

Zigzags and Leapfrogs: a Memoir

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Zigzags and Leapfrogs: a Memoir

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Candidate's signature

Maris O'Rourke

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Zigzags and Leapfrogs: a Memoir is my personal memories. It may not be how others remember events, I will read their accounts and future memoirs with interest. On matters of fact I've tried to depict events accurately. All mistakes are mine.

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Abstract

Zigzags and Leapfrogs: A Memoir, is a description of my quest to reconcile two, often conflicting, aspects of my existence. One is my search for a place to belong, a place to be assimilated into, a place to stand, my tūrangawaewae; the other is my obsessive desire to achieve, and preferably succeed, to be different from/to stand above the crowd.

The memoir begins in the present day and, come the conclusion, returns to it. Between first chapter and last, important events and influences in my life are examined in roughly chronological order. However, a variety of approaches has been taken to create a collage, rather than a straight chronology: for example, a graphic comic sequence, poems, anecdotes, photographs, a fairy tale, a questionnaire, and excerpts from an interview of me by someone else.

The accompanying exegesis, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, details the process I went through to deal with things such as facing difficult issues, ethics and truth, genre, archiving of material and the shape and structure of the memoir.

Combined, thesis and exegesis strive to create what Natalia Rachel Singer calls a *hybrid memoir*:

...in which a writer presents a life through a lens that reflects both inward and outward... [T]he best memoirists allow their life experiences to shed light on a culture, a historical moment, a time, a place, a social problem, a political issue that remains timely.

This aspect of the memoir needs further development and deepening.

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The Past is a Foreign Country
(Exegesis)

Maris O'Rourke

2015

THE PAST IS A FOREIGN COUNTRY (EXEGESIS)

The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.
L. P. Hartley *The Go-Between* (1953).

Introduction

I've toyed with the idea of writing my life story since 2006 when I did a genealogical search and wrote a family history: *Through My Eyes: looking at my 'family' - Lyons, Hackworth, Robertson, Broughton, O'Rourke and sundry others*. Until I did this search I knew nothing of my parental background, family or history; and there was no one left to ask. I don't want the same silence for my children and grandchildren. I want to leave a record.

First Steps

First, I had to overcome my reluctance to write. Did I really want to re-live my past? In an exercise from Deena Metzger's *Writing For Your Life, A Guide And Companion To The Inner Worlds*, she asks you to make a list of everything you must NOT write about because:

- it is not generally important enough from the point of view of literature
- it is too private and therefore trivial from the point of view of literature
- it would embarrass you to speak about it
- it would embarrass and offend your family and associates
- it would embarrass or offend the reader
- it is taboo

My list was:

- anything bad that's happened to me
- anything bad I've done
- any time I've failed
- anything that would upset my kids
- anything that will make someone else feel bad
- anything about my sex life at whatever age

- the names of men I've slept with
- anything that contradicts the life story I've invented for myself
- anything that puts me in a bad light
- anything that is going to ruin a hard won peace of mind and a good life
- anything where people will get to know the real me
- anything about abuse and loss

Faced with this list, I set the idea of writing my life story aside. However, over the next few years I kept circling back to it. I knew, as William Zinsser says in *The American Scholar* article "How to Write a Memoir":

Writing is a powerful search mechanism, and one of its satisfactions is that it allows you to come to terms with your life narrative. It also allows you to work through some of life's hardest knocks - loss, grief, illness, addiction, disappointment, failure - and to find understanding and solace.

I did a number of self-guided courses, including Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way* and *The Right to Write*. This helped me surface the difficult issues I'd need to tackle in a memoir and I decided to proceed. I also knew I needed support. I needed a structure, mentor, deadlines, a group to work with and lectures with content. I enrolled in a Master of Creative Writing at the Auckland University of Technology. Two questions interested me:

- How to write a memoir using non-traditional narrative?
- How to create a 'true' narrative while encompassing cross-genre creative techniques and mediums including poetry, fiction, the graphic novel and imagery?

Ethics and Truth

So I began. Immediately I faced a number of issues, in particular, ethics, privacy and confidentiality. As a senior public servant I'd signed confidentiality agreements under the Official Secrets Act and, as a professional, I'd adhere to those. Then there was the question of upsetting people. Should I leave things out that they'd wish to keep private and which might offend? I made the decision that I wouldn't censor myself. I'd write it all, or depict it in some other way e.g. graphically, and decide later what to include. I also tackled the five most difficult to write areas first.

