

**‘Truth usually is the same old story’:  
Truth, Genre and the Ethics of Memoir  
in *Maggie & Me***

**Submitted for the degree of  
PhD in Creative Writing: By Publication**

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## Abstract

This is a PhD by publication consisting of a published work and accompanying critical reflection. The published work is my memoir, *Maggie & Me* (2013), which depicts my chaotic and traumatic childhood in a post-industrial village outside Glasgow in the 1980s. The memoir juxtaposes the personal and political – ‘Maggie’ is Margaret Thatcher whose policies and persona were indelibly imposed on my community, my family and me.

The critical reflection aims to contextualise *Maggie & Me* in the genre of memoir, to interrogate memoir as a genre and to deconstruct my process and practice in four chapters, each arranged around a single question. I draw on the work of Buckley (1974), Couser (2012) and Gornick (2002; 2009), with reference to specific memoirs, chiefly Galloway (2008; 2011), Sanghera (2009) and Winterson (2011). In Chapter 1 I ask *Why not a novel?* considering *Maggie & Me* as a *bildungsroman* while examining the origins, expectations and, ultimately, limitations of the coming-of-age novel. In Chapter 2 I ask *Why write a memoir?* while outlining expectations and tropes of the genre and reassessing my decision to write *Maggie & Me* as a memoir rather than as an autobiography or work of fiction or autofiction. In Chapter 3 I ask *Is it all true?* establishing the distinctive ethical and legal considerations involved in writing memoir, and the pact this genre forges between writer and reader. Chapter 4 concludes by investigating the nature of memoir as trauma relived and performed and considers the possibility of catharsis before finally asking *Do I feel better now?* – the answer to which may lie with the reader as a shared act of meaning making.

## About the author

Damian Barr is a writer, journalist and broadcaster.

He graduated from Lancaster University (Bowland College: 1998) with a BA Hons in English Literature and Sociology first class before completing a Masters in Contemporary Sociology on an ESRC Scholarship in 2000. He was immediately recruited by *The Times* to edit their student supplement, which inspired his first non-fiction book, *Get It Together: A Guide to Surviving your Quarterlife Crisis* (Hodder: 2004). He's written for the *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Independent* and the *Sunday Times* and many magazines. In 2015 he won Travel Feature Writer of the Year and in 2016 was Highly Commended at the British Society of Magazine Editors Awards.

As a broadcaster, Damian has hosted *Front Row* and appeared on *The Verb*, *Today*, *A Good Read*, *Saturday Review* and *PM*. In 2016, he presented the BBC One documentary *Writers of Rye*, looking at Henry James, E.F. Benson and Radclyffe Hall. In 2019 he hosted *The Big Scottish Book Club* for BBC Scotland, as well as hosting *Live from Cheltenham* on Sky Arts. Since 2009 his Literary Salon has featured over 100 writers, including Diana Athill, Aminatta Forna and Naomi Alderman – the Salon is based at the Savoy but tours globally with British Council support.

*Maggie & Me* (Bloomsbury: 2013) is Damian's memoir of coming of age in post-industrial Scotland under Thatcher. A Radio 4 Book of the Week, it won *Sunday Times* Memoir of the Year, Stonewall Writer of the Year and the Paddy Power Political Satire Award. 'Both personally moving and a valuable historical document' – *Literary Review*. Published in the USA and Canada, it is currently being developed for television by STV.

*You Will Be Safe Here* (Bloomsbury: 2019) is Damian's first novel. He was given an Arts Council award for research. Set in South Africa in 1901 and 2011, it is inspired by real events, uncovering largely forgotten colonial history and a dark contemporary story. A *Guardian*, *Observer* and *Financial Times* Pick for 2019, it was a Radio 4 Book at Bedtime. 'Barr's first novel is distinguished by its compassion, its wisdom and its remarkable sense of poetry' – *Guardian*. Published in the USA and Canada, it is forthcoming in France. It was shortlisted for Fiction of the Year in the 2019 Saltire Awards and for the Authors' Club Best First Novel Award 2020.

Damian Barr has also contributed an essay to *Out There: An Anthology of Scottish LGBT Writing*, edited by Zoe Strachan (Freight Publishing: 2014); a short story to *Speak My Language, and Other Stories: An Anthology of Gay Fiction* edited by Torsten Højer (Constable & Robison: 2015); an essay to *Common People: An Anthology of Working Class Writers* edited by Kit de Waal (Unbound: 2019); a short story to *Others* edited by Charles Fernyhough (Unbound: 2019); an essay entitled *Testing Times: HIV Testing* to The National Library of Scotland (November 2019); and a short essay to *Imagine A Country* edited by Val McDermid and Jo Sharp (Canongate: 2020).

In 2017 he was given an Outstanding Alumni Award by Lancaster University. He is currently writing his next book.

## 1 Introduction: *Why not a novel? Beyond the bildungsroman*

Whence a metamorphosis ... to a literature ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of consolation holds out like a shimmering mirage.

Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, Volume One<sup>1</sup>

*Maggie & Me* is a coming-of-age story – it is, finally, a memoir rather than a novel, although in writing and editing the text, I closely attended to and borrowed from structures and techniques more usually associated with fiction, in part to confound many of the expectations and tropes of the memoir genre. As genres, ‘memoir’ and ‘novel’ are hotly contested, especially in the current era of autofiction, and each comes with their own conventions and expectations – I will explore my deliberations over autobiography, autofiction and memoir more deeply in the next section. *Maggie & Me* is, at its heart, a *bildungsroman* – put simply: a coming-of-age story. This tradition arrived in Great Britain from Germany in the eighteenth century and has only continued to grow in popularity. *Great Expectations*<sup>2</sup> is perhaps the most celebrated *bildungsroman*. I will define the term more fully momentarily but other classics of the genre include *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*,<sup>3</sup> *Kim*<sup>4</sup> and *To Kill a Mockingbird*.<sup>5</sup> Characters such as Tom Sawyer, David Copperfield and Scout Finch are key examples of the protagonists, for whom, as Moretti notes, ‘youth is

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p.59.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1861).

<sup>3</sup> Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1884).

<sup>4</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd, 1901).

<sup>5</sup> Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (New York: Lippincott, 1960).

both a necessary and sufficient definition'.<sup>6</sup> However, *Maggie & Me* is not fiction and it is vital to me personally and as a practice-based researcher to draw this distinction in my intent (however unfashionable the notion of authorial intent is).

My twenty years as a journalist then writer, first of memoir and more recently of fiction, have seen me increasingly define my writing as 'practice-based research', as defined by Linda Candy in her 2006 report for the Creativity and Cognition Studios<sup>7</sup> and as cited by Jenn Ashworth in her PhD by Published Work.<sup>8</sup> Candy distinguishes research that results in knowledge novel to the creator (practice-based) *from* research that seeks to contribute to a shared body of knowledge (practice-led). In practice-based research, the creative thing itself makes the new contribution to knowledge (not any subsequent analysis). Candy stipulates that this knowledge should be new, possible to share and able to be tested or evaluated. This definition is supported by Lyle Skains in 'Creative Practice as Research: Discourse on Methodology', who states that:

In practice-based research, the creative artifact is the basis of the contribution to knowledge. This method is applied to original investigations seeking new knowledge through practice and its outcomes. Claims of originality are demonstrated through the creative artifacts, which include musical performances, musical recordings, fiction, scripts, digital media, games, film, dramatic performances, poetry, translation, and other forms of creative practice. The creative artifact is accompanied by a critical discussion of the

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<sup>6</sup> Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987), p.4.

<sup>7</sup> Linda Candy, 'Practice Based Research: A Guide', <https://www.creativityandcognition.com/resources/PBR%20Guide-1.1-2006.pdf>, accessed 9 June 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Jenn Ashworth, *Preaching to the Choir: Writing and Uncertainty in a Mormon Context* (doctoral thesis, Lancaster University, 2012), p.6.

significance and context of the claims, and a full understanding can only be achieved through the cohesive presentation of the creative artifact and the critical exegesis.<sup>9</sup>

In this thesis *Maggie & Me* is the 'creative artifact' to be evaluated alongside my exploration of key questions pertaining to memoir as a genre and my writing practice. Here Ashworth describes arriving at understanding her own writing as practice-based research:

...by interrogating the process by which *The Friday Gospels* came to be and in examining the place the novel takes in a constellation of other novels about Mormon culture and religious experience. My writing had finally become fully fledged practice-based research.<sup>10</sup>

*The Friday Gospels* is a novel and Ashworth goes on to acknowledge that 'autobiographical writing is an important part of my process' while being clear she did not simply 'explore this autobiographical conundrum by playing it out through the situations my characters found themselves in'. This thesis places *Maggie & Me* in the context of other memoirs, exploring my process around genre and my evolving approach to ethics while drawing draw explicit attention to the constructedness of the narrative in which I place my characters, and myself.

I will explore the tensions innate to using the tools of fiction in order to excavate and re-present memories that read as 'true' or 'authentic'. All the while I acknowledge, as Foucault has, that the very idea of an essentialist truth in literature

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<sup>9</sup> Lyle Skains, 'Practice-Based Research', <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/creative-practice-research/what-is-pbr>, accessed 3 May 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Ashworth, pp.5–6.



is itself 'a shimmering mirage' negotiated between the writer, *I*, and the reader, *you*, and that the process of extracting it is infinite.<sup>11</sup> I will explore the opportunities within the genre to selectively obscure and reveal the self and the tensions this creates. 'A writer only begins a book. A reader finishes it,' as Samuel Johnson is believed to have said.<sup>12</sup> Any truth is just one of many possible truths. The title of this thesis, 'Truth usually is the same old story', is drawn from a quote by Margaret Thatcher – it is the epigraph for *Maggie & Me*.<sup>13</sup> I gave it such prominence in *Maggie & Me* because I wanted the reader to be thinking right from the start about ideas of truth and power and who gets to tell the truth and who gets to decide who hears it – central issues underlying my creative practice, which I intend to explore here.

I will reflect on key choices made when writing and editing *Maggie & Me* and how I borrowed from, but ultimately rejected, the *bildungsroman* as a genre. I will focus on how and why I chose memoir instead, its key tropes and the specific ethical concerns this choice raised for me as I sought to link the personal to the wider political sphere – another key identifying feature of the *bildungsroman*, according to Bakhtin: 'man's individual emergence is inseparably linked to historical emergence.'<sup>14</sup> My childhood was shaped, for better and worse – mostly for worse – by Maggie. It is worth reflecting, briefly, on how for Margaret Thatcher I arrived at using 'Maggie' in the title and text and not 'Thatcher' or 'MT' or 'The Iron Lady' or any of the other names she accrued. I did consider these alternatives. 'Thatcher' seemed

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<sup>11</sup> Foucault, p.59.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Nick Clark, 'Fifty Shades of Grey and JK Rowling's The Casual Vacancy are all too putdownable', <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/fifty-shades-of-grey-and-jk-rowlings-the-casual-vacancy-are-all-too-putdownable-8704048.html>, accessed 28 November 2019.

<sup>13</sup> 'Of course it's the same old story. Truth usually is the same old story.' Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister's Questions (1990).

<sup>14</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, 'The *Bildungsroman* and its Significance in the History of Realism', in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), p.23.

too formal – reverential even – which is not how I felt about her then or now: while she was a world away from me she was also right there every day thanks to the TV news. ‘MT’ sounds too much like a Civil Service abbreviation, an annotation from official minutes: my account of her impact on my life would be very much unofficial. ‘The Iron Lady’ would have been unthinkable hagiographic. Where I grew up, Maggie was a very popular name – my Granny Mac, another forbidding woman, was also called Maggie. So, I settled on Maggie because it sounds suitably irreverent without being outright disrespectful and is politically non-partisan – the title gave me additional satisfaction because it also functions as a private tribute to the influence of my Granny Mac. I refer to Maggie as ‘my other mother’ because her policies shaped my life, my family and community so profoundly. Hence Maggie *and Me*.

I made the decision early on to let Maggie’s words speak for themselves – to let her have her own voice, a privilege I’d often felt denied as a child. Each chapter is prefaced with a quote from Maggie and each had to be verified by me with her estate. I chose quotes I remember being widely reported at the time rather than going for her greatest hits. The quotes perform different functions – they set the scene, and support or sometimes throw into ironic relief the contents of the following chapter. I had to pay to license each quote. These quotes give Maggie a presence in the book without letting her dominate or interrupt the flow of the narrative. Crucially, keeping her words there maintains the balance of personal and political. In early drafts I felt my current political knowledge and views creeping in, and they stood out and stopped the flow of the story. I realise that to interject with political opinions, for example about privatisation, interrupted the voice of Then with thoughts from the voice of Now and imbued child Damian with a preternatural political perspective he did not possess. By writing in the first-person present tense I sought to situate myself

in a world that was being powerfully and actively shaped by politics and to take you, the reader, along with me. If the I of the child narrator was to start making astute political observations it would be both dishonest and ineffective. Dishonest, because as a child I had not yet formed sophisticated political views and to share any such political views would be to 'tell' the reader how I feel in retrospect rather than to 'show' the moment of impact of Maggie's policies on my community, my family and me. Ineffective, because importing a political opinion from Now would shock the reader from Then, which would break the spell of immersiveness, dragging them out of the time and place I'd gone to so much effort to create. I will consider the quality of immersiveness further momentarily and in greater depth in the next chapter in relation to memoirs that profoundly affected my practice.

Memoir distinguishes itself from the novel by crucially and consciously claiming to be true, and often proclaiming its veracity in the text, while also keeping the narrative promise of the *bildungsroman*. In *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding*, Jerome Hamilton Buckley makes the case, persuasively, that the novel form in English achieved commercial and critical success by borrowing key aspects of the German *bildungsroman* and that subsequently the novel diverges into a form of its own, but that they remain analogous, even now.

Here are the characteristic components of the *bildungsroman*, according to Buckley:

...childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love and the search for a vocation and

working philosophy—answers the requirement of the *bildungsroman* as I am here seeking to describe and define it.<sup>15</sup>

The Buckleyian model of *bildungsroman* is useful, but limited, and I want now to explore its limitations, particularly when transposed to the memoir genre.

*Maggie & Me* opens in 1981 with one of my very earliest memories – being wrapped in a towel after a bath by my Mum, then cuddling up with her to watch *The Muppet Show* on our big new colour television. The book closes in 1992 with me leaving school and going away to university (the first in my family to do so). And, thus, it encompasses my childhood in the Buckleyian sense. There is an epilogue and one of the main functions of this is to draw attention to the fact that I, the writer, am still alive and working as a writer even though you, the reader, must know this because, after all, I am not writing from beyond the grave. This author is not, as Barthes contended, dead – he makes this claim regarding fiction in order to depose the ‘author-god’ and raise the reader up on the recently vacated pedestal. He closes his celebrated essay claiming: ‘The birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author.’<sup>16</sup> The memoirist, or at least this memoirist, is not aiming for what Barthes calls the ‘castrating objectivity’ of fiction.<sup>17</sup> Memoir is a celebration and exploration of subjectivity. The re-presentation of the living, breathing writer as *I* in the text, body and all, is a key demand of memoir and I will explore this further in the next chapter. The need for this affirmation that the writer is not just alive but alive

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<sup>15</sup> Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), p.18.

