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Narrating and navigating troubling times: writers and readers

Abstract

Questions about the relationship between memoir, what really happened, and public history especially in times of significant societal change and disruption – troubled times – have no doubt been around since the earliest examples of the genre, most likely predating Ceasar’s *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars*. Memoir and biography readers encounter life’s suffering, dread and loss, alongside hope, achievement, redemption. For life writers, recalling and ordering in memoir, events that shape them, is there a danger of forgetting or expunging the discomfort, pain or distress those events provoked for the self or others? Do writers have responsibility in terms of their self curation to those others either inside or outside of the text? Beyond the text what imperative if any, exists for the reviewer or critic to raise ethical questions arising from the writer’s recollections? This article considers two recent examples of life writing presenting narratives of bohemian lives which have fulfilled requirements for higher degrees in creative writing. The conversational frame of this article, which nods to Ross Watkins’ and Nigel Krauth’s (2016) exploration of new forms for the journal article, is used intentionally to foreground the authors’ personal observations and responses to the texts, particularly as these intersect with the texts. This subjectivity is a springboard for questions about the social value of memoir and life writing in troubled times.

Biographical note:

Originating in the cane fields of Far North Queensland Dr Pamela Greet spent her early professional life working with refugees in Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe. The meaning and value of place drives her fascination with suburban lives.

Michelle Vlatkovic’s Croatian and Kamilaroi heritage informs her work as a writer and broadcaster living on Jaggera Country. She is currently completing a PhD in Creative Writing at Griffith University.

Pamela and Michelle collaborate to bring Brisbane *Salon REaD*, a platform for direct interaction between writers, creators and audience.

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Introduction

In his author's preface to *The Memoirs of Jacques Casanova de Seingalt* (1725–1798), Casanova declared

My Memoirs are not written for young persons who, in order to avoid false steps and slippery roads, ought to spend their youth in blissful ignorance, but for those who, having thorough experience of life, are no longer exposed to temptation, and who, having but too often gone through the fire, are like salamanders, and can be scorched by it no more.

Publishers and authors rarely insert such caveats or issue warnings, except possibly disguised as invitations, into their works today. In these troubled times – ‘personally, culturally and politically difficult events and contexts, or “troubled times”’ (IABA 2017) – it is not straight forward for the reader/reviewer of memoir today. We live in a time, a troubled and troubling time, that screams this at us from the nightly news on a daily basis, from the news feeds on our social media: stories can lead to young girls being blown up in icecream parlours and young gay men being lashed 83 times in front of thousands of fascinated fanatics baying hysterically in Aceh. Stories can and do kill if we accidentally or inadvertently or even intentionally get mixed up in the wrong deadly narrative.

We took on the job of reading and reviewing books for community radio 4ZZZ in Brisbane and within our first three months, came face-to-face with some big questions about the form and value of life writing. This article is based on our responses when we reviewed *A Wife's Heart* and *Scoundrel Days*. As current HDR candidates at the time of writing (June 2017) these works were of particular interest to us as both were written and submitted for doctoral level qualifications in creative writing. Brien (2017) and others (Joseph 2011) note the rise of publishers' and of creative writing tertiary students' interest in memoir – particularly trauma or confessional memoir. *A Wife's Heart* is the story of Mrs Bertha Lawson and reconstructs her experience of living with the fabled Henry Lawson genius. This work by Sydney journalist and academic at the University of NSW, Kerrie Davies, was published by UQP in March 2017. *Scoundrel Days* is a bohemian memoir from the badlands of North Queensland, in the mode of E-prime. Brentley Frazer's memoir was also published by UQP and came out in February 2017. Frazer teaches in the creative writing program at Griffith University in Brisbane.

Kerrie Davies' *A Wife's Heart* (2017), and Brentley Frazer's *Scoundrel Days* (2017), present the experiences of bohemian lives separated by around seventy years and distinguished by presenting the male protagonist from the badlands of North Queensland inside the adventure looking out (Frazer), and the female bystander in Sydney, outside the bohemian experience, looking in (Davies). Given the general profile of the radio 4ZZZ audience (supporting the station catch-cry of ‘agitate, educate, organise’, is interested in a radical alternative to mainstream news, and wants to hear voices from marginalized communities and independent local bands and artists), the linking theme of bohemia had a direct appeal to Zedders (4ZZZ subscribers and listeners).

