

Central Queensland University

Sue Bond

A shark in the garden: an adoptee memoir

Abstract:

My current work is centred around the adoptee life narrative, what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson call a genre of life writing. Specifically, I am interested in late discovery adoptee memoir, in which the adopted person describes learning of his or her adoptive status when an adult: the revelation of a long held secret. For the creative non-fiction part of my PhD, I am writing my own late discovery adoptee memoir, which I consider to be a form of bearing witness to my experience, which includes living with a mentally ill adoptive parent and being told at twenty-three that I had been adopted. For this paper, I will present extracts from my memoir in an attempt to illustrate the testimonial potential of such writing, and adoptee life writing in particular, and link to the themes of this conference, for my writing, rewriting, and remaking involves the stirring up of many ghosts. Martin Edmond, in his keynote address from the 2014 AAWP Conference, said ‘All writers go back to the dark to feed: going back to the dark to feed is, perhaps, analogous to riding the ghost train’, and my memoir is created from such darkness, where secrets lay waiting to be brought into the light.

Biographical note:

Sue Bond is a PhD student in creative writing at Central Queensland University, undertaking the writing of an adoptee memoir and an exegesis on adoptee memoir as testimony literature. Her published work includes short stories, book reviews, and an essay longlisted for the Calibre Prize in 2014. She has degrees in medicine, literature, and creative writing, and lives in the leafy green suburb of The Gap in Brisbane with her partner, one cat, and a large library.

Keywords:

Life writing – late discovery adoptee – memoir – testimony – secrets

My PhD thesis is comprised of two components: a creative artefact and an exegesis. The research statement at the conclusion of this paper gives more detail about the research aspects of my thesis, but I will give a brief background summary of the memoir to place the following extracts in context. The creative component is a memoir that describes living with my adoptive parents. It begins with the revelation of my adoptive status, when I was twenty-three years old, then goes back to tell stories of my childhood and teenage years, medical degree, and the deterioration in the relationship between myself and my parents. There are post-revelatory chapters describing my search for, and discovery of, my birth mother and extended maternal family, and also my birth father. The memoir concludes with the story of the day my birth mother and I reunited. It seeks to portray my adoptive parents as the complex people they were, with issues of mental illness, war experience, and infertility complicating their lives.

The first extract is self-explanatory; I was told of my adoptive status in December 1988. The second describes an event that occurred after my adoptive mother's death in 2001; my parents and I had been estranged for several years.

But before the extracts, I want to describe a strange experience I had recently, a ghostly one if you will. I was awake early and could not get back to sleep. My dead parents were visiting me, which is not unusual. Their ashes are stored in a wardrobe, waiting for me to take them back home to England: to Newent for my adoptive mother, where she was born, and somewhere on the sea for my adoptive father, who loved boats. But at this early hour, when the dark memories of life frequently seep into the mind to haunt and torment, the darkest memory of my attempt to kill myself thirty years before and the response (or lack thereof) from my father in particular brought a raging into my head. My parents' ashes were pulsing at me, and I had an overwhelming feeling that I could not tolerate them being in my house any longer.

A few days later, my partner and I went to the opening day of the 8th Asia Pacific Triennial (APT8) at the Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane. I particularly wanted to go on the opening day because a performance was taking place from 8am to 8pm, only on that day. This was by Indonesian artist Melati Suryodarmo who crushes charcoal for the entire eight hours. She stands on a bed of charcoal pieces and intermittently goes out into the bed to collect more lumps to grind with her giant rolling pin on a special table. She is involved in the transformation of tree to wood to charcoal to dust, a transfer of energy. In the process, her white dress is turned grey and black. This is a slow, deliberate, meditative process – at least it was in my eyes. An act of endurance. Within a minute or so of arriving in the room in which she was performing, I felt a visceral reaction: tears welled up in my throat and eyes, a force of emotion that surprised me. I checked again the title of her performance piece: *I'm a ghost in my own house*.