<sup>16</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’. *Aspen*, 5–6 (1967), in *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*, edited by K. M. Newton (London: Palgrave, 1997), p.120. Barthes also states, ‘Writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.’

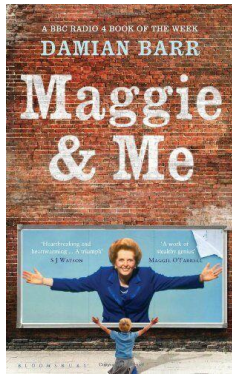
<sup>17</sup> Barthes, in Newton, p.120.

and well – as I show in my Epilogue – and that they have overcome the obstacles and challenges of the life described in the text, is one of the unique demands made by memoir and readers of memoir. The very fact of my Epilogue functions as an assertion and assurance of my subjectivity.

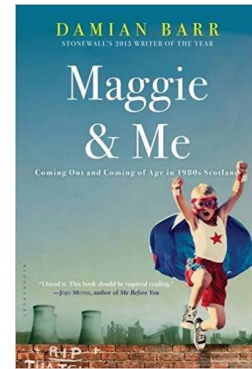
That *Maggie & Me* is a *bildungsroman* in the Buckleyian sense is deftly suggested by the book jacket on the UK edition but explicitly spelled out on the jacket of the American edition – American publishers do like a subtitle and this is what was tacked on to *Maggie & Me* when it was published there in 2014 by Bloomsbury: '*Coming Out and Coming of Age in 1980s Scotland*'. Decisions about the jackets – how they look, what they might mean and how they might impact on a reader's attention and first impressions of the book (and so, by implication, me) are relevant to this reflection on my own process because I was a central part of that decision-making. My literary agent and I made it very clear to my editor at Bloomsbury that I would need to be very closely consulted on jacket choices and even have a veto – this is unusual for memoir and vanishingly rare for fiction. I made it a condition of choosing Bloomsbury as a publisher that they give me this oversight because I did not want my story (mis)represented by a jacket that emphasised one aspect of my story or identity over another – I did not want a crying child or a sky full of rainbows. I felt, rightly or wrongly, that my memoir was a reflection of me; therefore, the book jacket felt as intimate and revealing to me as a portrait. I wanted the jacket to reflect my key preoccupations: class, boyhood and the tensions between the personal and the political.

The 'Maggie' of the title is not explained or pictured on the US edition. There is almost no need to explain her on the UK hardback edition, where a giant Thatcher looms over a young blond boy, her arms outstretched to embrace or perhaps crush

him as he leaps lovingly towards her. Each jacket features the same red brick wall, signifier of industry. The US edition features a vast factory – an actual image of the Ravenscraig Steelworks, where my father and thousands of other local men worked during its operation from 1954 to 1992 (this is based on the UK paperback edition).



(L: UK edition / R: US edition)



On both editions, the young blond boy – whether jumping towards Thatcher or leaping off a red brick wall clad in bright superhero clothes while some satanic mills belch smoke in the background – clearly establishes expectations of a heroic story: of leaping from darkness into light, from tragedy to triumph.

‘*Coming out*’ tells us the protagonist will experience the change critical to a *bildungsroman*<sup>18</sup> – he will realise he is gay and communicate this, or have it communicated for him, and so the boy will not merely grow into a man; he will struggle with and finally assert his new identity as a gay man.<sup>19</sup> This plays out Buckley’s ‘ordeal by love’ – or perhaps, more accurately, ordeal in search of love.

<sup>18</sup> Buckley says that the *Bildungsroman*, in its ‘pure form’ has been defined ‘as a novel of all-around development or self-culture’. The term ‘development’ suggests change that is not just temporal. Thus, the hero must be dynamic – he must make himself evolve over the course of the narrative. Buckley, p.18.

<sup>19</sup> Jeffers notes that ‘The hero [of the *Bildungsroman*] is not “ready-made”. He is what Bakhtin calls “the image of man in the process of becoming”.’ Memoir is about interrogating and then showing the workings of this process – the problems and attempted solutions. Thomas L. Jeffers, *Apprenticeships: The Bildungsroman from Goethe to Santayana* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p.2.

'Coming of age' also radiates a sense of achievement – the reader will witness the psychological growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood, whose compound effects we can summarise as 'character'. This is the core action of coming-of-age stories, from *The Telemachy* (8th century BCE)<sup>20</sup> through to *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)<sup>21</sup> and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999).<sup>22</sup> *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure (Fanny Hill)* by John Cleland (1748), *Emma* by Jane Austen (1815) and *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott (1869) are sparkling examples of *bildungsroman* with a female hero (if not always a female writer). Despite this, the *bildungsroman* is most often characterised as a genre starring a (straight, cis, white, middle-class) teenage boy who almost always appears in the first person – inner-monologue is a frequent feature, used to highlight their intense conflict with the outer world. Much dramatic irony and humour too often derives from this gap between 'seeming' and 'being'. From Hamlet to Holden Caulfield, the 'antic disposition' is a key identifying feature: to be or not to be. As we will see, this is central to my story, where I was as busy seeming to be straight as I was actually being gay. *Maggie & Me* subverts the traditional expectations of the hero-narrator of the Buckleyian *bildungsroman* with a carefully constructed queer, Scottish, working-class voice that explicitly claims to be speaking the truth.

'1980s Scotland' tells us when and where the story will take place and the juxtaposition with the steel mills and red brick walls makes it clear the action will not be taking place on the leafy streets of Miss Jean Brodie's Edinburgh – this will be a working class story, or perhaps a change of class will also be a part of the character's journey.

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<sup>20</sup> *The Telemachy*, a term generally given to the first four books of Homer's *Odyssey*.

<sup>21</sup> J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (New York: Little, Brown, 1951).

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (New York: Pocket Books, 1999).

So, why write memoir rather than fiction only to then plunder the tools of fiction and use them to craft a memoir? Which specific tools did I use and what decisions did I make on and off the page?

Before *Maggie & Me* was published as a memoir, I received an offer from a publisher on a partial submission interested in publishing it as a novel. As a working-class writer, the first in my family to finish secondary school, never mind go to university, I was thrilled by this attention from the literary establishment. And an advance would fund time off the treadmill of journalism to undertake the deep contemplative work any book demands. No matter how flattered I was – and I was flattered – I struggled to accept this offer. I felt I couldn't say 'yes' to publishing *Maggie & Me* as a novel because to do so would be to position my story as fiction – to say, quite powerfully, 'this is not true'. I would be expected to give interviews, do readings and publicly say 'this is all made up'. I could not perform the lie demanded by fiction. Why? As a child I had been forced to hide my family's poverty, to cover the bruises beaten on to me and, finally, to conceal my sexuality. Publishing my story as a novel – effectively re-presenting my childhood as fiction – would be a further lie and one in which my adult self could not be complicit. It would be to put myself back in the closet – as antiquated as this term seems, it remains powerful personally and culturally, and not just in terms of sexuality. Sedgwick's closet (or, more accurately, closets) remains powerful politically and culturally and as a metaphor for understanding oppression and resistance:

The epistemology of the closet is not a dated subject or superseded regime of knowing. While the events of June 1969, and later vitally reinvigorated many people's sense of the potency, magnetism and promise of gay self-disclosure,



nevertheless the reign of the telling secret was scarcely overturned with Stonewall. Quite the opposite, in some ways.<sup>23</sup>

I continue expending energy to escape this and other closets. As Sedgwick perceptively notes:

...every encounter with a new classful of students, to say nothing of a new boss, social worker, loan officer, landlord, doctor, erects new closets whose fraught and characteristic laws of optics and physics extract from at least gay people new surveys, new calculations, new draughts and requisitions of secrecy or disclosure. Even an out gay person deals daily with interlocutors about whom she doesn't know whether they know or not.<sup>24</sup>

The same is true of the publishing process – my agent and editor know I am gay, but I still had to come out in person and on the page to every person involved in the publishing process – editorial, sales, design, legal and so on. Writing and then publishing a memoir which features 'coming out' means coming out to every single reader of the text, performing my queerness at every single reading, where I must out myself again and again. There is no binarity, as Sedgwick says: no final in or out. Coming out is a life-long process of constantly (re)negotiated identity and power relations. I just came out to you.

I use the term 'coming out' advisedly:

The apparent free-floating from its gay origins of that phrase 'coming out of the closet' in recent usage might suggest that the trope of the closet is so

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<sup>23</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), p.67.

<sup>24</sup> Sedgwick, p.68.

close to the heart of some modern preoccupations that it could be, or has been, evacuated of its historical gay specificity. But I hypothesize that exactly the opposite is true. I think that a whole cluster of the most crucial sites for the contestation of meaning in twentieth-century Western culture are consequentially and quite indelibly marked with the historical specificity of homosocial/homosexual definition ... among those sites are, as I have indicated the pairings secrecy/disclosure and private/public.<sup>25</sup>

Writing and publishing *Maggie & Me* as a memoir would demand that I out myself in other ways – as a survivor of physical, mental and emotional violence and as working, or even under, class in origin: origins I have never denied or concealed but which I had simply not explored in my earlier writing. Such disclosure meant repositioning my writer self definitively as gay, Scottish and self-identified working class. Kerry Hudson has written movingly in her memoir *Lowborn* about how publishing her memoir would mean coming out of the class closet: ‘I wept because I now knew for certain that the writing of this book would be a process of turning myself inside out. That it would mean I could never again adopt my charming way, wear some decent clothes and “pass”.’<sup>26</sup> I really identified with Hudson’s anxiety, especially as publishing remains overwhelmingly middle and upper middle class. There is a loss of ‘overt prestige’ here but also, possibly, an accruing of ‘covert prestige’ from certain groups (though only the former was certain).<sup>27</sup> Such public self-

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<sup>25</sup> Sedgwick, p.72.

<sup>26</sup> Kerry Hudson, *Lowborn: Growing Up, Getting Away and Returning to Britain’s Poorest Towns* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2019), p.23.

<sup>27</sup> I use this in the sense developed by William Labov, whereby covert prestige is a scenario in which non-standard languages or dialects are regarded to be of high linguistic prestige by members of a particular speech community. In my case, I speculated that authentically representing my queer, Scottish, working-class voice would result in approval by those speech communities. William Labov, ‘The Social Stratification of (r) in New York City Department Stores’, <https://web.stanford.edu/class/linguist62n/labov001.pdf>, accessed 27 November 2019.

identification is both limiting and freeing and, as I have seen with my recent contributions to *Out There: An Anthology of Scottish LGBT Writing* edited by Zoe Strachan (Freight Publishing: 2014), *Speak My Language, and Other Stories: An Anthology of Gay Fiction* edited by Torsten Højer (Constable & Robinson: 2015) and *Common People: An Anthology of Working Class Voices* edited by Kit De Waal (Unbound: 2019), it demands constant restating on and off the page. I should reiterate that, given memoirs are as constructed as novels, it is entirely possible to construct closets, to mask, to conceal, to put a writer or a writing 'I' inside a closet in memoir. Sometimes this is tempting.

Furthermore, publishing *Maggie & Me* as a memoir would mean outing family members too – in some cases as fellow survivors but also as perpetrators and witnesses. I cannot separate myself from them or tell my story without writing about them – another key feature of the *bildungsroman*.<sup>28</sup> I would have to make the private (mine and theirs) public – a choice I could avoid or deny if I chose to re-present my/their story as fiction. I calculated that making the private public was less of a risk (to me) than keeping it private or making it public while claiming it was not true. So, I rejected the offer to publish my story as a novel and instead embarked on what would become a memoir – because I felt I had to 'tell the truth' and, vitally, be seen to do so. Doing so would mean consciously casting off the shame imposed on me as a child, while at the same time risking incurring further shame, not just for me as an adult but for my family, who remain rooted in the community I no longer live in.

As a practice-based researcher I sought to explore the physical, cultural and emotional landscape of the tiny village in the west of Scotland where I spent (or,

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<sup>28</sup> Jeffers notes that the hero-narrator of the *bildungsroman* is 'decidedly part of his social milieu, and his social milieu is part of him. Intersubjectivity – life with, for, and through other people – is an inextinguishable determinant of his identity ... the question of his responsibility to them isn't sidestepped.' Jeffers, p.36.

perhaps more accurately, survived) my childhood. It is a landscape neglected in fiction and non-fiction, yet as rich with stories as it once was with coal and steel: *Maggie & Me* occupies a unique, uncomfortable and hard-won space in literary non-fiction. Queer stories about the 1980s focus, rightly, on the AIDS crisis and most are by American writers about the American context: *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* by Randy Shilts (2001) being the apotheosis. It speaks in many of the same tones of *The Normal Heart*, an autobiographical 1985 play by Larry Kramer, which focuses on the emergence of the epidemic in New York City from 1981 to 1984. *Angels in America*, written by Tony Kushner and first staged in 1991, was a self-professed ‘*Gay Fantasia on National Themes*’ and makes HIV/AIDS – the fear, the resisting, the surviving and the succumbing – the heart of the queer story in 1980s New York. Undoubtedly, these influenced the way I write about HIV/AIDS in *Maggie & Me*.

Working-class stories have tended to be told about, rather than by, working-class people in the form of social studies or sometimes biographies, usually tracing the trajectory from the working-class outwards and supposedly upwards: rags to riches or even stardom. *Cinderella*, *Oliver Twist* and *Billy Elliot* are notable examples. And these tend to focus solely on class as a means of self-identification and self-determination – the narrators are working-class first and everything else second, if indeed they are allowed any plurality at all. Janice Galloway is unusual in that she tackles gender and class in her memoirs *This is Not About Me* (2008) and *All Made Up* (2011). Like Galloway, I wanted to escape what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls ‘the danger of the single story’ to establish an intersectional *I* that interpolated gender, sexuality, class and national identity – a voice that sounded

authentically and persuasively male, queer, working class and Scottish.<sup>29</sup> So far, and as far as I know, my text is the only memoir to attempt this. Yes, I wanted to do this partly for myself but also to share this within the literary community and a wider readership outside that privileged group. In this regard, I sought to add to our shared store of knowledge – another definitive feature of practice-based research.<sup>30</sup> Writing and publishing *Maggie & Me* as memoir, rather than a novel, was an active act of discursive resistance. I mean this in the Foucauldian sense, where power must be invoked in order to resist it: ‘Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.’<sup>31</sup> Positioning my story as fiction would have been to discredit myself as a narrator and to let ‘power’ off the hook. If I could hide behind the veil of fiction then so could the people who hurt me, my family and my community. Telling my story as memoir, using the tools of fiction, was an act of resistance. Writing a memoir would certainly demand engaging with existing trauma, but fictionalising my truth and presenting it as such in a very public way would be to inflict further harm. I refused to do this to myself and, by extension, to other survivors struggling to form or share their own narrative. Catharsis is most often discussed in terms of the reader’s experience but here I will consider it, and resistance, from the perspective of the writer in the context of reliving and (re)presenting trauma.

