

Central Queensland University

Donna Lee Brien

What about young adult non-fiction?: profiling the young adult memoir

Abstract:

Despite significant scholarly interest in the genre of memoir, the young adult memoir – as a subset of both young adult writing and the memoir more generally – has attracted far less attention. This introductory study understands the young adult memoir as a form of both life writing and creative writing. As a frame to the discussion, it outlines the history of scholarship and interest in young adult non-fiction, and then surveys a number of examples of the contemporary young adult memoir in order to provide a preliminary narrative profile of the form. This includes texts written for young adults by both adult and younger authors, as well as crossover texts. In identifying some common and more unusual subjects and narrative styles and forms, as well as remarking on the voice utilised in these texts, this article posits that the young adult memoir can be described as a distinct subset of both young adult and life writing texts and is, therefore, worthy of further detailed investigation in terms of these categories, providing an attempt at a preliminary classification of the form.

Biographical note:

Donna Lee Brien, PhD, is Professor of Creative Industries, and Chair of Creative and Performing Arts Research at Central Queensland University. Donna has published biographies, and critical work on specialist forms of life writing and non-fiction, since the 1980s. Donna is Commissioning Editor, Special Issues, of *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, on the Editorial Advisory Board of the *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, and Past President of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs.

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Nonfiction is not just about information. The truth is that for many young adult readers nonfiction serves the same purposes as fiction does for other readers: it entertains, provides escape, sparks the imagination, and indulges curiosity. There's a lot more to a good nonfiction book than mere information (Sullivan 2001: 44)¹.

Introduction

In 2014, Brisbane-based playwright David Burton's first book-length manuscript, his memoir *How to be Happy: A Memoir of Love, Sex and Teenage Confusion* (which was subsequently published in 2015), won the annual Australian Text Publishing Award. Launched in 2008, this award recognises a manuscript written for young adults and/or children. Winners receive a cash prize of A\$10,000 and a publishing contract with the respected publisher, which publishes such prominent authors as Kate Grenville and Kate Jennings. As the first memoir to win this prize, *How to be Happy* can be seen as a reflection of the rising visibility and, therefore, increasing commercial viability, of this specialist sub-genre of both young adult literature and life writing. Yet, despite the popularity of memoir with readers, its prominence in media discourse and the form having long been a topic of scholarly investigation – see, for instance, major work on memoir by Yagoda (2009), Smith and Watson (2010), Couser (2011) and Karr (2015) – the young adult memoir has attracted scant attention from scholars of creative writing or life writing, critics or the press. This lack of attention could be due to the recentness of the significant increase in the popularity of these texts with readers. In January 2015, American librarian and influential blogger about young adult books and reading, Kelly Jensen, indeed identified the entire umbrella form of young adult non-fiction (which includes memoir alongside such other non-fiction texts as biography, history and creative nonfiction) as one of the major trends of the past two years in terms of readership but a type of writing that, in her words, 'we don't talk much about' (2015). Within this broad category, Jensen identified the young adult memoir as an identifiable 'subsection within YA [young adult] non-fiction' (2015).

Young adult non-fiction

Young adult non-fiction, which includes (but does not name) the young adult memoir, has, however, been read – and discussed in school reading and literacy circles – since at least the 1960s, but its advocates have long argued that it has not received the attention bestowed on fiction even in those circles. Almost 25 years ago, for instance, Richard F. Abrahamson and Betty Carter argued that, despite the popularity of non-fiction with readers, fiction, poetry and drama had 'persisted as the dominant components of children's and young adult literature in course offerings, annual awards, textbook content, and research studies' (1992: 41). Comprehensive studies from the 1960s through the 1990s indicate strong interest in non-fiction narratives by young children to older young adult readers. In 1968, Daniel Fader and Elton B. McNeil reported on the importance of non-fiction in young readers' reading choices. This research was followed by George Norvell's *The Reading Interests of Young People* (1973), which identified that 'a strong interest in nonfiction emerges at about

the fourth grade and that interest grows during adolescence' (discussed in Abrahamson and Carter 1992: 46). In 1987, Guy Ellis calculated that at least 50 percent of high school students' reading was non-fiction. In 1992, Abrahamson and Carter concluded that at that time readers 'from pre-school classes to senior high campuses' (45) were avid readers of non-fiction, and 'even the youngest children' were drawn to what they described as 'information-rich' narratives (45). Abrahamson and Carter added the information that literature they had reviewed on this topic since the 1960s indicated that, while some of these texts were read for study purposes, 'the majority of these books ... were read for pleasure' (46). This echoed their findings from 1990 that much of the non-fiction read by young adults was read for 'diversion and entertainment' (Carter and Abrahamson 1990: 8). There are many other studies that agree with, and support, these findings about young adults' non-fiction reading preferences (see, for example, Blair 1974; Haskins 1976; Lasky 1985; Carter 1987; Ellis 1987; Giblin 1988; Abrahamson and Carter 1991).

