

Palgrave Studies in Life Writing

Series Editors

Clare Brant

Department of English

King's College London

London, UK

Max Saunders

Department of English

King's College London

London, UK

This series features books that address key concepts and subjects, with an emphasis on new and emergent approaches. It offers specialist but accessible studies of contemporary and historical topics, with a focus on connecting life writing to themes with cross-disciplinary appeal. The series aims to be the place to go to for current and fresh research for scholars and students looking for clear and original discussion of specific subjects and forms; it is also a home for experimental approaches that take creative risks with potent materials.

The term ‘Life Writing’ is taken broadly so as to reflect the academic, public and global reach of life writing, and to continue its democratic tradition. The series seeks contributions that address contexts beyond traditional territories—for instance, in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. It also aims to publish volumes addressing topics of general interest (such as food, drink, sport, gardening) with which life writing scholarship can engage in lively and original ways, as well as to further the political engagement of life writing especially in relation to human rights, migration, trauma and repression, sadly also persistently topical themes. The series looks for work that challenges and extends how life writing is understood and practised, especially in a world of rapidly changing digital media; that deepens and diversifies knowledge and perspectives on the subject, and which contributes to the intellectual excitement and the world relevance of life writing.

More information about this series at
<http://www.palgrave.com/gp/series/15200>

Meg Jensen

The Art and Science
of Trauma and the
Autobiographical

Negotiated Truths

palgrave
macmillan

Meg Jensen
Kingston University
Kingston upon Thames, UK

Palgrave Studies in Life Writing
ISBN 978-3-030-06105-0 ISBN 978-3-030-06106-7 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-06106-7>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018965232

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s) 2019

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use. The publisher, the authors, and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, express or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover illustration: Vincent van Gogh, 'Irises' © J. Paul Getty Museum

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

*To Professor Julia Watson, with gratitude for her professional
inspiration and personal kindness.*

PREFACE

On my desk is an old black and white composition notebook in which I once wrote the following: “How do writers write? What makes them want to tell their stories, especially the sad ones? Do they want people to feel sorry for them? Or are they talking to themselves when they write?” I asked these questions in October of 1975, when I was a thirteen-year-old seventh grader at St Ignatius Loyola School in Hicksville, New York and had been asked to participate in a Creative Writing class. To say that this class saved my life is no exaggeration (thank you Mrs. McEvoy wherever you are). But neither is it an exaggeration to say that the concerns I examine in this book are indeed the interests of a lifetime.

How and why do writers write, especially about their sad stories? is, in essence, my central research question. In various projects over many years I have tried to answer that question creatively, through fiction and poetry, practically, through targeted and applied writing workshops in collaboration with groups in need of various kinds of support, and of course analytically. Firstly I drew on a paradigm of influence and intertextuality that grew into an interest in all things autobiographical, and from there investigated the relation between various forms of writing and trauma which led, seemingly inevitably, to interdisciplinary research of the kind common to life narrative studies, research that included study of the biological, psychological, sociological, cultural, historical, aesthetic, and neuroscientific models of what trauma is, does, and how it can be treated.

This volume is thus a distillation, not of everything I have learned, but rather of the connections and chasms I see among these subjects. Its aim is to foster discussion and enhance understanding of the complex relationship between the art and science of the autobiographical in order to add to critical and scientific debates on the nature of PTSD, and to enhance the development of effective therapies for practical application. The work this book contains, however, also incorporates a much greater quantity of self-reflection and examination than is normally the case in academic writing. I make no apologies for this. Like Clarissa Dalloway, I have often had the feeling “that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day.” My increased knowledge and understanding of current research on PTSD across these multiple disciplines has helped me enormously in my own recovery, and I hope that reading this work will help fellow PTSD survivors.

I am deeply grateful to a number of friends, family, and colleagues who have offered practical, emotional, and editorial support. In particular, I want to thank those colleagues at Kingston University whose goodwill and collaboration helped me to develop this project: Vesna Goldsworthy, Norma Clarke, Anne Rowe, Jane Jordan, David Rogers, and Patricia Phillippy. Special thanks to Martin Dines whose conscientious critique of an overly long, complicated and nearly unreadable draft chapter has greatly informed the whole of the volume. I owe you one. I thank the School of Arts, Culture and Communication research fund at Kingston University for financing a much-needed trip to the Berg collection at the New York Public Library, and for the generosity of the staff at the archive in helping me locate materials on Nabokov, Woolf, and Kerouac. The volume would not have been half as interesting without early collaborations on “Genres of Testimony” at Kingston University and University of Minnesota with Brian Brivati, James Dawes, Mark Muller, Eva Hoffman, Patricia Hampl, Barbara Frey, and Annette Kobak. Further collaborations such as work done as part of the Beyond Borders Festival in Scotland at Traquair House with the Women in Conflict Fellows, coordinated by Director Mark Muller taught me much about the potential practical applications for my research.