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<sup>29</sup> ‘Our lives, our cultures, are composed of many overlapping stories. Novelist Chimamanda Adichie tells the story of how she found her authentic cultural voice – and warns that if we hear only a single story about another person or country, we risk a critical misunderstanding.’ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story), accessed 27 November 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Professor Stephen Scrivener argues that practice-based research aims to generate culturally novel apprehensions that are not just novel to the creator or individual observers of an artefact. S.A.R. Scrivener, ‘Characterising Creative-production Doctoral Projects in Art and Design.’ *International Journal of Design Sciences and Technology*, 10:2, (2002a), pp. 25–44.

<sup>31</sup> Foucault, p.95.

Another expectation of the *bildungsroman* is that it is at least semi-autobiographical – the *I* of the novel, the hero or anti-hero, is not the writer but draws heavily on their experiences and is imbued with their voice. As such, these texts invite identification with the narrator and events are recounted from their perspective – we are immersed in their world. I did not want to write a thinly veiled novel – as producer and host of my own Literary Salon for over ten years I have read many, many *romans à clef*<sup>32</sup> that lack both the self-effacing conviction of fiction and the self-professed honesty of memoir – most often these follow the trajectory of the *bildungsroman* because they follow the arc of the writer’s own life. But I did want to write a memoir with the immersive power of a novel. Of course, the memoir is as constructed as the novel and both demand the writer make narrative choices in order to complete or confound the expectations of the form – just as I rejected the expectations and norms of the white, working class community I grew up in: chiefly, to be heterosexual, but also to follow my father and forefathers into manual labour, despite the fact that the light of the furnaces was dimming before their eyes. Dreaming of being a writer was one of my earliest acts of resistance. This is another defining characteristic of the *bildungsroman*: the hero as artist. Buckley asserts that:

...its hero [the hero of the *bildungsroman*], more often than not, emerges as an artist of sorts, a prose writer like David Copperfield or Ernest Pontifex, a poet like Stephen Dedalus, an artisan and aspiring intellectual like Hardy’s Jude, a painter like Lawrence’s Paul Morel or Maugham’s Phil Carey.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> ‘A novel in which characters are understood to be stand-ins for real people’. G. Thomas Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.79.

<sup>33</sup> Buckley, p.13.

In order to reflect on the specific choices I made writing and editing *Maggie & Me*, I will focus on major decisions about genre and ethics and focus my critical reflection around key questions I asked myself over and over while worrying about whether or not to embark on this venture – interestingly these are also the questions readers ask at almost every event. These questions run along fault-lines immanent to memoir as a genre, questions I continue to ask myself as part of my practice-based work.<sup>34</sup>

The first question is: *Why write a memoir?* How is memoir different from and similar to autobiography, autofiction and fiction? What restrictions and freedoms does each genre offer? Here I reflect on my critical reading of memoirs by Galloway, Sanghera and Winterson and explore how my own experiments with different genres led me to creatively engage with memoir.

The second – and thorniest – question is: *Is it all true?* What does ‘true’ even mean in this context – whose truth am I telling, am I allowed to do it (do I dare?) and how might I use the tools of fiction to construct it? Here I consider the idea of the unreliable narrator, Lejeune’s ‘autobiographical pact’<sup>35</sup> and the ethics of (re)presenting events that others also have a claim on.

In conclusion, the final question – and one I still contend with – is: how will writing, editing and publishing this make me feel? Better, worse, the same? Here I consider process as catharsis and explore the unique emotional labour demanded by memoir in the context of reliving and (re)presenting trauma and ask myself: *Do I feel better now?*

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<sup>34</sup> Questions I thought I would avoid entirely as a novelist but soon encountered as I researched the historical and contemporary events in South Africa that inspired *You Will Be Safe Here*.

<sup>35</sup> Philippe Lejeune, ‘The Autobiographical Pact’, in *On Autobiography*, translated by Katherine Leary, edited by Paul John Eakin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp.3–30.

## 2 *Why write a memoir? What is (and is not) memoir? Why choose it? Expectations and tropes of the genre*

The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means.

Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*<sup>36</sup>

Empirically as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition; each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm; the works themselves always seems to shade off into neighbouring or even incompatible genres and, perhaps most revealing of all, generic discussions, which can have such a powerful heuristic value in the case of tragedy or the novel, remain distressingly sterile when autobiography is at stake.

Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*<sup>37</sup>

Any observer of the current debate around what is (and is not) autobiography, memoir, fiction or autofiction would be hard pushed to describe it as 'sterile'. De Man made his claim in 1984 and since then social media, which is predicated on telling stories of our selves, has done more than any other single innovation to expand narrative non-fiction about the self, even as it challenges us as readers and writers. It is precisely because, as de Man noted even then, these genres increasingly and energetically 'shade off into neighboring or even incompatible genres' that I had so

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<sup>36</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1961[1967]), p.14.

<sup>37</sup> Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p.68.



many, seemingly conflicting, storytelling options to consider when beginning to write what would become *Maggie & Me*. Each option had – has – critical implications for me as a practitioner and also as a person (not that the two can very easily be separated). I have argued that *Maggie & Me* is a coming-of-age memoir tracing the trajectory of the Buckleyian *bildungsroman* – a work of narrative non-fiction built using the tools of fiction. Every genre makes unique demands, explicit and immanent, of the writer and reader and every genre is a specific contract between reader and writer. As Couser states: ‘Genre *does* matter.’<sup>38</sup> I could have chosen just about any genre to tell the story and have briefly reflected on why fiction was not right for that story at that time. When I started writing what would become *Maggie & Me*, I did also consider autobiography and fiction while experimenting with autofiction. Ultimately, I chose memoir. *Why write a memoir? To what end?* Before examining specific writing and editing choices – key decisions about voice and truth – I first need to consider memoir more deeply as a genre. To understand why I chose to write and publish *Maggie & Me* as a memoir, and the ongoing implications of that choice, I must first ask what is (not) a memoir? To, as Sontag says, discover ‘how it is what it is’ but also to interrogate ‘what it means’.<sup>39</sup>

De Man explicitly rejects the idea of a generic distinction between autobiography and fiction, claiming any such a distinction ‘is not an either/or polarity but that it is undecidable’. This will be news to publishers and readers and of particular interest to lawyers. He goes on:

Autobiography, then, is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts ... this specular

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<sup>38</sup> Couser, p.33.

<sup>39</sup> Sontag, p.14.

structure is interiorized in a text in which the author declares himself the subject of his own understanding, but this merely makes explicit the wider claim to authorship that takes place whenever a text is stated to be by someone and assumed to be understandable to the extent that this is the case. Which amounts to saying that any book with a readable title page is, to some extent, autobiographical.<sup>40</sup>

De Man uses the generic terms autobiography and memoir interchangeably. As Couser notes in his *Memoir: An Introduction*<sup>41</sup> “‘memoir’ has eclipsed ‘autobiography’ as the term of choice for a certain kind of life narrative.”<sup>42</sup> That eclipse is only partial and occurred somewhere between de Man’s claim made in 1984 and Couser’s book being published in 2012 – although both terms pre-date both publications and continue to coexist. Vital distinctions remain between the two genres in terms of expectations for writers and readers and I was forced to consider the implications of these when deciding which genre to write and publish in. As Couser explains:

Until quite recently, then, ‘memoir’ was minor and ‘autobiography’ major; ‘memoir’ subliterary and ‘autobiography’ literary; ‘memoir’ shallow and ‘autobiography’ deep; ‘memoir’ marginal and ‘autobiography’ canonical. The distinction has been invidious—more a matter of value than of kind.<sup>43</sup>

Broadly then: autobiography at the time of de Man’s writing was, generically, great men (and less often women) writing about their great careers and great works

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<sup>40</sup> Paul de Man, ‘Autobiography as Defacement’. *MLN*, 94:5 (December 1979), pp.919–930.

<sup>41</sup> Couser brings a valuable and scholarly historical perspective to current debates within and about life-writing as well as a particular understanding of writing about difference, so I will be referencing him widely.

<sup>42</sup> Couser, p.3.

<sup>43</sup> Couser, p.18.

in great big tomes while memoir featured, generically, less important men and even women writing about their supposedly smaller lives and smaller struggles in often slender volumes. The partial eclipse of autobiography by memoir reflects a wider shift in who gets to tell their story in our culture – who gets to vote, to marry, to enjoy equal freedom and protection in law. Although both genres are almost always first person, the autobiography still tends towards the universal whereas the memoir insists on subjectivity. Sudjic skewers this perfectly:

When (white, cis-gendered) men write, even about their personal experience, they write about the human condition and, like the erroneous beige of flesh-coloured tights, their perspective is deemed universal. Books written by women, about women, are not.<sup>44</sup>

So, more people – notably women – are telling their stories and describing them as memoir. Vivian Gornick describes this revolution in *The Situation and the Story*:

Everywhere in the world women and men are rising up to tell their stories out of the now commonly held belief that one's own life signifies. And everywhere, civil rights movements and the therapeutic culture at large have been hugely influential in feeding that belief. In this country alone forty years of liberationist politics have produced an outpouring of testament from women, blacks and gays that is truly astonishing. Following quickly in the wake of political interpretation has come the echoing response of lives framed by pedestrian chaos: alcohol, domestic violence, sexual disorders. These, too, it appears,

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<sup>44</sup> Olivia Sudjic, *Exposure* (London: Peninsula Press, 2019), pp.101–102.

signify, these, too, have a story to tell, a catastrophe to relate, a memoir to write.<sup>45</sup>

*Maggie & Me* is just such a 'testament' explicitly linking the personal and the political (which are, anyway, indivisible) while also detailing much 'pedestrian chaos': my parent's divorce, the violence meted out to me by the various men in my family, my mother's catastrophic illness, alcoholism in my family and in our community, poverty, neglect, and emotional, physical and sexual abuse. I felt empowered to share my testimony by trailblazing memoirs that broke new ground in terms of subjectivity (who get to speak) and story (the stories the speaker feels able to tell): *This is Not About Me* (2008) and *All Made Up* (2011) by Janice Galloway, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* by Jeanette Winterson (2011) and *The Boy with the Topknot: A Memoir of Love, Secrets and Lies in Wolverhampton* by Sathnam Sanghera (2009). Each of these spoke to me as no other book had – not fiction, not memoir.<sup>46</sup> In different but crucial ways each of them inspired me to tell my own story – all three writers tell different stories of being other. Janice Galloway opened the front door of the wee council house in Saltcoats where she grew up with her mother and her violent sister Cora. Once indoors, the atmosphere crackled with secrets and far too much hairspray – it was the 1960s after all. And Galloway, like me, loved English at school and was saved by the kindness of teachers. Here was the working-class west of Scotland I was raised in and it wasn't just gossip from my

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<sup>45</sup> Vivian Gornick celebrates this in *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), p.91.

<sup>46</sup> Actually, *A Boy's Own Story* by Edmund White did wake me up to the existence of a gay central character in books, but it was a novel and I read it as such age sixteen. In my twenties, I understood it was partly autobiographical and a conversation with Edmund White in 2014 confirmed this. Nevertheless, it is not an autobiography or a memoir. Edmund White, *A Boy's Own Story* (Boston, MA: Dutton, 1982).

mum or a newspaper article – it was a proper book. Notably and mercifully, it wasn't a misery memoir – Galloway doesn't shy away from revealing poverty and tragedy and she does it using beautiful language and the actual local vernacular, the way I had learned to talk. Much of Jeanette Winterson's memoir *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011) will be familiar to readers of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) and this is not surprising, since that bold first book was a *roman à clef* and Winterson never claimed otherwise – there's a whole book to be written on reading the two side by side. 'Why be happy when you could be normal?' was the question asked of Winterson by her adopted mother, as she evicted sixteen-year-old Winterson for taking up with a new girlfriend (after the attempt to exorcise her of her lesbianism proved unsuccessful). In Winterson's memoir, we hear again her mother's joke about the sweet-shop owners dealing in 'unnatural passions' (which the young Jeanette thinks means they put chemicals in their sweets) and visit again the swaying gospel tent.<sup>47</sup> Only this time we know it's all true because she says it is – whereas in the novel we only felt it might be. Her memoir reads like fiction with characters and plot and dialogue and a narrative arc, but it is not a novel – we don't have to look hard for her in here, we trust that she isn't making it all up – her memoir is a contract with the reader. Like Winterson, I had also fallen in love with a person of the same sex and been bewitched and bewildered by this. I had also faced the struggle to reconcile my sexuality with my faith and been cast out for moral failure by my faith community. Reading Winterson's experiences recounted as memoir, and seeing some of my own reflected there, gave her words added power – to hurt and to heal.

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<sup>47</sup> Jeannette Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (London: Vintage, 2011).

*The Boy with the Topknot: A Memoir of Love, Secrets and Lies in*

*Wolverhampton* is Sathnam Sanghera's memoir of growing up in a working-class Sikh family in Wolverhampton in the 1980s. Sanghera and I are the same age and worked together on *The Times* for some years. Because I thought I knew him well, his memoir proved doubly shocking. In it he brings to life a close-knit community focused around industry, again very familiar to the community I grew up in (though ours was steel not garments). His first job was working underage in a sweatshop (mine was also underage and as a waiter). His memoir contains two big secrets. Firstly, Sanghera's father is living with schizophrenia, a fact Sanghera only discovers after he's left home and which explains violent and disturbing episodes from his childhood. Secondly, Sanghera is, contrary to the hopes and dreams of his family and the values of his religious community, dating white women outside his faith. Sanghera's memoir is, in many senses, a coming out story regarding both mental illness and romantic attraction. Unlike Galloway and Winterson – he's the same age as me – I had been thinking I somehow needed to be older, to have lived more life, or a more important life, to have a story worth writing and publishing. Yet, here was a peer of mine telling a story that, again, had echoes of my own – violence at home, a working-class community and experiences of shame and otherness. Sanghera writes powerfully about the ongoing corrosiveness of Enoch Powell's infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech at a Conservative Association meeting in Birmingham on 20 April 1968.<sup>48</sup> Sanghera and I even shared a sense of humour and listened to the same music. In his Acknowledgements (often fruitful in a memoir) he writes that he was encouraged to feel he could write his memoir by Mary Mount, his editor at Penguin,

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<sup>48</sup> Powell was the Conservative MP for Wolverhampton South West, which is the constituency Sanghera grew up in.

who 'got in touch, listened and convinced me that books aren't always written by other people'.<sup>49</sup>

Each of these memoirs touched on aspects of the story I felt I wanted to tell, yet was afraid, maybe just ashamed, of telling: living in a council house, growing up in poverty, surviving abuse of all kinds and coming out to myself and others. These memoirs did not encompass my whole experience and, had there been another memoir out there that did, I might have thought again (and again). These memoirs (re)presented all the experiences of their writers in their own vernacular language and often with great humour and warmth. There was sadness, yes, but they were not misery memoirs. And they were certainly not accolade-heavy autobiographies. They are all first-person, told unapologetically from their point of view and make extensive use of dialogue and dialect and so have the immersive quality of conversation. I felt them speaking to me and I trusted them – as they spoke, the world outside the book fell away, very similar to my experience of reading the *bildungsroman* I cite in my introduction. On re-reading these texts I recognised and admired this immersive quality, which was so much about winning the trust of the reader, taking them to a specific time and place and letting them make up their own mind (rather than the voice of Now intruding and telling them what to think or feel). It's precisely because of the identity of these writers, the stories they are telling and the language they choose to tell them in that memoirs have historically, as Couser notes, been minor rather than major, subliterary rather than literary: 'the distinction has been invidious—more a matter of value than of kind.'<sup>50</sup> These bold, brave memoirs can only take up space on bookshelves because their creators have learned to take up

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<sup>49</sup> From the acknowledgments, Sathnam Sanghera, *The Boy with The Topknot: A Memoir of Love, Secrets and Lies in Wolverhampton* (London: Penguin Books, 2009).

