

## The Ethics and Intentionality of Writing Family

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"We should take care with the stories we tell, they become part of our lives, part of our history."<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

*This paper discusses the ethical challenges of writing family memoir/biography; a task I undertook to know more about my grandmother's life and to discover the identity of my grandfather. Life writing of this sort necessitates balancing diverse responsibilities: those to the subject, to family members, and to the integrity of the narrative. The ethics of such writing are complicated; a workable solution is implementing relational ethics, as used by ethnographers. These principles are relevant to contemporary women's life writing, which often encompass disparate narrative conventions.*

*I begin by exploring academic and author P J Eakin's understanding of writers' responsibilities. The paper uses examples from Australian writer Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy* and British author Doris Lessing's *Alfred and Emily*, as well as my own work. Within the context of Eakin's principles I address an author's intentions regarding the*

*mother/daughter bond in the works of daughter/writers, and the oral storytelling roots of life writing. The paper particularly considers the inclusion of fictional material within memoir/biography and how this slants ethical issues.*

*The latter part of the paper focuses on the concept of relational ethics as advocated by both author Carolyn Ellis, the developer of autoethnography, and Australian feminist academic Marilyn Metta. Within that framework I consider the effect of revealing family secrets, and writing of subjects no longer alive. I conclude by suggesting that a writer may be guided by self-questioning and by disclosures of intent within the narrative. My perspective is that of a white, Western woman, an ethnicity shared by the female subjects of my life writing.*

## Introduction

My family, immediate and extended, were at the forefront of my mind as I wrote the memoir/biography, *In Search of Kate Annie* (Kate Annie), the creative component of my PhD thesis, which narrates our story, particularly that of my grandmother. In the process of writing, I asked myself how my family would respond to the narrative. Was it appropriate for me to reveal family secrets? Did my account of events accord with theirs? Would they understand why fictional scenes were included?

In discussing these intricacies, I refer to the works of two authors chosen for their approach to writing family and their focus on a mother-figure. Australian writer Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy* is a biography of her mother that includes fictional elements. Doris Lessing's *Alfred and Emily*, contains both a biographical account and a separate fictional account of her parents' lives. I also discuss my own memoir, *Kate Annie*, as yet unpublished, which uses fiction to shape unknown parts of my English grandmother's life (1883-1956). I examine contemporary theoretical perspectives and reflect on the complexities of writing family. Having worked my way through a minefield, I propose a way forward.

Family writing requires a writer to balance diverse responsibilities: those to the subject, to family members and to the integrity of the narrative. I believe it is possible to do justice to each area by following the principles of relational ethics, described later in this article. This approach, used by ethnographers, is particularly suited to contemporary women's life writings, which often encompass disparate narrative conventions within one work.

Initially I deliberated on the concepts of P. J. Eakin, G. Thomas Couser, and William Zinsser, principally how Eakin defines the ethics of "self-narrators." Eakin's main injunctions are: (i) the need to avoid "misrepresenting biographical and historical truth," (ii) the "infringement

of the right to privacy," and (iii) "failure to display normative models of personhood."<sup>2</sup> However, if contemporary women's life writing is "different," as Judy Long and Linda Wagner-Martin assert, any discussion of ethics should bear in mind that difference.<sup>3</sup> Wagner-Martin notes that women's narratives do not fit "the personal success story" shape of many biographical works by men. "Women's lives are a tightly woven mesh of public and private events," she writes, and the interconnected parts tell the story of that life.<sup>4</sup> Such accounts offer a re-envisioning of women's history. They may use innovative generic strategies; suggesting that an approach other than Eakin's would appropriate.

Eakin reasons that while authors have the right to create their own life stories, tacit moral constraints are necessary.<sup>5</sup> His first injunction, the issue of misrepresentation, seems straightforward. Although readers of conventional biography are positioned to expect factual narratives, the majority of modern readers understand, as William Zinsser asserts, "A writer can only write their own truth."<sup>6</sup> Zinsser does not imply that writers should play fast and loose with dates or events. He refers to the inevitability that "facts," of any kind, offer versions of events; thus making Eakin's phrase, "misrepresenting biography and historical truth" ambiguous, unless the word "deliberately" is added.

Written histories reflect the times and customs specific to the author's era, and those values influence the writing.<sup>7</sup> E. H. Carr cites George Clark's contention that "knowledge of the past has come down through one or more human minds, has been 'processed' by them, and therefore cannot consist of elemental and impersonal atoms which nothing can alter."<sup>8</sup> A contemporary re-envisioning of history frequently disagrees with previously accepted facts. Indeed, the fascination of new works is their re-framing of supposed truths. For example, few accounts of Australia, written a hundred years ago, gave voice to the experiences of Australian Aboriginal peoples, yet relatively recent autobiographies written by Indigenous authors, such as *My Place* by Sally Morgan (1987), or *Jack Davis's A Boy's Life* (1991), reveal an alternative history to that formerly recounted by the colonisers.<sup>9</sup> These, and many other Indigenous re-assessments of Australia's past, do not necessarily indicate that earlier narratives were untrue; they were 'true' from the perspective of non-Indigenous authors who wrote with a limited knowledge of Indigenous Australia, rather than, perhaps, deliberately irresponsible writing. The later histories I refer to, written from the contemporary perspective of the marginalised Indigenous peoples, are important correctives to earlier accounts and therefore are a vital contribution to Australian history.