The charcoal resembled the ashes of my parents, I realise now, and the performance released deep emotion within me, released perhaps the energy of my parents' ghosts. I am not a ghost in my own house, but my parents are, and have been for a long time. As I note in my abstract, Martin Edmond wrote in his keynote address for the 2014

AAWP Conference that 'All writers go back to the dark to feed: going back to the dark to feed is, perhaps, analogous to riding the ghost train'.

Revelation

I sat on my bed, formed fists in my lap, got up again. In the mirror there was my reflection, but all I saw was fear. I sat down, thought of what I was going to say, stood again.

If I didn't force myself out through my bedroom door, all would be lost. I had rung the student quarters at the hospital, there was a room ready. I had spoken to Dr P. It was time for me to go. The words were formed in my mouth, I had only to speak them.

Three days before, I had come home to find my father in a state of heightened anxiety, asking me where the hell I had been. He'd rung my friend C because I had told him, falsely, that I would be going over to her place for a fitting of the bridesmaid dresses. I lied to him because the other bridesmaid was someone he disliked intensely, and did not approve of me seeing her.

I had to tell him the identity of the other bridesmaid. My father accused me of abusing my mother's good nature because she was helping me make my bridesmaid's dress. I was not a good seamstress, whereas my mother made most of her clothes, and ours, so in reality she was the one making the dress.

When you've lied to your parents it is difficult to maintain the high ground, or any ground at all. But I did try to tell him that if he didn't dislike so many of my friends, I wouldn't have to lie to him in order to shield them and have a life outside home. If I knew he wasn't going to blaspheme the other bridesmaid every time I said her name, then I could have been upfront.

What resulted was a dark silence.

I was completing a supplementary exam in obstetrics and gynaecology. Once passed, I would graduate with a Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery degree, and be able to work as an intern in a hospital.

I hated obstetrics and gynaecology. It was about bodies like my own and their special functions, and seemed like an invasion of privacy. Women were set apart as specimens, as flawed creatures, as beings whose wombs were always going wrong, a difficult separate species. Men were the predominant teachers of wisdom about these bodies, and I found this repugnant.

But somehow I had to get through it. I had to get up each morning and go into the hospital and do the ward rounds and see patients. I had to study the books. I had to pass that exam. It had become something other than just an exam to me. It was an enemy against which I must fight.

Every morning I woke up and wondered what mood my father would be in, and whether it would have something to do with me. Was I the good daughter today, or the bad one? This happened every day. It was worse because of the fight over the

wedding. It was a relief to close my bedroom door at night and be alone, away from him. But my mother too. I felt as if I was betraying her, by not being cooperative with my father. It would have been easier to have done everything he said, and keep the household peaceful. But the cost of doing that would have been much higher: I would have given my life over to him, and disappeared as a person.

I could wake up and forget for a few seconds where I was and what had happened the day before. But then I remembered. I lived in dread of what my father would say, and in dread of his silence.

That morning I woke up and instantly thought of what I had to do. After the last fight, I realised I did not want to live with such pain and fear anymore. I did not want to cause it, or to live with it, or to kill myself, or to subsume my spirit in the pathology of my father's thinking. I wanted to live.

Now I knew I had to walk into the living room and speak those words to my parents.

My mother was sitting in her spot, at one end of the speckled and striped grey and brown sofa, doing a crossword. My father was in his armchair, head on his hand. I walked around the end of the sofa and stood by 'my' armchair next to my mother.

'Mum and Dad, I need to talk with you about something.'

I sat down as I said this, and looked at each of them in turn.

'I know we haven't been getting on very well lately, and I think it might be best if I leave home and go to live in the students' quarters at the hospital. I'm twenty-three now. I think it might be good for us to spend some time apart.'

I'd said it. It was out in the atmosphere, and I could only wait. And whatever they said, I was going. I was leaving.

My father kept looking at me for a moment, then straightened in his chair, and cleared his throat.

'You sound as if you've worked this all out. Well, I have something to say. I suppose you know you were adopted.'

