

Archetypal Life Scripts in Memoirs of Childhood: Heaven, Hell and Purgatory

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Today the memoir has become a robust trend in American publishing. If the memoir was once the preserve of eminent people and celebrities, now ordinary women and men are telling their life stories as well. This article is an attempt to identify and analyse a particular genre of this popular form of autobiographical writing – the memoir of childhood. The article examines the patterns and distinctions that can be discerned in contemporary narratives of childhood. In many memoirs of childhood, elemental motifs are discernible. In many narratives of childhood, the child inhabits either a hell (a period of remembered suffering and misery), a heaven (a period of a remembered paradise), or a purgatory (a period of a transitional social space lived between two social worlds). The article looks at examples of each of these three motifs in memoirs of childhood.

Mary Gordon (1996: xiv) wrote in her memoir of her father that ‘I am primarily a writer of fiction, but I knew I couldn’t present him as a fictional character because the details of his life, presented as fiction, would be too bizarre to be believed.’ Years ago people who thought they had a story to tell sat down to write a novel: but today many people with a story to tell about their lives sit down to write a memoir, a story told directly from life, rather than a story fashioned by the imagination out of life. Many contemporary memoirs are written by novelists, who no longer find it necessary to shroud the events of their lives in supposedly purely imaginative works (Gordon, 1996; Harrison, 1997). Fiction demands that the writer invent; memoir exploits the gift of lived experience. Where once the novel, based

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on the author's lived and remembered experience was the form chosen, the memoir has become the form for conveying that experience.

One of the attractions of contemporary memoirs is that they not only 'show' and 'tell', but they reflect on the very process of telling itself. In many contemporary memoirs, the author successfully combines the techniques of fiction with essay writing, the personal with public dimensions of experience, and the documentary account with poetic and evocative recreations of experience. For many writers today, the memoir is the format of first, not last, resort. American publishing is, in the words of Vivian Gornick (1996) experiencing a 'memoir boom'. The current age seems to be characterized by a need to testify about the meaning and significance of one's life.

Today, particularly in American culture, the memoir has become a popular choice for telling a story. 'Alice B. Toklas did hers and now everybody will do theirs', Gertrude Stein observed in *Everybody's autobiography* (1973), referring to her companion, whom she impersonated in *The autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933). Contemporary times, it has frequently been noted (Atlas, 1996; Blais, 1997; Gornick, 1996), are characterized by a deluge of memoirs. Memoir seems to have become the fin-de-siècle literary form. The literary genre of the memoir has become a particularly robust trend in contemporary American publishing. There has been a proliferation of titles, a noticeable presence on best-seller lists, special sections in book reviews and special sections in bookstores. No doubt commercial interests are involved in the proliferation of memoirs; many memoirs have been huge successes that authors and publishing houses would wish to repeat.

Not only are people moved to write their life stories, but there is a ready audience for the stories. Readers crave to know the life experiences of others. The popularity of memoirs for the book-buying public has been noted by numerous cultural observers. Blais (1997: 80) notes that 'You would have to be living in a cultural vacuum not to have noticed that memoir as a genre is hot.' James Atlas observed in *The New York Times Magazine* (1996) that the triumph of memoir is 'now established fact'. The memoir, Patricia Hampl asserts (1997), 'has become the signature genre of the age'.

Since the publication of Augustine's and Rousseau's confessions, the memoir has been a staple of a written form that involves the writer as self-publicist, discloser and author of personal history as against public history. Memoirs were once written by famous people, eminences basking in the twilight of their fame. They were the preserves of ex-presidents, public officials and celebrities. That has now changed. Today it seems that ordinary women and men are

rising up to tell their story of how an individual life has meaning. Autobiographical writing, as Richard Coe (1984: 41) has observed, 'is an assertion of uniqueness'. The writer, by fixing his or her experience on the printed page, is making the claim that his or her life experience is of significance. The uniqueness of this experience mandates the telling of that experience.

In recent decades, there has been a notable flowering of narratives about the remembrance of personal pasts. A growing number of authors (some of whom are professional writers and novelists, others ordinary people), have a story to tell, a lesson to teach, a life to be made public. This new trend in confessional writing has produced a library of historical, sociological, psychological and cultural revelation. Memoirists witness their traumatic illnesses, racial experiences, sexual identities and family dysfunctions. It seems that there is no topic that is taboo, or not written about. The contemporary memoir has opened up a new kind of narrative authority for ethnic subcultures, for different sexual persuasions; for anyone, in short, whose experiences fall outside the themes of worldly success, power and moral or spiritual growth, which were once prominent in American autobiography.

This essay is an attempt to identify and analyse a specific segment of this popular form of autobiographical writing – the memoir of childhood, which given the volume of such works, could well be considered a distinctive literary genre in itself. In *Mystery and manners*, Flannery O'Connor (1969) wrote that 'Anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days.' The sheer volume of contemporary memoirs on childhoods would seem to verify Flannery O'Connor's claim.

The child has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention in the last few decades. Studies have been devoted to the historical status of childhood (Aries, 1962; de Mause, 1974; Postman, 1982), the status of childhood in literature (Kuhn, 1982), the autobiography of childhood and adolescence (Coe, 1984), the status of childhood in social theory (Neustadter, 1989) and the psychology of the child (Erikson, 1950). The purpose of this essay is to examine the descriptions and patterns of childhood in recent memoirs.

The task set here is to illuminate the memories of childhood in the contemporary memoir and cast some light on the kind of childhood that is remembered. This essay asks: 'what are the common and recurrent characteristics of childhood, as interpreted in the perspective of contemporary memoirs?' The ideas and images concerning the child emerge from their representations and coalesce into a dynamic pattern. By looking at these representations not individually,

but as a coherent corpus, we can discern a system with its own images and landscape. The multiplicity of contemporary memoirs in which childhood is represented, varied as they are, forms a complex system with various levels of significance. By analysing certain specific themes and images in the memoir, it may be possible to make visible some of the themes of a composite language that is the retrospective creation of adults who have written about their childhoods, a childhood they try to make sense of and bear witness to.

