Line of Flight:
a journey into memoir.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Master of Creative Writing.

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Abstract

This Master of Creative Writing thesis presents a memoir, *Line of Flight* (85%), and goes on to examine the issue of ethics in memoir in an accompanying critical component, *A Line to Cross* (15%).

Line of Flight consists of 19 essays covering distinct episodes from my early childhood through to the recent past. Flight provides a tangible thread to the collection, from an early fascination with becoming airborne, but also from pursuing the many and varied directions in life. These stories range from challenges as a young woman in male dominated pursuits and workplaces, to extreme 'near death experiences' in various corners of the globe, and touches on relationships with those I was inspired by, loved, and lost. The collection is not consistently chronological, nor comprehensive, but instead follows a line of an evolving understanding of humanity and all that surrounds us; the cumulative result of experiences and relationships across 50 years of life.

A Line to Cross is an exegesis which focuses on ethics. I compare two principal texts, *The Mirror Book*, by Charlotte Grimshaw, and *Educated,* by Tara Westover. This essay explores 'the why' or justification for writing these and other memoir, and 'the how', the tools or craft each memoirist employs to minimise or mitigate harm, particularly when writing about family. *A Line to Cross* refers to the metaphor of a line in the sand, the decision to cross into ethically challenging territory by revealing experiences that involve family or friends, episodes or commentary that they might prefer to remain buried.

The critical accompaniment was a necessary and valued adjunct to the creative work. Ethics was a major consideration when justifying then crafting *Line of Flight*. The research and consideration greatly assisted in the approach and revision of some of the more confronting essays in my own work. It is important to note that the critical component, *A Line to Cross*, is simply an exploration. Ethics in memoir is a personal and subjective area of investigation. Just as any line in the sand can shift with the wind, there are more questions than answers.

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Acknowledgements

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A Line to Cross:

An essay exploring ethics in memoir.

Introduction.

'The unexamined life is not worth living,' said Socrates, unsuccessfully defending himself in court, 400 years before Christ. More than two millennia on, Socrates' words have become the cornerstone of justification for New Zealand novelist, Charlotte Grimshaw, in writing her memoir, *The Mirror Book* (2021). Grimshaw, or rather her therapist, reduces Socrates' broad statement of philosophy to another oft-repeated line presented throughout her memoir: 'To tell your story is existentially important' (Grimshaw 7).

I cite this quote from Socrates, and the interpreted quote from Grimshaw, because it is this maxim which is at the core of Grimshaw's justification for why she writes about members of her family, potentially hurtfully. This opens the pandora's box of ethics in memoir, the plethora of ethical considerations around writing truthfully (and that word needs to be qualified) about friends and family in nonfiction. If the act of writing and potentially publishing a memoir is so existentially important, does this then justify every line, every revelation, or any interpretation of the events in one's life?

When I started out thinking of writing a memoir of sorts – as Washington Post book reviewer, Lorraine Adams, termed it, a 'Nobody memoir' – I certainly didn't hold such high regard for any examination of my own life. On the contrary, I hesitated, thinking it might be an indulgence, a form of narcissism. Perhaps the Tall Poppy syndrome had finally hit home. Who was I to think anyone might be remotely interested in the events in my life? The only person I thought might one day value reading my story is my daughter. She had heard snippets along the way; perhaps it was a way I could tell her the full, unedited versions of those episodes and in particular the lessons I would hope she would not have to learn the hard way, as her mother had.

That aside, however, I am still not entirely convinced that 'writing about one's life is existentially important' is sufficient justification to put up against ethical concerns. Certainly, ethics gave me pause to consider and reconsider. In my case, those concerns loom large, mainly the fear of betraying trust, revealing aspects about past events involving other people that they

might not want revealed, or being brave enough to provide an honest commentary on other people's actions. There is more *not* said, not divulged, barely even referred to, than there are candid accounts in my own manuscript of literary nonfiction, *Line of Flight*. (I would not describe it as a 'book' just yet; the line to cross towards possible publication raises another whole spectre of ethical considerations to traverse.)

Is there a right and wrong, any set of rules, or indeed any justification to consider when writing memoir? As much as it has been a journey to pick my way through my own life thus far, selecting episodes that might have both relevancy and readability, there has been a concurrent investigation as to how to do it well and, critically, where to find my own 'line in the sand' regarding ethics, if there is one. The phrase, 'a line in the sand', is cited as stated during historic battles, a physical line beyond which, should the enemy step, the consequences are unthinkable. More nuanced a meaning has evolved, however, which is more appropriate to this discussion: an imaginary line, that if the memoirist is to step beyond it into ethically challenging territory, they must accept the consequences – recrimination, hurt, anger or worse. Or they take care to tread over the line judiciously, respectfully and compassionately. And in so doing, can perhaps justify their actions.

Any exploration of ethics has necessarily involved reading other memoirists, particularly those writing about family, to examine their justifications if they venture into this territory, or how, within their writing, they may have sought to justify or mitigate any possible 'fallout'.

In *The Mirror Book*, which analyses Grimshaw's family dynamics since early childhood, she acknowledges these ethical difficulties overtly: 'If you were a writer grappling with these questions, would you write about them? Would it be morally wrong to put them on the page?' (266). She goes to considerable effort to justify her potentially hurtful revelations and stark comparisons about her parents, which, it has to be acknowledged, are extreme. For this reason, I have chosen *The Mirror Book* as the primary focus of this essay on ethics in memoir.

Tara Westover's *Educated* provides a useful comparison to Grimshaw's book, regarding how the author handles the ethical challenges in relation to her immediate family. *Educated* could be described as an equally injurious memoir, in the telling of so many potentially defamatory stories as she also looks back and recounts the events and relationships in her

isolated, Mormon fundamentalist upbringing in rural Idaho, U.S.A. One thread of the story in *Educated* would provide evidence for an allegation of grievous bodily assault and threats of worse. But as we'll discover, Westover's motivation, her craft, and not least her situation, differ markedly from Grimshaw's. Her predominant justification is truth, Westover's own stark and somewhat harrowing truth (and she goes to some lengths to qualify truth). *Educated* is so obviously 'existentially important' for Westover (without saying so), it may have been her saviour in terms of mental health if not survival.

Accompanying and deepening my appreciation of the ethical questions within memoir are the voices of the many critics and other life writers providing insights into the craft of life writing. Helen Garner, for example, offers blunt but accurate commentary on her own practice, which is relevant in its application to all nonfiction writers, particularly memoirists: 'I tried hard to be irresponsible, to vanish, to be swallowed up in the texture of the writing. Because the one who records will never be forgiven. Endured, yes; tolerated, put up with, borne, and still loved; but not forgiven' (*True Stories* 53). Critic James Wood's appraisal of Garner is also apt within this discussion: 'What gives her writing its power is that she is unsparing, in equal measure, of her subject and of herself.'

In this exploration of ethics in memoir (life writing/autobiography) therefore, I follow two major areas of examination: 1) the why, whether it might be existentially important or if there are other salient reasons to write and publish a memoir, and 2) if you are going to step into this arena, how to do so in good conscience (assuming that's important to the writer), by which I mean, how to craft your memoir to minimise or mitigate harm to friends and family whose stories they might prefer to leave buried, knowing that if you risk causing hurt by revealing events or commentary that involves them, you have good reason to do so.