Our aim in this paper is to present key issues from the many telephone discussions and email exchanges we have had about the two works in question to frame and contextualise questions arising from Greet's reviews of *A Wife's Heart* and *Scoundrel*

Days which were published on the station website. To present these ideas, this paper, like our presentation at the IABA Conference in June 2017 ‘Life Narratives in Troubled Times’, is an in-conversation exchange.

Michelle: Amplifying voices from the margins as reviewers and readers for 4ZZZ we have been deliberate in seeking work we think will be of interest to Zed listeners and that aligns with the 4ZZZ mandate, primarily promoting smaller publishers and looking out for emerging writers. We like to focus on stories that speak from the margins or from alternative perspectives.

Pamela: When I started volunteering at 4ZZZ in the early 1980s it was still on the University of Queensland campus at St Lucia. The station’s genesis as an alternative voice was shaped during the height of the Bjelke Petersen premiership of Queensland and civil liberties protests – another troubling time. Its roots were in the student union movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Now broadcasting from a small building formerly owned by the Communist Party of Australia, on the fringe of ‘The Valley’, it is hemmed in by high-rise construction and residential towers.

Michelle: Let’s start with readers. As reviewers they are our touchstone. We are primarily interested in 4ZZZ audience so we are interested in reviewing Australian thinkers, change-makers, people testing boundaries and looking at things in new or different ways. There are responsibilities and choices attached to this.

Pamela: You are right. The intention of the reviews is to encourage listeners to be readers of alternative voices and stories. Zed programming invites listeners to enter doors into non-mainstream ideas and arts. This is about provoking questions, not to map any particular pathway, guidelines or blueprint. 4ZZZ exists to incite interest to explore different possibilities. Alternative is probably the defining word here. The station programming aims to present alternative views to consider, to provide ways for alternative voices and stories to reach its audience.

Michelle: As a writer you need to know what you are going to call your work. This flags for the publisher how to promote it and where it will be positioned on the bookshelves in the shop or under which heading on a website. We have seen that as we scrutinise publishers’ lists selecting what to ask to review. That positioning is important as it can attract readers who might be drawn to the works in terms of the issues they address, the troubled themes, and life experiences on offer. I don’t think this is a form that is locked down into the kinds of demographics that once existed in book-selling: young adult up to 18, the 18-35 market, 35-55 market, 55+ market. Now there are all these other things that potentially flag to the market what a work offers and to whom.

We reviewed these works for 4ZZZ because both of them are in this space of bohemia, by which I mean both are interested in the creative or performing arts and drawn to unconventional lifestyles and the pursuit of pleasure. We know that younger people in the 4ZZZ audience are interested to know about these kinds of experiences. Also we are looking at these works from the point of view of having ourselves inhabited this strange flower. We see that these younger people attracted to 4ZZZ, who have read

Keroac and Burroughs might be interested in what these two works can open them up to in terms of similar aesthetic concerns.

For us as scholars, and for those students and academics who attended the 2017 IABA Asia–Pacific Conference, I believe these two works are of interest as examples of life writing Doctoral projects that have gone on to be published, even before the Doctorate was awarded, and have been well received.

Pamela: Yes, Donna Lee Brien’s observations about memoir are worth considering here. She notes the benefits of scholarly study of the form while noting that it remains frequently disparaged by critics for its narcissistic, formulaic qualities, and by other critics being ‘the logical outcome of a voyeuristic society obsessed with celebrity’ (Brien 2017: 5).

Memoir/story/history/herstory ... I’m wondering, do you think it matters what we call it? Helen Buss wrote in the introduction to her work on women’s memoir: ‘Memoir is a form in which history must come into concourse with literature in order to make a self live and to locate that living self in a history, an era, a relational and communal identity’ (Buss 2002: xiv).

