

NONFICTION

There are many kinds of nonfiction; in this chapter the focus is on nonfiction texts that fall, at least to some extent, within the literary tradition. Nonfiction narratives are linked by the convention that they tell a story or stories about real people and actual events. However, in literary nonfiction the nature of truth often comes under scrutiny, and the writer's attempted objectivity will always include a subjective element. In nonfiction narratives, as in other narrative genres, the writer determines what to include, the order in which to relate events and the ways in which individuals, beliefs and events will be portrayed through particular word choices and imagery. Even biographies, which often aim to be detached and objective, are written from a certain perspective, which is evident in the choice of information included or, just as significantly, omitted. The more creative forms of nonfiction can draw on elements of fiction, such as characterisation and narrative structure, to fashion a compelling narrative in which there is a significant element of subjectivity and even invention.

This chapter looks at several nonfiction genres that share much with imaginative forms of literature: the portrayal of complex, engaging individuals; incidents and circumstances that are unusual and intriguing; and language that is multilayered, nuanced and evocative.

Memoir and autobiography



Autobiography is the story of the author's own life. It is usually very subjective and presents the writer's views and opinions on a range of issues, in addition to factual material.



Memoir is an account of part of the writer's life, often foregrounding the social and cultural contexts of that period.

In autobiographies and memoirs – that is, firsthand or ‘eyewitness’ accounts – the author’s recounting of the facts is influenced by their particular point of view, as well as by the fallibility of memory. The author’s purpose in writing about their life might be to give testimony, find answers, share a traumatic experience or reveal a hidden story, and this purpose can also affect how they recall or shape the account.

As the author is telling their own story, they have a great deal of creative control over the way in which it is told. They might, conventionally, begin with the earliest event and work their way through chronologically to the most recent; or they could use flashbacks and flashforwards to shift between present and past, describing events ‘out of order’. They might use a plain style and a contemplative tone, or more figurative, poetic language; they could choose to use humour, irony and a more colloquial style to entertain as well as inform their readers.

One of the best-known memoirs in Australian literature is **Clive James’ Unreliable Memoirs** (1980), which gives an account of James’ childhood in Sydney from his birth in 1939 until his departure for England at the end of 1961. James was a teenager during the 1950s, a period of growing self-confidence for the Australian nation, and his memoir captures the society and culture of a time and place, as well as his growth to early adulthood, in a way that is realistic, humorous and poignant.

Other children, most of them admittedly older than I, but some of them infuriatingly not, constructed billycarts of advanced design, with skeletal hard-wood frames and steel-jacketed ball-race wheels that screamed on the concrete footpaths like a diving Stuka [a German plane used in WWII]. The best I could manage was a sawn-off fruit box mounted on a fence-paling spine frame, with drearily silent rubber wheels taken off an old pram.

Towards the end, though, James becomes increasingly nostalgic as he reflects on the impossibility of capturing past experience as well as the material and cultural reality of an earlier time:

The longer I have stayed in England, the more numerous and powerful my memories of Sydney have grown. There is nothing like staying away for bringing it with you. I have done my best to tell the truth about what it was like, yet I am well aware that in the matter of my own feelings I have not come near meeting my aim ... Nothing I have said is factual except the bits that sound like fiction.

On the surface, Joan Didion's memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) could hardly be more different. US writer Didion describes the course of a single year, 2004, following the death of her husband, the writer John Gregory Dunne, on 30 December 2003. At that time their daughter Quintana was in intensive care, and she remained seriously ill for several weeks; in March 2004 she suffered a brain injury that required surgery and extensive rehabilitation. Yet despite the traumatic nature of the book's content – and Didion makes clear the extent of her loss and grief – her memoir is engaging, thought-provoking, life-affirming and often witty. She reflects on the years of her marriage and her close working relationship with Dunne, as well as the challenging year following his death, moving easily between present and past, humour and melancholy.

