A writer might keep a notebook to jot down observations and stray thoughts which might be useful to remember later. These notebooks might be preserved and kept in the archives for scholars of the future. Or the author might publish them as a book.

Murray Bail’s notebooks are just notebooks. They are not diaries: there is no day-to-day narrative of a writer’s life. They are presented entirely unadorned, without any explanation or contextualising. A typical page might contain four or five totally unrelated entries, some no more than a short phrase, some extending to a couple of paragraphs. There are overheard scraps of conversation, descriptions, sometimes acute, of scenes and people, anecdotes from friends (identified only by initials), obituaries both quoted and fabricated. Mystery is fostered by the very occasional personal or confessional remark, unexplained: ‘Everything I do is difficult. Writing, reading, talking, not talking, walking, loving.’ There are flashes of wit: ‘He gave his address as “Artillery Mansions”. Brief envy.’ But the entertainment value soon palls, and it would take a keen aficionado to maintain interest or even attention over 300 pages of this. It’s hard not to see this as an exercise in self-indulgence or perhaps self-aggrandisement.