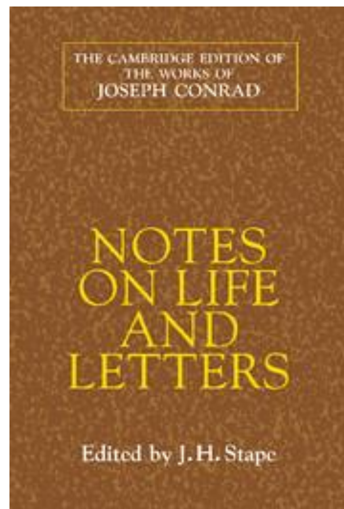
LIFE WRITING

Life Writing is often a search for the right form for what you want to write about. There is no one formula that fits all – Life Writing comes in all shapes, sizes, styles and combinations. Finding a form means finding the principle that allows you to organise your materials in a suitable way for what it is you want to say.

Carl Tighe

Life Writing covers both biographical and autobiographical writing. The novelist Joseph Conrad, who was often concerned to turn his own life experience into fiction, wrote:

> Fiction is history, human history, or it is nothing. But it is also more than that; it stands on firmer ground, being based on the reality of forms and the observation of social phenomena, whereas history is based on documents, and the reading of print and handwriting - on second hand impression. Thus fiction is nearer the truth. But let that pass.[1]



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The life you choose to write about need not necessarily be your own – you may be writing up autobiographical materials or uncovering someone else's biography.

Either way Life Writing always involves research. Some people choose to research their own or their family's history – often you come up with long lost photographs, ration cards, identity papers, old passports, family recipes or letters etc. Sometimes people choose to include their poems from now or from the past.

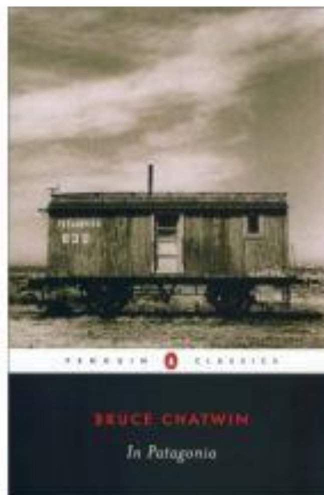
Often the writing is a rich combination of elements where time swirls backwards and forwards from the adult of the present to the child of the past. Often the adult knows

[1] Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters* (London: Dent, 1921), p.33.

more than the child and usually this is a source of pain. The most important thing to recognise is that beyond writing very well indeed, there are no rules. Some writers choose to use the present tense in writing their own life. Others prefer the past tense.

Some writers prefer a very fragmentary form, like Bruce Chatwin's *In Patagonia*:

> In my grandmother's dining-room there was a glass-fronted cabinet and in the cabinet a piece of skin. It was a small piece only, but thick and leathery, with strands of coarse, reddish hair. It was stuck to a card with a rusty pin. On the card was some writing in faded black ink, but I was too young then to read.
>
> 'What's that?'
>
> 'A piece of brontosaurus.'
>
> My mother knew the names of two prehistoric animals, the brontosaurus and the mammoth. She knew it was not a mammoth. Mammoths came from Siberia.[2]

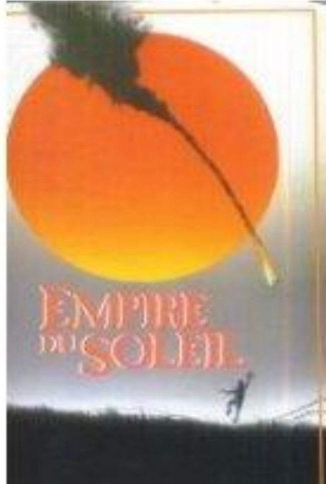


Sometimes writers disguise their life and experience by putting it into fiction, like Ballard's *Empire of the Sun*, which although it purports to be a novel about a boy called Jim and is told in the third person, is clearly about Ballard's early life in Shanghai, about the arrival of the Japanese and his life in a Japanese camp for civilian prisoners:

> Wars came early to Shanghai, overtaking each other like the tides that raced up the Yangtze and returned to this gaudy city all the coffins cast adrift from the funeral piers of the Chinese Bund.
>
> Jim had begun to dream of wars. At night the same silent films seemed to flicker against the wall of his bedroom in Amherst Avenue, and transformed his sleeping mind into a deserted newsreel theatre. During the winter of 1941 everyone

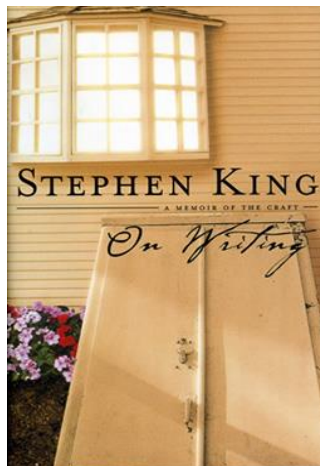
[2] Bruce Chatwin, *In Patagonia* (London: Vintage, 1977), p.1.

