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Starving, bingeing and writing: reading and writing memoirs of eating disorder

Abstract:

Memoirs of eating disorders have attracted considerable popular, critical and scholarly attention as a sub-genre of life writing. These memoirs have also been noted by, and incorporated into, the medical and psychological discourse on eating disorder. Rarely, if ever, however, have these memoirs been read, categorised or discussed as a sub-genre of food writing. In so doing, this article proposes that while many personal memoirs of disordered eating concentrate both on gastronomic/culinary and personal matters (like the food memoir), many also narrate a concern with the act of writing, the author's motivation towards producing this unique group of texts, and their intended consumers. Surveying the eating disorder memoir in this way, and investigating its history, themes, tropes and prominent metaphors, contributes to our understanding of both memoir and food writing as nonfiction genres.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Nonfiction – Food writing – Food memoir – Eating disorder memoir

‘Then there’s only one thing to be done,’ he said. ‘We shall have to wait for you to get thin again.’

‘How long does getting thin take?’ asked Pooh anxiously.

‘About a week, I should think.’ ...

‘A week!’ said Pooh gloomily. ‘*What about meals?*’

‘I’m afraid no meals,’ said Christopher Robin, ‘because of getting thin quicker. But we *will* read to you.’ (AA Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh* 1926)

Introduction

Food writing encompasses many subjects, genres and styles, but is, as Bloom notes, ‘most often upbeat and nurturing, providing successes and triumphs – modest and major – for readers to feast on, with occasional glimpses of utopia’ (2008: 346). Alongside the role food performs as fuel and source of pleasure, it can, however, also be the site of considerable personal and social anxiety (see, for instance, Hepworth 1999 on the social construction of *anorexia nervosa*), and writing about food can reflect this. This paper discusses one such example of writing about food as a discomforting life element, focusing on food as it features in the personal literature of starvation, overeating and purging – the eating disorder memoir. It does so in order to both propose that the eating disorder memoir can be read as a distinctive sub-set of both memoir and food narrative, and to investigate what such readings can contribute to our understanding of nonfiction writing more generally.

The kind of autobiographical memoir that details its author’s misfortunes – trauma, abuse and illness and other troubles – and which is often now grouped together under the description of ‘misery memoir’ – has been traced back to an example by Trollope in the latter nineteenth century (Sutherland 2008) and even earlier. The form was so popular with American readers in the 1990s that such memoirs not only regularly made, but also heavily populated, the nonfiction bestselling lists in that decade. This popularity has also spread to other Anglophone countries, where the form continues to enjoy considerable success, with a growing prominence in Australasia (Korte 2012: 75; Bates 2012). Memoir is today a familiar and identifiable part of Western culture. Yagota’s recent major study indeed proposes that memoir has become ‘the central form of the culture’ (2009: 7). He elaborates that this is ‘not only the way stories are told, but the way arguments are put forth, products and properties marketed, ideas floated, acts justified, [and] reputations constructed or salvaged’ (2009: 7).

Although throughout most of its long history, auto/biographical memoir had been by, and/or about, subjects of considerable note, many of the highest profile memoirs from the 1990s onwards have been written by those who became famous, or infamous, for the suffering survived or transgression confessed (Brien 2004) – in Adams’ terms, ‘nobodies’ who have become ‘somebody’ by the very act of telling of their extreme experiences (2002). In this context, memoirs of the eating disorders known popularly as anorexia and bulimia (and other less well known conditions) have begun to attract critical and scholarly attention as an identified sub-set of life writing in general, and

memoir in particular. Couser identifies these narratives as part of a set of ‘new niche sub-genres’ (2011: 3), and includes them among a large number of medical or other human conditions that have begun to develop their own literature, and that ‘have never before been represented in nonscientific nonfiction [sic], in particular in life writing’ (Couser 2009: 5). They were, however, already visible enough a decade ago for Adams to classify the eating disorder memoir as a component of what she found to be the three main types of contemporary memoir: ‘childhood’, ‘physical catastrophe’ and ‘mental catastrophe’ memoir, in the third of which she included ‘madness, addiction, alcoholism, anorexia [and] brain damage’ (2002).

Such memoirs have also been noted by, and incorporated into, the medical and psychological discourse on eating disorder, and feature in therapeutically-focused volumes, journal articles and textbooks. This inclusion is marketed as a strength of these texts. Sharlene Hesse-Biber’s [1] *Am I thin enough yet?: the cult of thinness and the commercialization of identity* (1996), which was selected as one of *Choice* magazine’s best academic books for the year of its publication and is still in print is, as the book’s description tells, ‘Packed with first-hand, intimate portraits of young women from a wide variety of backgrounds’. These narratives are, moreover, integral to the narrative’s power:

The author builds her case in part by letting her subjects tell their own story, revealing in their own words how current standards of femininity lead many women to engage in eating habits that are not only self-destructive, but often akin to the obsessions and ritualistic behaviors found among members of cults (1997 reprint edition).

