

7 'Memory: The true key to real imagining'

LESLEY GLAISTER

Lesley Glaister (b. 1956), novelist, short-story writer and radio dramatist, was born in Northamptonshire and grew up in Suffolk. She took a degree with the Open University, and was 'discovered' as a writer when she attended a course at the Arvon Foundation in 1989. Her first novel, *Honour Thy Father* (1990), won both a Somerset Maugham Award and a Betty Trask Award. Other novels have included *Limestone and Clay* (1993), which won the *Yorkshire Post* Book Award, and, most recently, *As Far as You Can Go* (2004), a psychological drama about a young couple in a remote part of Australia. She teaches creative writing at Sheffield Hallam University.

I am on a beach. I don't know where – Southwold perhaps. I am very small and wearing a blue ruched swimming costume, which scratches the tops of my legs and fills with bubbles of water when I go in the sea. But I'm not in the sea. I'm sitting on a big striped towel, shivering. My dad is sitting beside me and I'm thinking how hairy his legs are, like gorilla's legs. Then I notice something: a hollow in the soft bulge of his calf, big enough to cup an egg in, not hairy like the rest but dull pinkish, fuzzy like newborn mouse skin. I want to put my finger inside and feel but I don't. Somehow I know I can't do that and I must not mention it. Then Dad gets up and hobbles down the shingle towards the sea. He breaks into a run when he gets to the flat bit before the sea begins. He plunges in and swims out and out and out. My mum is reading and my sister shovelling pebbles into a bucket. No one but me has noticed how his head gets smaller and smaller the further out he swims, until at last I can't see him between the waves. He has gone. But I don't shout or scream. I turn over and lie on my tummy on the towel, feeling my heart thudding against the lumpy pebbles. I have seen my daddy drown but I don't say a word. I lie there with the sea or my heart roaring in my ears.

I lie paralysed by fear and guilt for what seems hours until I hear the crunch of footsteps and feel the sprinkle of cold drops on my skin. Daddy is back and is standing above me waiting for me to get off the towel. He is fine, invigorated and oblivious to my terror, rubbing himself dry, slurping tea from the thermos.

That experience encapsulates for me a key moment of growing up: the sudden realization of my dad's vulnerability and his mortality – and by extension that of everyone including myself. An apparently insignificant moment when the bottom fell out of my safe child's world.

It wasn't until my father died, about twenty years later, that the seaside moment came back to me. Only then did it occur to me that the hollow in his leg was the scar of a tropical ulcer contracted during the war. He was one of the soldiers captured by the Japanese when Singapore was taken in 1941. He worked as a slave on the construction of the Burma/Siam railway, suffering cerebral malaria, cholera, dysentery, beatings, near starvation – an unimaginably traumatic time about which he never spoke. It was a deep area of silence. Not only was it never spoken of but there seemed an embargo even on wondering. It wasn't until years after his death that it even occurred to me why, as a naturally curious child, I never even *wondered*. About ten years after his death I became fascinated by the idea of that deeply layered silence – not unique to my family, I know – and began to plan the novel which became *Easy Peasy*. The seaside memory – only a tiny moment in the book – was the seminal one from which that novel grew, the true key to real imagining.

There are very few literally true moments like this in my own fiction, although naturally writers vary enormously in the way they process and utilize memory. Much of what I write feels as if it is made up – but that really means that it is memory refracted through imagination, often unconsciously, into something new. This might mean a scrap of a childhood memory is blended with something I heard yesterday and comes out as something unrecognizable as either. That, I think, is the real stuff of fiction – memory blended, refracted, transformed. That is why something that is apparently entirely imagined can have the real force of emotional truth.

For instance, my mild dislike of confined spaces was transformed into a potholing disaster in *Limestone and Clay*. And the queasy embarrassment I felt as a child at an accidental glimpse of my father's genitals (again on the beach!) dramatized into Jennifer's mortification at the spectacle of her naked grandparents in *Digging to Australia*. This latter was quite unconscious, indeed I didn't realize where it had stemmed from until years later.

And this unconscious salvaging is another and more fundamental way in which memory is employed in the making of fiction. Every impression ever made on a person from newborn babyhood onwards will

contribute to the shape and texture of the imagination. And an individual's personality is largely shaped by early experience: unconditional love, disappointed hunger, rejection, displacement by a newborn sibling, star or scapegoat status within the family. These all affect the deep patterning of expectation, the rhythm of a unique world view. This affects the deep structure, the rhythm that becomes apparent within a piece of writing. This is why with many writers similar tropes recur, similar themes are visited and revisited. Whatever the actual consciously chosen subject – from true romance to sci-fi fantasy – that pattern or rhythm is very likely to recur.

The most exciting moment in the writing of a novel comes with the onset of the wonderful trance-like state when a book seems to begin to grow itself, seems there to be discovered rather than created. Some writers describe this as the moment when the characters take over. It seems that the writer has little choice but to let them have their way. It is thrilling and feels somehow *real*. That is because it is. It is simply the deep unconscious patterning rising up and taking over the conscious critical planning mind. The unconscious rhythm that dictates the shape of most deeply felt fiction that has its germ in the structure of the writer's personality; and which also bestows on each writer a unique and precious voice.

Would-be writers often object that they have no memories to draw on, or that nothing interesting ever happened to them. This is not possible. Memory can be hard to access, but it's a skill that can be learned. And it's not so much interesting things but unique ways of seeing ordinary things that makes the most original and satisfying fiction. Catching one little tail end of a memory and patiently teasing it out can be a way to start. And it doesn't matter if the memory is not complete, nor entirely true. Remember you are writing *fiction*. A little kick start from the memory can set off your imagination – and who knows where that might lead ...

Source: Julia Bell and Paul Magrs (eds) (2001) *The Creative Writing Coursebook*, London: Macmillan, pp. 75–8.