In general, memoirs that deal with childhood may be divided into two broad categories. In one are those works whose central purpose is to recapture the essence of a lost past. The means of achieving this end are diverse and various memoirists employ differing techniques to reach it. Frank McCourt and Mary Karr attempt a rigorous use of memory, whereas Mary Gordon's reconstruction is based at least partially on documentation of family and personal records. The second category contains those works in which the construction of a childhood world is not an end in itself but a pretext. Such recollections may serve as an outlet for the nostalgia of the adult for a long lost paradise that is believed to have once existed. The child in his or her own Garden of Eden is the vision offered by Jill Kerr Conway, Doris Kearns Goodwin and Elizabeth Spencer. Whatever the tools employed, these practitioners of memoir subscribe to the proposition that childhood is a central element in existence. In both of these perspectives, the childhood universe is usually portrayed as an extreme one.

This paper is intended as an examination of the kinds of childhoods that are remembered, and of the types of childhood experiences that are recreated in literary form by contemporary men and women describing and examining the existence of their former selves. Memories and recollections of childhood may look at many facets of childhood, psychological and self-development, personality, religious faith, philosophical quests and political ideologies. There are, no doubt, many possibilities for dividing, organizing and classifying an inquiry into the myriad of memoirs that focus on and describe childhoods. There are many archetypal life scripts in memoirs of childhood.

The structure of this paper is simple and topological in classifying and describing these archetypal life scripts. In many recent memoirs, there are elemental motifs of childhood that are discernible. The memoirs considered here conjure up, by way of symbols, images and impressions, a picture of childhood with a pattern and significance that can be retrospectively interpreted. The recollections and

descriptions of the unique landscape of childhood are myriad, comprising both a heaven and hell and in some cases a transitional space – a sort of purgatory that is neither a hell nor a heaven, but a transitional landscape betwixt and between. The archetypes of heaven and hell have been used by Kuhn (1982) to analyse depictions of childhood in fiction, and by Coe (1984) to examine childhood in autobiographical writing. In this paper, this typology is applied to contemporary memoirs. The category of a purgatory, of childhood lived betwixt and between cultural borders, reflects the experience of childhoods in multicultural societies. They reflect neither experience of a hell or a heaven, but a childhood lived in an often ambiguous and confusing space. This paper will examine examples of each of these three depictions of childhood in the memoir. It is presented neither as a comprehensive study, nor a representative study. The memoirs discussed here are presented as samples of the many contemporary memoirists who have written about what happened to them in their childhoods.

THE HELL OF CHILDHOOD IN MEMOIR

Children in the novels of Dickens and Zola are often the subjects of unbearable conditions and exploitation. The vision of childhood as a period of unmitigated suffering is by no means any longer unique to fiction. The aspects of life experience now appearing in memoir would in the past be addressed only in fiction. The social taboos on discussing violence, parental cruelty and incest no longer censor what appears in the memoir. In recent memoirs, the source of suffering is not social and political turmoil, but sources closer to home. The story of inadequate and dysfunctional families has become one of the central motifs of the late twentieth century. Many children experience family break-up, fatherlessness, a parent's alcoholism, and physical and sexual abuse. For many adults, an unhappy childhood leaves an indelible imprint in memory. There is a plethora of narratives of unhappy childhoods. As Richard Coe (1984: 68) has noted, in his study of over 600 examples of autobiographical writing on childhood, there is a 'high proportion of unhappiness' in childhood autobiography. Memoirists of unhappy childhoods fill books with descriptions of remembered miseries.

The catalogue of writers whose childhoods were miserable and intolerable is large and growing. The vision of childhood as a period of unmitigated suffering appears frequently in a number of contemporary memoirs. Every happening, every relationship and every event is framed by remembered unhappiness. The theme of the child as the

victim of intrafamily conflicts, whose home life is transformed into a domestic hell by the cruelty or neglect of parents, is a recurrent one. The essence of a childhood perverted by the indifferent malice of authoritarian and capricious parents has been distilled in several contemporary memoirs. These memoirs describe children who experience terrible childhoods, which involve dysfunctional families, troubled parents, poverty and abuse. Lack of love, the interdiction of communication and physical cruelty are the elements that make up the infernos to which they are condemned.

There are numerous accounts of bad childhoods. Frank McCourt makes a case that his was particularly 'miserable'. In *Angela's ashes* (1996), the story of his Limerick childhood in the 1930s and 1940s, McCourt begins his memoir by wondering how he survived such a 'miserable childhood':

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 miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood. People everywhere brag and whimper about the woes of their early years, but nothing can compare to the Irish version: the poverty; the shiftless, loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English, and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years. (1996: 11)

The major tragedies of his 'miserable childhood' were his father's alcoholism, myriad childhood deaths and his family's poverty.

Frank's father, Malachy, drank the family into semi-starvation and his wife into beggardom. Frank describes forays into the pub to try to bring his father home before he drank up all his weekly wages:

When the farm money is gone he rolls home singing and crying over Ireland and his dead children, mostly about Ireland. If he sings Roddy McCorley, it means he had only the price of a pint or two. If he sings Kevin Barry, it means he had good day, that he is now falling down drunk and ready to get us out of bed, line us up and make us promise to die for Ireland.

(1996: 95)

Malachy drinks not only the dole money, but a relative's 'telegram money' for a new baby. 'It's bad enough to drink the dole or the wages', Frank writes (1996: 186), 'but a man that drinks the money for a new baby is gone beyond the beyond as my mother would say'.

Almost as relentless as the father's drinking is the list of childhood deaths. Three of Frank's siblings die. The twins Eugene and Oliver die. A sister, Margaret, dies when she is seven weeks old. Later on Angela had a stillbirth, and then later still bore two more sons who did not survive.

Frank became ill with typhoid fever and was hospitalized on a fever ward for several months. The ward was empty, except for a young girl, Patricia, with diphtheria and 'something else', who haemorrhaged to death. They are forbidden to talk to one another, laugh, or sing. But she loans him a book with the first works of Shakespeare he has ever heard. When the nurses learn that Patricia is teaching Frank poetry, they transfer him upstairs to the end of a large empty ward. Soon after the separation, she dies. Two of Frank's boyhood friends, Mickey Spellacy and 'Quasimodo', die of consumption. McCourt describes his first sexual experience with a consumptive young girl and describes how he was terrified that this had hastened her death.

