

The Air that Falls: ethics and aftermath

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The day I went to collect the pre-publication copies of my first book from the post office, a quote from Geoffrey Wolff was running through my head: ‘No one who writes an autobiography can possibly know what they’re in for until that book comes out’ (qtd. in Cooper). Of course, it was way too late to be having cold feet. After four years writing a memoir and one year working with a commercial publisher, there is no way you can change your mind about the whole thing two months before publication. But still, I found myself wondering, ‘what have I done?’, or more particularly, ‘what have I done to my son?’ Strangely, the last time I remembered this feeling of ground-shaking doubt was the day my son’s father moved out of our family house. Separation was one thing; writing about separation was turning out to be a repeat performance. Except of course I hadn’t really written about separation—it is mentioned, but my memoir is really the story of my relationship with my son Ben, his diagnosis with autism and what that meant for him and for me.¹

Still, I found myself terrified as I opened the parcel and saw my ten free author’s copies. I gave one to Ben.

'It looks good,' he commented and then scuttled off into his room with it, closing the door behind him. I put the other nine books in a cupboard (I felt a strange shame and wanted to hide them) and then wandered about the kitchen, pretending to be doing chores. After about ten minutes, I knocked on Ben's door and put my head in.

'Is everything okay?' I asked.

'Yes, mum, I'm fine,' he replied. 'I'm reading the book.'

'You don't have to read it now. You can keep that copy,' I said. He looked at me in a slightly reproving way.

'Mum, if you had a book written about you, then I think you would want to read it straight away.'

Every half hour or so, I tapped on his door and asked him nervously how he was going. 'I'm fine,' he answered each time. But I kept going in because I was worried about how he would find it reading about himself in a printed book. I had read him bits of the manuscript and we had talked a lot about how he felt about me publishing the book. Now it was really happening and the book was about to be launched and sold in bookshops, it all seemed a bit more real.

'This was written for adults,' I said. And: 'It's just my version of events.' And: 'You can write your own story about our life when you're older.'

'It's okay, mum,' he said, 'I like this one,' proving once again what a generous soul he is. 'But you got a few things wrong,' he pointed out. 'When you say, *Twenty cute four-year-olds*, that's not right. It was December so some of us were four and a half and some even five in kindy.'

'Oh, yes, I'm sure you're right.'

'Also, mum, when you say that I write stories about girls with names like Rowena Smithwinson—actually, her name was Pergola Smithwinson. It was Rowena Pavingstone.'

'Sorry, darling. I should have checked that with you.'

'It's okay.'

So, it seemed as though he didn't hate me and he wasn't traumatised by reading the book. Actually, he enjoyed reading the

scenes about himself and he skipped the bits about me and the more theoretical passages. Six months later, he still likes reading the book and will often refer to events from his early childhood and laugh about them. His enjoyment is similar to kids who like to look at photos or videos of their younger selves. But Ben will also discuss with me some of the more challenging aspects of what I've written, like where I expressed my feelings about his difficulties with forming friendships by writing: 'I imagine a future full of unrequited love for girls and then women who like him but don't return the full measure of his feelings'. My heart turned over the day he quoted this sentence to me, his head on one side, eyes slightly puzzled. He must have recognised the horror on my face because he said, 'It's okay, mum'. To have your beloved twelve year old reassure you that your honesty is not necessarily a betrayal is a terrible but lovely thing.

Of course, I didn't write and publish this memoir in a vacuum or with a naive view of life writing.² Being a literary person I read all that I could about ethics and memoir writing. I read Tom Couser's work on the representation of vulnerable family members, his warnings that parents writing about children with a disability may reinforce stigma rather than remove it. Arthur Frank, taking another tack, describes parents writing about their children as a moral act, a way to reinscribe value to people who are generally under-valued in our society. Paul John Eakin argues that the central theme of all life writing is ethics; that we write biography and autobiography because we want to understand what it is to live a good life. This is an interesting idea because it suggests that we write (and perhaps read) personal stories partly for reasons of moral or ethical engagement, and yet writing—or at any rate publishing—a personal story is full of ethical challenges.

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Now that my own memoir is published, the ethical dilemmas of life writing continue to engage me, particularly those around motherhood memoirs. Here my exploration of the ethics of women

writing about marriage and motherhood is done through a case study, the memoir *Aftermath* by Rachel Cusk.

