

# The Rise of the Bibliomemoir in the Twenty-First Century

JACQUELINE McMILLAN

*Bibliomemoir* is a relatively new word for a relatively new kind of memoir, one so new in fact that the word has yet to be recognised by the *Oxford English Dictionary*,<sup>1</sup> and my word processing programme underlined the word in red until I added it to the programme's dictionary. Like other books about books, bibliomemoirs are often packaged with piles of books enticingly depicted on their covers, which might lead you to pick up a bibliomemoir for reading recommendations rather than for the life story contained within. So, what are the characteristics that define this new and fast-growing genre?

Firstly, what they are not. When browsing the 'Books about Books' section at your local bookshop, where bibliomemoirs are usually to be found, or in the non-fiction shelves—Dewey number 028 or in the 800s—of your local library, you will find all types of beautiful 'books about books.' In fact, despite (or, as has been suggested, because of) the ongoing migration of texts of all kinds from physical to digital media, 'books about books' are flourishing,<sup>2</sup> and the phenomenon is something for bibliophiles and book historians to ponder upon. There are many books that you will see on these shelves that are not bibliomemoirs: book review collections, such as *Stuff I've Been Reading* by Nick Hornby; critical works, usually at the academic end of the spectrum, but including more accessible titles like *Faulks on Fiction* by Sebastian Faulks; literary biographies; memoirs of editors, publishers, booksellers, and writers, such as Elspeth Sandys' *Casting Off: A Memoir*,<sup>3</sup> which includes references to her reading throughout; diaries such as Shaun Bythell's *Diary of a Bookseller*; themed anthologies about reading taken from a lot of sources, such as *Shelf Life: Writers on Books and Reading* compiled by Alex Johnson; works of advice or self-help, about how particular books can improve your life, make you more intelligent, or at least sound like you know about literature, like the *Torchlight List* and *The New Torchlight List* by Jim Flynn; lists of 'must-reads' and how to approach literature, like Wendy Lesser's *Why I Read: The Serious Pleasure of Books*, which sounds like a bibliomemoir from the title, but actually has more in common with E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*; and there are also booklists, bibliographies, books on bookshops, libraries, or

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<sup>1</sup> The words *bibliomemoir*, or derived terms such as *bibliomemoirist*, had yet to appear in any print or online English language dictionary as of 30 April 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Tankard, review of *Books That Changed History*, Fr. Michael Collins et al. (London: Dorling Kindersley, 2017), *Script & Print* 42: 4 (2018): 224.

<sup>3</sup> Elspeth Sandys, *Casting Off: A Memoir* (Dunedin, NZ: Otago University Press, 2017).

individuals' book collections, histories of the book, books on book-covers, and lots of books advocating the importance of reading, such as David Ulin's *The Lost Art of Reading*. The list could go on.

Bibliomemoirs differ from works of literary criticism, or recommended reading lists, but can contain elements of these books about books. Although few critics have attempted to define the bibliomemoir, there is increasing—if somewhat reluctant—acceptance of the sub-genre's existence. Joyce Carol Oates is credited with one definition and it is this definition that is referred to in most reviews of bibliomemoirs.<sup>4</sup> In her 2014 *New York Times* book review of Rebecca Mead's *The Road to Middlemarch: My Life with George Eliot*,<sup>5</sup> Oates compares Mead's work to that of other bibliomemoirists, beginning her review stating:

Rarely attempted, and still more rarely successful, is the bibliomemoir—a subspecies of literature combining criticism and biography with the intimate, confessional tone of autobiography. The most engaging bibliomemoirs establish the writer's voice in counterpoint to the subject, with something more than adulation or explication at stake.<sup>6</sup>

Despite her doubts about bibliomemoirs, Oates clearly approves of Mead's approach, but would prefer some other writers of bibliomemoirs to keep their thoughts about their reading to themselves. She says:

Each [bibliomemoir] represents a risky appropriation of an exalted subject, and each fearlessly casts the memoirist's shadow over the text. By contrast, Rebecca Mead's "My Life in Middlemarch" is a beguilingly straightforward, resolutely orthodox and unshowy account.<sup>7</sup>

Oates, however, ultimately seems unwilling to give credit to Mead's personal experience, or to be "beguiled," as she says:

There is something self-limiting if not solipsistic about focusing so narrowly on a single novel through the course of one's life, as if there were not countless other, perhaps more unsettling, more original, more turbulent, more astonishing, more aesthetically exciting and more intellectually challenging novels—James

<sup>4</sup> Lucy Scholes, "Close Readings: The Rise of the Bibliomemoir" in *FT Books Essay* (24 Feb 2018). <https://www.ft.com/content/92812c26-17d4-11e8-9c33-02f893d608c2> and Mike Shuttleworth, "Bibliomemoirs: Four Recommended Memoirs about Books and Reading" *Readings* <https://www.readings.com.au/news/bibliomemoirs-four-recommended-memoirs-about-books-and-reading>

<sup>5</sup> Full details of bibliomemoirs mentioned in the text but not quoted from will be found in the bibliography at the end of the essay.