This focus on the importance of an individual with a disorder being allowed, enabled or empowered to tell his or her own story and the power of their ‘own words’ are reiterated again and again in such digests, enacting not only the central tenet of life writing, but also Czech writer, dissident and politician Václav Havel’s statement that ‘human identity is not a “place of existence” where one sits things out, but a constant encounter with the question of how to be and exist in the world’ (1989: 355).

Food is a central theme of these memoirs of eating disorder and, as might be expected, these narratives contain sustained and intense passages about it. Despite this, I can find no evidence of the writing about food in these memoirs having been read, categorised or discussed as any kind of culinary narrative (or as a sub-genre of food writing). Nor have these memoirs been understood as, at least in part, a sub-set of the food memoir (a type of memoir which is sometimes also called the culinary memoir). Yet, the connection clearly exists. As best-selling memoirist Marya Hornbacher identifies in her *Wasted: a memoir of anorexia and bulimia*, there are clear links with the authors of other narratives clearly identified as food memoirs: ‘Some people who are obsessed with food become gourmet chefs. Others get eating disorders’ (2006 [1998]: 13).

These eating disorder memoirs are, moreover, an illuminating example of the food memoir, in both their similarities to, and differences from, examples more usually classified in this way. While the food memoir – like food writing in general – is, for example, usually buoyantly positive, the eating disorder memoir is certainly not similarly optimistic in its tone or content. The food memoir most commonly narrates

the personal and professional development of the memoirist through the lens of food memories and/or professional food experiences in narratives that either begin with childhood or that include flashbacks to formative experiences (Waxman 2008). As with many other memoirs, the food memoir is often structured around a personal or professional problem that has to be struggled against, but the narrative arc most usually traces the ultimate success of the narrator as they evolve into a mature food professional or passionate amateur, who is often a contented and grounded adult (Waxman 2008: 364, Brien 2011). In contrast to the types of professional and/or self actualising projects narrated in many food memoirs – such narratives as running a restaurant (Febbroriello 2003), becoming a pastry chef (Jurgensen 2009), training to be a butcher (Powell 2009), or living for a year on food grown at home (Kingsolver 2007) – many eating disorder memoirs instead chart a story that involves a struggle with food, therapy, and then, ultimate survival, with all of this in the context of a much more tenuous sense of ‘success’ than in most other forms of personal memoir. A number of eating disorder memoirs contain postscripts of their authors falling back into disordered eating habits, and some even of the death of the writer from disorder-related consequences after the completion of the manuscript. Other memoirists, whose narratives end in seeming success, then pen another memoir of ongoing struggle. A significant number describe their ongoing survival as a work-in-progress. Shohet usefully classifies narratives of eating disorder recovery as two distinct genres: ‘struggling recovery’ and ‘full recovery’ (2007) and although this is in relation to unpublished narratives, the classification is useful when considering published memoirs. The notion of partially fulfilled success (let alone failure) is very rare in contemporary memoir, which most often follow the story arc of Joseph Campbell’s hero’s journey (1949).

Based on research into this form of memoir and reading over forty examples, the below outlines the history of the eating disorder memoir and makes the case for it as a sub-genre of food writing/food memoir, in the process investigating its themes, tropes and prominent metaphors, and elaborating where it converges with, and diverges from, the food memoir more generally. It focuses on book length works and does not include first person memoir narratives online, including those on pro-anorexic sites, [2] which are currently being considered for a forthcoming study.

The eating disorder memoir

The phenomenon of self-starvation has been traced back to the medieval period, with women and men refusing food in the pursuit of spiritual goals. The so-called ‘fasting girls’ of the nineteenth century have also been an area of interest to scholars and historians (Bell 1987, Vandereycken 1994, Brumberg 2000). Concern about eating disorders has become much more apparent in the twentieth century, and particularly, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and has prompted both medical and psychological inquiry. One vehicle of this visibility has been the set of memoirs written by sufferers and their families, friends and therapists, which form the topic of this article. While the earlier ‘fasting girls’ were much written about in both journalistic and medical accounts (see, for instance, Hammond 1879), the increasing

consumer demand for memoir and interest in Couser's 'niche sub-genres' (2011: 3) has, since the 1990s, provided a stimulus for first person narratives of the experience to be produced and circulated on an unprecedented scale with research in progress indicating some 200 of these memoirs published since the late 1970s. Although digital narratives in blogs and other websites are outside the scope of this discussion, the online environment has provided a highly effective and efficient means for distributing information about, and increasing access to, book length and other memoirs of all kinds.