Rachel Cusk is a well known UK writer, author of three memoirs and seven novels, including *The Bradshaw Variations* and *Arlington Park*. *Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation* (2012) is partly Cusk's account of the breakdown of her marriage and her own emotional responses to this and partly an examination of the complexities around contemporary marriage, feminism and the responsibility for child rearing, using her own marriage as a case study. It's a fascinating, and I think flawed, book. And the public reaction to this book in the UK is also intriguing for the way Cusk appears to have transgressed some unwritten ethical (or perhaps cultural) rules.

An important aspect of this book is that it explores motherhood as well as marriage breakdown. I suspect that in most people's eyes the ethics of a parent, especially a mother, writing about a child is a special case when it comes to memoir. Readers surely have different expectations of mothers writing about children from those they have of women or men writing about any other relationship in their life. Mothers are supposed to protect their children and put their child's needs above their own; using your child as material may be considered exploitative. A classic example of this is the press coverage Julie Myerson received on the publication of her 2009 book *The Lost Child* which, among other things, explored her teenage son's addiction to skunk. Minette Marrin, for example, claimed in *The Sunday Times* that Myerson had betrayed her son through ambition and didn't love him enough 'not to publish—the real test of the heart for a writer'.

Our culture's intense idealisation of motherhood also means that mothers who publicly express ambivalence about mothering are likely to be criticised. As Rozsika Parker says, 'Maternal ambivalence is curiously hard to believe in,' and can only be safely acknowledged in the context of humour (17). Memoirists who write seriously about the complexities of mothering may be viewed by readers and reviewers with great suspicion. Rachel Cusk's first memoir, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*, received some very negative commentary when

it was published in 2001. *A Life's Work* is an account of the confusion, pain and doubt she experienced during the early years of mothering. Expressing these emotions with seriousness and in literary prose, Cusk found herself accused of narcissism, selfishness and failing to love and care for her children properly. I found *A Life's Work* a very beautiful book about a complex issue. This may be the problem. As Parker suggests, 'maternal ambivalence is viewed askance and defended against by both idealisation and denigration of mothers' (35)—in this case, the denigration of the mother-writer. It is all the more amazing to me, then, that Rachel Cusk dared to write a third memoir, given that her second, *The Last Supper: A Summer in Italy*, also caused controversy when some of the Italian locals threatened to sue the publisher over how they were represented.³ She has now joined the ranks of writers described as 'serial memoirists', a phrase that surely echoes the term serial murderer.

The reaction to *Aftermath* in the UK press followed immediately from the publication of an extract of the book in *The Guardian*. David Blackburn called for book publishers to be scrutinised by the Leveson Inquiry because *Aftermath* 'raises questions about publishers' ethics and privacy law'. In a short piece in *The Spectator*, he claims that the book 'is extremely frank, sparing little of her erstwhile husband's privacy or that of her children, over whom the warring parents have been fighting' and suggests that the Leveson Inquiry 'is the perfect setting for further debate' about the 'rights of voiceless children'. In an article in *The Telegraph*, Zoe Brennan asks, 'How can a mother lay her family so bare, while her husband is so passionately opposed to the public airing of their affairs?' Rather astonishingly, Brennan then names Cusk's husband (who is not named in *Aftermath*), tells readers about his life and new career as photographer while berating Cusk for mentioning him in her memoir. Amanda Craig, writing in *The Independent* notes of Cusk: 'She does love her daughters; a reader questions whether, despite her accounts of trying to maintain normality, she loves them enough'. Comments from readers and in the blogosphere were often similarly critical, condemning Cusk for

her solipsism, intellectualism, breaching her family's privacy and (once again) not loving her children enough.

Of course, there were also positive reviews of the book and commentary supporting Cusk's right to write about her marriage. Lisa Appignanesi writes in *The Telegraph*, "The facts here are all to do with her own ways of seeing and feeling. There is nothing to embarrass children, even husband, unnamed friends and lover. Readers may want more fact than she is prepared to give, even while chastising her for giving what she has". Her point is well-made: many comments on *Aftermath* both criticise the author for writing about her marriage breakdown and demonstrate disappointment that she didn't tell more about why the marriage failed. The only detail provided—'an important vow of obedience was broken' (Cusk, *Aftermath* 2)—seems to anger readers into demanding both less and more.