A good deal of my life is in the public domain (see Appendix B Bibliography). However, I'm a first-person narrator telling the events from my perspective. Sometimes first-person narrators deviate from the truth, or have mental conditions that limit their abilities to tell the story accurately. We call these characters 'unreliable narrators,' a term first coined by Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). It could be argued that any first-person account is, by definition, 'unreliable' and some literary critics argue that there is no such thing as a reliable first-person narrator since every character is affected by his or her past experiences in the telling of a story. However, most first-person narrators do attempt to give an accurate version of events and I was aiming to do that. The reality is that the only 'truth' the writer of a memoir can work with is what it's been like for them, not others. As Witi Ihimaera says in *The Matriarch*, "All truth is fiction, really, for the teller tells it as he sees it, and it might be different from some other teller."

I'm a woman who has spent a lifetime trying to reconcile two aspects of myself. The first is my deep-seated desire to *belong*. This often requires inclusion, focusing on the needs of others, staying put, and compromise. The other is my obsessive need to *achieve*, and preferably succeed. This usually requires exclusion of others, focusing on myself, moving on, and little or no compromise. On this quest I've blanked out areas of my life, repressed memories and rewritten events. What is the truth then? Adrienne Rich in *Women and Honor: notes on lying* says:

There is nothing easy or simple about this idea. There is no 'the truth' or 'a truth' - truth is not one thing or even a system. It is an increasing complexity. The pattern of the carpet is a surface. When we look closely, or when we become weavers, we learn of the multiple threads unseen in the overall pattern, the knots on the underside of the carpet.

As I surfaced my blanked out areas and rewritten stories I began to see the underside of the carpet. I then had to decide whether to be honest about these in the memoir. Rich argues that women's honour is seen as:

... virginity, chastity, fidelity to a husband. Honesty in women has not been considered important. We have been depicted as generically whimsical, deceitful, subtle, vacillating. And we have been rewarded for lying.

I've been creative about my life story over the years and rewritten and reframed it in more ways than one. However, I decided to follow Lee Gutkind's mantra in *You*

Can't Make This Stuff Up: the complete guide to writing creative non-fiction from memoir to literary journalism and everything in between. He says:

The word 'creative' in creative nonfiction has to do with how the writer conceives ideas, summarises situations, defines personalities, describes places - and shapes and presents information. 'Creative' doesn't mean inventing what didn't happen, reporting and describing what wasn't there. It doesn't mean the writer has a licence to lie. The word 'nonfiction' means the material is true. The cardinal rule is clear - and cannot be violated. This is the pledge the writer makes to the reader - the maxim we live by, the anchor of creative nonfiction. 'You can't make this stuff up!'(p. 6).

Genre

Next there was the issue of genre - was I writing an autobiography or a memoir? The accepted idea is that if you're writing about your whole life it's an autobiography, whereas a memoir focuses on one aspect, period or incident in your life e.g. Bill Bryson or P. J. O'Rourke's travel memoirs, or Waris Dirie's life as a desert nomad, or Sattareh Farman Farmaian's life in her father's harem. In his introduction to *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* William Zinsser says:

A memoir is defined as some portion of a life. Unlike autobiography which moves in a dutiful line from birth to fame, omitting nothing significant, memoir assumes the life and ignores most of it. The writer of a memoir usually takes us back to a corner of their life that was unusually intense or vivid, childhood for instance, or that was framed by unique events. By 'narrowing' the lens the writer achieves a focus that isn't possible in autobiography; memoir is a window into a life. (p. 21).

Gore Vidal says about his *Palimpsest: A Memoir*: "A memoir is how one remembers one's own life, while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates and facts double-checked." (p. 5).

I knew I'd be researching dates and facts, and trying to ensure my story was accurate, but I didn't want to write a straight chronology of my life from birth to death (an autobiography). I wanted to avoid the trap of writing something which was too general, temporal and linear. However, I also didn't want to restrict myself to one aspect, or time of my life, and write something too narrowly focused.

As I explored the literature (see Appendix A Bibliography), I found that most people's autobiographies were narrative and chronological, as were many of the memoirs. However, a few did take different approaches e.g. Edmund DeWalt's innovative *The Hare With Amber Eyes* where he explores his past through a set of

inherited netsuke, or Fiona Farrell's *The Broken Book* examining stability and instability through walks and the Christchurch earthquake, or Leonard Cohen's *The Book of Longing* which incorporates photos, drawings, poems and songs.