Family narratives, such as Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy*, may also produce altered explications of a life. Contemporary feminist writers often depict mothers as oppressed by the social constraints of their era. Works such as *Poppy* do not necessarily narrate new events; they re-appraise

female lives using contemporary insights; a re-shaping and re-thinking of what occurred. Modjeska writes of *Poppy*, the character exemplifying her real mother, "But they misjudged her, as they always had, and Poppy was not the failure they wished on her. There were other forces moving in her, even then . . ." <sup>10</sup> Modjeska's portrait contextualises and reflects on Poppy's experiences within a specific era. A writer's connectedness to a subject, and interrogating supposed facts, provide nuanced, credible portraits. The obscurity of historical and biographical "truth," and any contemporary analysis, refutes judging life writing ethics by an emphasis on authenticity. Few facts are unequivocal and it is the deliberate misuse of data that is unethical, not a scrutiny of events or people with new understanding.

Early drafts of *Kate Annie* relied on family myths I had heard as a child. As with many family stories, repeated over generations, fragments of truth were buried within the myths and only discovered after considerable research. One example was the belief that Kate gave birth to three illegitimate children, two of them before the birth of my mother, the only child reared within the family. Lengthy investigation exposed the distinct possibility that children born earlier had existed, exactly as mythologised, except that they were almost certainly not Kate's children, but those of Kate's partner—born to another woman. In the memoir, *Kate Annie*, written in 2015, I narrated the story of these 'lost children' by incorporating the original story, and the new information, as well as my hypothesis. I believe that narrating each aspect of an unfolding story was an ethical way to include unverifiable material. Historical and biographical details of ancestors' lives can prove difficult to confirm. *How* the researcher presents the material is of greater significance.

Eakin's second proposition is that writers avoid invading the privacy of others. For family biographers constructing narratives according to their own vision, yet ensuring the privacy of family members, can produce conflicts. 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.<sup>11</sup> Such an argument illustrates that avoiding hurt to others is an elusive goal, particularly in biographical family projects.

Claudia Mills argues that we "need both to tell stories and to hear stories told," and that fictionalising minimises any harm. She suggests disguising the origins of a story, yet retaining "the emotional core" to allow the "distinctive and irreplaceable value of sharing 'real stories.'" Real stories, for Mills, are those originating from authentic life experiences, which underpin an understanding of the human condition. She believes that authors should tell such stories sensitively.<sup>12</sup> I agree, yet this is a vague

dictum. A writer may believe they are being sensitive. A more suitable arbiter of insensitivity is, surely, the subject of the work.

Alison Summer views the infringement of her privacy in Australian writer Peter Carey's *Theft: A Love Story* (2006); a fictional version of their marriage as, "a kind of intimidation. It's emotional terrorism."<sup>13</sup> Carey's work grants an equivocal privacy: on one hand, there is the implicit claim that it is fiction, and not a depiction of real people. Yet any writer is aware of how easily "fictional" subjects can be recognised. Mills' claim that writers "minimise the cost" by fictionalising, cannot ensure *no* harm is done.<sup>14</sup> The question remains; which takes precedence, the story—however disguised, or a 'subject's' privacy?

If I wish to be certain of protecting my immediate and extended family, I would need to change the names, and most events in *Kate Annie*. However, the specific circumstances of Kate's story—her pregnancy at a late age, the loss of her home, her brothers' behavior and the identity of her lover—are pivotal to Kate's life, and the narrative. The story becomes meaningless, or an entirely different story, without them. Kate's story, and similar life writing, represent social history and have value as paradigmatic women's stories. "Women must turn to one another for stories; they must share the stories of their lives and their hopes and their unacceptable fantasies," writes feminist author Carolyn Heilbrun.<sup>15</sup> Heilbrun, Mills, and Judy Long consider that such stories, told orally or in print, have important social and emotional functions.<sup>16</sup> I agree, but does this point imply the author's entitlement to write whatever he or she wishes? I argue that it does not. I made the decision to disguise the names, at least, in *Kate Annie*.

Similarly, Doris Lessing mitigates concerns of family and friends in her autobiography *Under My Skin* (1994), by removing potentially disturbing details. She explains her decision:

I did change the names of some people – particularly in Volume Two. Because when I did Volume One I was fascinated by the children and grandchildren who wrote to me and came to see me and they had no idea about a lot of their parents' lives... so I thought, 'Well I don't want to tell on my old comrades, I shall shut up because it's very upsetting for the grandchildren.' Some of them, you know, they don't know about close friends their parents had, all kinds of adventures their parents had, let alone lovers. So I left a lot out about other people.<sup>17</sup>

In *Poppy*, Drusilla Modjeska chooses to circumnavigate these challenges by creating diaries and letters, purporting to reveal intimate parts of her mother's life. These fictional constructs 'disclose' the mother's thoughts, through the writer's assumption of that identity. Is that a double invasion of privacy? Modjeska complicates the ethics by stating that the

diaries “seemed to me one of most truthful parts of the book.” She clearly does not feel she violated her deceased mother’s privacy, and clearly reveals in the dedication to Poppy that her mother “never kept a diary.” Modjeska’s purpose is to narratively inhabit the person of the mother to, “get inside, not her shirt, but her skin.”<sup>18</sup> This is either a comprehensive invasion of privacy, a betrayal of the mother’s identity or, I would argue, the very opposite. Modjeska’s way of working is similar to that of the writer Frances Sherwood who, when writing the life of Mary Wollstonecraft, said, “That was a life that spoke to me.”<sup>19</sup> Modjeska and Sherwood describe an empathic writing process, a working from the inside; the writer inhabiting the identity of a subject. This embodies the “ethics of care,” a “witnessing” and “healing,” which Margaretta Jolly views as exemplifying women’s writing.<sup>20</sup> Such a way of working alters privacy infringements, slants the ethics of the writing, and embodies relational ethics.

