

# Memories, Memory, Fiction, Art, and Life — The Whole Big Mess

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• Janet McNaughton •

*Résumé* : Nous présentons la réflexion d'une auteure reconnue sur le rôle de la mémoire dans son œuvre.

*Summary*: This piece is the response of an award-winning author when asked to comment upon the role of memory in her work.

You can probably tell by my title that things got a little out of hand while I was working on this piece. Mostly, I've been thinking about the role that memory plays in the work of a writer. Not specific memories, but Memory, as a quality, perhaps even a talent or skill — Memory with a capital M. Over the years, I've become convinced that having a prodigious memory is as important to the writer as, say, having a large vocabulary. The two are very similar in some ways. Without a large vocabulary, a writer is limited in what he or she can express. A small memory limits the writer in the same way, perhaps on a more basic level, the emotional or sensory levels that are almost pre-verbal, even though, of course, everything a writer wishes to express must eventually be translated into words.

My memory is like one of those regrettable pairs of black pants that come out of a suitcase looking like a lint brush. It picks up everything, whether I want it to or not. I can recall the most useless details. Three years after a single visit, I was able to tell another writer with a heavy suitcase at the Red Maple award ceremony that yes, there is an elevator in the office building that houses the Ontario Library Association. "Don't you remember?" I asked her, because I also remembered that we'd shared that very same elevator, a mere three years before. Given a choice, I would have preferred to use that same space in my brain to house a recipe for crème caramel or something equally useful, but memory doesn't appear to work

that way. I should add that my memories are not always completely accurate, and that I have no memory for numbers whatsoever. But I have become the collective memory of my family. If they want to know, for example, where the best ice cream can be found in the vicinity of Gilbertsville, New York, and road directions for reaching this destination, I'm the first resort.

In my case, a good memory is not simply a lucky accident of genes. The 1960s was a time when rote memorization was still regarded as a perfectly useful pedagogical tool in Toronto. In church, we were rewarded for memorizing psalms from the King James version of the Bible, which we recited, individually, to members of the Session. I knocked off a psalm every few weeks. The school I attended held annual oratorical competitions, which required children to write and memorize speeches. I did so every year. In high school, I graduated to plays. In demand whenever shorter-than-average characters were required, I played the Ghost of Christmas Past and Grandma in Edward Albee's *The Sandbox*.

I even memorized things no one told me to. I was a closet singer throughout childhood. I could not bring myself to raise my voice outside the safety of a choir in public, but I sang in secret and learned new songs constantly. Every morning, eating breakfast while listening to CFRB in Toronto, I would wait for the particular songs I wanted to learn and memorize them. Later, when I discovered poetry, I memorized poems too. My main source of poetry was my father's high school anthology, the 1924 Ontario Ministry of Education's *Shorter Poems*, which had been purchased from the T. Eaton Company for 40 cents. I can still recite the first stanza of Marjorie Pickthall's *Dream River*, although I had to check my yellowing *Shorter Poems* for both the title and the author's name. As a child, I was not interested in such details; I was after the words. So my memory was trained, although I didn't suspect I was doing anything of the sort at the time.

Rote memorization was important, but it seems likely that lucky genes did play a role in the development of my lint-brush recall. My first memories date from when I was two-and-a-half. This is certain, because they coincide with the first traumatic event in my life — moving away from my grandmother. Happy is the baby with two mothers, but no one bothered to inform me that our living arrangements at my grandmother's house were just temporary, until my parents could afford a house of their own. I had never bothered to distinguish between the mother who bore me and the mother who bore her. They were both mine, and I loved them equally. Having two mothers seemed like the most natural thing in the world. I could not imagine life without both.

I have just two memories of the move, both very sketchy, both focusing on sensory experience. The first is a view through a window. I was a precocious climber, but it seems to me that someone must have placed me on a chair. Outside the window, I saw a truck, a deep blue 1950s pickup truck

with an orange lying on the floor of the open back. No orange has ever been oranger. And I realized that this was the truck that would move our belongings, and we were moving away from my grandmother. I have a feeling my sister played a role in that telling, she being six and so much wiser, but that might just be because I have cast my sister as purveyor of all bad things in the narrative of my childhood. The only aspects of the memory I can be certain of are the vivid colours and my profound disquiet. Now, I would say that it was the feeling that nothing would ever be as whole or as perfect in my life as it had been to that point. I was about to be cast from the garden. But this is hindsight.

My second memory is mainly of soap. Perfect cakes of fragrant, pale purple soap (not lilac or violet; I seem to have had only purple in my vocabulary at that point). This soap was a gift that my sister and I gave to my grandmother when we left her. I have since learned this from my mother, who of course orchestrated the gift-giving. I think I can vaguely remember giving my grandmother this gift, but the soap itself is my primary memory. The emotions, which must have been terrible, are subsumed by that image. I don't remember the aftermath of the move — my sister and I crying every morning for weeks because we wanted to live with my grandmother again. Those memories belong to my mother.

