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**Narratives of death and dying from one remove: surveying the undertaker's memoir**

Abstract:

While most book-length published memoirs on the topic of death and dying could be broadly classified as illness memoirs, there are a surprising number of memoirs currently in circulation whose narratives focus on the life and work of the undertaker. Despite achieving a measure of popularity with readers, none of these works have been explored (individually or as a group) in detail or categorised as a discrete sub-set of the auto/biographical memoir. Surveying these narratives as a sub-genre of memoir – and examining their modes of writing, publication and public reception – can contribute to our understanding of both this revealing auto/biographical practice and practices of writing and publishing popular memoir more generally. A way of categorising these works is suggested, with representative memoirs in each category used as illustrative examples. In suggesting that these texts are able to communicate to readers on the often difficult topic of death and dying, this analysis serves to point to the power of auto/biographical writing.

Biographical note:

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## Introduction

The book-length memoir is a form of creative writing that is not only popular with readers but also of considerable current interest in higher education at both undergraduate and postgraduate coursework levels, and for research higher degree students. This discussion acknowledges the contemporary interest in reading, writing, and writing about memoir (Yagoda 2009; Rak 2013), and follows Couser's work on niche areas of memoir (2007a) in surveying an under examined form of memoir: the undertaker's memoir. Rather than scrutinise a group of memoirs through a literary studies lens, the below utilises a case study approach to study these works as a discrete form of creative writing production. This is useful in this context as Merriam posits that the case study can examine a small sample of objects of study and produce a 'narrative description' (2009: 51) that constructs a richer picture of an under-examined phenomenon. In suggesting that these texts are able to communicate to readers on the often difficult topic of death and dying, this analysis serves to point to the power of auto/biographical writing.

## Memoirs about death and dying

Despite the often-repeated assertion that death is a taboo in modern Western society (see, for example, Zimmermann 2007; Dying Matters Coalition 2011; Thulesius et al. 2013), contrary opinions are beginning to be asserted. In 2014, discussing organ donation and euthanasia, Deputy Director of the University of Bath's Centre for Death and Society, John Troyer, for instance, explained that: 'we love discussing death. Dead bodies fascinate us ... We hear about and see images of death every day; we embrace it in what we watch ... Death is not a taboo' (2014). Some researchers have gone so far as to proposed this idea as so contested as to describe it as the 'so-called death taboo' and even the 'formerly postulated taboo' (Wildfeuer, Witten and Schulz 2015: 366). Death and dying are certainly an enduring central theme in fiction, with representations of a wide range of death-related material, from characters giving accounts of dying, and/or feelings about death or bereavement, to where death is used a literary device or symbol for decay and/or ending of some kind (Skelton 2003). In a recent collection of essays on the subject of death in fiction, Hakola and Kivistö summarise that death in is also 'more than a physical or psychological experience in literature; it also highlights existential questions concerning humanity and storytelling' (2014).

Death and dying is also a significant subject in non-fiction writing, including in life writing. In their influential definitional listing of sixty genres of life writing, Smith and Watson include *autothanatography* to name that group of autobiographical texts that focus on (terminal) illness and dying (2010: 261). Egan notes that such texts emphasise 'illness, pain and imminent death as crucial to the processes of that life' (1999: 224). Illness memoirs – many of which include death and dying – are, indeed, a much-discussed sub-genre of memoir (see, for example, Frank 1995; Forché and Gerard 2001; Avrahami 2007; Couser 2007b, 2011; Yagoda 2009) and, as a group, are a form of writing which can assist writers, as well as readers, to access and organise their own thoughts and feelings regarding death and dying. While illness memoirs are, as identified by Smith and Watson, often autobiographical (2010: 261), a closely

associated form of memoir could be described as the bereavement memoir – memoirs which describe the actions performed and emotions felt by those experiencing, or after, the death of another. Many of these texts relate to illness, but others build narratives around death from accident or other causes, including aging. All these memoirists relate the loss and the process the bereaved are undergoing to process or otherwise understand that loss. As Miller writes:

As memorialists of the dead, writers join readers who find themselves caught up ... in the situations of loss and grief that come with the territory of human ties. Whatever our singular destinies, such memoirs offer the reader an occasion to reflect autobiographically on ... and how to make sense of [death, dying and loss] (2000: xi).