Michelle: I am thinking about my own story and what I’d call it. What it makes me think about and what I don’t want to make decisions about until I have completely seen the shape of it. When I think of memoir I don’t think of it necessarily as a political space as I do when the words ‘history’ and ‘herstory’ are used. Those words have an intonation about them which indicates to me that the writer is trying to position me in a political way. Whereas memoir I think falls more into the literary genre. But then there are memoirs written or marketed as self-help books. And they are not necessarily literary.

I would call Brentley’s work memoir. But it is the emotional truth of the lived experience, not the lived experience in isolation, for him as a writer, that is important here. From what I read E-prime injects the emotion powerfully into the moments he selects for inclusion in the memoir. Whereas herstory or history signals that the work is anchored with evidence such as the Bertha story provides, rather than with emotion.

Pamela: Definitely the memoir form gives Brentley scope to completely play with form and the telling of his life. For me it reads as a canabilisation of his story, employing the forced perspective of E-prime, resulting in a cruel burlesque of his extended boyhood. I see the use of the literary conceit E-prime pushing it into nihilism and hyper-reality - more modern day Joker as played by Heath Ledger than the wistful Tom Sawyer referenced as Brentley’s touchstone.

I don’t know that Davies talks about her work as herstory or history. She uses the phrase ‘untold story’, not memoir. She says she has an interest in ‘revisionist biography’ (UQP unpublished publicity flyer for the book). So she’s proposing a counter narrative to the accepted story of Henry Lawson as troubled bohemian who struggled for acceptance and recognition. Her narrative is certainly not without emotional power. It is freighted with the struggles Bertha had to survive financially, to survive emotionally and to preserve her psychological well-being both before and after the divorce from Henry.

The narrative is not merely anchored with evidence but the emotional truth is woven in and supported, fortified through Davies' research and documented historical evidence.

Michelle: What is the relationship, then, between memoir and history and does this matter? Is this different for autobiography vs biographical writing and do we look at this differently if the life being written is a public or private one?

Pamela: Well certainly if I were reading the memoir of a public figure – in Australia political figures Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard, Anna Bligh and many others have all penned them and Barnaby Joyce's will be released in August 2018 – I'd expect it to reflect their perspective as well as conforming to publicly known historical truth.

I think of memoir being concerned to some extent with history because it is built from particular space-time locators, and relates experiences or events observable in reality which are to some extent verifiable. Linda Neil (2009), writing about truth in family stories refers to Donald Spence's two types of truth: narrative truth and historical truth. She notes that her father's stories were narrative truths: creative acts containing the same kinds of power and magic as stories she read in books. They were never considered to be historical truths.

I wonder if this might also be true of Brentley's memoir. Because of how it overlapped in places with my personal family history, that's certainly what I'd like to believe. But also I note that my reading and subsequent review of the work was shaped by the intrusions of his stories into my family history, as I'll explain further. Waters (2016: 7) says that in memoir, the narrative reveals the nature of the identity the memoirist wishes to relate.

For me as reader to enter into a memoir, a level of verisimilitude is an important element of the contract between writer and reader. We have seen, in the case of *A Million Little Pieces* (Frey 2004), and other deceptions, what happens when this fundamental contract is broken. The memoirist's art is in setting up the reader's perspective through presentation of the narrative, the plotmaking writerly function or what Neil and Spence describe as the narrative truth. Smith and Watson (2010) describe these as the memoirist's 'rhetorical acts' that justify their perceptions, build reputation and scaffold a desirable future - for Brentley's future as writer and poet is at stake.

Michelle, it is relevant to note here that both you and I have our own personal connections with these edgy, eccentric lifestyles. My youthful and wild experimentation began in the same territory inhabited by the young Brentley - the bush badlands of Far North Queensland. And you Michelle, albeit 80 or so years behind Bertha, were rampaging around Ice Street and other hidden corners of Paddington and Woolloomooloo where the Henry/Bertha Lawson bohemian tragedy unravelled with Henry incarcerated and Bertha struggling with the divorce, finding work and supporting her children emotionally and financially.

Michelle: Thinking about authenticity, evidence, memoir, and the choice of form I wonder if in some way it might be easier for Davies to be read and understood as emotionally authentic and self-aware because she has used the vehicle of exploring another person's life at a distance rather than writing her own memoir?