I suspect there are many issues coming into play here, including a misunderstanding about the nature of memoir, an idealisation of motherhood, and an anti-intellectual ethos in public life. The discussion has been framed as an issue about privacy and family. My interest in reading *Aftermath* is how it works to highlight the key challenges of memoir around ethics (including privacy) and truth-telling.

It seems to me that *Aftermath* dramatises the classic liberal feminist dilemma, where the goal of individual emancipation is compromised by liberalism's foundational division of social life into separate public and private spheres and by the notion of individual autonomy within the public sphere as the key to emancipation. Cusk struggles with the notion that, because her lawyer husband gave up his work in order to 'help' look after the children, she has to pay him maintenance after they separate, even though she is 'only a writer' (that is, she doesn't earn much and is a woman) and he has developed a new career as well as being able to practise as a lawyer if he wishes (and is a man). She believes that in swapping the traditional roles of bread-winning husband and childrearing wife, they have somehow come to be 'unsexed' or 'transvestites'. Like many women who negotiate this swap, Cusk found that she still had a second role of

childrearing; as she puts it, she was 'both man and woman, while my husband—meaning well—only did one' (23).

Cusk says, 'Call yourself a feminist, my husband would say to me, disgustedly, in the raw bitter weeks after we separated. He believed he had taken the part of woman in our marriage, and seemed to expect me to defend him against myself, the male oppressor' (6). Her husband's questioning of her feminist credentials is repeated by Cusk herself. She suggests that as a feminist she simply adopted the male values of her father. This became a problem only when she had children. She suggests that a feminist 'acts as an interface between private and public, just as women always have, except that the feminist does it in reverse. She does not propitiate: she objects. She's a woman turned inside out' (15). This sense of being a woman turned inside out when the role of mother is added to her identity was first explored in *A Life's Work* and is revisited in *Aftermath*. When her husband says he wants 'half of everything, including the children', she immediately says that the children 'belong' to her, and then is shocked by her own reaction (8–9). She realises that one of the unspoken conditions of the pact that allowed her career equality in marriage was that she 'would not invoke the primitivism of the mother, her innate superiority' over the father as parent. By 'swapping roles' with her husband, Cusk realises that she has unwittingly ceded her special status as main carer of the children while still doing much of the childrearing work, another contradiction that she struggles to accommodate.

Near the end of *Aftermath*, Cusk argues that it is 'the authority' of marriage and the 'manufactured normality' (105-6) of the nuclear family that causes these dilemmas, though of course marriage and family cannot be divorced from the social context in which we enact them and raise children. She finds life after separation to be full of chaos and says marriage 'absorbs disorder and manifests it as order' (122), expressing ambivalence about this authority and order. In an interview with Katherine Viner in *The Guardian* after the book's publication, Cusk says, 'what I saw was that in the breakdown of marriage the whole broken mechanism of feminism was revealed. I had expected to

find, at the end of the family structure, at least some proof of feminist possibility, however harsh. But either it wasn't there or I couldn't find it' (Cusk, 'Divorce is'). The post-familial, post-order life of separation is what Cusk calls aftermath, like the ruins of a civilisation, the Dark Ages explored by her school history teacher, Mrs Lewis. In spite of the pain of living in aftermath, Cusk notes that it is also a place of creativity. 'Better, in Mrs Lewis's view, to live the compartmentalised, the disorganised life and feel the dark stirrings of creativity, than to dwell in civilised unity, racked by the impulse to destroy' (5).

