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Abstract My PhD thesis, *Writing Through* (2022), was envisaged as a critical and creative inquiry into the process of writing through grief. My intention was to write through rather than simply about the loss of my father in 2015 and to then explore the structure of this writing, yielding insights for other practitioners. The four-year process of research resulted in the production of a creative component over three parts – an original television screenplay, a work of nonfiction and a bridging piece of prose in various ways drawing on a personal experience of grief – alongside a contextual component: ‘The Structure of Writing Through.’ This component is abridged and its opening part, on ‘Handling Grief as a Creative Methodology’, introduced and established here.

Keywords: *autobiography, autoethnography, autofiction, counselling, creative, critical, death, fiction, grief, loss, memoir, nonfiction, practice, process, prose, script, structure, television, therapy, writing*

Objective

I wanted to see if I could write through grief (rather than about or even around it) to produce something – a script or a piece of prose – to take out into the world as a practitioner. This was about creatively handling loss through practice rather than therapy.

The point was not to cure myself but *to produce a creative outcome*. Many of the insights arose from this process of creative inquiry, rather than through a theoretical review of literature. I nevertheless recognised during the process a structure, which I could see in my own work as well as the work of others.

My overarching objective was therefore to investigate this proposed *structure of writing through grief* via reflection on my own practice as a writer – i.e., by examining the *formation of writing through grief* as a process and exploring *the resulting form of this writing* as a body of text on the page.

The discovery was made possible because of the journey, as it were, a process of writing through fiction and nonfiction and the joining of dots – in other words, the integration of creative elements and analysis of what was there on the page. I mean *on the page* literally, of course, the structure of writing through manifesting in sentences and paragraphs and pages and pages and pages.

This is recognisable in the text but does not call for a one-size-fits-all approach to writing through. It is not a checklist of things to find and tick off. It is not rigid. It is a very delicate pattern to do with writing as a structured and lived process and indeed writing as a way of experiencing *life through writing*. In a word, writing through is a process of integration and it has a structure.

Handling Grief as a Creative Methodology

Writing Through used a practical research methodology and was grounded in my work as a practitioner.

My research process started with a script. DESCENT (formerly OUR FATHER) was envisaged as a television drama about family and forgiveness. The story, set in the north-west of England, would ultimately follow Edward, an NHS forensic psychiatrist at a high-security hospital, and Adam, his patient – with the drama centring on Edward, his responsibilities both as an NHS doctor and a man finally stepping out of his father's shadow.

I began working on the script a few months after my father died in May 2015. I wanted to see if I could write *through* rather than around or even about my grief. I also wanted to continue a conversation cut short – a conversation that I could, somewhat obviously, never have again. I found myself writing about a relationship between two men as well as the relationship between these men and their fathers – the doctor-patient dynamic both a fictional meeting of minds and a once (or perhaps twice) removed searching for answers to seemingly unsolvable real-life questions in dramatic form. The result, effectively, was me talking to myself about my dad, missing my dad and grieving for the loss of my dad.

The two main characters, Edward and Adam, would nevertheless come to mirror my own descent. I had become a new father not long after losing my own and, in a case of life mirroring art, I struggled spectacularly to cope with my new responsibilities. This resulted in my arrest for drink-driving at the end of 2015 and then led, beyond all that, to the writing of *Your Father's Secrets* – a parallel work of nonfiction *memoirising* this period in my life.

If the script was about making sense of my grief through fiction then the 'memoir' was designed to make sense of the making sense. The intention was to

experience and understand my life by *writing* – that is, *supra*, writing as a structured and lived process and indeed writing as a way of experiencing *life through writing*. I went from being twice removed through fiction to (perhaps) once removed through nonfiction. I was my own subject. I was interrogating this fact using the tools of my discipline. I was getting closer to my grief and writing through it. The bridging piece at the very top of my thesis, while completed last of all, joined up the dots. The three pieces were therefore integrated and connected through *practice* – they were also three pieces forming one *creative* whole.

My methodology was grounded in my work as a practitioner. I nevertheless had a duty of self-care to consider when deciding what to share and what to protect. I worked with the Centre for Death & Society in Bath for guidance on counselling and meeting other researchers in my field. I interviewed working forensic professionals for DESCENT, a work of fiction – but for *Your Father's Secrets* I had to be careful to show respect for other people and their part in 'my' story.

