

**HAZEL ROWLEY FELLOWSHIP LECTURE  
ADELAIDE WRITERS WEEK, 3 March 2021**

Thank you, Della. It was a great thrill to be the winner of the Hazel Rowley Fellowship three years ago, and I remain grateful for the support. And given the Fellowship's track record after ten years, it is clear that the benign, questing, and sometimes argumentative spirit of Hazel herself continues to flourish.

Well, I'm here to talk about what it's like to write memoir when you've previously written biography, and I will, but first I'd like to go through some of the things you're not told when you embark on writing biography, and seeing how they compare with the writing of memoir.

That great research tool, the internet, can make impossible the job of forming a realistic and coherent picture of what is going on in the world ... new information is always clamouring for attention, displacing what is already there, or perhaps contradicting it. Everything seems equally important. Researching biography is a bit like this; finding consistency and coherence of information is not easy. And that's for the same reason: information comes from many and varied sources.

One thing you don't usually have in biography is a plot problem. This is because we all have the same basic story: we are all born, we all die. But unless you want to write the most boring biography on the planet, you can't describe everything your subject has done in chronological order, with no judgment about its relative importance.

You always need to use a fair bit of writerly craft. (One of the things that really annoys me about reviewing non-fiction of any kind is the statement that such and such a book is 'beautifully written' as though good writing is an optional extra.) You need to structure your material, find the climaxes and the low points. And you have to ask yourself some of the same questions a novelist does: what it is like to be in this person's shoes? How do you approach that, when your own life experience might have been so different? You need to find a way in to feeling empathy, trying to understand, even though you may feel outraged at something your subject has done.

It also helps to like the people you're writing about. There's a story about a well-known journalist and biographer to whom it was suggested that he might

do a biography of John Howard, not precisely his most congenial subject. His response was, 'I know how long these things take, and I'm not having that little [choose your favourite four-letter epithet] in my head for five years.' I truly sympathise! It's problematic sometimes ... you can start off liking your subject, then discover something that makes you change your mind completely. Or your subject can do something you find really difficult to cope with. With my biography of Hephzibah Menuhin, I had real trouble trying to come to terms with the fact that she walked out on her husband and two young children. It wasn't so much the fact that she did it – I mean, women have been known to do that – but the justification she provided. Someday, she said, the boys will understand why I had to take up with someone who was extremely special, and the possessor of a great truth. They'll be grateful. Well, as time passed, they weren't, not a lot. Oddly enough.

But the reverse can apply. I admired Julia Gillard in general terms, but I warmed to her as I knew more, especially having seen what it was like, and still is, to be an ambitious woman politician in Canberra. It's wonderful that this awful culture is getting an airing at last.

Then there's the frustration of knowing that your information may only be partial. You're dependent on what you can find, the written record, the interviews, the bits that have floated to the surface. In the words of Louis Menand in the *New Yorker* in 2003, you cling to the bits you have, while somewhere below, the huge submerged wreck of the past sinks silently out of sight. It's always well to remember that. Not much you can do about it.

Well, you don't have those problems with memoir, right? I mean, you're writing about your life, you were there when things happened, you know how you felt. I'll come back to that.

But first, why write memoir? Having done a bit of coaching in life writing I think there are two main reasons. The first is that it's because we have a story we want to tell. In my case, I wanted to write the story of my brief marriage to Kenneth Cook, the author of the novel *Wake in Fright*, later made into a landmark Australian film. I'd wanted to wrestle him into some kind of narrative for about 30 years, ever since he died three months into our marriage in 1987. We have all lost people we loved, some under circumstances more trying and harder to assimilate than mine. So what I also wanted to do was reach out, express things that other people might also have felt. And writing something

down, in my case, is my way not of 'coming to terms' with it, but of analysing, evaluating if you like, the experience.

But this is the chief difficulty. Virginia Woolf – you always come across her when you're talking about these issues – said that the reason so many memoirs don't work is that they leave out the person to whom things happened. I was part of the story. But I thought Ken was the focus, not my perceptions of him. And so I wrote something that was really a biography, a literary history. That's what I was used to doing, after all. But my first publisher, who had contracted the book, rejected that: Ken Cook, he said, wasn't famous enough for a full biography. My agent, Jane Novak, asked me two questions: 'What is this, a biography, a literary history or a love story? And where are you?' Excellent questions. This is a love story.

It became a memoir about love and death called *Beyond Words*. Ken was a character in the story, but so was I. And so I had to step back, look at the person I was, the person who did what she did, thought the way she would not do now, remember what a twit she was in some respects. As a biographer you develop antennae about equivocation; having demanded honesty from people I had interviewed, I felt it only right to ask the same of myself. I've always been a bad liar, and I knew the book wouldn't work unless I could be as truthful as possible.

But how much information is too much, and how much is the reader entitled to? These are anything but easy questions. You have to play it by ear. Riveting though certain facts might have been for you, it's absolutely necessary to step back and evaluate their interest to the reader. (Details of meals and purchase of clothing, for instance, need not apply, unless they are there for another reason that illuminates character or moves the story along.)

Back to the question of memory. I worried that I hadn't kept diaries at the time and was working on what I remembered. But my relationship with Kenneth Cook, including its aftermath, was such a seismic episode in my life that I had no trouble recalling events. There were changes, though. Conversations can't be recalled with complete accuracy after thirty years, though their substance can. And I did change the name of one person, and signalled that I had done so in the text. None of that worried me; I could live with that and I thought readers could too. Everybody knows that detailed memory can be unreliable, and that three people will have three different recollections of the same event. But remembering times and dates incorrectly is not the same as deliberate fabrication, and I wanted to be as emotionally truthful as I could possibly be.

And funny. As I told booksellers, the book is short, it's not inspirational, and it has jokes. Let there be light.

Was writing the memoir therapeutic? Not particularly. But I did discover something unexpected: that events in your life do not go away, they are not 'dealt with'. Losses, more than triumphs I think, stay with you, like a virus in the blood, ready to surface if your emotional immune system isn't working too well. But I'm not sorry I told the story, and I won't be. I did the best I could, and that's all I could do.

Jacqueline Kent