While the 'breakthrough' book, which brought the eating disorder memoir into general prominence is Hornbacher's *Wasted* (1998), there were a small number of precursors and contemporaries of this text. Lemberg and Cohn's comprehensive bibliography of books about eating disorders to 1999 notes that eating disorder literature was 'rather obscure until in the mid-1980s' (1999: 227–33), with less than forty clinical, medical, general self-help or autobiographical volumes in print on this topic prior to 1984, and correctly predicts that the growth in this literature at the end of the 1990s was 'likely to continue as more and more recovered individuals want to tell their stories', therapists had insights to share, and educational needs continued to grow (227). Thomas, Judge, Brownell and Vartanian found only 30 such autobiographical narratives of an author's experience with an eating disorder listed on WorldCat as having been published prior to 2000. There was then a sharp increase to over 50 (cumulatively) by 2004, with nine of these produced in the two years of 2003 and 2004 alone (2006: 418).

While accepting these figures may be inexact and not include every memoir published, a brief consideration of precursor to *Wasted* memoirs reveals a number of enduring themes and narrative tropes already in place. Aimee Liu's *Solitaire: a memoir of anorexia* was first published by prestigious American publishers Harper & Row in 1979, when the author was 25 years old. The story narrates how, during a 'childhood frosted with affluence' (1), she suffered from the age of 14 for seven years, undiagnosed and untreated, obsessed with counting calories and eating only certain foods, bingeing and purging. Liu's graphic descriptions of her obsession with, and negative perceptions of, food are repeated in every one of these memoirs, and, in her case begin on the first page of her narrative:

The lure of the television, the call of my homework were no competition for the magnet of the kitchen: food. Like a creature obsessed, neither tasting nor thinking, I burrowed through cupboards, refrigerator, cookie jar, and freezer. Grabbing fistfuls of Mallomars and brownies, gulping ice cream, Jell-O, and cheese, I was indiscriminate in my gorging ... No doubt about it, eating was evil (1, 2).

Setting in place another trope of these memoirs, Liu describes this period in hindsight, as 'troubled years' (212) of 'morbid obsession' (213) full of self-hate and fears that 'ate at us from the inside' (212).

Caroline Miller's *My name is Caroline* (1991), published by Doubleday and still in print, similarly relates an outwardly 'picture-perfect life' (back cover): an affluent childhood with a loving family and school and athletic success, and then a university education. Underneath this, however, lay her self-described 'crazy behaviour' (3) as a

bulimic, which her memoir images as an addiction to bingeing and purging large quantities of food. When this behavior proved almost fatal, she was able to admit her secret to family members and seek help. Her text then narrates a journey to health and wellbeing (Miller presents herself as being cured by 1984), as a guide to assist both sufferers in their journeys to health and to promote an understanding of bulimia. An Alternate Selection of the Literary Guild, *My name is Caroline* was a bestseller republished in 1991, 2000 and 2013, and continues to sell and be read today. The book was widely reviewed and featured on television and radio programs, and Miller herself made numerous media appearances – including on the high profile CBS This Morning and Sally Jesse Raphael show. She went on to write a number of other self-help books (1991, 1994 and 2009) and the forthcoming sequel *Positively Caroline* (projected 2013), which will be the first book by a survivor of bulimia after more than 25 years of recovery. Another early volume, *Pain behind the smile: my battle with bulimia* (1995), written by Tennessee beauty queen, Leah Hulan, is another ‘had it all’ memoir, but is, in this case, more in line with celebrity memoirs more generally which chart how beauty, glamour and fame come at a psychological and emotional price. Hulan describes how she sought therapy, and this provided her with tools that led to her version of recovery, which is, in her case, a relentless and ongoing process:

Yet, just because I now have these tools, if I don’t constantly dig and put forth the effort to free myself from the pit, I will sink further back. My recovery is something at which I have to diligently work everyday... It is something that constantly needs nurturing (151).

Michael Krasnow’s *My life as a male anorexic* (1996) is the simply told chronicle of how the author maintained a weight of 34 kilograms – he is 175 centimetres tall – during his twelve years as an anorexic. While Miller and Hulan attest that they felt driven to write to share their stories in order to help others understand both the condition and those who suffer from it, Krasnow’s book begins:

For some time now, my mother has been encouraging me to write a book about my screwed up life and my experiences with anorexia nervosa and depression. I’ve never given this idea much consideration. However, now that I am not working, I figure I might as well give it a shot (1996: 1).