This was supported by the creative application of the Dual Process Model (1999) – a model that separates the experience of dealing with grief into the 'loss-orientated' and the 'restoration-orientated' (the former focusing on the loss itself and the latter focusing on the life after loss), with everyday living then involving a degree of 'oscillation' between the two. Loss-orientated activities centre on the avoidance and even denial of change while restoration-orientated activities centre on attending to this change and embracing new things. In my research I went one step further, coalescing these loss-orientated and restoration-orientated activities by merging the writing life with the everyday life – *without oscillation between the two*. I lived my grief and wrote through my grief and there was, in my case, neither oscillation nor separation. I was not using the model as a form of therapy but, rather, as a way of thinking about how I engaged with grief through

my process of writing.

This essentially personal nature of grief directed my wider research, involving a close reading of a range of texts across various genres and platforms as well as existing scholarship on the grieving process. My writing process included the reading itself and keeping a journal with light notes. Much of the latter comprised observations, snippets of dialogue and quotes either heard or remembered. These rough thoughts were expanded on and transferred, in my case, to a laptop screen – but I maintained the diary, writing about my emotions and how these emotions might eventually be represented in another form.

Reading supported my writing. I looked at other examples of writing in this specific area, considering contemporary nonfiction and autobiographical fiction – and this writing helped me to reflect on my own work and how grief rendered itself visceral on the page. I looked at self-help books. I looked at grief memoirs, all of which dealt with first-hand and felt loss. By exploring how this experience impacted on the creative process – in turn reflecting on *my* grief and its influence on *my* writing – I pursued a clear line of investigation into grief as delineated in writing through and recognised how grief could shape creativity in particular ways. It became possible to decipher the poetics of writing through and reveal where grief showed up in the language and mood of a text. In this way, I was able to identify a structure to this writing through.

Writing Through is more than just the title of my thesis – it is the key methodology that I used to research, investigate and create this body of work.

In plain language, I write in order to reflect on writing. Specifically, within my thesis, I use writing to creatively investigate and explore the structure of grief on the page.

Other writers (and scholars) have approached writing (and grief) in a similar way. Natalie Goldberg, in *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*

(1986), asks writers to focus only on 'the essential, awake speech of their minds'. In the context of grief, Goldberg's words evoke the Freudian concept of working through (with *mourning*, rather than writing, providing necessary separation and release from *melancholia*). The result here, or the answer to Goldberg's question of methodology – writing with no other goal than to discover something about the process of writing itself – leads inevitably to further questions. These questions concern form as well as structure – i.e., what this writing actually looks like. 'We may write three novels before we write a good one,' Goldberg warns. 'So form is important, we should learn form, but we should also remember to fill form with life. This takes practice.'

Goldberg is not an academic but her approach to writing, much like mine, has a lot in common with the scholarly tradition of 'autoethnography' (Matthews, 2019). The use of writing as a methodology is most prominent in this tradition. Practice (or structure) here renders the imperfect (or life) something writers can work with – give form – and leave out there on the page. To give the reader an insight into how I used this thinking and writing as a research methodology, I will discuss and explore the similarities between the scholarly use of autoethnography and more 'authorly' practices of autobiography and autofiction. I will use a combination but prefer *author* over *scholar* to refer to creative thinkers who, although not academics in the traditional sense, have nevertheless produced new knowledge about the processes, experiences and structures of writing on the page. Scholars and authors alike, I propose, can use writing not only to communicate a subject but also to work and write *through* it creatively.

The following methodological exposition entails a review of how autoethnographers, nonfiction writers and literary authors have approached the practice of writing through grief in its initial phases, often with no audience but themselves in mind. I will consider the process or methodology of writing

through and look at what it means to directly confront grief within the felt experience of writing, drawing on and analysing how scholars / authors have talked about the ways in which their grief first appears in the text and citing the work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler (2014), alongside writing by (among others) Joan Didion, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Thomas Harding, Richard Beard, Yiyun Li, Martin Amis, Julian Barnes and Annie Ernaux. I will also compare the process of scholars / authors with my own methodology, using the theory of 'Handling Grief' as a scaffold to explain how the raw and unprocessed appearance of grief first appeared on the page in my own work.