When I was clearing out a file drawer recently I came across a thick file labeled 'Planning.' The very fact that we made files labeled 'Planning' suggests how little of it we did. We also had 'planning meetings,' which consisted of sitting down with legal pads, stating the day's problem out loud, and then, with no further attempt to solve it, going out to lunch. Such lunches were festive, as if to celebrate a job well done.

Didion combines specific details of John's death and Quintana's illness with reflection and introspection, fusing the personal and the philosophical.

In Australian literature, an important form of autobiography has been Indigenous life writing. With official versions of history so often marginalising the experiences of Indigenous people, the publication of memoirs such as Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987) and Ruby Langford Ginibi's *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (1988) brought Aboriginal experiences to a mainstream non-Indigenous audience, raising awareness and contributing to a wider recognition of Indigenous rights.

Diaries and journals

Many people keep diaries and journals, though seldom with the intention to publish them. Nevertheless, when the writer or their experiences (or both) are of broader public interest, a diary can provide valuable insights into its writer's life and times, as well as having literary value. Samuel Pepys' *Diary* begins on 1 January 1660, and much of its interest lies in its account of the Great Plague of London (1665–66) and the Great Fire of London (September 1666). Pepys' lively descriptions also provide a firsthand account of London's social life at this time. Likewise, English playwright and novelist Frances 'Fanny' Burney's journals and letters, written between 1768 and her death in 1840 but not published until the late 1800s, show her flair for observation and description while conveying details of the household and society in which she lived.

When the historical and cultural context in which a diary is written is of special interest, the intensely personal, often confessional mode of a diary becomes even more affecting. The diary of Anne Frank, a Dutch Jewish girl whose family went into hiding during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands in the 1940s, was only published after World War II ended, when Anne's father, Otto, was the family's sole surviving member. Published in English in 1952 as *The Diary of a Young Girl*, the diary's personal and intimate style conveys the author's growing maturity and insight as well as the tragedy of her circumstances. Translated into more than seventy languages, the diary has reached a massive global readership and become one of the most moving testimonies of the war.

The diaries and journals of respected authors can offer insight into the creative process, as well as having value as literature in their own right. Virginia Woolf's *A Writer's Diary* (1953) comprises extracts from her journals that focus on her novel-writing: in his review for the *New Yorker* magazine, poet WH Auden declared he had 'never read any book that conveyed more truthfully what a writer's life is like, what are its worries, its rewards, its day-by-day routine'.

War memoirs

An important subgenre of memoir comprises recollections of wartime experiences. Many writers have enlisted as soldiers and felt that giving an account of their experiences was an important form of testimony, particularly when official accounts of conflict tended to be more celebratory or to glorify

war. The horrific circumstances of trench warfare in World War I (1914–18) were not widely known by the public at that time, and in the years following the war a number of now-acclaimed memoirs were published. There were also novels based strongly on their authors' wartime experiences, such as Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and, from the German perspective, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, both published in 1929.

Robert Graves joined the British army at the start of World War I and was seriously wounded in 1916 in the Battle of the Somme. His memoir *Goodbye to All That* (1929) includes an unflinching account of trench warfare and its huge cost to human life:

We had no blankets, greatcoats, or waterproof sheets, nor any time or material to build new shelters. The rain poured down. Every night we went out to fetch in the dead of the other battalions. The Germans continued indulgent and we had few casualties. After the first day or two the corpses swelled and stank. I vomited more than once while superintending the carrying.

The war had initially seemed largely unthreatening – ‘over by Christmas at the outside’ – but even after it became bogged down in trench warfare, and thousands of lives could be lost in a single day of fighting, Graves notes the public’s ignorance and continued patriotic enthusiasm:

England looked strange to us returned soldiers. We could not understand the war-madness that ran wild everywhere, looking for a pseudo-military outlet. The civilians talked a foreign language; and it was newspaper language.

Graves, like his fellow soldiers Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, wrote war poetry that confronted readers of the time with the horrors of the war, but the physical details and matter-of-fact style of this memoir make it an essential account of the soldiers’ experiences, stripped of ideology and glamour.