I felt mine was a memoir, although not the normal definition of one. I envisaged something more eclectic, like a display in a Museum for example. *The Guardian* provided a podcast from a Guardian Live event (June, 2015) of a conversation between critic Alex Clark and Jeanette Winterson (*Why Be Happy When you Could Be Normal?*) and Helen McDonald (*H is for Hawk*). In the interview the two writers shared their tips on memoir writing. One tip was: 'Don't try to fit the genre.' Jeanette Winterson says:

Write what you write at the time and don't worry about the future. It's not about the obvious successes, it's not about where it lands you in the world: you have to be able to hold your head up and know it was the best you could do.

That seemed good advice and I put aside whether I was writing an autobiography or memoir and focused on writing my life story as a quest.

Structure

Another tip from Winterson and McDonald was: 'Choose your chronology.' Neither of their memoirs conform to chronological order. The order is set by a progression of emotions and themes not constrained by a linear idea of time. Winterson says: "The way we remember things doesn't happen in sequence, things sit side by side according to their emotional impact." I found this often e.g. when I wrote about my first son's birth and then immediately thought of, and wrote up my second son's birth story, which actually occurred 10 years later. As Margaret Atwood in *Cat's Eye* says: "You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away." (p. 3).

Other writers have taken the same approach to memoir as Winterson and McDonald and bucked the trend, e.g. in *Safekeeping: some true stories from a life* Abigail Thomas sets aside a straight-forward narrative for brief passages of vivid prose. She revisits pivotal moments and tiny incidents that have shaped her life-long.

Some biographers have, in effect, told their own story through others e.g. Malcom Cowley's *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920's* about his contemporaries, American writers in Paris and New York, or Zarah Butcher-McGunnigle's haunting

prose poetry *Autobiography of a Marguerite* which is as much about her mother as herself.

Two memoirs about the same event, widowhood, take very different approaches. Joyce Carol Oates' *A Widow's Story* is largely diary entries and switches between first and third person. It objectifies her as 'a widow.' Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* on the other hand, is essayistic and concise, seeking external points of comparison and trying to set her case in some wider context.

The definitive 'different' life story is probably the poet Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*. It is in English and full sentences yet, at first reading, seems incomprehensible. It is more of an experience than anything else. You have to dive in. The words flow over one like water, and it is at an almost subconscious level that you come to understand her childhood. Lisa Samuels has written *Eight justifications for canonizing Lyn Hejinian's 'My Life'* and in it calls Hejinian's story an autography. She says: "I use the word 'autography' because this is the story of a languaged self, a written 'I', rather than the autobiography of an experiencing human."

I didn't expect to scale the heights of these luminaries but I felt I could produce something exploratory that told my life story in a different way. Alex Hamilton in *Writing Talk: conversations with top writers of the last fifty years* tells us that when Kurt Vonnegut was asked if a story of his life would be a chronicle or a collage he replied "a collage." (p. 28). That resonated with me. I had a wealth of material e.g. poems, journal entries, short stories, newspaper articles, flash fiction, photographs, anecdotes and vignettes. I envisaged my memoir as more of a cross-genre bricolage than a conventional chronological setting down of events.

In Zinsser's *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, Annie Dillard says about writing her book *An American Childhood*: "...the writer of any first person work must decide two obvious questions: what to put in and what to leave out." (p. 25). She then added:

It's not enough just to decide what to put in - it has to have vitality and drama as any good story does - it has to feel like the truth. You have to heighten the reality or use fiction to conjure up what is 'real.' (p. 25).

In the same book Russell Baker says: "The autobiographer's problem is that he knows too much; he knows the whole ice-berg not just the tip."

However, the issue of what we think we know about ourselves is also complex. In *The Undiscovered Self* C. G. Jung (1958) says:

...the so-called normal person possesses only a limited degree of self-knowledge. Most people confuse 'self-knowledge' with knowledge of their conscious ego personalities. Anyone who has any ego-consciousness at all takes it for granted that he knows himself. But the ego knows only its own contents, not the unconscious and its contents. People measure their self-knowledge by what the average person in their social environment knows of himself, but not by the psychic facts which are for the most part hidden from them. (p. 6).

He goes on to say, that the way we commonly devalue the psyche and resist psychological enlightenment are based in a large measure on fear i.e. on panic-fear of the discoveries that might be made in the realm of the unconscious. He continues that often the fear is so great that one dares not admit it, even to oneself. (p. 49).

I certainly felt a level of fear, and over-whelmed with how much had happened in my life. I struggled throughout with what to put in and what to leave out. Hamilton tells us that Graham Greene said his problem with *A Sort of Life* had also been what to leave out. In the end he had been run by his conscience as a novelist and dropped many sequences that broke the story line. (p. 286). The goal, Gutkind says, is to make nonfiction stories read like fiction so that readers are as enthralled by fact as they are by fantasy. That became my aim.