<sup>50</sup> Couser, p.18.

space in the world – they would have been impossible without the social change Gornick highlights. You can't write a 'testament', in Gornick's sense, without first having lived your life and, if you belong to a minority status group, your life choices are circumscribed and struggle is a key part of your experience. Reading these memoirs made me aware of this and encouraged me to write and live authentically. I will return to these texts and ideas of authenticity in greater depth when considering truth and ethics.

Finally, between autobiography and memoir there is also a difference in scope, which Judith Barrington succinctly summarises in her essay 'Writing the Memoir':<sup>51</sup> 'autobiography is story *of* a life, memoir is a story *from* a life.' A memoir usually focuses on touchstone events and turning points from the writer's life – say an illness, a journey, or a job). This is borne out by Couser, who says:

...we can think of autobiography as self-life writing that attempts to do for the author what a biographer would do: write the whole life ... In contrast, much self-life writing focuses only on a discrete part of the life.<sup>52</sup>

I only wanted to tell my story up to the point I left high school – a part of my life, not the whole. This is partly because I met my partner at university and I did not want my writing to infringe on his privacy – an issue I will explore more when I consider ethics. But also, because I needed limits for my enquiry and a word limit. An autobiography may even have footnotes and seek to further establish credibility with an index. Memoirs rarely make such claims on authority. As Gore Vidal once said, 'a memoir is how one remembers one's own life.'<sup>53</sup> Memory is, of course, subjective,

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<sup>51</sup> Judith Barrington, 'Writing the Memoir', in *The Handbook of Creative Writing*, edited by Steven Earnshaw (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p.109.

<sup>52</sup> Couser, p.23.

<sup>53</sup> Gore Vidal, *Palimpsest* (New York: Random House, 1995), p.5.



which raises many legal questions and ethical concerns. I spent at least three years grappling with these before finally giving myself permission to write a memoir – I consider them still, although the book is long out, and I definitely approached the ethical decisions regarding real people and events in my fiction differently having first written a memoir. So, I decided to write and publish *Maggie & Me* as a memoir rather than as an autobiography and because of this I will privilege ‘memoir’ where possible and where the terms have been used interchangeably by another writer, I will let both stand.

Of course, we may read fiction through an autobiographical lens, as de Man’s ‘figure of reading’<sup>54</sup> – keeping our eyes peeled for flashes of the writer in the long-grass of the novel. Indeed, much fiction proudly claims to be autobiographical – that is, *based on a true story*. My debut novel, *You Will Be Safe Here*,<sup>55</sup> is set in South Africa in the distant past (1901) and near present (1974–now). The first section is a fictional diary begun on 1 January 1901 by the character of Sarah Van Der Watt – she was inspired by real women I had read about in first-hand accounts of farm burnings and concentration camps during the Second Boer War collected by Emily Hobhouse.<sup>56</sup> Sarah is not any one of these women but I drew on their collective experience, their vocabulary and voice to create her. Within the framework of historical events – the Scorched Earth policy, the Second Boer War and women’s resistance in the British concentration camps – I conjured the characters and events Sarah records in her diary. The contemporary section in post-Apartheid South Africa is anchored by the character of Willem Brandt, who was partly inspired by a real-life boy called Raymond Buys murdered in 2011 in a contemporary camp run by former

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<sup>54</sup> de Man, ‘Autobiography as Defacement’, pp.919–930.

<sup>55</sup> Damian Barr, *You Will Be Safe Here* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

<sup>56</sup> See C.E. Hobhouse, *Report and Evidence of the War Commission* (Bristol: J.W. Arrowsmith, 1904) and C.E. Hobhouse, *War Without Glamour* (Nasionale Pers, 1924).

soldiers who promised to ‘make men out of boys’. I deeply and respectfully considered Raymond and his family and the circumstances in which he was killed before I created Willem – who looks and thinks and acts very differently from Raymond and who has a different family and history. I then placed Willem in an imagined camp where, yes, he faces some of the same terrors Raymond did. The two boys, real and imagined, are not the same and their stories are very different – particularly their endings.<sup>57</sup> Cumulatively, *You Will Be Safe Here* could be said to be autobiographical in that it draws on my own experiences and my particular interpretation of real events, but it is not an autobiography. It is, at most, autobiographical fiction. As Couser notes:

When we say that novels or plays are autobiographical, we are saying only that their contents have a basis in, or may parallel, events in their authors’ lives. We are not reclassifying them as nonfiction.<sup>58</sup>

The novel may contain truth and feel true but it is not all fact and we, as readers, accept this. However, as Couser makes clear, when a work is advertised as autobiography ‘we take it to be the story of a real person—its author—not of a fictional character’.<sup>59</sup> The *I* of the narrator is also the person whose name is on the cover of the book. This distinguishes it from all other genres:

Thus, the genre has an identity claim at its core: by definition, a memoir or autobiography purports to represent its author and the extra-textual work

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<sup>57</sup> There is much more to be said about this process and the decisions involved and I will touch on this again in ethics but the place for deeper analysis is not here or now and beyond the scope of this work.

<sup>58</sup> Couser, p.80.

<sup>59</sup> Couser, p.80.

more or less directly, in a way that fiction, no matter how historical or autobiographical, does not claim to do.<sup>60</sup>

The Damian Barr on the front of *Maggie & Me* is also the *I* of the text. Whether or not you believe in him and the truth he purports to tell is another matter and I will contend with the ‘truth’ of his voice later on and the ethical decisions involved telling his story.

Having rejected fiction and autobiography I began to experiment with autofiction. What could it offer? In 2008, when I was starting work on what would become *Maggie & Me*, autofiction did not enjoy the huge popularity it does now, as exemplified by the success of Rachel Cusk’s *Outline* trilogy (2014–2018) and Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *My Struggle* series (2009–2011). Presently, it is as fashionable as autobiography once was. In *Exposure* (2019), her timely essay on the anxiety epidemic, autofiction and internet feminism, Olivia Sudjic claims autofiction ‘makes no pretence to making things up nor to telling the truth’.<sup>61</sup> Here, autofiction is defined, broadly, by Alex Clark in the *Guardian* as ‘fictionalised autobiography that does away with traditional elements of the novel such as plot and character development’.<sup>62</sup> A work of autofiction is neither a novel nor a memoir, yet contains elements of both – it dispenses with the narrative contracts demanded by fiction and memoir and this offers a great deal of creative scope for practitioners. In detail that is both forensic and lavish, Karl Ove Knausgaard offers us *My Struggle*, an epic account of the life of the narrator Karl Ove moment-by-moment, volume-by-volume. In Rachel Cusk’s

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<sup>60</sup> Couser, p.80.

<sup>61</sup> Sudjic, p.110.

<sup>62</sup> Alex Clark, ‘Drawn from Life: Why Have Novelists Stopped Making Things Up?’ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jun/23/drawn-from-life-why-have-novelists-stopped-making-things-up>, accessed 29 August 2018.

*Outline* trilogy, a novelist, Faye, travels around Europe retelling the stories told to her by strangers and acquaintances. Other notable examples include the writings of Sheila Heti, specifically *Motherhood* (2018), in which she describes her own struggle with what it might mean to have children (or not) and Édouard Louis's *The End of Eddy* (2014) and *History of Violence* (2016), which recount his abusive childhood and early adulthood in France, including details of his experiences of coming out and sexual violence. In each of these texts (even when they are not first person, though most are) it is impossible to differentiate between the I of the narrator and the I of the writer – especially when the narrator takes the same name as the writer. And that is, of course, exactly the point, as Alex Clark concludes: ‘these books don’t simply use the biographical details of their authors’ lives as inspiration, but also to disrupt and complicate our experience of story and subjectivity.’<sup>63</sup>

As a reader, I can clearly see the attraction – the sparky interplay between the authorial I and the first-person I of the narrator, the ‘did she, didn’t she, how could she’ bingo, the lacunae of experience into which I can pour my own speculation. These are compelling reasons to read autofiction but, for me, they did not offer sufficient reason to use it as the genre for the story I subsequently told in *Maggie & Me*. My early experiments with autofiction flitted between fiction that felt insufficiently made up (a narrator called Darren) and memoir that felt insufficiently true (a father, not a mother, suffering catastrophic illness). This could, certainly, have been down to a failure of technique or imagination on my part. But what I see now is that what was stopping me fully embracing this genre was the very thing that makes it so attractive to others – the absence of boundaries, of rules I felt I knew and my reader would know too. Diana Athill told me that writing her memoirs was ‘cathartic’ for her and I

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<sup>63</sup> Alex Clark, ‘Drawn from Life’.

wanted that experience too – writing of the self as a form of therapy. Autofiction appeared to offer me neither the clarifying catharsis of memoir or the divine sublimation of fiction – it felt like a coy strip-tease where, when the music stopped, I would be left standing awkwardly neither wholly naked nor entirely clothed. I have said that, while writing and editing *Maggie & Me*, I closely attended to and borrowed from structures and techniques more usually associated with fiction, in part to confound many of the expectations and tropes of memoir. But I was always explicit about my intention – the promise I was making to the reader: the book in your hands is my memoir. *This is me, this is true*, and, by extension, *this could be you*. And I wanted my story to generate empathy – to put the *I* of the narrator and *I* myself on the line and in so doing ask the reader to do the same, to briefly leave their own life and step into mine. Couser is clear that, although fiction and memoir are both mimetic – they imitate life in the sense that art is said to imitate nature – they are read differently:

Memoir presents itself, and is therefore read, as a nonfictional record or representation of actual humans' experience. Fiction does not; it creates its own lifelike reality. And that makes all the difference.<sup>64</sup>

De Man acknowledges that this unique demand of memoir as a genre also makes exclusive demands of the writer:

Since the concept of genre designates an aesthetic as well as a historical function, what is at stake is not only the distance that shelters the author of autobiography from his experience but the possible convergence of aesthetics

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<sup>64</sup> Couser, p.15.

and history. The investment in such a convergence, especially when autobiography is concerned, is considerable.<sup>65</sup>

In memoir – memoir that succeeds – there can be no such sheltering distance for writer or reader. As a writer you can hide in autofiction but not in memoir – this, of course, is part of the appeal for writers who, historically, have been silenced or ridiculed either for who they are or the stories they burn to tell. It is why so much autofiction is written by women and so little by men. Considering Cusk's decision to write autofiction, having been very publicly shamed and ridiculed for *Aftermath*, her memoir about her divorce, Sudjic says:

Cusk's self-reflection has resulted in a writerly reinvention ... While it normally seems a mistake to let criticism entirely shape your next book, in [the] trilogy of *Outline*, *Transit* and *Kudos*, the elusive narrator has done just that. She's still radically honest but is now a medium for other lives ... It is a shape, a structure, a subject too, defined by its author's absent presence.<sup>66</sup>

Perhaps foolishly, I did not want to hide. I wanted to be seen and feel seen. I wanted to better understand my self by writing about myself. I also wanted to show a different side of the 1980s – accounts of the decade in popular culture are dominated by Thatcherite success stories with a narrator who is most often English, middle-class, cis-male and heterosexual (even if, like Self in Amis's *Money* (1984), he personifies these qualities to a parodic extent). Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004) depicts a queer story and does contend with class – Nick is not as posh as

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<sup>65</sup> de Man, Paul, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, p.67.

<sup>66</sup> Sudjic, p.117.

the Fedden family, he is an outsider – but this is not a working-class story and the action takes place in a gilded London square. Notable exceptions – *Kes* (1969), *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (1987) and *Boys from the Black Stuff* (1982) – stand out precisely for their focus on working-class stories but are all situated in the North of England (where working-class stories, like coal, are mined). I wanted to tell a queer, working-class Scottish story that I had not heard or seen told in any book or film – partly to memorialise the past of my childhood but also to make a point in the present about the politics of the past: to show the impact of Maggie on me, my family and my community. This is one of the unique capabilities of memoir, as identified by Couser:

Especially in life writing, then, genre is not about mere literary form; it's about force—what a narrative's purpose is, what impact it seeks to have on the world.<sup>67</sup>

Another aspect of the impact I wanted my story to have, and which drove me towards telling it as memoir, was memorialising. My close friend Mark completed suicide while I was in the early stages of writing the book. I did not want to forget him and I wanted others to know him as I did. Disguising him in a novel wouldn't satisfy this need to make him known to the world. As Couser observes: 'among the things memoir can do that fiction cannot is to immortalize – or at least memorialize – actual people.'<sup>68</sup> I wanted to give Mark another life and I could only do that in my memoir. I also wanted to memorialise the place and time I grew up in – the Ravenscraig steelworks, depicted on both the hardback and paperback, dominated the skyline lighting up the sky at night with molten steel so we seemed to have two sunsets. The

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<sup>67</sup> Couser, p.9.

<sup>68</sup> Couser, p.14.

steelworks is now long gone and even the soil beneath it has been taken away, so the topography of my childhood has vanished. On a visit back there I got lost driving roads I'd been on thousands of times before – I was lost in my own past. I decided to write it all down before I forgot it completely so others could see it as I had. Again, this is a unique power of memoir, as Couser observes:

If events are not recounted, they may be forgotten; memoir serves to archive them for subsequent generations. Thus, memoir can be a repository for witnesses' accounts of historical events in a way that fiction, for all of its range and power, cannot.<sup>69</sup>

The writer of memoir and their reader share this mission of generating empathy, according to Vivian Gornick in *The Situation and the Story*. Here she describes Rousseau writing the *Confessions*, still considered the *ur-text* of memoir as a genre:

When Rousseau observes, 'I have nothing but myself to write about. And this self that I have, I hardly know of what it consists,' he's saying to the reader, 'I will go in search of it in your presence. I will set down on the page a tale of experience just as I think it occurred, and together we'll see what it exemplifies, both of us discovering as I write this self I am in search of.' And that was the beginning of memoir as we know it.<sup>70</sup>

*Together* is the key word here – memoir makes a unique promise to the reader, it holds out its hand. Gornick is careful to make clear that this is not about

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<sup>69</sup> Couser, p.21.

