

TEXT review

Looking behind the words: Patti Miller's *Writing True Stories*

review by Paul Williams



Patti Miller

Writing True Stories

Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest NSW 2017

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Philip Roth once quipped that ‘Memoirs lie and fiction tells the truth’ (quoted by Drabble 2010: 110). Life-writing is bedeviled with issues of truth-telling, not to mention problems with ‘narcissism, the confessional impulse, sincerity, the hubris of assessing oneself with finality’ (Powers 2016: 323). Far from being a simple act of remembering and reclaiming the personal past self in words, writing memoir needs careful negotiation with notions of truth / fiction, reader accountability and how history and the ‘self’ is constructed. Life writing, Margaret Drabble goes as far to say, is a ‘dangerous game’ (Drabble 2010: 111).

Patti Miller’s *Writing True Stories* weaves adroitly through these issues. In this accessible and practical guide, Miller negotiates this ‘dangerous’ territory using the authority of personal experience and the support of a broad range of readings, sources and writing exercises to encourage her readers to find their own truth.

On first reading, I was struck by the weight this author gives to failure in her book. Miller acknowledges the pitfalls most of us will fall into when writing memoir. Note the chapter headings: ‘Midway Blues – Continuing on’, ‘For the days when you think your writing is terrible’, ‘Difficulties of Truth telling’, ‘What goes wrong and how to avoid it’, ‘Avoiding Self-indulgence’ and ‘Difficulties’. Failing is an important part of the writing process, and by naming specific failures, as Miller does, we can be reassured we are on the right path, that Miller has been there too, and can guide us through those craggy parts.

Writing True Stories is divided into two sections – ‘Starting Out’ (a hands-on guide to the basic narrative elements such as voice, structure, etc.) and

‘Masterclasses’, where more experienced writers can tackle deeper issues such as the fuzzy line between memoir and fiction, the identity of the narrating persona, and the ethics of storytelling.

But why another book on memoir / life writing? Miller has written two successful books *Writing Your Life* (2001) and *The Memoir Book* (2007) that cover much of the same material, even with many of the same chapter headings. Is this an update or a consolidation of the others? In *Writing True Stories*, Miller explains that she is reaching ‘wider areas of non-fiction – travel, personal essays, true crime, nature writing and the whole vast area of creative non fiction’ (ix). But the sections on these other sub-genres are scanty (sometime just one page or two), and do not give the same nitty-gritty details as do the sections on travel writing and the personal essay. Yet the new book whets the appetite for those who wish to adventure further, and works well as a comprehensive textbook for a life-writing class.

Where Miller is at her best is when she helps life-writers go beyond mere narrative techniques that comprise most how-to-write-memoir books. She compels us to ‘look behind the words’ (124). Writing for Miller is a kind of ‘sorcery’ and she marvels how ‘a system of signs on the page can enter the mind and cause the body to react as if it had received sensory input’ (157). She encourages us to inhabit our ‘earthy, sensory body’ (156) in order to produce in our writing the ‘lived texture of life’ (157). Writing memoir is an act of defamiliarisation ‘restoring the sensation of life’ (54). ‘Everyone’s memory is a poet’, she says (38).

Philippe Lejeune, in *On Autobiography*, stresses the necessity for the author, narrator and protagonist to be identical in an autobiographical work (Lejeune 1989: 4). Miller finds this confronting – we are ‘required to be in two places or two roles at the same time, both narrator and principal protagonist’ (2017: 183). Perhaps she could have invoked Barthes here who separates those (false) confluences of self and describes the writing of memoir as the reading of the past self as a text. This self should not be equated with the reader of that self (the writer) (Barthes 1977: 1).

But Miller takes the pragmatic approach, nodding to the basic tenets of post-structuralism: yes, she says, a narrator “‘constructs” a narrative self’ (185) and she acknowledges that words are not a window but ‘more like permanent contact lenses that construct the world’ (4), but reminds us that even though ‘everything which passes through memory is fiction ... we are, as a rule, not postmodernist in our daily interactions with people’ (257).

We can feel the weight of her authority and the experience of a successful practising writer here, and it would be good for any would-be memoir writer to seek out *Ransacking Paris* and *The Mind of a Thief* as companion texts to *Writing True Stories* to see exactly how Miller works her magic.

Why on earth couldn’t the self be a respectable subject for literature? It was a territory as complex, as vast, as any other; a moment-by-moment hallucination of sense impressions, emotions and thoughts, continuously creating the experience of a shady chestnut tree, an itchy leg, a smiling face, a sense of belonging, of love and grief and delight. Wasn’t an ungraspable sense of being, in fact, the only thing that connects each one of us? (Miller 2015: 12)

Miller does not only offer the do's and don't's of writing but the energy and exuberance of a raw writing practice. She urges us to:

write with your heart and your gut, pegging the bloody
mess out on the page ... write wildly, fiercely,
unrestrainedly, disturbingly, passionately ... write without
respect, write inappropriately, scream if you want to ...
write with only the fierce discipline of the desire for truth to
guide you. (238)

Writing for Miller is experiential and practice-led: 'structure comes from within the material itself' (91). Creative practice is 'not a straight line but an experiential process with lots of trial and error' (24). Life-writing in Miller's hands is adept and malleable and innovative, and *Writing True Stories* will empower readers to 'communicate the curious nature of being' (x).

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return to text

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return to text

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[Return to Contents Page](#)
[Return to Home Page](#)

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