

Anecdultery

... about fact, faction & fiction

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"When are you going to write the book about how you write stories?" asks an 8 year old.

"An autobiography?"

"Yeah."

"Never."

"Tell us about how you wrote the hippo on the roof, I might read it if it was funny," says the 8 year old and wanders off.

This is my dilemma.

That 8 year old didn't say the bit about the hippo and being funny. I put that in for dramatic contrast. Authors don't actually lie, they just embellish. And after they've told an anecdote a few times, they can't distinguish the raw material from the "doctored" dramatised version. Is it dramatic licence or lying? Fiction or fraud? Creativity or crime?

Anecdultery it has been called. Children's authors are good at it. Embellishing and re-telling stories.

"When did you start reading?" is a frequent question on author visits to schools and conferences.

My usual answer is, "Before I went to school. My grandma taught me."

Now I think that is true. But I'm not absolutely sure about any early fact now. Certainly my grandmother read to me daily, as due to early working parents, she was my minder before and after school. I can remember being disappointed with the first day at school because they wouldn't let me take the new library books home. I'd been looking forward to a new supply of stories as I knew all my very Baptist Grandma's Biblical stories and the "missionary" serials about Fijian and Chinese converts were "gory" and I had to pretend to need to go to the toilet to miss the bloodthirsty bits. Grandma was convinced I had a weak bladder.

I can also remember a teacher "Miss Hugo" from Grade 2 who yelled at me, accusing me of lying. Because I'd read all the beginners' books within the classroom library, I'd been permitted to "borrow" one book from the Grade 2 shelves in the classroom next door. I chose carefully at 3.30pm and returned it the next day to Miss Hugo. She couldn't believe I had read it over night and yelled at me for "lying."

"How dare you say you read this book last night. You're a liar! And you know what happens to little girls who tell lies."

Certainly I knew all the Biblical odds about breaking the Ten Commandments. I never went near her classroom library shelves again, but it didn't stop my readaholism.

I remember her as an alarmingly large woman with a shelf of a bosom. Coincidentally when I was 17, I recognised her on a city tram. I was now taller. She was tiny, but still with a shelf-like bosom which I imagined stacked with unread library books.

Authors have always claimed dramatic licence to "play around" with events so the published stories are more interesting for the reader or viewer. I'm not just talking facts, such as dates here but more a matter of interpretation.

Unlike sportspeople who can measure how far or fast they run or swim, author's challenges and viewpoints are unmeasurable except by fans and their questions.

After running workshops on "Writing a Non Boring Family History" for ages (not good on specific dates) I'm aware of the dangers of egotistical exercises in chronological boredom which pass as autobiographies. Especially (shipping) lists of "begats" i.e. who married or didn't marry, the children's names and when they died. Dead boring stuff.

Also I'm conscious of how relatives re-invent the past to make their present look acceptable. After a recent visit from an interstate relative, and long chats about common ancestors, I've realised that my interpretation of some relatives is entirely different.

Yesterday I realised that I am one of the few left alive who remembers my grandparents, but is my interpretation of them accurate, or have I manipulated memories? It's like a detective at the crime scene checking witnesses" ... different versions.

So my stock answer is, "My grandma taught me to read before I went to school." I honestly think that's right. But I've said it so often now, that I can't get my mind around a picture of it. Can I see her with the book in her hand? Can I see myself mouthing the words? No. Did I invent that, just so I seem intelligent? NO??

Most writers re-invent the past, to make themselves look better. But then so do relatives.

The only pictorial memory is frequently racing off to the outside, slightly smelly toilet near the well with the fig tree, as a means of getting away from some of mild mannered Grandma's gory missionary stories.

That one I do remember.

But maybe I am committing Adecdultery?

Hazel is the author of "There's a Hippopotamus on Our Roof Eating Cake" which is 29 this year, Hazel Edwards" is NOT yet writing her autobiography although she's collaborated with her cartographer son Trevelyan Quest Edwards on the edited blog "Cycling Solo: Ireland to Istanbul" (Brolga/Pan Macmillan). Blogs are the new electronic autobiographies. In 2001 she researched Antarctic Writer on Ice on an Antarctic expedition and that's the closest first hand account of her life. Not to be repeated! Visit www.hazeledwards.com for links and articles.