One of Krasnow’s motivations for writing was, he stated later in the text, to increase awareness of both males with anorexia and their unique issues with the condition: ‘My parents and I could not pick up a book and read about male anorexics. For all we knew, I was the only man in the world with anorexia’ (1996: 24). Krasnow also attracted the attention of the media, shared his story as part of a television segment titled ‘Men dying to be thin’ the year after his book was published (WSVN 1997), but neither he nor Hulan produced any further publications.

While Miller’s book was acclaimed and successful, Hornbacher’s *Wasted* (1998), written when the author was aged 22, provided a compelling combination of quality literary expression and detailed content for a memoir market then enjoying an unprecedented level of consumer interest and demand. Dramatic, intense and at least twice as long as the memoirs discussed above, *Wasted* was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, and translated into 16 languages. Hornbacher’s narrative of her struggles with

anorexia and bulimia fitted neatly into the sub-genre of trauma/survivor memoir, nestling most closely alongside other illness memoirs, and can now be clearly seen as the inspiration for a series of other eating disorder memoirs as well as the success that gave publishers confidence in this subject matter. Like *My name is Caroline*, *Wasted* also launched the literary career of its author, and Hornbacher has written other books narrating relapses into disordered eating and her mental illnesses. These include the memoir *Madness: a bipolar life* (2008) chronicling the years following *Wasted* when she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Her next book *Sane: mental illness, addiction, and the twelve steps* (2010) is a recovery handbook for those suffering from both, but is closely based on her own life story, as is her latest volume, *Waiting: a nonbeliever's higher power* (2011), which explores what spirituality can mean to an atheist in recovery from addiction, mental illness or both. The obvious and intentional rhetorical intertextuality between these volumes has been discussed to argue for a feminist reading of these and what Day calls other 'disability memoirs' (2011); however, this intertextual relationship appears to be an essential feature of understanding all such multiple works of memoir. Aimee Liu's *Solitaire* (1979) and its sequel, *Gaining: the truth about life after eating disorders* (2007) and Caroline Knapp's *Drinking: a love story* (1996) and *Appetites* (2003) about her anorexia are further clear examples.

Memoirs that deal with eating disorders (both before and since *Wasted*) can be grouped and classified in a number of ways. There are memoirs dealing with a single specific disorder (mostly those conditions popularly known as anorexia and bulimia) – while a number deal with combinations. Some, like *Wasted*, also refer to other mental and physical illnesses. Most are written from personal experience in the first person and many are by girls and young women; however, older women are represented as both authors and subjects. Although there is increasing evidence that males are affected by eating disorders (see, for instance, Crosscope-Happel 1999), memoirs about disordered male eating are a minority of the total number of texts and memoirs by male writers relatively rare. Close family members also feature as authors, relating both the story of the suffering of their loved one, and their own role in what is often presented as the key drama of their family life. A number are written collaboratively by a parent and his or her child (and, of these, the largest number are by a mother and daughter combination), but there are also examples of other familial combinations. There are also those jointly written by doctor or therapist and patient, or by medical professionals who include memoir case studies in their texts, but most of these fall outside the delineation of 'personal memoir' used to set parameters around this discussion. There are eating disorder memoirs by celebrities, but the majority is not. While most memoirists produce one volume of their story, others produce and publish multiple volumes, dealing with cycles of multiple 'cures' and relapses or related health or other issues. There are other formal similarities, such as when writers employ the diary format, or co-authors alternate their narratives throughout the text.

Eating disorder memoir as food memoir

Most obviously, the eating disorder memoirist shares the powerful interest in food that dominates the food memoir. The below discussion divides this compulsive preoccupation into four categories that are also common themes in the food memoir (Waxman 2008, Brien 2011): foods and their power; rituals of consumption; taste and a relentless quest for flavour; and the search for self through a relationship to food. Given *Wasted*'s centrality in this genre, it features in a number of the quotations below alongside a range of other memoirs, but many other examples could be cited in each section.

Foods and their power

The eating disorder memoirist is aware of – and often repeatedly, and honestly, describes – his or her obsession with food and eating. Representative examples include: ‘I thought about food and working out more than anything else’ (Pettit 2003: 52); ‘everything in my life was starting to become secondary to my obsession with food and my body’ (Taryn Benson in Benson and Benson 2008: 12); ‘daily life included lots of TV and whatever was in the kitchen cabinets that I could put a hit on’ (Marino 2004: 29), but further examples abound in all memoirs of eating disorder.

