The Universal Autobiographer: The Politics of Normative Readings

Kate Douglas

In Australia, autobiographies ‘seem to be published more than ever’.1 Hilary McPhee argues that ‘life-writing is now a profitable enterprise for publishers. The readership is growing all the time. First person narratives ... sell much better than novels’.2 The past decade has seen autobiography become one of the premier cultural sites of social and political struggles, particularly between individuals or minority groups and the social world.3 Autobiographies once composed ‘master narratives’ which favoured white male writers, describing human universality or the unified subject. Carolyn Kay Steedman argues that in recent decades ‘the autobiographical canon has been greatly extended’.4 Susanna Egan and Gabrielle Helms note changes in the autobiographical form and suggest that autobiography has become ‘an exploration of insistent voices determined to challenge the mainstream and affect cultural perception of previously undervalued lives’.5

This article examines the implications of reading autobiography through certain ‘autobiographical standards’ which have significant social currency. In mainstream publishing, autobiographies are received and promoted as perceptive, sensible, generous and educative acts, articulated from a position of success. The existence of the successful, published author provides evidence of the value of their particular autobiographical narrative.

Autobiography has had particular currency in Australia in recent years with the publication of ‘stolen generations’ narratives, auto/biographies of parent-child relationships, and a myriad of autobiographies relating experiences of childhood abuse and neglect. The figure of the child has become a potent cultural symbol and emotive force in literature, popular culture and mediascapes, and is an essential feature in such texts as Richard Coe’s ‘Portrait of the Artist as a Young Australian: Childhood, Literature and Myth’ (1981)6 and Joy Hooten’s Stories of Herself When Young (1990).7

Peter Pierce’s The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety (1999)8 traces the cultural and moral implications of ‘the lost child’ in Australian sociocultural life. Pierce’s overview begins with nineteenth-century depictions of lost settler children, which typically connect childhood innocence and naïveté with an unforgiving landscape. The study continues into the twentieth century to comment on the figure of the child in the national consciousness, focusing on issues such as the Stolen Generations and the post-war British child migrants to Australia (the ‘Orphans of the Empire’), but also media representations of the disappearance and death of Azaria Chamberlain and Jaiden Leskie. Pierce argues that the lost child is a symbol of socio-cultural guilt in relation to settlement, racism and poverty, but equally the child figure is emblematic of Australia’s future potential.

In relation to Stolen Generations narratives, Denise Cuthbert argues that the trope of the stolen child provides both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians ‘with a rich and emotionally powerful lexicon with which to speak about the
impact of assimilationist history”. This image has been so pervasive that it ‘now appears to occupy virtually all of the available space in accounting for this history’. Cuthbert suggests that ‘the particular force of these [Stolen Generations] testimonies is also generated by ongoing associations of childhood with innocence’. Similarly, Cath Ellis argues that the central focus [of the Stolen Generations] is not ‘indigeneity ... but the image of the child’. Ellis writes that ‘the recognition of childhood as a universal and as an innocence renders this report desirable and accessible to the general reading public’. These two concepts ‘universalism’ and ‘innocence’ are central to the circulation of autobiographical narratives in Australia.

This article will focus on Donna Meehan’s *It is No Secret* (2000) and explore its production and circulation, and will also examine the reception of Rosalie Fraser’s *Shadow Child* (1998). Examining reception reveals one way in which contemporary autobiographies are affected by the prevalence of normative readings, which result in readings mediated primarily through two frames: the figure of the innocent child, and the successful, resilient, writer who overcomes adversity to author their autobiography. These two frames are complementary as the innocent child becomes the knowing, adult author who has struggled and survived to engage in the political act of indigenous autobiography, which in turn is affected by the commodification of autobiographical narratives in the commercial publishing industry. The effects of dominant expectations in reception, as well as the apparent sanctioned positions for writing and reading, caution against the tendency for normative readings of autobiographical texts.