Despite this interest by these specialist researchers in, and advocates for, the value of young adult non-fiction, in 2001 Ed Sullivan asserted that non-fiction writing 'just doesn't get any respect from librarians and teachers' (43), whether in terms of what was being set on class reading lists or recommended for more informal reading. This lack of appreciation also included, Sullivan argued, from reviewers who routinely focused on the superficial and utilitarian aspects of these texts – the veracity of their information, for instance – with only very few reviews offering commentary on what Sullivan characterised as 'the aesthetic qualities of the book: the author's ability to craft an engaging narrative; its structure, point of view, pace, tone, voice and so on' (43) – the basic elements of creative writing (see, for instance, Grenville 1990, Lodge 1992). In line with this assessment, these are the kinds of literary elements Carter described as the qualities of the best non-fiction books: 'beautifully written prose, definable themes, unifying structure, and stimulating subjects' (1993: 59). And, so, despite Abrahamson and Carter proclaiming more than twenty years ago that 'modern non-fiction – with its stunning visual formats, highly readable prose, and appealing subjects ... [was then] enjoying a rebirth of interest among publishers, librarians, and teachers who work with literature of children and young adults' (1992: 42), young adult non-fiction writing remains an undervalued form of creative production.

The young adult memoir

Calls to specifically include the young adult memoir in school curriculum and reading lists are another enduring aspects of this type of research (see, Johannessen 2002; Schick and Hurren 2003; Kirby and Kirby 2010; de Gracia 2012; Johnson-Durham 2013; Jensen 2015). Despite this work in literacy research, the young adult memoir is under-investigated in life writing and creative writing scholarship. Telling evidence of this is found in a scan of major journals in these fields for the descriptors 'young adult' and 'memoir/s' in the title or subtitle of any article published. These terms do not appear for the past 15 years in prominent journal *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* (although some memoirs herein classified as young adult memoir are reviewed and/or discussed during this period). Nor does the term 'young adult' occur

in any title in the cumulative index for *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* journal covering 1995 to 2014. No articles on young adult life writing been published in the major general creative writing journals, *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses* (from 1997), *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* (from 2004) and *Axon: Creative Explorations* (from 2011).

In order, therefore, to begin to discuss the young adult memoir as a subset of the memoir, and as a creative writing text, the below will employ a case study approach (Gerring 2006), to examine a range of texts that can be classified in this way. As I have posited when investigating other under-investigated sub-genres of memoir (Brien 2013, 2015), a case study of a small sample of works, each of which explores an aspect (or aspects) of a form is useful as it allows, according to Merriam, a richer picture of an under-examined phenomenon to be constructed (2009). The purpose of this investigation is to provide sufficient examples and background detail to begin a discussion about this form of writing and suggest avenues for future research. Merriam also posits that a small-scale case study has value as ‘much can be learned [...] from an encounter with the case through the researcher’s narrative description’ (51). In this spirit, the below will provide a narrative profile of the young adult memoir as a distinct and unique group of life writing, and creative writing, texts.

Definitions and forms

There is, and has been, considerable discussion of, as well as disagreement over, how to characterise the young adult reader, and how, as a discrete category of literary endeavor, young adult fiction and non-fiction differs from writing for children on one hand, and for adults on the other (see, for instance, Gilmore and Marshall 2013). In psychology, a young adult, according to Erik Erikson’s classic eight stages of human psychosocial development, is understood to be a person in the age range of 20 to 40 years of age (1950). In this schema, a person aged from 13 to 19 years of age is termed an adolescent, which is much more in the range of what is often referred to as a young adult reader. The prominent Young Adult Library Services Association of the American Library Association, indeed, defines a young adult as someone between the ages of 12 and 18. Others have defined young adult literature as that written for readers aged from 16 to 25 years, with ‘teen fiction’ for 10 to 15 year-olds (another category again) bridging the gap between the children’s and young adult categories (see, for instance, Cart 2001). ‘Teen’ is also sometimes used as a catch-all term for young adult literature.