> in Shanghai was showing war films. Fragments of his dreams followed Jim around the city; in the foyers of department stores and hotels the images of Dunkirk and Tobruk, Barbarossa and the Rape of Nanking sprang loose from his crowded head.[3]



However, if you look at Steven King's *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft,* you will see he prefers the fragmentary approach. King writes without a through-line, using only snapshots – short, numbered chapters, often only a page or so in length, relating to a scene or a memory. He wrote:

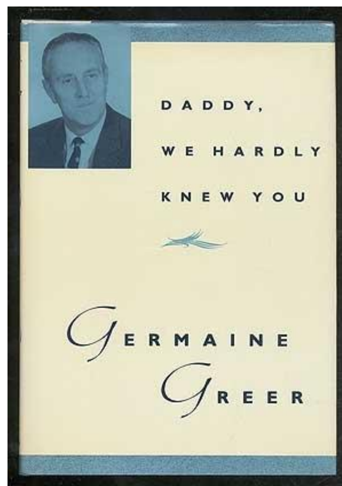
> Don't bother to read between the lines, and don't look for a through-line. There are no lines – only snap shots, most out of focus. [4]



[3] J. G. Ballard, *Empire of the Sun* (London: Flamingo, 1994), p.11.
[4] Steven King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2001), p.4.

Others prefer something more coherent, conventional and unified. But even what appears to be conventional can be unsettling, for example Germaine Greer's portrait of her father:

> It is silly of me, a middle-aged woman, to call my dead father Daddy. It's not as if I were some giddy heiress anticipating the next instalment of my allowance or Little Orphan Annie learning to get what she wants out of Daddie Warbucks, or yet some southern belle refusing to be her age. My brother and sister called my father Reg, but they knew him better than I did and could permit themselves such familiarity. I always called him Daddy, and much mockery did I take from my mother for doing it. Daddy is a baby's palatal word; the word mother on the other hand is admirably adapted for saying through clenched teeth.[5]

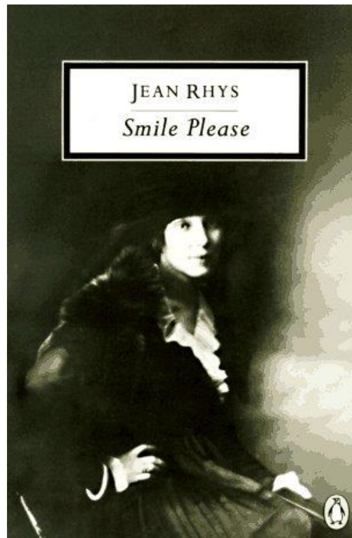


Jean Rhys (1890–1979), was until recently perhaps one of the UK's most under-rated novelists. She was driven to write and did not care that other people might consider her writing a failure because it had not sold well, and wrote on in case she began to think herself a failure. In fact she did not stop writing until the day she died.

She started her autobiography *Smile Please: an Unfinished Autobiography* (1979) when she was 86. She too preferred the more fragmentary and experimental approach. Indeed you could say that her book is nothing more than a loosely connected string of vignettes, without any coherent linking structure to give the whole thing shape or to direct what the meaning might be. It is what it is – fragments of her life. She provides

[5] Germaine Greer, *Daddy, We Hardly Knew You* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), p.1.

loosely connected sections entitled: ‘Poetry’, ‘My Father’, or ‘St Lucia’ and dispenses with an overall structure or linking narrative.



Really she just collects snapshots. Here is an extract:

> How old was I when I smashed the fair doll’s face? I remember vividly the satisfaction of being wicked. The guilt that was half triumph.
>
> Two dolls had arrived from England, a present from Irish Granny I suppose. One was fair, one was dark. Both beautiful. But as soon as I saw the dark doll I wanted her as I had never wanted anything in my life before. While I was still gazing my little sister made a quick grab.
>
> ‘Oh no,’ I said. ‘Oh no, I saw her first.’
>
> But when I tried to take the doll away she yelled and my mother rushed to the rescue.
>
> ‘You must let your little sister have it. You don’t want to grow up a selfish girl whom nobody will love, do you?’
>
> ‘I don’t care.’
>
> ‘Silly. You ought to be pleased she’s so happy.’
>
> ‘Now here’s the fair one. She’s just as pretty. Even prettier. And look, her eyes open and shut.’
>
> ‘I don’t like her,’ I said.
>
> ‘Don’t be silly. Don’t be selfish.’
>
> With the fair doll in my arms I walked away.
>
> ‘Where are you going?’
>
> ‘Into the garden.’ I walked out of the sun, into the shadow of the big mango tree. I laid the fair doll down. Her eyes were shut. Then I searched for a big stone, brought it down with all my force on her face and heard the smashing sound with delight.

There was a great fuss about this. Why? Why had I done such a naughty, a really wicked thing?

I didn't know. I was puzzled myself. Only I was sure that I must do it and for me it was right. My mother was so uneasy that she spoke to my father about my extraordinary behaviour.

