

## Memory's Constant Flux

*Stop the Clock: Writers and the Perception of Time* saw the writers Ekow Eshun and Hilary Mantel and the psychologist Douwe Draaisma gather to discuss the role of memory in writing. They were chaired by Steven Rose, a neuroscientist more used to studying memory in mice than in memoirs. This sideways slant set the tone for the evening, which was thoughtful and thought-provoking on the degree of 'truth' that can be achieved in – or expected or required of – a memoir.

Draaisma framed the debate by explaining (referring to but not reading from his books *Metaphors of Memory* and *Why Life Speeds Up As You Get Older*) the ways in which things remembered are subject to the values and perceptions the individual holds at the moment of remembering; and thereby are subject to constant change. If all memory is constantly reassessed and changed by the present, there can be no 'false' memory. Draaisma noted that novelists, in knowing and utilising this fact, are decades ahead of the psychologists who traditionally set would-be empirical experiments to establish 'true' and 'false' memory.

The Purcell Room audience was treated to an accomplished reading by Mantel of three excerpts from her memoir *Giving Up the Ghost*, rich in the smells, tastes, sensations and fears of early childhood; and to a slightly less fluent reading by Eshun from *Black Gold of the Sun* – childhood again, but more obviously overlaid with the social inferences drawn from racism and bullying in 1970s British schools, and by the sardonic distance that the adult gaze can give.

Primed by Draaisma's comments, the audience during both readings was conscious of the distortions wrought by the act of recollecting such moments from the position of an adult: humour, an appreciation of the absurd, the quest to rationalise actions and reactions. Mantel's account seemed closer to a pure transcription of the child's sensations and experience, but as Rose commented, the beauty of the language in which the memories are framed and the careful grooming of each word revealed she had crafted the account using the skills of an adult and experienced novelist.

In both novel and autobiography, the panel agreed, accuracy is irrelevant. Autobiographical memory is concerned with recording the process of change and development, not with facts. In Eshun's words, 'emotional honesty' or the ability to remain true to the feelings of the time is key.

Draaisma proposed that the facts of youth can be seen *more* clearly through the greater understanding and perception gained with greater age. Many who had experienced poverty in childhood, he recounted, do not recognise poverty in their remembered feelings about that time: it is only with hindsight that they acknowledge it. Put another way, 'before colour TV, no one had black and white TV, they just had TV'.

Memory cannot begin until we are aware of someone else's focus on us or in relation to us, according to Mantel. But Freud had pointed out that in so many people's 'first memories' the subject is viewed as if from outside – with the implication that this is merely an acquired memory. Mantel's own first memory, of her mother taking a photograph of her in her pram, is reinforced by the writer having later held that picture in her hands. But her memory of the imagined monkey of her early years is as strong as her memory of the actual pavement she walked on when she thought of the monkey – so that a memory of something imagined has as much weight for Mantel as the memory of something real.

For Eshun, the spur to writing his memoir was the question posed since early childhood, 'But where are you *really* from?' The facts he had taken to be true – where he lived, the structures of his life – were constantly called into question, so he remembers from an early age realising that nothing is solid or permanent. Everything is subject to change and varied interpretation. This, he claimed, bred in him the tendency to step back and view things as if from the outside.

The audience, men and women dressed in the manner of mature students, writers and academics with a scattering of smart older literati, listened intently and followed up with intelligent and searching questions. What senses most provoke memory – is fear a major spur to remembering? If the things remembered are sometimes hard and will become known, what is the temptation to censor yourself as you write? Having written about those memories, is the writer then able to 'finish' with them?

When Mantel works with people new to writing, she revealed, she asks them what they felt or smelled at some point in the past. This changes memory from mundane facts to a dramatic unlocking of sensation. For Draaisma, the taste of childhood food sparked Proustian moments. Eshun, however, views 'the hard things' as more interesting and challenging. If he is reluctant to or cannot remember something, he is intrigued. Is there a reason he's blotting out the memory? He registered the intense, sometimes angry, reaction his family gave to his book, explaining it as his memory of the past being different to theirs. They have suppressed or altered memory differently to him. Yet Eshun says he is also trying to go beyond personal vulnerability to try to say something that resonates more universally.

Mantel claimed to have felt more exposed by people reading her novels. Since a novel is constructed as the memories and thoughts of its characters, channelled through her as author, she is nervous of what is unconsciously revealed there. With her memoir, she 'owned' all the memories, and was thus more conscious of what she was saying about herself.

Most of us would now accept that memory is not absolute but a work in progress. Other species remember only themselves; humans are the only species who 'recollect', and memoirs, even intensely personal ones like Mantel's, are also records of the people and social history of the time. One questioner stated that British autobiography is currently stuck in two modes: a rose-glow memory of society of the 1950s; or the miserable Irish childhood and doubted whether a value system could honestly be revisited with hindsight. Mantel concluded that memory is 'a branch of ethics'. In talking about and sharing memories, humans evolve the patterns of behaviour that become a society's value system.

The panel stepped up to the mark on these issues and concluded a brisk hour and 20 minutes that left us all with even bigger questions – if a person is not articulate, for example, how can they frame their memories? Psychologists have a new technique of interrogating memory, which itself can change and warp memory. Do memoirs then have the capacity to be more truthful, being self-generated?

But it was time for book-buying and -signing. For anyone wanting to mine their own memory creatively, it felt a shame not to carry on the fascinating and fruitful discussion. An even greater shame was that the venue was little more than half full, though the ticket price of £8.50, expensive compared to other venues and to the free events in the series, may have explained that.

**Douwe Draaisma, Ekow Eshun and Hilary Mantel**  
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