In her profoundly moving paper, 'Writing Through Grief: Using Autoethnography to Help Process Grief After the Death of a Loved One' (2019), Angela Matthews harnesses autoethnography – i.e., an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis *et al.*, 2010) or, as Matthews defines it, ethnography with the self at its centre.

She does this via a 'grief journal' to process the grief she endures over the loss of her son, arguing persuasively that a combination of the so-called 'personal' and the so-called 'academic' can reveal an understanding of 'complex, painful issues' and indeed that such an approach can work as a strategy for others. The paper is itself an outgrowth of Matthews' Dissertation (2017), exploring writing through grief as a doctoral student and offering this as a guide to other doctoral students during the completion of their studies.

This work is very much in step with my inquiry here, although there are three major differences.

The first difference is my avoidance of approaching writing as 'therapy'. This is a personal rather than theoretical rejection, although I explore some of the differences between grief writing as

therapy and writing through grief as a creative process elsewhere in my thesis. The second difference is my absolute and total focus on writing as a practitioner (rather than, say, a student), hence the emphasis on *writing* rather than what follows – my preoccupation, remember, was with the creative handling of a loss and ultimately producing a creative outcome. The third difference is the departure I make by examining the results of this process on the page, offering a structural analysis of my work and the work of others and yielding insights for other scholars / authors.

To understand my methodology in the context of handling grief is to begin to recognise a structure to the process of writing through and even to see the early stages of this structure on the page. I will draw below on different examples of how this might work in practice, both from my own writing and the writing of others.

Matthews herself writes about feeling 'flat and dead' immediately after the death of her son and describes the 'sparseness' of her early journal entries (Matthews, 5). Echoing the work of Goldberg, the act of writing, for Matthews, then gradually becomes about discipline and release. This study of the self follows stages, in Matthews' case the model belonging to Worden (2009). Greenblatt's stages follow denial, depression and acceptance (1978) while the five stages of loss – a model belonging to Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2014) – presents a five-act structure. 'Handling Grief' might represent a parallel stage for creative thinkers, a stage that is at once integral and able to stand apart.

Whatever the model, though, it is tempting to think of this initial phase of writing through grief as *the beginning*. There is still a need here for refinement as well as caution. Kübler-Ross and Kessler warn:

The five stages – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance – are a part of the framework that makes up our learning to live

with the one we lost. They are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling. But they are not stops on some linear timeline in grief. Not everyone goes through all of them or goes in a prescribed order (p. 7).

Similarly, during the process of producing my thesis, I found that although there was a structure to writing through grief – a structure with 'stages' – this process was not linear. There is order to the chaos but no order to either writing or grieving. Kessler (2019) himself adds 'meaning', a sixth stage – writing three years after the death of his own son – and it is this yearning that relates directly to writing through. Finding meaning, like writing, requires effort, as Julia Samuel (2017) writes, for 'grief is a process that has to be worked through'.

This process can be a painful one. 'My brother Chuks called to tell me,' Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2021) writes, 'and I came undone.' The immediacy of the writing here, coming as it does in the very first entry, offers a way in. Subsequent sections are short – the book, originally an essay in *The New Yorker* (2020), maintains this rhythm throughout – but these opening moments deal with the impact of loss, the loss itself and felt experience of that loss.

The news of Adichie's father's death comes via Zoom, a physical distance joining the ontological. 'I stare and stare at my father,' Adichie writes. 'My breathing is difficult. Is this what shock means, that the air turns to glue?' There is denial to go with the sense of shock. 'He *was* not,' Adichie corrects, denial turning into anger. 'He *is*.' This denial is at times to the point of *unseeing*. 'A refuge, this denial, this refusal to look,' Adichie writes. In the immediacy of a loss there is still a choice to make – to face things or turn away – to *orientate*, one way or another. 'Grief is forcing new skins on me,' Adichie explains, 'scraping scales from my eyes.' There is also a feeling of futility – of hopelessness. 'Only now do I learn,' Adichie continues, 'while feeling for its porous

edges, that there is no way through.' There is a questioning, too. 'How is it that the world keeps going, breathing in and out unchanged,' Adichie writes, 'while in my soul there is a permanent scattering?' The immediacy here is, among so many things, *physical*. 'My four-year-old daughter says I scared her,' Adichie admits – then continues:

She gets down on her knees to demonstrate, her small clenched fist rising and falling, and her mimicry makes me see myself as I was, utterly unravelling, screaming and pounding the floor. The news is like a vicious uprooting. I am yanked away from the world I have known since childhood. And I am resistant (p. 3) ...