The book itself attests to both the creative potential and the disorganisation of Cusk's aftermath. At only 152 pages, it is stuffed with metaphors and analogies that aim to convey the pain and confusion of post-separation life. Her life is like a broken plate, a heap of jigsaw puzzle pieces, the aftermath of war, a Greek tragedy, a huge messy cake. A long story about a tooth extraction becomes a substitute for describing the day her husband moved out. Her daughter in an animal mask represents their joint longing to escape from painful emotions. There is a lodger howling in the garden at night and a bizarre holiday episode where Cusk allows herself to be abandoned in a run-down cottage without transport while her daughters take horse riding lessons. The stories of Abraham, Oedipus and Clytemnestra are retold and interpreted in ways that link to Cusk's own situation and argument. Even as a sympathetic reader, I found this to be overkill. She is trying to convey an experience of grief—and grief is incoherent and disorganised and so must be structured—but the patterning here feels too contrived and elaborate. There is a final chapter, too, called 'Trains', which retells some of the separation story from the viewpoint of an au pair. As the au pair has not been mentioned previously (though Cusk paying for child care has), it is unclear whether this is a wholly fictional character invented for the book or if Cusk has imagined and dramatised the viewpoint of an au pair who had been working for her. Frances Stonor Saunders describes this as an 'utterly disingenuous novelistic trick of resolution' and suggests Cusk is suffering in this book from a

'writerly greed, swooping on everything and wringing meaning from it, transforming it into something else rather than just letting it be.'

It is ironic that *Aftermath* proceeds in this exaggerated way, because one of the book's key themes is the primacy of 'truth' over 'story'. At the start of the book, Cusk says that her husband believes she has treated him badly. 'It was his story, and lately I have come to hate stories. If someone were to ask me what disaster this was that had befallen my life, I might ask if they wanted the story or the truth' (2). She goes on to argue that 'the problem usually lies in the relationship between the story and the truth. The story has to obey the truth, to represent it, like clothes represent the body' (2–3). She notes that unclothed truth is shocking while over-dressed truth becomes a lie, and that reconciling the two positions is difficult. Of course, Cusk recognises the contradiction in rejecting stories while writing her own story, an autobiographical act that uses stories from other texts and times to unveil her meaning. She also no doubt recognises that separating truth and story suggests the questionable idea that there is some truth available to us beyond the narratives we use to communicate with ourselves and one another. Writing about Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, she acknowledges that 'form, in the end, conceals truth' (55), perhaps reflecting also that the form and conventions of memoir have the potential to conceal truth. This acknowledgement may be one reason she breaks these conventions with her ventriloquist final chapter.

Questions about truth and narrative are common in discussions about autobiography. Philippe Lejeune, updating in 2005 his 1975 notion of 'the autobiographical pact', says, 'The autobiographical pact is the engagement that an author takes to narrate his life directly (her life, or a part of it, an aspect of it) in a spirit of truth' (qtd. in Miller 538). Academics may quibble about what this means, but writers and readers appear attached to this 'spirit of truth'. John Barbour, in his book *The Conscience of the Autobiographer*, makes a useful distinction here between truth, which he calls a 'correspondence between human thought and reality' and truthfulness, which is 'a process or quality of a person' (26). The autobiographer, he argues,

cannot tell the truth, but can demonstrate truthfulness, 'the active search for the most exact and insightful understanding of past experience' (26). Using this distinction, Cusk's memoir can be read as an attempt to be truthful in her interpretation and articulation while struggling with the inability to tell 'the truth'. Her suspicion of 'story' as she tells a story makes sense in this context. Barbour suggests that we can understand truthfulness in autobiography as a dialogue between a writer's conscience and her imagination: 'The writer's moral scruples set limits to and orient the imaginative project of self-representation' (27). Revisiting *Aftermath* in this light, we might argue that the tooth extraction, howling lodger, animal masks and the like are the only way she can represent herself with truthfulness and remain faithful to her imagination and sense of self. If the book at times seems grandiose, this may be a reflection of what Parker describes as our society's 'grandiose expectations of mothers' which, she argues, 'mothers, with their profound desire to be good mothers, both reproduce and resist' (34). Cusk's 'over-egged effect' (Burchill) represents this grandiosity while the voice of self-dissection resists it.

Barbour views autobiography as an exercise of conscience, part of the purpose of which is to protect the integrity of the self and maintain the self's continuity and identity. The representation in *Aftermath* of the disorder and loss that separation entails is accompanied by the narrator's commentary on the gap between the ideal and the reality of both marriage and motherhood. Scenes from Cusk's life are constantly juxtaposed with theoretical discussions, complicating and enriching the work, creating the seeds of a post-aftermath identity. By the penultimate chapter, Cusk is seeing a psychologist and a new lover. There is a sense that she is starting to move on from the separation but, ironically, this chapter is in fact less coherent than earlier chapters, being written in fragments with no clear structure. It is as if Cusk has not yet developed the stories she needs to help her interpret or pattern her new life and self. Where is the roadmap for life after the Dark Ages?

