

## Jane Satterfield

### Other People's Histories: Ownership and Appropriation in Nonfiction

No writer is raised in isolation nor can we write of any personal experience without some resort to family, community, and history. This reality is wryly acknowledged in British poet Simon Armitage's nonfiction collection, *All Points North*. Blending journalistic and literary writing, Armitage's autobiographical writing distinguishes itself from plot-driven memoir popularized by the publishing industry in the '90's through the adoption of a humbly perceptive narrator, one who is far more attentive to the ways his experiences mirror the history and mores of his native West Yorkshire than to the emotional effects of events themselves. Describing the much-maligned Northern landscape, a region shaped by its industrial heritage and geographical remove from the centers of English power, Armitage writes:

Your front door opens out on to some of the most empty and dangerous countryside in Britain. Hundreds of square miles of saturated earth and rotting peat, a kind of spongy version of the sea. When you were a kid, you walked across the moors looking for bodies, but found tractor tyres instead, or fridge—freezers, or crash helmets, miles from anything or anywhere. The only other thing to do was break into the air shafts above the railway tunnel and drop stones on to the Liverpool train.

Here, the use of second-person narrator has the immediate effect of establishing an artistic persona distinct from the person behind the prose. Most readers remember the moors from the works of the Brontës, still others understand Armitage's veiled reference to the Moors Murders, that mid-'60's horror show masterminded by Ian Brady and his creepy sidekick of a girlfriend, Myra Hindley. Admirers of the English essay tradition, too, recognize familiar ghosts inhabiting Armitage's anecdotal, colloquial, and sometimes satirical prose: the calculating observant personae adopted by Addison & Steele in the periodical essays of the *Tatler* and *Spectator* to entertain and educate middle-class readers; the satirical eye of the class-conscious Orwell; an attentiveness to visual composition reminiscent of Virginia Woolf in such passages as the opening of "The Moment: Summer's Night," where careful description is used to recreate the external world and also to mirror the narrator's internal landscape. Of course, Armitage departs from these forebears' narrative techniques in his use of the second person. If this rhetorical choice reveals a certain reticence toward self-disclosure, it remains a beneficial technique, one that emphasizes collective rather than individual experience.

Although the origins of the essay as we know it hearken back at least to the Classical Era—to the prose of Plutarch and the letters of Seneca (whose rhetorical arsenal included philosophical self-interrogation and dialogues with interlocutors)—Montaigne remains the writer frequently credited as the genre's originator. Montaigne, as Brett Lott observes in his essay "Toward a Definition of Nonfiction" identified "if not invented the form"; his *Essais* (in French, *trials* or *attempts*) were driven by a central question (what do I know?) and a confirmed belief in the universality of the individual life, as the essayist himself put it, that "Each Man bears the entire form of man's estate." In a 2000 Round Table Discussion on the History of the Essay, *Fourth Genre* editor Michael Steinberg described Montaigne's initial essays as "fairly academic, quoting liberally from his reading" and evolving to a more "personal voice" and a more flexible form: one

described by its creator where “style and mind alike go roaming.” A free-ranging imagination and colloquial style lie at the heart of the essay tradition; qualities that still define the rhetoric and methodology of much contemporary nonfiction, all of which requires reference—explicit or implicit—to the individual writer’s life, family, and community.

If the essay’s literary prestige has varied throughout the centuries, these days writers and scholars alike value the genre as a highly flexible form that gives its practitioners the ability to counter the clichés of language and received knowledge. Philip Lopate, the Guggenheim-winning memoirist and editor of *The Art of the Personal Essay*, credits the essay’s long life and contemporary popularity to the unapologetic subjectivity of its writers whose use of “personal voice” as well as autobiographical and biographical reference effectively “punctured the stiffness of formal discourse.” In fact, Paul Heilker, former Director of First-Year Writing at Virginia Tech, sees the essay as a necessary and powerful form for student writers and advocates teaching the personal essay in composition classes. As part of a multi-pronged defense of the genre in his book, *The Essay: Theory and Pedagogy for an Active Form*, Heilker adopts the Bahktinian notion of carnival, examining the essay’s tendency to “counter the entirety of official ideology, ritual, and dogmatism, to offer us temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and established order, from the ready-made, completed, and immutable.” This impulse is evident, too, in *All Points North*, where the oddities of daily life—quiz nights at local pubs, football games, and telephone calls from the taxman—have the cumulative effect of creating what an *Esquire* reviewer called an “unofficial guide to the other England.” Armitage includes autobiography, travel writing, and broadcast journalism to create a sequence of variations on the geographical theme of the North. Indeed, the use of multiple vignettes, associative rather than linear development of narrative, and adoption of extra-literary designs are familiar techniques used in many of today’s so-called “disjunctive” or “segmented” essays. The use of white space, page breaks, paragraph breaks, multiple vignettes and narrative strands is so frequently observed in contemporary nonfiction collections and essays that Robert L. Root, Jr., co-editor of *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Essayists of/on Creative Nonfiction*, claims this may be today’s “dominant form.”