Pamela: But remember Davies doesn't just use her research and subsequent reconstruction of Bertha's story to build this memoir of marriage with a bohemian. And this is what makes her work more engaging than a straightforward revision of the Lawson biography. Davies builds in the counterpoint or second strand which is the story of her own disintegrated marriage with a bohemian man: a musician who travels the world pursuing employment opportunities and gigs on cruise ships and elsewhere. For me as a reader this very personal element gives the investigation of Bertha's story an authentic and emotionally honest context. It provides a platform from which Davies can invite her readers to consider the changes in how marriages and partnerships are constructed around men's and women's careers, their investment in family, child raising, the essentially compromising stuff of life partnerships.

Although it is unlikely Bertha would have thanked her mother-in-law for anything, Louisa's magazine had supported those suffragettes who first lobbied for the deserted wives, left in the dust of the gold rush, and then later the wives deserted for drink...in 1888 Louisa reflected, 'Men legislate on divorce, on hours of labor, and many another questions intimately affecting women, but neither ask nor know the wishes of those whose lives and happiness are most concerned' (Davies 2017: 120).

Davies writes:

Because of his recurring child-support debts, it is easy to dismiss Henry as an uncaring father, just as dismissing Bertha as the bitch might seem like an answer. Bertha tried to be diplomatic in public, even if her letters demanded money and pleaded for him to see the children ... [Of her own disintegrating relationship] I remember Dan arriving with a giant pink stuffed unicorn that sprawled across Ruby's bed. 'Guilt present,' his sister observed ... All divorced parents know that their children will eventually have their own contested versions to tell (2017: 148-149).

Michelle: Let's talk about Brentley and his choosing to write a memoir. What would you say if I put the proposition to you, that it would have been dishonest for Brentley to present himself as anything but a narcissist with an absence of moral or ethical substrate? I'm saying that for me the question is what informed the decision to write a memoir and then to adopt the E-prime format, rather than a question of honesty or dishonesty.

Pamela: I find this an endlessly fascinating question Michelle. Can one person's honesty obliterate another's truth? I think Davies also grapples with this between Bertha and Henry.

Memoir, being reflective to some extent demands reflection, contextualisation, relativism; otherwise call it auto/bio/graphy: the self writing the life of self. Laura Tanja King (2015) touches on this in her discussion about navigating 'the liminal space between memoir and fiction' where she discusses the shift between reportage and lyricism to achieve a portrayal of emotional truth. Brentley's choice – particularly his employment of the E-prime device - appears to reflect his desire for writing and reading that is urgent and direct, suggesting the writing is unfiltered. But memoir is necessarily filtered.

My experience is that as a writer one chooses the memoir genre for the rationale it offers for the snipping, the sorting and shaping of the recollections and fragments one chooses to present to the world. Ian Jack (2003) former Granta editor, says of the difference between autobiography and memoir that memory is the weakest link. He suggests, and supports his claim with examples, that the ‘memoir’ label can be an excuse for creating what one would have liked to have occurred. Quite different from an eye-witness account.

Stephanie Burt (2017) proposes that while memoir is frequently seen as a source of lessons learned, for writers especially it may be the form that is more valuable. That may well be the case for both Davies’ and Frazer’s products.

Michelle: Perhaps Brentley’s approach is a ruse? A knowing provocation on the one hand and on the other the creative side of his creative nonfiction endeavour is in fact to use E-prime as a device to illustrate the particular point-of-view he had before his redemption. What I’m suggesting is that working in E-prime is his meditation to purge himself from his guilt, doing those yards at his desk reshaping, reworking words to make peace with his past? In truth he sees the nihilism of his youth and is now some distance from that in his own personal values today?

Pamela: Your questions assert his redemption on the page, Michelle. I’d like that too, but I want stronger evidence, not just to make assumptions. Moreover, to be honest, I guess my close personal connection with the times and places and (male) behaviours and attitudes toward women which replicate what Brentley wrote, pulled me up and made me question. Yes, I see the writing as alive, active, controlled, powerful and deliberately leaning to provocation rather than redemption. But I needed something more to make me want to recommend it unequivocally to other readers.

