'But sir, I lied' - the value of teachers using their own autobiographical writing in the classroom and the therapeutic benefits of using autobiographical discourse and "life fiction" in the classroom.

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Abstract:

In this paper I focus on using my own autobiographical writing in the classroom in order to stimulate autobiographical responses from the secondary school pupils I teach. In order to do this, I analyse the reasons why I write and my own pedagogical practice, using psychoanalytic and other frameworks. My essential research questions is: what value do various modes of autobiographical discourse have in the classroom?

Taking a "symbolic interactionist" methodological approach which builds upon the thought of sociologist Norman Denzin and the philosophy of Paulo Friere, I have employed "Action Research" cycle in the secondary school where I teach to generate data and enable my pupils to write their own fictionalised autobiographies.

My analysis of the data discusses using my own writing in the classroom and examines the advantages and disadvantages of teachers using their writing in the classroom. In particular, it argues that encouraging pupils to write "life fiction" in the classroom context has beneficial effects. In common with other research, I have found that the blending of fiction and non-fiction (what I term 'life fiction') enables pupils to tackle difficult events in their lives in a more imaginative and creative way. By sharing with them the benefits I have reaped from this approach, I have been able to make them see that one's life can be "constructed" anew through the process of writing. I will show how this has fostered a sense of empowerment amongst my pupils; they no longer see themselves as passive victims of their own life-stories but as active creators of it. Thus I have been able to blend my theoretical thinking with my pedagogical approach.

The power of the autobiographical utterance

The seeds of my writing life were sown when I listened as a child to what Harold Rosen labels "minimal autobiographical utterances". Rosen writes of this particular phenomena:

"The least regarded, the least studied form of autobiographical acts is the single utterance, which while it is itself not a story, points to a larger narrative. Although it scarcely gets a passing mention its the most pervasive of autobiographical acts, exemplifying more than any other".

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kinds of text the inescapable, always present autobiographical-ness of spoken discourse...²"

There is no doubt in my mind that my mother’s “minimal autobiographical utterances” provoked many questions in my mind as a child. When I was young my mother would make sweeping pronouncements about members of my family such as “Your father wanted to put me in prison”, “Granny (my paternal grandmother) was terrible to me when you were a baby”, “My father ruined my life” “You have ruined my life”. My mother never fully fleshed out these bold statements, choosing not to elaborate upon them but leaving them there to linger. As Rosen points out, autobiographical discourse of this ilk tends to “further an argument, furnish an instance, shift a debate from the abstract to the concrete”; what my mother was telling me were tantalising fragments of oral stories.

As a result, perhaps it’s not difficult to see why autobiographical discourse has fascinated me throughout my life both as a child and, later, as a teacher and writer. This is why the big questions I want to ask for my paper are: “What value does autobiographical discourse have in the classroom? Can autobiography and fiction be successfully merged so that pupils can feel freer to speculate about their lives? What is the therapeutic value of using autobiographical discourse in the classroom? Can autobiographical discourse improve the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom? Can the strategic use of autobiographical discourse enliven a moribund curriculum in many different ways? Can autobiographical discourse animate and humanise the abstract ideas that suffuse so much learning in school?”

Born in 1968, I was educated for the most part in suburban London schools: a state primary school and a private secondary school. I read English at Sussex University, gained a Postgraduate Certificate in Education in English at Cambridge, and an M.A. in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia in 1990, where I was taught by Rose Tremain and Malcolm Bradbury. I had had dreams of becoming a writer but realised after doing the MA that I was unlikely to make a living out of it. During the 1990s, I taught, for the most part, in various comprehensives in London. I would write in the evenings after I’d marked my pupils’ work and prepared my lessons for the next day. Writing a few hundred words every night meant that I wrote

five novels, none of which were published. I saw my writing and teaching identities as entirely separate: I never wrote about my life as a teacher. I didn’t want to: I wanted to forget all the stresses of the classroom when I was writing. At school, being pressurised by the constraints of time and an unenlightened curriculum, I held fast onto my “banking concept” of education; that I had a certain amount of knowledge that I had to funnel into my pupils’ heads. Paulo Friere writes in the *Pedagogy of the oppressed*:

“The banking concept (with its tendency to dichotomize everything) distinguishes two stages in the action of the educator. During the first, he cognizes a cognizable object while he prepares his lessons in his study or his laboratory.”

This is exactly what I was trained to do and am currently instructed to do: to identify specific “gobbets of information” to impart to the pupils I teach. My business was “data-transfer”. This necessarily leads to lessons being reductive experiences which are about the teacher making sure all pupils are cognizant of what Frier terms the “cognizable object”. As Friere points out this is an implicitly oppressive model for education with the teacher playing the role of “oppressor” and the pupils being the “oppressed”.