The Why.

'Telling stories is a fundamental part of being human. Narrating lives then, narrating real lives, is not just something people do, it is part of what people *are*' (Freeman 98).

Storytelling is indeed part of human nature, the age-old pastime of sharing stories around a fire, or sharing a meal around a table. Even I've been prodded, often at dinner, with the request for a story. 'Tell us about the time when…?' it begins. Close friends know I have a few anecdotes from my past not needing any embellishment. But in those moments the entertainment factor is the main driver of the narrative, a relatively superficial telling of a near death experience for example, hoping someone could please change the subject.

Something else evolves when you begin, however, in the quiet of your own office without an immediate audience, to instead write that story down. The superficial précis of events seems inadequate. There is something else there underlying the narrative – fear, fate, the quirks of human reaction in extremis, joy, even the strange serendipities of a turn of events, or simply what occurs to you in hindsight, observing your own behaviour at a remove, what you might have missed all those years ago. The story, hopefully, evolves from a girl's own adventure to a more nuanced understanding of human reactions, relationships, even of mortality.

But what is the motivation, why do we go to such pains to put the remembered episodes of our own lives into prose? Reflecting on writing in general, writer Anne Lamott responds: 'We are a species that needs and wants to understand who we are … A writer always tries, I think … to understand a little about life and to pass this on …' (Lamott, qtd. in Popova).

Lamott goes further to justify writing about one's own life in nonfiction during a 2017 Ted Talk: 'You're going to feel like hell if you wake up someday and you never wrote the stuff that is tugging on the sleeves of your heart: your stories, memories, visions and songs – your truth, your version of things – in your own voice. That's really all you have to offer us, and that's also why you were born.' Part of me winces at this statement, seemingly veering into hyperbole. No doubt her statement is valid for a good many life-writers, that the memoir provides a portal by way of making sense of themselves and the world they find themselves in. But I would like to think I have more to offer humanity than a story about myself, and often wonder if it is not more useful (the why I was born) to tell the stories of others, or the stories that might impact real change for the betterment of many.

Then again, I pause. Surely memoir/life-writing is an art alongside every other art form, the writer akin to the artist. Without that confidence and self-belief – giving in to 'the stuff

tugging on the sleeves of your heart' – we would have no music, no art, no masterpieces of film, all that gives reassurance and comfort through either beauty or understanding. I am reminded of this in my account of my good friend, the sculptor Gérard Koch, in the essay entitled 'Séquences' in *Line of Flight.* Gérard was not only born to create, but escaped the Holocaust as a child, a journey on foot across Europe, then survived war in Israel to dedicate his life to sculpture. However hesitant I feel about my own story, I might therefore have to agree with Lamott and put the craft/art of writing memoir into that same elevated category, and suggest that this goes some way to justify its creation – it is, after all, a work of art.

Essayist Maria Popova gushes over Lamott's writing, including her nonfiction, largely autobiographical, in the following statement: 'Lamott sees in writing not a selfish act of personal gratification but an act of warm generosity.' It's an idea echoed by writer and creative writing lecturer, Lee Martin, who suggests memoir, done well, can be an act of generosity. 'We need to be generous enough to make room for the characters in our narratives … Writing a memoir is an act of love, or should be.' I hesitate, casting my mind over several works of memoir (and am reminded of critic Lorraine Adams' criticism of the genre as 'narcissistic'), to gauge whether generosity could be sufficient justification.

It is certainly difficult to transpose that laudable intent of generosity to *The Mirror Book.* This is perhaps because at the heart of Grimshaw's memoir is the clear indication that she's writing this book mainly for herself and, perhaps at a stretch, for her immediate family (whether they like it or not). She's clear about wanting to write the memoir to investigate why she's been thrown off kilter:

> Finally ... I formed this solemn conclusion: there was something wrong with me. With the state of my social connections ... So what to do about that? ... It seemed logical: this state of affairs could only be explained by looking back ... The questioning gained its own momentum. It felt urgent and vital; I was trying to save myself. I had started an uprising in my own mind, and I wanted to write about it. (18, 20)

Writing *The Mirror Book* has clearly been existentially important for Grimshaw. Which means there's something inherent in the creation of this book to do with a renewed confidence in her sense of self, finding a 'raison d'être' or reason for being. Emma Espiner, in her review of the book for *The Spinoff*, wrote of it: 'Very occasionally you encounter a book where you think – this writer saved their own life in the writing of this.'

This rationale, however, veers into Lorraine Adams' argument against the proliferation of memoir, that 'Memoir is self-help disguised'. Adams suggests, 'Many blame psychotherapy for the nobody memoir'. Admittedly, *The Mirror Book* is certainly not a 'Nobody' memoir, but very much a 'Somebody' memoir; the main protagonists in the memoir, Grimshaw and her parents, are well known to the New Zealand literary public. That aside, however, Grimshaw's memoir fits neatly within Adams' critical description of 'self-help':

> … the narrowness of the therapeutic requires that the memoirist adhere to certain conventions: brutal honesty, and confessions of suffering as well as sins. There is only one plot as well: the talking cure, in this case the writing cure, heals. Stories of triumph are obligatory.

Memoirist Mary Karr is equally blunt: 'If you're doing it for therapy, go hire somebody to talk to. Your psychic health should matter more than your literary production' (29).

Grimshaw does both. Her account of actual psychotherapy accompanies the text in *The Mirror Book,* Grimshaw referring to the ongoing relationship with her psychologist, Dr Marie Sanders, and extolling her apparent new dependency on the counselling sessions: 'Marie Sanders, she was so quick. She was Ariadne, whose thread led me out of the maze' (304). This references Ariadne, a Cretan princess in Greek mythology, who personified strength and resilience and found a way out of a labyrinth. Grimshaw appears to find validation of her own version of childhood events in these counselling sessions, but also finds a way out of the labyrinth of confusion as to how she had become the woman she was at the point of 'a personal crisis that generated a wider family dispute' (7), that crisis being when her marriage

seemed to have ended. She not only recounts the events of this time but the process of psychotherapy in arriving at an understanding.

Critic Sven Birkets is milder than Adams in his comparison of the genre of memoir to therapy:

> … the structural logic of memoir can, as we will see, echo the long-term process of a therapy. Where the narrator presents him or herself as confused, uncertain of outcomes–where the hindsight perspective is used only sparingly–the odds are that the work will culminate in some breakthrough ... Which are both, of course, goals of psychotherapy. (105)

The Mirror Book appears to adhere structurally to this model. The narrative progresses toward the moment when Grimshaw arrives at a breakthrough, her marriage restored, her version of events clearly stated and believed, her anguish assuaged, no longer in need of her psychologist: 'I saw now why it [telling your story] was existentially important ... Telling the true story had changed my brain ... This is what is existentially important: to be heard and understood, to have a listener affirm it, to know the mind is not alone' (303).