Eakin’s third life writing “transgression” is the “failure to display normative models of personhood.”<sup>21</sup> He quotes psychologist John Shotter’s contention that narrating our lives is inured within us through a process of “social accountability.” We validate ourselves through talking, and later through writing, however mundane it may be. That writing is a manifestation of personhood; where “telling the truth” is a primary principle.<sup>22</sup>

Eakin views the controversy surrounding Norma Khouri’s fabricated biography, *Forbidden Love* (2003), not as a literary issue but as one of ethics. The case is straightforward; Khouri deliberately creates a false narrative and, in naming the work a biography, knowingly misleads publishers and readers alike; transgressing against her own identity, and the reader’s expectations of a biography.<sup>23</sup> Conversely, a writer of authentic autobiography, for example, British politician Alan Johnson, recalls his life as accurately as possible in the memoir *This Boy* (2014). The narrative accords with his terms of reference at the time of writing and we assume there is no intention to deceive. Johnson describes an episode with a girlfriend, “It was on one of these country walks that Edna and I kissed, and that’s when she told me she loved me. Addresses were exchanged and promises made to write and meet again; promises that were never kept.”<sup>24</sup> If, at a later stage, the writer realises errors of recollection, he has not violated his identity in the way that Eakin claims Khouri has done. The decisive point is a writer’s intention, yet Eakin, believes this is impossible to know and, “this very unknowability can make any enquiry into the author’s intention seem fruitless if not impertinent.”<sup>25</sup>

Judy Long regards writers’ intentions as knowable and, when stated, of great assistance in understanding their work.<sup>26</sup> Eakin may have overlooked the many occasions when writers, in print or orally, explain their intentions. Or it may be that he, like other philosophers, would argue that our intentions, discussed in retrospect, or even reflected on as a work



develops, cannot be totally articulated, even to ourselves.

Writers' intentions are at the core of their ethics, argues Australian feminist academic, Marilyn Metta.<sup>27</sup> I agree, and suggest that those intentions shape a writer's choice of generic strategies and are fundamental to a deliberation on ethics. Especially, since the generic strategies used by many contemporary women writers do not seek to present inviolate authentic details of a life. Rather, they pursue emotional clarity, using techniques that evidence uncertainty and embrace multiple perspectives. These strategies point to a dissonance if authors apply Eakin's concepts to much of women's life writing.

Relational ethics, which, as Metta and Carolyn Ellis state, focus on an affiliation between ethnographer and subject are, I believe, better suited to the responsibilities of family life writing, particularly the works of contemporary women writers. The affective paradigm of relational ethics operates similarly to an interweaving partnership of narrator/subject/reader found in women's life writing. Ellis encourages writers to act from their "hearts and minds" and Metta sees ethics as a looking inward.<sup>28</sup> Eakin's concepts of privacy and misrepresentation look outward, away from the writer, to the effect on subject and reader, thus changing the ethical perspective.

The insights of Metta and Ellis are relevant to the emphasis on relationships and feminist philosophies in contemporary women's writings.<sup>29</sup> Family ethnography requires a "new" relationship, Metta writes, and this is equally applicable to family life writing. In both genres, a writer's research is enhanced by a close rapport with the subject. This connection engenders evocative narratives.<sup>30</sup>

If relational ethics develop contiguously with the rationale for writing, as Metta argues, and the rationale in turn engenders the strategies used, it follows that ethics are embedded within the fabric of the work, rather than being a separate consideration. Metta recommends that writers ask, "Why am I doing this?" and "What are my real motivations?" thus instigating ethical reflection, and placing that reflection at the thinking/planning stage of the work.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, a writer's use of interrogation and inquiry in a narrative, can be viewed as further deliberations on their ethical stance. Such strategies may also serve to moderate the concerns of historical or biographical misrepresentation raised by Eakin. Lalage, the narrator of *Poppy* (1990), says of her mother, "I misunderstood her not yet seeing that the inner histories that absorbed her were not just the accompaniment to the real story..."<sup>32</sup> The reader understands that *Poppy* is the writer's investigation; one that is open to interpretation. Modjeska writes that in searching for evidence of her mother she did not realise, "that the effort it would demand would be as much of heart as of will."<sup>33</sup> *Poppy* makes visible that unfolding comprehension, for example, "Perhaps I'm asking the wrong questions,

battering at the painful episode of Poppy's breakdown when the answer I want is not to be found in the wound, but in the way it is healed."<sup>34</sup> Such reflections, writes Judy Long, create connectedness, highlighting the partnership of subject/narrator/reader.<sup>35</sup> They engender a reader's participation in the work and mitigate the issues of misrepresentation raised by Eakin.

