Judgement of the Memoir Competition 2021

Xabia Book Circle

Christopher North October 2021

I was delighted to judge our Summer Memoir competition. So interesting to read some anonymous memoirs from our community here on the Costa Blanca – a community of friends that meet, socialize, endlessly talk of current politics, favourite restaurants, gossip in the Pueblos and Urbanizacions, with ferocious discussions on books, films, paintings, music, sport – all things that go towards a pleasant, comfortable congenial world for our retirement.

So what’s interesting? – Well, we arrive here with our rich and detailed pasts with its highs and lows, triumphs, disasters and achievements, but by and large they are not discussed or explored – most of us have done some reinvention, some recasting and representation of ourselves. We don’t broadcast our back-stories – or possibly we deliver them considerably edited. It is somehow the norm – without the familiar geography of the past life around us, we can reinvent ourselves. I was very glad to do so.

But then along comes this challenge: write a memoir, re-engage with that past in 4000 words.

Actually the word limit is quite a challenge. Memoirs are popular media and most published ones are full length. So what might be a rounded story of a particular year, a particular person or place has to be necessarily condensed.

A memoir is not the life story — it is a fragment, a touchstone, a taste, not the whole life but something framed and taken out of the grand narrative.

Memoir  is described as ‘[nonfiction](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nonfiction) [narrative](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative) writing based in the author's personal memories. Assertions made in the work are thus understood to be factual. While memoir has historically been defined as a subcategory of [biography](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biography) or [autobiography](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autobiography), since the late 20th century, the genre is differentiated in form, presenting a narrowed focus. A biography or autobiography tells the story "of a life", while a memoir often tells the story of a particular event or time, such as [touchstone](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Touchstone_%28metaphor%29) moments and turning points from the author's life.’

But memoir is a fairly broad church — extending from the anecdotal to a full inquisition.

So in our competition, what was the response?

Twelve entries were received — all entered within the rules and in acceptable format – although the submission of one in the form of a poem extended over 55 pages stretched a point. I have to read on print, not screen.

I hugely enjoyed reading them all through September. I now have some insights into other lives — I have been moved, entertained and informed. With the length restriction there often had to be ‘Multum in Parvo’, much condensed into a small space and that was certainly true of most of the entries.

All entries were read at least three times, and some more. Multiple readings bring out initially hidden good qualities, and, of course, the reverse – points that I did not respond to well initially become clarified, the problems identified and my thoughts confirmed or otherwise.

Nearly all creative writing is telling a story, so the fundamentals of story creation have to be there whatever. That doesn’t mean totally resolved plots, dramatic closure or resolution but ending at a point that has a logic, that satisfies at some level.

And prose style is, of course important. For me the best way to find problems in a text is by reading it aloud — clumsy sentence formation, sentences that have too many subordinates, excessive adjectives and adverbs and clumsy words etc. all become clearer. I read all the entries out loud `pacing up and down our loggia here.

So here is my final judgement — and I’ll start with some comments on the memoirs that didn’t quite make it.

**‘A Bump on the Head and the new Lycra: The Start of a Tour de France’**

**‘India by Train 1988’**

**‘Alligators all Around and we are Stuck’**

**‘Little Boy Brave’**

**‘Three Doggie Tales’**

I enjoyed reading all these entries and all had memorable subject matter and interesting passages but for me fell down, in the first three cases above, for similar reasons.

In these, essentially travel memoirs, the authors did not first of all ask him or herself firmly enough the question: — ‘What will be of interest to my reader? What does the reader need to know and what is unnecessary detail or distraction. The ‘reader’ I have in mind in this case is someone without special knowledge, but who will be open and receptive to a story. As I have said, memoir is at root a story and a story is an account of events shaped and honed to capture the interest of the listener.

In one case the memoir comprised an account of a Cycle tour but the narrative became drowned in excessive detail about travel arrangements, delivery dates, train times, proximity of spare part stores etc. This could be very engaging for a ‘special reader’ in an article in a cycle touring magazine possibly, but as a general memoir, I became a little bogged down in what seemed unnecessary detail.