'Existentially important', on a personal level then, is Grimshaw's main justification for writing her memoir. But her secondary justification is that by writing and publishing this memoir, she hopes to heal the differences and rift with her parents. She uses the phrase, 'Let's have a Truth and Reconciliation Commission' (39), referencing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa following the abolition of apartheid in 1995. This comparison, however, also implies that Grimshaw sees herself as a victim, that perhaps she is seeking the admission of responsibility from the guilty party, presumably her parents.

But this secondary justification still demands the obvious question: why publish? Couldn't Grimshaw have kept it as a private file on her computer, or handed out copies to her family, and left it at that? Adams is blunt about the effect of publication: 'In memoir, the loved one is not only told about it, but so is the reading public; and instead of an air-clearing session screamed over the kitchen table, it is preserved in the Library of Congress.' Or, in Grimshaw's

case, broadcast not only through the lines of her book, but on New Zealand radio, television and in numerous writers' festival interviews.

Is it possible, however, that the very act of publishing demands a level of attention and insight that might not be achievable if the work was left merely as an unread manuscript? Birkets, in his defence of memoir as self-help, describes it as: 'about circumstance becoming meaningful when seen from a certain remove' (8). This 'certain remove' refers not only to hindsight and distance, but to something else again that is particular to memoir. Birkets goes on to describe it as a kind of 'alchemy':

> *This really happened* is the baseline contention of the memoir, and the fascination of the work – apart from the interest we have in what is told – is in tracking the artistic transformation of the actual via the alchemy of psychological insight, pattern recognition, and lyrical evocation into a contained saga. (190)

Even as I began to write my own life stories, there were thoughts and realisations that arose from 'I don't know where', obviously deep in the subconscious, through the very act of writing. When it happens, it's surprising, yet satisfying. 'Yes,' I'd say to myself. 'That's as it should be.' This alchemy often touches on the existential, finding moments or images that seemingly appear out of nowhere, but provide an answer, a connection, however oblique.

It is possible that the very knowledge that ultimately an audience will read the work, whether it is the act of publishing or the final presentation of a thesis, demands a rigour that enables that part of the creative brain to kick in; to take the mundane accounts of past experiences, retrieve the emotional response long buried, and (ideally) transform them into something more meaningful, and therefore more compelling for the reader. You could argue that had Grimshaw presented her memoir as a list of grievances to be discussed over the kitchen table, there would have been no hope of 'reconciliation', indeed no discussion. Nor might the power of her words have reached the equivalent impact as the prose ('lyrical evocation') of her published work.

It is also important to note that Grimshaw had already tried to present this material,

albeit in a different genre – fiction. As was the refrain in her literary family, 'It's material. Go and write about it' (20), Grimshaw did indeed write about it, more than once. She told a version of her life story as fiction in her short story, 'The Black Monk', but most notably in her novel, *Mazarine,* which she describes as the companion novel to *The Mirror Book* (Grimshaw, Newsroom). Many of the scenes from *Mazarine* are repeated almost word for word in *The Mirror Book.* Is it possible that presenting her version of her life's events within her fiction went nowhere in terms of her stated aims of 'Truth and Reconciliation' and obviously had significantly less impact than her nonfiction memoir, at least within her family? Quite possibly, yes. As Birkets goes on to say: 'There is a necessary wisdom in the best of these works [memoirs] that cannot be discovered in any other genre, not in the same way' (190).

Truth and Reconciliation, or was the underlying justification for this memoir simply setting the record straight? As Grimshaw writes about her father, novelist, poet and critic, C.K. (Karl) Stead, 'Karl was a controller by nature; he controlled the message. He wrote the story' (159). Up until the publication of *The Mirror Book,* C.K. Stead had very decisively presented his version of this family, particularly in the second of his three books of autobiography, *You Have a Lot to Lose: A Memoir 1956-1986.* Grimshaw repeatedly quotes a line from it, '*There was a minimum of piety among us, tears but not too many, shouting but not too much, some songs, some recitations from memory, and endless jokes'* (Stead, qtd. in Grimshaw 196). Although *The Mirror Book* had yet to be published when Stead's second autobiography was released, Grimshaw was beginning to voice her views publicly, including a version of events contrary to her father. Journalist Diana Wichtel describes an exchange with Stead in a Going West interview, when Stead responded to his daughter's alternative version: '"Yes, well, I think her memory of her childhood and my memory of her childhood are somewhat at odds … Well, she just has to get on with that and when I'm dead write her version."'

She did not wait for him to die, of course. Grimshaw's response to why she chose not to publish this book after her father had died, is revealing. Writer and critic Steve Braunias wrote in his Newsroom column about an interview in which he asked her, 'Why write this now, when they were still alive … why not wait till they were dust?' Grimshaw replied: 'There's no prospect of reconciliation, no dream of a happy ending with the dead.' Her stark response emphasizes

the understanding that her motivation behind this memoir was to heal, not necessarily to set the record straight. The effect, however, has been just that – by presenting her own version of family life so forcibly and publicly, Grimshaw has indeed put a dent in her father's account. As Philip Matthews says, 'After that explosive book [*The Mirror Book*], the facade of Stead is still standing but the foundations have been dangerously hollowed out.'

Although Tara Westover's view of the world and her childhood differ markedly from her father's and many of her siblings, it's unlikely her motivation behind writing *Educated* was to 'set the record straight'. On the contrary, she's careful to pay attention to the version of events as told by other family members (I discuss this in detail, later). It's also unlikely that Tara Westover needed to write *Educated* as a form of self-help. The experiences described in the book might follow Birket's theory, 'confused, uncertain of outcomes', but Westover's breakthrough doesn't appear to be as a result of writing her memoir. She'd already made that breakthrough, or as she describes it, 'Transformation. Metamorphosis' (Westover 377), by attaining that education.

Educated is arguably, in Martin Lee's words, a work of generosity. Westover certainly risked a great deal by writing it; her brother Shawn's violent threats were potentially exacerbated by its publication. No doubt the 'existential' was aided by the act of weaving her many journals into one seamless narrative, but the 'why' behind writing this memoir (she was previously a 'nobody'), errs more closely to the simple reason inherent in our appetite for good stories: this one is extraordinary, and knowing it is nonfiction, horrifying at times. It also cites experiences and human fallibilities that resonate well beyond the confines of a cloistered, evangelical upbringing.

But *Educated* is also a work of observation, a firsthand account of a sector of rural US society that might otherwise remain unexamined. The 'why' of *Educated* strikes closely to the justification that, as well as being a terrific yarn, it is an important document of history, and to some extent, geography, with powerful descriptions of the Idaho landscape and community, along with prevailing values and politics, rarely seen or understood. As Westover suggested in an Aspen Ideas interview, Idaho is a forgotten corner of the United States where 'the schools

are struggling to get teachers … and the main way you're going to interact with government are requirements in agriculture that don't make any sense, or speeding tickets.' Documenting a place and time in history then, is yet another justification for memoir, even if it's told by the 'nobody' historian. G. Thomas Couser argues that memoir 'is a powerful expression of democracy. [Democracy] may not be necessary to it, but [memoir] is capable of strengthening it and enriching its culture' (Couser 181).