Such questioning and authorial commentary on the writing process, within a narrative, may constitute uncertainty, yet position the reader to view the work as a writer's insights, not definite truths. The contemporary female praxis of life writing is less concerned with temporal, geographical, historical or biographical certainty. At the heart of these works is a striving for emotional reliability.<sup>36</sup> This emphasis reshapes the ethics of life writing.

The essential nature of women's stories offers further complexity to a discourse on ethics. Jo Malin reasons that women's stories emanate from the mother and are entwined in emotive mother/daughter relationships.<sup>37</sup> We re-enact that first storytelling, and maternal bond, through the tales we tell other women during our lives. These oral stories are a fusion of characters, relationships, personal insights and events; confirming our connectedness as women. Women's life writing embodies the intentions, patterns and emotional emphases of storytelling. The generally accepted ethical responsibilities of oral storytelling have always been understood, if unspoken. The continuum from oral to written stories makes sense of, and adds insight to, the responsibilities, or ethics, of life-writing.

*Kate Annie* originated from stories told by my mother. The saga of my grandmother is one of many family stories I share with friends, as many of us do, to varying degrees. In turn, friends relate their stories. We participate in established transmissions of information and communication. These rituals have few responsibilities, unless the topic is a profound secret, in which case the teller warns a listener that the story should go no further. Experience tells us that most stories are retold—with due care to omit names or identifying clues. This does not point to women as thoughtless repeaters of confidences. It attests to women as disseminators of familial and social history—whether orally or in written form—and as storytellers with an appreciation of privacy. Just as oral stories are shaped by a teller's perspective and the listeners' participation, so women's written narratives develop through an association of narrator/subject and reader. Oral and print stories are similar in respect of intention, function, and shape, suggesting a re-positioning of the ethics of written family narratives.

If, as Malin argues, daughters' stories originate from the mother and shape a daughter's writing, women are imbued with an imperative to negotiate that bond. Therefore, an underlying rationale for family writing becomes the understanding of self, as well as of the mother—and a reflection of that connectedness. Ultimately, this is a working out of identity, which is analogous with Eakin's idea of normative personhood.



This search for identity is interwoven through *Poppy*, and is demonstrated by the narrator's self-enquiry: Lalage, destabilised by a return to her country of origin and mother's fading life, reflects on her own identity, "It's easy enough to say I am the visitor, it's me who's changed. But it doesn't answer the question. What I want to know is whether it's the same sky, that sky that you see on a clear day? Does it stay in the same place when the earth moves or does it move with the earth, taking us with it?"<sup>38</sup> Later Modjeska, through Lalage, articulates the bonds existing between women, "Whatever has happened to me, or has not, with lovers and husbands (de facto or de jure), continuity and security have built on the excellence of friendship... and when I look at Poppy's life I can see that this was so for her too. Yet these connections between women are taken for granted, a backdrop to the real business of life: husbands, children, jobs. It takes only the slightest change of focus to see that these neglected intimacies, independent of more passionate demands, can offer the terms on which we best learn to be ourselves."<sup>39</sup>

Metta views such self-reflection as vital to relational ethics.<sup>40</sup> *Poppy* is a literary working through of the primal mother/daughter bond. She explains her need to learn more, "That is how we mark a woman, by her kin and progeny. But it doesn't tell me who she was." *Poppy* makes visible Modjeska's struggle to understand and narrate her mother's story, and is an example of "ethics in practice."<sup>41</sup>

What of stories that cast aspersions on the mother? How can the daughter/writer, then, be demonstrating "ethics in practice?" Biographer and academic, Lyndall Gordon, suggests writers, "exercise empathy even in ambivalence."<sup>42</sup> Lessing's *Alfred and Emily* provides an example of this. Lessing recounts an incident when her mother (Emily) informs the daughter's employer that she is a communist and, "a danger and threat to public order," Lessing tackles Emily, "Mother do you realise you could have lost me that job." She writes, "Now she crumpled. She was suddenly flustered, guilty and even panicked."<sup>43</sup> Lessing delineates the unpleasantness of a mother, whom she admits to "hating" as a child,<sup>44</sup> yet creates empathy by showing the mother's response; thus, demonstrating Gordon's "empathy even in ambivalence."

An ethical dilemma for me, in writing *Kate Annie*, was to present a balanced view of Kate. Much of the information I had originated from my mother and showed Kate in a negative light, yet this was not my understanding of Kate. In the first drafts my closeness to Kate caused me to judge my mother's opinions quite harshly. To moderate this imbalance, I sourced memories and anecdotes of Kate from my extended family—not to disprove my mother's stories, but to offer disparate narrative voices. The intention to create a more nuanced portrait of Kate lead me to provide a narrative voice for her. I reflected on the incongruity of the mother's silence in Lessing's *Alfred and Emily*, where the mother is defined solely

by the voice of the narrator / daughter. The real mother may have spoken little in life but narratively perpetuating this diminished the character. Modjeska's decision to give Poppy a voice, albeit one constructed by the writer is, Judy Long argues, a "deliberate exercise of empathy, a feminist writer's method of participating in another's identity."<sup>45</sup>