In 2013, in her thesis on how teachers interpret the young adult memoir, Heather L. Johnson-Durham notes that ‘there are few, if any, formal definitions as yet of the young adult memoir’ (8) and provides an expansive definition as ‘any memoir ... written for, marketed to, assigned to, or popular among young adults’ (17). She opines, however, that young adult memoirs generally focus on ‘the adolescent search for identity and belonging’ (17), what Irina Dimitrova Kyulanova would call ‘rites of passage’ (2014). Johnson-Durham identifies a number of common features of young adult memoirs in terms of the narrative (that may or may not be present in any individual memoir): that it may be expressed in accessible and sometimes colloquial

language; may include controversial subject matter and individual and/or social problems that might not be resolved by the conclusion of the text; and may include the story of a narrator who is critical of, and/or rebellious against, society. Young adult fiction writer Jennifer Kendall's recent recommendations of contemporary memoirs written for 'teens' is more specific, stipulating that these narratives all 'include life lessons about making choices, overcoming monumental challenges and having the courage to be a voice for change' (2015). While this is a common feature of many other memoirs, this feature is certainly lauded by librarians and authors in relation to young adult memoir – together with the aspect discussed below, that the memoir focuses on the young adult years.

In seeking to profile recent examples and attempt a preliminary classification of this form, I begin with two very broad ways of dividing these books: firstly, as memoirs *about* young people and, secondly, as memoirs not only about young people but which are also *written by* young people. Jensen would agree with this division, having stated that the young adult memoir is a book 'written for teens, about an experience by the author in their teens, regardless of whether or not they're in their teens as they're writing or if they're adults reflecting upon a teen experience' (2015).

Memoirs about being a young person by adult writers

There are a large number of memoirs about a young person's experience by adult writers. These include texts written for adults (termed 'crossover' texts when they are popular with young adult readers)² as well as those produced specifically for a younger readership. The below seeks to outline some prominent features of these memoirs.

In terms of Johnson-Durham's 'adolescent search for identity and belonging' (17), many memoirs in this group describe how growing up challenges the beliefs of childhood. Aaron Hartzler's *Rapture Practice: A True Story About Growing Up Gay in an Evangelical Family* (2013) is a good example here as it clearly describes how as he grew up, the author began to question his family's beliefs and rebel against these. In the process of this rebellion, Hartzler relates finding his own identity, including in terms of choosing friends and coming to terms with his sexuality.

These memoirs can, however, also provide a means for the author to share information about the past. Russell Baker's *Growing Up* (1982), for instance, describes his childhood during the Depression because, he wanted to tell his children 'what the world was like when I was young ... because, born in the gorgeously prosperous 1950s, they were likely to be spoiled by the comfort and plenty of American life' (i). Leon Leyson's *The Boy on the Wooden Box: How the Impossible Became Possible ... on Schindler's List* (2013), his story of surviving the Nazis, is a Holocaust memoir that includes much information on the Nazi invasion of Poland and life in the Krakow ghetto. In terms of later war history, while the narrative arc of *Rock 'N Roll Soldier* (2009) revolves around how memoirist, Vietnam War conscript Dean Ellis Kohler, forms a band at the behest of his Captain, this text is another example of a memoir which also provides a vivid historical narrative, as are many others.

Some of these memoirs include very confronting material. Brent Runyon's intense *The Burn Journals* (2004), published when he was 27, details how he set himself on fire when he was 14 years old. The focus of the book is on his recovery over the following year, but this is in itself difficult and painful, with Runyon undergoing not only excruciating burn care and skin grafts, but also arduous physical and psychological therapy. Such memoirs of illness and recovery are popular with young adults – with those of eating disorders the topic of a significant number of memoirs (Brien 2013) read by this group (Smith 2011). Other memoirs written by adults, popular with young adults include much less difficult subject matter as, for instance, in a long series of memoirs of professional sports people, which may match readers' own interests or curiosity. These include memoirs of surfers, snow skiers, swimmers and ballet dancers. There are also what could be called 'special interest' memoirs, on topics such as travel, beloved pets or living in unusual places. Such memoirs are discussed below.