There was an enormous movement in my head. Adopted. I suppose you know you were adopted. Age of my parents at my birth: forty-seven and forty-eight. *How long have you and Dad been married, Mum? Oooh, that's a tricky one.* School principal's wife, eyes flicking from me to Mum and back again, *You don't look much like each other, do you?* People referring to me as my mum's friend, not her daughter.

This all came to me in a flash of memory, a psychological click and shift that I was certain was audible outside my mind. I did not move, and I did not speak.

My father continued. He was talking about my biological mother. The woman who, until a few seconds before, I had not known existed.

'We were walking on the beach one day with you, and she came towards us. She didn't look one way or another, just kept her eyes straight ahead. Didn't acknowledge us, or you.'

At one point my mother said to me, ‘You aren’t going to leave before Christmas are you?’

All of her hopes and desires were in that question. I was not a good daughter, and yet I knew that I was breaking her heart by leaving, particularly before Christmas. Even a bad daughter is better than no daughter at all. And there nearly was no daughter at all. *I suppose you know you were adopted.*

But did my mother understand nothing of the turmoil that lived within me? Did it really not matter to her that I was leaving, as long as I didn’t do it before Christmas? Did she understand why I was leaving, did she even want to know? Did she understand more than I knew? I did not ask any of these questions.

Instead, at some point I got out of the chair and walked into my bedroom and pulled out the suitcase I had already packed the night before. I threw other things into other bags. I called for a taxi, in a voice supernaturally calm. When the taxi came, I humped the suitcase down the stairs and out of the garage and into the boot, then went back upstairs and got the other bags and humped them down as well.

And while I did this, I was shouting at my father and he was shouting at me. I seem to remember seeing him out of the corner of my eye, following me down the stairs, then back up again. Following me to my bedroom door, then down the stairs to the taxi.

I don’t remember what my mother was doing.

The only words I remember my father saying then are: ‘You’ll end up in the gutter.’

I responded: ‘At least I’ll get out of this poisonous household.’

And then the taxi was at the hospital, and I was in a room, high up in a nondescript, grey and brown building. I unpacked some of my stuff, put my clothes in the narrow wardrobe, my shoes in a line on the floor, my books on the desk. I imagine I took out my toothbrush and lotions and hairbrush and put them on the bedside table.

That night I lay in the bed and let waves of relief ripple over me. My parents were not there, sitting in the next room, speaking in low voices about how bad I was. I was not going to wake up and brace myself for my father’s opprobrium, or feel guilty for letting my mother down. Not right then, and not the next morning. The guilt and the self-loathing were, at that moment, banished, frozen, held-in-time.

The knowledge of my adoption was also held-in-time: I couldn’t deal with it in any real way, and would not for a long time.

No drugs, no sex, no rock ‘n’ roll

A few months after my mother’s death, my father had a particularly bad fall, and fractured a vertebra in his lumbar spine. When we got the call, it was from a passerby, a woman who had seen him fall, or at least had seen him lying on the ground next to the rubbish bin he had just put out. She had helped him back into the house, and had been trying to get hold of me by phone. I had been trying to get hold of him, as we had visited him the day before, and was worried by his condition, and his loneliness.

I never found out who she was; she didn't leave any details.

My father had, as well as a broken bone, a swelling as big as an egg on the back of his head. He couldn't walk. He said, 'It's up to you now.' It was almost as if he felt relieved that it had happened, because it meant he didn't have to make a decision. He had never liked making decisions.

We called the ambulance, and they thought, I'm sure, that we had abused him. They treated us with suspicion. I did not look, after all, like the daughter of an eighty-two year old man. The stocky paramedic was brusque with my father, did not speak to me.

'Why is the furniture arranged like this?' she asked.

'Dad can hold onto it, and the walls, as he walks,' I said, when I should have let him answer.

'Looks pretty dangerous to me,' she said, not looking at me. 'Should have clear pathways for you to walk. No wonder you fall over. Lots to bump into.'

But it soon became clear that he had, in fact, had an accident, that we had not bashed him. The two officers took him by each arm and attempted to help him to the ambulance.

He did not trust their support, even though they were both strong and obviously capable. He tried to hold onto the brick wall of the house. They told him to let go, and rely on their arms. He couldn't, I could see that. He believed he would fall. His legs were jelly underneath, gave him no confidence.