*It is No Secret* recounts Donna Meehan’s experience of being a child of the stolen generations. It begins by depicting Meehan’s childhood days with her family and community in a camp at Coonamble and then describes Meehan’s forced removal from her mother and separation from her siblings at age five. This is the key moment of Meehan’s childhood: where her childhood innocence is lost. Meehan sees her own history in terms of larger social processes such as assimilation and recognises that her childhood had been engineered by social policy. Meehan recounts her life in Newcastle with her white family with affection, but *It is No Secret* is concerned with describing her experiences of racial prejudice. Her autobiographical struggle reflects a need to reconcile these aspects of her life and to restore a cultural identity that was stolen from her.

The narrative speaking positions in *It is No Secret* are of particular interest. Hooten argues that in indigenous women’s autobiography ‘the individual story, sharp and even unresolved as it may be, is perceived as describing a general experience; it is both unrepeatable autograph and cultural archetype’. *It is No Secret* reflects this through the specific naming of places, people and experiences unique to Meehan, who is positioned as one of a community of people who suffered a similar experience. Meehan describes the feelings of other children as if she remembers them and she attributes emotions and opinions to members of her community. Such examples may have inspired this review comment from Paul Kraus: “this is not a book about one stolen child. Donna Meehan gives voice to the thousands of silent stolen children”. Meehan is quoted as saying that ‘I just wanted it to be something my mob could read’ but also as hoping that the book will go ‘where my feet can’t go’, advancing the cause of reconciliation.
Autobiographies are thought to provide new spaces for the affirmation of diverse experiences and, in making these experiences available to a wide readership, function to address some of the injustices of the past. This is a key value of autobiography, but what if this opportunity becomes an expectation? Despite moments where Meehan directly addresses the indigenous reader, her text devotes much space to explaining Aboriginality to the reader, the effect of which is that it assumes the currency of social myths amongst its readership: ‘[p]eople probably think that just because we live in the city and eat the same foods as they do and speak the same language and dress the same way that I have assimilated.’ Meehan emphasises the emotional richness of her childhood experience with her Aboriginal family in describing a childhood Christmas, a trip to the circus and the strong supportive bonds within the community. Another example is her description of ‘Tin Town,’ an Aboriginal camp near Coonamble:

Although living conditions were rough and were neither wanted nor respected by the white people, such camps were a great support socially, psychologically and spiritually. The women shared food and clothing and looked out for one another’s kids. The men had plenty of business to discuss, sharing with one another any hint of rumours where work was available. We were the dispossessed. Herded on to the outskirts of town. Out of sight and out of mind. We weren’t given any community nurse or counsellors in those days, as white people had no idea or understanding of the black’s fight for survival. So the camps served a vital function for support, and were the true meaning of community.

This exchange of information functions as a dialogue between an indigenous writer and non-indigenous reader. It is No Secret appeals to ideals of love, understanding, acceptance and optimism that are commonly universalised in autobiographies. The chapter titles ‘The healing strength of love’, ‘Your people will be my people’ and ‘Two mothers together’ locate It is No Secret within the discourse of reconciliation.

Readers have come to recognise a particular set of associations as ‘stolen generations narratives’. Mainstream reception perpetuates certain specific expectations of autobiography, particularly in relation to the provision of narratives which are the ‘must read’, ‘truthful’, ‘honest’ versions of events. An autobiographical text like Meehan’s is often presumed by readers (professional and recreational) to offer the ‘privileged access’ to Aboriginal experience that John Colmer suggests minority autobiography can provide — a notion that is ominously problematic. It assumes that listening to one story absolves the reader from thousands of others, as they have read the ‘key’ text. Cath Ellis argues that it is not enough for readers to take their act of reading an indigenous autobiography as sufficient apology for two hundred years of white domination.