Regardless of approach, good writers in all genres seek to locate the intersection of the public and the private, the personal and the historical—as is the case with Janet Burroway’s witty, insightful essay “I Didn’t Know Sylvia Plath,” (as we know, everyone else did). This piece opens *Embalming Mom: Essays in Life*, a first essay collection by the author of the acclaimed text, *Writing Fiction*, one of whose seven novels, *Raw Silk*, was a National Book Award finalist. A writer whose life-story has been appropriated as literary material by many who knew her and many who did not, Plath is, of course, a prime example of appropriated history, an unfortunate literary trend going back at least to Boswell whose *Life of Johnson* guaranteed him literary eminence. Among a selective list of titles that comes to mind, one might consider roommate Nancy Hunter Steiner’s *A Closer Look at Ariel: A Memoir of Sylvia Plath*; critic/friend A. Alvarez’s *The Savage God*; Aurelia Plath’s *Letters Home* with its cheery revisionist introduction; Janet Malcolm’s *The Silent Woman*, a purported “meditation” on biography; Kate Moses’ *Wintering: A Novel of Sylvia Plath* and, of course, the BBC bio-pic brought to life by Gwyneth Paltrow. A discussion of the merit of these and similar titles is beyond the scope of this discussion, though they exemplify the dilemmas of rightful ownership. Even so, we may return to Burroway’s personal essay with its rather modest claims on the life of this literary celebrity; this piece represents a significant understanding of artistic responsibility with regard to appropriation. Like others of her generation, Burroway observed the youthful Plath’s ascendance at a careful distance, ultimately following in her footsteps to a Mademoiselle internship, Cambridge Fulbright, and beyond. Admittedly wary of the risks in referencing the ever iconic Plath as she is of literary memoir’s patina of reflected glory, Burroway observes:

. . . I didn’t know Sylvia Plath, and this piece is not about her but me—or about a particular kind of lit-and-print mad girl of the fifties, whose thwarted hunger augured a

shift in what we mean by marriage.

Scouring her own journals, letters home, and memories—a technique reminiscent of Boswell’s biographical inquiry—Burroway had an additional tool at her disposal—the voluminous literary impressions of Plath. Burroway, however, remained wary of the traps of writing in first person. As Annie Dillard observed, it’s a choice that can “trap the writer into airing grievances.” Burroway’s purpose, though, is far more sociological than personal. From the distanced perspective of age, Burroway turns a skeptical eye on the past, interrogating her own assumptions to illuminate the struggles of this generation of women (writers such as Jane Truslow and Joan Didion also make brief appearances): the first to face the conflicting pulls of the domestic and artistic/professional life. Thus, Burroway bears witness to larger concerns and crafts a witty and insightful analysis of female passage through pre-to post-feminist eras. Burroway follows the contemporary trend of using non-linear modes of organization to construct a life narrative. The sixteen essays composing this collection are stylistically distinct. The title essay, for instance, is an imaginary dialogue between the writer and her mother; “Changes,” a segmented or collage essay, explores the effects of aging on the female mind and body. Essayist Philip Lopate once observed that the essay’s “capacity for processing doubt is part of what makes it so stimulating and tonic.” Burroway’s narrator is tonic indeed—a humble presence in the tradition of Hazlitt, who viewed the essay as an “intellectual walkabout.” Burroway’s essays, too, have the stimulating quality of a good talk: she resists wearing her learning on her sleeve and is open to self-contradiction. Her insights are seamlessly interwoven with “trash talk that can take the mickey out of its own best brag” (“Trash Talk”), as when presumptions “bang me on the forehead crude as a stepped-on rake”—a literal reminder to this essayist that “gaining perspective is a process never finished” (“Of the Beholder”).