My construction of imaginary letters and conversations for Kate does, I believe, give depth to the characterisation and signify the intimacy of my relationship with her. Yet I asked myself whether this was ethical writing. Modjeska wished to "unearth" her mother's life and having little information fashions a portrait employing "some of the imaginary, symbolic, fictional, metaphorical world."<sup>46</sup> To find Kate I looked inward and discovered her within myself. This process, described by Modjeska as "a line between fact, fiction, between imagination and evidence" was, for me, acting, of a kind.<sup>47</sup> I wrote as if I were Kate and, whether I instinctively recreated the cadences of her speech and used phrases she would have spoken, I cannot be certain. I was sure, however, that it was a fitting way to create her portrait. In life Kate rarely spoke for herself. She did not refute accusations of promiscuity or defend her reasons for not marrying the father of her illegitimate child. By assuming her voice, I tried to rectify this. The framework to support the fictional letters and conversations came from accumulated evidence and my own memories. It is, I argue, an ethical way to write when there is a strong connection between narrator and subject.

In oral histories, "Women's voices are at the centre of history," redirecting "our gaze to overlooked topics," writes Joan Sangster.<sup>48</sup> When women's voices are heard in written narratives they perform a similar task. Essential to constructing these voices is an understanding of the socio-historical milieu of female subjects, thus allowing the author to comprehend women's decisions and behaviour. Modjeska provides such a context for Poppy's life in her descriptions of England's optimism after World War Two, a place where the slums were pulled down "and replaced by the spanking new council houses that were to give every Englishman his castle and every woman a solid lounge suite . . ." <sup>49</sup> Poppy is depicted as stifled by a society that assumes all a woman needs is good furniture. It is not surprising that she says, "I was ashamed that I always wanted so much more . . ." <sup>50</sup> Without a social context, women's lives written in retrospect, as a daughter / writer's re-evaluation of a mother's story, have less integrity. Imagined dialogue, diaries or letters form an essential part of that re-telling; inclusions that, therefore, are an ethical way to delineate that life.

Lessing chooses to completely fictionalise the lives of her parents in the first part of *Alfred and Emily* (2008). Modjeska creates "a mixture of fact, fiction, biography and novel" in *Poppy*.<sup>51</sup> Her construction of fictional diaries and letters gives the reader a sense of Poppy's thoughts, such as

the entry on November 1965: "Living with growing girls is no joke. Their hands are so big. I remember when they were soft and tiny and slipped into mine. Even May is too big to come into bed with me anymore."<sup>52</sup> Poppy's diary is a construct of the writer, as is the whole text of *Poppy*, nevertheless this strategy creates an understanding of the mother's feelings. A balanced depiction of a parent is not necessarily negated by the use of fiction. If the imaginary nature of the writing is disclosed, or apparent, it may still follow the principles of relational ethics.

What is particularly significant in any discourse on the ethics of using fiction in family writing is the writer's rationale which, in many cases, is a desire to interrogate the essence of a life.<sup>53</sup> Women writers are "soaked in family lore and dreams," contends Lyndall Gordon.<sup>54</sup> This suggests that insights originate from subconscious depths. Modjeska views the imaginary diaries in *Poppy* as "one of the most truthful parts of the book."<sup>55</sup> She was influenced by the Australian writer and academic Dorothy Green's belief in the morality of "putting thinking and feeling together, the heart and the soul..."<sup>56</sup> This thinking proposes that fictional components of work, such as *Poppy*, rather than diminishing the integrity of the work, demonstrate a determination to construct a faithful portrait of the mother. To offer respect, dignity and affinity to a subject, is surely an ethical way to write.

Jo Malin views *Poppy* as a conversation between mother and daughter, rather than a daughter telling a mother's story.<sup>57</sup> *Poppy* negotiates, reflects and explicates the selfhood of the narrator, and of the mother, as well as their relationship. Relational ethics ask that a writer "act from our hearts and minds, to acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others and to initiate and maintain conventions."<sup>58</sup> Modjeska's strategies make this process visible to the reader. However, does that openness make revelations of confidential family material in *Poppy*, or in any work, acceptable?

"A family without secrets is rare indeed," writes British cultural theorist Annette Kuhn, and those secrets, "haunt our memory-stories, giving them pattern and shape."<sup>59</sup> Kuhn infers that family stories are lesser stories without them, and Margaret McNay reasons that family secrets may be part of a larger social history.<sup>60</sup> The disclosures in *Poppy* of the mother's nervous breakdown and affair, although specific to the narrator's family, are not uncommon in the lives of women. Modjeska generalises the difficulties of marriage in Poppy's diary entry, "How many of our husbands have kept their vows in spirit as well as in name?" and "How many of us come to that?" Lalage, the narrator, answers, "Most of us have daughters who will be marrying soon. Which men are we going to trust with them? Will they believe their vows?"<sup>61</sup> Similarly, the story of the mother's mental illness achieves a wider significance by the use of relevant medical information such as, "I presume her state would have been considered depressive. The standard treatment for depressive

states described in British and American textbooks . . . a combination of electroconvulsive therapy, ataractic drugs and psychotherapy where possible."<sup>62</sup> Modjeska writes, "Lily thought it was better for her, having a breakdown in the seventies, because by then psychiatric disorders were regarded as illness rather than lunacy."<sup>63</sup>

Kuhn suggests that revelation, "allows the deeper meanings of the family drama's mythic aspects to be reflected upon, confronted and understood at all levels."<sup>64</sup> By reflecting on who may be hurt, as Metta suggests we should, we are reminded that any potential gain from disclosure should be a secondary concern, if the benefit Kuhn refers to cannot be assured.<sup>65</sup> Metta believes the "breaking of silences" is integral to telling the life of a woman.<sup>66</sup> Revelations can be cathartic for families, and society, yet each decision to disclose has different ramifications.

