explore how oral history can give voice to repressed views, as a way of understanding the past. The ethics of rewriting the past, reinterpretation using oral history interviews from relatives brings up questions of inducement, obligation and family ties. While fictionalising aspects of memoir gives a degree of protection to the subjects involved and names and places or appearances can be changed, conflict arises when the writer must consider both the ethics of protecting subjects from possible harm and revealing full details. The balance of family ties becomes precarious when writing a family memoir, suddenly it is not only the work of the author but becomes a family work, with names, reputations, livelihoods at stake.

Biographical note:

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The conflict between writing memoir and family ties

William Zissner describes memoir as ‘a window into a life, very much like a photograph in its selective composition. It may look like a casual and even random calling up of bygone events. It’s not; it’s a deliberate construction’ (1994: 99). I see memoir as a window into the past, into another world of memories, some beautiful and others mundane or frightening. It is a walk in the museum, a gaze at a mummy or preserved cicada in a box. It is a preserved artefact which does not change, even though the original life it describes is no more. When it fully engages the reader, the present dissolves and a new world shimmers brightly in the imagination.

The genre of memoir includes recollections, personal memories in a historical period, often one or two eventful chapters of a person’s life. While an autobiography or biography covers the whole of a person’s life, a memoir reveals a shorter life period (Klems 2013). My memoir focuses on how war impacted my relatives’ lives. In my desire to know more about my past and my family history, it was not enough to be told facts. I wanted to know the why’s and how’s as well. I remember clearly my mother telling me to stop asking too many questions. ‘You want to know it all!’ she snapped. In her opinion, I should only know what she chose to tell me. My questions were annoying and interrupted the pleasure she felt when talking about her past. I soon learned that wanting the whole truth was precarious, and that sometimes if made public, hidden knowledge could also be dangerous.

The balance of family ties comes into question when writing a family memoir, suddenly it is not only the work of the author but a family work, with names, reputations, livelihoods at stake. There are many reasons to write a memoir, for some it is to ‘help people understand the complex political and historical events that shaped the moral choices those involved in them had to make’ (Scarfe, 1994: 14). Gage, who wrote his family memoir, describes ‘a need for revenge’ (1983: 11), and the desire to celebrate the life of his mother and investigate the events behind her murder (1983: 7). For me, the need to write the memoir was driven partly by my desire to understand the cultural background from which I had been separated as a child and also to honour relatives’ wishes that their stories be published. The parts of their lives I found most interesting and wanted to write about were often the parts they did not want to remember or acknowledge. Like riding a tandem bike, I had to learn to work with their wishes and desires, leading the way but always checking that they were in agreement with my direction.

A host of possible negative outcomes opens up for ethical consideration in researching and writing this kind of memoir. Strategies such as fictionalising aspects of their lives gives a degree of protection to the subjects through changing names, places or appearances but conflict can arise where the writer must consider the ethics of protecting subjects from harm and the competing interest of revealing events which would hold great public interest. Imagine the further dilemma when writing about one’s own relatives. When writers write about loved ones it could be seen as a public

betrayal of trust (Mills 2004:104). The case of Emma Tennant highlights this notion of betrayal. She wrote *The Colour of Rain*, which was a disguised memoir published under a pseudonym. The people whose names she had changed could still recognise themselves and others in her novel and took legal action (in Eakin 2004: 42). Clearly, telling one person's story means telling the stories of other people as well and it may not be possible to disguise everyone. Every truth does not need to be told if it carries with it a high risk. Telling those stories would benefit no one, be humiliating again for the victims and add nothing material to the story. My strategy follows that of Mills who explains that 'our goal must be to achieve the great benefits of the sharing of stories while minimizing the costs to those whose stories are shared' (2004: 111).

I agree with Cohen that 'telling your story provides an opportunity to take on the cultural or familial narratives that have long been accepted as truth' (2014: 20). Cohen also encourages writers to question why they are writing the memoir, what is the motivation? Is it to get revenge, expose something or someone, or to shine a light on an aspect of life which has since vanished? She recommends writing about them with compassion and as whole people, to take the time to know who they are, through first or second hand interviews. Remembering their gestures, their vulnerabilities and including all of these will mean that you write about the humaneness of the person, regardless of how flawed, limited or wonderful you think they were (2015). The writing process for memoir is more laborious than writing a novel. A memoir must be 'crafted and shaped like clay into sculpture' (Cohen 2014: 16).