We got into our car and followed the ambulance.

Once my father knew he had to go into the nursing home, he instructed me to clear the house, get it ready. There were two lifetimes' worth of belongings. The only things that had been touched since my mother's death were her clothes, but only those in one of the large wardrobes in their bedroom. It had been something for me to do while we waited for her funeral, and a way, I thought, hoped, to help my father.

The house had four bedrooms, more or less, plus a tiny room that was full of odd things. There was a bread slicer, a desk my father had made, a steam clothes press, suitcases, papers, and a plastic shelving unit on wheels that had onions and oranges in it. The onions were going bad, and cockroaches had been at them, as well as everything else in the room. The curtains had holes in them and brown stains from the insects. The desk was full of cockroach excreta and had stain all over the plywood backing. We had to throw it out, it was so ruined.

The suitcases had cockroaches, dead and alive, within them. The bread slicer had ants crawling on and around it, attracted to particles of food.

I can't remember now where exactly I found the diary. It may well have been on the plastic shelving, or in one of the drawers of the desk. It was an old one, from 1988, and from the Medical Defense Union. It also had cockroach stains on its cover.

That year was the last year of my medical studies. By that stage, everyone seemed exhausted. At least, everyone I spoke with; maybe I was projecting my own feelings upon others. But the relentless studying, tutorials, ward rounds, exams, finally had an

end in sight. It was the worst year, the year when I failed three subjects, seemed in constant conflict with my parents, and was told the secret that changed everything.

The diary was the only one of my father's that I discovered in the whole house. I don't know if he threw out all his other diaries, or didn't bother with them except on occasional years. It was a pocket slimline one, with a week to a page. It had a black cover and gold on the edge of the pages. There was a fabric bookmark attached to the top of the spine.

If you open someone else's diary, you must take responsibility for the action. You may invite ghosts to come taunt you or bring pleasantries or simply stare. Be prepared.

I don't know what I expected. I'm not sure if I thought about what the consequences might be, to read this personal record. When I flicked through it, there didn't seem much written in the spaces, so maybe it seemed innocuous. I wanted, I suppose, to find something that would help me understand my father, and my mother.

There were entries in some days, not others, and he did not write very much.

Came home high as a kite

Must be on drugs

Silent as a mouse

Morose

Rude to her mother

High as a kite

Must be on drugs

Depressed today

I turned the pages, and read these things, and suddenly I could not breathe. I could not speak. Craig was only in the next room, but I could not say anything.

I dropped the diary on the floor. I walked across the cork tiles to the outside, looked up at the sky, looked around at my mother's pot plants, at the shed, at the roof of the house, at the concrete under my feet.

I stood out there for some time, frozen.

My memory is of the concreted area, its shades of grey, the stains, the inert solidity, the nothingness. I stared at it while I learned how to breathe again.

When I could go back into that house, and into that tiny cubicle with its atom bomb, I grasped the diary, and cast it out, across the next room, almost out of the door.

The time that my father wrote of was a time of great pain. I walked through the last year of that course in a fog. I knew it would end, that I had only to endure. There were parts of it that were not so bad; I always liked listening to patients, liked writing up a person's case history, liked tapping knees and testing cranial nerves.

But I was a failure. I did not fit in. I could not remember everything I had to remember. The facts I had tried to learn would disappear. I would see them float away. My brain seemed to shut down with facts, take some random ones on board, and reject others. I watched other students get the answers right, and wondered why I couldn't.

It was a year where exams seemed set to trick me. They seemed to have a code I could no longer decipher. I gave answers and they were wrong, it was simple. I read those questions twice, three times, wrote my answer carefully, thinking: Okay, I might not remember everything, but here's enough, surely. But it was not enough.

One subject stumps me particularly savagely: obstetrics and gynaecology. There were several different sections to the exam: a row of specimens in bottles from which we had to interpret; a written exam; and a *viva voce*, where we sat in front of examiners and answered their questions. I failed all these sections. The things in bottles seemed like alien objects I had never seen before. The examiners asked questions that had no answers. What I thought were reasonable responses to the problems on paper must have been ridiculous.