Further influential work has included conferences, workshops, and edited collections organised by and with Margareta Jolly, and, more recently the expressive writing programs funded by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office Human Rights fund, and developed and delivered with Siobhan Campbell alongside Dr. Ghassan Jawad Kadhim and

Asmaa al Ameen in Iraq, and Nadine Saba in Beirut as well as the training jointly developed and delivered with Siobhan Campbell, Catherine Moira Kennedy, and Sundus Abbas for the United Nations Development Program in Iraq. These collaborations have been central to my work and my thinking on the relation between trauma and life narratives. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart. Membership of the International Auto/Biographical Association has been an intellectual inspiration and lifeline, and I am especially grateful for debates and discussions with Margaretta Jolly, Leigh Gilmore, Julia Watson, Craig Howes, Sidonie Smith, Rosemary Kennedy, Tom Couser, Gillian Whitlock, Julie Rak, and Clare Brant that informed this project and other related ones. Any value that this volume contains is heavily indebted to such discussions and to the prodigious research each of you has provided the field. All errors or misunderstandings within this book are of course, my own. Personal thanks to my brothers, Kenneth and Paul and my sister Carolyn for their continued love and support and to Max and Hannah for letting me into their life. Lana and Scout—thank you for rearranging my papers and standing in front of my computer screen until you were fed. A huge thank you and much love and admiration to my editorial assistant and indexer extraordinaire Tessa Jensen-Hedgecock (and apologies that your mother wrote such a long book). Finally, to my hero Brian Brivati whose multiple intellectual challenges and suggestions on both the form and the content of this book (over three years' worth of reading drafts) were as important to its completion as his cooking is to my survival and his love is to my life. Thank you my dearest friend.

That Creative Writing class I took in grammar school not only taught me about the craft of turning lives into stories, but it got me to think about the how and why of that process in the context of suffering. In this book, I hope to finally provide the young me with some answers and to generate more questions for the old me to think about. I think Mrs. McEvoy would have liked that.

Kingston upon Thames, UK

Meg Jensen

A WORD ABOUT THE COVER

Vincent Van Gogh (Dutch, 1853–1890)

*Iris*s, (detail) 1889, Oil on Canvas

74.3 x 94.3 cm (29 1/4 × 37 1/8 in.)

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

In 1987 I was working at Sotheby's auction house in New York and was given the task of overseeing the production of the sales catalogue for the auction when Vincent Van Gogh's *Iris*s came up for sale. In doing so, I became one of the very few people to be able to engage closely with this masterpiece as it had previously been in private hands. Each day I went to see the painting in its temperature controlled room, checking the images we would use in the catalogue against the original. In those visits I began to feel a connection to the artwork. The shockingly beautiful and heartbreaking purple blossoms, the soothing green of the leaves and the chromatic genius of the yellow and single white flower in the background all crafted in thick textural brushstrokes: it was too much. One could not look at it for very long. And it was not only the color and the artistry that enthralled me. It was what happened when you stepped back. Forced to glance away from the overwhelming glory of this exquisite tableaux the eye was drawn down to something in the corner: the artist's name, rendered in a childlike hand, *Vincent*.

The catalogue I coordinated for the auction helped the painting become (at the time) the most expensive painting ever sold. But that wasn't what mattered to me. In fact I didn't even go to the auction as

I didn't want to see it sold or see who would take my painting from me. Having had the privilege and the pain of contemplating this work at length, and both learning and *feeling* what it said about the relation between suffering and art, it became a key inspiration for my later academic career. The painting is aesthetically ravishing but despite the popular misconception that Van Gogh's work resulted from a kind of mad, untrained genius, in fact he had worked for years to achieve the compositional perfection evident in *Iris*es and many other paintings. His letters to his brother illustrate these concerns and discuss his habit of drawing preparatory studies before beginning a major work, and his creation of a mechanical device to help him measure perspectives and map out grid lines. *Iris*es, in other words, is an apt as well as a majestic example of what can arise from the relationship between art, science, and suffering: powerful, affective and affecting autobiographical projects that show us the terrible pain *and* the unbearable beauty of life in the context of trauma.

CONTENTS

1	The Negotiated Truth	1
2	Valuing the Witness: Typologies of Testimony	29
3	Time, Body, Memory: The Staged Moment in Posttraumatic Letters, Journals, Essays, and Memoirs	73
4	<i>What It Is Like</i> : Fiction, Fear, and Narratives of Feeling in Posttraumatic Autobiographical Novels	115
5	Speaking In and Speaking Out: Posttraumatic Poetry and Autography	153
6	Annihilation and Integration in Collective Posttraumatic Monuments, Testimonies, and Literary Texts	201
7	The Art and Science of Therapeutic Innovation: Hope for PTSD Sufferers Today and Tomorrow	247
	Index	287