Stories which are more the stories of other families rather than the stories of my family are problematic. Events which are exclusive and identifiable as belonging to another family are shared histories. Assuming permission was granted to use the stories, it would be difficult to separate rumour from fact without direct interviews. This could be seen as invasion of privacy by those who do not wish to participate. By comparison, Fraser conducted over 300 interviews for his memoir, *The Blood of Spain*, where he tried to capture the lived experiences of people who participated in the events, through eyewitness narration, as 'an attempt to reveal the intangible atmosphere of events; to discover the outlook and motivations of the participants, willing or unwilling; to describe what civil war, revolution and counterrevolution felt like from inside both camps' (1979: 29-30). He used the correct names of the people who agreed, and changed the names of others. His aim was not to write a history but to show how people lived through the war and the climate of the time (1979:32). As he was an outsider, it may have been easier to get approval from so many people. A family memoir has implications of allegiances and ties which bring different dynamics into effect when researching and writing narratives.

In theory, some ethical issues around family memoir can be covered by formal approval. While conducting research for my memoir, even the use of the informed consent forms and information to participants did not prevent misconceptions. The language barrier meant that these had to be translated. However, when non-computer-literate relatives read these texts, they still misunderstood, assuming that when I advised them the final public version of the memoir may appear on the internet, they

assumed their recorded voices would also be published. It took careful explanation to clarify such points and allay some of their fears. They expressed a degree of vulnerability in opening up to me about their lives. In conducting the interviews, the contemporary context played a part. Due to the current explosion of emotions around the Greek financial crisis, many relatives refused to participate, believing that somehow it could lead to detrimental effects, persecution, financial difficulty, trouble with authorities and notoriety. This fear of persecution was mentioned by the Scarfes who wrote a collective memoir. They found that many Greek Resistance fighters who had settled in Australia refused to speak about the past, as a change in government back to the right would mean imprisonment or torture for them or their relatives if they returned to Greece (1994: 13).

While writing the memoir was my priority, I had no intention of coercing anyone to participate. The preservation of the family ties was far more important than getting participation from all my relatives. Most relatives had some idea about each other's stories anyway. This brought up concerns of including stories which are from relatives but incidental to others' stories. I realised I would need to sift through overlapping stories and work out what to omit. Couser, in discussing vulnerable subjects advises that 'the product cannot be divorced from the collaboration that produced it' (2004: 3). It is possible my relationships with my relatives are the reason they agreed to participate. My participation in the research, recording of memories, asking questions, directly affected the outcome. Relatives who liked me seemed inevitably more ready to share their memories with me, however, they were also careful which memories they focussed on and the way they described them. Couser explains it is better to mention in the memoir one's involvement and any conflict of interest and loyalty to the subject you are interviewing than to minimise one's presence in an effort to make the work less ethically problematic (2004: 3-4). This is because 'inequities are possible in two distinct but interrelated aspects of the project: portrayal and partnership' (Couser 2004: 41). The writer has the greater power because they record the narratives. Change a word here or there and the whole meaning of the original interview can alter.

While these issues impacted on interviews with living relatives and their inclusion in the memoir, my portrayal of deceased relatives was also problematic. I had not met some of them, and the ones I had met, I had seen only for a few hours, days or weeks. I felt reasonably confident that my knowledge of the culture, and family members' ways of life would lead me to a portrayal that would be a good representation of my deceased relatives. The obligation of trust when writing about a person would be ongoing, even if that person passed away. Which means the writer should consider that if the deceased would not have wanted certain information revealed about them while they were alive, then it should not be revealed when they are dead. Freedman calls this 'implicit trust provision' (2004: 129). However, he explains that this trust may be breached if it is a question of "public interest" or if there is something 'inappropriate about the relational environment in which my trust, and the expectation of loyalty to which it gave rise, took shape' (ibid). Through interviewing my relatives, I have realised that not only the implicit trust provision with the deceased needs to be

considered, but also the trust of all existing relatives. I had to take into account the possible impact on reputation in a small village, as there would be no anonymity as afforded by larger towns and cities. The context of writing about a small Greek village had relevance about what questions to ask and what information to record.