The loss of a loved one – whether parent or partner – brings with it a physicality evident on the page. 'No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear,' writes C. S. Lewis (1961) after the death of his wife, 'H'. 'At other times it feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed.' Again, for Lewis, there is denial. 'I find it hard to take in what anyone says,' Lewis writes. 'Or perhaps, hard to want to take in.' Denial then hardens into something like resolve. 'There are moments,' Lewis continues, switching gears, 'most unexpectedly, when something inside me tries to assure me that I don't really mind so much, not so very much, after all.' A dose of realism swiftly follows. 'Then comes a sudden jab of red-hot memory,' Lewis adds, 'and all this "common sense" vanishes like an ant in the mouth of a furnace.' There is that questioning again, for Lewis, of the spiritual sort. 'Thank God the memory of her is still too strong (will it always be too strong?) to let me get away with it,' he writes – but the immediacy of it all, even for the devout, brings with it recrimination. 'Meanwhile,' he asks, 'where is God?'

A Grief Observed, like Adichie's a relatively short work, forms four separate sections, while Calvin Trillin's *About Alice* (2006), which is about the loss of a spouse and, at its heart, about love, unfolds over eight parts. Trillin tells the story of Alice from the beginning. He dedicates and devotes but

navigates the immediacy of her death through laughter and lightness – a particular condolence letter opening the story.

For Joan Didion (2005), writing after the sudden death of her husband, a longer work comes after a protracted pause, the only words possible, at first, 'Life changes in the instant. The ordinary instant.' These come 'a day or two or three after the fact', in January 2004, following Didion's husband's death in late December 2003. There is nothing more for a number of months until it is finally time for Didion to tell the story. 'In outline,' she begins again, not quite able to find the right words. 'This is a case in which I need more than words to find the meaning,' she writes, yearning for something but finding this elusive. Writing on the page, for Didion – and like grief – 'comes in waves'.

To recognise a structure to the process or methodology of writing through is to see the stages there on the page – but understanding the structure of any story is about listening to what the story is telling the writer it wants to do (Saunders, 2017).

Returning to the stages, in the case of handling grief it is only *the beginning* insofar as it initiates or sets up everything that happens straight after (inclusive of the ultimate inciting incident – i.e., death). This unstructured process of handling grief often happens without a reader in mind and only through the immediacy of the first act. There is nevertheless the process of writing through a gradual build-up to *the next thing*, an impact, or a second act. The writer moves towards a moment when they are writing *for* someone, or for something – i.e., towards a time when their writing might make an impact somewhere else.

In some instances this is impact of a brutal, unthinkable kind. For Thomas Harding, writing in *Kadian Journal* (2014), the only way to tell the story of his son's death is by beginning at the beginning and describing the terrible accident in the present tense – everything

immediate and *happening*. Kadian is riding up front, his father behind. 'He's suddenly way ahead of me,' Harding writes. 'A hundred feet perhaps. He must have gathered speed. And then there's a flash of a white van, moving fast from left to right, at the bottom of the slope. It shouldn't be there. And it hits Kadian. Driving him away from view, away from me.' Harding establishes time and place and builds a dreadful tension, over the space of a few pages, until he sees the worst. 'This is real,' he continues. 'This is happening. I can't believe it.' Harding's sister arrives at the scene. "'He's dead,'" I say to her. "'He's dead.'" Harding, on the page, is seemingly back in an endless present and uses the tense to bring the reader with him.