Memoirs punctuate and illuminate history, whether a writer's experience is of early feminism, war, the Holocaust or the US Civil Rights movement. These books have an obvious and important justification. But for less prominent, personal memoirs, the contribution to that 'expression of democracy' is more nuanced, a subtext of background events in society, rather than an obvious or major theme. Throughout *The Mirror Book,* Grimshaw traverses events in New Zealand history, such as the Bastion Point land protest and the Springbok tour, and the reader gleans an understanding, either through Grimshaw's lens, or through the actions and responses by members of her family to those events. Similarly, we can trace a progression of feminism, as it impacted on her relationships with her parents, their views or how they have may or may not have changed. Harvey Weinstein? 'Poor Man', says her mother (265). As Philip Matthews wrote in Newsroom: '*The Mirror Book* has appeared at a particular cultural moment, when, to put it crudely, the authority of old white men is being challenged, whether they are fathers, bosses or presidents.' Matthews alludes to a quote from Grimshaw retelling her father's reaction to the 'Roast Busters' rape case in 2013: 'Karl leaned into my face and said with maximum scorn, "They weren't raped". But how did he know?' (Grimshaw 276).

Critic Nancy K. Miller reinforces the value of such work: 'In their introduction to *The Feminist Memoir Project*, the editors comment on the work of memoir in accounting for the recent feminist past, in the value of memoir as a gesture towards "making an honest and ethical attempt to restore a sense of history's specifics"' (Miller 158). The net result of many such accounts, is that history, indeed democracy has inherited a positive legacy from the accumulation of life writing on the library shelves. As North American memoirist Fleischmann concludes: 'The process of asserting individual truths, of "speaking your truth" has been a powerful social and political tool in the modern world' (Fleishman 45).

Ultimately, however, the raison d'être or justification for memoir might boil down to something much simpler. As with so much of literature, discovering that someone else has a life story that resonates, validates, reassures and provides some comfort to the reader, is often reason enough. Helen Garner, as always, says it beautifully: 'Sometimes it seems to me that, in the end, the only thing people have got going for them is their imagination. At times of great darkness, everything around us becomes symbolic, poetic, archetypal. Perhaps this is what dreaming, and art, are for' (*Everywhere I Look* 152).

The How.

'Memoirists are vampires and thieves, you might say: vampires and thieves with shards of ice in their hearts' (McWilliam, qtd. in Higgins). It is tempting to read that line from Candia McWilliam, bin any consideration about ethics, and simply say, 'tough'. Similarly, as John Eakin quotes Janet Malcolm, 'The biographer is, she observes, a "professional burglar, breaking into a house, rifling through certain drawers that he has good reason to think contain the jewelry and money, and triumphantly bearing his loot away"' (Eakin 9). Triumphantly? Guiltily for some, perhaps. If you believe the above quotes, then there is no need to discuss the 'How', how to grapple with or minimise the potential hurt through revelations about friends and family in memoir. As Lesley Neale, quoting Robert McGill, suggests, it may be a pointless ambition:

> An absolute determination to ensure privacy for those living, or deceased, might mean a work is never published. Canadian writer and literary critic Robert McGill argues that all writing is a 'betrayal,' even of the author themselves, since any words can psychologically betray a writer's unconscious mind. Such an argument illustrates that avoiding hurt to others is an elusive goal, particularly in biographical family projects. (McGill, qtd. in Neale 113)

I would argue, however, that there are myriad ways in which the majority of memoirists, when writing about friends and family, practice a form of restraint. It is not only for the sake of ethics or conscience, but in effect, for better prose. You want your reader onside; you do not want to come across as a heartless monster.

I hit the ethical speed bumps almost as soon as I embarked upon *Line of Flight*. I was concerned about getting it wrong, immediately checking a few facts past my surviving sisters. Guilt or conscience was front of mind. I changed names, or left individuals un-named. In one case I realised litigation might result from re-quoting certain allegations, so in the hope of avoiding being sued for defamation, I not only changed character's names, but also street names, dates, quotes. Of course, my name remains the same, so anyone connected with that episode will know the identity of anyone concerned.

It is ethically convenient when you write a story that involves other people who are no longer part of your life, including those who have died. But it is a small world; you know there will be someone out there connected with that story. It is much more difficult, of course, to write about people who are still present or connected to your life, who cannot be renamed, who cannot be hidden under any vagaries of description. Usually family. It is then that the memoirist wrestles with how far to go with potentially hurtful revelations, or the writer's interpretation or commentary on those events.

In the essay entitled 'Meditation on Kindness' in *Line of Flight,* I quote the words from a friend's mother: 'Before you say anything, ensure two out of three requirements are met – is it true, is it necessary, is it kind?' This was the scaffolding I would come back to, a line I drew in the sand for myself to test whether or not I should write about something or not. Perhaps it not only relates to my own writing, but to memoir in general.

Truth is the first, potentially the most quixotic of all questions or requirements. Critic Thomas Larson begins with a quote from memoirist Mary Karr: '"What I wanted most of all was to tell the truth". But what is this truth? Where does it exist? In memory? In the writing? In the intermixing of the two? Anyone who wants to tell the truth soon learns that truth may not want to be told' (Larson 33). Larson goes on to discuss how difficult it is to find the truth from that hazy gulf between imagination and memory. 'We must remember that often our memories

have erased and altered things before we search out their latest version or a version from someone else. The nature of memory, as any brain doctor will confirm, is to mix imagination and fact' (Larson 25). Mary Karr suggests the most useful approach is to 'Collude with the reader about your relationship with the truth and memory' (Karr, 191).

Tara Westover certainly does just that. She constantly questions the reliability of her memories, expressing this overtly on the page. She goes to quite some effort to qualify her version of truth in *Educated,* providing a series of endnotes throughout the book, offering alternative versions of key episodes, as remembered by others. For example, 'I've heard conflicting accounts of why Shawn fell' (Westover 148), endnote added and duly explained. In a separate concluding section, 'A Note on the Text', Westover goes into greater detail about other family versions of important episodes, citing 'What I take from this is a correction, not to my memory but to my understanding' (384). Westover has diaries, journals she filled throughout those critical teenage years. She even cites doubt in her own written accounts:

> I decided that if I had asked differently, been more calm, he would have stopped. I write this until I believe it, which doesn't take long because I *want* to believe it, because that means it is under my power … I have often wondered if the most powerful words I wrote that night came not from anger or rage, but from doubt: *I don't know. I just don't know.* (127)

Curiously, the effect on the reader is not to distrust Westover's version of the truth. Rather, it results in even greater trust. By presenting the element of doubt, and citing alternative versions of those stories, the reader's faith in Westover's veracity is strengthened. As Helen Garner suggests: 'you have a responsibility to the "facts" as you can discover them, and an obligation to make it clear when you have *not* been able to discover them' (*True Stories* 113).

