IMPERFECT MEMORIES

CONTEMPORARY WRITINGS
ON PAST AND PRESENT

EDITED BY

Lenore Manderson

Introduction: Finding Meaning

Lenore Manderson

For its momentousness, we nod to the pandemic. We sigh for the pauses it put on daily life, harried parents, lost jobs, closed restaurants. Holidays and football games and concerts and exhibitions and lectures and mindless things we did for fun all on hold. These were the imprints of the pandemic for those of us who escaped infection or its most toxic outcomes. We, some of us at least, turned the year into an opportunity, mastered meetings across time zones and wrote. Those with small children home-schooled and struggled to write; others went slowly mad with loneliness and anxiety, and the ache of what next. In Australia, we punctuated lockdown with locust plagues and mice plagues, and plagues of domestic murders. We marked its start as the embers still glowed. We felt Climate Change change our weather and our mood, unsettle ideas of the wild and the natural, strip places of beauty and wonder, wear away our confidence in caring and conserving. We struggled with the darkest ideas of these

disasters that we had made ourselves. We were staring down the apocalypse.

COVID robbed us of our future, it seemed, and in doing so, it stole our past. We could only be safe in the ever-present. We habitually checked the calendar. What day was it? Did it matter? Even those not locked down entirely found a tempo defined by eating, bathing, Zooming, sleeping. In the end though, we needed to find a way through this fog and to resist social hibernation. The future couldn't be mapped out with the surety we once assumed, and we learnt it was no longer necessary to anticipate whatever, whenever, wherever we wished. But we needed to imagine a life in which we could be simply lively. So we worked to retrieve our histories. Now we had time, we threw out some memories, embraced the grief, worried at and wore out the anger, held the love and joy and precious pain.

In Melbourne, when months went by without options, I walked. Melaleucas, eucalypts, oleanders, plane trees and crepe myrtle, an odd mix of landscape fashions over time. By late spring of 2020, full-leafed branches waited to be cropped into slingshots to cradle the power lines. Tracing roads and footpaths, weaving in and out of small council parks, the stories started to unfold, tightening the threads of belonging to place. I reminisced in order to create a new life, one unfamiliar, uncomfortably suburban and insular; I reckoned with lives worn thin by the busyness of the everyday and swallowed my own discomfort.

The present's uncertainty reinforces connections to people and places glued through shared histories; their salience is reinforced by our own contested memories. The past provides building blocks, pathways to the future. We search for the promise of a continued existence.

Memory's capricious, yet some of it's indelible. How else to make sense of a lemon gelato, sour and sweet with the mouthfeel of a soft serve, savoured in the mid 1950s and unrivalled despite a lifelong search? The Brockhoff Baker's horse clopping along a suburban street. My grandfather, fifty-five years ago, relaxed in an armchair, nibbling a square of Old Gold. The antics of a dog forty years ago, its name, size and temperament, when I had no real contact with it then and few ties with its owner since?

I deign not to keep a journal with each day fixed by the metrics of the pandemic, even at the height of my obsession with them. I tamp down memories that become sharp with this extended time for reflection. Some surfaced even so, stamps of shame and embarrassment, life's errors, humiliations, poor judgements; these are meant to stay suppressed, it's how we self-preserve. I roll around softer memories. I find new ones hidden in the corners of my mind, leaking out as time goes on, nudged by a glimpse of something once familiar then forgotten. Small things trigger whole stories. The sounds of cicadas and pigeons, and the clip of heels on a street, audible as the traffic thins. Smells of fresh bread and roast lamb trigger other memories I thought lost to time:

milk bottles with thick foil lids, the smell of fresh cut hay, the suck of mud. I was surely not this nostalgic *before*.

* * *

This book was born in reaction to such reminiscences and the relief of storytelling; they helped to reinforce connections at a time when there were so few. *... remember when... and then we went... when I was young... years ago we...* We told stories to each other to find meanings in the present, to while away the time, and to build a sense of camaraderie. The term seems pompous, and yet it was critical for us in the deserts of our suburbs in the middle of the lockdown. We felt we should go further – write down these memories, theorise them, share them, bring others in. Hence this volume.

* * *

We choose certain events as pivots for the plot. But the narrative, LeMahieu notes, is unstable, full of omissions and uncertainties; recapturing the past is flawed.[*] 'Memory,' Mintz writes, 'does not function with that much clarity.'[†] Only a resolute diarist would fix in time key details of her life through determined

[*] D.L. LeMahieu. 2018. The rise of the memoir. *Life Writing* 15(2), p.288.