Such notions also presuppose that autobiography is a portal to reality. Despite the prevalence of postmodern thought denying the possibility of truth in cultural production, the presumption of truth in autobiography is still common in popular media accounts. Richard Freadman argues that ‘we have theories that truth is an impossibly elusive thing. But on the other hand, we hold closely to the assumption that biography and narrative history can bring us close to the truth. I don’t think postmodern scepticism will decimate that attachment’. Autobiography is seen to work in
particular ways: in its educative honesty it speaks to a mass readership in a familiar way — herein lies its social value.

Penny Van Toorn argues that newspaper headlines following the stolen generations ‘echoed the language of gothic romance or the titles of daytime TV soaps. As a media commodity the stories were at times highly sensationalised’. In a similar way autobiographical narratives are often promoted in terms of entertaining accessibility. In discussing Carmel Bird’s *The Stolen Children*, Cath Ellis argues that her stated purpose to provide a simple, small, portable, paperback storytelling tool so that readers can indulge themselves with a private reception of “the intimate and personal oral histories of these courageous and sorrowful people” endorses a voyeuristic reading pose and gaze. This ‘voyeuristic gaze’ can be found in reviews of indigenous autobiographies, such as Jan Mayman’s review of Rosalie Fraser’s *Shadow Child* in the *Age*: “it is a brutally honest account of the bleak underworld inhabited by many Aboriginal Australians... Few manage to escape this hidden Australia, which exists beyond the imagination of most outsiders”. Van Toorn suggests that:

[O]n the one hand, it might be tempting to dismiss them as merely exploitative — white business interests making a buck out of black people’s pain by commodifying the stories irresponsibly for mainstream consumption. On the other hand, the [National Stolen Generations Inquiry] formally recommended that the history and effects of forcible removal should be disseminated as widely as possible throughout the community ...

It is politically imperative that the dissemination of narratives should reflect their unique social and political significance. In attempting to gain a white readership, review practices impose a normative identity of ‘the autobiographer’ on the indigenous autobiographer. As Van Toorn suggests, the ‘accessibility at any cost’ initiative creates challenges for critics attempting to preserve the integrity of particular autobiographical narratives.

Meehan’s *It is No Secret* is positioned to speak to indigenous and non-indigenous readers. Meehan overtly offers her text as regenerative force and she appeals directly to the Aboriginal reader:

[For our people who are still searching for their families I pray that you find the answers your heart needs to know. For the thousands who were institutionalised and unloved in your childhood and ignored and unwanted when you returned home, we weep with you.

Reviewer Sally Croxton suggests that, since writing her autobiography, Meehan has become a vocal advocate for Aboriginal rights and has been asked to speak publicly about the issues raised in her book. Another reviewer, Paul Kraus, commends the political value of Meehan’s autobiography: “I hope the publishers have sent a copy to John Howard”. The implication is that *It is No Secret* is ‘mainstreamed’: it must speak beyond Meehan’s indigenous community to white Australians and raise their consciousness. It is valuable because of its potential to speak to John Howard, particularly upon issues that are part of public discourse.

Publicists and sellers of autobiographies agree that one of the keys to the successes of autobiographies is the connection autobiography elicits between author and reader. A popular, critically successful autobiography can be read and
appropriated by multiple readers, which may account for appeals to universal subjects in the marketing. Sidonic Smith and Julia Watson argue that ‘autobiographical narratives, their citation, and their recitation have historically been one means through which the imagined community ... constitutes itself on a daily basis’.\textsuperscript{35} The reviews of Fraser’s and Meehan’s autobiographies create a community by packaging, for the non-indigenous reader, ‘unknown’ experiences (being one of the stolen generations) in terms of ‘the known’ (commonly universalised concepts such as ‘love’, ‘honesty’, ‘forgiveness’ and ‘survival’). Kraus writes of Meehan’s ‘story of a stolen child’:\textsuperscript{36} ‘her honesty in revealing so much about her spiritual journey is rare’;\textsuperscript{37} similarly, Fraser is ‘brutally honest’ according to Mayman.\textsuperscript{38} Mayman writes that Fraser’s \textit{Shadow Child} ‘is a story of survival, the crippling chaos of mental illness, the conquest of alcoholism and, above all, the healing power of love’.\textsuperscript{39} Bert Hingley, the publisher of \textit{Shadow Child}, says that:

At times it is horrific, yet it is an affirmation of life, of the victory of the human spirit over cruelty and suffering. This is a book for the world, a heartfelt cry for all suffering children ... It is a tragic tale with a happy ending, offering hope and inspiration for others.\textsuperscript{40}

This emphasises that this is ‘a book for the world’ that asserts the universal value of Fraser’s narrative using words and phrases such as ‘affirmation of life’, ‘human spirit’, ‘a heartfelt cry for all suffering children’ and ‘inspiration for others’. Stolen generations narratives are typically framed to ‘speak’ beyond indigenous issues because of the potency and presumed universality of the innocent child figure.

The image of the child has been the force behind the recent circulation of child narratives of not only the stolen generations but of Alan Gill’s \textit{Orphans of the Empire}, the story of post-war British child migration to Australia, and Kate Shayler’s \textit{The Long Way Home: The Story of a Homes Kid}, a post-war autobiography of growing up in an institution.\textsuperscript{41} The most obvious connections to be made between the three texts are largely promotion issues: each was published within three years of each other; all by Random House; each has a photo of a young child on the cover, and the most recent of these books, by Kate Shayler, contains the publisher’s promotional blurb for the other two books in its back pages.\textsuperscript{42} Though this was likely propelled by marketing, this gesture is a powerful one as it reduces these socio-political narratives as primarily ‘issues of childhood’ narratives rather than narratives of race or class, which become secondary concerns. Cath Ellis’s claim that romantic ideas of the child and childhood are still very much in circulation is reaffirmed in this process.\textsuperscript{43}

The development from childhood to adulthood in autobiography is commonly characterised in terms of overcoming hardship. \textit{It is No Secret} is promoted as a triumph against adversity. The book jacket tells the reader that, ‘thanks to Donna’s resilience and forgiveness, [the book] is ultimately uplifting. This is a story about hope and grace and the indomitable strength of the human spirit’.\textsuperscript{44} Similarly, Elizabeth Scott writes that Meehan ‘has traveled a long, hard journey to be where she is today’.

Meehan’s narrative is worth reading because it depicts, according to Kraus ‘an extraordinary achievement’.\textsuperscript{46} When certain achievements are celebrated or normalised in literature, literature (and its critics) become
prescriptive. In this instance, dominant social ideologies, such as the work ethic, are installed and perpetuated. In his review of *It is No Secret*, Kraus writes that:

[A]lthough the author’s life journey has understandably been punctuated by sadness, her story also carries much that brightens the heart ... Despite many setbacks, Donna Meehan gradually overcame these traumas, strengthened by a radiant Christian faith and its accompanying abiding hope.47

The discursive effects of these reviews, particularly their valuing of resilience, places responsibility for the eradication of racism and social inequality with individuals rather than institutions. Consider the opening lines of Jan Mayman’s review of another Aboriginal Australian autobiography, Fraser’s Shadow Child: ‘at two, Rosalie Fraser was a stolen Aboriginal child destined for years of abuse. At 14, she was an alcoholic street kid. Today at 40, she is a newly acclaimed writer whose Cinderella story will touch many’.48 Mayman quotes Fraser as saying ‘I feel as if it’s a dream ... things like this don’t happen to people like me’.49 Mayman asserts that, ‘with five children of her own and over 20 years of happy marriage, Fraser is serene, poised and deeply fulfilled today’.50 These statements invariably position the indigenous author in terms of conventional western capitalist indicators of success: a rags to riches ‘Cinderella’ figure with a successful job as an ‘acclaimed writer’.