This is the context in which we read the final chapter of the book, 'Trains'. This chapter is narrated in the third person from the focal

point of Sonia, a European au pair working for Cusk and her husband just before they separate. Sonia is young and initially frightened to be away from home. Through her eyes, Cusk—called 'the woman'—is described: 'the woman talks about things that don't exist. There's something that comes from her, something other than words. It's as if she isn't contained in her own skin. She spills out and Sonia can see the spillage' (133). Soon after she arrives, Sonia tells 'the woman' about an episode when she was on a train going to boarding school at fifteen and a man raped her on the train. Sonia's mother was angry with her for reporting this and so Sonia harmed herself and then spent a year in a psychiatric hospital. 'The woman' seems angry that she hasn't been told about this and talks about sending Sonia back home. However, later that day 'the woman' becomes ill and Sonia looks after her and the children. Not long after this, the couple separate and Sonia is sent to live with a relative's family in London. The chapter ends with Sonia making a *stollen* and posting half to 'the woman' and half to 'the man' for Christmas.

It is unclear exactly what Cusk is trying to achieve with this final chapter. Is it an attempt to gain 'resolution' as Saunders suggests? Or a way of showing, through an onlooker, how little we know ourselves, as Lisa Appignanesi proposes? Could it be an attempt to give validation to her story or, conversely, a way of acknowledging that in the wider scheme of things, her own traumas are not very serious? Can she only allow empathy (for herself, her husband, her au pair) into her work by stepping into another person's mind? Is she breaking the autobiographical pact here to suggest that all of her book has been just 'story' after all, on a par with her husband's story that she had treated him monstrously? Perhaps it is the very notion that she is writing about the self that drives this final chapter, an acknowledgement that it is the (feminist) relational self not the (masculine) singular self that autobiography represents. As Nancy Miller puts it, feminist theorists have argued persuasively that, 'the female autobiographical self comes into writing, goes public with private feelings, through a significant relation to an other' (544). Indeed, Miller (following Eakin)

argues that this model of a relational self is true of all autobiography, saying: 'Perhaps it is time to understand the question of relation to the other—to others—as being as important, foundational, to the genre as the truth conditions of the "autobiographical pact"' (544). Cusk's final chapter may be a result of this imperative to be seen in relation to or from the viewpoint of another.

Whatever the reason for this chapter, my concern is with the ethics of it. Cusk has been criticised for writing about her husband and children, even though in fact she hardly divulges anything about them, avoids using their names and writes only about her own feelings and experiences. But I have not read any commentary about the ethics of Cusk writing about or from the perspective of Sonia. I wonder if this is because the privacy of a young European au pair is considered less important by the UK media than the privacy of Cusk's husband and children. If Sonia is based on an au pair who worked for Cusk then it seems to me that Cusk is guilty of a breach of privacy at the very least. But even if Sonia is a fictional character, the fact that the reader doesn't know this and she is introduced without explanation in the final chapters raises ethical questions. We read memoir as non-fiction and therefore we may expect Sonia to be a real person, just as we expect the other facts told in the chapter (Cusk's illness, her swollen jaw after the tooth extraction, the *stollen* and so on) to be truthful. Is it then ethical to tell of Sonia's rape, self-harm and stay in a psychiatric ward as an incidental side-issue to the important marriage breakdown story of this book? To tell the story from the focal point of Sonia herself does not resolve this ethical dilemma. There is little honouring of Sonia's story—or of similar experiences that many young women have suffered. Nor is there space in this chapter to convey the full richness and specificity of Sonia as a character; she is only really a witness to the Cusk family drama. Given Cusk's ability to be self-critical, even cruel to herself (125), it may be that my response to this chapter was the intended one; that we are supposed to situate Cusk and her family woes in a wider perspective, to care about the Sonias of this world. However,

it's hard to see the value of that in this context. It feels like another of her self-indulgent moments; another story that is grist for her mill rather than a genuine consideration of other women's experiences.