I should add here that I too felt as powerless as my pupils. I, in turn, became “oppressed” by my pupils’ resistance against this style of education; their refusal to follow my commands, their lack of interest in what I had to say, their indifference to the academic material they had to learn. I gave up teaching in 1996 as a result and trained to be a journalist. Learning how to be a “hack” helped me a great deal: it made me less precious about my writing and it steered me towards writing about my experiences as a teacher. I worked for a little bit on various newspapers and then taught part-time in Havering, writing on a freelance basis during my spare time. I found my life as a teacher as an essential well-spring for my writing. I began to “re-educate” myself along lines more tune with Friere’s ideals. He writes:

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“Problem-posing education bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality; thereby responding to the vocation of personas as being who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation.”

By reflecting upon my own experiences as a teacher, I was able to craft articles and books which “creatively transformed” my past. Whether what I was doing was “authentic” is a moot point. My books *I’m A Teacher, Get Me Out Of Here* (2004) and *Teacher On The Run* (2006) was written to communicate what it felt like to be a teacher: to protect myself I had to fictionalise the people I had encountered, changing genders and attributes. To make the book entertaining and meaningful, I chose to dramatise key turning points. Although my writing in no way has the literary quality of the classic “aesthetic autobiographers” that Suzanne Nalbantian critiques, her observations of their techniques could apply to my autobiographical books about school:

“The autobiographical novelists drew first from their personal everyday life, cultivating perceptions selectively which could then be transposed into their fiction. A primary facet of their art can be said therefore to be an activity of perception. Then comes the leap to what is literary. In the passage from self-observation to self-recreation, life facts were transferred to structures dictated by concepts of aesthetics.”

This was certainly true of my teaching memoirs. After writing very dry, factual first drafts, I found that the material just didn’t “live” on the page and that I needed to highlight “spots of time”, key turning points, in order to make the reader feel what it was like to be in the classroom, to capture its excitement and terror, its joys and disappointments.

Writing about my teaching was a form of “problem-solving” learning on many levels: an exploration of my past, a therapeutic confession, an investigation into my own motives and ideologies, a construction of my identity as a teacher and a person. Furthermore, it led me to see the importance of autobiography in the classroom; that I should be encouraging my pupils to do what I was doing in my books; to examine

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themselves, to look at their motives, to perceive the ways in which they “constructed” their own identities, to identify where the problem areas were, to find ways of dealing with the stresses and strains of life. Moreover, I realised that it was the fictional techniques that Nalbantian speaks about which genuinely promote, as opposed to negate, this process of “constructing” oneself and one’s life. On the surface, this appears to be a counter-intuitive point: surely a teacher is actually encouraging pupils to “lie” about their lives if he/she asks them to use fictional techniques such as dramatic dialogue, poetic imagery, and invented characters when writing their autobiographies?

Indeed I was fascinated when a pupil, Charlotte, discussed at length later on, who normally didn’t work hard, turned in a fantastic but rather alarming autobiography about her difficult life but said, “But sir, I lied!” Her comments provoked all sorts of thoughts and questions in my mind which made me want to explore the ways in which autobiography is used in the classroom.

Indeed her comment was to spark my research project. I embarked upon a PhD in Creative Writing at Goldsmiths in September 2009 in order to write a memoir about a girlfriend of mine who had died quite recently entitled *Who Do You Love?*. As I began to write it I realised that I was twisting all sorts of factual details – names, places, events – in order to dramatise the narrative, to tell a truth deeper than the “facts”. As a result, I have now decided to term the work an autobiographical novel rather than a memoir and have toyed with labelling “life fiction”; fiction which is very consciously shaped from the experiences of my life.

From the very start of the course, I had wanted to integrate to do some educational research where I would use my own writing in the classroom and see what sort of response it provoked amongst my pupils.

Perhaps surprisingly, given that autobiographical writing used to be such a staple of the English curriculum, it has fallen out of favour in recent years, with pupils being asked to do much more “genre-based” pieces throughout their school career. My mission was ultimately moral. There was what Jane Miller calls the “Salvation Army” instinct in my desire to teach autobiographical writing; an almost religious belief that getting pupils to write about their lives would somehow liberate them.
Miller asks this important question: “Why was I so insistent that all my eleven-year-olds wrote me the stories of their lives?”

Like Miller, I possibly saw my role as “emancipatory”. I thought that if I read certain sections of my autobiography with them, then it would somehow “liberate” them from their “mind-forged manacles” to a degree. Perhaps I am satirizing myself a little here, but, if I honest, there is a grain of truth in this satire. Having written so much autobiography myself, I had begun to attribute almost mystical qualities to the form: I saw it as a unique genre that enabled investigation of the self; I saw it as politically empowering, enabling pupils to feel that their own lives were just as important as the much higher status individuals that they see on the media.