Miller describes another aspect of interconnectivity between stories:

If, moreover, every account of self includes relations with others, how can an autobiographer tell a story without betraying the other, without violating the other's privacy, without doing harm, but nonetheless telling the story from one's own perspective, which by virtue of being a published text exerts a certain power? (2004: 153).

By telling one story, I would no doubt be telling several other stories, or at least parts of them. Careful consideration had to be given to first, second and third drafts. A previously innocent seeming passage may during a later reading reveal a flaw which could cause misconceptions.

This is why I have called my version of writing memoir '*rewriting truth*'. Writing the truth as it was perceived by the subject of the memoir would be taking down the story as it is remembered, based on oral history and historical fact. *Rewriting* reflects the process needed to sift through the material which is allowed to stay, not only by the consent of the subjects, but also through ethical consideration of benefit over possible risk. There are many ways to write and then rewrite. In her guide to writing oral history, Brown states that 'every human event can be seen from different points of view, and every point of view is true in its limited way...In writing history, we can never write a completely accurate account, because the complexity we face is too immense' (1988: 5). Writing a memoir gives the opportunity for those skilled in oral rendition, but perhaps not able to write their stories to reach a greater audience and have their stories be preserved. Brown describes this as putting 'the people into history who belong there' (1988: 6).

My memoir aims to 'put the people into history who belong there' showing how short term policies and beliefs can have a drastic impact on a generation, which may be discarded a generation later. So, is the truth of then, the truth of now? According to Langer, all sides can be telling their version of the truth (1991: xi) and I believe that all sides need to be told for a more complex understanding of events.

Memory and truth are intricately connected, we want to know the truth, and rely on memory to do so. However, Karr asserts 'memoir is not an act of history but an act of memory, which is innately corrupt' (2007: n.p.). It is interesting that memory and truth are connected when memory and corruption are also connected.

Siani-Davies has also recognised that there cannot be only one version of the truth in the reconciliation process for Greece. He advises that 'reconciliation cannot be total if it encourages forgetting because of the risk of the uncontrollable return of the past' (2009: 559). Choices made during the writing process, should reflect what information is most reliable, most accurate, and most valuable to tell.

Fraser asked:

how are we to know that what people say is the truth? It is a justifiable question and can be answered without impugning the good faith of any of the participants: we cannot always know. Memory can be notoriously tricky, a long time has elapsed. It is not possible to check each assertion, every experience, unless documentary evidence existed (1979: 31).

Truth can appear to change over time, but it is not the truth which has necessarily changed but the people who perceive it to so have themselves changed. People may become more tolerant of what occurred or why, and something once outrageous may become less so.

Shapiro wrote in the LA Times article, *Speak, Memory*:

I have discovered memoir is not a document of fact. It isn't a linear narrative of what happened, so much as a document of the moment in which it is written. The present moment acts almost as a transparency, an overlay resting atop the writer's history. The interplay of these two planes – the present and the past- the me now and the me then, create the narrative and the voice. One can't exist without the other (2009).

This is why family life writing – memoir – is not for the faint hearted, not least because it must follow ethical guidelines. Existing family members should be able to give their opinions about the way their deceased parents are being portrayed, as their reputations are also impacted to a degree by their parents' reputations, and also the ethical issues raised by Freedman earlier (see page 4 of this paper). According to Couser, the text should represent the subject in the way they would like to be represented, and should the subject should have some control over this portrayal, in order to minimise harm to them or their reputations (2004: 42). In my research some relatives failed to see the value in bringing up the past. An uncle told me to focus on the present and the future and hoped bad times never repeated themselves. He could not see the value in discussing the terrible past which he did not care to remember. It genuinely made him uncomfortable. Not only that, it made him angry someone was asking him to look at his past, remember poverty, cold and hunger. I thought afterwards what he did with these memories... how he compartmentalised them from his daily life or other memories. I found some answers in the work done by Renn who advises that 'traces of the traumatic memory cannot be expunged until they have been translated into personal narrative' (2012: 27). Further, he explains the traumatic experience can 'overwhelm and disorganise a person's normal fight/flight response which leads to a partial loss of memory and it takes on a dream like quality (27). The traumatic experience is cut off and encapsulated as a separate, non-reflective reality (27). This 'disassociation does not erase traumatic memories, but severs the links among different memory systems' (28). Many of my relatives made it clear to me that the people they were 'then' were very different to who they are 'now' and they preferred the now.