The book is full of detailed descriptions of poverty. The overall impression of Limerick is dampness and misery:

From October to April the walls of Limerick glistened with the damp. Clothes never dried: tweed and woolen coats housed living things, sometimes sprouted mysterious vegetations. In pubs, steam rose from damp bodies and garments to be inhaled with cigarette and pipe smoke laced with the stale fumes of stout and whiskey and tinged with the odor of piss wafting in from the outdoor jakes where many a man puked up his week's wages.

(1996: 12)

The family home is next to the public toilet where residents of the entire lane disposed of their waste. A sadistic teacher peels an apple in front of his starving pupils, occasionally throwing them pieces.

Frank steals food from drunks. As the family becomes poorer Frank licks greasy newspapers for substance:

... I take the greasy newspaper from the floor. I lick the front page, which is all advertisements for films and dances in the city. I lick the headlines. I lick the great attacks of Patton and Montgomery in France and Germany. I lick the war in the Pacific. I lick the obituaries and the sad memorial poems, the sports pages, the market prices of eggs, butter and bacon. I suck the paper till there isn't a smidgen of grease.

(1996: 296)

Frank (1996: 250) spots his mother in a crowd outside a priest's house begging for any food left over from the priest's dinner: 'This is my

own mother, begging. This is worse than the dole. . . . It's the worst kind of shame, almost as bad as begging on the streets where the tinkers hold up their scabby children.' Frank becomes further alienated from his mother when he realizes that she is sleeping with their landlord to survive.

In *The liar's club* (1995), Mary Karr locates herself in the centre of a chaotic world of alcoholic parents, a mother with a nervous condition, divorce, step-parents and their lovers, whose relations to one another are constantly changing. Karr narrates with great force and wit the story of needy children and wayward parents and the awfulness of Leechfield, the town in which she grew up. Karr describes how she and her elder sister Leicia grew up during the 1960s in 'a swamphole, a suckhole, and the anus of the planet', Leechfield in east Texas. 'The oil refineries and chemical plants', Karr writes:

. . . gave the whole place a rotten-egg smell. . . . Plus the place was in a swamp, so whatever industrial poisons got pumped into the sky just seemed to sink down and thicken in the heat. I later learned that Leechfield at the time was the manufacturing site for Agent Orange, which surprised me not one bit. That morning, when I woke up lying under the back slant of the windshield, the world smelled not unlike a wicked fart in a closed room.

(1995: 34–35)

Children play by chasing the DDT truck to see who will upchuck first. The beach is covered with grunge, rotting shrimps and man o' war jellyfish. Karr's mother, Charlie, is stranded in this hell hole with two kids, a crazy mother dying of cancer and an alcoholic husband. Karr describes a southern gothic horror story of a dysfunctional family. The book is replete with violence and alcoholism – both parents drank heavily and fought bitterly, moving from verbal abuse to physical combat with their daughters as witnesses. There are stories of neglect and the tragic stories of her mother who lost the children of an early marriage, stolen from her by a mother-in-law who thought she was incapable of raising them, her father's stroke, an aunt dying of cancer, and an episode of rape at age seven: 'Think of two good-sized Smithfield hams – that's roughly how big I was. Then think of a newly erect teenaged boy on top of that and pumping between my legs' (1995: 68).

The central problem that haunts her life is her mother's 'nervousness', an east Texas euphemism for bouts of insanity. Her mother becomes increasingly psychotic, making a confused attempt on her daughters' lives, is adjudged 'nervous' and removed to an institution.

Karr describes her mother's breakdown in the voice of a lonely child observer watching her world fall apart:

Maybe drinking caused Mother to go crazy, or maybe the craziness was just sort of standing in line to happen and the drinking actually staved it off a while. All I know is that first Mother was drinking, then she and Daddy were fighting worse than ever, and finally they were hauling her away in leather four point restraints.

(1995: 125)

The essence of a childhood perverted by the malice of authoritarian and abusive parents has been distilled in the memoirs of Ruthie Bolton and Richard Rhoades. The story of Ruthie Bolton (a pseudonym) in *gal* (1994) is told to the novelist Josephine Humphreys 'the way that Southern stories are best told: out loud teller to the listener'. The resulting memoir the reader is told describes growing up in a troubled 'unloved childhood' in a 'no love family'.

Ruthie Bolton was born in 1961 to a 13-year-old mother in an unpaved section of Charleston called Hungry Neck. She recalls that 'They called me gal, because of one time I wandered past the yard and my grandfather hollered "Get that gal out of the street".' After Ruthie's vituperative step-grandfather, Clovis Fleetwood, beat her young mother for her promiscuity, she ran away, abandoning Ruthie to him and his wife. The mother that Ruthie never knew would be murdered by a lover who tied her to a bed and set her afire. Suspected of infidelity, her grandmother was bludgeoned beyond recovery in front of the children.

After his wife's death Fleetwood subjects Ruthie and her sisters to a life of drudgery, intimidation, humiliation and enslavement. Fleetwood commanded them to scrub the house 'spick and span' and to serve him as if they were his handmaidens. After his nightly bath he would order gal to scrape the dead skin off the soles of his feet with a knife. Later, describing the insect collection of her son, Bolton (1994: 164) notes 'I never had anything like that, no hobby. Hobby! Your hobby was to get your ass up, get your work done, that's what your hobby was!' While Fleetwood spent his money on girlfriends and drink, the girls wore socks on their hands instead of gloves and ate scraps.

The girls, especially Ruthie are tyrannized and beaten. Bolton (1994: 267) describes how 'I wasn't getting nothing but beaten. I was beaten for socks. Shoes. Hair. Bump. Any little thing'. After the principal of her school tells Fleetwood that gal has been stealing lunch money, he brutally beats her with a tree limb:

He started beating me and beating me and beating me. I was jumping up all over the table. I was screaming. I was screaming, I was screaming, screaming and screaming.