In the same way that the food memoirist finds (at least part of his or her) life’s meaning in food, many of the authors of eating disorder memoirs ascribe an almost supernatural, even magical, power to certain foods and all aspects of their consumption. Erica Rivers’ beautifully written *Insatiable: a young mother’s struggle with anorexia* (2009) was produced as part of an American university MFA. She is an accomplished writer, with a newspaper column and a string of literary journal articles. As might be expected, this memoir is carefully written and employs a much more obviously composed structure than many others. *Insatiable* begins with the author in therapy, and then moves back to the beginnings of the disorder as the place from where she can progress the narrative to her therapy situation, which is filled with personal and interpersonal conflict. Rivers’ narrative is also full of food. In a highly revealing meeting with a dietician, she is asked about which foods she restricts:

‘Is there anything you won’t eat?’ Allison asks.

I think: milk, juice, full-fat dairy products, fattening condiments, cereal, oatmeal, granola, crackers, trail mix, bread, buns, bagels, pancakes, waffles, muffins, doughnuts, pastries, cakes, pies, icecream, Popsicles, chocolate, candy, fruit snacks, potatoes, carrots, corn, peas, pineapple, grapes, bananas, melon, and raisins.

I say, ‘Junk food’ (13).

Many memoirists include such lists of forbidden and/or consumed-during-binges foods. Gary Marino’s *Big & tall chronicles: misadventures of a lifelong food addict* include many such lists: ‘amazing multi-layered lasagnas or massive antipastos with heapings of cheeses, salami, eggs, and olives ... spaghetti sauce with meatballs, sausages, beef ribs and crown pork roasts with potatoes, onions, carrots and stuffing’ (2004: 9).

Certain foods become of central importance to each memoirist. Frances Kuffle, author of *Passing for thin* (2004), an account of a successful weight loss of 188 pounds, and its sequel *Angry fat girls* (2010) in which she recounts the facts and personal significance of regaining that weight and, as the subtitle of the book reveals, ‘losing it ... again’, describes how:

I spent my nights in the pacifying arms of Entenmann’s [bakery products], Ben & Jerry’s [icecream], Cinnamon Life Cereal, European rice pudding, and the occasional order of Frascati’s chicken Parmesan with garlic bread (2).

Julia K. de Pree tells of friends who ‘existed solely on gum and large diet cokes’ (2004: 32) while she ate mostly ‘gum, hard candy and lettuce’ (34). In her compelling tale of marriage to an anorexic and bulimic husband, *Bitter ice: a memoir of love, food, and obsession*, Barbara Ken Lawrence details one of her partner’s notable dietary habits – one that a number of these memoirists share, and that prompted the title of her text – ice eating:

Ice was a substitute for food, and frozen water gave Tom the illusion both that he was eating and that he wasn’t drinking the water that he feared would make him bloat. ... [in their shared office] While I was working, while I was on the phone, all day long he would pull ice cubes out and crunch. I heard the crunching constantly, like an ice cutter cutting through the frozen arctic, a thousand Cicadas underfoot, squeezing Styrofoam – a sound like suicide as he substituted frozen water for food (1999: 4).

The amount of food consumed is also very important in these memoirs, as in *Skinny boy: a young man’s battle and triumph over anorexia*, where Gary A. Grahl relates exercising for hours before his breakfast which always consists of: ‘Exactly three tablespoons of skim milk over exactly three tablespoons of puffed wheat’ (2007: 3). These memoirists’ knowledge of the calorie content of various foods and combinations mirrors the kind of detailed culinary knowledge that many food memoirists display. Almost every eating disorder memoirist, for instance, echoes Rivers when she tells her readers: ‘I eat exactly the same foods to maintain my daily 1500 calorie intake’ (13) or Carnie Wilson’s statement that all her years of dieting had ‘made me some sort of an amateur nutritionist’ (2003: 16).

Rituals of consumption

Closely associated to the foods and amounts of them eaten (or not) are ritualised systems of consumption, as firm and arcane as the most refined of fine dining rituals. Eating strategies – such as ‘chewing and spitting’ that, reminiscent of wine tasting, allows the savouring, but not the swallowing, of food – are commonly described. The number or size of bites, licks, nibbles, chews or time taken to consume food also plays a prominent role in these memoirs. When Tara M. Rio writes ‘I only ate 4 bites of cereal and 2 bites of banana today. Not too bad I guess. So I only had to throw up once’ (2003: 58), this repeats a kind of often-occurring shorthand for the kind of detail Hornbacher gives us in a number of passages including her way of eating a single scoop of frozen yogurt:

I would spread my paper out in front of me, set the [fat-free peanut butter-flavoured] yogurt aside, check my watch. ... When five minutes had passed, I would start to skim my yogurt. ... You take the edge of your spoon and run it over the top of the yogurt, being careful to get only the melted part. Then let the yogurt drip off until there's only a sheen of it on the spoon. Lick it – wait, be careful, you have to only lick a teeny bit at a time, the sheen should last at least four or five licks, and you have to lick the back of the spoon first, then turn the spoon over and lick the front, with the tip of your tongue. Then set the yogurt aside. Read a full page, but don't look at the yogurt to check the melt progression. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. Do not take a mouthful, do not eat any of the yogurt unless it's melted. ... Picture a starving dog, gnawing and licking at a dry bone (2006 [1998]: 225).

