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### **Reading the eating disorder memoir as food writing**

#### **ABSTRACT**

*As examples of popular literature, food writing texts are more than practical manuals of culinary education. They are important but relatively unexplored narratives, which serve a range of purposes and contain significant cultural insights. These narratives can reveal what factors were shaping a society, how social roles have changed (and what was driving that change), as well as the personal stories of the individuals who wrote these texts. Memoirs of anorexia, bulimia and other eating disorders have attracted considerable popular, critical and scholarly attention as life writing, and these memoirs have also been noted by, and incorporated into, the medical and psychological discourse on eating disorder. Rarely, if ever, however, have these memoirs been read, categorized or discussed as a form of food writing. Surveying the eating disorder memoir in this way contributes to our understanding of food writing as well as the production of these texts.*

#### **KEYWORDS**

popular literature  
food writing  
illness memoir  
eating disorder memoir  
life writing

#### **INTRODUCTION: READING EATING DISORDER MEMOIRS**

This paper focuses on a distinctive kind of popular literature: personal memoirs that narrate experiences of eating disorder. It recognizes that memoirs of anorexia, bulimia and other eating disorders have attracted considerable popular, critical and scholarly attention as niche genres of life writing, and have also been noted by, and incorporated into, the medical and psychological discourse on eating disorder. It works from this recognition to propose that, given the sustained interest in food they contain, these texts can also be considered as a specialist form of food writing, and particularly, of the food memoir (Waxman 2008, Brien 2011). In order to explore this proposition, this

discussion investigates what these narratives share with food memoirs as well how they differ from them. Considered in this way, these memoirs can reveal much more than the personal stories of the individuals who authored these texts.

Recognizing the considerable body of culturally-focused research into eating disorders (Fallon, Katzman and Wooley 1996, Katzman 1997a, 1997b, Sing 2000), this discussion links memoirs of eating disorder to related popular culture research around memoirs as popular literature, and also to eating disorder in terms of the debate around whether models, celebrities and their presentation in advertising and the media promotes eating disorder (Holstrom 2004) and pro-anorexia (so-called “thin-aspiration”) websites (Reaves 2001, Dias 2013), although not exploring these linkages herein.

### **EATING DISORDER MEMOIRS**

I first read Maya Hornbacher’s *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia* (1998) more than a decade ago. At that time, I read this beautifully written but often harrowing personal story as a trauma/survivor memoir, and mentally categorized it with other mental illness memoirs, a category of life narrative of which there were then a number of high profile examples in print. These illness memoirs included Patty Duke’s *A Brilliant Madness: Living with Manic-depressive Illness* (1992), Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted* (1993) about her institutionalization with bipolar disorder, Elizabeth Wurtzel’s *Prozac Nation* (1993) on her depression, and Lauren Slater on suffering epilepsy, borderline personality, bipolar disorders and autism in *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* (2000). At the time, I was aware that *Wasted* was not the first memoir about disordered eating, but it was certainly the most visible, making *The New York Times* bestseller list in its year of publication, being translated into 16 languages, and going through numerous reprint editions. *Wasted* also launched the literary career of its author, with Hornbacher going onto write other books narrating other episodes of disordered eating and other mental illness (2008, 2010, 2011).

Although it had precursors, some of which were exceptionally well received (see Geneen Roth’s *Feeding the Hungry Heart: The Experience of Compulsive Eating* (1982) – a volume that is still in print), *Wasted* can now clearly be seen as the inspiration for a series of contemporary memoirs that chronicle personal narratives of eating disorders. Using popularly used, rather than medical, terms, these memoirs can basically be divided into narratives of anorexia, bulimia and/or compulsive overeating

and/or dieting narratives, although many of these memoirs contain more than one of these eating problems. While there are examples, and studies, of narratives of extreme fasting as far back as the medieval period (Brumberg 2000, Stacey 2003, Vandereycken 1994), the ‘modern’ eating disorder memoir can be seen to begin with works published in the late 1970s. Aimee Liu’s *Solitaire: A Memoir of Anorexia* (published by prestigious American publishers Harper & Row in 1979) is one of the earliest examples of this group, and has been kept in print during the ensuing decades. The research of which this study is part has, to date, located some 200 of these first person memoirs published in English in the United States of America, Canada, United Kingdom and Australasia from Lui onwards, although this search is still ongoing.

Many are autobiographical memoirs, written by the subject about their own story, while others are biographical, charting the story of another protagonist. Many autobiographical memoirs of eating disorder are written by young women, but writers of these narratives also include older women and males. A significant subset comprises biographical memoirs written by close family members or therapists. A number of texts are also the result of collaborative effort on the part of the individual with an eating disorder working with a co-author – again this is most usually a close family member or therapist. A number of memoirs are authored by medical professionals, who include first person memoir case studies as key components of their narratives. Some are penned by celebrities, but many are not. While most memoirists produce only one volume of their story, others have written and published multiple volumes about both their eating disorders and other life issues.