Similarly, after World War II the realities of the Holocaust become known to the wider world through memoirs such as *If This Is a Man* (published in Italian in 1947) by Italian Jewish writer and chemist Primo Levi, and *Night* (published in French in 1955) by Romanian writer Elie Wiesel, who was deported to the Auschwitz concentration camp with his family when he was fifteen.

Biography



A **biography** is the story of a person's life, usually from childhood until at least middle age, written by the **biographer**.

Most biographies are written in a formal style and with a high degree of objectivity and balance. In order to present a fair and accurate portrayal of the subject, a biographer will carry out a great deal of research, reading published documents and personal correspondence as well as conducting interviews. The biographer's sources are important, and a comprehensive biography will include details of where specific information was found.

A biography will describe the subject's date and place of birth, family background, early life, education, professional life, personal relationships, major achievements and contributions to society. It will include important social and historical events and give a sense of the subject's place in history or in a particular field. Although in telling the story of its subject's life a biography usually moves chronologically, from birth until late adulthood, it can also have nonlinear elements. A biographer might, for instance, move forwards in time to explain how a childhood event had an effect later in life. They might choose to begin the narrative with an incident in the subject's adult life, before moving back to their birth or their parents' meeting.

Patrick White: A Life, David Marr's 1991 biography of Australian novelist and playwright Patrick White, begins conventionally, with the marriage of White's parents, and ends with White's death. Yet Marr often moves forwards and backwards in time, sometimes giving historical context and sometimes showing the impact of an event or decision on White's later life.

In London it was [White's mother] Ruth who chose the curious name Patrick for their son ... in Australia at this time Patricks were Irish servants, Labor politicians and Catholic priests ... It was bound to cause some confusion and in later years White was sometimes put with Yeats, Shaw and O'Neill on the list of Irish writers who had won the Nobel Prize, but this Patrick had not a drop of Irish blood.

At many points, Marr notes where a person or incident from White's life was used, perhaps decades later, in one of White's works; quotes from the novels are incorporated within the life story. In this way, Marr connects the life and the work, showing how White drew on and reworked his life experiences to create his novels and plays.

Essays



An essay is a work of prose that presents a point of view on a particular topic. It can vary in length from a few hundred words to several thousand.

Although the academic essay is generally regarded as a dry, impersonal, formal and often formulaic piece of writing, the essay form is much more flexible and versatile than this. The term 'essay' was first used to describe this type of writing by Michel de Montaigne (1533–92), a French nobleman who retired at the age of thirty-seven to devote himself to reading, reflection and writing. The French word *essai* means an attempt or a trial, and Montaigne's essays exemplify a spirit of inquiry – self-inquiry, as well as reflections on wider questions of ethics and the human condition.

In a note 'To the Reader' prefacing the *Essays* (first published in French in 1580), Montaigne declares that 'I myself am the subject of my book', but in fact his subjects range widely and he draws on a variety of sources. He frequently quotes from classical Roman poets such as Ovid, Petrarch, Virgil and Cicero, refers to ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates and Plato, and relates anecdotes from his own and others' experiences.

In 'On the Cannibals', Montaigne reflects on notions of what is considered savage or barbaric, suggesting that such judgements often simply reflect a person's sense of what is familiar and 'normal', rather than anything inherently 'bad' or 'wrong' about the people or cultures being labelled in this way. He begins by referring to an account of (Greek) King Pyrrhus encountering the Roman army and declaring, 'I do not know what kind of Barbarians these are' – the Romans were not generally considered 'barbarians', so the term is immediately thrown into question. Montaigne next describes one of his employees ('a simple, rough fellow ... a good witness') who 'stayed some ten or twelve years' in Brazil and observed the culture of the indigenous people who, at times, ate the flesh of their war victims. This introduces the essay's main subject – the cannibals of the title – but Montaigne then digresses to reflect on other, seemingly unrelated questions. Montaigne's musings are often presented as random chains of thought, but they always have a point and a place within an unfolding argument. In other words, he might say the equivalent of 'but I digress ...', but this is simply a signal to the reader that they should see the various parts of his argument as contributing to the whole.