It was with these thoughts in the back of my head that I read the sections in Who Do You Love? which were about my childhood: being bullied at school; my parents’ divorce and the time when my mother forced me to take a lady’s handbag to school. This autobiographical writing really got the pupils’ attention; they listened like they’d never listened before. They laughed at me the spectacle of me carrying around a lady’s handbag and being called “Pilk”. Having “scaffolded” a number of smaller writing tasks, the pupils embarked upon writing a longer piece with a surprising degree of enthusiasm. Ironically, I was “saved” from being “Salvation-Army-like” by the prescriptive rubric of the National Curriculum, which insisted that pupils should be writing “fiction” for the “Writing to imagine, entertain and explore” component. As a result, I insisted that the pupils “made stuff up”, fictionalized their narratives, in some sort of explicit fashion. As I have said before, I am not sure that there is any such thing as “non-fiction”; even the most so-called truthful text is a form of fabrication, a filtering into prose of events that predominantly occurred outside the form of prose. The pupils were quite aware that they should consciously “drop-in” fictional elements into the narrative, blend “real-life” events and fictional ones.

Crucially, I said to my pupils that they could “invent” and “fictionalise” details about their lives if they wanted to – as long as it was realistic. I did this for a number of reasons. Firstly, I felt it gave my pupils “parity” with my own writing; I

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7 Trick or Treat? The Autobiography of the Question by Jane Miller English Quarterly, vol. 27, no. 3, Spring 1995
had “fictionalised” a great deal in my own memoir, so why couldn’t they? Secondly, it tied in my methodological approach. My research at Goldsmith had made me realise that the whole notion of “non-fiction” and “memoir” was highly problematical: the moment various experiences are transformed or translated into prose or the spoken word, it becomes a completely different thing altogether. It is a representation of experience and a new experience in itself. As I delved deeper into the philosophical ramifications of this approach, I realised I was taking a “social constructivist” approach to autobiography: we actively construct new identities for ourselves when we write about our lives.8

Using an “Action Research” model, whereby I was an active part of the research itself delivering lessons and then refining my pedagogical research after reflecting upon it, I gathered data from two main year groups at the comprehensive where I was teaching: Year 7 (11-12 year olds) and Year 11 (15-16 year olds). I choose these two different year groups because the different contexts involved. The Year 7 group were just at the beginning of their secondary school career and part of a curriculum which was a little less prescribed than the Year 11 group I was taking, who had to follow the strict rubric of the GCSE course. This, I felt, would give me a good cross-section of data: I would be able to explore my research questions in the light of different ages and different pedagogical contexts, but still within the same setting.

My methodological approach when dealing with my data and analysing it was within the “symbolic interactionist” framework. Norman Denzin’s detailed exploration of this approach, includes these observations, which encapsulate the central concepts of “symbolic interactionism”:

“Everyday and problematic interaction exhibit a situated, constraining structuredness based on ritual, routine, and taken-for-granted meanings...As interactional structures, ensembles are reified, patterned regularities of thought, action and interpretation...They include relationships of love, hate, and competition, and ensembles of individual and collective action...A person’s location in the world of experience is organized into a body of localized, interactional practices...Such

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practices are connected to the projects that persons pursue. Practices and projects personalise social structure...”

People who write autobiographies are often forced to reflect upon the “structuredness based on ritual, routine and taken-for-granted meanings”, to examine “relationships of love, hate, and competition” and to start to examine the relationship between the self and the wider society. A symbolic interactionist framework enables the researcher to look at the relationships between the structures of society and the self. Furthermore, as Denzin points out, the framework necessarily leads the researcher to examine people who are marginalized. Denzin writes:

“Constantly preoccupied with the daily, ritual and enforced performances of stigmatised identities (race and gender), the interactionists speak always to those persons who occupy powerless positions in contemporary society.”

Bearing this in mind, I chose six “outliers” to look at in detail; these were pupils who did not “buy in” to the autobiographical project and had “stigmatised identities” within the context of where I teach: Tom, Connor and Toral who were all Year 7 pupils, and Charlotte, James and Chris (brother of Tom) who were Year 11 pupils.

For the purposes of this paper, I will only examine Tom and Charlotte because they best illustrate the complexities, ironies and benefits of writing autobiography in the classroom.

Tom

Tom has the sparkling eyes and sly smile of a “naughty” child. Having known him for nearly two years now, when I meet him he always smiles at me; when I tell him off he smiles too. He is a friendly pupil who is “cheekily” sociable with teachers he likes. If he sees me in the playground or in the corridor, he invariably shouts out, “Oi, Gilbert!” or “Oi, Francis, yes!” Within the context of my school, where the pupils mostly address teachers formally, his insouciance stands out. There’s no doubt that it gives him cache amongst his peers in the class. He has been in trouble quite a


bit during his time at the school, having been temporarily excluded twice and frequently criticised for failing to complete work or behaving.