[†] Susannah B Mintz. 2013. Memoir: An Introduction. *Life Writing* 10(3), p. 355.

inscription, and even then, some details are dismissed, lost in the recording, faded out as they lose salience. With time, different stories compete for the telling. We rarely fabricate our lives, but certainly, we edit out the noise that deflects. We emphasise particular experiences, presence, motive, mood, even if the dates do not quite fit, or if events are included or excluded through the fault lines of memory and the merging of witness, time and place. Occasions and participants sometimes converge, other times dissipate, as we emplot our own lives and explain the disruptions to arrive at a provisional, comfortable, acceptable conclusion.[*]

Writing is a way of thinking or of thinking through. It is also always an exercise of editing, sculpting text so that it is exact, economic and aesthetic. It is partial, carved to purpose, retrieved to make sense of then and now. But memoir has a particular attraction to engage and inspire. We read in others' memoirs their *just like me* qualities. We tie memoir and autobiography to truth-telling, and marry the stories with the everyday, leading critics and others, Mintz suggests, to 'minimize the genre's artistry, as if adherence to the facts of life obviates an author's imaginative skills and makes a good memoir easy to write.'[†] This is far from so. The capacity of a memoir to engage ties inspirational story and reader's curiosity. Memoirs require creative leaps, ways to distil events and

---

[*] Cheryl Mattingly. 1998. *Healing Dramas and Clinical Plots: The Narrative Structure of Experience.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

[†] Mintz, p.353.

emotions to capture others' imagination. Not everything needs to be written and shared; we bury some people and events, actions and thoughts. We play with detail, take licence with sequence. But this does not strip away veracity, whether in social research or in daily life, in fiction or not. Some stories are insistently fictional, or confused, or are carved from a penchant for a good tale, but even so, they carry essential truths. It's an act of nerves – of courage and control.

* * *

Not all contributions in this volume are autobiographical, but where memoir and imagination meet autobiography, these essays and poetry find their place. *Imperfect Memories* conjures up events, narratives, the connections that bind people to each other and to places, the peripatetic and the incidental. In this collection, the authors weave these threads into powerfully evocative and poignant reflections. The works are a way of sense-making; their reflective writing, the authors imply, help explain who we are individually and collectively, and offer them, and us, resources to address new challenges and to imagine new futures.

The collection straddles boundaries and form. It includes poetry and some visual material, although most contributions are works of creative non-fiction – memoir, short essays or somewhat fictionalised pieces. In various ways, the authors reflect on

generational, historical and personal memory, and on the nature of reminiscence, reflection and resilience, in relation to family, quotidian past experiences, on lightness and shade. This book is not about the pandemic, but certainly COVID-19 provided the impetus for this collection. As we learnt to embrace solitude as a way of living more so than before, we found comfort in forefronting the past.

The first contributions centre on recollection and its imperfections; in this respect, the authors' works start conversations with memory writer-novelists and essayists like W.G. Sebald and Maria Stepanova.[*] They touch on what matters, on enduring questions of memory and its omissions; on how some memories are made by and embedded in story-telling and snapshots; other memories are blurred, buried or distorted.

In the following, I provide some guide to the contributions and their bundling. The texts are divided into sections and punctuated by images – oil paintings and monotypes – by Melbourne artist Susan Wald. Although, as Susan explains, the works are from observation and drawing, the subject matter is metaphoric and metonymic: caged and slaughtered animals; road kill; the majestic and desolate landscape of a people whose history was usurped

[*] W.G.Sebald. 2018 (2001). *Austerlitz,* Anthea Bell, trans. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin; W.G.Sebald. 2002 (1992). *The Emigrants.* Michael Hulse, trans. London: Vintage; Maria Stepanova. 2017. *In Memory of Memory.* Sasha Dugdale, trans. New York: New Directions.

and suppressed. The works demand contemplation on our role in these events, on how they substitute; they are analogues of our own lives. They ask us to engage with the perpetration of and resistance to histories, relationships, moods and decisive acts, but also, of ordinary things, fragments overlooked and events that simply slip by. The images are threads with and through the written texts, sometimes thin and frayed, sometimes a tight rope between their content. The slaughterhouse of Wald's Clean Kill, and the histories that sit behind the contributions from Marcia Jacobs, Alfreda Stressac and Jeanne Daly, are cases in point.