There are, however, a number of book-length memoirs currently in circulation that focus on the subject of death, not by concentrating on illness or bereavement, but on other topics that bring death into focus, and which can also assist in Miller's task of giving writers the opportunity to reflect on, and make sense of, death, dying, loss and the grieving process. This, of course, also then assists these authors in also providing this opportunity to their readers.

An intriguing sub-set of memoirs about death and dying are what, for the purposes of this discussion, I am describing as the *undertaker's memoir*, which covers the life and work of those professionals who are also known as funeral directors and morticians, as well as associated specialists such as embalmers (as, for example, in Zbarskiĭ's work (1998) about Lenin's embalmers). While undeniably a niche area of memoir, a surprising number of these volumes are in circulation in the public domain (I have surveyed twenty of them for this article), however, none of these works have attracted sustained scholarly investigation, either individually or as a defined group. Nor have these memoirs been described, classified or otherwise categorised as a discrete sub-set of life writing. This paper, therefore, focuses on surveying these texts as a specific type of memoir to contribute to an understanding of what I propose is an interesting and revealing form of auto/biographical practice. This study also claims that these works are useful, offering rich and valuable insights into death and dying in an accessible manner that has much to offer writers who are seeking to offer readers information on this topic to supplement the available medical, self-help and funeral industry material.

The interest in producing, consuming and researching these memoirs in Australia (Brennan 2012) – can be read as a result of what Patricia Jalland charts as the forces that have led to a revival of 'expressive grief' in Australia in relation to death from the 1970s (2006). These include: the temporal distance from the deaths of the first and second world wars; the waves of immigration over this period bringing different rituals around, and responses to, death and dying; reactions against the over-medicalisation of death in hospital; the palliative care movement and discussions about euthanasia; and the influence of the moving stories in psychiatrist Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's popular volume *On Death and Dying* (1969). Jalland posits that, from the 1970s, Australian society – which was traditionally reticent about expressing emotions about death – has been increasingly 'ready to hear [Kubler-Ross's] message that it was beneficial to the dying and the bereaved to express their feelings openly; and that the process of grieving was a normal part of a difficult process' (352).

Jalland also discusses how others, such as sociologist Tony Walter, have more recently stressed 'the value of continuing bonds with the deceased in the minds of survivors' (356) in dealing with grief. Jalland notes how published stories of 'dying and grieving' have 'special value' for the bereaved (364) – in that they show that 'grief is normal, though complex and distressing' (364). While Jalland discusses the In Memoriam notices published in newspapers as evidence of this – I believe that these memoirs present another such artefact of this 'expressive grief'. While bereavement memoirs clearly model aspects of the expression of grief, the undertaker's memoir offers another aspect to this discussion.

Maureen Strazzari suggests that means of accessing ways into discussing death and dying continues to be important today as, while there are what she describes as 'new ways of speaking about death' (2005: 262), most of these arise from, and relate to, medical and legal discourse. We can today, for example, decide and discuss whether we want to become an organ donor, appoint an enduring power of attorney, or the forms of treatment we want in the face of a terminal illness. While, however, such discourse raises the issue of making and discussing end-of-life decisions, it does not encourage discussion of what Strazzari describes as the human 'existential questions and anxieties' (2005: 262) around death.

### **Representations of undertakers as characters in fiction and non-fiction texts**

In terms of representing undertakers in text, writers can look to portrayals of individual undertakers as characters in fiction, and these have also received considerable scholarly attention. Henry Lawson's classic Gothic short story 'The Bush Undertaker' (1892) about an isolated bushman who finds the body of a friend and interferes with an Indigenous person's grave, is probably the most written-about fiction on the topic of dealing with dead bodies in Australia (see, for example, Lee 1993; Dingley 1998; Punter 2012), although these studies are all literary readings of Lawson's story. There are also a number of studies of the representations of undertakers in Victorian fiction (see, for example, Scandura 1996), many of which are figured in relation to 'death-bed' or other death scenes and funerals (see also, for example, Holubetz 1986). Interestingly, when undertakers are major characters in recent films they are often liminal, dubious presences, as in the murdering Waldo Trumbull who kills to provide himself with customers in the comedy-horror film *Comedy of Terrors* (Tourneur 1963), the suspicious William G. Dobbs in the murder mystery *Dead & Buried* (Sherman 1981); and the threatening Eliot Deacon, a mortician who seems to be able to communicate with the dead, in the thriller *After.Life* (Wojtowicz-Vosloo 2009). The biopic *Bernie* (Linklater 2011) stars Jack Black playing the real-life Texan undertaker Bernie Tiede, who was gaoled for murdering his wealthy companion. An exception to such negative descriptions is found in the representation of the sensitive and respectful morticians in the lyrical, award-winning Japanese film *Okuribito* (Yôjirô 2008) (released in English as *Departures*), in which an unemployed cellist takes a job with an undertaker, learning to prepare the bodies. These films have attracted some discussion in terms of studies in popular culture (see, for example, Hartley 2012; Boyd 2015), as has the popular television series *Six Feet Under* (Ball 2000–5) set in a funeral home (Wilson 2012;