In the introduction to *The Mirror Book,* Grimshaw acknowledges the gulf of doubt that can be associated with the concept of truth. '"Truth" is something else. Truth is for the reader to judge and consider, to decide, or perhaps to conclude: "Families are complex – how can one ever really know?"' (7). But it seems to me that nowhere else in the memoir does Grimshaw

question the fallibility or vulnerability of her own memory, not even recounting the story when she was seven, walking in the Waitakere Ranges. She writes, 'I remember intense fear and despair, the hours of terrified crying as we tried to find our way, and the *objectively correct* understanding that we could die' (75; emphasis added). If there is an alternative view, an opposing version of events, for example her mother's, 'Kay described the Pararaha experience as a "triumph"' (76), it is presented by Grimshaw doubtfully as just another 'it was our family persona, our front and face' (116). In the extreme situations of stories contradicting one another, she suggests an element of 'gas-lighting'. When discussing events with her father, she writes: 'When I disputed this, he insisted, "You're wrong. You get things wrong all the time"' (28). As discussed earlier, Grimshaw's memoir is defiantly countering 'a repressive narrative that denies individuals their own truth' (21), referring to her father's asserted version of family life. If she were to express any doubt in her recollections, would this then erode what is, in fact, central to *The Mirror Book,* that is, the existential importance of setting out her own memories, her own version of events in her life?

I wonder if the opposite might in fact be true. Just as Westover presents various versions of a story, some degree of doubt expressed by Grimshaw might, paradoxically, engender the reader's trust. Particularly regarding those childhood memories. We all have instances as children, when we could swear to a certain story having unfolded, only to discover no such thing. Imagination, a powerful dream perhaps, might have planted that image or story in our minds. Size, time and even danger can be exaggerated in the mind of a child. Grimshaw is insistent on her version of events remembered as a seven-year-old as 'objectively correct' (75). At this point in the narrative, I hesitated. Could she really be so sure, recalling events at the age of seven?

Truth, or however close to the truth as one can recall, is of course the very foundation of any memoir. As Mary Karr says: 'Truth is not their [memoirists] enemy. It's the bannister they grab for when feeling around on the dark cellar stairs' (Xv111). Karr quotes North American fiction and nonfiction writer, Don DeLillo: 'A fiction writer starts with meaning and then manufactures events to represent it; a memoirist starts with events, then derives meaning from them' (DeLillo, qtd. in Karr xvii). Meaning can only be derived from those actual events, and the

more precise the telling of the details, then a more powerful meaning can be inferred or understood from the truth. Both Westover and Grimshaw have an eye for detail in the retelling of pivotal events or experience. Put simply, they both know *to show*, not tell.

Grimshaw remembers and recounts 'lived experience', the events and conversations throughout her childhood – the walk in the Pararaha Gorge (74), (however questionable her lens of memory), the incident with a newly opened jam jar with her father, 'He would be holding up the jam jar as evidence. The odd thing was the intensity' (124), burning down the toetoe in the neighbour's garden (13) or even more teenage pyrotechnics on cars and a phone booth (136-138). Through each episode the reader gleans more about the characters than could otherwise be told – her father's anger, manifest in the toddler Charlotte defiantly stomping mud through the house (117), and here we learn as much about Charlotte as we do of her father, or through the episode with the jam jar we witness another episode of not only anger, but an odd manifestation of control. Later, in London, her father is so furious he goes to the extreme of climbing the outside pipes to climb in through a window to insist his daughter goes to school: 'It's comical, the image of Karl shinnying up the pipes, leaping down onto his screaming prey – pure slapstick' (93).

It is only having described an account of the episode and the actions of those who took part (as far as one can rely on memory), that the writer can then offer an interpretation of their own. Karr writes, 'A memorist can't help but show at each bump in the road how her perceptual filter is distorting perceptions as part of the writing process' (Karr 47). But Karr goes further, suggesting: 'The trick to fashioning a deeper, truer voice involves understanding how you might *misperceive* as you go along; thus looking at things more than one way. The goal of a voice is to speak not with *objective authority* but with *subjective curiosity*' (Karr 48-49; emphasis added).

Westover recounts a good many events from her childhood in detail, her father's lectures (7), the never-ending bottling of peaches (13), her father's preparations for the end of the world, either 'the Feds' or Y2K, her mother's first attempts at midwifery (29), and even her father's reactions to Westover's forays into dance and musicals (32). If she does comment or question those experiences or her parents' reactions, however, she's restrained, careful to only

apply what Karr describes as 'subjective curiosity'. When her father's impatience and impetuous control over the family results in a near fatal car accident (46), Westover at no stage draws the arc of blame on her father, and certainly not on the driver, her brother, Tyler, merely following his father's instructions. 'Me, I never blamed anyone for the accident' (49). Westover leaves it entirely up to the reader to make the connection and place the blame. But it's Westover's later 'subjective curiosity', her reflection on a day trip with her grandmother just a few days earlier, that has a much greater impact. She tells the story of finding 'Apache tears', pieces of obsidian and sedimentary stones shaped like tears among a sandstone rock formation in the desert. As told to her by her grandmother, these stones were the tears of the Apache women slaughtered here by the US Cavalry: 'Choices, numberless like grains of sand, had layered and compressed, coalescing into sediment, then into rock, until all was set in stone' (45). Amidst the chaos of the family car accident Westover reflects on this story as a metaphor for her own life: ' ... the accident would always make me think of the Apache women, and of all the decisions that go into making a life' (49).

Counter to Mary Karr's suggestion, it seems to me that Grimshaw often applies 'objective authority' in lieu of subjective curiosity. As previously discussed, other than her caveat in the introduction to the book, 'Truth is for the reader to judge and consider' (7), she expresses little doubt in her memory of incidents, rarely acknowledging that there is the possibility of misperceptions. But she goes further, making definitive assumptions about past events. For example the incident with the jam jar is used to illustrate her father's need to assert control over the family, but she extrapolates his control of food to her own response to dieting: 'All this eventually led me to drastic dieting' (125). I'd argue that she could have addressed this as a question; there is no incontrovertible cause and effect here. Similarly, she draws out the stories of teenage 'wandering' as a direct result of irresponsible parenting: 'Kay didn't give me any useful instructions about sex, men or safety, and she imposed no control over where I went, at what hours, or who I was with' (126). In my experience, as a teenager and now as a parent of a teenager, I know all too well that no matter to what extent a parent offers advice or boundaries to a young person, they can still decide to take their own path, however destructive.

Truth then, is essential. But counter-intuitively perhaps, an element of doubt (or as Mary Karr suggests, 'colluding with reader') serves to strengthen truth, not diminish it. This includes the possibility of doubt in the factual accuracy of one's memories, particularly as a child, but also an emphasis on the subjective interpretation, acknowledging that all one can do is pose the question, particularly about cause and effect in the vastly complicated life we lead.

Whether or not either of these memoirs, or any other, are *necessary* (number two in the tick box of requirements) is largely dealt with in the 'why' of memoir (the section above), by exploring the 'existentially important', the democratisation of memoir, and to some degree, the 'self-help' as it might relate not only to the memoirist, but also to the reader. Or the memoir is necessary because, quite simply, it's a good yarn that many a reader might enjoy or relate to.

As suggested, Grimshaw's 'necessary' equates to 'existentially important', 'Truth and Reconciliation' being her stated aim; Westover's to the need for validation, potentially survival, documenting a time, a place and a way of life, but moreso, to impart an extraordinary life story.

In my case, some of the episodes in *Line of Flight* are necessary (justified) because they're a compelling story. In some small way, I can also relate the necessary to that democratisation – feminism from the viewpoint of being born in the early 1960s, the MeToo movement, or the urgent need in 2022, given the Senate ruling in the US, to discuss abortion.