Smith and Watson argue that there is a conservative agenda underlying the production of autobiography: ‘personal histories — in all their varieties — serve as individualised testimonies to getting a “successful” life together’.51 Dominant social values relating to universal subjects and narratives of social success or the overcoming of adversity permeate the production and reception of autobiographies, especially those describing personal development. The overabundance of ‘rags to riches’ autobiographies would seem to confirm how a hegemonic value such as the work ethic intrudes upon autobiographical acts.52

When such subjects are present within autobiographical narratives they are commonly interpreted as fresh empowering narratives as opposed to conservative dominant tropes. When noting the explosion of recently published childhood narratives, one would assume that in our social world people overcome adversity more often than not. Research into Australian autobiographies suggests that the prevalence of representations of heroic resilience results in only ‘appropriate’ portions of history being represented.53 In this instance, an Aboriginal writer whose writing reflects forgiveness, and also professional success, is applauded. Sally Croxton’s discussion of the launch of *It is No Secret* emphasises Meehan’s forgiveness through its focus on the effects that the publication of her autobiography might have on Meehan’s adoptive white mother. Croxton writes:

Mrs Meehan believes a sad feature of the recent debate about the generation of Aboriginal children torn from their parents by ‘the welfare’ is its effect on people like her much-loved adoptive mother, Elizabeth Chandler. Well-meaning and loving adoptive parents had been caught up in the criticism of a system that operated in the 1950s and 60s.54

This discussion positions Meehan as a safe, almost apolitical writer. Fraser’s forgiveness is also emphasised in Mayman’s review of Shadow Child: ‘Fraser was four years old when her foster mother raped her with a knitting needle during one
bout of drunken madness; yet she has forgiven this monstrous woman: “I realise how sick she was ... I still put flowers on her grave”.

Hooten confirms that “none of the texts [in her study of indigenous women’s autobiography] are vehemently angry or even lastingly bitter; written from a position of achieved strength and pride, they celebrate the triumph of will and the resilience of the human spirit.” This absence of anger is consistently framed in terms of a universalised ‘human spirit’ shared by all autobiographers irrespective of race and racial experiences.

One of the most notorious statements about indigenous women’s autobiography is Mudrooroo’s in Writing from the Fringe, which David McCooey discusses in his book Artful Histories:

“[F]or many years now the majority culture has sought to imagine the fringe in dubious productions often termed ‘autobiographies’. These works, he claims, are compromised because they are produced for white audiences from within a white system of production (relying heavily on white editors). Mudrooroo claims that [Sally Morgan’s] My Place ‘is a milestone in Aboriginal Literature in that it marks a stage when it is O.K. to be Aboriginal as long as you are young, gifted and not very black. It is an individualised story and the concerns of the Aboriginal community are of secondary importance’. He sums up the work as ‘assimilationist’.”

This statement highlights the politics inherent in the production of indigenous autobiography. The autobiographical act is marked as political because it has become a site for identity struggles, particularly those redressing issues of equality of gender, race or sexuality. Perhaps most significantly, contemporary autobiography has been a site for considerable consciousness-raising. Unlike Mudrooroo, critics like Van Toorn and Hooten recognise the significant political consequences for writers and readers of indigenous autobiography, even if it has been produced and received within ‘a white system of production’ and has conformed to its requirements. Hooten argues that these texts indirectly compel the reader to “explain” the white culture, to perceive it through the puzzled eyes of an excluded and neglected outsider.

However, as Ellis and Cuthbert contend, the available spaces for narrating indigenous experiences are currently influenced by the dominant tropes of the stolen child and the resilient writer who has overcome adversity.