If autobiography is necessarily relational, then part of the struggle for a life writer to be ethical is surely around her characterisation of others (as well as herself). Ethics in writing memoir is not just about protecting the identities of your characters, avoiding telling embarrassing stories or outing people's secrets in your work. It is more than writing truthfully without claiming you tell 'the truth'. I would argue that ethical memoir writing is also about trying to convey, through characterisation, the interest and value of other people's lives and the value of different experiences and perspectives. Barbour, Eakin, Frank, David Parker and others argue that we write—and read—autobiography partly because we want to understand what it is to live a good life, a life of value or worth. If this is the case, then it is even more important that the other characters in life writing are fully developed and do more than simply act as commentators on the autobiographer's life.

The weakness of *Aftermath* is perhaps the weakness of many memoirs: by the end of the book we know very little about anyone other than the narrator herself. Her family and friends act as foils to her; her children are more like barometers of her own mothering skills than they are real people. There are no alternative versions of how to live offered. This may be the result of a desire to protect her children (and maybe her husband). By failing to develop them as characters, she avoids invading their privacy. The irony here is that Cusk has been condemned for allowing her children to be 'counted as acceptable collateral damage' in her work (Guardian) and portraying her husband as 'a man emasculated' (Brennan), accusations I consider unwarranted.

In spite of my reservations about the final chapter and some of the stylistic aspects of *Aftermath*, I think it makes a significant contribution to the life writing literature on contemporary marriage and mothering. Cusk demonstrates a rare willingness to articulate the complexities

of her relationship with her husband and children and the sense of disorder and fear that separation can engender. She has the courage to represent some of her own primal reflexes and feelings around her children. And she conveys the excruciating pain a mother feels when her own choices and actions result in suffering for her children. Once again, there is an irony in the way the publication of *Aftermath* resulted in a further aftermath where Cusk is condemned for causing more suffering to her children by acknowledging their suffering.

The extent to which children who are characters in their parents' memoirs suffer as a result is not something we can really know. As a writer, I can only guess how my son may feel about my memoir in the years to come. Will he have his own dark aftermath? Perhaps his experience will be no different from most children, much of whose lives are now recorded and made available on social media sites. A printed literary memoir probably has a smaller readership than most facebook pages. This is not to deny the seriousness of writing about family members, especially more vulnerable ones. As Jane Shilling asks, however, 'if one may not write candidly about the experience of motherhood, then about what else may one not write? What other human relationships might be deemed unsuitable for exploration by writers?' Cusk writes about her marriage breakdown as a way to explore the dilemmas around parenting for contemporary women in the UK. My own book was an attempt to explore how one might understand difference and mother across a kind of neurological or cultural divide, as well as a celebration of the value of autistic people. These topics seem to me to be worth exploring in an autobiographical form given the profound interconnectedness of the personal with their political, social and cultural aspects.

If, as John Barbour argues, autobiography is essentially an exercise of conscience, then the autobiographical act of creating a coherent narrative which shapes personal identity through moral self-reflection and imagination is simply a more formal and developed version of every individual's struggle for self-knowledge and self-understanding. Such self-knowledge cannot come without recognition of our relation-

ship to others. It is almost impossible for women to write autobiographically about motherhood without writing about their children. To simply argue that it is unethical to write about children at all is an easy response that denies mothers the opportunity to express what may be some of the most profound and complex experiences of their lives. As Carolyn Heilbrun says, 'power consists to a large extent in deciding what stories will be told' (43-4). Do we want to prevent readers from accessing literature that expresses some of their own experiences and against which they can consider their own lives? Heilbrun also points out, 'What matters is that lives do not serve as models; only stories do that' (37).

I can't predict how writing about my life as a mother may affect my son Ben in the future. At the moment, though, I can see that the stories in my book have been incorporated into our lives in the same way that, over time, holiday photographs come to define the experience of a holiday. At his recent birthday, Ben said to me, 'Mum, can you believe I'm thirteen now? I used to be that two year old who confused his pronouns, loved numbers and was afraid of loud noises.' He seemed amazed and impressed that he was growing up, as if reading my narrative had given him a new and different perspective on himself. I can't say if this is a good thing or not. All families tell stories that describe and may constrain individual members. I have gone to great lengths in my memoir to identify the narrative as my own, to suggest that other people, including my son, would interpret our lives in different ways. Indeed, I note some of Ben's re-interpretation of my perspective in my final chapter, when he questions my implication that a fascination with numbers is less valuable than an interest in other people and social connection. Ben also has the last word on how to end the book, hinting that it will be him not me who creates his own future, tells his own life story. Pablo Neruda is reputed to have said, "Two things make a story. The net and the air that falls through the net."