And he beat me. He beat me. He beat me, he beat me, he beat me. He hit me so much that he happened to hit his own self, and when he did that he went berserk. Then he took off his belt. He took off his belt. I'm going to make water come out of your eyes he said.

He didn't chop me with the leather end of the belt. He hit me with the buckle part. He had just chop and chop me and chop me. I was screaming and yelling but I never did cry. Never did cry. Never did cry.

(1994: 49)

After she escapes Fleetwood's brutality by moving out, she embarks on a course of promiscuity and drug abuse, endures a violent marriage, loses custody of her first child before finding transcendence and sanctuary with a tender man and his family: 'That family changed my life. I came out of a no-love family, and fell into a love family' (1994: 201).

The first sentence sets the stage and tone of Richard Rhodes's childhood memoir *A hole in the world*: 'When I was thirteen months old my mother killed herself.' This awful fact is the 'hole in the world' that defined and destroyed the author's childhood. After several itinerant years, his father finally landed Rhodes and his brother Stanley in the house of a woman who became their stepmother.

Rhodes describes his stepmother unambiguously as a ghastly, sadistic monster and his father as a 'cowardly' man, who allowed the stepmother's abuse to go on until the children were removed by the juvenile court. Rhodes uses political terms to describe what happened to him during the two years he lived with his stepmother. Rhodes (1990: 88) describes his 'victimization' 'in the concentration camp of our stepmother years'. 'She tinkered sadistically', he wrote, 'with control worked out on the surface and the interior of our bodies'.

Rhodes (1990: 117) described a tortured existence in which the stepmother imposed a rigid system of rules regarding how toilet paper was to be installed. This was enforced 'with violence' that included 'slapping us, kicking us, bashing our heads with a broom handle or a mop or the stiletto heel of a shoe, slashing our backs and the backs of our legs with the buckle of a belt'.

'Our stepmother', Rhodes (1990: 117) writes, 'tinkered more radically with manipulating what we took into our bodies and what we expelled'. Rhodes describes a tortured existence in which he and his brother were systematically starved. Rhodes describes how he

and his brother ate black-eyed peas and hard boiled eggs ‘while she and Dad dined on pork chops and even steak, the meaty sear of their frying drifting back onto the sleeping porch to tantalize us . . . our cheeks gushed saliva’. Both brothers are significantly under weight for their years and turn to scavenging.

In a horrific passage, Rhodes describes how his stepmother attempted not only to control his behaviour and diet but his bodily functions as well. Since the bathroom was near her bedroom she forbade the brothers to use the bathroom at night. Rhodes graphically describes his struggle to retain urine:

Dutifully I went to the bathroom just before climbing to my upper bunk on the north wall of the sleeping porch, but as soon as Stanley turned out the light and we settled down to sleep I felt my bladder fill. I lay awake then for hours. I tried to redirect my thoughts, tell myself stories, recite numbers, count sheep. I clamped my sphincters until they cramped and burned. Lying on my back, hurting and urgent, I cried silently to the ceiling low overhead tears running down my face without consolation, only reminding me of the other flow of body fluid that my commandant had blocked. When clamping my sphincters no longer worked I pinched my penis to red pain.

(1990: 119)

Rhodes urinates into a jar at night and surreptitiously empties it to avoid the wrath of his stepmother. The boy becomes an object to be used, misused and abused when his cost outweighs his usefulness.

Physical cruelty and lack of love are the elements that make up the domestic hell to which Bolton and Rhodes are condemned. Richard Berendzen, the former President of American University in Washington, DC, tells the story of a male incest survivor in his memoir *Come here* (1993). In the first episode of the book, Berendzen describes how when he was eight the ‘sexual abuse of my childhood began’ when his mother summoned him into the bedroom while she was having sex with his father. The abuse will become a recurrent one. Although sex with both parents never recurred, Berendzen describes how his mother became obsessed with him: his clothes, his academic achievement and his discipline. The incest resumed when he was twelve. During the next three years, he (1993: 7) became the ‘passion and her prey’ of a woman whose mental instability took the form of repeated incestuous assaults on a child who was powerless to resist.

If we look at these memoirs as a group, some archetypal fairy-tale qualities are present in them. These are bleak tales of needy children. Each narrative recounts memories of inadequate nurturing, the fear

of an evil parent or step-parent. Every happening, every event, is seen through the prism of remembered misery. And yet despite the abuses they endure, each of these memoirists displays an inner toughness that enables them to survive mental manipulation and torture. In general, the narrators not only lived to tell about their unhappy childhoods, they prospered. They are redemptive children. Their voices are purer than the voices in the world and the adults they encounter. The children in these memoirs are resurrected as adults. These memoirists emerge from their childhood hell, if not unscathed, intact into a world of mature satisfaction.

THE HEAVEN OF CHILDHOOD IN MEMOIR

At the other end of the scale are childhoods that are visions of a paradise lost. Memories of an idyllic childhood are not as numerous as those of miserable childhoods. In his study of autobiographical writing on what he called 'the Childhood', Richard Coe (1984: 62) noted that of the 600-odd examples in his study a sentimental 'nostalgia is rare'. Perhaps because of the focus on abuse and dysfunctionality in memoirs, some memoirists are inspired by the desire to recapture something of a paradise that has been lost, or partially lost, forever. As counterparts to the depictions of infernal horrors of childhood, there are the descriptions of its more joyful aspects. Bliss is harder to communicate than suffering, and the many attempts to recreate a childhood paradise all too often result in uncomfortably sentimental effusions characterized by a mawkish enthusiasm for nature.

Jill Kerr Conway probably comes closest to capturing the eternal awe and wonderment of a childhood Eden. In her memoir *The road from Coorain* (1990), Conway tells her story of growing up on an isolated sheep farm in the Australian outback. Joyful scenes of children frolicking in Edenic landscapes are lyrically described. In Conway's (1990: 51) description of a recollected morning, 'Magpies used to perch on the windmill's stand and sing every morning at first light. This sound would mingle in waking with the early morning smell of flowers in the garden. It was an idyllic world.'