Just as there are sanctioned speaking positions, there are affirmed reading positions for contemporary autobiographies. The space for responding to indigenous narratives is affected by dominant contemporary expectations of the autobiography of childhood, particularly in an emerging review discourse which encourages the reading of ‘appropriate histories’. The focus on childhood perpetuates this practice, as childhood allows for convenient appeals to universal humanity and common social goals. Reception has more to do with the promotion and promulgation of accessible, universalised autobiographical standards than exploring the political act of writing and reading autobiographies, or the momentous social engagements so often made in these texts.
45 ibid., p 123.
51 ibid.
57 ibid.
58 For Benjamin, the prostitute, along with the flaneur and the lesbian, was one of the heroes of modern life. Her hermaphroditism derived from her ability to endure a modernity that had made her a victim yet it also, paradoxically, related to her subversion of ‘normal’ codes of behaviour. As an ambivalent site in herself, the prostitute was an embodiment of the pleasure-world of the commodity, being, at once, dehumanised and desired.
65 Benjamin, op. cit., p 41.
69 Slessor, ‘It, If and Also!’, in Darlinghurst Nights, op. cit.

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1 David McCooey, Artful Histories: Modern Australian Autobiography, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p 2. There has also been a more general global boom in autobiography as Leigh Gilmore suggests, ‘around 1996’, ‘book reviewers ritualistically cited memoir’s ubiquity, more publishers expanded their lists to include memoir, more first books were marketed as memoir... Even a crude analysis using the Worldcat database show the number of new English language volumes categorized as “autobiography or memoir” roughly tripled from the 1940s to the 1990s’. See Leigh Gilmore, ‘Limit-Cases: Trauma, Self-Representation, and the Jurisdiction of Identity’, Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly, vol 24, no 1, 2001, p 128.
Notes to pp 173-179


3 Leigh Gilmore writes that ‘memoir in the 90s was dominated by the comparatively young whose private lives were emblematic of unofficial histories’. Gilmore, op. cit., p 128.


11 ibid.


13 ibid.


16 Hooten, op. cit., p 315.


20 ibid., p 22.


22 For a detailed explanation of these issues see Kate Douglas, ‘Blurring Biographical: Authorship and Autobiography’, *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* (forthcoming).


24 Ellis, op. cit., p 76.


27 Ellis, op. cit., p 77.


29 ibid.

30 Van Toorn, op. cit., p 252.

31 Meehan, op. cit., p 292.


33 Kraus, op. cit., p 8.


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This is the subtitle of Meehan’s *It is No Secret.*

Kraus, op. cit.

Mayman, op. cit.

ibid.

40 ibid.


Furthermore the publisher’s blurb on the back of Shayler’s autobiography directly works on the consciousness of the stolen generations and ‘the Orphans of the Empire’, explicitly suggesting that the issue exposed in Shayler’s autobiography should be of equal concern to readers: ‘A child separated from family is a truly disturbing prospect. Yet this has been the fate of many thousands of children in Australia’s recent history. The ordeals and triumphs of the Stolen Generations and British child migrants are now being exposed, but there is a great silence about their white Australian contemporaries …’

Ellis, op. cit., p 76.

Book jacket of Meehan, op. cit.

Scott, op. cit.

Kraus, op. cit.

ibid.

Mayman, op. cit.

ibid.

ibid.

ibid.


Anna Johnston notes that autobiographies commonly contain the ‘appropriate portions’ of autobiographical history, those which can be constructed through ‘narratives of Australian identity which permeate both literature and popular consciousness’. See Anna Johnston, ‘Australian Autobiography and the Politics of Narrating Post-Colonial Space’, *Westerly*, Winter 1996, p 77.

Mayman, op. cit.

Croxton, op. cit.

Hooten, op. cit., p 313.

McCooy, op. cit., p 105.

Hooten, op. cit., p 313.

**Pulped Fiction: *Broometime* and the Ethics of Oral History**

**Judy Skene**


2 ibid., cover.


4 The title of this paper is drawn from this seminar, 22 May 2001. The author wishes to thank Criena Fitzgerald for her suggestion of the title and her contribution to seminar discussion.


7 ibid., pp 38-9.


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