We each have to cast our own net.

Notes

- 1 'Ben' is the name used for my son in my memoir, not his real name.
- 2 For the purposes of this essay, I have used the terms autobiography and memoir somewhat interchangeably. In life writing scholarship there is normally a distinction made between a full autobiography and memoir which is often theme or time-limited. See Smith and Watson for more on these distinctions.
- 3 I recognise that controversy also helps sell books, especially memoirs.
- 4 Source unknown.

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Shane McCauley was born in England in 1954, but has lived most of his life in WA. Six books of his poetry have been published, the last of which was *The Drunken Elk* (Sunline Press, 2010). A chapbook, *Ghost Catcher*, is soon to be published by Studio Press. He was awarded the Max Harris Poetry Prize in 2008.

Marie McNeil is a Fine Artist. She also teaches art at St Marys College. Her 'paintings' are intricate, textured and multi-layered, made up of paint, pencil, thread, cloth and found objects. More collage than painting, they often have concurrent narratives defined or complemented by verse and typography. McNeil's works challenge life's deeper issues: identity, truth and meaning, and the integrity of the human soul.

Marjorie Main is a first year arts student at the University of Western Australia, majoring in English. Marjorie is a rural student from Torbay, in the Great Southern Region, Western Australia.

Caitlin Maling is a WA poet who has previously published around Australia in places such as *Going Down Swinging*, *The Australian*, *The Sun Herald*, *Blue Dog* and *Westerly* among others. She is currently based out of Houston where she is completing an MFA in poetry for which she was awarded the DCA (WA) Young People and the Arts International Scholarship.

Frank Moorhouse's *Cold Light* (2011), the companion novel in his Edith Trilogy, was published to high acclaim. The novel continues the life of his character, Edith Campbell Berry, and is set in Canberra and Vienna and has as its back ground the Cold War, the development of nuclear weapons, and the final arguments over of the planning of Canberra. *Cold Light* won the new Queensland Literary Award and was short-listed for the Miles Franklin Award. The first two of the trilogy, the award winning historical novels, *Grand Days* and *Dark Palace*, have as their background the rise of modern diplomacy and the failure of the League of Nations to prevent World War.

Robyn Mundy is the author of the novel *The Nature of Ice* published by Allen & Unwin in 2009. She has published short stories in the journals *Island* and *The Iowa Review*. She recently took up a Post-Doctoral Fellowship at Edith Cowan University's South West Campus, where she is writing a second novel.

Lucy Neave's novel, *Who We Were*, is forthcoming from Text Publishing in 2013. Her fiction has appeared in Australian and American literary journals, and in *The Best Australian Stories* 2009. She teaches creative writing at the Australian National University.

Marcella Polain has published three poetry collections, the latest *Therapy like Fish: new and selected poems*, and a novel, *The Edge of the World*. In 2010-2011, she was a recipient of an Australia Council grant for a new work of fiction. 'A Calf is an Animal' is reworked from that developing manuscript.

Ron Pretty's seventh book, *Postcards from the Centre*, was published in 2010. He is currently spending six months at the Whiting Studio in Rome, courtesy of the Australia Council.

Alice Pung is a Melbourne writer and lawyer. The author of *Her Father's Daughter* and *Unpolished Gem*, and the editor of *Growing up Asian in Australia*, Pung's *Unpolished Gem* won the 2007 Australian Newcomer of the Year award in the Australian Book Industry Awards and was shortlisted for several other awards. It has been translated into other languages and is also published in the U.K. and U.S. Pung has had stories and articles published in *Good Weekend*, *Meanjin*, *The Monthly*, *Age*, *The Best Australian Stories* and *The Lifted Brow*. In 2010, she was a judge for the Walkley Awards for Journalism, and in 2012 *Her Father's Daughter* won the non-fiction section of the 2011 WA Premier's Book Awards.

Rachel Robertson teaches Professional Writing at Curtin University. Her research interests include life writing, mothering and disability studies. Her memoir, *Reaching One Thousand: a story of love, motherhood and autism*, was published by Black Inc. in 2012.