I did poorly in surgery, and was too ashamed to ask why.

I could not read the language of X-rays. The mysterious shadows and lines and misplaced bones defeated me.

When I was told I had failed the radiology exam, I picked up my bag and left the paediatrician's rooms, where a group of us were waiting for a tutorial. I was not so much disappointed, as angry, by then.

Even when I was twenty-three, my father told me what to do, who to see and talk to, where my life should go. He told me I could not have passengers in the car because the insurance would not cover it. He did not hesitate to tell me that such and such a friend was worthless, that I should not go to a birthday celebration because I might contract AIDS.

When I became upset at these words, he looked surprised, uncomprehending.

He, and my mother, read the letters I received from a journalist I had met while doing a medical term in New Zealand, and confronted me. It was not something I wished to discuss with them. My relationship with this man had been a bright light in the fog and the misery, and my father, in particular, was not going to put it out.

I would find letters and my diary shuffled about on my dressing table and desk, but in my trust of them, did not realise what was happening.

My father had often made it obvious, unwittingly, that he wished to live his life again through me. This meant he would not let me go, would not let me out into the broad canvas of the world. He told me not to marry, told me not to travel. 'You don't want to do that', he would say.

Those days when I came home from hospital, defeated, were the days where I was *depressed* in my father's diary. The days where I was high as a kite I don't remember. They were not drug-induced.

I had a visceral pain then, one that caught my breath, punched me in the gut. Depression is not just feeling down. It is a creature that envelops and consumes you, mind and body.

My father suffered depression for decades. He had sustained head injuries during the Second World War, and had been discharged because of what I can only gather was a form of post-traumatic stress disorder. I don't think he ever got over it. He also did not seem to have proper, or at least effective, treatment for it. All the time I knew him, he never went to see a psychologist or a psychiatrist (he thought they were quacks), and was prescribed sleeping tablets by the doctors he did see. He always took something. In the last years it was paracetamol, or preferably, paracetamol with codeine.

There was an official document that showed he had been registered as a disabled person, with depression, in the late 1950s.

But although he had seen it from the inside out, he did not recognise it in me, at least not enough to think it was anything other than something irresponsible, like the results of drug-taking.

I am surprised now to think I did *not* take something to ease what I was going through. I got up every day to face failure and difficulty, to deal with a parent who wanted control over everything, and did this for six years with no chemicals. I didn't even drink alcohol. What was I thinking!

I wasn't thinking at all, just moving, turning the wheels, riding it out until the end.

It all came back when I read those diary entries. To be subjected to suffering and then have it thrown in your face – 'must be on drugs' – is tearing at a raw wound.

Research statement

Research background

The adoptee life narrative has been classified as a genre of life writing by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. I am specifically interested in late discovery adoptee memoir, in which the adopted person describes learning of his or her adoptive status when an adult (Morgan 2008). And further, my research question links to the role of memoir as testimony (for example, Luckhurst 2008), and specifically late discovery adoptee memoir as a form of bearing witness: not only an expression of personal experience, but life writing as 'a critique of larger cultural forces' (Smith & Watson 282).

Research contribution

My memoir is a contribution to new knowledge, both from its original status as the record of my own lived experience as a late discovery adoptee and from its attempt to add to the small but growing subgenre of adoptee life narrative that is written by late discovery adoptees (for example, Watson 2010). It also attempts, in autoethnographic form (Ellis 2004), to be both an expression of my own personal experience and a link

to that of other late discovery adoptees and the cultural milieu in which they were adopted, raised, and informed of (or discovered) their adoptive status.

Research significance

Significance lies in its originality as my memoir of a late discovery adoptee who bears witness to personal experience and the wider cultural forces that influenced the experience, such as wartime damage to those who served and the attitudes towards unwed mothers. Sections of this research have been published in various journals and presented at conferences. An essay based on the memoir was longlisted for the 2014 Calibre Essay Prize.

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