Duarte 2012; Akass and McCabe 2005; Coghlan, Hawryluk and Whitaker 2016), although the themes prominent in undertakers' memoirs regarding their profession – their motivation, training and daily work, and the role the undertaker plays in society – are not the focus of this research, nor is how the undertaker is portrayed a particular area of interest of these studies.

In terms of representations and analyses of the undertaker in non-fiction texts, what has been termed the so-called 'celebration of death' in the nineteenth century has attracted considerable scholarly inquiry (see, for instance, Curl 1972; Schanantz 2008), and this has duly focused some attention on the undertaker. Others have investigated those who photographed the dead in the UK and USA, a practice which is known as 'memorial photography' (Burns and Burns 1990; Davidson et al. 1990; Hallam and Hockey 2001; Mord 2014). Most of these works have taken a historical and/or popular culture approach. Studies of the actual work of the undertaker have been undertaken in a range of disciplines, with many historical studies (see, for example, Fritz 1994–95; May 2010) alongside those from a scientific/medical angle – an early article on embalming the dead was, for instance, published in *The Lancet* in 1902 (Garson). There are also numerous discussions of various aspects of undertakers' work in terms of professional and/or business practice as, for example, in terms of job satisfaction (Ludlum, Ludlum and Alsobrook 2014), professional identity (Valentine, Woodthorpe and Easthope 2013), marketing (Okrah and Richmond 1987), profitability and the decline of the family business (Grow 2003), occupational health and safety (Howarth 1993), legal matters (Street 1948; Wojcik 1994; Eth et al. 1996; Herndandez 1998) and new trends in burial and funeral rites (Harris 2007).

These are all studies, however, where undertakers (fictional or real) and their work with the dead are *talked about*. Few of these studies mention, let alone use or quote, individual undertaker's points of view or their reflections – including as represented in published memoirs – as a data source. Yet the published book-length memoir presents a great deal of information that could be of interest in relation to all these topics and in each of these disciplines. Similarly, in terms of these memoirs as works of literature, aside from reviews of a small number of these books by readers online and the occasional profile in the media (see, for example, the press around Caitlin Doughty's memoir (as discussed below) and her career (Lubitz 2014; Beckerman 2015; Power 2015)), I have not found one in-depth study which has discussed the undertakers' memoir as a form of life writing, autobiographical narrative, memoir or creative writing. With this in mind, the following investigation focuses on these memoirs as creative writing narratives.

Although autobiographical memoir has benefited in terms of scholarly study from the interest in autobiographical narratives since, especially, the 1980s, the published book-length memoir remains often disparaged by critics and in the media, by whom it is seen as a lurid, shallow and disposable form of publication, and 'widely reviled [as] narcissistic, formulaic, pretentious and often falsified' (Miller 2009). Some critics assert that reader interest in memoir is the logical outcome of a voyeuristic society obsessed with celebrity, and only popular with readers with no real taste or discrimination. Neil Genzlinger, writing in *The New York Times*, describes contemporary memoir scathingly as work by 'a sea of people you've never heard of,

writing uninterestingly about the unexceptional' (2011). Yet, memoir writing has a long and respected history (Yagoda 2009) alongside its enduring popularity with readers (Feather and Woodbridge 2007; Rak 2013). Some writers alternatively suggest that such narratives satisfy a deep human desire for writing about life and its meaning – American memoirist Patricia Hampl, for instance, believing that memoir of lasting value engages with a sense of wider cultural memory and history, achieving an 'intersection of narration and reflection' (1999: 33). This is also true of biographical memoirs – with Masters' memoir of his friend, *Stuart: A Life Backwards* (2005), providing a rich exploration of contemporary homelessness alongside the personal story of an unusual friendship. Lee Gutkind has categorised such memoirs as those which are 'unique on a personal level, but universal so that all readers can understand and relate to' the messages they contain (qtd. in Brien 2000). In this way of reading memoir, the undertaker's memoir may be positioned as one type of life writing text which is able to reveal a great deal about death and dying as well as public attitudes to this aspect of life's course.