Without my personal experience and closeness to the places and times he relates I would have thought, ‘Oh this is really provocative and clever and E-prime is such a great device: it is so powerful, evocative.’ E-prime draws the reader in close to the action creating a space the reader directly inhabits. It feels voyeuristic. The action unrelenting. But I felt there was no conscience in the work. No being.

Michelle: It’s a strident claim to make that a book has an absence of moral or ethical substrate. Can you give some evidence for this?

Pamela: So I try to think about how, say, an aspiring young woman poet who might come into Brentley’s orbit might read this in 2018, post the #metoo and #timesup hashtags. What conclusion might she come to about behavior presented here which is disrespectful toward woman, and this writing which presents women pretty much just as sexual playthings?

I go home to get my typewriter so I can type up a bunch of poems I’ve written. The days feel empty. At least Candy and I have a fantastic amount of sex. I classify as one of the horniest people ever to have lived and she keeps up with me.

In the suburbs my mother yells at me for not calling for a month. She thought I’d died or something. She gives me a huge list of all the times Cali has called wanting to speak with me. I feel pretty bad about that so I give her a call. She answers right away and asks if I can come and see her.

I turn up at Cali's house with my bags and my typewriter and she gets curious. I tell her I've moved in with a chick. She cries and begs me to give her another chance. We fuck a few times and as I leave she tells me she stopped taking the pill and she hopes she doesn't get pregnant.

Doing my best to hide my panic from Candy. (Frazer 2017: 180)

Having re-read the work several times I feel this is the trick of it: the action is inescapable. The choices made by the writer are obscured, there are no the shadows or tide marks of what isn't narrated. Invisible curation.

Frazer (2016) writes that E-prime makes the characters responsible for their actions, and also that used effectively it can persuade both the writer and the reader to stay in the text. Thinking about my reaction as reader and my relation of that subsequently as reviewer, the E-prime obscures or obliterates the conscience of the protagonist. It is as if the reader is on a wild ride with his id. It is as if the 'absence of being' achieved through not using any forms of the verb to be, also removes the ethical element of the narrative.

My reaction to the text responds directly to the feeling of being unable to escape and also the feeling of the protagonist eschewing responsibility for his actions and not caring or thinking about any ripples. I felt I had lived his story too, but as one the 'chicks', a ripple effect.

There were other disconcerting connections with the story: at that time my ageing parents lived around the corner from his mate Gigolo's crash-pad in Love Lane, in suburban Mundingburra, in Townsville. They had several break and enter instances including waking to find two young men in their room wielding knives, others crashed out in the garden. A cousin, a cab-driver, was robbed on several occasions, much as Brentley recounts an instance in West End, at the foot of Catle Hill. Too close for comfort.

Michelle: I am thinking about how gender shapes what these writers have shown and revealed in these stories. I suggest that if a woman had written a tell-all memoir of a careless rampage like Brentley's across so many different partners and so many different substances it would most likely be marketed and received very differently from 'profound, provocative memoir of self-destruction and self-discovery' declared in the back cover blurb of *Scoundrel Days*.

I tried to live like I have the starring role in a film about my life. I treated other people like cameras and did my best to not look at them, listened only to their voices as cues for my own lines – always busy ducking dollies, aware of stage left, tempted to break the fourth wall – like a crazy person in a supermarket queue, demanding we all look at them addressing the audience (Frazer 2017: 297).

More likely it would be shelved as misery porn or trauma memoir. Certainly it would be less likely to be found in serious memoir or rock'n'roll poetica.

Pamela: Brentley's story gets to page 301(of 302 pages) before I read any stirring of redemption. Love catches up with him. But even then, no regrets are expressed about those who may have spent their love on him: including his parents and sister, extended

family, his mates, countless sexual partners and girlfriends. He admits to few emotions other than fear, for example when he encounters a yowie by a water hole after smoking noogoora burr. Envy is apparent: wanting to be part of the cool gang from his earliest days as part of the ‘wreckers’, the gang he claims was loosely based on ideas he lifted from the *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. E-prime proves an apposite vehicle for Brentley’s throbbing, libidinous, abandoned unchecked bohemian rapture, explicitly challenging the Christian assertions of his parents and their religious community. Brentley’s driving force as recounted in *Scoundrel Days* is very much a conscious striving for adventures to record in his ever-present notebook, coupled with the desire to be stoned, ‘living his poetry’.