<sup>70</sup> Gornick, *The Situation and the Story*, p.92.



taking sides or eliciting sympathy in the sense of feeling sorry for the narrator or simply taking their side:

In all imaginative writing sympathy for the subject is necessary not because it is the politically correct or morally decent posture to adopt but because an absence of sympathy shuts down the mind: engagement fails, the flow of association dries up, and the work narrows. What I mean by sympathy is simply that level of empathic understanding that endows the subject with dimension. The empathy that slows us, the readers, to see the 'other' as the other might see him or herself is the empathy that provides movement in the writing.<sup>71</sup>

It is this shared feeling that drives the story forward in memoir – rooting for the writer. Alexander Chee describes this intention – to elicit familiar feeling from the reader – behind his personal essays: 'Narrative writing sets down details in an order that evokes the writer's experience for the reader ... if you're doing the job the reader feels what you feel.'<sup>72</sup> As readers, we approach memoir and novels differently, as Couser notes:

...our response toggles to a different mode ... characters in memoir are of course authorial creations; we know them only as effects of words on the page. But at the same time, they are representations of real people, who are vulnerable to harm.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Gornick, *The Situation and the Story*, p.35.

<sup>72</sup> Alexander Chee, *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel* (New York, Bloomsbury, 2018), pp.50–51.

<sup>73</sup> Couser, p.13.

Memoir demands that the reader care for the *I* of the narrator. This communing with the lives of others is of course a key function of fiction too – Sudjic calls the novel ‘an early empathy-inducing device’.<sup>74</sup> She claims the novel has retained this power because:

...while in real life we may be fearful of otherness, of a stranger’s perceived threat to our identity, in fiction, where we believe ourselves to be in the realm of fantasy, we are usually quite happy to enter the mind of someone else.<sup>75</sup>

With autofiction and with memoir we are exposed to an other without the protection of fantasy. With fiction and autofiction it’s not always clear who is talking – the Karl Ove on the book jacket or the Karl Ove in the prose – but with memoir we always know who the *I* is – there is only the persona Gornick calls ‘the singular self’:

...in fiction, a cast of characters is put to work that will cover all bases: some will speak to the author’s inclination, some the opposition ... In nonfiction, the writer has only the singular self to work with.<sup>76</sup>

In memoir, it’s just you and me. This, as many memoirists have found, has profound implications for mental health, which only became clear to me as I wrote my way in – I will explore this in my conclusion.<sup>77</sup>

This singular self is the unique strength, and failing, of memoir – if you enjoy spending time on the page with the person you will read on, if you do not ... end of story (allowing for memoirs where we can’t look away from the car crash). In memoir,

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<sup>74</sup> Sudjic, p.65.

<sup>75</sup> Sudjic, p.68.

<sup>76</sup> Gornick, *The Situation and the Story*, p.35.

<sup>77</sup> Sudjic points to Cusk’s reaction after the publication of *Aftermath*, notably a review in the *Sunday Times* so savage it won the journalist The Golden Hatchet of the Year. ‘After all this Cusk said, “I have lost all interest in having a self, being a person has always meant getting blamed for it”.’ Sudjic, p.116.

the narrator opens their arms and says, *This is me, I am not you, listen to me – if you want*. Memoir is an invitation to enjoin the experience of another. Perhaps even to occupy their body, as in *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* by Roxane Gay, or see through their eyes, as in *What to Look for in Winter: A Memoir of Blindness* by Candia McWilliam. Autofiction does not offer the total otherness promised by fiction or the self-confessed closeness promised by memoir – both of which can transport the reader to a wholly different life. Autofiction is perversely too personal to be fiction while not personal enough to be memoir – it generates knowingness rather than the self-knowledge that might lead to empathy, cool distance rather than intriguing otherness or warm closeness. It is a brisk handshake not an open embrace. All the while I was trying to write autofiction I felt somehow fraudulent – as if I was making stuff up, which I was told a lot as a child: *nobody will believe you if you tell them about this*. For all its playful ambiguity, autofiction offered me a solely intellectual satisfaction – an echo of the performative *ha-ha* in a theatre where the playgoers are congratulating themselves for getting the joke rather than losing themselves in actual laughter. I could not lose myself or indeed find myself in the autofiction I was trying to write. It felt dishonest, to me.

Edmund White has written novels, memoir and novels that call on real-life incidents, most famously *A Boy's Own Story* (1982) – one of the first explicitly queer books I ever dared read and a pioneering queer text. White unhesitatingly draws a clear line between memoir and autofiction:

To me there's a very clear distinction between autofiction and autobiography. I've just finished my third autobiography, the first two being *My Lives* and *City Boy*. I try, in those books, to be true and accurate. I believe in truth, I don't buy this bullshit that everything is fiction, I think that's silly. Most people know that

the truth is something like a horizon; it's something you head toward. Maybe you never get there, but at least you have a sense of direction.<sup>78</sup>

Memoir promised me that horizon of truth. But how to get there? Even as I moved towards it, the horizon already appeared to be shifting.

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<sup>78</sup> Daoud Najm, 'An Interview with Edmund White', <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/interview/an-interview-with-edmund-white/>, accessed 20 September 2019.

### **3 *Is it all true?* The intersection of memory, truth-telling and ethics in memoir**

The reader becomes the judge, the policing power in charge of verifying the authenticity of the signature and the consistency of the signer's behaviour, the extent to which he respects or fails to honor the contractual agreement he has signed.

De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*<sup>79</sup>

Memoirs are never the whole truth, never truth-ful. They're errant, fallible, fictive human constructions.

Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction*<sup>80</sup>

*Is this really happening?* That's the question I asked myself most often as a child. *Is this – can this – really all be true?* That's the question I asked myself over and over as I made tentative steps towards what would become *Maggie & Me*. This is not surprising – as a child I was routinely told by adults not to speak about what went on at home so much so that I began to doubt those things happened at all. Bruises told a different story. But eventually bruises fade and memory is all that's left. For example, I couldn't ask my sister about what had happened to me at the hands of Logan when our mother was away in hospital for some months because I had gone to such great lengths at the time to shield her from what was happening (I later did ask and it turns out I hadn't shielded her all that successfully). All I had to go on were

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<sup>79</sup> de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, p.71.

<sup>80</sup> Couser, p.168.

my memories and I had been warned from an early age not to trust those. Now I was asking readers to trust me – inviting them to judge me, in de Man’s terms. In order to have readers to engage with me at all I first had to persuade my agent and editors, who, rightly, asked me: *Is it all true?* This question remains, to some extent, unanswerable. It’s the question I’m asked most often by readers but not in a manner that suggests they disbelieve me, rather that they wish such things hadn’t happened: *I wish it wasn’t true for you.* It’s the question I would not have faced had I published *Maggie & Me* as a novel because the novelist isn’t claiming truth and, in any case, can point to reams of research, interviews and other source material – as I’m able to do with *You Will Be Se Safe Here*.

Choosing memoir as a genre over fiction or autofiction meant entering into what Lejeune famously describes as ‘the autobiographical pact’.<sup>81</sup> Couser cites this as ‘the critical concept’<sup>82</sup> in memoir, distinguishing it from all other literary genres. This pact operates on a number of different levels, all of which intersect as ethics (or, for this writer, anxiety). And all of which I had to work through, not just in writing then editing and finally publishing, but in the preparatory research and emotional labour undertaken before a single word was written. Lejeune’s pact is not a legal instrument – although I did, of course, have to sign a contract with my publisher, which I’ll consider momentarily. Lejeune’s pact has two signatories: you and me. You are the reader. I am the narrator, protagonist and author of the work – critically all bear the same name: Damian Barr. This pact has no end date – once your truth is published, it’s out, you can’t take it back. Couser outlines it thus:

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<sup>81</sup> Lejeune.

<sup>82</sup> Couser, p.80.

The pact is a matter of literary convention, not of law. It's a tacit understanding between reader and writer. This is not to say that memoir writers may not run afoul of laws; they certainly may. What it means is that the pact does not constitute a legal contract between author and reader (although the author and publisher may have one). Nor is the writer swearing to tell the truth, all of the truth, and nothing but the truth. The pact does not promise, much less guarantee, factual truth on every level; rather, it affirms the author's identity with the work's narrator and protagonist.<sup>83</sup>

Is this truth as opposed to lies? Is truth accuracy, sincerity, a form of authenticity? And whose truth is it anyway?

So, Lejeune's pact is primarily a statement of intent. That is not to say the writer won't recount a truth that others later claim to be a lie – I have been accused of lying by family members in one-star reviews on Amazon. It is to say, the writer intends to set out to tell their truth as they understand it at the time of writing. The reader of memoir signs up to this knowing their own memory is probably not perfect and so they allow the writer the same leeway they grant themselves: as Couser notes, 'readers need to acknowledge that memoir's reliance on memory renders it fallible; likewise they need to accept that memoir is, inevitably, to a degree fictive (not *fictional*).'<sup>84</sup> Before the writer can promise to at least aim for the truth they must first make the reader believe in this *I* who is narrating and starring in the story and whose name graces the cover. This identity claim, as it pertains to memoir, shifts the central question from *Is this true?* to *Who am I?* Or, as memoir is necessarily about the past,

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<sup>83</sup> Couser, p.81.

<sup>84</sup> Couser, p.81.

*Who was I?* It might also be: *Who could I have been?* Or *Who would I like you to think I was?* Undoubtedly – and precisely because I am identified as narrator, protagonist and author – I want you, the reader, to believe in me, to believe what I am claiming and even to like me, sad as that might seem. I had to accept I had – have – limited control over this because, as de Man says, ‘the reader becomes the judge.’<sup>85</sup> So, before you can choose me for your football team or leave me on the side-lines, I must first make you believe in me. So, you might think I deserve to be locked in a wardrobe and thrown off a slag heap by my Catholic friends for insulting the Pope, as happens in Chapter 2 of *Maggie & Me*, but you should be in no doubt that it happened: as Couser observes, ‘In fiction a narrator may be—and often famously is—unreliable ... In non-fiction, never. In non-fiction the reader must believe that the narrator is speaking truth.’<sup>86</sup>

Writing memoir is a process of self-discovery shared with the reader in which the reader is asked to do some work and invited to agree, or disagree, with the writer’s own evolving take on who they were or are and so might yet be: ‘it requires the participation of the reader’.<sup>87</sup> Readers judge and mostly they have agreed that what I say happened did actually happen, though they may feel differently about those events. There is one scene I have considered changing in a future edition because it evokes a different, and troubling, interpretation that I had not intended. In Chapter 11 I describe being assaulted in the kitchen of my home by a man at one of the parties that happened most weeks on benefits pay day (pp.166–170). He pushes my head into the freezer compartment and holds the door shut while pinning me against the fridge-freezer: ‘Cold dawn is breaking behind the fridge door and spilling

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<sup>85</sup> de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* p.71.

<sup>86</sup> Couser, p.14.

<sup>87</sup> Gornick, *The Situation and the Story*, p.15.



across the floor when he's on me, grabbing my arms and wrapping them round the fridge-freezer while pushing his thin hard body against mine, his crucifix belt buckle stabbing into the small of my back.<sup>188</sup> After reading this some readers have asked if I was raped. Initially, I was shocked by this interpretation. I also felt some obscure sense of shame. Had I been raped? No. At least, I didn't think so. Was this another trauma buried so deep I couldn't face it? On re-reading this scene (particularly the detail about his belt-buckle pushing into my back) in the context of a home where I was abused in every other way, it makes sense to think this man raped me. Because it makes sense, and because I suppose he could have done, I have left it in though I continue to correct it (gently) if asked. This interpretation is not my lived reality but it is a realistic thought: the reader judges.

Reader and writer agree to head out together in search of Edmund White's horizon of truth but it is the writer who must lead the way. I did not always know where I was going or even where I had been. Pace L.P. Hartley in *The Go Between*, the past is not a place – you cannot find it on a map. The past is a time and as such its only constant is change. The past changes every time we (re)visit, memories refuse to stay where we left them and when we do eventually lay our hands on them again they are not always as we recalled. They change because we change and they change again in the recounting. Gornick notes that 'We are constantly changing our personal narrative so that it matches our idea of who we are and in what role we see ourselves.'<sup>89</sup> *Maggie & Me* would doubtless be a different book if the *I* of now was writing it.

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<sup>88</sup> Damian Barr, *Maggie & Me* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.166.

<sup>89</sup> Judith Ortiz Cofer, '¿La Verdad?: Notes on the Writing of *Silent Dancing*, a Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood (A Memoir in Prose and Poetry)', in *Truth in Nonfiction: Essay*, edited by David Lazar (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2009), p.29.

In Chapter 3 I recount the experience of waking in the middle of the night vomiting violently before being thrown by Logan into a hot bath in which I nearly drown (pp.42–43). This was one of the most traumatic scenes to write and I avoided it for a long time. I had told this story aloud to my therapist and my husband but never written it down. It was only as I wrote it – word after word, sentence after sentence – then read it back out loud that I made a possible connection between the soup and being sick. Twenty-five years after the incident I was gaining a new understanding of what had happened that night through writing it all down. I had not been suspicious at the time that Logan was cooking for me and allowing me more food than usual; I was just delighted not to be hungry. I had always assumed I'd vomited because I had a bug. It was only as I described myself noticing the carrots floating in the bathwater around me and realising I hadn't noticed carrots in the soup that I began to wonder what else might have been in it. I cannot say he poisoned me, with salt or anything else, because I do not know and cannot know. But it would be in keeping with his character as revealed by his actions. So, I allowed for this possibility and let the reader decide:

Chunks float in an oily scum and the steam carries their stench. I start focusing on details, noticing lumps of carrot and wondering why there's always carrot in sick, then realise there must have been some in the soup.

The soup. The soup he made for me but did not eat. The soup I'm now sitting in.<sup>90</sup>

The / narrator here is Damian aged eight but it is also Damian the writer aged 28 (at the time of writing) reliving this experience – because so much of my process

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<sup>90</sup> Barr, *Maggie & Me*, p.44.

was not, in the end, about remembering, it was about reliving. This I will examine further in my conclusion.