In *Literature for Today's Young Adults* (2009), Alleen Pace Nilsen and Kenneth L. Donelson indicate another fascinating subset of these young adult memoirs by adult authors, those that are written by what they call 'Outstanding YA authors'; that is, by writers already familiar to young adult readers. These range from well-known examples such as Maya Angelou's lyrical *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (1970) and Paul Zindel's moving and funny *The Pigman And Me* (1992) to Walter Dean Myer's vivid *Bad Boy: A Memoir* (2001) about his life as a street kid who eventually becomes a writer, and Jacqueline Woodson's inspirational *A Way Out Of No Way: Writing About Growing Up Black In America* (1996) in which she details the books she read when young and the inspiration and hope she drew from them. Nilsen and Donelson note that these memoirs not only include subject matter engaging for young adults – 'the authors ... know what young adults are interested in' (2009: 38) – but add that these texts can also 'serve as models for teens' own creative writing' (38). This list could also be expanded with a number of other memoirs by young adult authors writing about their youth, including Ned Vizzini's *Teen Angst? Naaah ...* (2000), his entertaining memoir in a series of essays, and Chris Crutcher's humorous *King of the Mild Frontier: An Ill-Advised Autobiography* (2003). When Jack Gantos penned his compelling *Hole in My Life* (2002), he was an award winning children's and young adult author. This memoir won a Printz Award, given to a book 'written for teens, based entirely on its literary merit' (YALSA 2015). *Hole in My Life* describes how Gantos became a drug user and smuggler, and then his arrest and time in prison. It is, however, a story of recovery and hope; narrating how, upon his release, Gantos is able rebuild his life enough to attend college and, from there, foresee a future, embodying the redemptive narrative arc that is one of the key markers of the contemporary (adult) memoir – although this is, itself, contested (see, Robertson 2012).

Memoirs by young writers

A subset of the above memoirs *about* young people, are *by* authors who fit into the above categorisation of young adult, and some of whom are teen or even child

authors. The most famous autobiographical text by a young adult writer, Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* (first published in 1947) regularly makes the lists of most powerful, and popular, memoirs and/or autobiographical texts, and it is, indeed, included in several lists of the best books of the past century, including the top 100 and even top 10 titles (Crown 2007, Waterstones and BBC 1996). Although this work is not, of course, strictly a memoir – for the text was written as a diary, and then later published in book form by Frank's father – this text is worth considering in this context as it has a long history of being read and discussed as a memoir. Many draw attention to how Frank, after 1944, began reworking the text with publication in mind: 'rewriting and editing her diary, improving on the text, omitting passages she didn't think were interesting enough and adding other from memory' (Frank 1997: Foreword v).

A later, but also now classic, example of a memoir written by a young writer is Joyce Maynard's *Looking Back* (1973). After winning a number of national student writing awards while at school and writing for *Seventeen* magazine during her teens, Maynard had a long memoir article published by *The New York Times Magazine* in 1972. In this narrative titled 'An 18-year-old looks back on life', Maynard asked that sweeping generalisations not be made about either her or her fellow young adults, and reflected on her childhood, including the dominance of television. She also logs other key items of consumer culture in her childhood, including how 'Barbie ... built up our expectations for teen-age life before we had developed the sophistication to go along with them'. This brittle, disillusioned narrative – she writes, for instance, 'We feel cheated, many of us' – ends with her plans for her future, but these read like those of a much older writer: 'As some people prepare for their old age, so I prepare for my 20's. A little house, a comfortable chair, peace and quiet – retirement sounds tempting'. The next year, Maynard's book-length memoir, *Looking Back: A Chronicle of Growing Up Old in the Sixties* (1973), was published by prominent New York publisher, Doubleday, and republished in 1975, 2003 and 2012. This is another disillusioned critique of her past and present, presenting little hope for the future. The back cover of the 2003 edition noted that its re-publication aimed to bring the work to the notice of younger readers so that it might inspire them to write their own memoirs and 'give shape to their experiences of growing up'. This passage underscores this point, adding that *Looking Back* serves 'as a reminder that a person is never too young to tell his or her own story' (2003, back cover). Maynard has become a significant author of both fiction and non-fiction.

Recent examples of memoir by young authors include a number of what could be classed as 'illness memoirs'. In *Laughing At My Nightmare* (2014), 21-year-old Shane Burcaw is self-deprecating and, at times, savagely blunt about his spinal muscular atrophy. Burcaw details how he deals with 'everyday' young adult issues such as dating, but also describes the challenges of life in wheelchair, and the realities of this debilitating degenerative disease. *This Star Won't Go Out: The Life and Words of Esther Grace Earl* (2014) suggests two additional possible sub-categories. The first of these is the 'posthumous' narrative, as this memoir was compiled after Earl's death from thyroid cancer in 2010 aged 16. This work could also be described as a 'collage' or 'bricolage' memoir, as the text was assembled by family members using excerpts

from Earl's journals, letters and stories – the full author credit reading as 'Easter Earl with Lori and Wayne Earl'. Prominent young adult author John Green penned the foreword to this text, an indication of how Earl's involvement in a number of young adult-focused social campaigns had attracted support from a number of well-known people including J. K. Rowling (Maquard 2010), which may have helped create a market for this unique and moving text.