Similarly the memoir describing a trip by train across India became heavy on detail concerning of tickets taxis, trains etc — where a central calamity should have been the focus, that had real interest. I wanted to know far more about how it happened. As described the event lacked dramatic impact. And India was only sketchily evoked. Most readers would have been expecting more about the landscape, the people etc.

These two stories reminded me of an example once delivered at a creative writing seminar:

Imagine one day you are hailed in the street by someone you know a little socially. Shaking hands you ask:

‘Well, what brings you to town?’

‘Well, now let me see. I caught the 10. 20 from Beaconsfield (I parked in the station car park, luckily found a space, its often full on Fridays – you know the market’s that day but I was just early enough before the stall people arrive) and then I got the train (two minutes late) and , would you believe, it slowed to a stop at Rickmansworth for ten minutes — and my phone charge was low. Something on the line I think, but they never explained, so I was late arriving at Marylebone and so missed the normal tube to Oxford Street which meant I had to get a taxi for the last part — and that cost a tenner for just ten minutes and….

‘Yes, but what brings you to town?

Stick to what your memoir is really about and what will interest the reader.

An entry describing a trip on the Amazon stayed too out of focus and sketchy to enjoy fully but had a central passage about fishing for Piranha that could have been developed far more, indeed made central to the piece. Everyone is curious about Piranha fish. This brings out a point I’ve been asked – how much can you invent? The well known memoir expert Judith Barrington (‘Writing the Memoir’ Eighth Mountain Press 2004 – I have some mint copies available for purchase if anyone is interested.) was asked this at a Memoir course at Almassera Vella a few years ago. In her view an element of fiction is fine if it strengthens the basic premise of the story. Absolute fidelity is impossible any way — our memories are selective and the further back you go, the more selective the memory is. The important truth is emotional truth.

A moving memoir centred on the childhood of a disabled grandson ‘Little Boy Brave’, certainly had some stirring passages but the author seemed a little unclear as to who it is she was addressing, there being a mixture of Technical language and baby speak — in a single ‘Letters to the Grandson’. A deeply felt piece but needing some adjustments in the narrative voice.

And finally a long three part ballad of three jolly Rescue dogs told in rhyming quatrains and it was jolly, bouncy and fun to read as it must have been fun to write, but it was not really memoir.

And next to five commended entries –

Firstly **‘No Mistaking Paradise’ (Jeff Lee)** and‘**Headfirst into the Void’ (Rod Davis)**

These two memoirs both encapsulate an entire life, but in such a way I was always as reader held — they describe how themes and patterns emerge as the years furiously tick by, how what seemed chance and fortune, good or bad at the time, could later be seen as a unity, a pattern emerging, something seen now in reflective years. Each narrative contained details that could be expanded into memoir pieces on their own, you could read them as summaries. Both had a compulsive narrative drive.

**Sailing Lessons (Jenny Fallon)**

This piece took me back to my own sailing years via a series of beautifully captured sailing experiences in San Francisco bay and the Californian coast. The descriptions were evocative, the product of direct experience, one could tell, and enriching. Danger always close, sea change so often dangerously rapid - all brilliantly and joyfully evoked.

A sample passage:

*‘Sometimes a small sailboat will come so close to our bluff that it disappears from view, and I will hold my breath, imagining – old instincts die slow – that something has gone wrong. The jib sheet is jammed or the sail itself is hooked on a forestay. And it all comes rushing back to me.*

*I am there in the cockpit, my eyes glued to the sails, waiting for Cliff’s ‘Hard to lee,’ then the glorious moment as she heads up into the wind and the sails start to luff. I let go of the jib, then the rattle of the winch and that unique noise a sailboat makes when she’s tacking, the jib flapping on the bow like an angry seagull. Then cleated and quiet again, hearts can stop pounding as she settles on the new tack’.*