Conway's description of her childhood is literally a childhood in the garden. Her Coorain (1990: 31) was a 'delightful place to live', a terrestrial paradise. Conway describes her childhood in a tropical garden of Eden as beautiful and 'magical'. After a storm:

The transformation of the countryside was magical. As far as the eye could see wild flowers exploded into bloom. Each breeze would waft their pollen round the house, making it seem as though we lived in

an enormous garden. Bulrushes shot up beside the watercourses, and suddenly there were waterfowl round about, erupting into flight as one approached. Evidences of the fertility of the soil were all about us. (1990: 33)

Soon I would drift off to sleep in the evening bathed in the perfume of stocks, wallflowers, and heliotrope in the summer, the crisp aroma of chrysanthemums in autumn. A whole bed was given over to Parma violets, and great fistfuls of them would sit in the middle of the round table on which we dined in summer on the southern screened veranda. (1990: 41)

Perhaps the account is tinted in brighter colours than reality might justify. Yet, this Edenic garden in the outback provides a refuge in which Conway and her two brothers grow up in an uncorrupted state of nature.

Conway's joyful existence is based on an acceptance of her family's interdependence with a bountiful nature. Her social world is as bountiful as the natural world that she describes. Her parents are 'jubilant' with their lives, full of plans for the future. She (1990: 34) 'worships' her brothers, who are gentle and generous, and her mother, who 'encouraged a strict equality between us'. Even after the brothers go off to boarding school, Conway's loneliness is moderated by a 'fascinating new companion', a kindly hired hand who was a source of knowledge and friendship. Coorain is the perfect setting for conversation, security and happiness. Parents, siblings and friends make for a harmonious, prospering community.

The advent of a radiant future promised in earlier passages is threatened by the intrusion of events. After an eight-year drought, her father's death and her older brother's death, the family moves to the city where Conway prospers. Her strength and success in later life are attributed to her bucolic beginnings. What was planted and grew in the plains of New South Wales she optimistically and metaphorically notes 'hugs the earth firmly with its extended system of roots about which the plant life is delicate but determined' (1990: 23).

In Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Wait till next year* (1997), the 1949–57 Brooklyn Dodgers are the gateway through which Goodwin recollects memories not only of baseball, but of family, neighbourhood, community, and the sensibilities of her girlhood. Her early years are happily governed by family, neighbourhood and the baseball calendar. *Wait till next year* is an old-fashioned reminiscence, an elegant, endlessly affectionate evocation of a vanished way of life. The childhood paradise regained through the memory of baseball is a sublime one, a rich lode from which the most precious metals can

be extracted. Baseball has been very good to the young Doris Kearns. Baseball is her tie to many relationships. She notes that 'a lasting bond had been forged among my father, baseball, and me' (1997: 13). The neighbourhood too is both divided and united by their love of baseball.

At the centre of her childhood is the 'invisible community of baseball', a community which reached across generations and social class. The butchers at the Bryn Mawr Meat Market were Giant fans: 'They would mock my Dodgers, I would pretend to be angry, but the truth was I loved going into their shop' (1997: 63). The Lubars and Barthas were fervent followers of the Yankees: 'We carried on our arguments on the street, in the corner stores, and in each other's homes. If no minds were changed, we took great pleasure in our endless debates and our shared love of the sport'. Even her first confession is received by 'a baseball loving priest', who commends her to 'say a special prayer for the Dodgers' (1997: 64).

Doris's childhood has its own Dodgers and Doris highlight: a film compilation of her meeting Dodger star players. After Roy Campanella addresses a church meeting, Doris (1997: 96) meets the Dodger catcher, noting that 'The warmth of that broad smile was all I needed to know that this was a night I would never forget.' Gil Hodges eloquently accepts her St Christopher medal as a gift, and her (1997: 202) autograph encounter with Jackie Robinson gives her 'an unexpected moment I would treasure for the rest of my life'.

The Dodgers shine so brightly that her childhood glows. Television, she (1997: 120) observes, 'was only another wonder in a world of constantly unfolding wonders, like the stories my mother told me, the first book I read, or my first trip to Ebbets Field'. Through her mother, Goodwin came to worship the world of books. Every night her mother comes to read to her. She loved listening to her voice, so much softer and less piercing than her own. The block is an 'extended family':

Unlike more affluent modern suburbs, whose fenced homes are encircled by large ornamental lawns, the houses on my block were clustered so close to one another that they function almost as a single home. We felt free to dash in to any house for a snack from the mother-in-residence, race through the side door in search of playmates. (1997: 57)

The family vacationed at Jones Beach, 'which remains the finest beach I have ever seen. . . . A parade for children and grown ups alike'

(1997: 40). The nuclear family, with the idyllic setting of Brooklyn, constitutes the framework of an undisturbed paradise.

Goodwin portrays a state that is the essence of simplicity, but at the same time extraordinarily complex. The Eden of childhood gives way to a more mature realization of the fifties. Her narrative is a romantic tabulation within a realistic framework. Goodwin describes a time when her life seemed idyllic, but also remembered are fears of polio, air raid drills, the Rosenberg executions and McCarthy. If there were, as she (1997: 10) observes, such worries they 'hung over our childhood days like low-lying clouds'. The weather is hardly severe enough to disturb play in her field of dreams in Flatbush.

Elizabeth Spencer's *Landscapes of the heart* (1996) is a loving evocation of another beloved lost world. The Carrollton Mississippi into which she is born is a comfortable, well-to-do island of relative prosperity set on green hills above the Mississippi Delta. Spencer's childhood seems to have been an enchanted Eden of watermelon cuttings, swimming holes, the lengthening shadows of pecan trees, and long horseback rides along sleepy, dusty roads with magnolia-scented air. Spencer evokes affectionate reminiscences of a past way of life:

The cook would have left dozens of biscuits in long pans ready for the oven, and there would be ham or a mountain of cold fried chicken, with potato salad, sliced tomatoes and cucumbers, a wealth of peach preserves and blackberry jam, and tremendous appetites, much laughing and joking and good feelings, everybody cleaned up, the boys' hair slicked down with water. This was as good as it got.

