In a number of guises, the question ‘why’ reverberated throughout my reading of Whatever the Gods Do: A Memoir. This book opens with Patti Miller describing her sadness at the departure of ten-year-old Theo, who is leaving for Melbourne to live with his father. We soon discover that the author has been Theo’s substitute mother for the past seven years since the tragic death of Dina, his birth mother and Miller’s friend. Dina suffered a brain haemorrhage when Theo was two years old. She spent thirteen months in a virtually immobile state before her death at thirty-eight. Why the vibrant, attractive Dina should have been struck down when she had so much to live for is a legitimate question, but, of course, an unanswerable one. Why Miller should choose to write about her own life through this incident is also worth asking. Few are more qualified than Miller to address the reasons for, and benefits of, life-writing: she has run ‘life stories’ workshops around the country for more than ten years. In her bestselling manual Writing Your Life: A Journey of Discovery, she identifies various motivations for, and rewards of, life-writing, including healing and self-understanding, recording family and social history for future generations, remembering happiness and sharing one’s wisdom.

Clearly, Miller could have various personal reasons for writing about recent events in her life. In the current publishing climate, many such accounts of relatively ordinary lives are finding publishers and willing readers. Nor is Miller alone in ruminating in print upon a journey into death. Some intimate memoirs form an intricate dance as this little boy, pining for a mother’s physical presence, reaches out to this alternative maternal figure, while establishing rules of engagement. The first time he shyly kisses Miller, he adds, ‘My mummy is sick’. As Miller records: ‘For weeks, each kiss was followed by a statement of structure created before the fact of structure, she advises: ‘Structure created before the fact of the first person, such as Robert McCrum’s My Year Off: Rediscovering Life after Stroke or Inga Clendinnen’s Tiger’s Eye. Others have been written by family members, such as Linda Grant’s Remind Me Who I Am Again or, closer to home, Peter Rose’s Rose Boys. Most recently, Sonia Orchard published an exquisitely written account of her best friend Emma’s doomed battle with cancer, Something More Wonderful, which has many parallels with Dina’s story.

The intricate patterns woven into these descriptions of human interactions do, however, serve to highlight the banality of some of Miller’s reflections, dreams and her singing lessons, which she has chosen to bear the symbolic weight of this book. I suspect that Miller has learnt some of her lessons too well. In this manual, she emphasises the importance of symbolic imagery as a key to memory, recommending free association across random memories. Moreover, while her writing handbook recognises the importance of structure, she advises: ‘Structure created before the fact of writing is artificial and limiting … I like to leave a discussion of structure until plenty of writing has been done.’ These comments provide insight into Whatever’s failings: Miller has followed her tips for sparking the fuse of memory and stimulating the flow of writing, but life-writing still requires crafting, sifting and artful re-membering before publication.