As I committed to memoir as a genre and began the necessary processes of reliving and rewriting my past, I was deeply aware, and profoundly anxious, of the implications of the James Frey case. Frey had brought the genre, often flirting with shadiness, into disrepute after it was revealed he had exaggerated key experiences in *A Million Little Pieces* (2003). Couser outlines the furore thus:

Among Frey's many 'embellishments' of his story of his life on and off drugs was his inflation of a few hours in the clink into a period of three months—hardly a rounding error! More egregious was his claim that a girl from his town who died in a tragic train accident was his only high school friend. In fact, she was three years older than he, and her parents denied they had a close relationship. Oprah stood by Frey initially, but many of her fans did not, and eventually she withdrew her endorsement. Not only that, she had Frey on her show and berated him and his editor (Nan Talese) for knowingly misleading the public.<sup>91</sup>

Frey eventually admitted to some 'embellishments'. What were the consequences of all this? I interviewed Frey at my Literary Salon in 2010 and learned this from him: Frey's publisher offered disillusioned readers their money back, which fewer than 100 people subsequently asked for; nobody featured in the book brought legal action; and Frey went on to get a big deal for his novel *Bright Shiny Morning*. At the time of writing, the film adaptation of *A Million Little Pieces* is being shown in cinemas worldwide. In the long term, Frey and the genre he took

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<sup>91</sup> Couser, p.17.

such liberties with have emerged unscathed – in fact, both are thriving. In the case of Frey, many readers immediately rushed to defend him, claiming he was speaking *their* truth. This is the so-called ‘higher-truth defence’:

This is the argument that fabrications and exaggerations in books like these are in the service of more fully conveying ‘what it is really like’ to be Guatemalan or in recovery or whatever the theme of the life story happens to be. *A Million Little Pieces* tries to capture the experience of recovering from addiction. Readers don’t care whether these things literally happened to James Frey, because they didn’t buy the book to find out about James Frey. They bought it to learn about addiction and recovery. James Frey’s job as a writer is only to convey that experience.<sup>92</sup>

I knew I was part of more than one minority status group that stood to benefit from seeing their own experiences validated in a published book – based on my own validating experience of seeing aspects of my life reflected back in the memoirs of Galloway, Sanghera and Winterson. Indeed, as I wrote I thought of people I’d grown up with who’d faced similar adversities. The thought of helping them, and others, feel seen pushed me on. It could have pushed me into Freysian waters. Did it matter if I appropriated the experiences of others so long as I did so convincingly? This leads to the so-called ‘surrogacy defence’:

This is the theory that, although a particular event recounted in the book may not have happened to the author, it happened to someone. Such a book, then, is really the life story of a group. The memoirist should be understood as

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<sup>92</sup> Louis Menand, ‘Literary Hoaxes and the Ethics of Authorship’, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/12/10/literary-hoaxes-and-the-ethics-of-authorship>, accessed 27 July 2019.

representing all African-American men in the era of Jim Crow, or all indigenous people in Guatemala. Experiences common to the group are therefore legitimately represented as happening to a single, quasi-allegorical figure.<sup>93</sup>

But Frey was not representing himself as such a figure – he was claiming: *this is me, these things happened to me*. This is the claim I wanted to be able to make. In order to be able to make it I had to satisfy legal standards, which were becoming clear after I signed my deal, and my own ethical and moral standards, which I was working out. I did not know, until I interviewed him, that Frey had written *A Million Little Pieces* as a novel. He'd shopped it round unsuccessfully before finally receiving a big offer to publish it as a memoir. His autobiographical novel was repackaged as an autobiography. He signed a publishing deal but in doing so broke the autobiographical pact, which is why Oprah and so many of his readers were so angry:

...the outcry over Frey's 'embellishments' demonstrates that readers read memoirs differently than they read novels. Because the memoir is not supposed to require fiction's willing suspension of disbelief, readers invest in it differently. First they buy the book, then they buy into the story ... And when they learn that an author has taken license with this supposedly nonfictional prose, they are likely to feel betrayed.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Menand.

<sup>94</sup> Couser, p.17.

I did not want to betray potential readers, my family or myself. This demanded constant evaluation and the balancing of my own need to be heard, the needs of my story, the legal and other demands of my publisher and my loyalty to family, friends and community. I first had to consider the legal obligations of truth because chronic anxiety about being sued by family members and also by the man I call 'Logan' in *Maggie & Me* caused me to start and stop the book many times. It was partly this fear that drove me to experiment with autofiction and fiction, to hide myself and stay safe where I could just make stuff up rather than relive what had actually happened. Right up to publication, I considered repaying my advance and walking away because I was afraid, not just of being sued, but of being beaten by Logan in court as I had been beaten by him in private – this would have been a very public disavowal of my lived experience as a survivor. I knew he knew what he'd done – not only had he been there, of course, but he'd acknowledged his cognisance to me, and only me, as far as I know. He had admitted he had hurt me but he did not believe that what he had done was wrong – there was no apology because, in his eyes, there was no abuse. I was simply making it all up. Logan claimed ignorance rather than innocence and some people, not least of all my half-brother (his son), remain invested in his version of the truth. As a child I had gone to great lengths to lie about broken bones and bruises. So, who would believe me now? Could I even believe myself? It's clear from the soup scene that my own memory had more to yield up to me and was not as reliable as I thought.

Lejeune's pact is not legal but, for my memoir to reach your hands, a legal contract would have to be signed. I had to sign a contract with my publisher affirming that every word I'd written was true or at least verifiable by at least one other person. I knew, or thought I did, what had happened in my childhood and knew that the other

people involved knew too (or thought they did). But could I prove any of this if called upon? Often there were only two people present: me and Logan or me and another abuser or person with an interest in keeping their actions secret (for fear of shame or reprisal from the family or community). Couser is clear that such 'truth claims' are one of the most complex aspects of ethics for the memoir writer:

As a result, memoirists assume two distinct kinds of obligations – one to the historical or biographical record and another to the people they depict. While utter fidelity to factual truth in memoir is not possible – and may not even be desirable – we also need to insist on some degree of veracity.<sup>95</sup>

I worried I might not be able to meet all these obligations. If I couldn't, what might the consequences be: for me, the other real people (re)created as characters in the text, the publisher and the reader?

First, I had to submit my finished manuscript for a reading by a lawyer who returned it to me replete with pages of edits I was instructed to make in order to protect my publisher, and myself, from potential legal action by persons depicted in the text. I had to pay for half the cost of this legal reading and incorporate all the edits in order to be indemnified – so that if someone did sue (a fear that kept me awake) my publisher would cover my (potentially very large) legal costs. That felt to me like a tax on truth but I paid it to protect myself. These edits were sometimes big and sometimes small but always important because they forced me to balance, as a practitioner, what was central to my story with what was core to my sense of self. Where possible I tried to put story over self when the two needs were not concomitant – this process was undoubtedly easier during the editing rather than

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<sup>95</sup> Couser, p.10.

writing. Libel was their and my biggest concern. I was familiar with libel law from my career as a journalist. Again, I could have avoided this potential charge entirely by writing a *roman à clef*. But I did not want to do this because I wanted to understand my own truth better through the writing process and to share that with readers so it might help them find their own truth. To begin with, I did also want Logan to know I was no longer keeping his secrets: as Couser acknowledges, 'In certain circumstances – like a history of child abuse – memoirs can accuse and condemn. This too is significant work.'<sup>96</sup> This was not a noble objective, but it was, undeniably, part of my motivation at the start. I could, after all, have written this privately – nobody was making me publish a memoir. I did also want to show very directly the impact on my family and community of the policies Maggie had imposed on the country – to take readers behind the headlines about income inequality into a house with no carpets on the floor and frost on the inside of the windows. I knew Maggie was not long for this world and that soon she would be beatified by the Right and demonised by the Left and that the truth – my truth – lay somewhere in between.<sup>97</sup> My warring feelings about her are revealed in the last lines of the last chapter when I address her directly:

My other mother. I want to watch you walk through the world before you leave and if you stumble I'll rush forward to catch you. I'd like to think I'd show you the kindness you never showed me. I'd like you to owe me a favour. I want to show you that I did it. I want you to be proud of me.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Couser, p.14.

<sup>97</sup> I was pleased when Boyd Tonkin noted this in his review of *Maggie & Me* in the *Independent*. 'Right-wing advocates of this book will treat it as a precious tribute wrenched from an alien tribe. Conversely, to the left Barr may count as a heretic and a renegade. But neither response fits the case.' Tonkin, Boyd, 'The Thatcher of Most Writers Belongs to Myth. Time for a Full-Dress Portrait', <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/boyd-tonkin-the-thatcher-of-most-writers-belongs-to-myth-time-for-a-full-dress-portrait-8568647.html>, accessed 27 November 2019.

<sup>98</sup> Barr, *Maggie & Me*, p.240.



Libel is what kept me awake but I had given little thought to other areas of the law such as privacy. Under European law we all have a right to a private life.<sup>99</sup> Being featured in a book, positively or negatively, is a breach of your right to a private life. I did not know this when I signed my contract. Rachel Cusk's novel *The Last Supper* was pulped in 2009 – supposedly fictional characters were able to directly identify themselves and their experiences of a group holiday with the writer in Italy.<sup>100</sup> I did not want my memoir to meet a similar fate. I wrongly assumed that only those depicted negatively would have cause for complaint. So, after Bloomsbury bought my book my editor told me I couldn't use real names or even places that might enable people to pick themselves out or be identified by others. Obviously, the Maggie of the title was exempt – she was impossible to ignore throughout my childhood. Other than Maggie and me, I would have to give everybody new names – even my parents, though they're mostly referred to as Mum and Dad. I approached this delicately because, as Couser notes, 'names can anchor a whole pattern of allusion'.<sup>101</sup> There are many possible allusions readers may connect with names – if I called a character Myra you couldn't probably help but think of Myra Hindley. And there are allusions for the writer too – I couldn't christen someone with a name that already belonged to someone I knew. So, considering likely allusions for reader and writer I made a grid of banned names. I renamed my Dad Jack and my mum Sandra – names that working class Scots would have been given at the time they'd been born (I checked National Statistics to be sure). Then I sat down to write the rest of

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<sup>99</sup> At the time I started writing in 2008.

<sup>100</sup> Lynn Barber, 'Rachel Cusk: A Fine Contempt', <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/aug/30/rachel-cusk-lynn-barber>, accessed 27 November 2019.

<sup>101</sup> Couser, p.171.

the book.<sup>102</sup> Nothing happened. I couldn't make these characters come to life. I could describe things that had happened to them but they were oddly removed and distant – at one point my editor even described my parents as 'ghosts'. Jack and Sandra meant nothing to me. Frustrated, I switched to Mum and Dad and things improved dramatically but this would not satisfy my legal editor and I would have to do this to be protected at publication. I was interviewing Janice Galloway about her memoir *All Made Up* (2011) at my Salon and asked her if she'd faced this problem.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, she had. Janice advised me to go ahead and write it with all the real names, then go back and change them all. Eureka! She gave me a second piece of invaluable advice: choose names that scan. This is more important than it sounds. When reading aloud at events you don't want to stumble – this would be an extra-textual cue to readers, who are firstly listeners, that something about the text is not right, is somehow sticking in your throat. As events, like my own Salon, increasingly make up for what has been lost in books' coverage in newspapers, the writer is increasingly called upon to perform their work – these performative utterances must be as believable as the words on the page. So, I wrote the first draft with all the names as they were in real life, then did a search and replace with new names that scanned exactly. In the instance of my girlfriend turned best friend, I gave her a name she hated so I invited her to choose another and she went for Heather. She is the only person I extended this privilege to because I felt she was the only person who had really, truly been there for me during the time I was writing about.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Bloomsbury won *Maggie & Me* at auction based on what is known as a partial – three chapters. I then had eighteen months to write and edit it before publication on 5 May 2013. Margaret Thatcher died 8 April 2013. This undoubtedly gave the book extra attention.

<sup>103</sup> 11 September 2011, <https://soundcloud.com/theliterarysalon/literarysalon-janice-galloway>, accessed 27 November 2019.

<sup>104</sup> She was the only person in the book that I let read it before it was published – not because she was the only person whose opinion mattered – I deeply needed to know what my parents and siblings thought – but because her opinion was the only one that really mattered to my legal editor as a potential witness. Mark was dead by this time.

Legally, I also had to change physical features that might be potentially identifying. Again, I wrote people as they seemed to me so I could connect with my feelings about them, then went back and altered their appearance. This was harder than simply changing names and I found myself tempted by Dickensian tropes, particularly with Logan, who I wanted to seem monstrous when, in fact, he was handsome, which is partly why my Mum fell for him. Because most members of my family still live where they did, I also had to change addresses and locations. I also wanted to do all this because I wanted to protect them as much as possible – I did not want them to feel, like some of the real people depicted in Cusk’s novel and Frey’s memoir, betrayed. Some of the edits I was asked to make surprised me. At one point I say my friend Kev ‘stole’ a torch.<sup>105</sup> The lawyer advised that I should change this to ‘borrowed’ or ‘took’ but I refused for a couple of reasons. Firstly, Kev did return the torch but he didn’t know he would when he took it and he took it without asking. Secondly, he was using it to illuminate a porn magazine he had somehow got his hands on. ‘Stole’ underscores the illicitness of our mission and also the differences between me and Kev – I would never, ever have stolen something. I would borrow, Kev would steal. Finally, because he used the torch to illuminate a porn magazine we had masturbated over together I very much doubted he’d come forward, decades later and sue me for libel (assuming he had read my book at all and was able to pick himself out, having had his name and identifying features changed). So far, Kev hasn’t protested.

My legal editor asked me if there was any evidence, beyond my memories, of the neglect and abuse I claimed to have experienced. Just being asked this was challenging – when you have been told as a child nobody will believe if you tell them

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<sup>105</sup> Barr, *Maggie & Me*, p.72.

what's happening at home and then someone, who is supposed to be on your side, questions this, it is painful. This gave me some insight into what publishing might be like and added to my anxiety. My parents did not always know what was happening to me because they were not always there or always sober or much aware of anything beyond their own affairs (literally). A lot of what I was writing would be news to them, especially my Dad because he did not have custody of us. Remember: I was repeatedly told by Logan that he would hurt my sister if I ever told anyone he hurt me.<sup>106</sup> This was a very effective incentive. Over the years I had confided in two close friends about what had happened to me in the time after my parents' divorce, when me and my mum and my sister lived with Logan, and these same friends witnessed the years after that, when we all lived in a three-bedroom council house with her new (alcoholic) boyfriend Dodger, my less-than-law-abiding uncle and many cousins. Heather could corroborate that what I was writing was also what I had told her, some of which she had seen for herself. Mark could too. I had also told some of this to two high school teachers named in *Maggie & Me* as Miss Campbell and Mrs Shaw. They all said they would be willing to support my claims and, if necessary, write letters. I also knew there would be some evidence in my medical files of childhood injuries I'd explained away. This would have to be enough and it did satisfy my lawyer. What was shocking was that after publication others came forward to say they had known 'things were not right at home' – neighbours, classmates, teachers. While this was in some sense reassuring – I hadn't made it all up after all – it was also depressing: why had nobody intervened to help me?

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<sup>106</sup> 'Wan word,' he whispers, 'an yer wee sister's next for a bath'. This is how I chose to end the chapter in which Logan almost drowns in me in the bath. Barr, *Maggie & Me*, p.46.

Lejeune's pact is actualised on the boilerplate page at the front of *Maggie & Me*, which, unusually, I worked on with my editor. Legally, my memoir had to have a disclaimer and, as Couser notes, 'A genuine, specific disclaimer can go a long way to establishing trust.'<sup>107</sup> My disclaimer says: 'This book is a work of non-fiction based on the life, experiences and recollections of Damian Barr. In some cases names of people have been changed to protect the privacy of others.' I chose this wording for the same reason I chose not to publish my story as a novel: I wanted to proclaim – *this is true. Life, experiences and recollections: this is my truth*, which is the only truth any of us can tell: my mum could write a different version of events, as could my dad, my sister, my brother, any of the people in those pages. Memory is relative and every relative has different memories. Their truth is their own, although my own truth is the only version of events being published and that moral responsibility weighs on me still – I particularly do not want readers to think ill of my mum or dad. To me, their divorce and everything that happened after created a space in my life where bad things happened. I no longer blame them and don't want readers to either but that is not how I felt at the start. I only arrived at this more peaceful place after several angry drafts. Writing changed my feelings about my past, if not the past itself. To begin with I very much did blame my parents. In fact, I was furious with them. Those first drafts were rages. But in writing and rewriting I was forced to let go of the comfortable certainty of blame and get closer to the actual truth, which was, perhaps inevitably, much messier and even darker than I had been telling myself.