I also made clear decisions about what events or experiences were not necessary. I could have told a number of stories about exotic travel experiences, but I decided the human interest factor was limited. I hesitated when writing the short essay, 'The grey area', making a clear decision not to rake over a particularly painful time in my young life. A public airing might be justified to seek retribution or justice, but knowing how it might affect innocent bystanders was enough for me to put it to one side. It was a line I would not cross. It was also not necessary to delve into the aftermath or suffering; I preferred to deal with this obliquely, in the following short essay, 'Winged'.

There's another 'necessary' that comes to mind with Tara Westover's memoir, which merges with the third and last requirement, kindness. *Educated* is in many ways a love letter, one she

could not otherwise send. It is a love letter to her mother and father – whatever path in life she chose, she never denied her love for them – but also for her siblings and extended family. The reader can but hope her mother, at least, opened and read the correspondence.

Kindness then, is the last option of requirements to satisfy, and is no doubt at the very heart of ethics, at the crux of how to minimise harm. And right from the outset, it is an uphill battle. 'I don't see how you can be an artist without causing pain. I don't mean hurting people on purpose, for revenge, or idly, or to settle accounts. But what you see, if you're really looking, is often what people wish you *wouldn't* see' (Garner, *True Stories* 161).

Journalist Laurie Hertzel echoes Garner's warning about writing to hurt people for revenge, quoting psychologist, critic and memoirist, Kerry Cohen: '"Never write in order to get revenge or to hurt someone," she says. Instead, write about your characters fully, as whole people. "Your parents are also people. They are human beings whose life events informed who they became"' (Cohen qtd. in Hertzel). Or as Philip Lopate suggests, 'Never write to settle scores (enter into the other person's point of view and be as fair-minded as possible)'.

On one level in *The Mirror Book,* you could be forgiven for thinking Grimshaw is making an attempt to settle scores, finally finding a platform to address grievances of the past against her parents, or simply to hold them responsible, as she quotes Philip Larkin, for 'being fucked up ... by your Mum and Dad' (Grimshaw 25). *The Mirror Book,* however, is more complex than that. In this literary family, Grimshaw's father, writer C.K. (Karl) Stead, has been accused on more than one occasion of 'revenge fiction' (Wichtel). Grimshaw defends him, both father and daughter seemingly concurring on the importance of ensuring compassion, or empathy, for any character in fiction, and therefore (for Grimshaw at least) also in nonfiction. She writes, 'he and I would agree that a vengeful motive will likely spoil the tone of fiction, and turn it into caricature. We both subscribed to Australian novelist Christina Stead's rule: the writer has to have a Christ-like sympathy for everyone. If you don't empathise with characters they'll be two-dimensional' (Grimshaw 194).

Whether that's true of Grimshaw or C.K. Stead's fiction is not up for discussion here. But in *The Mirror Book,* does Grimshaw succeed? Are we left with three-dimensional and empathetic portrayals of both her parents? We certainly glean three-dimensional portrayals of

both parents, but empathy might be debatable. Grimshaw's ambition of healing her relationships with her parents certainly comes, she insists throughout the memoir, from a place of love. As discussed, the over-riding purpose of the book, by her own account, is one of healing or restoration: 'This is what I'm interested in recording, the destructive effect of silence, and the restorative power of narrative' (7), reiterating, 'Let's have a Truth and Reconcilation Commission' (39). The value of such an ambition is reinforced by Lesley Neale, as she in turn quotes auto-ethnographer Christopher Poulos: 'Disclosure is ethical if this leads to healing, "The power of story trumps the power of the secret"' (Poulos qtd. in Neale 121).

Westover's compassion and kindness is obvious from the start. For one thing, she changes everyone's names. Within the vast 50 states of the U.S. of A., and the one state of Idaho, her parents and siblings are not identified. At no stage does she totally discredit her father or mother but goes to great lengths to explain why they might hold the views they have. As essayist John Barbour writes: 'Good judgment means trying to imagine the point of view of the parent as well as taking an external observer's perspective; it calls for ethical assessment that takes account of both what was within the parent's voluntary choice and the ways in which he or she was constrained, pressured, or determined by things outside his or her control' (Barbour 91).

Westover paints the picture of her father, brought up in the Mormon faith, but she then questions the possible layers of mental illness, bipolar or schizophrenic disorders (240). Throughout her narrative it is almost painful to keep witnessing her love for her father, no matter how severe his judgement and control over the family. As she returns home late in the narrative to nurse him, she says: 'It was difficult to imagine a man like Dad–proud, strong, physical–permanently impaired. I wondered if he could live a happy life ... if he wasn't able to grasp a hammer. So much had been lost' (258). But she does, however, tell a story her father would prefer she did not tell. It may be necessary, it may be true, and to minimise harm she goes to some effort to ensure it is also as kind as possible.

She goes to the same extraordinary lengths with her mother, showing compassion even when her mother goes back on her promise to support her daughter's allegation of abuse against her brother Shawn (314). It is similarly excruciating to read, but you have to admire

Westover's restraint, her empathy and understanding. As she herself explains in the conclusion, 'We are all of us more complicated than the roles we are assigned in the stories other people tell' (384).

It is not clear to me that Grimshaw goes to quite the same lengths towards compassion. Truth and Reconciliation is her stated aim, but whether or not this played out following the publication of *The Mirror Book* is not something the reader can be privy to. There was one response from a family member, Charlotte's sister, Margaret, who wrote an understated but powerful opinion piece, verging on defence of her parents, in the New Zealand Listener. It brings to mind Barbour's comment, above, Margaret Stead clearly describing the point of view of the parent, mostly with regard to their mother, Kay, or 'the ways in which he or she was constrained, pressured, or determined by things outside his or her control'. Immediately following the publication of *The Mirror Book,* Margaret Stead's piece appeared in the New Zealand Listener:

> Karl has written about the early years of their marriage ... I often think about how young they were – barely older than my son. Kay suffered nightmares, waking Karl to go with her across the garden of their tiny bedsit on Takapuna Beach to use the outhouse.
> Our parents raised us in the 1970s and 80s, when people didn't think about or discuss 'parenting'. They had children. It was a complicated and dark time in many ways, perhaps especially for our parents' generation, who were blown sideways by the machinations of the baby boomers who came next. (Stead 28)

Grimshaw backgrounds her mother's life with some understanding, but arguably, nowhere near as compassionately and gratefully as her sister does. Grimshaw's suggested aim of a 'Christ-like sympathy' is, at times, strained. But you could argue that she is simply showing us 'what people wish you *wouldn't* see' (Garner, *True Stories* 161). Certainly, the portrait Grimshaw paints of her father is one that many in the literary milieu had seen, or at least suspected. But the revelations about her mother might well have come as a surprise to many. It is evident that Grimshaw loves both her parents – she says so, repeatedly – but her lines

reiterating that love are often outweighed by what could be described as harsh commentary and comparisons to other notable figures. In the case of her father, Karl Stead, there is the examination of the personality of Donald Trump. And in the case of her mother, Kay Stead, there is the story of Aurelia, the mother of Sylvia Plath. Grimshaw is careful not to state any comparison overtly, all is ambiguous and merely carefully juxtaposed.