Now to get back to the subject, I find (from what has been told to me) that there is nothing savage or barbarous about those peoples, but that every man calls barbarous anything he is not accustomed to; it is indeed the case that we have no other criterion of truth or right-reason than the example and form of the opinions and customs of our own country.

Although the culture of the indigenous Brazilian people is at the heart of the essay, Montaigne also considers such varied topics as the extent of unknown lands yet to be discovered by Europeans, and the nature of true bravery and victory in battle. Yet all these discussions work together to suggest that our knowledge is never as certain as it may seem; there is always a contrasting perspective, another way to consider things. Above all, Montaigne condemns hypocrisy – the failure to apply the same standards of judgement to ourselves as we apply to others:

It does not sadden me that we should note the horrible barbarity in a practice such as theirs: what does sadden me is that, while judging correctly of their wrong-doings we should be so blind to our own.

This blend of the personal and the analytical, the anecdotal and the scholarly, the whimsical and the serious, is typical of Montaigne's approach to the essay.

Since Montaigne, there have been many renowned essayists, and they have deployed structure, style and tone in various ways to achieve their purpose. More recently, published collections of essays for the general reader often have a strong first-person voice; and, when essays investigate a topical issue, they can overlap or merge with journalism.

American writer **Joan Didion** began her career when she won an essay-writing competition run by *Vogue* magazine, and her first nonfiction book, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968), was a collection of essays that had been published in magazines such as *Vogue* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. Didion is often associated with the New Journalism movement of the 1960s and 1970s (see page 190), and her work fuses literary techniques with reportage and investigation. While in some essays the subject is largely Didion herself, in others she takes the role of a reporter who observes and records, while also making her own status as an interested observer part of the story. In 'California Dreaming' (included in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*) she writes about the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, a Californian think tank:

I have long been interested in the Center's rhetoric, which has about it the kind of ectoplasmic generality that always makes me sense I am on the track of the real soufflé, the genuine American kitsch, and not so long ago I arranged to attend a few sessions in Santa Barbara. It was in no sense time wasted.

As this quotation shows, Didion's style features long, complex sentences (balanced judiciously by short ones for added impact); metaphorical language; and a certain ironic, sometimes sceptical, tone. It is sincere, yet with a playful, amused note under the surface that keeps the reader engaged and entertained at the same time as they are being enticed into forming a more thoughtful view of the world.

Extended essays

Many writers have used the general approach of an essay but extended it into a book-length piece of writing. This can be effective when the writer seeks to develop a complex argument about a major social or ideological concern.

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) is an extended essay developed from lectures she gave at the women's colleges of Newnham and Girton at the University of Cambridge in 1928. Woolf argues that the literary tradition has been dominated by men for hundreds of years due to the oppression of women within patriarchal societies, a situation that can only be redressed if women are able to have more time and space in which to write. She also surveys the work of female writers, such as Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters and George Eliot (the pen name of Mary Ann Evans), creating the sense that there is a strong female tradition of writing already in existence.

Although *A Room of One's Own* presents an argument and is essentially factual, Woolf incorporates fictional elements and literary qualities. She invents an 'extraordinarily gifted sister' for William Shakespeare and uses a style rich with imagery and complex sentences, even when describing a simple scene of 'sitting on the banks of a river':

To the right and left bushes of some sort, golden and crimson,
glowed with the colour, even it seemed burnt with the heat, of fire.
On the further bank the willows wept in perpetual lamentation,
their hair about their shoulders. The river reflected whatever it
chose of sky and bridge and burning tree ...

A Room of One's Own thus takes its place within the literary tradition – exploratory and inventive in its language as well as its ideas.