Richard Beard, in *The Day That Went Missing: A Family's Story* (2017), uses this same tense to great effect. 'For nearly 40 years I haven't said his name,' he writes, 'but in writing I immediately slip into the present tense, as if he's here, he's back. Writing can bring him to life.' Beard describes the day and the hour and the moment of loss and tells the story from there. Doubt creeps in. 'The memory is unsatisfactory,' Beard concedes. That self-assurance and initial control over tense soon slips, the writing faltering. 'My younger brother's name is Nicholas Beard,' he writes. 'He was nine years old, and I was with him in the water when he drowned.' Beard manages to steady himself in the *now* rather than the *then*. 'Events that happened before and after are a blank to me.' The story becomes about the telling, moving beyond denial – 'without any fictional evasions' – towards something like honesty. 'Liars prosper, no question about it,' Stephen King (2000) confirms, 'but only in the grand sweep of things, never down in the jungles of actual composition, where you must take your objective one bloody word at a time. If you begin to lie about what you know and feel while you're down there, everything falls down.'

Fiction, too, tackles the impact of an encounter with grief – as well as its immediacy. *Bad News* (1992), the second

of Edward St Aubyn's Patrick Melrose novels, delivers on the promise of its title on the opening page. Patrick's father, the reader and Patrick soon learn, is dead. The rest of the story, taking place over the proverbial long weekend, involves the protagonist attempting to outrun his past and painful memories of an abusive parent – neither one of which is *gone*. Life and death coexist in this space. 'For the heart, life is simple: it beats for as long as it can,' goes the first line of Karl Ove Knausgaard's *A Death in the Family* (2009), the first in his autobiographical 'My Struggle' series.

In Carys Bray's novel, *A Song for Issy Bradley* (2014), the eponymous heroine dies and the family, stricken, must learn to deal with what comes after a life (and a loss). 'There is no discernible moment of death; she stops imperceptibly, like the clock in the Parents' Lounge,' Bray writes, evoking *the moment* and pre-empting the next. Meanwhile, in *Where Reasons End* (2019) – 'a novel', according to its title page – Yiyun Li imagines a conversation between a writer and her son, Nikolai, the conversation here taking place in the shadow of Nikolai's suicide. 'One of us made this happen,' Li writes, assuming the narrative 'I'. Nikolai replies, 'I blame you.' Li began writing the book only months after her 16-year-old son's suicide (Sehgal, 2019).

Where Bray's search for honesty adopts a more familiar fictional form and Li's book cleverly subverts convention, Beard's is a journalistic quest for the truth or, again, something like it. All three writers deal with the immediacy of writing on the page, Bray by exploring the moment and its aftermath, Beard by reliving and Li by circling it – in the latter case not evasion but avoidance and, for the author, a necessary and understandable denial.

Inside Story (2020), by the late Martin Amis, also presents on the title page as 'a novel'. 'Fiction,' he writes, 'comes from silent anxiety.' The cover image of the UK edition is a photograph of Amis with his long-time friend, Christopher Hitchens – the conceit of the 'novel' inviting the reader in, like a house guest,

even suggesting something of an *entrepreneur* quality to the telling. The result is straight-talking autobiography and structurally 'freewheeling' at the same time (Harvey, 2020).

Amis missing his friend is, however, what he is really writing through. 'Life,' Amis writes, 'is artistically lifeless; and its only unifying theme is death.' Here, writing and grieving, Amis is beginning to find structure to the experiences of loss in a writerly form.

In *If the Spirit Moves You: Life and Love After Death* (2001) Justine Picardie writes parenthetically – the following lines within brackets:

When someone dies in a family, the survivors rearrange themselves in unexpected places; find different ways of talking to each other; negotiate the spiked mantraps of grief. This struggle to make the separate pieces of a broken family fit together again is, possibly, as bewildering as anything one might encounter in a séance room (pp. 102-103).

Picardie also writes in the present tense, like Harding and Beard, turning her attention to conjuring and communing and, like Didion, following a full year in her life after her sister's death – although the beginning of this story begins almost three years later. 'Good Friday in the year 2000,' she writes. 'Jesus is dead and so is my sister, and I'm running on a treadmill at the gym, watching MTV with no sound on.' Picardie nevertheless looks for structure by stages – 'numbness, denial, anger, grief, acceptance' – before that familiar doubt, again, creeps in – 'but it can't only be me who looks for short cuts, and ends up going the long way round?' There is no order – to writing or to grieving.