### **The undertaker's memoir as creative writing text**

In the following I use five key elements of creative writing – subject matter, voice, form/style, authorship and publication details (see, for instance, Grenville 1990) – in order to both discuss the features of these memoirs and then posit a series of descriptive sub-categories of such memoirs.

As perhaps might be expected, almost all these memoirists take aspects of death and dying, and – in particular – what happens to corpses and their families and friends after death, as their main subject matter. In this way, these texts have much in common with classic investigative (Mitford 1963, 1998) and creative non-fiction (Cullen 2006) accounts of the funeral industry. Undertaker's memoirs, however, usually focus on the individual who is the subject of the memoir and are often, although not always, less critical of the funeral industry than accounts such as Jessica Mitford's ground-breaking 1963 expose, *The American Way of Death*, which was reissued in 1978 and revised in 1998. Evelyn Waugh's novel *The Loved One* (1948) is a famous satirical study of the funeral industry. Many undertaker's memoirs, however, reveal facts about both standard practices and occasional events that can prove quite shocking to the reader unversed in this information. These details include facts such as that the bodies at some hospitals are wrapped tightly in plastic wrap while waiting to be transported to the funeral home (Jokinen 2010: 3), the actual processes involved in the preparation of the body for burial (a feature of almost every memoir), and that a surprisingly large proportion of ashes of cremated corpses are not picked up from crematoriums (related in a number of memoirs). Such unexpected and unknown information about the realities of what occurs after death is present in almost every one of the memoirs I surveyed and is, I suggest, a characteristic aspect of these texts, contributing to their appeal by providing a pleasurable frisson for readers. A preliminary survey of online readers' reviews of these texts, together with my own reading of them, suggests that this reaction is, very rarely so extreme as to be characterised as anything approaching revulsion, disgust or horror but, instead, provides arresting moments of surprise and interest that

makes these works engaging, memorable and informative for their readers. Inclusion of this material also provides a sense of access to a secret world that characterises many memoirs of professional life, and which may be a key part of their appeal for readers (Brien 2010, 2011).

A number of these memoirs also provide a rich commentary about how the undertaker is seen in society both in the past and today. With the decline of formal religion after the First World War, and the carnage of that and subsequent wars, people in the developed world began to view death with fear and suspicion. This can be seen in the literature of 1914 to 1918 and after (Bonadeo 1989; Quinn and Trout 2016) and how the processes around death and the disposal of bodies became increasingly isolated from everyday life from this time (Mitford 1998; Brennan 2014). As a result, many of these memoirs suggest that the undertaker today performs two main roles. The first of these is practical in terms of the disposal of dead bodies in line with relevant legal requirements and community standards. The second is a far more social role – assisting interested parties navigate not only this, but also the emotional territory involved with death in the contemporary world.

In terms of voice, one clear commonality between these memoirs is how these memoirists often use the language of popular discourse about death and dying, where a myriad of euphemistic words and phrases are used. These describe the death and dying using terms such as 'passing away', 'passing on', 'expiring', 'making a final exit', as well as the 'final rest', 'eternal rest', 'fatality', 'casualty', 'mortality' and 'gone to a better place' – all of which stand testament to a widespread discomfort with the realities of what these words describe. In this way, these memoirs almost universally use the noun 'body' instead of 'corpse', although they also use the euphemisms such as the 'deceased', 'dear departed' and 'loved one'.