**The Teddy Bear (Diana Pringle)**

This memoir very evocative — a specific childhood memory explored — of sleeping in her mother’s arms, but not willingly with a teddy bear as her sole consolation. The foetid, heat and imprisonment stoically borne by a young girl. A memoir against the normal grain — here the mother figure unsympathetic, and very real. What is particularly powerful is the absence of judgement — the reader is left to make up his or her mind:

*It was dim with the curtains drawn, and felt stuffy, with a faint scent of Mother’s make up. The huge overblown pink roses of the wallpaper seemed to push out from the walls, and the enormous dark mahogany wardrobe loomed menacingly over everything in the room. Slowly, holding Teddy, she climbed in beside Mother who promptly cuddled her up in a tight grasp. The girl protested that she was too hot being cuddled up so close, but Mother was determined. She was not going to let the girl out of reach; who knew what mischief she might get up to if out of sight while Mother slept unknowing. The girl felt very hot and uncomfortable. She wasn’t tired, and didn’t want to sleep the afternoon away, she wanted to play.*

**My Wish (Hilary Marshall)**

A moving short memoir evoking something positive flowing from a deeply experienced grief. Carefully controlling the emotional temperature, the reader is carried along with the quiet humour of the piece – a consolatory humour that surprises and warms.

And now a Highly Commended Entry:

**A Pilgrimage into History (Tony Lawton)**

Highly commended as I was impressed by this captured architecture of a single special day. I suppose all of us have odd ritual days — I have, that is by going to enormous lengths to attend an event, perhaps as part of an established group consensus and unquestionably tied only by that event – and so I was transported by this memoir to the Trent Bridge Test Match of 2015 for a unique occasion. Perfectly paced, laden with humour and never a question asked as to why you would sacrifice so much to attend this annual event. Perfectly judged for the word limit of the competition.

A sample:

*It is difficult to describe what we feel. None of us could have anticipated the havoc that Broad had just wreaked against the cream of Australian batsmen. How could we? I am pinching my own arm in case I am dreaming. I am not saying this figuratively, I was really getting my fingernails right in there. Keith and Keith have forgotten about the horses they have betted on. John is sitting silently with a huge grin on his face, supping his ale. Andy, who runs a climbing equipment and outdoor shop in the Lake District, is shaking his head and laughing. Nick and Nigel are both repeating “I can’t believe this” We look at each other nervously saying “Is this really happening?” We have a drink, and try to settle down. Some of the crowd are stunned into silence, which is odd as the rest are making so much noise that it is deafening; some are standing and shouting, others are singing, everyone keeps staring at the scoreboard trying to make sense of it.*

And so to my winner:

**Mother, Mister McLardy and the ‘Low Dishonest Decade’**

**(Peter Davies)**

My winner.

What are the winning qualities?

Firstly voice, a rapport is established with the reader. The language flows, it is an idiosyncratic first person narrative, it has personality, it sticks to the story, is amusing, sympathetic, has an easy readable rhythm.

Secondly the subject of the story is always centre stage, there are no unnecessary details – we form a picture of the central character of the story and find the figure credible, interesting — alive.

Thirdly, the memoir describes something of universal historical relevance giving additional power to the story – all in all, a strong, eminently publishable piece of memoir.

My congratulations to Peter Davies!

Peter has suggested that as the piece is in the voice of a female – he has invited Alison to read it for us – so here it is,

**Mother, Mister McLardy and the ‘Low Dishonest Decade’**

Some Recommended Memoirs from my library:

* A Lie About My Father – John Burnside
* Unreliable Memoirs - Clive James
* Two in a Boat – A Marital Rite of Passage – Gwynneth Lewis
* As it Was and World Without End – Helen Thomas
* Pour Me AA Gill
* The Three of Us Julia Blackburn
* Experience Martin Amis
* The Presence Dannie Abse
* In the Blood Andrew Motion
* The Horseman’s Word Roger Garfitt
* In My Father’s House Miranda Seymour
* Life Saving Judith Barrington