

*CAN CHILDREN NARRATE
MEMOIRS?*

**CELEBRATING
EXPERIMENTAL
NARRATIVES**

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AGENDA

- ❖ *Absence of Child Narrators in Memoir:*
 - ❖ *Silence of Child Narrators*
 - ❖ *Truth of Child Narrators*
- ❖ *Reading from an excerpt of my memoir*





REDACTED

“

*My hands are not the ones tapping
the keyboard, although I still believe
they are, and these words you are
reading are entirely hers, which I
still believe are mine.*

”

Amy Tan, *Where the Past Begins*, ed. Daniel Halpern (London: Fourth Estate, 2017), p. 226.



CHILDREN'S HISTORICAL VOICELESSNESS

❖ *Linda Steinmetz, 'Extremely Young & Incredibly Wise: The Function of Child Narrators in Adult Fiction'*

'When we speak of children aged five or less, then there is general consent that these very young members of society need adult care, like emotional, physical and financial support, in order to get around in the world and to basically survive [...] Our basic concept of a child is that of a person who in some fundamental way is not yet developed, but who is in the process of developing. It is in virtue of children's undeveloped condition that we feel that we have special obligations to them, obligations which are of a more paternalistic nature than our obligations to other adults. The special obligations to children include duties to protect, nurture, discipline and educate them. Indeed we think of children as people who have to be raised, whether they like it or not.'

pp. 33-34.



CHILDREN'S HISTORICAL VOICELESSNESS *CONT'D*

- ❖ 'Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households [...] they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders [...] They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers.'

Attributed to Socrates by Plato, according to William L. Patty and Louise S. Johnson, *Personality and Adjustment* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1953), p. 277.

- ❖ '[...] children in the old days had to study the Bible and repeat their elders' point of view and adopt adult behaviour all too quickly, because they had to fend for themselves. So, although children in the past had to use their imagination, in order to construct their understanding of the world, past children were, on the other hand, subject to adult and religious indoctrination and could not fully or independently make up their own mind.'

Steinmetz, p. 39.



VOICELESSNESS OF CHILD *NARRATORS*

- ❖ 'When we think of adult novels featuring *child narrators* [...] we spontaneously assume that this literary genre has always existed.'

Steinmetz. p. 45. [my italics].

- ❖ '[...] astonishing to discover that the perspective of the child had a secondary or non-existent status in literature, before the beginning of the 19th century?'

p. 45.

- ❖ '[...] had been anterior literature focusing on children's voice[s] [...] a less thorough concentration on the child narrator and on his psyche?'

p. 45.

- ❖ '[...] **children had to die [...] in order to find [their] literary voice.**'

p. 125.



CHILD-NARRATED LITERATURE

'The Widow Douglas she took me for her son, and allowed she would civilize me; but it was rough living in the house all the time...' (pg. 1)

MARK TWAIN

Huckleberry Finn

'Then I begin to run. I run toward the back and come to the edge of the porch and stop. Then I begin to cry. I can feel where the fish was in the dust.' (pg. 53)

WILLIAM FAULKNER

As I Lay Dying

'Today I'm five. I was four last night going to sleep in Wardrobe, but when I wake up in Bed in the dark I'm changed to five, abracadabra.' (pg. 3)

EMMA DONOGHUE

Room

'What about a teakettle? What if the spout opened and closed when the steam came out, so it would become a mouth, and it could whistle pretty melodies, or do Shakespeare, or just crack up with me?' (pg. 1)

JONATHAN S. FOER

Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close



ONLY IN FICTION?

- ❖ Nonetheless, all these child narrators, across literature, seem to only be found in fiction. They do not appear to exist anywhere in the vast realms of life-writing, nonfiction – or any story from truth. Maybe no one has tried.
- ❖ Why not? Can they not speak to truth, as well as the imaginary?
- ❖ My child holds a narrative in her throat: a narrative she may have voiced through the fantastic, the fragments of make-believe parallels, but voiced nonetheless in an effort to speak the truth, her truth. Standing outside the locked door, fidgeting, she knows the voice inside her is, in fact, one of truth. Could she speak to it?
 - ❖ *If she did, would you listen?*



REDACTED

“

*The process of writing is the
painful recovery of things that are
lost.*

”

Amy Tan, *Where the Past Begins*, ed. Daniel Halpern (London: Fourth Estate, 2017), p. 34.