Whether the memoir is written in a matter-of-fact, comic, religious/spiritual, lyrical, poetic or confessional tone and/or if a redemptive narrative arc (one of the key makers of the contemporary memoir) (Robertson 2012) is mobilised, is another key element for consideration by writers and others. Considering how these memoirs are written allows such memoirs to be described as traditional or experimental; a continuous or discontinuous narrative (a collection of essays, for instance); and, whether the text is rendered in one authorial voice or a series of voices. Undertaker's memoirs can also be described as autobiographical or biographical or a mixture of these; and, as single, dual or group memoirs. Kenneth McKenzie and Todd Harra's collections of stories from almost one hundred different undertakers, *Mortuary Confidential* (2010) and *Over Our Dead Bodies* (2014), are examples of relatively unusual group memoirs. These are thematically organised, aiming, as the authors state, 'to give the readers a look into our world, from our perspective, not the salacious media's ... look[ing] at the lifestyle of an undertaker, [to] learn a little about the job, and examine some of the thoughts of funeral directors' (xiii).

Structural elements such as whether the narrative is chronological, thematically arranged or organised in an alternative manner is also important as this affects how the story is told and the information related to readers. These memoirs can also be classified in terms of how each memoirist presents the undertaker's work (as their life's work or

a part-time occupation), and whether undertaking is the focus of the memoir or one of a number of themes or motifs in it. Whether a text is illustrated, and how, is another structural element to take into consideration, and leads to consideration of graphic memoirs such as Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006) being considered as a form of memoir – instead of (as is more usual) as a form of graphic novel first and an autobiographical text second (see, for instance, Pleyer and Schneider 2014).

An examination of factors in relation to what can be called 'the author' encompasses such aspects as whether the memoir is set in the memoirist's deep or more recent past; whether he or she self-identifies as a writer or not; whether the memoirist undertook the job of undertaker/mortician to write the book; and whether he or she was well known, or not, before writing. How authors describe themselves – thoughtfully, kindly, generously, unsympathetically, critically, censoriously or disapprovingly, and so forth – is also revealing in this context. Graphic memoir is a useful source of study here, as the authors often picture themselves in their texts and this can be very revealing.

In terms of publication details, whether the memoir is published by a major, mainstream commercial publisher or self-published is a valuable consideration in terms of distribution of the text, as is a consideration of whether the text is available in print and/or electronic versions. Whether the text is a first, sequel (Waters 2014) or one-off memoir, and whether the writer came to the writing of their memoir as a published author or not are other relevant aspects. A number of high profile memoirs have been described as 'blooks', being based on blogs or other online publications (Pederson 2009; Pacea 2014). This is useful to consider as these memoirs can attract significant readerships from the serial narratives' followers. Caitlin Doughty – founder of 'The Order of the Good Death', an on- and off-line group with an interest in rituals around death and related issues – has a multimedia presence as blogger and YouTube series host (for *Ask a Mortician*), which has underpinned the marketing and dissemination of her information-rich memoir, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes and Other Lessons from the Crematory* (2015).

Consideration of these elements provide a way that memoirs can be compared for fruitful analysis. In this case, thinking about and mapping the undertakers' memoirs against these elements, I have identified a number of commonalities and trends, which I utilise below in describing the undertaker's memoir. In this first attempt at characterizing these texts, I am using five kinds of memoir which I have previously utilized in relation to memoirs in another professional context (Brien 2010).

### ***The comprehensive memoir***

In this case, a comprehensive memoir can be described as a text whose content is primarily about an undertaker and his or her life in that profession. These are, by far, the most common type of undertaker's memoir among those I have surveyed. These memoirs chronicle the career path of the memoirist or a close family member – with the most common family memoir that of a husband by his wife, but there are also a number by daughters. In the introduction to her landmark gender-based study, *Lifting the Taboo: Women, Death and Dying*, Sally Cline posits that women have a special

relationship with death and dying, and can shed light on 'our culture's uninformed attitude towards death' (1995: 1). Undertakers' memoirs by women fulfill one of Cline's aims in her study, to 'offer women the space to speak about death' (2). Women, indeed, comprise a significant number of the memoirists surveyed for this study. These narratives include those written by women working, or who have worked, in the funeral industry themselves (Nadle 2006; Williams 2010; Doughty 2015), as well as undertakers' wives (Hastings 2005; Oliver 2015), daughters (Gassman 1952; Mayfield 2015) and family friends (Holloway 2007).