In Hornbacher's case, as for many other memoirists, this focus on minutiae relates to notions of self-control and 'safety' and echoes the pleasure provided by food in the food memoir:

If I eat this apple sandwich in precisely *twenty bites*, no more, no less, then I will be happy ... If I am nineteen years old, sixty pounds, and eating a carton of yogurt a day, and it takes me precisely two hours to eat this carton of yogurt, and I smoke a cigarette every fifteen minutes to prove I can stop eating, then I will be safe (2006 [1998]: 7).

This can also extend to ritualistic methods of preparing these self-regulated food portions that obviously relate to cooking in the food memoir. Grahl thus describes making toast for his family and himself:

I like my toast just right – not too crispy, not too floppy, with extra fat free jelly and limited butter. Generally, I make everyone else's pieces first and pile them on a plate before I construct my slice to utter perfection. One time I went through an entire loaf of bread before I was finally satisfied (2007: 209).

In contrast, there is also unordered, unsafe eating. In fourth grade, home alone, seeking 'solace in front of the refrigerator', Hornbacher eats:

I melted cheese on toast and ate. And more cheese, more toast. Cereal. Mushrooms fried in butter and brandy. Filling the mouth, the hole in my heart, the endless hours with the numb stupor of food (2006 [1998]: 41).

Just like in the kind of food memoir that I have elsewhere characterised as 'extreme eating' – and which includes narratives of competitive eating such as those by Jason Fagone (2006) and Ryan Nerz (2006) – eating enormous amounts can be a goal, and even a badge of honour (Brien 2011). Uncontrolled eating can also be a defiant form of attention seeking, and this, and subsequent purging, is written in the same tone as many celebratory food memoirs:

My nighttime baby sitter would watch me and laugh as I boasted, I bet you I can eat this entire loaf or bread. No you can't, she'd say. Determined, I'd start popping bread in the toaster, heart pumping. I remember the toast, the butter I spread on it. The crunch of toast against teeth and caress of butter on tongue. ... Locking the bathroom door, turning the water on, leaning over the toilet, throwing up in a heave of delight (Hornbacher 2006 [1998]: 43).

These notions of controlled and uncontrolled eating mirror the representations of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ eating in the food memoir – whether this be fresh versus processed foods, imported versus local foods, or expansive cosmopolitan food choices versus more restricted food selections.

The location where eating takes place is also an important feature of these narratives – and are written about with the same detail and passion that the food memoir recounts dining out – whether this is where wild bulimic binges are enacted or the site of sole and secret eating rituals. Many narrators describe how they avoid eating out as well as any public situations where the amount eaten, or not eaten, cannot be controlled, and how social engagements are cancelled to achieve this control. These avoidance strategies are narrated with the same passion as discussions of visiting restaurants, cafés and other eateries in food memoirs.

Taste and the relentless quest for flavour

Another thematic aspect that is shared with the food memoir are detailed descriptions of the tastes of foods and the authors’ reactions to these:

When you are not eating enough, your thinking process changes. You begin to be obsessed with food. ... You want to discuss tastes. What does that taste like? ... Salty? Sweet? Are you full? You want to taste something all the time. You chew gum, you eat roll after roll of sugar-free Certs, you crunch Tic-Tacs (just one and a half calories each!) You want things to taste *intense*. ... You pour salt and pepper on things. You eat bowls of sugar coated cereal (no fat). You put honey and raisins on your *rice* (Hornbacher 2006 [1998]: 105, italics in original).

Like other memoirists, the eating disorder memoirist also searches for satisfying flavour combinations, but in doing so, describes food categories that are as exotic as those from foreign lands. These are, moreover, described in the same way as unknown foods are in food memoirs. Hornbacher explains:

Remember anoretics do eat. ... There are systems of Safe Foods, foods not imbued, or less imbued, with monsters and devils and dangers. These are usually ‘pure’ foods, less likely to taint the soul with such sins as fat, or sugar, or an excess of calories. ... I would have a hard time putting into words the passion we have for our systems (2006 [1998]: 245–6).