{ EARLY MEMOIR DRAFT - '*BAD*' }



MEMOIR'S ADULT NARRATOR

- ❖ The patronising, 'condescending or ironic superiority' of my adult narrator, in her 'difference in age and experience' that 'authorised' this unintentional tone felt entirely 'manipulative', as she 'present[ed] the particulars of [my child's life] that [she] want[ed] audiences to hear' – or, 'both narrat[ing] and justif[ying].'
- ❖ F.K. Stanzel, in *A Theory of Narrative*, declares that 'cases like these [adult narrators of memoir], in which the novel is used as a vehicle for the direct propagation of an idea or an ideology of the author, miss the specific function of *point of view* and *personalized narrator* as devices of narrative composition.'
- ❖ 'Clearly, the narrator is not all-knowing, and certainly not all-telling,' she argues, noting that 'authorial omniscience is highly selective: it includes reading the minds of some characters but not of others; it holds back information in order to create suspense; it produces ellipses that will be filled later, and so on.'
- ❖ the constant 'invasion of the story by commentary' and it's almost 'metanarrative' quality often reads as 'intrusive and...puncturing the illusion of reality.' Essentially, the adult narrator's 'narrating self...forces itself so strongly into the foreground...namely in the quasi-autobiographical ones, that empathy...can no longer really arise.'

Stanzel, p. 220; Genette, p. 259; Fludernik, p. 61; Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, trans. by Patricia Häusler-Greenfield and Monika Fludernik (Oxford: Routledge, 2009), p. 113; F. K. Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, trans. by Charlotte Goedsche (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 11 [my italics]; Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 252; Erich Goode, 'Narrating the Transgressive Self' (London: Sage Publications, 2014), p. 59.



CONT'D

'When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all.'
(p.1)

FRANK MCCOURT

Angela's Ashes

'My sharpest memory is of a single instant surrounded by dark.'
(p.3)

MARY KARR

The Liar's Club

'I've been thinking about this day for twenty-five years.'
(p.1)

SAROO BRIERLEY

A Long Way Home

'My strongest memory is not a memory.'
(p.7)

TARA WESTOVER

Educated

'[...] a temporarily less intimate, more detached observation of one's own self belongs to the tradition of autobiography and memoirs.'
(p.102)

F. K. STANZEL

A Theory of Narrative

'[...] the first-person narrator's reference to himself in the third person must be sought in the contemporary literature of memoirs.'
(p.102)

F. K. STANZEL

A Theory of Narrative

'Subsequent narrating [...] is what presides over the immense majority of the narratives produced to this day'
(p.102)

GERARD GENETTE

Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method

'Most [...] writers have chosen to distance [...] children's narratives by funneling them through an adult's point of view [...] [and employ an] adult voice to impose order.'
(p.102)

MARY JANE HURST

The Voice of the Child in American Literature

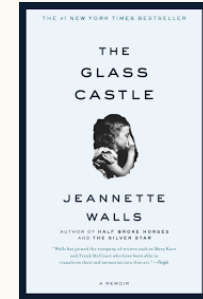


DAVID MURA, 'STORY & NARRATIVE VOICE IN MEMOIR'

- ❖ 'Memoir presents a past self; he begins, 'the experiences of that past self and how that self understood those events.'^[1] However, Mura clarifies straight away that 'frequently', this is shown via 'a *present* self' who 'sees these past events and the past self differently from the way the past self viewed them.'
- ❖ In such cases it is in the gap between these two understandings, their contradictions and differing pictures, that the voice of the memoirist arises. And it is through this exploration of the difference between these two selves that memoir finds a depth which it might not otherwise achieve.
- ❖ As 'the younger self often does not have sufficient information to understand the past,' Mura argues, their limitations evidently constrict their abilities to speak truthfully (Mura seems to attribute this to 'psychological repression or denial' that 'allowed the younger self to survive...in cases of trauma' but again, that really only applies to a lack in understanding, not an inability to speak truth).
- ❖ His criticism of, I suppose, 'unsuccessful' narration in memoirs specifically hinges on a voice that 'remains a bit too anchored in the earlier consciousness, the earlier self; as a delineation is 'required' in order for experience to properly narrate 'things the earlier self does not see or understand, or the lies the earlier self is telling...the gaps in her consciousness.'
- ❖ Therefore, Mura's declaration to life-writers is that lived experience restricts narratorial freedoms: 'it is only as an adult that the author possesses the resources and freedom to access the truth of the past and survive.'