Young authors have also penned a number of narratives that describe triumph over misfortune. This includes Michaela de Prince's (written with Elaine De Prince) *Taking Flight: From War Orphan to Star Ballerina* (2014), which tells of, after being orphaned in Sierra Leone during the war, she was adopted by an American family, attended dance classes, and now has a career as a ballet dancer. Ishmael Beah's powerful and much admired *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007), published when he was 19, describes how, in the early 1990s, the narrator became a child soldier in Sierra Leone's civil war. The text describes how Beah found himself capable of shocking brutality and after being rescued by UNICEF, how difficult he found his rehabilitation, although this was eventually achieved, and Beah traveled to the USA and graduated from college. *A Long Way Gone* was ranked third in *Time* magazine's 2007 list of 'Top 10 Nonfiction Books', with critic Lev Grossman praising it for the way Beah portrayed the reality 'behind the dead eyes of the child-soldier in a way no other writer has' (2007). Another memoir inspired by the Sierra Leone war, Mariatu Kamara's *The Bite of the Mango* (2008), harrowingly relates how, at 12 years of age, she was kidnapped by rebel soldiers who cut off both her hands. Begging to survive, Kumara made her way to a refugee camp and was eventually rescued by journalists, and is now a UNICEF Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict.

Joint and multiple authors

Memoirs by young authors can be written solely, with a named collaborator (who may or may not be a family member), or with, or by, a ghostwriter; although those in this final category are obviously often difficult to determine (Couser 1998; Zeitlyn 2008). Those written with a named collaborator or co-author, who is almost always an older writer, can be further split into two categories – those that focus on telling the young adult's story in a single voice, or that present two (or occasionally, more) points of views about the same story. *Positive*, subtitled *Surviving my Bullies, Finding Hope, and Living to Change the World: A Memoir* (2014) by Paige Rawl (written with Ali Benjamin), for example, is a teenager's memoir of the experiences of being HIV positive, that is relayed in her single voice. In terms of family members as co-authors, there are a number of memoirs written by a young adult and a parent. In some of these texts, the young adult point of view is sustained, but in many others, the parent offers their own interpretations of events. *Elena Vanishing: A Memoir* (2015) charts the story of Elena Dunkle's five-year struggle with *anorexia nervosa*, from her point of view, but co-written with her mother, an award-winning author. Interestingly, the same year, the mother, Clare B. Dunkle, also published a memoir about her experience, *Hope and Other Luxuries: A Mother's Life With a Daughter's Anorexia*

(2015). Other examples of eating disorder memoirs by child/parent authors include dual mother and daughter memoirs, *Distorted: How a Mother and Daughter Unraveled The Truth, The Lies, and The Realities of an Eating Disorder* (2008) by Lorri Antosz Benson and Taryn Leigh Benson and *Hungry: A Mother and Daughter Fight Anorexia* (2009) by Sheila Himmel and Lisa Himmel. *Comeback: A Mother and Daughter's Journey Through Hell and Back* (2006) by Mia Fontaine and Claire Fontaine includes parallel stories by mother and daughter about drug addiction and incest.

This category of multiple authorship includes a pair of recent memoirs about young people in gender transition. *Rethinking Normal: A Memoir in Transition* (2014) by 19-year-old Katie Rain Hill (written with Ariel Schrag) narrates her unhappiness due to being born in the body of a boy and of first attempting suicide at 8 years old, and then undergoing gender reassignment. *Some Assembly Required: The Not-So-Secret Life of a Transgender Teen* (2014) by 17-year-old Arin Andrews (with Joshua Lyon) shares the details of undergoing gender reassignment as a high school student. Apart from the insight these memoirs provide into the lives and decisions of these young people, this pair of texts are also of interest in terms of their intertextuality – because the two transgender Oklahoma teens were friends, and had been in a relationship and, therefore, their narratives share a number of characters and events, but which are narrated from their individual viewpoints.

With memoir becoming a seemingly ever-increasingly valuable commodity in the literary marketplace, publishers use a range of strategies to market these texts to readers. Pitching the same book to different age categories (and with different covers and descriptions) and even in different versions is one of these tactics (see, Thein, Sulzer and Schmidt 2013). A prominent example is *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and was Shot by the Taliban* by Malala Yousafzai (with Christina Lamb), published in 2013 when Yousafzai was 16 years old. The next year, a 'Young Readers edition', with a different co-author, Patricia McCormick, was published with a slightly reworked subtitle: *How One Girl Stood Up for Education and Saved the World*. Yousafzai has stated that the young readers' edition focuses on her story, whereas the adult edition includes more information on her father. Both describe how, when she was ten years old, the Taliban took control of her region of Pakistan and banned girls attending school. Speaking openly about her refusal, Yousafzai was shot in the head one day while on the bus home from school. Surviving, she has become an international spokesperson for peace and, in 2014, the youngest Nobel Peace Prize laureate. In 2015, a new edition of the adult version of her memoir was published, featuring an updated preface by Yousafzai.