Cathy Rentzenbrink (2015) writes about the death of her brother, Matty. She begins the story not at the beginning but later, looking back, questioning her prayers immediately following her brother's accident – 'Please don't let my brother die' – and accepting, rather than Matty living for eight years in a coma, 'It

would have been so much better if Matty had died then.’ In the next chapter Rentzenbrink relives the day of the accident – again, like Harding – and tells the story from there. This becomes about regret (they work in the same bar – she gets a lift home and her brother stays). ‘This is the moment,’ she writes. ‘If I could go back in time and force him to come with me then everything would be different.’ The way in – the immediacy here – is also a question of memory. ‘I just wish I could tell her,’ she adds, ‘the girl with the henna-red hair in charity-shop clothes, to write down everything that happened. Write it down, I’d say. You won’t want to – you’ll think every detail will be burnt onto your brain forever. You don’t know this, but you’ll forget.’

Handling grief, like going through those stages, is not a linear process.

Jean Hannah Edelstein (2018) writes about the death of her father – and inheriting ‘the gene that would cause me cancer too’ – by dividing the story into three and rearranging the order: ‘Between’, ‘Before’ and ‘After’. The impact of loss, this time in the past tense, is nevertheless there in the first line. ‘I was in Brooklyn looking for love on OKCupid when my father died,’ she writes. There is a sense of time to go with place. ‘It was a cold February night in 2014,’ Edelstein continues. ‘It was almost two years after the night in late spring when my parents called me on Skype – I was at home in London, and they were at home in Baltimore – and Dad looked into the camera and said: I have lung cancer.’ There is, again, the physicality of things to go with the impact. ‘That night in February,’ she writes, ‘I had a rare feeling of contentment, or something like it.’ Then, a few pages later, there is the immediacy of it all. ‘His heart. It stopped. The cancer wore it out.’

Max Porter’s *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* (2016), like Edelstein’s work, is in three parts: ‘A Lick of Night’, ‘Defence of the Nest’ and ‘Permission to Leave’. Two young boys and a father are missing a mother, the usual well-meaning visitor taking the form of a

crow, remaining with the grieving family until *the thing* is done. This (re-)structuring is something of a trend. Julian Barnes, too, splits *Levels of Life* (2013) in three – ‘The Sin of Height’, ‘On the Level’ and ‘The Loss of Depth’ – taking in ballooning, photography, love and grief – and dedicates the book to his late wife.

‘The facts may be correct so far as they go,’ writes Norman Douglas in an open letter to D. H. Lawrence (quoted in Forster, 1927), ‘but there are too few of them; what the author says may be true, and yet by no means the truth. That is the novelist’s touch. It falsifies life.’ Barnes, in *Levels of Life*, certainly employs ‘the novelist’s touch’. ‘You put together two things that have not been put together before,’ he writes at the very beginning of part one. ‘And the world is changed.’ In part two, though, there is a subtle shift. ‘You put together two things that have not been put together before; and sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t.’ A few lines later, Barnes refining things further, he writes, ‘You put together two people who have not been put together before; and sometimes the world is changed, sometimes not.’ The dramatic arc continues to climb until, in part three, Barnes is able to at least write *about* rather than *around*. Only here, though, two thirds of the way into the book, is the author ready to confront the immediacy of his wife’s death.

You put together two people who have not been put together before. Sometimes it is like that first attempt to harness a hydrogen balloon to a fire balloon: do you prefer crash and burn, or burn and crash? But sometimes it works, and something new is made, and the world is changed. Then, at some point, sooner or later, for this reason or that, one of them is taken away. And what is taken away is greater than the sum of what was there. This may not be mathematically possible; but it is emotionally possible (p. 67).

Writing through becomes about, among other things, confusion. ‘Grief, like death, is banal and unique,’ Barnes writes, himself quoting Forster – ‘One death may explain itself, but it throws no

light upon another.’ Grief, for Barnes, is ‘unimaginable: not just its length and depth, but its tone and texture, its deceptions and false dawns, its recidivism. Also, its initial shock’ – this in ‘the moment’, that is, when it comes (just 37 days, he writes, ‘from diagnosis to death’). There is denial and anger – anger at the dead and anger at the living, anger at friends – especially for not reacting to the speaking of his wife’s name – or for using the euphemistic ‘pass’ – before Barnes begins to empathise with ‘the griefstruck’, taking his place among their number.