Some relatives did refuse to participate and I respected that, while others were more than happy to share their memories and stories. I also felt guilt, in my desire for their

stories which may have been difficult for them to discuss or remember. Couser states that ‘the closer the relationship between writer and subject, and the greater the vulnerability or dependency of the subject, the higher the ethical stakes, and the more urgent the need for ethical scrutiny’ (2004: xii).

Stories became clearer and clearer, as I collected supporting narratives. Others appeared to be lies, mysteries, and misconceptions. My need to discover the stories and even to tell the stories may partly stem from growing up in the diaspora and hankering after the rhizomes of our family history. My relatives grew up in Greece, not separated by geographical distance from their past, and told me they were thankful for the passage of time to heal their wounds. Our shared histories were passed on to me as stories around the heater in winter, or after a Sunday lunch, when father and mother would remember their own childhood meals with their parents. Hirsch, in her discussion of post memory writing, advises that we do not have ‘literal memories of others’ experiences’ but it ‘approximates memory in its affective force and psychic effects’ (2012: 31). Importantly, Hirsch explains that any break in the transmission of memory, or post memory between generations, due to traumatic historical events, ‘necessitates forms of remembrance that reconnect and re-embodiment an intergenerational memorial fabric that is severed by catastrophe’ (2012: 32). This desire to look at the unfinished business, the disassociated memories and buried memories of my relatives was possibly inherited from my parents’ own desires to reconnect with the past through a connection lost by the geographical distance of moving to Australia.

Another point of difference was that my ideas of what comprised a good story differed from those of my relatives. Describing poverty and difficult circumstances was embarrassing for them, one aunt laughed nervously while telling me aspects of her childhood. I found it enthralling and amazing that she had overcome so many difficulties, however, she was not pleased that I focussed on those difficulties and wanted to know more about them. Couser describes some memoirs as being a ‘betrayal of trust’, where the writer pretends to be on the side of the subject but is secretly working against them – ‘manipulation masquerading as collaboration’ (2004: 3). The writer seems to be sympathetic to the wishes of the subject so that they can access more information. My respect for my family ties and my desire to follow ethical guidelines meant that I could not use information after my relatives requested it be withdrawn. My relatives were advised they could retract any part of their stories that they do not want to make public or be included in the research. Mills asks ‘if there can be a great relief to me when finally I tell you my secret, is there a great relief to me when finally you tell my secret?’ (2004: 108). This point was made clear to my relatives, they may have felt relieved unburdening themselves to me, but they should consider would they feel relieved if that material became public?

Not everyone wants to write their own memoir, it is a laborious task, and some people are not able to take it on themselves. I noticed while some relatives relished the thought of parts of their lives being made public, they wanted to be in control of how it was told. I believe that in order to tell the story in a way that would benefit the

subject, attention must be given to the things they are proud of having achieved in life. Rewriting the past can be dangerous. When the interviewee tells their story to the writer, they trust them to protect and not misuse that information. They expect their wishes to be respected. Once in written form, a secret becomes tangible, an entity. Relatives may remember events differently, so there is the danger of defamation and issues with accuracy, or which version of events is more correct. If relatives may not have wanted a family secret outed publicly they may view a published memoir as an invasion of privacy (Cook 2010). There is also the difficulty of interpreting events in ways which the subjects agree or disagree with, and at times employing fiction to fill in gaps. Levine advises ‘first do no harm’ when writing a biography. The writer not only researches the material and gathers truth, but also shapes it, ‘all narrative decisions are also ethical decisions’ (cited in Scutts, 2012). This means that to an extent, the published memoir is the view of the writer, not necessarily the complete views of all the subjects. Attempting to do no harm is very difficult, when dealing with many views on shared memories.