In such jointly written memoirs, a question arises regarding the level of input from the collaborator, and who is, therefore, actually 'the author' of these texts. As Megan Schliesman from the Cooperative Children's Book Center in Australia has recently noted in relation to editing such texts, 'one of the challenges, when taking on a project like this ... is trying to balance the teen's voice with the adult collaborator's' (2014). While outside the scope of this article, this and related issues of memoir authorship warrant further investigation.

Non-Western authorship

As can be seen above, a number of high profile young adult memoirs are by non-Western writers and are set, at least in part, outside the West. Their themes are usually, however, similar to other young adult memoirs (see, Sun 2013). In Australia, *Mao's Last Dancer* (2003) by Cunxin Li was not only also popular text with adult readers, but has often been a set text on school reading lists. Other prominent examples include Judith Otiz Cofer's *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* (1990), which moves from Puerto Rico to the narrator's new life in New Jersey, and indicates a common theme in similar memoirs: how forced assimilation into the dominant culture can be difficult and uncomfortable for immigrants or their children. Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (originally published in 1982, but republished to acclaim in 2004) speaks of how his attempted assimilation causes him painful alienation from his past, parents and culture, while Mexican-American Victor Villaseñor's *Rain of Gold* (1991) tells the story of hardships suffered by three generations of his family after they migrated to California. Adeline Yen Mah's *Falling Leaves: A True Story of an Unwanted Chinese Daughter* (1998), the story of her life in mainland China and Hong Kong, relates the emotional abuse she suffered from her wealthy father and his second wife. Lucy Lum's *The Thorn of Lion City* (2007) relates how, born in 1933, she grew up in an immigrant Chinese family in Singapore dominated by her grandmother. This includes many scenes where Lum was treated harshly but also recounts some of the pleasures she enjoyed. She loved sweet treats as, for instance, 'ice-kachang ... red beans and agar-agar, piled high with ice-shavings and streaked with the delicious multi-coloured syrup' (69, italics in original). Food is also shown to be the basis of superstition and even magic, as when a family friend feeds puppy meat to her husband to attempt to break a spell she believed his mistress had cast on him.

The next part of this discussion will profile the young adult memoirs in terms of their subject matter, and then narrative style, voice and form, and necessarily discusses memoirs authored by adults, young adults and joint authors, as well as Western and non-Western memoirists.

Popular subject matter of young adult memoirs

A series of what could be now regarded as 'modern classic' examples of young adult illness memoirs include Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted* (1993) about her institutionalization with bipolar disorder, Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation: Young and Depressed in America* (1994) on her mental illness and treatment, Lucy Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face* (1994) about growing up with extreme facial disfigurement and undergoing repeated surgery to repair it, and Marya Hornbacher's *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia* (1998). More recent texts repeat many of the narrative tropes and trajectories of these texts. Tracey White's *How I Made it to Eighteen: A Mostly True Story* (2010), for instance, describes how at 17 years old she was admitted to a mental hospital due to her lack of self-esteem, body image issues and drug addiction. Nic Sheff's *Tweak: Growing up on Methamphetamines* (2007) details his drug addiction and journey towards recovery. In his sequel memoir, *We All*

Fall Down: Living with Addiction (2011), Sheff writes candidly about relapsing and his multiple admissions to rehabilitation facilities. Ryan G. Van Cleave's *Unplugged: My Journey into the Dark World of Video Game Addiction* (2010) details the writer's compulsive obsession with video games and was the first memoir on this subject. Those that deal with accidents can be seen as a subset of the illness memoir as in Bethany Hamilton's *Soul Surfer: A True Story of Faith, Family, and Fighting to Get Back on the Board* (2006), written with Rick Bundschuh, the story of a 14-year-old competitive surfer who lost an arm in a shark attack off the coast of Hawaii. The book describes this injury, but then how she continued surfing, including competing in the World Surfing Championships.

There are many memoirs of childhood and young adulthood that deal with abuse and trauma. These include famous examples such as Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir* (1996), which is usually acknowledged to have been the text about which the term 'misery memoir' was first used, although less derogatory descriptions for these texts could be 'trauma memoirs' or 'survival memoirs'. McCourt's narrative about childhood in Ireland after his family migrated there from Brooklyn memorably begins:

When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood (1).