Writing through does landscape as well as any other writing – that is, emphasising exterior over interior, or setting the scene rather than focusing (only) on emotions.

‘It was a Sunday, in the early afternoon,’ writes Annie Ernaux in *A Man’s Place* (1983), a book about class and about growing up and about leaving home and, in the end, about the death of her father. Within a page or two Ernaux deals with the immediacy of things, describing the day of her father’s death and preparation of his body. ‘I don’t remember the doctor who was called in to sign the death certificate,’ she writes – questioning her memory but also confronting the physicality of the situation. ‘Within a few hours,’ she continues, ‘my father’s face had changed beyond all recognition.’

Combining autofiction with sociology, Ernaux tells the story of her father’s life as well as death and, five years later, performs the same ritual for her late mother. ‘My mother died on Monday 7 April in the old people’s home attached to the hospital at Pontoise, where I had installed her two years previously,’ she writes in *A Woman’s Story* (1988). ‘The nurse said over the phone: “Your mother passed away this morning, after breakfast.” It was around 10 o’clock.’ Again Ernaux describes the body, this time following preparation. ‘She looked like a small mummy,’ she writes. And again Ernaux describes the funeral, before turning to the physical. ‘The week following the funeral,’ she continues, ‘I

would start to cry for no particular reason.’ She describes her dreams and, when awake, her forgetfulness. ‘Quite often I forgot how to do things in the right order,’ she writes. Ernaux confronts the reality of her mother’s loss on the page – her mother’s suitcase leaving her ‘paralysed’ in the cellar. ‘The worst moments were when I left home and drove into town,’ she writes. ‘I would be sitting behind the wheel and suddenly it would hit me: “She will never be alive anywhere in the world again.”’ This ‘condition’, as she calls it, ‘is gradually easing’. Full of doubt, Ernaux analyses her own words. ‘I still get that sinking feeling every time I realise “now I don’t need to” or “I no longer have to” do this or that for her,’ she writes. ‘I feel such emptiness at the thought: this is the first spring she will never see. (Now I can feel the power of ordinary sentences, or even clichés.)’ The only way forward, Ernaux decides, is to write about her mother. There is nevertheless more doubt. ‘Perhaps I should wait until her illness and death have merged into the past, like other events in my life’ – like her father’s death – ‘so that I feel the detachment which makes it easier to analyse one’s memories. But right now I am incapable of doing anything else.’

Before detachment, then, there are *emotions*. ‘You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends,’ Didion writes. There might be another way of seeing, so to speak, or another way of writing. You sit down to *write* and life as you know it ends, immediacy only the first thing before the next thing. This for Didion was a beginning, of course, if only insofar as it was the beginning of her ‘year of magical thinking’. She continues:

This is my attempt to make sense of the period that followed, weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and memory, about grief, about the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself (p. 7).

I have, above, introduced and explored 'Writing Through' as the principle methodology that I used to investigate and develop my thesis – and I have argued that the brutality of loss represents an inciting incident for the writer. It is not a linear beginning but a way of directly confronting the immediate impact of grief on the page.

Writing through, as it goes – after anger and denial and the questioning of memory (and even words) but before detachment from the moment – indeed before *interrogation* and *integration*, which I explore fully in my thesis – is on the page all about *immediacy*.

Biography

Dr Gavin James Bower FHEA was born and grew up in Lancashire. He graduated with a degree in History from the University of Sheffield, before modelling in Paris and later working as an editor and publisher in London. The author of two novels (*Dazed & Aroused* and *Made in Britain*) and one nonfiction title (*Claude Cahun: The Soldier with No Name*), his journalism has featured in the *Guardian*, the *Independent* and *Independent on Sunday*, the *Sunday Telegraph*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Esquire* and BBC Radio 5 Live. He joined EASTENDERS in 2014, writing five episodes. He lives in Somerset and is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University – where he completed his PhD – as well as a Tutor on the Jericho Writers Ultimate Novel Writing Course.

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