I first taught when he was in tutor group, 7.6, and was his first English teacher at the school. His new English teacher at the time of writing, who does not get on well with him; Thomas threw an apple on his head and was temporarily excluded as a result.

Tom’s English book reveals that he “bought in” to my English lessons during the first few weeks that he was at the school. Thereafter there’s considerable evidence to suggest that he “lost interest” in the work because work is either not completed or entirely absent. This is an important point to consider, since my autobiographical project began in May 2010, when Tom had been at the school nine months. By then, the norm in lessons for him to do the “minimal” amount of work – often spending quite a bit of trying to draw attention to himself by “misbehaving”. So my field notes from the time are telling:

10th May 2010: “Tom F is working hard. Engrossed in his story about trampolining at the Michael Sobel story. Get him talking about how his brother used to be nice to him, now fights him. The mother is with them, working on a crossword.”

In order to get Tom working, I sat down with him and worked for some of the time as his amanuensis as well as a “co-creator” of his story, questioning him about the environment, which he recalled in vivid detail. Steedman’s comments in *The Tidy House* are relevant here. Steedman was anxious to “see beyond” children’s technical errors in their writing:

“The obvious and superficial differences between the child and adult writing – the spelling errors, the handwriting – are distracting to the reader, partly because they promote the indulgent smile, and partly because they deflect attention from interpreting the text.”

I felt that with me “at the helm”, eradicating the distractions that Steedman talks about, I was able to reveal the true depth of Tom’s “autobiographical imagination”. He wrote about a taking a trip to the Michael Sobell Sports Centre with

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11 Page 27 of The Tidy House.
his brother, Chris, and mother. The trip had a poignancy because his parents were divorced and he lived with his father, seeing his mother at weekends.

I was struck by the simple, descriptive beauty of some of his sentences. For example, he wrote about getting a drink in between trampolining: “If I was thirsty I had a ribena or a hot chocolate I liked it how the machine put the cup down then poured the chocolate into the cup then the boiling water.” This sentence seemed to defamiliarise the whole process getting a drink from a vending machine, turning it into a thing of transformative wonder, seen fresh through a child’s eyes. There is embedded in the passage a Hardy-esque nostalgia, an idealization of the past, perhaps best represented by the sentence: “This was back in the time when my brother was nice to me.” My reading of Hardy’s poetry after his wife died informs my reading of this sentence because it seems as Hardy tapped into a fundamental structure in the human mind that of colouring the past with deeply-felt meaning and regret. Implicit in Tom’s sentence is a belief that things were fundamentally better when his mother was around more; this is clearly how he views the past.

In the next lesson, I asked the pupils to write a more conventional autobiography because I felt that many students were struggling with “dramatising” the scenes in sufficient detail. So I decided to back-track a bit and ask him to write their life-stories using a prompt sheet that I gave them. During this lesson, Tom was back his “normal behaviour”: he mucked around and wrote that he hated me on the document that follows – which he then deleted. The second paragraph is “typical” Tom:

“My parents are called brain badomda and agustos qumbie. George works as a truck driver. Mary is a priest in the Church of England.”

While these facts are not true, they “hover” around factual accuracy; I was to learn later that Tom’s father was a “verger”, working at St Martins-in-the-Fields until he gave. However, since I said that it was “realism” and not truth that I was after, I let this ride. Sitting down to help him, with me as amanuensis, he wrote this:

“My first memories are of going to the toilet. I remember pooring myself and having to run to the toilet and get my Dad to change my nappy. He was smiling and laughing about it all, saying “Who is a poopy boy!”
My first accident was when there was a big child called Michael who lived two
doors away from me. On the first day of nursery, Michael beat me up. He got his
dummy and stuck it up my nose.

My first day at school was a problem because I farted in the lesson. I like to
fart.

There’s a kid who lives in my house and we adopted him he’s names chriis.the
worst teacher ever is

By some kid’

Tom enjoyed talking about taboo topics such as “farting” and “pooping”, as well as
giving his parents different professional identities. His ambivalent relationship with
his brother is revealed in the last paragraph, where he claims “chriis” (sic) has been
adopted. Interestingly, he using the pronoun “we” in connection with the adoption,
suggesting his parents and he have acted as a family unit to adopt “Chris”. The line
“the worst teacher ever is…” was where he wrote my name and then deleted it after
being told off. Another teacher Mrs Carnochan observed that particular interaction
and approved of my admonishment of Tom, saying: “You can understand that a child
might bring a teacher into their autobiography but there is an appropriate way and
they’ve got to learn how to do that.” Tom’s jokey low self-esteem is crystallised by
his signing off: “By some kid”.