In *Kate Annie*, I chose to reveal family secrets which, when revealed, modified the reputations of my grandparents, even though neither of them are alive to benefit. If I had written twenty years ago the anger and embarrassment caused to my mother by these revelations might have prevented me completing the work. Jeremy Popkin reasons that hiding information may have a protective function and that those involved might prefer a secret to remain that way. This raises the issue of who has the right to tell a story, especially since anecdotes containing secrets may be originally related without thought of future publication.<sup>67</sup> In many cases secrets are narrated by participants—and, as Kuhn reasons, can be "a key moment in the making of ourselves."<sup>68</sup> She sees secrets as memory components which, when reflected upon, can shape identity. Claudia Mills separates secrets into "good secrets" which are fun and "bad secrets" that hurt. This separation is useful, yet it is not always easy to tell which is which, especially if a writer feels that telling a "bad secret" may achieve a good outcome.<sup>69</sup> Auto-ethnographer Christopher Poulos argues that disclosure is ethical if this leads to healing, "The power of story trumps the power of the secret."<sup>70</sup> This is a bold statement and, in general terms, I agree; however, discerning the value of revelation may only be possible retrospectively and, by then, it is too late to avert any harm.

The secrets disclosed in *Kate Annie* were previously unknown to any of my family, yet I barely hesitated in believing that it was responsible to include them. I was catapulted both by default, and by my relationship with Kate, into becoming the family historian. I had an abiding need to find out why so much of her life was hidden. At the start of my research, Kate's secret appeared to be the identity of the father of her illegitimate daughter, and what had happened to her "lost children." There was, however, a bigger secret. Throughout her life, Kate had steadfastly refused to name, or give details of, her daughter's father. Lengthy research revealed him to be a man who suffered from an incapacitating mental illness and was, in personality and life choices, quite unlike the family myths of him that

had evolved. Illegitimacy and mental illness were secrets kept by many families in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century when social mores deemed them shameful. Hiding these disgraces protected a family, whereas in the twenty-first century such matters carry less dishonor, although families may still wish to conceal them. My grandmother Kate lived with the shame of the illegitimacy, as did her child. Her family and community made their judgments very apparent. Kate refused, however, to add the facts of her partner's mental illness to that calumny.

Family writers may choose, as I did, to tell the hidden stories by contextualising and analysing events, thus revealing a very different story. I present Kate as unconventional, constrained by the social expectations on women, rather than a family disgrace. My grandfather, had he lived today, would, I expect, receive appropriate treatment for his mental illness, since his several incarcerations were for "prolonged mental stress and recurrent mania," which I understand are easily treatable today by medication and therapy. The response to his medical symptoms is similar to that of another relative, who in the same era was also incarcerated several times for "melancholia." It is only with hindsight that we can fully understand some events in the past. By making visible the iniquities of past family shame, life writing can resurrect family members from discredited positions. *Kate Annie* gives, I hope, a nuanced portrait of two people—not by sanitising their lives, but by illustrating the prevailing social and historical circumstances.

Inherent in fashioning a life is the writer's evaluation of that life. Responsibilities to subject and material, especially if fictional writing is included, suggest that Metta's question, "What are my real motivations?" is pertinent.<sup>71</sup> My overarching motivation was to discover unknown family history. Bringing Kate's unknown life into view required careful assessment and selection. Every new piece of information, each discovered anecdote, or socio-historical fact had to be assessed and compared with evidence already available. Collating these fragments necessitated leaps of faith, conjecture and imagination since there was no way, more than a hundred years after Kate's birth, to verify all the information. I was involved in acts of detection, conjecture and collation as well as imagination. The narrative *Kate Annie* could not delineate what actually took place. I could only speculate on what might have occurred. My approach was to articulate, within the narrative, the writing process and decisions. I make clear what is fictional and what is not, and attempt to moderate bias by including perceptions of Kate's by family members whose opinions of her differ from mine.

Ethical responsibility to a subject is not necessarily negated in the case of a deceased subject, such as Kate. Living descendants, or friends may wish to protect reputations by amending or deleting parts of the narrative, even if the subject has no public profile. Memoir writer and

theorist G. Thomas Couser argues that a deceased person is a “vulnerable subject” and that death “entails maximum vulnerability to posthumous misrepresentation because it precludes self-defence.”<sup>72</sup> In law the dead do not have a right to privacy, yet moral responsibilities operate.<sup>73</sup> The subject of *Kate Annie*, died sixty years ago, yet her story involves the life of her daughter, family members, and myself.