JEANETTE WALLS, *THE GLASS CASTLE*



- ❖ 'We were always doing the skedaddle, usually in the middle of the night.' (p. 19)
- ❖ 'Dad started pulling pebbles out of my face. Some were buried deep in my skin, so he reached into the glove compartment for a pair of needle-nosed pliers. When he's plucked all the pebbles from my cheeks and forehead, he took out his handkerchief and tried to stop my nose from bleeding [...] I started laughing really hard. "Snot locker" was the funniest name I'd ever heard for a nose. After Dad cleaned me up and I got back in the car, I told Brian and Lori and Mom about the word, and they all started laughing as hard as me. Snot locker. It was hilarious.' (p. 31)
- ❖ 'A waitress with red fingernails and blue-black hair asked if we wanted a Coca-Cola or, heck, even a beer, because we'd been through a lot that night. Brian and Lori said yes, please, to Cokes. I asked if I might please have a Shirley Temple, which is what Dad bought me whenever he took me to a bar. For some reason, the waitress laughed.

The people at the bar kept making jokes about women running naked out of the burning hotel. All I had on was my underwear, so I kept the blanket wrapped tightly around me. After I drank my Shirley Temple, I tried to go back across the street to watch the fire, but the waitress kept me at the bar, so I climbed up on a stool to watch through the window. The fire trucks had arrived. There were flashing lights and men in black rubber coats holding canvas hoses with big jets of water coming out of them.

I wondered if the fire had been out to get me. I wondered if all fire was related, like Dad said all humans were related, if the fire that had burned me that day while I cooked hot dogs was somehow connected to the fire I had flushed down the toilet and the fire burning at the hotel. I didn't have the answers to those questions, but what I did know was that I lived in a world that at any moment could erupt into fire. It was the sort of knowledge that kept you on your toes.' (p. 34)





{ EARLY DRAFT - '*CONFUSED VOICE*' }

REDACTED





“

*Soon we will arrive at that place
where the past begins.*

”

^[1] Amy Tan, *Where the Past Begins*, ed. Daniel Halpern (London: Fourth Estate, 2017), p. 326.



CHILDREN'S TRUTH

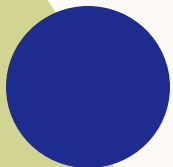
- ❖ 'Disappointment, anger, aggression and rejection, by other human beings, change our personal ethical standards, whereas children naturally react in a compassionate and ethical way.'
- ❖ A child's way of life is uncluttered by adult perception and thus, the child observes its environment unfiltered, by the idea of what one should observe and what one should overlook, according to stereotypical social conventions. The child narrator becomes the author's tool that allows the writer to point out and comment on social shortcomings. In that situation, the reader perceives a child that tries to make sense of a world that is unknown to him, whereas an adult character commenting on social shortcomings is understood as overtly critical of society. A child is still protected by stereotypical adult assumptions. Adults believe that the child is naïve and finds it challenging to understand his surrounding world. A child is allowed to ask questions, whereas an adult asking questions is often frowned at or laughed at for his ignorance or, in contrast, for his intrusiveness [...] The child who points out social shortcomings turns unconsciously into a moral instance, but the adult reader is more willing to accept and contemplate the child's words, than adult criticism. The child's evaluation of the situation is pronounced without any judgment, because often the child does not know what the adult words or thoughts he imitates really imply.'

Torrie Sheridan, 'Straight From the Mouths of the Most Honest Consumers — Kids' (2020), *Purdue University* <https://agribusiness.purdue.edu/consumer_comments-from-the-mouths-of-kids/> [accessed 10 December 2022]; Steinmetz, p. 43; Attributed to Jean-Jacques Rosseau, according to Jocelyn Kim, Andrew Wong, and Jean Wong, 'Children as Inherently Good', *Perceptions of Children: Children's Literature of the Eighteenth Century* <http://websites.umich.edu/~ece/student_projects/childrens_lit/Children_as_Good.html> [accessed 10 December 2022], cited in Steinmetz, pp. 27-8; p. 69; p. 70; pp. 70-1.



CONCLUSION

- ❖ My child speaks for herself; my child speaks for all.
- ❖ She does not play the quiet game anymore, she voices it.
- ❖ Her life is worth writing about – and if that's too 'experimental' for you, maybe consider this:
 - ❖ *what are you so afraid of?*



THANK YOU!

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