One of the earliest examples of a comprehensive undertaker's memoir I have found is the biographical memoir, *Daddy was an Undertaker*, by McDill McCown Gassman, a mid-century southern American writer who was born in Alabama and died in Georgia. First published in 1952, her memoir about growing up above a funeral parlour in the 1920s begins 'There was always somebody dead at our house' and was so popular that it went into three hardcover printings the year it was published (Bonner 2010: 34). This illustrated text is organised chronologically. Although her father's story is related with considerable humour, there are also many serious passages. Gassman writes, for instance, of returning to her hometown as an adult, visiting her father's grave and finding a woman standing there. When the woman, a stranger, told her, 'Undertaking, itself, is no easy job, I'm sure', Gassman wrote, 'I knew in that moment, with a sweet and solemn knowing, what Daddy had always known; that death is just the gateway to life' (qtd. in Amarillo Globe-News 2010). State correspondent for the *Atlanta Constitution* since 1957 until she died, Gassman's journalism appeared in several national publications and she also published a volume of poetry *Fragments* (Huntsville History Collection). As a result of *Daddy was an Undertaker*, however, Gassman won considerable respect as an author and for her knowledge of the subject. She was, for example, the first woman speaker at the US National Funeral Directors Association, a convention of some 4,000 members (Alabama Authors).

A number of other female memoirists chart their own professional careers. June Knights Nadle's *Mortician Diaries: The Dead-Honest Truth from a Life Spent with Death* (2006) outlines how, born and raised in rural Idaho, she studied Mortuary Science in the years immediately after the Second World War and then pursued a fifty-year career as an embalmer and funeral director. Nadle clearly states her motivation for writing about her life's work: 'It's my hope that the stories in this book, recounting some of the most compelling and poignant deaths that I have encountered ... will incite your own realisations about how you want to relate to life and death ... The nature of each of our internal dialogues with death will vary, but hopefully the stories in this book can lead you into uncharted territory' (4–5). Dee Oliver's *The Undertaker's Wife* (2015) charts both her life with an undertaker husband who died both suddenly and young, and her own subsequent decision to undertake training in a mortuary science degree. In this memoir, Oliver wisely describes how death is 'perhaps the only certainty in life that still manages to catch us off guard' and that she hopes the information and advice in her story 'can help prepare and equip you for the journey' (182). Michelle Williams' *Down Among the Dead Men* (2010) is unusual not for its subject matter, as it follows, as the subtitle states, *A Year in the Life of a Mortuary Technician*, but because it is set in the UK. Williams works for the National Health Service, whereas almost all the other

memoirs located for this survey – except one set in Australia (Eames 2005) and two in New Zealand (Mann 2009, 2011) – are American memoirs dealing with private practice. In being part of a national bureaucracy, Williams discusses a different range of issues than the other memoirists, but encounters many of the same challenges and relays similar insights about death and dying as those other memoirists.

Tom Jokinen's wide-ranging *Curtains: Adventures of an Undertaker in Training* (2010), which follows his journey as an apprentice as he learns the role, exposing a wide range of arresting facts and disturbing information about funerals and the work he undertakes, is decidedly humorous while relating this serious subject matter. Jim Eames' *The Country Undertaker: Reminiscences of a Bush Life* was published by major Australian publisher Allen & Unwin in 2005. *The Country Undertaker* is a fond, and at times quite humorous, biographical memoir of his father, an undertaker in the Riverina country town of Holbrook in New South Wales. Set in the 1950s, the narrative also provides an interesting addition to the social history of this district – of which hardly anything is available in published form. Eames describes his father, a footballer who worked as a spare parts man, becoming an undertaker by chance, and then bringing a McGyver-like can-do attitude to the task. This is a common theme in many memoirs of small and country-town undertakers pre-1970s, where the undertaker was a key component of local communities and when the preparation for burial was far simpler than today's lengthy and complicated process. This is certainly the case in Gassman's memoir. These memoirs contain many stories of how families and friends deal with the grieving process – from those who show a steely resilience to those who are broken down by encountering death. In this way, even the seemingly lightest, anecdotal and largely humorous memoirs, provide a valuable series of examples for readers of how others have dealt with grief and mourning – and for writers of how death and mourning can be written about.