I could meet some of my legal obligations and my obligations to others by verifying key facts – my Mum has an old biscuit tin bursting with birth certificates and other official documents, which she was happy to let me rifle through. I was surprised

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<sup>107</sup> Couser, p.84.

to learn that my parents' actual divorce didn't come through until later than I had remembered. We were not a Kodak moment family, so I have only two photographs of me as a baby – I found these among other photos, some of which had helpful dates scrawled on. I decided early on that I did not want to include pictures of my family, partly for legal reasons and partly to protect their privacy but also because, as I have said, I was attempting to co-opt the tools of fiction, which meant inviting the reader to conjure me and my family as characters in their own mind's eye. Other useful *aides memoires* were school report cards and even old jotters with dates on. I did write sporadic diaries, which I now store in an old trunk I bought as a student. One is a burgundy Filofax – a totally 1980s' artefact that speaks directly to my desire to be somehow better than I was, a yuppie. Another is a *Smash Hits* diary from 1988 with spiral-perm era Kylie smiling on the cover. I resisted these for months as a form of memory quality control – if I couldn't instantly recall something then surely it wasn't worth writing about. I kept thinking of Borges's idea that writing (and living) is as much about forgetting as remembering.<sup>108</sup> Consulting them felt like cheating. Finally, I succumbed. My diaries were both more and less useful than I had predicted. For starters, I had recorded what I ate in minute detail but simply left out the days where there wasn't enough to eat – when all the benefits money had been drunk by all the adults in the house so we had no dinner. I didn't record my shame but it was there in the absence of accounting of meals on Thursdays and Fridays when the week's money was gone. I wrote lots about school but it was all very *he said, she said* – I also seem to have had more friends than I remembered. I crammed some pages with tiny script and on others slip into a pseudo-copperplate.

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<sup>108</sup> Borges explores this idea in the story 'Funes the Memorious'. The title character, Ireneo Funes, has a horse-riding accident after which he is able to record everything around him in excruciatingly particular detail. This is both a talent and a curse. The first English translation appeared in 1954 in *Avon Modern Writing No. 2*.

On one page I appear to have written in blood. I wrote about my sexuality in code – referring to my best-friend, named Mark in *Maggie & Me*, as Luke.<sup>109</sup> For a while I tried to keep count of how many times I masturbated each day – Mark and I were competing. I signified each event with a letter ‘W’. What is depressing is how matter-of-fact I am about incidents like finding someone unconscious in our front garden as I arrived home from school or calling 999 to get the police to come out and break up a party. Recently I interviewed Tracey Thorn about *Another Planet*, her edited diaries of growing up in the 1970s in Brookmans Park, in which she writes:

When I want to know what really happened, instead of what I think happened; what I really felt, instead of what I’d like to think I felt; what I really did, instead of what I say I did, I look at my diary.<sup>110</sup>

She writes this as if her diary is the raw material that she remixed in her subsequent memoirs before going on to acknowledge this is not the case: ‘However confessional it looks there are pages I’m not showing you. It’s about power and control, in the way that writing always is.’<sup>111</sup> It was clear, on rereading my diaries, that I was editing myself even then – I left significant incidents out, wrote them partly in code and even hid my diaries under the floorboards in my room in case they were found and I was outed. For a while, they confused me. I found myself referring back to them for exact dates – when did I meet Heather? Was it the first day at school? The second? The third? I got myself in a tangle of time. This was partly to do with my journalistic experience, which was proving very difficult to unlearn – I was used to keeping myself out of the story and having to find more than one source for every

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<sup>109</sup> Luke Skywalker.

<sup>110</sup> Tracey Thorn, *Another Planet* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2019), p.1.

<sup>111</sup> Thorn, Tracey, <https://soundcloud.com/theliterarysalon/tracey-thorn-literary-salon>, accessed 28 November 2019.

piece of information. This difficulty is not uncommon for journalists who go on to write memoir but I did not know this at the time, only felt it:

Writers come to memoir from other genres all the time, and that primary genre (a habitual way of making meaning) seems to make all the difference. Those who have been journalists understand reality as something that can be corroborated: facts can and must be checked ... Writers schooled in fiction often seem concerned with the creation of a narrator—who's telling this story and what does he or she know?<sup>112</sup>

After months of grappling with Chapter 9, where Mark and I start at Brannock High School, I realised the incontrovertible truth of what I felt about what I remembered of that day – and indeed every day since – had to be more than a mere accumulation of facts: it did not matter exactly what day I met Heather, rather that I met her and immediately threw a strawberry milkshake over her and that we became, and remain, the best of friends despite this. Equally, I wrote several long scenes about moving house – in the book we move house four times, in reality we moved six times. Reading it back I realised that you, the reader, did not need to know about each move. You just needed to know my life and schooling were disrupted and that my family's social trajectory was down. So, I demolished two houses entirely and focused instead on what had happened inside them, allocating different events to different houses. I was coming to learn what Gornick makes clear:

Truth in a memoir is achieved not through a recital of actual events; it is achieved when the reader comes to believe that the writer is working hard to

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<sup>112</sup> Mark Doty, 'Bride in Beige', in *Truth in Nonfiction: Essay*, edited by David Lazar (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2009).



engage with the experience at hand. What happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the large sense that the writer is able to *make* of what happened. For that the power of a writing imagination is required. As V.S. Pritchett once said of the genre 'It's all in the art. You get no credit for living'.<sup>113</sup>

This is a tough lesson to learn – I did actually want some credit for having survived my childhood but simply showing day-by-day, house-by-house what I had survived would not be enough. I would have to show how and why I had survived. This meant manipulating chronology to highlight character development – I made the decision to live my life forward and in the present tense, as I will explore further shortly. The decisions I made about time – what to include, exclude and what to put where – were the same decisions I made writing my novel, the same fictive techniques. As Couser notes:

One fundamental aspect of any narrative is the ordering principle behind the sequence of events. Chronology is the dominant ordering principle in memoir, probably because it seems intuitively apt, even inevitable: after all, we live our lives in chronological order.<sup>114</sup>

My diaries and the contents of my mum's biscuit tin were useful for some legal verification but they were not helpful creatively. In Gornick's terms, my diaries and the past they depicted were simply the *situation*. My memoir would have to be much more than that – it would have to be my *story*:

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<sup>113</sup> Gornick, *The Situation and the Story*, p.91.

<sup>114</sup> Couser, p.64.

Every work of literature has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say.<sup>115</sup>

It was impossible, for me, to move towards any sense of story without first recounting the situation and of course the very act of trying to capture events caused them to shift, appear and sometimes disappear altogether. Only while looking back after managing a first draft was it possible to begin to try and hear the quieter story over the noise of the situation. As my agent said to me, you can't edit nothing. Writing was about capturing the situation and editing was about finding the story within that, restructuring the narrative to reveal that insight, to share the thing I realised I had come to say. I began writing my memoir by simply recounting my situation, which led me to understand it differently, and so I began to shape my story – altering chronology, moving houses, leaving spaces for the reader to judge. At last, after three years of struggling with decisions about genre and ethical anxieties, I was beginning to understand what I thought I wanted to say, to who and why. I had shifted my practice as a writer from a fact-seeking journalist to a story-telling memoirist. My story would be more than my situation, just as my truth was proving to be more than simply an accumulation of facts.

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<sup>115</sup> Gornick, *The Situation and the Story*, p.13.

#### 4 Conclusion: *Do I feel better now?* Trauma and healing: catharsis as process and emotional labour in memoir

If you are silent about your pain, they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it.

Zora Neale Hurston<sup>116</sup>

At its best, life writing does not register pre-existing selfhood, but rather somehow creates it. This inverts the intuitive idea that one lives one's life, then simply writes it down. Instead, in writing one's life one may bring a new self into being. If this is true, then in reading life narrative, we witness self-invention.

Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction*<sup>117</sup>

*Do I Feel Better Now?* This is the hardest of all the questions I asked myself before, during and after writing, editing and publishing *Maggie & Me*.<sup>118</sup> I have clearly addressed the other questions central to my process: *Why not a novel?* Because I wanted to move beyond the *bildungsroman*. *Why write a memoir?* Because, imperfect as it is, memoir is the only genre where I can be me and you, the reader, both know and expect this. *Is it all true?* You decide. It's certainly my truth. *Do I Feel Better Now?* Ask me today and I'll give you one answer. Ask me tomorrow and I'll give you another. And you might very well believe neither because, 'the reader becomes the judge.'<sup>119</sup> Before grappling with this question yet again I want to unpack

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<sup>116</sup> Cited in Susan Green, *Through a Black Lens* (Bloomington, IN: XLIBRIS, 2017).

<sup>117</sup> Couser, p.14.

<sup>118</sup> Publishing remains an open-ended process so I continue to ask myself this question.

<sup>119</sup> de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, p.71.

it, considering the emotional labour undertaken in (re)presenting trauma and healing, the therapeutic possibilities of testimony and the need for catharsis that typifies (some say tarnishes) memoir as a genre.

The trauma I speak of here is primarily my own but it is also the harm done to my family and community by the policies of Maggie. I open *Maggie & Me* with an introduction on the night of two major shocks, one personal, one political: the Brighton Bombing and the first night after my Mum left my Dad and moved us in with Logan. This introduction establishes right away how inescapable (and indestructible) Maggie is, how much my Mum and all the other adults hate her and how awed I am by Maggie and their hatred of her. Elsewhere in the book, whenever Maggie is responsible for a direct hit on me and those around me, I make this clear – as with the closure of the Ravenscraig Steelworks where my Dad works; the enforcement of Section 28, which prevents my favourite teacher from supporting me when I confide in her about being gay; and the terrifying government health campaign about AIDS. I wanted to show the impact of Maggie on me and everyone around me. I did not want to privatise my pain *or* take sole credit for my survival. My Mum, Dad, sister and brother experienced their own pain, as well as being hurt by witnessing mine at the time and reading about it after in *Maggie & Me*:

The term 'trauma' describes the experience of both victims who have suffered directly—and those who suffer with them, or through them, or for them if only by reading about trauma.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Laura Frost, 'After Lot's Daughters: Kathryn Harrison and the Making of Memory' in *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, edited by Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p.218.

Again, such testimony is a unique function of memoir. I was surprised, upon publication, by how readily the community I am from and the wider country engaged with this testimony. That the publication of *Maggie & Me* coincided with the death of Thatcher, and a moment of shared national self-examination, undoubtedly helped.<sup>121</sup> Telling my truth unexpectedly offered opportunities for healing beyond myself:

The memoir and all forms of personal testimony not only expand the boundaries of identity construction and the contours of the self but also lay claim to potential territories of community. In complex and often unexpected ways, the singular 'me' evolves into a plural 'us' and writing that bears witness to the extreme experience of solitary individuals can sometimes begin to repair the tears in the collective social fabric.<sup>122</sup>

I say unexpectedly because this was one of many particular responses I had not anticipated. I was learning to let go – not just to let the reader judge, but also to let go of their judgement.

Returning briefly to the concept of 'practice-based research' I outlined in my introduction, whereby the creative thing itself makes the new contribution to knowledge (not any subsequent analysis),<sup>123</sup> the unexpected opportunity for wider healing represented yet more knowledge novel to this creator. Re-reading *Maggie & Me* nearly seven years after publication and examining it critically, this creator was struck by just how much novel knowledge his practice-led research brought to light and continues to bring. When I started writing I imagined (foolishly) I would simply be

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<sup>121</sup> Adam Mars-Jones, 'Maggie & Me by Damian Barr – Review', <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/apr/25/maggie-me-damian-barr-review>, accessed 27 November 2019.

<sup>122</sup> Frost, p.217.

<sup>123</sup> As defined by Candy and cited in Ashworth, p.6.

retelling stories I already knew – after all, this had all happened to me, hadn't it? A few months in, and precious few words later, I began realising I was going to have to do much more than try to remember – I would have to relive then recount then reconstruct my experiences as a narrative using the tools of fiction.<sup>124</sup> As highlighted in the previous chapter, drafting the soup scene made clear the possibility that Logan may have poisoned me – something I had never allowed myself to consider before. Turning to my diaries I discovered a different self yet again before being beset by anxieties about chronology: what happened where and more importantly when. Each stage of the process – writing, editing and publishing – brought (brings) new questions. The act of writing about my past was so radically different from talking about my past that I wondered if I could be relied upon as a narrator. My situation, in Gornick's terms, was far more complex and painful even than I had worked through in therapy and the writing process was revealing this. I spent the first three years of writing gaining much (usually unwelcome) knowledge about my situation but felt no closer to comprehending what my story might be. Only after realising that my story had to be something more than my situation and that I was allowed to be at least as (un)reliable as any other narrator did I feel able to begin to carve my story out of my situation. To really begin writing.

The idea that writing about the most difficult events from your own life must somehow be cathartic remains enticing. The flipside of this is the notion that spending months or even years writing about yourself is somehow self-indulgent. This axis of catharsis-narcissism underpins much criticism of memoir. Its most

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<sup>124</sup> I had done some reliving under clinical supervision in therapy – being talked back into the place and time where I experienced trauma. I recreated this state while I was writing. Sometimes I wrote in 'white' ink in Word so that I could not read words back and so was not responding to what I had already written but rather writing what I was feeling. I also saturated myself in the place and time – I rewatched the television and films of my childhood and these were effective emotional prompts. I also made repeated visits to the place I grew up in and did informal interviews with family and friends.

famous proponent is William Gass who, in response to a series of incredibly popular memoirs, wrote: 'Are there any motives for the enterprise that aren't tainted with conceit or a desire for revenge or a wish for justification?' He went on: 'To have written an autobiography is already to have made yourself a monster.'<sup>125</sup> I'd read Gass's essay before embarking on my memoir and I continue to encounter this criticism, in all its guises. Underlying it is the assumption of presumptuousness – who are *you* to tell your story? It is expressed to Janice Galloway in *All Made Up* (2011) when her mother says: 'Who do you think you are?'<sup>126</sup> I was 27 when I started writing *Maggie & Me* – young, gay and from a working-class village in the post-industrial west of Scotland. My first, and hardest, task was to give myself permission to write. As I have said, reading the memoirs of Galloway, Sanghera and Winterson empowered me – their stories spoke to me and they had dared to publish and even won awards. I was surprised to learn that Diana Athill, a privileged woman from a privileged background, also faced this barrier when embarking on her memoirs. 'YOU ARE NOT THE ONLY PEBBLE ON THE BEACH might have been inscribed above the nursery door,'<sup>127</sup> she wrote in her Costa-winning memoir, *Somewhere Towards the End* (2008). If a woman born in a country house was afraid to speak up then it was no surprise a boy from a council house felt intimidated – especially as I'd been told over and over I would be hurt if I ever told anyone what went on at home or revealed my feelings for other boys. I was surprised by how powerful and familiar this fear and shame felt as I sat down to write. I wish I had heard then the exhortation the memoirist Melissa Febos gives in her compelling essay 'The Heart-Work: Writing About Trauma as a Subversive Act':

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<sup>125</sup> William Gass, 'The Art of Self', *Harper's Magazine*, May 1994.