The reader could rightly assume that Grimshaw repeatedly alludes to President Donald Trump throughout *The Mirror Book* simply because he's so prominent in her consciousness (and in the media) at the time of writing. She says as much herself:

> Perhaps it wasn't surprising that at this time I was also greatly fascinated with Donald Trump: wannabe autocrat, patriarch, pathological demagogue who sees people as objects, who ruthlessly exiles anyone who stops flattering him, who rejects women who look too old, too real or too powerful. Who can't tolerate dissent, and rules through splitting, conflict and division. (21)

The passages alluding to him, and his 'pathological narcissism' are scattered throughout the book. But eventually, you arrive at the conclusion that Grimshaw is suggesting there is an element of Trump's personality, or rather some of his characteristics, in her own father. She even references Trump when reflecting on a conversation with Stead: 'Was it likely, I asked him, that I would suddenly become a "fantasist"? I recalled Trump's Orwellian instructions to the American people " ...what you're seeing and reading is not real"' (21). The comparison builds until, towards the end of the book, Grimshaw arrives at the most overt comparison of qualities inherent in Donald Trump to that of her own father:

> From individual narcissism to the collective narcissim that is nationalism. Or family pride, family front and face.
>
> I kept coming across this fact: a narcissist requires praise ... As long as you admire and flatter you will enjoy his favour, but if you stop praising, if you question, you will injure his ego.

> It will dawn on you that your purpose is to provide praise. Once you've stepped outside that role, you don't exist. You will be exiled to the outer. (301)

It is a tough call, suggesting your father is a narcissist (and only by juxtaposition, not overtly), and in particular citing these characteristics as comparable to those of Trump. Despite this, however, you are reminded that Grimshaw has enduring love and respect, professional and personal, for her father. She includes excerpts of his poetry, adoringly, and reiterates the warmer childhood memories of games and conversations. 'This was the father I'd sometimes told when growing up, *"You are my favourite person in the world"'* (26). Her compassion and understanding for his perceived weaknesses (illicit affairs, control over food, anger, 'Byzantine family dynamics'), are repeatedly overwhelmed by the positive and enduring connection between the two.

This is not the case, I believe, for her mother, Kay. The comparison to Plath's mother is more subtle than her father to Trump, but potentially more damning. (The 'shards of ice' come to mind.) And it is a while before we get there. Over the first half of the book, the narrative of successive childhood incidents – less to do with outright negligence, but certainly not your expected showering of a mother's love – accumulate and build to a not particularly flattering portrayal of Kay Stead. There are the stories of getting lost in the Pararaha Gorge, and Kay's dismissal of any fear or danger (76, 84); of Kay and Karl leaving Grimshaw's baby brother at a party (181), of Kay's closed and locked door to her children (47), of the put-downs, 'Look, she's raving again, Karl. She's mad' (95), and constant repetition of Kay saying to her daughter, 'There's something bad in you. There's something bad in yourself' (110). When Grimshaw recounts her mother's response to Harvey Weinstein, 'The poor man. I'd like to know about his background' (275), it is clear Kay has not only lost respect from her daughter, but possibly strains any respect or understanding from most readers as well.

It is late in the memoir that Grimshaw alludes to a review she is writing for the Spinoff on a volume of Sylvia Plath's letters. It is a long passage, and the reader could become mystified as to why it is included. Grimshaw attempts an analysis of Plath's mother-daughter relationship, even discussing it with her own psychologist (265). Sylvia Plath's story is certainly an extreme

story of neglect, one Plath herself controversially compared to stories of Holocaust survivors. Grimshaw writes: 'Perhaps it wasn't the hell of "madness" ... that Plath was evoking with her Holocaust imagery, but the abyss: the existential terror of the individual whose sense of connectedness and safety is fundamentally threatened, who experiences the terror that the "mind is alone"' (266). Surely Grimshaw has gone too far, the reader might think; surely Grimshaw can't compare her own relationship with her mother to this? Grimshaw, however, carefully hones into the nub of the issue, of a child's dependance on someone (their mother) who the child perceives as simply not wanting them: 'A person so close, there is nothing between you. What if *that* person wants you to disappear?' (265) The strongest link between Plath's situation and Grimshaw's own is examined in the concluding passage about Sylvia Plath's account of her mother, Aurelia: 'What if you grew up with an absence of maternal love, as Plath described in her journals ... Your mother has the ultimate riposte: If you'd been lovable, she would have loved you .../ It has to be *your* fault' (266).

Although Grimshaw attempts to redeem her relationship with her father, however narcissistic his portrait, I am not convinced that in her text she shows anywhere near the same understanding or respect for her mother. There is, however, an acknowledgement, even an appreciation, for Kay's ongoing loyalty to Karl: 'And in the end. / They love each other, they are devoted to each other ... I see them, still holding hands, walking away from me under the flowering pōhutukawa, into the sunlight' (153). Many readers might readily accept Grimshaw's reiteration of her ongoing commitment to her parents: 'I am still devoted to them, still only a few streets away, and as I've told them, if they need anything, day or night, I am on my way' (8). But the accumulation of oblique criticism of her mother throughout her childhood and the harshness of the Plath excerpt, could be perceived as outweighing any plainly stated words of love.

Was Grimshaw's aim of healing and restoration achievable? I am not sure. As Grimshaw describes it, Kay Stead's fragility, a lifetime of carefully manufacturing that 'front and face', would surely be shaken to the core by the publication of this account. You cannot help but wonder, were sleeping dogs best left well alone? Grimshaw questions the obvious at the

outset: 'If I told my own story, would I hurt the people I loved? Or would they stay safe within their own reality, comfortably sure I was crazy, and making it all up?' (33).

It is clear that there was a emotional divide between mother and daughter even before the publication of this memoir. Kay Stead had effectively closed the door; had told her own daughter it was goodbye. Gifting a copy of *The Choice* by Edith Eger to Grimshaw on her birthday, Kay had inscribed 'Set all the bad times aside, set us aside. Good bye darling child' (203). Grimshaw says she was 'devastated', but claims to have reacted with the calm and constant end-goal of reconciliation. She responded to Kay: '*Yes* The Choice*. Those bad times were set aside and folk moved on – although on the basis, of course, that first there was* Nuremberg' (203). At this point, Janet Malcolm's quote is apt: 'This is what it is the business of the artist to do. Art is theft, art is armed robbery, art is not pleasing your mother' (Malcolm, qtd. in Grimshaw 266).

There is something missing here, however, that bothers me. Essayist John Barbour suggests: 'Because there are many gray areas where the degree of responsibility cannot be measured exactly, good judgment sometimes resembles not judging – that is, making assessments of responsibility with a good deal of caution, tentativeness, and acknowledgment of ambiguity' (Barbour 91). In *The Mirror Book,* there is a definite lack of acknowledgement of ambiguity, the most obvious question being around nature versus nurture. Grimshaw even goes so far as to dismiss the possibility: 'If everything was down to genes, there was no responsibility for the way people turned out, nor was there any point in enquiring how someone's personality had been formed' (269). As Grimshaw reiterates Socrates' statement, 'The unexamined life is not worth living', she also asks, 'How we turn out the way we do: surely it was the kind of thing you'd want to know if you were interested in poetry and literature?' (269). Grimshaw certainly paints her younger self as wilful, and from the story of a two-year-old child beating her mother, no doubt full tantrum (110), you have to wonder if there is an element of nature here that Grimshaw needs to own, or at least to acknowledge; that not all of her personality, and her present day problems, even her fraught relationship with her mother, are attributable to her upbringing.