## **FOOD MEMOIRS OF DISORDERED EATING**

*Wasted’s* success focused media and reader notice on memoirs of eating disorders, and they were also noted by health professionals. These texts are quoted alongside statistics in medical studies of eating disorder, and sometimes set in courses for medical student and trainee psychologists and dieticians. Digital autobiographical narratives of eating disorder (in weblogs and other formats) have also attracted the attention of scholars in terms of whether they are dangerous in terms of triggering or encouraging disordered eating behaviours (Lavis 2011). These memoirs have, however, more slowly attracted critical and scholarly attention as a specific sub-set of life writing, when they have most often been read as a form of illness narrative, a category of narratives which Elaine Showalter has noted is identified with women writers (Wagner 2012: 321), and

are sometimes dismissed as of little significance or interest (Atlas 1996, Zacharek 1997).

Even more rarely, if ever, have the often sustained and sometimes intense narratives about food in these memoirs been read, categorized or discussed as a form of food writing. Nor have these memoirs been considered as a form of the food memoir. Yet, the connection to these memoirists and other culinary professionals clearly exists. In *Wasted*, Hornbacher identifies this, writing: ‘Some people who are obsessed with food become gourmet chefs. Others get eating disorders’ (Hornbacher 2006; 1998: 13). Fascinatingly, the terms Hornbacher and other memoirists use to describe themselves – in terms of their eating disorders and as writers – is common to many food writing chefs and others – ‘we are often extreme people, highly competitive, incredibly self-critical, driven, perfectionistic, tending towards excess’ (6). All these individuals channel this ‘drive, perfectionism, ambition, and an excess of general intensity’ (Hornbacher: 6) into food – but in this case into cultivating and maintaining an eating disorder instead of the types of professional and/or self-actualising projects narrated in many food memoirs. These include narratives of running a restaurant (Febbrioriello 2003), becoming a pastry chef (Jurgensen 2009), training to be a butcher (Powell 2009), or living for a year on food grown at home (Kingsolver 2007).

In eating disorder food memoirs, these character traits of perfectionism, ambition and intensity are not only channelled into food, but also into the act of writing, and the process of becoming, and/or being, a writer. Hornbacher writes: ‘I am not a doctor or a professor or an expert or a pundit. I am a writer ... I do research. I read. I talk to people. I look around. I think’ (7). In *Being Ana: A Memoir of Anorexia Nervosa* (2010), ShaniRaviv declares ‘I believed in my writing talent. I always knew in the back of my mind that I wanted to write a book, but I never knew it would be a book about my life’ (xi). Jena Morrow writes ‘since I was old enough to hold a pencil and form words, writing has always been my way or responding to a world that at once scares and overwhelms me, surprises and delights me’ (2010: 18). There are many other examples.

This paper asserts that eating disorder memoirs are, moreover, although-provoking example of food narrative, as they both resemble, and differ from, the food memoir more generally. Although many follow the now commonly recognized triumphal memoir narrative arc, in this case from illness to cure, these narratives do not

provide an unremitting series of accounts of success and triumph. Although, like many illness narratives, many eating disorder memoirs involve therapy and tell tales of (and sometimes multiple instances of) recovery, these narratives also reflect the high relapse rates for the disorder (Goldstein 2005: 91). A number of these eating disorder memoirs indeed contain postscripts of regression into ‘bad’ eating habits, and some even of the death of the writer after the narrative ends. A number of those that end in seeming success, moreover, like *Wasted*, are then followed by a sequel or other revelation that reveals this recovery did not last.

### COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES

The most obvious commonality is that eating disorder memoirs, in common with other food memoirs, dedicate a considerable proportion of text to discussions of food. Those suffering from eating disorders do eat, and devote considerable amounts of text to musing on foods. Certain foods occupy a special place in these narratives. In the food memoir, writers discuss such foods as the meals of their childhoods (often recounted with nostalgia, but sometimes with scorn) as well as the then current gourmet or ‘foodie’ staples (which would today include such foodstuffs as heirloom tomatoes, artisanal bread, cruelty-free meat, free-range eggs and organic fruits and vegetables). In the eating disorder memoir, it is the foods that sufferers either allow (or do not allow) themselves to eat that take prominence in the narratives. Some of these are expected, with lettuce, carrots, salads, apples, tuna in water, diet (low fat/low calorie) foods, black tea and coffee, and diet soft drinks all regularly recurring. Other foods consumed are more surprising, such as jarred baby food and orange juice soaked cotton wool. In *Bitter Ice: A Memoir of Love, Food, and Obsession*, Barbara Ken Lawrence details her own search for identity while living for 27 years with her husband’s anorexia and bulimia. Lawrence’s husband has one notable dietary habit, which the author alludes to in the title – eating ice – and describes in poetic, but distressing, detail:

Ice was a substitute for food, and frozen water gave Tom the illusion both that he was eating and that he was not drinking the water that he feared would make him bloat. ... While I was working [in our shared office], while I was on the phone, all day long he would pull ice cubes out and crunch. I heard the crunching constantly, like an ice cutter cutting through the frozen arctic, a

thousand Cicadas underfoot, squeezing Styrofoam – a sound like suicide as he substituted frozen water for food (1999: 4).

In common with other food memoirs, the eating disorder memoir contains detailed discussions of flavour and the sense of taste. In *Wasted*, Hornbacher describes her desire for flavour sensation: ‘You want to taste something all the time. You chew gum, you eat roll after roll of sugar-free Certs, you crush Tic-Tacs (just one and a half calories each!)’ (105). As in other food memoirs, the eating disorder food writer also searches for satisfying flavour combinations. As Hornbacher continues, ‘You want things to taste *intense* ... You pour salt and pepper on things. You eat bowls of sugar coated cereal (no fat). You put honey and raisins on your *rice*’ (105), but in this, often describes food categories that make sense only to the writer.

There are systems of Safe Foods, foods not imbued, or less imbued, with monsters and devils and dangers. These are usually ‘pure’ foods, less likely to taint the soul with such sins as fat, or sugar, or an excess of calories. ... I would have a hard time putting into words the passion we have for our systems (Hornbacher 245-6).

Further examples can be found in many memoirs.

Also in common with many food memoirs, consumption rituals are important, although in this case, it is the size of the meal, the number of calories, and the number or size of bites, number of chews or amount of time taken to consume and then process, the food in question which is paramount. Actor Portia de Rossi describes a similar typical evening’s meal:

I had eaten my 60-calorie portion of tuna normally, using chopsticks and allowing each bit of canned fish to be only the height and width of the tips of the chopsticks themselves. After dinner, I smoked cigarettes to allow myself the time I needed to digest the tuna properly and to feel the sensation of fullness (5).

Lawrence’s husband similarly puts ‘almost nothing’ on his plate for Christmas lunch: ‘a tight little circle of a piece of broccoli followed by a teaspoon of gravy over a mushroom and morsel of turkey’ (17).

Then there is also unordered, unsafe eating – akin to the food memoirist admitting to having a secret yen for fast or highly processed foods – although in this

case it is not the food in question which is the focus of the writing. It is, rather, the amount or way that food is eaten. De Rossi thus continues to describe how, after eating that evening's (Monday's) portion, she binges on 170 calories of yogurt: 'Before I knew it, I was on the kitchen floor cradling the plastic Tupperware containing Tuesday's portion in the palm of my left hand, my right hand thumb and index finger stabbing into the icy crust (7). In fourth grade, home alone, seeking 'solace in front of the refrigerator' Hornbacher binge eats: 'I melted cheese on toast and ate. And more cheese, more toast. Cereal. Mushrooms fried in butter and brandy. Filling the mouth, the hole in my heart, the endless hours with the numb stupor of food' (41). Many other memoirists describe binges, including Lawrence's descriptions of her husband's actions after his minimal family Christmas meal:

If I went into the kitchen, I would find him, his hands sunk into the turkey like a frenzied gynaecologist, tearing it to pieces, stuffing the meat in his mouth, clawing at the cranberry sauce, smearing it over his lips, pushing wads of potato into his mouth, swallowing as fast as he could so he would not choke on the food (19).

In common with many other food memoirists, self-described 'food addict', Gary Marino describes at length how foods were at the centre of his family life, and how his sense of self and identity revolved around social rituals of eating (2004).

Other memoirists reveal how overeating can also be a form of defiant attention seeking, which, in these cases has some similarities to how competitive eaters describe their eating—another sub-set of the food memoir – (Fagone 2006, Nerz 2006). However, in the case of the eating disorder memoir, this almost manic consumption is written in the same tone as many celebratory food memoirs. Hornbacher describes how as a girl,

My night-time baby sitter would watch me and laugh as I boasted, I bet you I can eat this entire loaf of bread. ... Determined, I would start popping bread in the toaster, heart pumping. I remember the toast, the butter I spread on it. The crunch of toast against teeth and caress of butter on tongue (43).