In the first text, the poem *Caritas Christi*, Kate Cole-Adams centres on her mother, capturing the challenges of memory and recollection. Rosalie Ham writes of her childhood in rural Australia, the quirkiness of a place and its population and its commitment to keeping secrets, honouring conventions while allowing for eccentricities and eruptions. Lenore Manderson, beginning with similar images of rural Australia and then travelling wide, writes of the recurrent unsettling presence of rodents and the emotions that they evoke; there are, for all of us, shadows and flickerings at the edges of our sightlines that unsettle and tease us. Barbara Toner explores the twisted plot line of her childhood memory, perhaps inconsequential yet a spindle for other stories of truths and realities. From Toner's lightness we move to a grim history, as Alfreda Stressac takes us to her early childhood and her frustration with her mother's flawed recollections of the details of

their flight to safety. As she shows us, some memories are repressed or hidden, sometimes for decades; to some extent, enforced lockdown triggered old memories of incarceration and fear. Peter Kenneally, drawing on the discipline of writing one hundred words a day during the pandemic, offers extracts that recount his efforts to find his way as a young man, an artist and a writer, in the UK. Marcia Jacobs visits the setting of her parents' meeting in Italy as refugees and through this, she celebrates love and loss. Christopher Houston takes us to Turkey, and the sometimes-surprising ways in which his father's memory fades in and out with ageing and dementia; his writing brings us back to Cole-Adams' *Caritas Christi* and the problematic of forgetting.

The second cluster of works focus explicitly on loss and the sense-making that it asks of us. Megan Jennaway recounts her father's decline and death, and the ways in which her care built on and strengthened the connecting threads among siblings. Kerrie Clarke begins with her husband's burial, and Kalpana Ram writes of the night her husband died, both authors taking us as readers into the rawness of loss and grief. Michael D. Jackson provides some distance, as he recalls the apparition of his grandfather and the power of ritual in making sense of death, how engaging with another world cradles the pain of departure for those who are left behind. Jill Moonie too writes of mourning's slow path in the aftermath of her father's death. John Bailey's fictionalised account of repression, grief and imaginary friends, and the capacity of

the imagination to fill loneliness, finds kin with Jackson's ghost and Ram's gods. L.L.Wynn writes of the emotional density of the family, how the loss of one family finds echoes in the constitution of another, and how the connective threads of love withstand the contraventions of state interference. Dennis Altman's loss is one of love and a particular imagined future: his loss is shaped and storied by the contingencies of the pandemic, but also of how this personal drama is set in the foreground of other global missteps and tragedies. But even as some options fade, Kavita Bedford's reflection on drowned cities and mythic places suggest to us the value of phantasy and the imaginary as a way to find agency to shape the unknown.

The final group of essays are more firmly rooted in the present, and its messages for a future that is always occluded and uncertain; in the context of the pandemic, especially foggy. Kate Cole-Adams writes on art, power, gender and her daughter's wonderful resistance to bullying; Kavita Bedford writes of a city dense with smoke, the urgency of the losses from a bushfire entangled with her own private heartbreak. Jill Moonie writes of the overpresence of absence, and slowly comes to terms with her father's untimely early death, finding a way of simply letting go. Linda Meades struggles with the shame she feels with her father's departure, her resentment of her mother, and her painful accommodation of the enduring effects of absence and abandonment.

I had attended a Zoom funeral for a friend whose death

was untimely but kind, short-circuiting inevitable suffering. As respite, I was reading W.G.Sebald's *Austerlitz,* and I was musing on serendipity and fortuity. As I turned to page 301, on which Austerlitz reflects on Brahms and Clara visiting the aged, confused Schumann, Desmond Manderson's essay popped into my inbox. Here is happenstance. Manderson reflects on the 'late style' of Brahms and others, and what this means for him too, and so, for us all. Jeanne Daly recounts Lesley Schermbrucker's imprisonment and isolated life in South Africa, and how yoga paced her days and helped her through years of confinement, seclusion and surveillance; again Daly brings to the fore the lessons that Lesley offers us all in managing both existential threats and literal constraints to our lives. K.M.Rees takes us to a much darker life, one recurrently punctured by violence, invective and manipulation. This is deeply personal, painful reading, but as Rees gains insight and acts to break the abuse and to find her own path away from it, she leaves us with a sense of optimism. And Biff Ward carries this through. In fictional mode she tells an old story of rape and the even older, tired tropes of blame directed to women. In a year in which violence against women found space among the persistent stories of pandemic spread, containment, death and reprieve, this is a fitting way to conclude, and Biff Ward does so with a gesture of defiance.