We return, then, to the examination of truth as it relates to an honest account – factual through memory, but honest through interpretation – of all that has unfolded. And come back to Grimshaw's line in the introduction: 'Truth is for the reader to judge and consider, to decide, or perhaps to conclude: 'Families are complex – how can one ever really know?' (7).

Families are so very complex. As Westover illustrates, there are indeed varying accounts from individuals in the same family, a different lens not only on specific episodes, but also on relationships. When Barbour suggests 'good judgment sometimes resembles not judging', perhaps the reader has the same challenge judging the writer, as the writer her own family and friends. Grimshaw's experience is not the same as her sister Margaret's, even though they come from the very same family and home. Westover acknowledges this differing view of family life among her siblings repeatedly; it's this which gives her narrative such a feeling of honesty and strength.

I know this differing lens all too well. In my case: four girls in four years, brought up by the same parents. And yet our memories, our feelings, values, politics, or that level of 'compassion', differed hugely between each one of us. While my older sisters continued to show loyalty and love towards my mother, it was only with distance, the distance of time, that I could feel any compassion towards her. But as I write in the essay, 'Mum' in *Line of Flight,* that realisation also evolved with maturity, realising my mother was a woman brought up in a different generation, battling the constraints of that era and place.

It is also one thing to feel injustice and pain, but quite another to have been silenced, muffled. In Grimshaw's family, her father did, in effect, control the narrative, and her mother, submissive as were many in her generation, supported him. In Grimshaw's words, Grimshaw was repeatedly invalidated, told that she was wrong. This is exactly an instance when 'setting the record straight' is tempting, when someone else has maintained control of the narrative for so long, and you are the poorer for it. Finding compassion at that point is challenging. When I first read Mary Karr quoting Hubert Selby, 'If you're writing about somebody you hate, do it with great love' (Selby, qtd. in Karr 120), I stumbled. Perhaps for the Dalai Lama, I thought, but it is a struggle for me. Curiously, it took reading Charlotte Grimshaw's line, 'a vengeful motive will likely spoil the tone of fiction,' or in my case, nonfiction, to stand back and try and find that

necessary compassion. (I'm still working on it, the essay, 'Meditation on Kindness' is necessarily ambiguous, kindness relating as much to me as to others.)

The corollary of healing was never a consideration as I embarked on the series of essays that make up *Line of Flight.* On the contrary, the process has probably 'muck-raked' a few memories I'd rather have kept carefully buried away. Healing of any relationships, or as Grimshaw describes it, 'reconciliation', was also not an ambition. And yet, in some small way, the process of 'alchemy' through the writing process has resulted in just that.

In conclusion, ethical considerations in memoir are inevitably up to each writer to decide for themselves. It is their choice as to whether to subscribe to either Hubert Selby's 'do it with great love', McGill's 'avoiding hurt to others is an elusive goal', or Janet Malcolm's 'professional burglar'. We can but try to refrain from revenge writing, we can do our utmost to write with '*subjective* curiosity', we can attempt to show compassion and understanding, but most of all we have to write a true (as is possible), compelling and readable story. If that story tells us a little more about the world in which we live, and an insight into the human condition, all the better.

If there is a line in the sand to cross on ethics, perhaps that's for each writer to discover for themselves. As New Zealand children's writer and memoirist Kyle Mewburn says: 'You have this thing about wanting to pursue your idea truthfully. It's all about maintaining integrity as a writer and a storyteller, so is there a line at all? I think there's a personal line, I don't think there's an actual line that can *not* be crossed.'

There will always be a risk, of course. No matter how hard the memoirist tries to mitigate harm, there may well be hurt. Perhaps it's useful to return to the words of Helen Garner, forever the realist, also pointing out how much more difficult this is for women:

> And anyway, who was ever silly enough to imagine that you could be an artist and a nice person? How can a *woman* be an artist and nice in the way women are supposed to be? Who can be the oil in the social machine when she's got the fiercely over-developed observing eye that the artist has to have? The two don't match. They can't. The nice

thing is not to notice. But artists *must* notice. They have to stare coolly, and see, and remember, and collect. That's their job, their task in the universe. (*True Stories* 161)

Flying full circle.

I never felt it was my task in the universe to write about my own life. On the contrary, justifying even beginning to write *Line of Flight* took a great deal of resolve for reasons already discussed – seeming indulgence or narcissism, or a reluctance to join what Lorraine Adams referred to as the 'memoir boom'. But initially, I also failed to see how I could find any 'story arc', any connection between each seemingly unrelated episode. The woman who might be writing the story today had little in common with either the child, the teenager, or the young woman who departed like a Godwit, without innate migratory bearings, in each and every direction.

I admit, however, that as reluctant as I am to agree with Anne Lamott, there was a small 'something tugging on the sleeves of my heart'. So I began to write, at the very least for this thesis. And those meanings or connections somehow just appeared. I nodded when I read Don DeLillo, 'a fiction writer starts with meaning and then manufactures events to represent it; a memoirist starts with events, then derives meaning from them' (DeLillo, qtd in Karr xvii). Once I began writing, this happened without being conscious of it. Birket's concept of 'alchemy' (190) took me by surprise. Start early enough in the morning, take the phone off the hook, and the alchemy might do its work – a kind of literary magic between head, memory and hands.

As suggested, ethics was a major consideration. It may have constrained the content of the narrative, but ethics also provided the necessary parameters as to how to write about the the more difficult episodes in life, to try and put aside any hurt or anger and instead find compassion, if not forgiveness. And, hopefully as a result, better prose.

Line of Flight, a collection of essays. It is not a comprehensive, nor chronological memoir; many of the essays stand alone. For the sake of some continuity, however, I wrote and included a number of interludes, shorter stories that might help bind some of the more significant experiences. Ultimately then, is there any connection between these seemingly disconnected episodes? However subtly, yes. The alchemy did its work, and the whole finally emerged as much greater than the parts. Between beginning and completing the project, this was the comforting realisation of not only what binds a memoir, but also gives meaning to a life. There is the love of flight, a phenomenon and metaphor that continues throughout, like a first love and an old friend. But there are other, perhaps more meaningful threads that emerge

out of the narrative: how our lives are directed one way or another by happenstance, by chance encounters, by a cross-wind or storm surge, and how tracing the flight path of these whys and wherefores can lead to unexpected outcomes; and the clearest line of all – how the accumulation and compounding of experiences and relationships across more than a few decades of life has resulted in an understanding of humanity and all that accompanies the inevitability of suffering.

The unexpected windfall from this writing process were moments of joy. When I arrived at the last few paragraphs of the essay, '*Séquences'*, coming to an understanding of my oldest friend through his lifetime of sculpture, then beginning the dance of words in the final story, the existential meaning appeared on the page, touchdown, just like that. At least it did for me. I sincerely hope it appeared for the reader as well.

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