In many ways, Tom reveals that what Jerome Bruner says in Acts Of Meaning
is valid:

“The first is human reflexivity, our capacity to turn around on the past and
alter the present in its light, or to alter the past in the light of the present. Neither the
past nor the present stays fixed in the face of this reflexivity. The “immense
repository” of our past encounters may be rendered salient in different ways as we
review them reflexively, or may be changed by re-conceptualisation. The second
universal is our “dazzling” intellectual capacity to envision alternatives – to conceive
of other ways of being, of acting, of striving.”12

Tom’s reflexivity is a testament to Bruner’s fundamental point: his unique
psychology means that he is frequently re-evaluating his past and present, constantly
changing the identities of himself, his brother, and his parents in his mind. The

psychological ruptures in Tom’s family perhaps necessitated this. For him, his family may have had no fixed, stable identity. Furthermore, his destabilised view of his family possibly led him to envision alternatives in much the way that Bruner suggests. Steedman in *The Tidy House* talks about the links between imaginative play and writing, seeing that writing facilitates the kind of re-conceptualisation that Bruner talks about because it enables the writer to see an event from different perspectives. She writes:

“The act of writing in childhood bears an obvious relation to the imaginative play of children – which we do know a great deal about – and its role in enabling them to see a situation from differing perspectives. But writing, unlike play, lets children watch and act from two perspectives simultaneously...”

With her project, she asked the children to think of putting themselves in the shoes of a variety of characters. Reading *The Tidy House* made me think that Tom would have definitely benefited at this juncture with writing things from his parents or his brother’s point of view. This may have helped him “unlock” his thoughts more. The piece he wrote was “locked” into his own perspective, laden with value judgements about his brother in particular.

I conducted several interviews with Tom in which he and I reflected upon the project. He spoke to me at length about the train journeys that he went on with his brother across London. He said:

“Well there’s two types of train, one is old and the other is C2C. I like them. We sometimes go to Heathrow cos erm on the Picadilly Line which is my favourite line but his favourite line is the Metropolitan and erm at Heathrow we go to see like the aeroplanes and we go in Marks and Spencers and buy like sandwiches or something to eat... when it’s winter is nice and it starts to snow we go to a place called Moor Park and it’s a station and it’s really nice and we take pictures of the train...”

After this conversation, I revised my opinions of Tom’s aesthetic sensibilities. Clearly, he enjoyed the aesthetic pleasure of the train journey; the environment of Amersham obviously pleased him as did Moor Park. The image of him and his

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brother walking around the deserted Moor Park in the snow, of the two of them sitting on the Metropolitan Line in the outer reaches of the London suburbs in the snow made me recall Thomas Hardy’s poem, *Snow in the Suburbs*. The image for me is both poetic and full of pathos; an emblem of the isolation from the parents but also imbued with a sense of salvation. Somehow the image suggests that they’ve escaped from the imprisoning nature of their parents’ dysfunctional relationship, if only temporarily.

My conversations about Tom’s mother and Tom’s writing about her were made more poignant when a year later, she died. Tom told me in an interview I conducted in March 2011 that she died from a seizure, the type of which she’d been suffering from since she was very young after a car accident. He said it was difficult now because she isn’t there to speak to: “Sometimes I think like I normally phone my mum at eight o clock...every day...and sometimes I think oh I have to phone up my mum.”

This conversation made me return to Tom’s exercise book. When writing about his parents during the first week of school, he stated that his mother had been in a coma. He wrote:

“When my mum was 10 she got run over and she was in a comma (sic) for 3 months. She shes brain and still a little now. I live with my Dad and brother my mum left when I was 10 months old.”

The story of his mother’s childhood accident is clearly a story that had circulated in his family; a narrative which had been used to explain the divorce of his parents and his mother’s illness – she suffered from epilepsy. It made me realise that Tom felt that one of the most important events that was connected to him was this accident, which apparently happened to her only a couple of years younger than he is right now. There is a sense that he has always seen his mother as permanently being a “child”.