In his consulting-room I stood and looked at him. I'd asked my mother once, 'What colour are his eyes?'

'Your father has beautiful hazel eyes,' she'd answered.

Hazel. A new word. I must remember that.

And now what? What's going to happen?

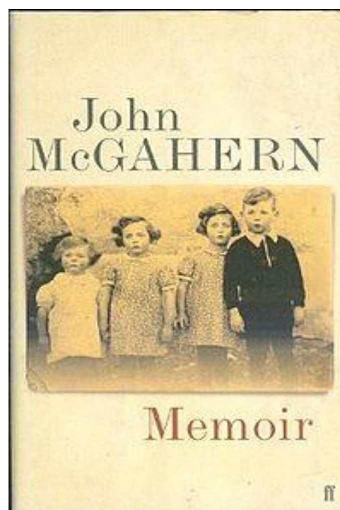
'What am I going to do with you? It was a very stupid thing to do,' he said, looking away.

'I wanted the other one. I saw her first,' I managed to say. 'She only wanted it because I did. It wasn't fair.'

'Nothing is fair,' he answered rather grimly. 'Nothing. And the sooner you understand that the better. You weren't very fair to the poor doll if it comes to that. So silly, so naughty. Why not give it away if you didn't want it?'

This was a new idea. Why not? No, that wouldn't have been enough.[6]

However, Life Writing, for all the opportunities it offers for telling it 'like it was', is not always a satisfying reading experience and perhaps one of the main problems is how to avoid getting locked into the predictable 'would' formula. Here is an example:



My father would come down the stairs in his shirt and trousers and unlaced boots. The fire had to be going by then, the kettle boiling. We went through these mornings on tiptoe. While he sharpened his open razor on a leather strap that hung from the wall, we'd pour the shaving water into a basin that stood in a tall,

[6] Jean Rhys, *Smile Please* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p.1.

> rusted, iron stand in front of the scullery window. Then he would lather his face with a small brush and shave in the mirror that stood in a brown wooden stand in the window. Outside were the beds of rhubarb and beyond the low wall the shapes of Lenihan's fields.
>
> The house went completely still while he shaved. Sometimes he would nick himself with the razor and we'd bring him bits of newspaper to staunch the bleeding. A clean, dry towel had to be placed in his hands as soon as he washed. In the living room he would polish and lace up his boots, draw the silver buttons of his tunic together on a flat, brass comb while he wetted them with a white substance, and brushed them until they shone. As soon as he buttoned his tunic, he would comb his hair in the big sideboard mirror. The signal that he was completely dressed was when he picked up his new handkerchief from the table and placed it inside the cuff that wore the three silver stripes of his rank. Then he would sit down to breakfast, facing the big sideboard mirror. At this time Bridgie McGovern would have served him, later my sisters. He never acknowledged the server or any of the small acts of service, but would erupt into complaint if there was a fault – a knife or dish or fork or spoon missing, or something accidentally spilled or dropped. When he wasn't eating from his plate, he stared straight ahead into the big mirror, chewing very slowly. At exactly nine he would go down to the dayroom, and the whole of the living room relaxed as soon as the dayroom door slammed shut.[7]

Once you spot this, the style begins to feel repetitive and unadventurous, but finding another way to say these things is a challenge.

Follow-Up Work

- Remember when you were roughly seven years old? The exact age doesn't matter. We are thinking of a stage when the world still seems strange and new, but babyhood is far behind.
- Go through the five senses – sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell. Jot down one particular scene, sound, texture, scent and taste that brings that time back to you. Write a few words to jog your memory.
- Now share some of these sense impressions. Think not only about the details of texture, taste etc. but their associations. Sometimes the sense impressions will connect with each other, but other lists will be more fragmented. Smell is a particularly powerful stimulant.
- The sense impressions inevitably have a context and that is how our memories start shaping themselves into stories.
- Now it's time to shape your storytelling onto paper – while the recalled memories are still fresh. Write simply and directly. The sense impressions that you started with don't have to be worked into the piece systematically, but the writing should be rooted in the physical perceptions of a seven year old.

[7] John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005).

- Don't strain for a plot: let the storytelling develop as it did through speech.
- Virginia Woolf writes about *moments of being,* flashes of awareness that stand out from day to day existence. For her, it is typified by a memory of listening to waves breaking beyond the nursery window. What we are after is your subjective sense of the past.
- You can re-draft and polish your work outside the workshop.
- Don't worry about writing chronologically - people don't recall early memories in that way.
- Facts of time and place are less important than the quality of the experience.
- Try to avoid writing 'would'**,** as in *On Sunday's we would go to Auntie Mimi's...*
- Write about a particular day, even if this means rolling separate happenings into one day.

Further Reading
For more information on Life Writing see:

- Antonia Fraser & Midge Gillies, *How to Write Memoir & Biographies* (London: The Guardian/The Observer, 2008)
- Ailsa Cox, 'Writing the Self' in: J. Singleton & M. Luckhurst, *The Creative Writing Handbook* (London: Palgrave, 2000)