Ashley Rhodes-Courter's *Three Little Words* (2008) was another memoir of a miserable childhood that became a *New York Times* bestseller. Describing Rhodes-Courter's decade in foster care, its sequel, *Three More Words* (2015), is an affirming narrative that details how the memoirist comes to terms with this past. Jason Schmidt's *A List of Things That Didn't Kill Me* (2015) tells the story of growing up with an abusive father, who died of AIDS when Jason was a teenager.

Children and young people being held in slavery is another deeply harrowing theme in the young adult memoir. Shyima Hall's compelling *Hidden Girl: The True Story of a Modern-Day Child Slave* (2014) tells how her family sold her into slavery in Cairo when she was aged 8, to placate a family from whom her older sister had stolen money. Hall writes how, after being trafficked, she worked for the family seven days a week and then, eighteen months later, was smuggled into California with them. Two years after this, a neighbour alerted police to the girl's plight, and the rest of the book relates how she was rescued, moved through a series of foster homes, and was eventually adopted. She now regularly speaks publicly about human trafficking.

One of the most appalling aspects of Hall's story is how her own family knew of her plight and repeatedly refused to assist her. Bestselling memoirs pitched to an adult audience that detail parental neglect and abuse abound and, although often criticised as being exaggerated or even false, and pandering to voyeuristic readers (Plotz 2000, Jordan 2002), these are often consumed by young adult readers (Jensen 2015). Frank Furendi has called these narratives 'the pornography of emotional hurt' (2007) and they have been notably popular for at least a decade, and especially in the UK (O'Neill 2007). These memoirs regularly detail incest and other physical abuse and

cruelty, as well as poverty and neglect. Prominent examples include Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called It* (1993), Augusten Burroughs' *Running with Scissors* (2002), Jeanette Walls' *The Glass Castle* (2005) and Donna Ford's *The Step Child: A True Story of a Broken Childhood* (2007).

There are, however, a myriad of young adult memoirs that deal with much less dark subject matter. These include professional memoirs (Brien 2011) about moving from school and college into the work of work. Cheryl Diamond's *Model* (2008) and Kelle James' *Smile for the Camera* (2010) both focus on these teenagers' attempts to become high-fashion models in New York. Ryan Smithson's *Ghosts of War: The True Story of a 19-year-old GI* (2009) describes how he joined the US Army Reserve when he was 17 and two years later was deployed to Iraq as an Army engineer. In this riveting memoir, Smithson reveals the details of the everyday life of a contemporary soldier in a combat zone. Other memoirs that fit into this 'non-misery' category are discussed below.

Narrative voice, style and form

The voice of the narrative is another important aspect of the young adult memoir. This examination focuses on first person narratives, by far the majority of those published, although there are some exceptions. Author Kevin Brockmeier's *A Few Seconds of Radiant Filmstrip: A Memoir of Seventh Grade* (2014) is, for instance, written in the third person. Set in the mid-1980s, this memoir deals with how he was bullied at school. Brockmeier's narrative is also unusual in that he openly moves into speculation when his former self is confronted with the future. While speculative life writing is attracting some scholarly attention (see, Brien 2015), this relatively rare narrative mode in young adult memoir allows Brockmeier to, as he explained in an interview, 'investigate my life the same way I investigate the lives of my fictional characters' (qtd. in Stephenson 2014). Although the first person memoir is so common as to be seemingly hardly worthy of commentary, Schliesman has questioned whether:

at moments ... I wondered if it wouldn't have been better for their stories to be something other than first-person. / Then again, I think the first-person is also part of where the power of their narratives resides. And those occasional moments that made me wince in some of the books are also, perhaps, the very things that teen readers might find most genuine (2014).

This is another rich area of relevance for writers where little, or no, research has been conducted.

Another unusual category of young adult memoir is the group biographical memoir. An example of this is Susan Kuklin's *No Choirboy: Murder, Violence, and Teenagers on Death Row* (2008) which gathers testimony from four young men who, sent to death row as teenagers, reflect on their lives and describe prison life. Another example is *I Can't Keep My Own Secrets: Six-word Memoirs From Teens Famous and Obscure* (2009), a book containing 800 autobiographical statements by teenaged writers. This book resulted from a *Smith Magazine* call for teenagers to write a six-

word memoir and submit it for publication. These mini-memoirs range from humorous to deeply moving and surprisingly profound.