Perhaps his reluctance to engage in autobiographical writing was somehow connected with this. However, it makes me aware that his piece about going to the Michael Sobell Centre with her is now a precious artefact because it does poetically and obliquely express his love for his mother in a powerful yet under-stated fashion.
One student who particularly flourished with this project was Charlotte, who wrote it as part of her GCSE coursework. The autobiography, because it was consciously fictionalised, fulfilled the rigid criteria needed for the “Writing to imagine, explore and entertain” part of the coursework. She handed in an autobiography which was far more detailed than anything she’d done for me before. Most importantly, it was immediately clear that all of her work was her own; she’d handed in essays before which were basically “clones” of other essays, not exactly plagiarism, but basically work which was someone else’s thoughts in her own words. Charlotte had been quite badly behaved in my lessons; she and her friend, Sophie, never stopped talking to each other, getting out their mobile phones (banned in the school), arguing if they didn’t like any tasks, bickering with other pupils, turning up late and making inappropriate remarks whenever the opportunity arose. I have taught many girls like Charlotte during my career. She was from an aspirational, working-class background, and lived in the local area, Upminster. The most noticeable thing about her was her make-up, which was plastered on her face in a thick, brown cake. It must have taken hours to put it on every day. She wore school uniform, but it was highly adapted; a very tight skirt, a figure-hugging blouse, and fancy shoes. Her manner was a curious mix of flirtatious and truculent with me – as it was with many male teachers. Her accent was strongly local and her voice could be extremely loud. It was only by working with her on this autobiographical project that my relationship with her began to improve.

When I first read the account, I actually assumed it to be true because her behaviour and demeanour in class did seem to be that of someone who was quite disturbed: clamouring for attention, very quick to take offence, poor concentration skills and so forth. I marked it quickly and was enthusiastic, saying that it could get a good mark. Charlotte was pleased but turned to me quite anxiously and said, “But sir, I lied”. I smiled and said, “Of course, you did. That was the point: to fictionalize things.” She responded by saying, “But I really lied. None of it is true.” Again I nodded, but never really believed her. It felt true to me. It wasn’t until a year later that I could quite easily see where the discourses of “soap-opera” or “misery-lit” were blended with more genuinely autobiographical discourses.
Charlotte completed a number of autobiographical pieces of writing at primary school, very much in the fashion that Jane Miller describes in her article: autobiographical writing that was carried out because it was just something “you did” at primary school. A ritualized activity to encourage writing, and little more. Charlotte told me about these activities, saying that she wrote: “about your friends and pets and stuff like that. Your hobbies. Never like a big thing, but probably small things... Yeah, when you used to come back from the summer, you used to write about what you’d done over the summer like that. Yeah, and then you’d write up about what you’d done, and then you’d read it out sometimes... I enjoyed it coz then you could share what you’d done with everyone.”

Charlotte phrase “never like a big thing, but probably small things...” indicates that these activities carried little pedagogical significance but were “small things”. Yet, it’s fascinating that Charlotte remembered many years later that she wrote about her “friends and pets and stuff like that. Your hobbies.” For such “small” things these exercises certainly stuck in her memory. It appears that autobiographical exercises are memorable in themselves, that they have their own “autobiography”, the “autobiography” of autobiographical writing.

This is possibly because they employ a discourse that’s centred on the self. Vital to acknowledge in Charlotte’s account is the second person possessive pronoun, “your” which prefaces the list that includes “friends”, “pets” and “hobbies”. The autobiographical discourse enables the writer to make links between these concrete nouns and herself, thus fostering, developing and nuturing an “emotional” connection within the language itself. Charlotte’s comment that she “enjoyed” it because “you could share what you’d done with everyone” is particularly important. Once again, she’s using the second person pronoun, in his subject form here, and linking it with the verb “share”. Charlotte is very much of the “FaceBook” generation, a teenager who is utterly at ease with sharing personal details in many contexts and situations – although not all as we will discuss in a minute. For her, the enjoyment of autobiography is making her life part of others, she enjoys making her autobiographical discourse public, thus enabling her to feel connected to other people. In such a way, autobiographical writing becomes a collective exercise, an act which
enables and engenders commonality. In such a way, you could argue that the use of autobiography in the classroom, rather than creating a sense of isolated subjectivity appears to make subjectivity visible to everyone and thus nurtures a shared sense of subjectivity.

My interview with Charlotte made me aware of the deep complexities and ironies embedded within her autobiographical piece for me. Firstly, I realize now that her fictional “traumatized” events could well have been caused by reading my own autobiographical accounts – although Charlotte didn’t confirm this. However, I feel given what she said about enjoying sharing her autobiography in her primary school, this could be a valid point to make. Charlotte appears to be someone who seeks “commonality” within the various contexts she exists in. She certainly does when she’s with her friends; for example, her inch-thick “make-up” could well be a way of finding commonality with her friend, Sophie, who is similarly bedecked. Her misery-lit fiction which, for me at least, was so carefully embedded within the real life events of her life, could well have been a way of finding commonality with my “traumatized” narrative of family break-up, bullying and unhappiness. If this is only speculative, there can be no doubt that the narrative she wrote certainly sought to find commonality with narratives she encountered on TV and in films.