I question what Brentley believes about the writer’s responsibility in curating and narrating events in a memoir. E-prime effectively disallows the discomfort, pain or distress those events provoked or caused for others. For me that makes it a kind of half-truth and forces my attention to what is absent. Reading *Scoundrel Days* I kept asking whether writers have any responsibility to those others either inside or outside of the text?

Michelle: So you’re unconvinced that he demonstrates any evidence of responsibility to anyone but himself but you think Davies work expresses emotional honesty, authenticity and self awareness?

Pamela: Davies’ snippets of her own personal story work as a counterfoil to the story of Bertha and Henry. For me this second element adds a contemporary and personal dimension and has the value of inserting her humanity into the narrative. She also married a bohemian, a musician who travels the world and leaves his wife and child to grow up and grow together without him. He asserts his expectation of freedom in a way Henry Lawson could not or did not.

While Ruby slept, he said, ‘I’m going to do this cruise. I think we should have a break. I don’t want to be a sad old fuck in a shop. I want to have my career and I can’t have it here.’ (Davies 2017: 80)

Davies’ presentation of Henry Lawson feels balanced: for example how she deals with the questions relating to Bertha’s sanity and her incarceration in a mental asylum whilst they were in London, and the burden this placed on Henry. Davies sets the story not simply in a personal domestic context but shows how what happens to Bertha can best be understood within the political and social structure that determined what possibilities might have been open to her as a writer, as a single mother, as a woman living with the double stigma of being divorced and having had a mental illness.

Mary [Gilmore] claimed that Henry originally intended to stay on in London for six months or so at least after Bertha left, so he could work away from his wife and take his place in literary history, and that he had no intention of coming back to Australia soon. She decided that Henry’s unhappiness was because of ‘injustices heaped upon him’ and claimed Bertha confided to her that she sometimes threatened to throw the children out the window if Henry did not do what she wanted....Mary said she checked with Bertha’s doctor in London prior to their voyage to Australia and he told her he sympathised with Bertha, ‘as any woman was to be pitied who had a husband who drinks’. (Davies 2017: 70-71)

Are there useful conclusions we can draw out of this conversation about memoir, and writers and readers in troubled times? Inevitably in many forms of life-writing readers encounter life's suffering, dread and loss. Readers may expect that life-writing and memoir offer maps of, or at least guideposts for negotiating, troubling times and this seems to us to be a reasonable expectation. Academic and memoirist Jil Ker Conway (1998) is one among many who suggest memoir presents experiences that may be instructive (positively and negatively) and may lead readers to certain values, views, actions.

Willa McDonald (2010) and Zachary Snider (2016) write of the axiological challenges writing memoir raises particularly in the rendering of narratives involving family and friends. Perhaps it is timely to extend this axiological concern to memoir more broadly. Is it only the self that needs to be a point of concern when considering how a memoir writer renders themselves and their world? Is it ultimately reasonable, or not, to expect writers of memoir as distinct from fiction to consider their readers? Or is this the job of the publishers and reviewers or critics?

Carl Tighe's view of the usefulness of writers considers how they can help us to interpret the past and understand our present. If we overlook this, Tighe says we may never understand 'how our future is diminished or enhanced by a particular book or play or poem or, by the absence of a particular book or play or poem?' (Tighe 2005: 86)

In troubled times the many varieties of life writing from Snapchat to blogs to autobiographies via memoir can provide avenues for readers to look beyond themselves, through the stories of others, to weigh the possibilities of options other than those immediately obvious. There are important 'whys' lurking in this relationship that go to questions of motivation, of factuality, authenticity, or truth. Within the broad reach of life writing are found the individualised perceptions of memoirs and the more research driven or fact-based presentations of biographies. Beyond their own success and reputation as writers, as creative artists, beyond the engagement and excitement of the narrative there is an audience that counts.

Troubling times demand a continuing interrogation of our stories. Troubling times urge attention to the matter of who is the writer and who is the reader. Troubling times assert the importance of context beyond their encounter on the page.

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