Search for self through a relationship to food

The ways in which eating disorder memoirists describe themselves are very similar to those employed by food writing chefs and others who produce food memoirs. As Hornbacher writes: ‘we are often extreme people, highly competitive, incredibly self-critical, driven, perfectionistic, tending towards excess’ (6). All these individuals channel this ‘drive, perfectionism, ambition, and an excess of general intensity’ (Hornbacher 2006 [1998]: 6) into food – but in the case of the eating disorder memoir into cultivating and maintaining a disordered relationship with it instead of the kinds of aspirational goals noted above – such as training to be a chef/butcher/beekeeper or

other food professional, setting up and running a restaurant, building a career as a food writer or living for a year on food grown at home.

Again in close commonality with the food memoir, the search for identity is a prominent theme of these narratives. Interestingly, this is always the narrator's search, even if he or she is narrating someone else's eating disorder. Thus in *Bitter ice*, Lawrence details how her experience of her husband's disorders led to her own search for her own identity and ultimate independence, and Daniel Becker's memoir about life with an anorexic mother, *This mean disease* (2005), analyses his own psychological development. Many memoirists describe this as a major reason for writing. Rivers expresses that: 'I wrote this book because I needed to, for myself. Writing helped me understand, accept, and then forgive my own complicity in what was a profoundly dysfunctional relationship (xi).' De Pree explicitly describes 'my desire to write, to write myself back to the garden of selfhood' (64).

As with all memoir, this concern with identity can lead to a self-absorption that can become tedious for readers. What is marked in the eating disorder memoir is how a significant number of these memoirists recognise this in themselves, displaying a high level of self-awareness regarding how and why he or she is telling their own story, although this recognition does not seem to rein in the tendency towards self-obsessiveness. Hornbacher, for example, clearly articulates this:

Eating disorders, on any level, are a crutch. They are also an addiction and an illness, but there is no question at all that they are quite simply a way of avoiding the banal, daily, itchy pain of life. Eating disorders provide a little private drama, they feed into the desire for constant excitement, everything becomes life-or-death, everything is very grand and crashing ... And they are distracting. You don't have to think about any of the nasty minutiae of the real world ... because you are having a *real* drama, not a sitcom but a GRAND EPIC, all by yourself ... you are having the *most interesting* sado-masochistic affair with your own image (2006 [1998]: 280–1, capitalisation and italics in text).

Differences

The above has outlined how the eating disorder memoir and food memoir have much in common. It has also touched on some differences. One of the starkest disparities in terms of theme between these forms of food writing is the presence of a vivid thread of writing about physical and emotional hunger in the eating disorder memoir. While this is subtly present in Western food writing and some memoirs, it is distinct and up front in the eating disorder memoir. While binge eating could be read as an example of greed, many of these narratives segue instead into a discussion of lack and need:

We ... creep into the kitchen some nights, a triangle of light spilled on the floor from the fridge, shovelling cold casseroles, icecream, jelly, cheese, into our mouths, swallowing without chewing as we listen to the steady *tisk-tisk-tisk* of the clock. I have done this. Millions of people have done this. There is an empty space that gnaws at our ribs and cannot be filled by any amount of food. There is a hunger for something, and

we never quite know what it is, only that it is a hunger, so we eat (Hornbacher 2006 [1998]: 118).

De Pree repeatedly links this hunger with writing: ‘Like the poem in which nothing is left wanting and what is desired is its own end, hunger seeks out desire in the negation of desire and finds fulfillment in the refusal of its need (2004: 52).

This connection signals another of the most significant differences between the eating disorder memoir and the food memoir more generally: how many personal memoirs of disordered eating also narrate a revealing concern with the act of writing, and the author’s motivation towards producing this unique form of food writing. In the non-eating disorder food memoir, as noted above, the author’s perfectionism, ambition and intensity are channelled into producing or otherwise working with food, and becoming or being what could be classed as a particular type of professional or amateur ‘food worker’. In the eating disorder memoir, these qualities are also channelled into the act of writing and the process of becoming, and being, a writer. When de Pree suggests that ‘Starvation is a form of communication that offers the body as a text to be read’ (2004: 55) she is also articulating the close relationship between this act and the act of writing about it. Hornbacher writes of this self-identification more bluntly: ‘I’m not a doctor or a professor or an expert or a pundit. I’m a writer’ (7).

Another strand of difference (and something that these memoirs have in common with many other ‘survivor’ memoirs) is that eating disorder memoirists, almost without exception, frame their narratives in altruistic terms of providing assistance to others, although this motivation often exists alongside recognition of an intensely personal search. Thus Hornbacher writes: ‘I would do anything to keep people from going where I went. Writing this book was the only thing I could think of’ (2006 [1998]: 7). This narrative of togetherness in the savage aloneness of eating disorder is echoed in Hulan’s dedication: ‘I dedicate this book to you – the reader ... If you are one of those unfortunates who is suffering, know that you are not alone in your darkness and pain’ (1995: iii). In *Confessions of a carb queen*, Susan Blech directly addresses her reader: ‘I’ve written this book ... because for a long time I felt very alone, and no one should feel that alone and scared and ashamed. ... This is my story. ... I’m sharing my life with you’ (2003: vii). Christie Pettit clearly brings these two threads of helping others and oneself together: ‘As part of my recovery, I have felt a strong desire to help others ... I must try to make sense of the anorexic experience, both for myself and my fellow sufferers’ (2003: 44).