Let’s look at the first extract in her autobiography where she significantly deviates from the “real-life” facts. Her accounts reads:

“One day, when I came home my older sister was there, there was a big family row and now I only see my mum, brother and my sister’s baby at the moment. My sister aged 17 had a baby, she called it Latisha and she was a beautiful little girl. However my sister didn’t want her so my mum looked after her for a few years and I liked to help. Eventually the baby was put into care my sister moved away to Ilford with her new boyfriend and I haven’t seen her since. My mum couldn’t work so she got a job in Dagenham, although she found it hard to cope with our small and cramped flat. My mum met a man who she thought she loved although that never worked out, it never did.”
I found the concision of this first sentence utterly convincing when I first read it because it was “in tune” with the prose style of the rest of the autobiography. Particularly powerful was this opening complex sentence. Her adverbial phrase “one day” was in tune with some of the generalities about time in the rest of the piece and gave the ensuing incidents a plausibility precisely because there was a vagueness about exactly when they happened. It was Charlotte’s ability to mix vagueness about time with quite specific time-frames that added to the plausibility of the narrative. Perhaps, I should have “smelled a rat” because it seems obvious to me that there is a “fairy-tale” quality to the phrase “one day”. Yet, I am still struck by Charlotte’s beautifully simple yet utterly surprising use of the connective “and” in this first sentence; having used two embedded clauses, Charlotte deploys a compound clause which uses “anaphora” to create a powerful effect; having referred to her “older sister” in the embedded phrase, Charlotte implicitly refers again to the “sister” again because she is absent from the list: “my mum, brother and my sister’s baby”. This in itself tells a powerful story and forces the reader to realize that the big sister is chief victim or casualty of the family row. Furthermore, the reference to “my sister’s baby” makes you realize that the big sister has given birth and is now separated from her child. The deadpan style has a “child-like” quality but there is a real sophisticated of thought there.

The sentences that follow are packed with action, again all recounted in the same simple prose style. Yet, there is real emotion there, particularly when the sister’s child is mentioned. She a “beautiful little girl” and Charlotte “liked” to look after her. The reference to her being put into care appears on the surface to be emotionless, but in the context of what happened before it is tinged with feeling.

In my interview with her, Charlotte told me: “Maybe you know, at the time probably, because you like there are TV programmes where people’s lives are actually like that…Cos I couldn’t really think of anything to write.”

In other words, Charlotte reached for narratives in the media in order to “dramatise” her own story. But her “translation” of media narratives into a prose “life fiction” narrative is sophisticated, providing her with a sense of a parallel or “possible” life she could have led if her circumstances were different. Thus we can see the power of
such an exercise; it enables the writer to access both their own life and other possible lives, both “real” and “imagined”.

There are real complexities in Charlotte’s attitude towards what she has written. I asked her this question: “… do you feel like your life is a disappointment because you haven’t had all this drama?”
Charlotte laughs: No, I wouldn’t have wanted any of that drama. No.
FG: How did you feel when you were writing it?
Charlotte: I would have felt, I dunno, you think you’d feel sorry for someone who had so much trauma like that in their lives at such a young age.
FG: Yeah, so it sort of helped you…
Charlotte: To feel grateful about your own life I suppose.”

My questions are “leading” here but possibly effective. When I suggested to Charlotte that the exercise “sort of helped you…” I was clearly thinking about the original intention of my thesis which was to uncover the therapeutic value of autobiography. Charlotte duly obliges when she says that the exercise helped her “feel grateful about your own life I suppose”. The adverbial phrase “I suppose” is important because it qualifies this point. Perhaps more interesting than the point I was unintentionally directing her to say was what she said previously. She said: “I would have felt, I dunno, you think you’d feel sorry for someone who had so much trauma like that in their lives at such a young age.”

Notice her use of the conditional tense here; she is quite hesitant about what she was feeling while she was writing. Her tentative elaboration of her feelings at that time embraces the complexity of knowing one’s feelings during the process of writing autobiography. She speculates that “you think you’d feel sorry for someone who had so much trauma…”. There is a sense that she is aware that she has felt empathy for her fictional “alter ego”, but this awareness of feeling empathy is tempered with a sense that she might NOT have felt this way.