Kate’s daughter, my mother, is the most vulnerable subject and she was alive at the time of writing. Significant parts of the material originate from her, yet she professed no interest in the project. Was her indifference a tacit permission? Couser suggests that, since writer and vulnerable subject are analogous to patient and doctor, the principles of bio-ethics could be followed. He writes, “respect for autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, and justice—seem pertinent to life writing.”<sup>74</sup> These attributes are akin to the relational ethics of respect, dignity, connectedness and doing no harm. The rules of vulnerability, if applied to my mother, indicate that she did have autonomy. At any time during the writing of *Kate Annie* she was able to request changes or omissions. I tried to ascertain her wishes, since as Kate’s daughter, part of her own story was used to illuminate Kate’s, but she refused to discuss the work. A writer cannot know the wishes of subjects unless they are willing to voice them but we can act from “our hearts and minds” and continually reflect on our intentions.<sup>75</sup>

I wrote *Kate Annie* as a memorial, of sorts, to my grandmother. As mentioned earlier, my primary motivation was to discover and understand Kate’s life and my relationship to her. Untangling family connections may be the way we gain a clearer sense of our own identity. So far, I have retained names, places and events in Kate’s life, even in fictional episodes, since I am writing to commemorate her lived life. I will change names and identifying features, before publication of *Kate Annie*, thus maintaining the integrity of the narrative, and keeping faith with the family depicted. I suggest that relational ethics can guide family life writers. The theorists I have referred to concur on significant points; writers should avoid making assumptions of a subject’s life and always challenge pre-existing notions. A life is better written through engagement with the life, through empathy, and a delineation of the subject’s struggles.<sup>76</sup>

Writing of a close familial relationship, may offer compassion that was unable to be extended during the writer and subject’s lifetime.<sup>77</sup> Developing *Kate Annie* has given me greater perception and compassion for my mother’s situation. In balancing the personal with the socio-historical and by disclosing narrative strategies family writing can embody relational ethics.

The similarity between ethnographies and family narratives indicates how comfortably the guidelines of relational ethics may be used for both. I chose to follow those principles, and I strongly believe that disclosure, in whatever form, is essential to responsible writing. Above all, I affirm the



efficacy of the self-directed questions; "Why am I doing this?" and "What are my real motivations?"<sup>78</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Drusilla Modjeska, "The Emergence of Women Writers Since 1975," *Australian Feminist Studies* 2, no. 4 (1987): 121. doi: 10.1080/08164649.1987.9961544 10.1080/08164649.1987.9961544.

<sup>2</sup> (Original) Paul John Eakin, *Breaking Rules: The Consequences of Self-Narration* (2001) <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/biography/v24.1eakin.html> (accessed 2013 113-127)

(New) Paul John Eakin, "Breaking Rules: The Consequences of Self-Narration," *Biography* 24, no. 1 (2001): 113-127.

<sup>3</sup> Judy Long, *Telling Women's Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 1999), 121.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Wagner-Martin, *Telling Women's Lives* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 6.

<sup>5</sup> Paul John Eakin, *Breaking Rules*, 113.

<sup>6</sup> William Zinsser, *Inventing the Truth: the Art and Craft of Memoir* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1998), 6.

<sup>7</sup> E H Carr, What is history: The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures (1961, 2) <http://www.jstor.org.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/stable/1844108?sid=primo&origin=crossref> (accessed Mar, 2012). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1844108>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Paddy Cavanagh, *In Black & White: Australians All at the Crossroads*, eds. Rhonda Craven, Antony Dillon and Nigel Parbury (Victoria: Connor Court Publishing Ltd., 2013), 21-23.

<sup>10</sup> Drusilla Modjeska, *Poppy* (Victoria: McPhee Gribble, 1990), 112.

<sup>11</sup> Robert McGill, *The Treacherous Imagination: Intimacy, Ethics, and Autobiographical Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Claudia Mills, "Friendship, Fiction, and Memoir: Trust and Betrayal in Writing from One's Own Life," in *The Ethics of Life Writing*, ed. P.J. Eakin. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 107-119.

<sup>13</sup> Suzanne Goldenberg, "Two Scribes go to War," *The Guardian* (2006) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/may/09/australia.books> (accessed Sep, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Claudia Mills, "Friendship, Fiction, and Memoir," 119.

<sup>15</sup> Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books 1989), 44.

<sup>16</sup> Claudia Mills, "Friendship, Fiction, and Memoir," 107; Judy Long, *Telling Women's Lives*, 121.

<sup>17</sup> Doris Lessing, "Writing Biography and Writing Fiction," *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 13, no. 1(2000): 9.

<sup>18</sup> Drusilla Modjeska, *Timepieces*. (Sydney: Picador 2002), 87.