### ***The embedded memoir***

In what I am terming the embedded memoir, the undertaker's memoir comprises a significant part of the text, but not the whole. The memoir may frame, for instance, the rest of the work or function as a subtext throughout it. The emphasis in this category is not on how much of the text as a whole is memoir, but that the memoir element is central and crucial to the work's meaning as a whole. A clear example of this kind of memoir is *The Undertaking* (1997), in which Thomas Lynch presents largely autobiographical prose, poetry and photography around the theme of death, written from his point of view being a small town undertaker for over forty years. While the author's musings on his work permeate his poetry, they are not the organising subject of the work, however, his reflections on the role are completely interwoven into all his writing and, thus, the text can be read, at least in part, as a memoir. Many reviewers noted Lynch's profession and how this lent authenticity to the poetry in this and his other collections. Another example is Celia M. Hastings' *The Undertaker's Wife* (2005), which mixes descriptions of her experiences in this role with a range of practical information regarding what to do when a death has occurred including guides to writing obituaries, and organising funerals. Hastings has a Masters degree in theology and her

spiritual reflections are a key component of the text, which, overall, reads as her memoir of both her husband's work as an undertaker and how that has impacted on her life and beliefs.

### ***The incidental memoir and the fragmented incidental memoir***

In the incidental undertaker's memoir, snippets of professional life story information are included through a work that is largely about a different subject. Despite its title and the image and text on its cover, Charles Wilkins' *In the Land of the Long Fingernails: A Gravediggers Memoir* (2008) which describes how the author, then a university student, took a job as a gravedigger in a vast corporate cemetery in Toronto for five months in the summer of 1969, is not focused on his work in the funeral industry. Although describing this work and some related events, such as a gravediggers' strike and unearthing an unsolved murder victim, these anecdotes are mainly a way for the author to describe the time vividly – the end of the 1960s – and his own coming of age, with the facts about this unusual job dispersed throughout his story. This wider narrative not only provides an insider's view of an industry, but a fascinating historical perspective. Author of fifteen books, including other memoirs, *In the Land of the Long Fingernails* was reviewed positively in *The New York Times* and shortlisted for a number of awards including the Trillium Book Prize, the Stephen Leacock Memorial Medal for Humour and the City of Toronto Book Prize, and republished in 2011.

When such incidental shreds of memoir are found in a number of discrete works, they can be defined as the fragmented incidental memoir. Examples of this are commonly found in magazine, newspaper feature and review writing, where the ostensible topic is supported by autobiographical material from the writer. It can also be found in works by some of the memoirists mentioned here who have published more than one memoir or other book, and who continue to add material about this topic of the undertaker in other works. An example of this is how Alison Bechdel continues to refer to her upbringing in a funeral home – one of the core topics of her *Fun Home* (2006) – in her other work.

### ***The veiled memoir***

The final category to be outlined here is the *veiled memoir*, where the memoir-related information is purposefully hidden or otherwise concealed in the work under consideration. Examples of this include a number of memoirs and biographies where the author keeps their own experience in, or connection to the profession of, undertaking secret, but where it is revealed at some key point in the narrative – or not revealed, but can be worked out once this is known. Gassman, author of *Daddy was an Undertaker* discussed above, is such a case. When tracking back over her journalism and poems, information about her father being an undertaker can be read in some of this work – but only if that information is already known.

## Conclusion

The undertaker's memoir is a niche area of memoir, but the above discussion suggests it can be a sub-genre of significance for readers as well as writers. Lee Gutkind has categorised memoirs of lasting value as those which are 'unique on a personal level, but universal so that all readers can understand and relate to' (qtd. in Brien 2000) the messages they contain. Alongside the rich individual life stories they tell, these works offer valuable insights into contemporary death and dying in an accessible manner that has much to offer creative writers who are seeking to create narratives about, around or including these topics. They also offer a detailed vocabulary about death and dying, and a range of ways of writing and thinking about death and the grieving process which range from the humorous to the serious, the anecdotal to the philosophical, and the informational to the poetic.

Alongside exploring a relatively unexplored sub-set of popular memoir, the above discussion reveals that such systems of creative writing-based analysis not only allows comparisons of modes of production and an assessment of writers' careers that move beyond labels that focus on the overall subject or content, but can also transcend arguments based solely around judgments of literary value. This approach allows a series of texts to be discussed in a nuanced way that provides a way of thinking about popular memoir that is useful for writers and teachers of writing at all levels. In this, I am not denying that some memoirs are facile and produced for their shock and/or entertainment value, but I believe there are also many writers who are striving to produce narratives of lasting value that can contribute to a range of important discussions on subjects that are not always easy to raise in other fora.

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