Creativity and rewriting the past

There are many ways to write a memoir, including varying levels of fictionalisation. Names, places, descriptions can all be changed. However, in pursuit of truth and authenticity, a writer can focus on what is being said and present that in a way that the subject agrees with. One example of this style of writing, using oral history interviews is Patty Leow’s *Seventh Generation Earth Ethics: Voices of Wisconsin*. Here, each subject is interviewed for a chapter, with a brief introduction followed by their stories in the third person. The interviews are ordered chronologically and the writer uses her skill to express short life histories as clearly as possible. I employed a similar technique when writing the memoir, until I realised there would be gaps that no-one could fill because the interviewees could not remember every single detail of their past and often were annoyed when asked for more information. How could dialogue be created and still be seen as relevant or partly truthful? No-one could remember exactly how something was said and sometimes they couldn’t remember which person said it. So, if memory is so unreliable, especially after the passage of decades, then a writer can be forgiven for considering fiction when creating dialogues in a memoir. Without dialogue, a memoir would possibly be more factually correct. However, it would be difficult to read slabs of description. Polking advises that ‘the look of a printed page that is solid text turns some readers off. They want to hear the characters themselves’ (1995: 136). Polking claims that the use of the words ‘allegedly’ and ‘supposed to have replied’ help writers report dialogue which has no known source (1995: 138). I feel this may be a useful way to include some creative elements in the memoir, for the purpose of plot or characterisation.

If interviewees can remember the main parts of conversations, then dialogues can be reconstructed. A memoir is different from a novel in that readers are expecting to read about real life events, and preferably, real conversations. During my interviews with my relatives, they did not have many dialogues or conversations to contribute. It was

all past tense first person when recalling their lives and past tense third person when speaking of others. They might have added a few words they remembered, and from those few words, I constructed dialogues. Roorbach explains that when writing memoir he uses some leeway, especially when events occurred twenty or thirty years ago. While nonfiction dialogue uses the same creative devices that fiction writing does, there is the 'added burden' that it must really have been said or be 'representative' of what was said (2008: 27).

I came across other areas of conflict when thinking about dialogue and events: one person's word against another's. There was often a dilemma of which version to use, or if I should present both versions. Perhaps my relatives would object to the way I would portray them or others. Cook advises that there could be issues of defamation or invasion of privacy to consider, especially when there are differences of opinion in the memories of those depicted (2010).

There was a danger the whole memoir would end up on the scrap heap of never ending adjustments. I agree with Polking's explanation that it is easier to leave out of your memoir members of your family who have not given their consent to be included, because 'truth is not a defence against invasion of privacy' (1995: 82).

Taking the first person viewpoint when writing a memoir does allow for the author to add more personal information, including what they think the protagonist may have been thinking. However when there is little basis what they were thinking, because you were not told, then a third person viewpoint is more valid. When translating the original spoken material into English, there is also another element of power imbalance and an increased margin for error.

Any liberties you take such as an 'omniscient viewpoint' need to be revealed in the preface (Polking, 1995: 132). I found that it was all too easy to use this viewpoint and to put my own interpretation into events and how my relatives might have been thinking. It was harder to cut back descriptions to include only what I had been told. I did not believe I was not taking extreme liberties, as I had years of stories from my youth for extra material. I had seen the colour of the curtains in my grandparents' house, I had descriptions of what sort of toys my mother and her aunts played with. I could add these details into the memoir without being told about them. In the end, I decided that the people I knew most about, my parents would feature most prominently in the memoir, as I had years of journals about what they thought and did and said. Most significantly, I found that by searching for the truth about my relatives' lives and how historical events had affected them, it changed my own perception of history. I did not accept one viewpoint, one source, or general information anymore as being factual, but rather a version of events. My memoir was going to become my family's version of those events, personal, culturally biased and colourful.

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