What I take away from those two memories is a sense of the workings of the mind of a very young child, to whom random objects take on a huge significance because emotions can only be endured, and the forces that make things happen are felt but cannot be understood, let alone controlled. Those two small fragments will probably never work their way into any story I write. I rarely use direct personal experience to create my stories. This is partly a desire to protect my privacy, but also an expression of a fundamental attitude toward my work. I believe that good fiction is founded in creativity, not experience. Imagination should be the primary moving force in fiction, and, contrary to what many writers believe, I find that raw personal experience rarely translates onto the page with the same force and affect as something that is skilfully imagined. Life is not art; life just happens, it's very messy, and it has no inherent order or meaning. Art takes sweat and effort to create, its beauty lies in pattern, and its purpose is to create meaning. In my worldview, art and life are almost antithetical.

Ironically, because I refuse to draw on memories as sources for my stories, Memory serves me almost constantly in my writing. Perhaps what I call Memory is just the emotional core that is at the heart of artful fiction. If this sounds confusing, I'll try to be less abstract, and because I seem to have invoked the ghost of my maternal grandmother, I'll return to her.

I was sixteen when my mother's mother died, but she'd actually left us years before, lost in a bewildering world of senile dementia that even doctors did not understand at the time. The summer that my grandmother died, it seemed as if the world imploded. My mother's sisters quarrelled

over the care their mother was receiving, and the rift that developed would last more than a decade for some of them, even though “rift” does not even approach the depth and intensity of the quarrel. My grandmother and her daughters had always been my primary extended family, and what was happening seemed to me to be a strange combination of slow death and bad divorce, even though sisters can’t divorce. At the same time, I was working at the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto, making milkshakes in the Pure Foods building. One of my mother’s brothers had spoken for me to get the job, and my mother expected me to be on my best behaviour. The male side of this large family was much more distant, so there was a formality in our dealings with my mother’s brothers that was totally absent in our relationships with my mother’s sisters and their families. I had enjoyed working at the Ex the previous summer, but new management policies made the work oppressive, and, in the last few days of my grandmother’s life, I got into a fight with the supervisors and quit. It was one of the worst summers of my life, culminating in a funeral that I couldn’t begin to describe.

Given that I am a writer of young adult fiction, you might think this would make a good story. Walking through a minefield would also make a good story, but you won’t catch me doing that either. The metaphor is deliberate. Even writing that bare-bones description of those events, more than 30 years later, set off overwhelming feelings. As a writer, I want to be in control of the emotions I’m dealing with. This may be my flaw, the secular Presbyterian cross I bear. Perhaps wonderful art can be created by confronting overwhelming emotions, but probably not by people who also expect to get dinner on the table by 6:00 P.M. that evening and listen attentively to other members of the family while they talk about what happened that day. We all have our limitations.

More to the point, I think if I were to try to wrestle that memory onto the page, the facts of the experience would simply overwhelm with the flow of the fiction. If I tried to portray a real person — my grandmother, for example — I would end up with a mishmash of feelings and impressions, details that would mean something to me but convey little to anyone outside my immediate family. As a writer, what would I take away from that summer? Only a few moments. There was a small historical garden on the ground of the Exhibition that I loved to visit in the mornings before I went to the job that was growing more unbearable every day. One morning, perhaps the day I quit, I went to that garden. It was late August. The day was hot, although the sun had only been up for a while. The shadows were long and the light was golden. The Exhibition grounds had an empty, private feeling visitors never knew. I crushed a bit of lavender in my hand and breathed it in. The smell of those flowers seemed like everything my life was not: genteel, orderly, calm. I wanted the life that went with those flowers. I ached for it. As a writer, I would take that feeling, if not the mo-

ment itself, into fiction. The feeling of being sixteen and having the world fall apart. The feeling that everything was out of control, and that moment when the character latches on to some small object that provides a symbolic contrast.

One more thing. After I'd had that huge blowout with my employers and quit (and they were as shocked by my action as I was), I went out into the Exhibition grounds and I couldn't stop crying. A man who must have been in his 50s, a small, wiry, tough-looking carney, was the only person who spoke to me. "Lucky," he said, "what's the matter? Are you okay?" I would take that stranger, that act of kindness from such an unexpected source, and create a character for a story.

I think it is not accidental that the details I believe I could use from that experience were minor and peripheral, nothing that anyone who lived through it with me would recognize as related to those events, moments that belong to me and no one else. The rest of it, the whole complicated story that led to those two moments, would be left behind — the memories that created Memory. What actually happened to me is, finally, just the pulp from which pure, minor, artistic Memory can be distilled, a morass that is certainly life, not art, and ultimately meaningful to no one but me. Recognizing that could be an act of maturity, a refusal to require an audience to accept the trivial details of my trivial life as art. Or it could be an act of cowardice, the deliberate imposition of limitations that may, in fact, work against creativity. It's entirely possible that both of those statements are true.

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*Janet McNaughton, winner of numerous awards, grew up in Toronto and now lives in Newfoundland. She has written one work for junior readers, **The Saltbox Sweater**. Her books for young adults include a historical novel set in Newfoundland, **Catch Me Once, Catch Me Twice**; its sequel, **Make or Break Spring**; a historical novel set in Toronto, **To Dance at the Palais Royale**; a futuristic science fiction tale, **The Secret Under My Skin**; and her most recent novel, a work of fantasy that draws on her training as a folklorist, **An Earthly Knight**. A picture book based on Newfoundland folktales, tentatively titled **Jack Meets the Unicorn**, is scheduled for release in 2005. Some of her books are now being translated into Dutch, Danish, German, French, and Portuguese.*