(1996: 54)

Spencer's memories have more in common with the country life of the mythic Lake Wobegon, as described by Garrison Keillor, than with the America of that time described by Theodore Dreiser or Sinclair Lewis.

The two sides of her family, the Spencers and the McCains were of the genteel merchant class. 'In my growing up time', Spencer (1996: 8) writes, 'I thought of our two families, my mother's (the McCains) and my father's (the Spencers) as part of one, which was mine, and believed we were happy. I think that back then we mostly were.' Her world is populated by loving kin. Grandfather Gan was 'the loving companion of days that would never be repeated'. Uncle Sidney fixed 'affectionate attentions' on his niece and was 'ready to praise whatever good he could observe'.

Even the racial system looks benign in retrospect. The South's code of apartheid was 'an ugly system', she (1996: 32) comments. 'But in that childhood time of enchantment and love, it never seemed to be

anything but part of the eternal. Might as well question why the live oaks were there, or the flowers in Aunt Ester's garden, or the stars in the sky.' 'As best I can recall', she writes about the relations of blacks to a beloved uncle, 'they were exceptionally good-humored around him in a way that seemed to make their dependency a reassurance to them rather than a burden. I can't to this day believe I would not have noticed any deep-seated animosity.' Later, the Eden of childhood gives way to a more mature realization of what the polite South was really about, but the nostalgic images remain: 'Enlightened as to its ills, as one would have to come to be, I could never deny that I loved it, or cease to look back on it with the greatest affection. I still claim joy as a good portion of its quality, and I love it still' (1996: 33).

As Coe notes, these reveries of a lost paradise are also realizations that modernity and progress have annihilated the pleasure and possibilities of the past. 'This is more than nostalgia', he (1984: 64) writes, 'it is nostalgia shot through with bitterness, resentment, and disgust. Not merely – once upon a time – did the grass seem taller, the flowers and butterflies brighter, the birds noisier; it is a fact that there was once more grass and less concrete, that wildflowers and the butterflies had not yet been reduced to rarity by weedkillers and insecticides.' In these memoirs, the outback is still pristine, major league baseball unsullied by free agency and corporate ownership, and the South beautiful and race relations harmonious. Basically, the message is the same in these memoirs. Something good that once existed has been destroyed.

What emerges from the memoirs considered here are the stories of childhoods that are the incarnation of simplicity and innocence. These narratives describe happy, untroubled childhoods. The representation of an idyllic domestic world as the natural habitat of the child presents the family as a perfect social unit. The child in paradise experiences a pure bliss that is not allowed to grown ups. One reason for this heightened sense of happiness is that the child has an undeveloped sense of time. These children who live in an earthly paradise are oblivious to time. These childhoods, which never know the miseries described by McCourt and Karr, are privileged because they represent the hope of adults who see in the child the possibility for the fulfilment of their own dreams.

NARRATIVES OF CHILDHOOD ON RACIAL AND GENDER BORDERS

The new circumstances of childhoods lived in multicultural societies gives rise to a new type of childhood memoir. Aronowitz and Giroux (1991: 118–19) use the concept 'border pedagogy', which sees

cultural differences as enhancing public life and encouraging readers ‘to engage the multiple references that constitute different cultural codes, experiences, and languages including their own.’ There is a subgenre of memoir by biracial authors and gays about living on the borders of a race-obsessed and gender-obsessed society that allows readers to enter such a world of multiple references. A number of recent memoirs describe a childhood lived in a purgatory of sorts, a borderland – a social landscape in which children grow up on racial and gender borders, experiencing childhood in and between two social worlds. In these memoirs, identity is not established but in flux.

In *The color of water* (1996), James McBride’s moving narrative of his white mother’s childhood as the daughter of a cruel itinerant Orthodox rabbi, and her efforts to put her dozen children through college, McBride recounts the multiple confusions of his own childhood with a white mother and 12 mixed race children in a black housing project surrounded by black people. Since conflict about racial identity was part of their lives ‘written into our very faces, hands and arms’, McBride (1996: 94) writes: ‘The question of race was like the power of the moon in my house. It’s what made the river flow, the ocean swell, and the tide rise, but it was a silent power, intractable, indomitable, indisputable, and thus completely ignorable.’ But the question of race will not go away. ‘Is God black or white?’, he asked his mother in frustration. In the answer (1996: 39) that gives the book its title, she said: ‘God’s not black. He’s not white . . . God is the color of water. Water doesn’t have a color.’

McBride’s early childhood, in addition to containing all the ordinary joys and pangs and struggles of life in large family, was touched by the confusions of living on the racial border – a black child with a white mother. At school, on the subway and at camp, his mother was often ‘the only white face in a sea of black faces.’ His mother’s whiteness often embarrassed and sometime alarmed him, for he perceived her to be in imminent danger from blacks and from whites who disliked her for being a white person in a black world.

I could see it in the faces of the white people who stared at me and Mommy and my siblings when we rode the subway, sometimes laughing at us, pointing, muttering things like, ‘Look at her with those little niggers’ . . . I remember two black women pointing at us, saying, ‘Look at that white bitch,’ and a white man screaming at Mommy somewhere in Manhattan, calling her a ‘nigger lover.’

(1996: 23)

Such incidents confirmed his childhood fears ‘that Mommy was always in danger.’ McBride describes other childhood moments of

living on a racial border, living between two worlds: shopping with her black children and bargaining heatedly in Hasidic stores, his mother would suddenly shout in Yiddish, 'I know what is happening here', when the merchants lapsed into Yiddish.