Rachel Cusk, another novelist who turned to nonfiction because of the larger canvas it provides for cultural analysis, expressed her reserve about this genre’s more literal nature in the introduction to *A Life’s Work: Becoming a Mother*. To write about one’s own life, she observes, is automatically “to trespass” on the lives of others. Generations before, Vera Brittain expressed a similar concern when publishing her own account of the personal and historical upheavals of the early twentieth century. An ex-armed services nurse who served in a number of World War I theatres before becoming a peace activist and writer, Brittain underscored the sociological, ethical, and political relevance of autobiography in the preface to her widely acclaimed volume, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925*. Explaining the evolution of this work—from social history to novel to nonfiction—to readers who might have questioned the motivation for publishing seemingly private material, Brittain identified a fundamental rhetorical advantage of nonfiction prose: “In no other fashion, it seemed, could I carry out my endeavor to put the life of an ordinary individual into its niche in contemporary history, and thus illustrate the influence of worldwide events and movements upon the personal destinies of men and women.” Writing nearly thirty years after publication of Adrienne Rich’s groundbreaking *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Institution and Experience*, Cusk, a confirmed feminist, discovers—to her surprise—that even in the new century, in motherhood a woman “exchanges her public significance for a range of private meanings, and like sounds outside a certain range they can be very difficult for other people to identify.” Cusk’s ability to translate this hidden range of sounds and meanings is considerable; in her hands vivid descriptive scenes move swiftly, surprisingly, and effectively into insight and analysis. Contemporary female nonfiction writers like Cusk are fortunate to follow a female narrative tradition established in the early twentieth century by Virginia Woolf. When composing *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf found it necessary to articulate her ideas about the paucity of a female literary tradition through a witty narrative and affable persona. Contemporary women writers, however, have been able to write directly out of their lived experiences—to write about themselves—without risking the degree of marginalization and ridicule faced by literary mothers such as Woolf or Charlotte Brontë, or Mary Wollstonecraft and Aphra Behn before them. Not all of these women, of course, were mothers—nor did they focus solely on domestic matters.

It’s no accident that motherhood—or any psychically transforming event for that matter—

nudges a writers toward nonfiction, a genre that accommodates documentary impulses and reflective modes. Even as back as far as St. Augustine who composed his *Confessions* sixteen centuries ago, we see the experience of religious crisis engendering the impulse to document the individual's journey toward a changed consciousness. Childbirth is, as Tess Cosslett, author of *Women Writing Childbirth: Modern Discourses about Motherhood*, observes, a “narrative crisis that confirms or creates a woman's sense of identity.” This is the focal point of Kathryn Rhett's *Near Breathing: A Memoir of a Difficult Birth*. A poet, Rhett found herself pursuing nonfiction because she was drawn beyond the boundaries of the poem while documenting her less than ideal birth story for insurance purposes. She observes:

I came to recognize it as the only way through, the channel for me from past to present. The writing felt like clear water, with no pretensions, no particular style compared to the poetry I wrote . . . I wanted to claim my observations, and know myself alive in the time between the beginning of labor and the ending of being the mother of a healthy child. . . to posit a history which felt as crucial to me as the end result. I couldn't feel the present without examining the past; unlike other events in my life, it couldn't be absorbed without explication.

The chronicle of her daughter's stay in an ICN due to meconium aspiration syndrome provides an ambivalent assessment of the medical establishment, both instrumental in saving her daughter's life and bringing about the syndrome that she suffered. In her nonfiction Rhett, like other contemporary women writers, is what Woolf once called “an inheritor and an originator”—she draws on literary tradition and breaks new ground. With her direct voice and unpretentious approach to her subject, Rhett breaks through the conventional silence surrounding traumatic births and also provides readers with a striking view of the creative partnership she's forged with her husband, a fiction writer. Throughout the book, Rhett avoids the triumphant rhetoric of essentialism for a spare prose style that accommodates the bewildering contradictions that accompany both reflection and sustained narrative development. For instance Rhett's characters—whether family, friends, or medical professionals—are drawn with an even hand and a sympathetic eye as she shapes her own narrative. The resulting “crisis” memoir is, in her own words, “the passage through grief, to possibility.”