<sup>126</sup> Janice Galloway, *All Made Up* (London: Granta, 2011), p.125.

<sup>127</sup> Diana Athill, *Somewhere Towards the End* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), p.178.

Listen to me: It is not gauche to write about trauma. It is subversive. The stigma of victimhood is a timeworn tool of oppressive powers to gaslight the people they subjugate into believing that by naming their disempowerment they are being dramatic, whining, attention-grabbing, or beating a dead horse. Believe me, I wish this horse were dead.<sup>128</sup>

I began an ongoing process of what I call self-privileging: I might not be the only pebble on the beach but I was the only pebble that was *me*, to paraphrase Diana Athill. I refused, as Hurston did, to be silent about my pain any longer because I could see that keeping quiet about Then was actively harming Now – a lesson I had learned from therapy. As Couser says: ‘for far too long child abuse was hidden from view; the stigma attached to it served to silence its victims, adding insult to injury’.<sup>129</sup> I could not go back and prevent injury but I could protect myself from insult by breaking the silence imposed upon me. This was at the heart of my decision to publish *Maggie & Me* as a memoir and not as a *roman à clef* or autofiction. Self-privileging was freeing for me as a writer – the words flowed. But it was painful for me as a person because memories flowed too. Suddenly, all the incidents I had actively avoided revisiting – being thrown off that slag-heap in a wardrobe, near-drowning in the bath, almost suffocating in the freezer – demanded my attention. It was overwhelming. To my surprise, it wasn’t just episodes where I was the victim that caused me shame. Recalling my schooldays, I heard again the insults me and Mark hurled: ‘spazzy Leanne Smith’ and ‘fatty Moira Gardener’ are standard

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<sup>128</sup> Melissa Febos, ‘The Heart-Work: Writing About Trauma as a Subversive Act’, [https://www.pw.org/content/the\\_heartwork\\_writing\\_about\\_trauma\\_as\\_a\\_subversive\\_act](https://www.pw.org/content/the_heartwork_writing_about_trauma_as_a_subversive_act), accessed 27 November 2019.

<sup>129</sup> Couser, p.147.



examples.<sup>130</sup> My editor recommended I cut these, saying they were ‘unpleasant’. She was right about that but wrong about cutting. I also kept in the equally horrid scene where Mark dares me to throw a strawberry milkshake at some girls shouting ‘periods!’ (which I do and one of those girls is Heather, who becomes my girlfriend then best-friend).<sup>131</sup> Not my proudest moment. Confronting the uglier aspects of my younger self peaks in Chapter 13 when I recount my attempt to murder my mum’s boyfriend, Dodger, by strangling him with a plastic cable – ‘the second time I try to kill a man I am fourteen. Killing a man seems a very grown-up thing to do – like writing in biro.’<sup>132</sup> Why choose to relive all this, write about it, then shout about it? Because I was not – could not and cannot – always be the hero. If I was going to show everybody else’s flaws I felt I also had to show my own – this seemed fair. It also served a narrative function: because nobody’s perfect, you are much more likely to trust me if I show I’m not either. Seeing myself like this was not easy. As Febos warns:

Navel-gazing is not for the faint of heart. The risk of honest self-appraisal requires bravery. To place our flawed selves in the context of this magnificent, broken world is the opposite of narcissism, which is building a self-image that pleases you.<sup>133</sup>

Reliving my own trauma and bearing witness to that of my family and community involved undertaking more emotional labour than I had anticipated. It was not immediately healing but I hoped it would be in the long-term. My hopes were grounded in established research, as well as anecdotal evidence from writers I had

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<sup>130</sup> Barr, *Maggie & Me*, p.90.

<sup>131</sup> Barr, *Maggie & Me*, p.150.

<sup>132</sup> Barr, *Maggie & Me*, p.185.

<sup>133</sup> Febos.

interviewed such as Galloway, Sanghera and Athill. In the 1980s, social psychologist James Pennebaker conducted his now famous studies on his theory of 'expressive writing'. Pennebaker asked an experimental group of participants to write about a past trauma, expressing their deepest feelings around it. In contrast, he asked a control group to write objectively about neutral topics. Both groups wrote for just fifteen minutes on four consecutive days. Some participants in the experimental group found the exercise upsetting but monitoring over the next year showed those participants made significantly fewer visits to doctors. Pennebaker's research has since been replicated many times and his results confirmed: writing about trauma is good for your health. It just doesn't feel good at the time, at least it didn't for me. These benefits are not immediate and not without cost. During the writing of *Maggie & Me* I suffered cluster migraines – not experienced before or since. My post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) returned – nightmares, intrusive thoughts and catastrophising were my go-to symptoms. Immediately after writing the soup scene I ran out into my garden and vomited. That was all during the writing. Editing was easier. Publishing proved hardest of all – because I had to publicly perform my writing, and therefore my trauma and my healing, and engage with readers in public forums where I was, to begin with, unprepared and unsupported. Discussions around the idea of memoir as catharsis often fail to note the need for mental preparedness in the person undertaking the writing, the relative stability required to do the work or the emotional and (sometimes) physical costs of revisiting harrowing moments – especially at public events. While the idea that writing about pain can be cathartic holds true for me, I did often find reliving then recounting actively re-traumatising. It's a danger the psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk warns of in *The Body Keeps Score* (2014), where he notes that 'reliving' therapies can further destabilise patients with

PTSD, exacerbating trauma rather than easing it.<sup>134</sup> Shifting from simply remembering to actively reliving improved my writing, in quality and quantity, but I soon overloaded emotionally and went back into therapy. My editor and agent were as supportive as they could be but there was no official support for me during this process beyond what I put in place. It was all too much for ‘the singular self’ identified by Gornick.<sup>135</sup> Yet, even as I pressed the bruise, I had to keep writing because I knew that, painful as it was, simply going ‘there’ was not enough – I had to come back with a story. And I had to make it good. This was a kind of double duty described here by Febos:

Being healed by writing does not excuse you from the insanely hard work of making art. ... Writing about your personal experiences is not easier than other kinds of writing. In order to write that book, I had to invest the time and energy to conduct research and craft plot, scenes, description, dialogue, pacing—all the writer’s jobs, *and* I had to destroy my own self-image and face some unpalatable truths about my own accountability.<sup>136</sup>

I have said that I put off writing certain scenes – like the soup scene – because I knew reliving them would be traumatic. Violence characterised my childhood but I had to find a way of writing about it that was descriptive yet not so upsetting readers stopped reading or I stopped writing. This is a difficulty often faced by those writing about hurt done to them and any writer considering memoir should be aware of it – here it is outlined by Marianne Hirsch in her essay ‘Marked by Memory’:

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<sup>134</sup> Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps Score* (New York: Viking, 2014).

<sup>135</sup> Gornick, *The Situation and the Story*, p.35.

<sup>136</sup> Febos.

The challenge is to define an aesthetic based on a form of identification and projection that can include the transmission of the bodily memory of trauma without leading to the self-wounding and retraumatization that is rememory.<sup>137</sup>

I found the answer in two techniques: detail and understatement. Here I describe Logan hurling my rocking horse at me:

With one hand he lifts the horse up off the floor and slowly he starts to spin round and round and I think he's going to smash it off the wall and break its beautiful legs and faster and faster and round and round and, 'They're off!' he shouts, letting go of the reins and that's the last of my baby teeth.<sup>138</sup>

I focus on the details of the horse and, crucially, do not describe the moment of impact – I did write this but cut it: you didn't need to see it and I didn't want to have to read that scene in public ever. I spared us both – an ethical choice but also an aesthetic one. Again, such sparseness in the description of violence is a familiar technique in memoir:

In narratives of extremity a stripped down prose is demanded as proof of the author's sincerity, while narrative devices, such as metaphor, which gesture away from the event at hand in order to evoke another frame of reference, are thought to call the story into question.<sup>139</sup>

At a recent reading I gave in Toronto, the interviewer, Clive Veroni, observed that I depict violence – in my memoir and my novel – in the style of Hitchcock (rather

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<sup>137</sup> Marianne Hirsche, 'Marked by Memory', in *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, edited by Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougas (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p.77.

<sup>138</sup> Barr, *Maggie & Me*, p.72.

<sup>139</sup> Frost, p.221.

than Tarantino), who famously said: ‘There is no terror in the bang, only in the *anticipation* of it.’<sup>140</sup> I was pleased by this and also because it was about technique rather than the feeling my words evoked. It is an irony of choosing memoir as a genre that you are aiming to make readers feel while simultaneously hoping they forget that you are constructing a story. If you are successful, the reader feels their feelings and doesn’t notice you behind the curtain. The memoir writer must accept the success of their art is to make the artist disappear.

Editing was far less upsetting than writing – I found it easier to move the words around the page than get them on it. Here I think my discipline as a journalist, which had proved a barrier at first because of my thirst for facts, proved useful. I was used to being edited and welcomed it, seeing the value an editor could have because of their relative emotional detachment. *Maggie & Me* is 75,000 words. The finished manuscript was 90,000 words. Most of what I cut had been valuable, even therapeutic, to write – much of it concerned my Mum and my friend Mark. Ethically, because it was more about them than me and because I could show these aspects of myself without further impinging on their privacy, I decided to cut it. Much of it was also repetitive in terms of the needs of the story. What I cut was almost entirely situation. It was surprisingly easy to do this. Editing felt impersonal, somehow, after the deeply personal act of reliving and writing. I was doing all this to characters not people, at least that’s what I told myself. During the editing, I was much more able to identify and serve the needs of the story than I was during the writing when I was

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<sup>140</sup> Cited in Mo Costandi, ‘The Psychology of Alfred Hitchcock’, <https://neurophilosophy.wordpress.com/2006/10/17/the-psychology-of-alfred-hitchcock/>, accessed 27 November 2019.

mostly just coping with myself. In the words of Gornick: ‘what mattered most to me was not the literalness of the situation, but the emotional truth of the story.’<sup>141</sup>

While editing I was occasionally tempted to change the course of events – often to save my past self or someone close to me from pain or humiliation or worse. I found myself adding jokes, especially after violence. When I read them back, not only were they not funny, they were sad – I was clearly attempting to distract from some horror or compensate you for it with a laugh, something my therapist had drawn my attention to long before. Also, the jokes didn’t ring true – they were so clearly the voice of the Now intruding in Then. They jarred. So, I cut them all. If I couldn’t make it better for me Then, I couldn’t – and shouldn’t – try to make it better for me or you Now. My therapist called this ‘sitting with pain’ and it’s a powerful example of how I brought my experience of therapy to writing. Writing was about giving myself permission to speak and then reliving and recounting my situation. Editing was about refining that situation into a story while ensuring I left sufficient space for the reader. Here I mean going beyond simply showing the reader how I felt and hoping they felt the same to allowing them to feel whatever they feel. To acknowledge the value – to writer and reader – of catharsis then go beyond it. T. Kira Madden writes about this in *Against Catharsis: Writing is Not Therapy*:

I am not proposing that we ignore the healing benefits of creation. ... What I want is the space for you, as you’re reading this essay, to read these words and supplant your own knowledge where mine breaks, to apply these ideas to your own work and your own opinions and purposes. ... It’s the readers’ experience of the work, that we writers are after in the first place.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Vivian Gornick, ‘Truth in Personal Narrative’, in *Truth in Nonfiction: Essay*, edited by David Lazar (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2009), p.7.

<sup>142</sup> T. Kira Madden, ‘Against Catharsis: Writing is Not Therapy’, <https://lithub.com/against-catharsis-writing-is-not-therapy/>, accessed 27 November 2019.

The reader doesn't just judge, as de Man claims, the reader creates and not because the writer is dead, as Barthes claims, but because he is joyfully, messily, insistently, alive. It is a shared act of making meaning and sometimes even self-creation, as Couser hopes.

Nowhere is the writer more alive than during the publishing process. I found early reviews so terrifying my husband very kindly read them for me first. Criticism of my memoir felt like criticism of me. This is not uncommon and it's a unique, and unfortunate, feature of memoir, as Sudjic identifies:

...the irony is that, in narrativizing a life story so skillfully that it appears almost unmediated, the life itself, through such close scrutiny and needlepoint attention, can be unpicked in public. The author still risks annihilation of herself rather than criticism of the work.<sup>143</sup>

Over the two years I toured with *Maggie & Me* I did over 200 events at festivals and in schools, libraries and bookshops. I still do events, though much less often, because publishing is open-ended. These events are as rewarding as they are tiring. Each audience requires me to come out over and over, in Sedgwick's terms, as queer, as a survivor, as working-class, as Scottish, as all the things that make me me.<sup>144</sup> I am expected to repeatedly perform not just my trauma but my healing. I read out loud the same passages I know won't make me too upset and I have answered thousands of questions at events and online. It's easier now than it was in 2013, when I often found myself crying on stage or off but still find it impossible not to relive

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<sup>143</sup> Sudjic, p.113.

<sup>144</sup> Sedgwick, p.68.

the material on some level. Lejeune's autobiographical pact has no end date – *Maggie & Me* is still in print and every event and every email, tweet or Facebook message from a reader is part of that open-ended publishing process: the pact needs updating with emotional terms and conditions. Every time I engage with a reader – in person or online – I undertake emotional labour. You could argue it is paid labour but it is still labour. It is a true privilege to hear the very personal stories readers feel able to share with me because I have shared with them – to make a space inside myself for their secrets, to help someone shoulder a burden they may not even know they have been carrying. But it is also not easy. I have learned to bring my experience of therapy to publishing by maintaining appropriate boundaries with readers and exercising self-care. Having published a novel since I have found that readers of memoir expect deeper engagement than readers of fiction – they feel closer to me, the I of the writer and narrator whose name is also on the jacket, than they do to any fictional I. They expect you to be there for them just as they have been there for you during their reading of your memoir. And that is because readers of memoir do also give more – more attention, more generosity and ultimately more love.

In writing *Maggie & Me* and this thesis I have endeavoured to leave room for you, the reader, to bring your own story and to make a space for you to reflect, as I have done, on the process of making and sharing truth. I have shown how I learned that my situation was not my story and that truth is more complex and conflicting than a simple accumulation of facts. I came to trust my own unreliability as a narrator. Along the way, I had to accept that I couldn't change the past I relived in order to bring my memoir to you – I couldn't go back and save that boy, his family or his community. But I could choose how I (re)presented that past to myself and to you



here in the present. I could tell you my story. Which is the only power I have. And that is more than enough.

So, *Do I feel better now?*

Do you?

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