<sup>19</sup> (Original) Frances Sherwood, *Belles Lettres: A Review of Books by Women*. Interview with Diane Prenatt Spring (10): (1995, 22) [https://searchproquestcom.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/docview/222320904?rfr\\_id=info%3Aaxri%2Fsid%3Aprimo](https://searchproquestcom.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/docview/222320904?rfr_id=info%3Aaxri%2Fsid%3Aprimo) (accessed Nov, 23 2017)

(New) Diane Prenatt, "Interview with Frances Sherwood," *Belles Lettres: A Review of Books by Women* 10 (Spring 1995): 22

<sup>20</sup> Margaretta Jolly, *Biography and Autobiography* (2012), 153 <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199846719/obo->

97801998467190006.xml

- <sup>21</sup> Paul John Eakin, *Breaking Rules*, 113-114.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid, 115.
- <sup>23</sup> Paul John Eakin, *Breaking Rules*, 114.
- <sup>24</sup> Alan Johnson, *This Boy* (London: Corgi Press, 2014), 158.
- <sup>25</sup> Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 149.
- <sup>26</sup> Judy Long, *Telling Women's Lives*, 103.
- <sup>27</sup> Marilyn Metta, *Writing Against, Alongside and Beyond Memory: Lifewriting as Reflexive, Poststructuralist Feminist Research Practice*. (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 59.
- <sup>28</sup> Carolyn Ellis, "Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research with Intimate Others" *Qualitative Inquiry* 13, no. 1 (2007): 4. DOI:10.1177/1077800406294947
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid, 8.
- <sup>30</sup> Marilyn Metta, *Telling Women's Lives*, 58.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid, 59.
- <sup>32</sup> Drusilla Modjeska, *Poppy*, 12.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid, 12.
- <sup>34</sup> Drusilla Modjeska, *Poppy*, 12.
- <sup>35</sup> Judy Long, *Telling Women's Lives*, 3.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid, 118-121.
- <sup>37</sup> Jo Malin, *The Voice of the Mother: Embedded Maternal Narratives in Twentieth-Century Women's Autobiographies*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2014): 72.
- <sup>38</sup> Drusilla Modjeska, *Poppy*, 242.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid, 309.
- <sup>40</sup> Marilyn Metta, *Telling Women's Lives*, 59.
- <sup>41</sup> Carolyn Ellis, *Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives*, 3.
- <sup>42</sup> Lyndall Gordon, "Writing Family Memoir," May 19, 2014, Oxford Center for Life Writing, podcast, MP3 audio, <https://www.wolfson.ox.ac.uk/clusters/lifewriting/podcasts>.
- <sup>43</sup> Doris Lessing, *Alfred and Emily* (2008), 266.
- <sup>44</sup> Doris Lessing, "Writing Biography and Writing Fiction: Interview with M. J. Daymond," *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 13, no. 1 (2000): 12.
- <sup>45</sup> Judy Long, *Telling Women's Lives*, 121.
- <sup>46</sup> Bronwyn Rivers, "Of Life and Love and Art: An Interview with Drusilla Modjeska." *Meanjin* 56, no. 2 (1997), 320.
- <sup>47</sup> Drusilla Modjeska, *Timepieces*, 72.
- <sup>48</sup> Joan Sangster, "Telling our Stories," *Women's History Review* 3, no. 1 (1994): 55.
- <sup>49</sup> Drusilla Modjeska, *Poppy*, 64.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid, 64.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid, 317.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid, 107.
- <sup>53</sup> Judy Long, *Telling Women's Lives*, 121.
- <sup>54</sup> Lyndall Gordon, *Writing Family Memoir*.
- <sup>55</sup> Drusilla Modjeska, *Poppy*, 89.
- <sup>56</sup> Bronwyn Rivers, "Of Life and Love and Art," 321.
- <sup>57</sup> Jo Malin, *The Voice of the Mother* (2000), 6.
- <sup>58</sup> Carolyn Ellis, *Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives*, 4

- <sup>59</sup> Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets*, 2.
- <sup>60</sup> Margaret McNay, "Absent Memory, Family Secrets, Narrative Inheritance," *Qualitative Inquiry* 15, no. 7 (2009): 1185.
- <sup>61</sup> Drusilla Modjeska, *Poppy*, 119.
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-81.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.
- <sup>64</sup> Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets*, 7.
- <sup>65</sup> Marilyn Metta, *Writing Against, Alongside and Beyond Memory*, 59.
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.
- <sup>67</sup> Jeremy Popkin, "Life Writing in the Family," *Auto/Biography Studies* 25, no. 2, (2010): 178-180.
- <sup>68</sup> Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets*, 2.
- <sup>69</sup> Claudia Mills, "Friendship, Fiction, and Memoir," 107.
- <sup>70</sup> Christopher Poulos, "Narrative Conscience and the Autoethnographic Adventure: Probing Memories, Secrets, Shadows, and Possibilities," *Qualitative Inquiry* 14, no.1 (2008): 53.
- <sup>71</sup> Marilyn Metta, *Writing Against, Alongside and Beyond Memory*, 5
- <sup>72</sup> G. Thomas Couser, *Vulnerable Subjects. Ethics and Life Writing*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 16.
- <sup>73</sup> Carolyn Ellis, *Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives*, 12.
- <sup>74</sup> G. Thomas Couser, *Vulnerable Subjects*, 17.
- <sup>75</sup> Carolyn Ellis, *Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives*, 4.
- <sup>76</sup> Marilyn Metta, *Writing Against, Alongside and Beyond Memory*, 57-60).
- <sup>77</sup> Suzanne Juhasz, "Towards Recognition: Writing the Mother Daughter Relationship," *American Imago* 57, no. 2 (2000): 178.
- <sup>78</sup> Marilyn Metta, *Writing Against, Alongside and Beyond Memory*, 59.