Truth telling

In contrast to memoir more generally, both the food memoir and eating disorder memoir have largely escaped the scandals around truth telling and authorial credibility that have dogged many other forms of memoir in recent years. The trustworthiness of the narrator has not yet been an issue in these narratives for either readers and critics – even while, and (most interestingly) perhaps because, narrators’ accounts openly include many instances of subterfuge, deception, dishonesty, deceit and fabrication. The ‘true story’ tagline is a feature of both the covers and the

descriptions of the eating disorder memoir, and the narration of these texts follow the positively perceived ‘testimonial’ approach to narration – that is, their texts present themselves as confessions: this is the truth as I saw, and now see, it (see, Young 1987, Henke 1998).

The issue of competing narratives (and, therefore, contradictory perceptions of reality and contested authorial truth claims) has dogged the contemporary memoir and the misery/trauma memoir in particular (see, Brien 2006). This has moved beyond reader disappointment and literary criticism to the courts, with family members accused of incest or abuse, for instance, recently suing memoirists and/or composing alternate narratives in dispute. Such cases as that of British judge and barrister, Constance Briscoe, whose mother sued her for libel over claims in her memoir *Ugly* (2006) that she had neglected, beaten and otherwise abused her daughter (Meikle 2008, Williams 2008), and the establishment and work of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation (which contests the validity of recovered memories) (FMSF 2011) epitomise this trend.

The possible dissonance between competing narratives has been embraced by, and absorbed into, the eating disorder memoir in a series of co-authored narratives, which preserve each author’s individual truth and authorial integrity by employing parallel narratives. This is a major difference from almost all food memoirs, the vast majority of which are authored by a single writer. Most of these are joint eating disorder memoirs are mother-daughter narratives. In *Hungry: a mother and daughter fight anorexia* (2009) restaurant critic and winner of a prestigious James Beard food writing award, Sheila Himmel, and her daughter Lisa Himmel, both relate their own concerns around food in alternate passages of prose. Lisa provides autobiographical memoirs of her own eating disorders, while her mother places these and her own experience in the context of wider cultural issues with food, including but not isolated to, obsessive overeating and dieting. *The anorexia diaries: a mother and daughter’s triumph over teenage eating disorders* by Linda M. Rio and Tara M. Rio is told, as the title suggests, in an alternating series of diary entries from 1978, with Linda’s entry on Tara’s first day of kindergarten, to 1993, when Tara writes about being sexually assaulted when she is at college. As in most of the memoirs presented as diaries, sets of diary entries are framed by, and linked with, prose passages.

Conclusions

While eating disorder memoirs remind us that alongside food’s positive role in our lives as sustenance and pleasure, it can also be, for some, painful and dangerous, there is some debate regarding the value of these narratives, and even some calls that they should be banned. While their writers and supporters promote these memoirs as powerful and vivid means of conveying information, assistance and even therapy, others criticise these texts as providing encouragement and even guides for readers to engage in disordered eating practices. The first study of the effects of these memoirs on readers’ eating attitudes and behaviours, found that these texts appeared to have little effect on the fifty female undergraduate students’ eating attitudes and behaviours

who participated (Thomas et al. 2006), but this is contradicted by much online testimony (Brown 2012) [3].

This investigation seeks to contribute to such discussions by identifying some of the characteristic elements of this sub-genre of memoir. By investigating how the eating disorder memoir both mirrors and adds new dimensions to our current understanding of the food memoir, this discussion proposes that, while food is a certainly a focus of all these narratives, there are a number of differences. Surveying the eating disorder memoir in this way, and investigating its history, themes, tropes and prominent metaphors, will also, hopefully, prompt much needed further study of this fascinating and moving body of literature.

Endnotes

1. See also, Hesse-Biber's *The cult of thinness* (2007).
2. These sites promote anorexia as a lifestyle, and sometimes promote eating disorder memoirs as 'thinspiration' to motivate dietary restriction (Thomas et al 2006: 419, Feinberg 2009).
3. The study called for future research to investigate whether, and how, these narratives might affect those who already had a 'pre-existing eating pathology', especially in terms of normalising and glamorising the symptoms of eating disorders (Thomas et al. 2006).

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