In this case, Hornbacher's delight is magnified by the secret purging that occurs afterwards. This passage thus continues: 'Locking the bathroom door, turning the water on, leaning over the toilet, throwing up in a heave of delight' (43).

There are also numerous personalized rituals around food, as firm as any for fine dining or elaborate cookery. Laura Moisin describes a common activity – of handling and breaking food apart (in her case muffins) – buying, storing and then destroying them with the same absorption and attention that other food memoirists describe preparing complicated dishes (2008). Hornbacher describes in painful detail:

I would spread my paper out in front of me, set the [fat-free peanut butter-flavoured] yogurt aside, and check my watch. I would read the same sentence over and over, to prove that I could sit in front of food without snaring it up, to prove it was no big deal. When five minutes had passed, I would start to skim my yogurt. ... You take the edge of your spoon and run it over the top of the yogurt, being careful to get only the melted part. Then let the yogurt drip off until there is only a sheen of it on the spoon. Lick it—wait, be careful, you have to only lick a teeny bit at a time, the sheen should last at least four or five licks, and you have to lick the back of the spoon first, then turn the spoon over and lick the front, with the tip of your tongue. Then set the yogurt aside. Read a full page, but don not look at the yogurt to check the melt progression. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. Do not take a mouthful, do not eat any of the yogurt unless it is melted (225).

This passage vividly ends with Hornbacher's summary statement: 'Picture a starving dog, gnawing and licking at a dry bone' (225).

Like other food memoirists, eating disorder memoirists also pay attention to, and describe, what others eat. In *My Rory: A Personal Journey Through Teenage Anorexia*, Alyssa Biederman writes: 'I would watch my friends and other thin girls eating cookies at lunch along with fries and could not understand it. They were thin!' (2005: 82). Despite this concern with others, there is also a relentless self-absorption in these memoirs that a number of readers and reviewers find narcissistic, tedious and/or annoying (see, for instance, Gass 1994) – a not uncommon observation among critics of memoir more generally. What is interesting, and perhaps quite distinctive in the eating disorder memoir, is that some writers recognise this in themselves. They see their lives as stories and can be critical of the parts they see themselves playing in them. Hornbacher certainly does:

Eating disorders, on any level, are a crutch. They are also an addiction and an illness, but there is no question at all that they are quite simply a way of avoiding the banal, daily, itchy pain of life. Eating disorders provide a little private drama, they feed into the desire for constant excitement, everything becomes life-or-death, everything is

very grand and crashing ... And they are distracting. You do not have to think about any of the nasty minutiae of the real world ... because you are having a *real* drama, not a sitcom but at GRAND EPIC, all by yourself ... you are having the *most interesting* sado-masochistic affair with your own image (280-1, italics and capitals in original).

While the above has focused on commonalities, while noting some dissimilarities, there are also some key differences that can be identified between the eating disorder memoir and food memoir more generally. One of these is that these writers, almost without exception, frame their narratives in terms of providing assistance to others – a strategy they have in common with other illness narratives. Thus Hornbacher writes: ‘I would do anything to keep people from going where I went. Writing this book was the only thing I could think of’ (7). Susan Blech directly addresses the reader in *Confessions of a Carb Queen*: ‘I’ have written this book ... because for a long time I felt very alone, and no one should feel that alone and scared and ashamed ... I am sharing my life with you’ (vii). This is not to suggest that an intensely personal search for answers does not also characterize these memoirs. It does and can, indeed, be read as a central theme of these eating disorder memoirs. In *Starving: A Personal Journey through Anorexia*, Christie Pettit clearly brings the two threads of helping others plus seeking self-understanding together: ‘As part of my recovery, I have felt a strong desire to help others ... I must try to make sense of the anorexic experience, both for myself and my fellow sufferers’ (2003: 44).

## CONCLUSION

These two kinds of memoir – the generic food memoir and the sub-set discussed here, the eating disorder memoir – have much in common but also notable differences. While this discussion has begun to tease out their similarities and suggest some of the places where they diverge, it is hoped that further examination of this and other sub-genres of memoir will ensue. Such investigation both contributes to our understanding of popular literature as a category of writing as well as the texts themselves, their authors, and the circumstances and implications of their production and consumption.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sincere thanks to the reviewers of this paper and the editors of this collection for their insightful and generous suggestions. The research reported in this paper was funded by

the Learning and Teaching in Education Research Centre at Central Queensland University.

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### SUGGESTED CITATION

Brien, D. L. (2013), 'Reading the eating disorder memoir as food writing', *Peer Reviewed Proceedings of the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand (PopCAANZ)*, Brisbane, Australia, 24-26 June, 2013, P. Mountfort (ed), Sydney: PopCAANZ, pp.91-102. Available from <http://popcaanz.com/conference-proceedings-2013/>.