Steedman’s comments upon the narratives she observed Carla, Lindie and Melissa construct in primary school in The Tidy House are relevant here. Steedman writes:
“Carla, Lindie and Melissa were able to use their particular local and personal experiences to construct meanings that have a general cultural validity. Out of their extremely limited experience they were able to draw on, and transform, a powerful set of symbols: ‘the poetic depth of the space of the house’, mothers, babies, birth. Anyone who writes creatively is after all bound to do this and to demonstrate what Carla, Lindie and Melissa did is after all to say no more than that a little language. That the particular style of spoken language that these children used is still condemned…” 14

Sadly, not much has moved on since Steedman wrote this in the early 1970s. Even Charlotte, who is from what I would characterize as an “aspirational” working class background, speaks with a strong local accent and is aware that this is not a “prestige” accent. Furthermore, her “borrowings” from media narratives to energise her autobiographical narrative are consciously “borrowings” which present her life as “lower status” rather than “higher status”. For example, she could have picked other more socially prestigious narratives from the media to “enhance” her self-image; she could have borrowed from glamorous Hollywood films where people live in huge houses and have wonderful “sexy” lives. She didn’t do this but chose instead to present herself in a much more “traumatic” light. On the surface, this might suggest that she actually has a “low self-image”, but I think it’s much more subtle than that. While there is a sense of Charlotte needing to present herself as someone with a disturbed background because she isn’t that confident, there’s also a sense that this narrative actually enhances her current “self-image”. Presenting herself as a Hollywood superstar would have meant that Charlotte would have been aware that she wasn’t those things in real life and thus would have left her feeling her life was deficient. This narrative makes Charlotte feel really grateful for what she’s got; it re-affirms her sense of self and her own “real” autobiography. Thus we could view the fictionalization of her life as an act of both “image-building”—it covertly endorses

her ‘true’ autobiography -- and “image-shattering” – it overtly presents her as of low social status.

**Drawing together the threads: my writing, Charlotte’s and Tom’s**

I believe ultimately Charlotte’s narrative was a reclamation of her own life – but this is always tempered with a deep sense of sympathetic irony. Steedman’s thoughts are worth considering here: “...writing is an elaboration of the process of language development: as a writer, a child must make continual shifts in perspective between herself as composer, herself as her audience for her writing, herself and her created characters. In the immediate act of writing, the child needs to be both herself and her created characters…”

Charlotte’s process of writing was even more complex than this because of the multiple layers involved in her merging with “real-life” events and fictional ones, and her relationship to what I had written. As has been pointed out before, there is a sense that her writing is a response to my “traumatized” narrative, an act of sympathy with the teacher, and there are also the manifold ironies of her being aware that what is represented is both her life – and not it. Thus, we could say that the intellectual processes involved in Charlotte’s narrative are distinctly more complex than those we find in *The Tidy House* and with my Year 7 pupils and Tom in particular. There is a level of “self-conscious” empathy and “image-building/shattering” in Charlotte’s writing and intellectual processes which simply isn’t there with Tom.

Of all the case studies I have examined, Charlotte’s “journey” – both in planning, writing and reflecting upon share most similar to my own. I have blended what I perceive as the “real-life” events of my life with some quite consciously “fictionalized” events.

However, the pool of narratives I have drawn from are wider and more varied than Charlotte’s. For example, Thomas Hardy’s work is quite a big influence in *Who Do You Love?* I realize now – although I wasn’t aware of this at the time of writing – that Ellida is as much Bathsheba Everdene in *Far From The Madding Crowd* as she is the

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“real-life” person I based her on. The most classic example of this in the scene when I wake up with my head in her lap after my bad drug trip. Something did happen like this in real-life (though it wasn’t this specific drug trip actually!) but the scene shares many similarities with the time when Gabriel Oak wakes up in Bathsheba Everdene’s lap after nearly choking to death from smoke in his shepherd’s hut.

Throughout my narrative there is a deep sense of my persona needing to be “rescued” from himself. This theme of “rescue” permeates Charlotte’s narrative but her perspective is different; it is the Charlotte persona who attempts to rescue the “baby Laticia” and her “older sister”. In fact, this theme is so strong that it causes Charlotte to contradict herself; earlier on in the narrative she had said that she doesn’t see her older sister anymore, but later on in the narrative, she does see her sister and is on good terms with her. In the section entitled 2002-2005, she writes:

“My sister started getting in touch again, and the older I got the more of a relationship I felt I had with her.”

These contradictions abound the last section of the narrative, entitled 2009. Charlotte writes:

“But lately things haven’t been on the up as behind my smiley personality and my happy face, I feel that maybe I have grown up too quickly…when my friends talk about their childhoods, I wonder why (sic) didn’t do this either. Coming from a broken home has made me a much stronger person.”

You could argue that there is a more sophisticated combination of thought and emotion here than there is in my “less contradictory” narrative. Charlotte is actually talking about herself when she speaks of other friends being from homes where the parents haven’t split up; she, in herself, is the “Other” in this narrative. And yet she is also the Charlotte from a “broken home” as well and this has made her a “stronger person”. Similarly, throughout Tom’s autobiographical writing, there is a sense that his mother needs to be rescued: rescued from her illness and his own memory.
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