As a young adult, McBride was torn between being a musician and a journalist, which he saw as a conflict between his blackness and his whiteness. That uncertainty set him tracing his Baptist minister father's heritage and learning about his mother's Jewish heritage. Although his mother is rejected by her Jewish family (they sit shiva, the Jewish ritual mourning for the dead, for his mother when she takes up with a black man) and she rejects them, she kept the Jewish passion for education and took advantage of the window of opportunity the education authorities granted to parents to have their children attend different school districts if they wanted. Consequently, his (1996: 68) mother 'invariably chose predominantly Jewish public schools.' His experiences left him with a unique sensibility of life on a racial border. McBride describes himself as living on a border, a black man with a Jewish soul:

Now as a grown man, I feel privileged to have come from two worlds. My view of the world is not merely that of a black man but that of a black man with something of a Jewish soul. I don't consider myself Jewish, but when I look at Holocaust photographs of Jewish women whose children have been wrenched from them by Nazi soldiers, the women look like my mother and I think to myself, There but for the grace of God goes my own mother – and by extension myself. When I see two little Jewish old ladies giggling over coffee at a Manhattan diner, it makes me smile because I hear my own mother's laughter beneath theirs.

(1996: 79)

McBride explores his early confusion about race, but never mentions feeling deprived or unhappy. He finds love and respect for both black and white worlds in his mixed race experience.

In *Life on the color line* (1995), subtitled 'the true story of a white boy who discovered he was black', Gregory Howard Williams tells his painful story of being brought up in Virginia believing that he was white and then moving to Indiana where he becomes 'a colored boy.' When his parents' marriage failed, Williams discovers that his father, who had been passing for Italian, is black. As the family split up, Gregory and his younger brother Mike return to Muncie, to live not with the white side of the family, which lived in a sparkling new two-storey home that they had visited previously, but with the black

side of the family, which had no indoor plumbing and used a slop jar on the porch.

Williams literally lives on the border between the white and black world. ‘This is the projects’, their father explained (1995: 38). ‘Colored families live on this side of Madison, and crackers on the other. Stay outta there. If the crackers learn you’re colored, they’ll beat the hell out of you. You gotta be careful here, too. Colored don’t like half breeds either.’ White relatives live only two miles away yet ‘not one of them had come for us.’ Yet on the playground, the black kids pick fights because he looks like a cracker. Williams is able to explore issues of race and identity living on what he calls ‘the color line.’ The memoir balances the voice of the displaced boy with the calm voice of an adult which allows movement past the personal to the abstract. ‘Balancing on Muncie’s racial tightrope’, Williams describes his experiences in school, sports and dating. ‘Muncie would not permit me to date white girls’, he (1995: 166) notes, ‘and apparently couldn’t tolerate seeing me with black girls either.’ When Williams associates with white girls, he is admonished by coaches, counsellors and teachers. When he is with black girls on the street and at school, he is called ‘a nigger lover.’ Williams describes how, growing up as a mixed race child, he was often constrained by the ‘color line.’

In the aptly titled *Black, white and Jewish: the autobiography of a shifting self* (2001), Rebecca Walker describes a childhood in a cultural trifecta. Walker examines the events and the fragments of her childhood in the context of race and religion. The daughter of the novelist Alice Walker and the lawyer Mel Leventhal, Walker describes herself as a ‘Movement Child’ – the offspring of a liberal white Jew who believed that equality and freedom could be achieved through law and an African American mother who believed that equality and freedom could be cultivated through the magic ability of words to redefine reality. Walker describes (2001: 12–13) her birth in Jackson Mississippi as: ‘A mulatta baby swaddled and held in loving arms, two brown, two white, in the middle of the segregated South. . . . That makes me the tragic mulatta caught between both worlds like the proverbial deer in the headlights.’ However, as she grew up, she notes, she never felt ‘contained’, either by walls, parents, or cultures. She lived in and moved back and forth between black, white and Jewish communities.

After her parents divorced, she was raised by her parents in two-year shifts shuttling between coasts, her mother’s San Francisco and her father’s upper-middle-class New York suburb. Ferrying between several worlds, she (2001: 117) grapples with where she fits

in: 'Now as I move from place to place, from Jewish to black, from D.C. to San Francisco, from status quo middle class to radical artist bohemia, it is less like jumping from station to station on the radio dial and more like moving from planet to planet between universes that never overlap.'

As an inquisitive child, a highly sensitive teen and a young woman, she is confronted with the colour assumptions of friends, teachers and family. She describes how she is too white for blacks, and too black for whites. In elementary school, Bryan Katon tells her that he does not like black girls. She (2001: 93) takes ballet classes from a woman "who tells me I will never be a great ballerina because black women's bodies aren't suited for ballet". There have never been any famous black ballerinas. Visiting her mother's relatives in Atlanta an uncle (2001: 85) uses the word 'cracker' 'again and again to describe me or one of my mannerisms.'

In junior high school, black girls threaten to beat her up for 'acting like a white girl.' In Larchmont, she attends a school where the black kids are 'scruffy, unkempt and ashy', not mixing with 'a sea of rich Jewish Kids.' During the year she attended high school in Larchmont, not one black student says a word to her. At Fire Lake, a gauche Jewish camp where the campers obsessively listen to 'Fiddler on the roof', she is told she is too 'intimidating.' 'It doesn't occur to me', she notes, 'that intimidating might be another word for black' (2001: 180). Later, after she is voted to be the captain of a singing programme by the girls, the counsellors take away the honour because she is 'too bossy, too tough.' In high school, a boyfriend criticizes her for being 'too white.'

Ultimately, Walker makes a choice between her shifting identities, choosing to 'be on the right side of issues involving social justice.' 'In the twelfth grade', she (2001: 312) writes, 'I decide to move Leventhal to the more obscure middle position in my name and add Walker to the end, privileging my blackness and downplaying what I think of as my whiteness.' In *American chica: two worlds, one childhood* (2001: 301), Marie Arana describes a childhood in which she is also shuttled between two deeply separate cultures for years. However, she comes to understand that she is a hybrid American – 'a New World fusion, an American Chica.' Arana focuses on the way culture not only divides and defines, but enriches.

Arana's memoir of growing up in Peru and America centres on her parents' tumultuous marriage. She uses the metaphor of her parents' marriage to join North and South – chica and gringa. Her father, 'a South American man', is an engineer. Her mother, 'a North American woman', is a musician: 'They were so different from each

other, so obverse in every way.’ Yet their marriage survives 40 years, family difficulties, the politics of two continents and long separations. Their marriage overcomes bicultural tensions.