In a 1999 visit to my campus to discuss this memoir and the experience of editing the anthology *Survival Stories: Memoirs of Crisis*, Rhett addressed students' questions about the ethical choices one faces in representing others, especially family members, in one's writing. In addition to feeling their private lives are exposed to strangers, family members' accounts of common experiences can differ widely and that contradictory viewpoints aren't always reconcilable. Rhett's solution was to show her manuscript to family members prior to publication. Although Rhett did not promise to make specific changes in her manuscript, she felt obligated to consider them and to weigh relatives' concerns about privacy and differing viewpoints against her own aesthetic goals. As she notes in the book's acknowledgments, her family “faced the uncomfortable task of reading about themselves in occasionally less than flattering moments” but also “allowed me to present my version of the story.” (For instance, Rhett included passages of reflection about the effects of her parents' divorce and a shortlived adolescent flirtation with self-destruction).

But this ideal isn't universally attainable or even, in some cases, desirable. As a new mother, for instance, I faced the challenge of maintaining an artistic identity within the context of a marital breakup. Anyone involved in a legal dispute knows her words may, at worst, be used against her or at best, portray her in questionable light. My daughter, I knew, would not be an infant forever and any account about the break-up of her parents' marriage would have to be handled with care: I would have to walk a fine line between maintaining privacy and altering truth by evasion. Although

Rhett’s decision reflects a healthy conscience and high degree of sensitivity to those whose stories intersect with the writer’s own, she doesn’t go as far as Annie Dillard, author of *An American Childhood*, who explained in “To Fashion a Text” that she offered her family members a “pass” on the memoir of her Pittsburgh childhood, promising to take out “anything at all” to which any of them expressed an objection.

It seems admirable, I suppose, to engage in a dialogue with parties who may well feel aggrieved, misrepresented, or misunderstood. Lee Gutkind, editor of *Creative Nonfiction* addressed this complex ethical issue in his 2001 *AWP Chronicle* article, “The Creative Nonfiction Police.” Here, Gutkind argues that a sense of integrity is a necessity for practitioners of nonfiction. Writers, he says, are disinclined to share narratives with those they have written about “because they are afraid of litigation or ashamed or embarrassed about the intimacies they have revealed.” After all, the effects of self-disclosure can be dangerous. As Gutkind observes, disclosure prior to publication “could ruin your friendship, your marriage, your future”—but as all writers know—publication itself carries the same risk.

What keeps a writer honest, then? Gutkind suggests the importance of motive: that we remember that “art and literature are our legacies to other generations.”

Frank McCourt’s decision to forestall publication of *Angela’s Ashes* until his mother’s death spared her the humiliation of reliving her family’s impoverished Irish past. It also immortalized this lost woman’s suffering, creating a legacy for her descendants. Immigrants, too, face choices as they construct new identities and efface their origin, as do successive generations of those who remain at home. Without full knowledge of historical complexities of lived experience, a writer risks projecting her own views, her own self, onto the past and, in the words of Irish poet Eavan Boland, risks “turning witness into an empty decoration.” In recent years, I’ve approached similar questions in writing poetry and prose about my maternal family’s veiled nationality. Boland’s prose and poetry is of particular help to writers who pursue questions of personal history in nonfiction. Those who come from immigrant forebears often have little written history to rely upon as they attempt to construct a narrative of this passage and instead, must assemble a version of history from a jumble of fact, hearsay, or conjecture. In her poem “Lava Cameo” Boland describes the few details of her grandfather’s life as “something thrown out one in a random conversation; /a hint merely.” To imagine the past is to construct a set of images and a narrative that may be inherently flawed: it may not accurately reflect the unknowable complexities of a distant place and time. Moving through this process, Boland observes a danger:

there is a way of making free with the past,  
a pastiche of what is  
real and what is  
not, . . .

The risks of such artifice “can only be justified,” Boland suggests,

if you think of it  
not as sculpture but syntax:  
a structure extrinsic to meaning which uncovers  
the inner secret of it. . .

My own mother’s accounts of her visits to a family farm in Ireland, I discovered, concealed as much as they revealed about her own family’s desire to efface their Irish heritage, a silence not uncommon to emigrants from that troubled nation. A poem, of course, has insufficient room for historical and sociological analyses of such silences. It can, however, pay tribute to them. Patricia Hampl, author of “Memory and Imagination” articulates an even more radical view: that if “we refuse to do the work of creating this personal version of the past, someone else will do it for us.”

The function of memory, and life-writing then, becomes at its best, “surprising political”: the writer creates a version of the past that is “real, tangible, made of the stuff of a life lives in place and in history.” By recovering lost voices in poetry and in prose, we pin them on the page in such a way as to honor lived realities and it is, perhaps, in this way, as Boland suggests, that our small transgressions on others’ lives can be justified.

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