Archiving

The crime novel writer Sue Grafton has a detective, Kinsey Millhone, who uses index cards to solve mysteries. She writes facts, scenes, ideas, people and so on onto separate index cards and then plays around with them. Shuffling, arranging and re-arranging them into new and different configurations until solutions, often unusual, appear.

I decided this would be an interesting method for me to try. I made three cards that listed (in date order): everywhere I'd lived; every job I'd had (paid or unpaid); and all the education, training and self-development courses I'd done. Apart from the wide-ranging and peripatetic nature of my life, nothing jumped out at me.

Then I made a card of 'turning points', major changes in my life. Many I'd initiated but some had just happened to me. This card proved to be a turning point. A number of them were major successes and achievements, usually to do with professional work and education. I also saw that I'd often been the first to do something.

Others were about significant events to do with relationships such as birth, death, marriage, divorce, partners and friends. Patterns began to emerge. I was creating a 'personal archive' meaningful to me.

In 1998 French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), commonly known as the founder of deconstruction, wrote *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. In it he posits that the way we archive things changes things. He says that there is a fluid relationship between the archive and what it archives. The archive, its structure, formulation and operation is informed by its contents, along with any number of external bodies of knowledge. Derrida asserts then, that the archive cannot remain outside what it memorialises. This removes the objectivity with which records and archival documents are typically treated. Derrida says *archive fever*:

...is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement. (p. 91).

In other words, we want to get to the bedrock of our memories. A difficult task. Derrida tells us that Freud conceives of: "a psychic archive distinct from spontaneous memory." This psychic archive is an internal inscription in the mind that is virtually housed and remote but from which psychoanalysis may be able to gather "documents" as the products of a successful psychoanalytic session.

By indexing in a certain way, and through my choices of what to include, I was changing not only my past, also my present, and possibly my future. Derrida asserts that:

...the technical structure of the archiving archive determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archiving produces as much as it records the event. (p. 17).

Thus archiving technology determines, "the very institution of the archivable event." informing, as well, the conception of the future, and possibly the future itself. (p. 18).

Meanwhile, I continued with my personal archive. I put the various vignettes, scenes, short stories, anecdotes and poems that I'd written onto separate cards. No matter how I shuffled them around it was a messy mish-mash, with no apparent form or structure.

Bianca Zander (Master Class, 2015) talked to us about scaling our project, and the key concepts of its architecture: protagonist, antagonist, setting, conflict, theme, symbolism, foreshadowing and irony. She then elaborated on the components of the Three Act Structure: One: exposition (beginning); Two: inciting or transformative incident, rising action, climax (middle); Three: falling action and resolution (end). This was helpful. The marriage break-up had split my life in two. I therefore put it in the middle and tried to arrange the cards around it. Many were different approaches to the same event e.g. a poem, anecdote and short story. These I stapled together. It was still a muddle.

In May, I took the pile to my mentor Siobhan Harvey. She set me a structure exercise in which she asked me to place all episodes I wanted to include in the work onto cards, one card per chapter/event. She asked that those which were already written appear in blue coloured font; those which were yet to be written appear in red coloured font; and those that were partly written appear in both colours. She set me a month to complete the archive exercise before returning to her office with the cards.

At our next meeting, she asked me to line them chronologically on the floor in a peak with the transformational incident in my life, my marriage break-up, roughly at the apex of the peak, events before that on the incline and events after this on the decline. I'd been resisting a straight chronology as boring. However, I laid them out on her floor like a mountain rising to the apex of the separation and descending again. They began with the present day, and came back full circle. In between there was some moving backwards and forwards in time. It worked. Arriving at this structure was a key turning point in my writing.

Interestingly, I'd found while doing this exercise that there were huge gaps where I'd written nothing. I'd completely blanked out sections of my life. They became red cards. Unsurprisingly, these red areas turned out to be significant. As Peter Wells in *The Long Loop Home* says:

...isn't the past always elusive when you set out, on safari, as it were to capture it? The past is an elusive being, half mythical then astoundingly, painfully real. If you don't watch out when your back is turned, it can gore you to death. (p. 277).

The cards, and subsequent structure, showed me that I have two driving forces in my life. The first is a deep-seated desire to *belong*. The other is the obsessive need to

achieve, and preferably succeed. These two, often opposing, forces in my life have been a fecund source of creative tension and resulted, as with many women, in zigzags, leapfrogs, strange trajectories and unusual choices. This gave me my working title, *Zigzags and Leapfrogs: a Memoir*.