A number of young adult memoirs could be labeled ‘immersion journalistic’ narratives, akin to the popular adult memoirs written in this style, where the memoirist sets his- or herself a topic of investigation or personal quest and then documents this. Josh Sundquist’s *We Should Hang Out Sometime: Embarrassingly, A True Story* (2015) by a paralympic ski racer and cancer survivor, for example, chronicles his investigation into why he was single. Sundquist interviewed the girls and young women he had dated, or tried to go out with, as a young man and reflects on their answers in this humorous, but perceptive, narrative. In *The Pregnancy Project* (2013), Gaby Rodriguez documents what she learned from the experience of pretending to be pregnant. Another teen author, Maya Van Wagenen, describes a school year following a 1950’s popularity guide written by a former teen model in the engaging *Popular: Vintage Wisdom for a Modern Geek* (2014). *I Will Always Write Back: How One Letter Changed Two Lives* (2015) narrates how a school assignment resulted in a six year correspondence between Caitlin Alifirenka in the US and Martin Ganda in Zimbabwe and the friendship, and insights, that result.

There are also a number of powerful young adult memoirs presented as graphic memoirs. Like the texts above, these vary in subject matter and tone. Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2006) describes childhood in a family of morticians and then leaving home to go to college. All the while, she is questing to understand both whether her closeted homosexual father committed suicide or was more likely to have been killed in an accident, and her own identity as a lesbian. Another much-discussed example is Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2000) describing her youth in Iran. Ramsey Beyer’s *Little Fish: A Memoir from a Different Kind of Year* (2013) describes the changes a teenage girl from the country undergoes in becoming a city college student, living independently. Liz Prince’s *Tomboy: A Graphic Memoir* (2014) chronicles Prince’s attempts to come to terms with her gender identity. The charming and poignantly funny *El Deafo* (2014) relates how, after contracting meningitis at four, Cece Bell became deaf. She first went to a school for deaf children, but then attended a general school in a small town where she was fitted with a huge hearing aid connected to a radio microphone that her teachers wore. When these teachers forgot to remove, or switch off, their microphone Bell could listen in their conversations and gain insights into the adult world.

There are common forms of adult memoir that are rarely found in young adult memoirs, however, these examples are interesting to consider as they provide an insight into the range of content that the young adult memoirs may contain and, given the increased sophistication of recent YA material, that younger readers may be interested in accessing. One example is what could be described as the ‘true crime’ or ‘crime-related’ young adult memoir. This type of narrative is exemplified by Cylin Busby and John Busby’s *The Year We Disappeared: A Father-Daughter Memoir* (2008), in which these narrators describe the challenges faced after their family was forced into hiding from a murderer who had already shot the father, a police officer. The ‘travel memoir’ is another less common young adult form. Casey Scieszka’s *To Timbuktu: Nine Countries, Two People, One True Story* (2011), illustrated by Steven

Weinberg, relates how the pair, who had both recently completed college, met in Morocco while teaching English, then began to travel including to Timbuktu. Related to the travel memoir is the ‘adventure memoir’, represented by *No Summit Out of Sight: The True Story of the Youngest Person to Climb the Seven Summits* (2014) which describes how, at 13, Jordan Romero became the youngest person to reach the summit of Mount Everest and how, by 15, he had scaled the world’s highest mountains.

Conclusion

As detailed above, the young adult memoir reproduces many of the characteristics of what could be termed the ‘adult memoir’. There are, however, some subtle differences and unique concerns. In identifying a number of ways of categorising memoirs by, and about, young adults – the ultimate aim, following G. Thomas Couser’s influential work on life writing genres and sub-genres – is to attempt to clarify, rather than classify, this form of memoir. The purpose of surveying these texts in this manner and beginning to identify some of their features, tropes, commonalities and variety has been to encourage a more nuanced discussion of these memoirs by writers, publishers, critics and readers. By developing a more detailed set of descriptors for the young adult memoir, this suggests that much will be gained from future comparative analyses of these texts, and including these young adult memoirs in future studies of memoir and creative writing, more generally.

Endnotes

1. Throughout, I use the Australian standard spelling of ‘non-fiction’, except in American quotations, where the form ‘nonfiction’ is most commonly employed. I also use American spelling of the term ‘creative nonfiction’ as it was coined and popularised in the US.
2. Sandra Beckett notes that while the descriptor ‘crossover’ might be relatively recent, the concept is not new, with fairy tales and early novels examples of the form (2009, see also Beckton 2015, in this issue). Rachel Falconer notes that ‘critical analysis ... has not kept pace with the growing popularity’ of the crossover novel (2008), but while this suggests that the crossover young adult memoir is worthy of detailed investigation in its own right, such a focus is outside the scope of this discussion.

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