In her father’s Peruvian family, Arana was taught to be a proper lady, yet in her mother’s family she learned to shoot a gun and break a horse. Her childhood is filled with the experience of living on cultural borders. In Peru, she learns about ‘Peruvian racism’ when she is ostracized in a classroom for being too white: ‘I saw that Peru has its sediments too, and that its lines are drawn in color’ (2001: 117). In the United States, she is seen as too black. When she visits her mother’s family in Wyoming, an old man suggests that she and her brother are on the wrong side of town: ‘Suppose-ta be across those tracks over there on the niggah side, ain’tcha, now?’ (2001: 192).

As a child, Arana is obsessed with the features of her physical composition. She contemplates the meaning of skin colour in Peru and the United States. But after immigrating to the United States, she comes to understand, accept and appreciate that she is a hybrid. ‘I’m not any one thing’, she (2001: 301) writes, ‘The reality is I am a mongrel. I live on bridges; I’ve earned my place on them, stand comfortably when I’m on one, content with betwixt and between.’ She counts both cultures as her own, and yet is caught between the two, celebrating being ‘a New World fusion. An American chica.’

Another type of border narrative in childhood memoirs involves gender. How do men whose erotic focus is other men shape the narrative of their childhood? How do women whose erotic interest is other women shape the narratives of their childhood?

In *Becoming a man* (1992), Paul Monette describes the otherness of the conflicted life of a closeted gay childhood. Monette (1992: 228) instructs readers about his anguish as a gay boy who tried to be straight – to ‘pass’, and about ‘the process of “de-selfing” my own world for the craziness that’s turned my life into a minefield, this wanting to be somebody else instead of me.’ Monette (1992: 57) confesses on the first page of his book that he grew up without a story of (gay) manhood that he could live by: ‘I was the only man I knew who had no story at all. I’d long since accepted the fact that nothing had ever happened to me and nothing ever would.’ Monette describes how he grew up in a ‘twilight world’, a ‘hidden world’, ‘turning invisible’, having to come ‘up with the right mask’ in order to be able to navigate through family and school. He describes hiding being gay in the role of the clown and the sophisticate. He also describes the safety zone of the courtiers’ role: ‘I came so close to being a eunuch escort full time.’

Monette overtly uses literary language – images and analogies of being in the closet, of feeling oppression and suffocation, imagery of anguish about the conflict between his private and the public self. Monette (1992: 25) uses aggressive rhetoric to describe the closet. He describes how at nine and a half he had a physical relation with a male friend but is able to deny its meaning: ‘That as long as I kept them apart, love would be sexless and sex loveless, endlessly repeating its cycle of self-denial and self-abuse. The process by which we become our own jailers, swallowing the key.’ He lives a life of emotional solitude. Thus, by inexorable degrees does the love that dares not speak its name build walls, until a house is nothing but closets. This he contends leads to his sexually arrested development: ‘that’s where my sexuality stayed for the next twelve years, locked in the locker room of my brain’. He led a life of emotional isolation, ‘consoling myself by means of connoisseurship for the bitter solitude of my life’ (1992: 86).

In *Zami, a new spelling of my name* (1982), the poet Audre Lorde tells the story of an African-American lesbian life. Lorde says in the prologue to *Zami* that as a child she felt on the border between man and woman, that she had always wanted to be man and woman: ‘to incorporate the strongest and richest parts of my mother and father within to share valleys and mountains upon my body the way the earth does in hills and peaks.’ In Greenwich Village she again stakes out a life on the border: ‘Downtown in the gay bars I was a closet student and an invisible black. Uptown at Hunter I was a closet dyke and general intruder.’

Clearly, the sense of aloneness and separation felt by these authors is related to their search for individual identity. In these memoirs, the authors convey their consciousness of being alien, of being different, of being somehow wrong when they were children. Their narratives are self-examinations of growing up between two worlds, with attempts to retrace the steps that led from one world to another. Theirs is the search to explain the forging of an identity, for an understanding of the present self in relation to the experience of having grown up betwixt and between and having crossed the borders of two social worlds.

CONCLUSION

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, there has been an outpouring of autobiographical writing by women and men focused on the urgent questions of identity and the significance and relevance of their childhoods. This essay has attempted to examine some

significant types of childhood that have been described in contemporary memoirs. If we look at this crop of memoirs as a group, some existential archetype attaches to each of them. The vision of childhood as a period of unmitigated suffering and abuse is most common. The depiction of the child as the victim of intrafamily conflicts and whose home life is transformed into a domestic hell by the cruelty of parents is a recurrent one. There are those memoirs that attempt to capture something of a paradise that has been lost, the once idyllic past where the child was happy and encapsulated in a protective cocoon, living in a loving and nurturing environment. The third existential archetype is of the child who does not fit in, a childhood without either disconnection or connection, but a search for connection. The narratives of biracial and gay childhoods describe a childhood between two worlds – white and black, Chica and American, gay and straight – where identity is not established, but in flux.

These childhood realms are resuscitated through memory. Constantly at work within the dynamics of these narratives depicting the state of childhood, there is a dialectical relationship between the present of adulthood and the past of childhood. The construction of these childhood worlds is not just an end in itself, but a pretext in service of a broader purpose. Those who recollect childhoods of misery use it as a framework for their own concerns with inadequate nurturing, the victimization of children and family breakup. Idyllic recreations may serve as an outlet for the nostalgia of the adult yearning after a long-lost paradise that may never have existed. Still another purpose that is served by the memoir is that of providing a convenient allegorical framework for the expression of certain political and philosophical viewpoints. The memoirs by biracial authors often use their childhood experience to make some statement on race and culture, as they see their lives testifying to the issue of race in America.

The story of childhood is one of the central themes in the current crop of memoirs. Among the many themes that writers have taken up in the recent memoir boom is the recollection of the experience of their childhoods. Each memoir is unique and each story is meant to stand alone. However, when memoirists speak of their childhoods, they do so through literary forms that seem to capture the universal archetypal forms of hell, heaven and a purgatory, a transitional stage of an ambiguous and conflicted social existence.

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