Shape

In *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* Zinsser says:

Ego is at the heart of all the reasons why anybody writes a memoir. Memoir is how we validate our lives. The writer of a memoir must become the editor of their own life. They must cut and prune an unwieldy story and give it a narrative shape. (p. 24).

This is not easy. However, half-way through the year, with a first draft completed, I became clearer on the shape my memoir would take. It was a collage. As well as prose it had five poems, a graphics comic sequence, a short story, excerpts of interviews of me by someone else, a few photos and a fairy tale. It was also a chronicle, and roughly in date order.

Gérard Genette in *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method* introduces an influential new term into the debate, namely “distance.” He explains that:

...the narrative can furnish the reader with more or fewer details, and in a more or less direct way, and can thus seem (to adopt a common and convenient spatial metaphor, which is not to be taken literally) to keep at a greater or lesser distance from what it tells. (p. 162).

My first draft was mainly in the first person. However, there were scenes, where I’d distanced myself through use of the third person e.g. *Like a chameleon* and *Wear the pram wheels down to the rim*. I also used other means to allude to events e.g. *SuperStela* a graphic, and *Questions I wish I could ask my mother* written in the second person. I got the idea for this piece from Kim Adrian’s *Questionnaire for My Grandfather* published in: *You. An Anthology of Essays Devoted to the Second Person*.

For the second draft I decided to ‘own’ the story and try to close the psychic distance. I redrafted the third person pieces to the first person, thus creating a continuity of voice.

Gutkind says people remember facts longer when they are part of a story. Information and ideas need to be presented in story form. He says:

...this is done through crucial scenes with characters and suspenseful and surprising turning points - important life decisions based on memory and with vivid recreations of a scene. 'The scene is the foundation and anchoring element of creative nonfiction.' They are the building blocks - they must be factual and true and make a point or communicate information and they have to fit into the overall structure of the book. It's about show not tell. (p. 92).

My first draft was largely narrative, a lot of 'show not tell' and missing the 'story beats' that would provide it with rising action. It was also missing subtext. We had a useful Master Class from Siobhan Harvey (May, 2015) on Subtext, Imagery and the Secondary Story. In particular, this immersed students in considering the power of motifs and themes to create underlying meaning. I identified what my conflicting themes might be e.g. belonging versus achieving and the motifs e.g. tauhou/ wax-eyes, mountains/ volcanoes and layered them throughout the memoir as sub-text: a subsidiary story that would hopefully entwine with the main facts.

Christopher Booker, in *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* argues that just seven basic plots run throughout world literature (including movies, plays, and operas as well as novels and short stories):

1. Overcoming the Monster
2. Rags to Riches
3. The Quest
4. Voyage and Return
5. Rebirth
6. Comedy
7. Tragedy

I think this may apply to memoirs too and, although my life story seems to have aspects of all seven, The Quest seems the best description. That is I've been looking for success, and looking to belong, and looking to resolve the basic conflicts and constraints between these two things. The memoir, therefore, needed to demonstrate that quest. As I redrafted I kept in mind what Zinsser says: "Remember that you are the protagonist in your own memoir, the tour guide. You must find a narrative trajectory for the story you want to tell and never relinquish control."

Next Steps

The memoir does deal with all the fears I expressed in my initial list - one way or another. Through closer examination and documenting what happened I've redefined 'bad events' and 'failure'. I discovered they were basically learning experiences, some even turned out to be successes and a 'good thing' over time. By surfacing repressed events, archiving them onto 'red cards', writing them into blue cards, then including them in the memoir, I've expanded and accepted more of my elusive past, and therefore myself. I tried to mesh in difficult issues, e.g. abuse and loss as an integral part of the narrative using a collage approach. With respect to my two initial questions I've been able to write a memoir using some non-traditional narrative and also created a 'true' narrative whilst encompassing some cross-genre, creative techniques and mediums including poetry, fiction, the graphic novel and imagery.

Nevertheless, issues remain. In 2004 Natalia Rachel Singer contributed to "The Short List: The Most Influential Books" (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 10/22/04). I aspire to her notion of the *hybrid memoir*:

...in which a writer presents a life through a lens that reflects both inward and outward.... [T]he best memoirists allow their life experiences to shed light on a culture, a historical moment, a time, a place, a social problem, a political issue that remains timely.

In the first draft, I didn't place myself in a social and historical context in any sort of sophisticated way. In subsequent redrafting, I've included more reflective thinking about what happened in my life and how. However, this aspect of the memoir needs further development and deepening. I've produced the quantity. I now plan to improve the quality.

Appendix A: Bibliography

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