<sup>6</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, "Deep Reader," in *New York Times* (23 January 2014). <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/26/books/review/rebecca-meads-my-life-in-middlemarch.html>

<sup>7</sup> Oates, "Deep Reader."

Joyce's "Ulysses," to name one; Fyodor Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment," to name another.<sup>8</sup>

This may be true for Oates, but it is Mead's bibliomemoir, and it could only work if Mead had read those other two named books throughout her life. Oates desires literary criticism, or literary biography, and not the autobiographical, idiosyncratic and confessional elements which are clearly part of the point of the new genre of bibliomemoir.

More integral, I think, to purpose and character of the bibliomemoir is Anne Fadiman's view that the reading and re-reading of much-loved books are key chapters in the lives of their readers.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, bibliomemoirs represent, for the writers of them, "the articulation and interpretation of the shapes their lives have taken *as a direct result* of certain loved books, not merely as seen through the prisms of those books."<sup>10</sup> I would argue that bibliomemoirs are therefore memoirs that are framed around a selection of books the writer has read. These books act as a framework for the writer's memories, and thus offer a structure by which to write their memoirs. The books they have read add a deeper, and perhaps more intellectually intimate dimension to 'the life' as recorded through the succession of mere events. These writers acknowledge how reading books develops and shapes them. The rhetoric of the titles of many bibliomemoirs implies how reading 'changed', 'saved', 'built', or 'made' their lives, and how they have 'learned' in their 'journey'. Bibliomemoirs can therefore potentially offer more psychological and contemplative appraisals of lives than memoirs that are framed around life's external events and circumstances.

In March 2016, I interviewed writer and celebrity rare book dealer Rick Gekoski, author *Outside of a Dog: A Bibliomemoir*, for the Dunedin Public Libraries' magazine *NB*.<sup>11</sup> We began by discussing his 2009 book and I asked him if he had coined the word 'bibliomemoir.' In answer he quoted two lines from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, where Humpty Dumpty says to Alice, "It is my word, it will mean just what I say it means" and "when I make a word work that hard I always pay it extra." He said he "would be thoroughly pleased if 'bibliomemoir' got into the *Oxford English Dictionary*, especially if they quote me first." He thought that the word had occurred occasionally before he'd used it,

<sup>8</sup> Oates, "Deep Reader."

<sup>9</sup> Anne Fadiman, *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), xi.

<sup>10</sup> Jenny Bhatt, "The Books We Read, The Lives We Lead" *Bibliomemoirs, Part 1*. <https://indiatopia.com/2014/01/31/books-read-lives-lead-bibliomemoirs-1>; my emphasis.

<sup>11</sup> Jackie McMillan, "Rick Gekoski: In Conversation" in *NB* (July-August 2016). <https://hail.to/dunedin-public-libraries-k-kete-wnaka-o-tepoti/publication/XYQpWJJu/article/5YLMsYm>. (Gekoski was in Dunedin to speak at the University of Otago Centre for the Book's World Book Day lecture).

and maybe he had purposely adapted it and changed its meaning, so that it now meant a memoir of a reader, rather than the story behind certain books, like his *Tolkien's Gown*.<sup>12</sup> The premise for *Outside of a Dog*, Gekoski explained, is like the popular idea that you are what you eat; thus, you are what you read. "So, for some of us there is some truth in that. For me it is totally true."<sup>13</sup>

It is now ten years since Gekoski's bibliomemoir was published, and many more bibliomemoirs have since been published around the world (though few writers, or publishers, have used the word as conspicuously as Gekoski). In 2019, Australian writer and literary journalist Jane Sullivan published *Storytime: Growing Up with Books*, which includes the following endorsement inside the front cover:

*Storytime* is a bibliomemoir that lures us deep into the literary world. Through Jane's explorations we understand how it is that the enchantment of books we read as children can shape the people we are today.<sup>14</sup>

So, finally after ten years, we see the genre label of *bibliomemoir* being applied by a publisher. And it is accepted, in this statement, that readers relate to the writer with their own reading experiences; that bibliomemoirs offer an added, almost conversational, element for readers. Bibliomemoirs resonate with readers because of their shared experience of reading itself, occasionally (though not necessarily) of the same books. Reading a bibliomemoir can be like having a conversation with a good friend about their favourite books: some of the books you know and perhaps love, others you may know you will never read. The added element in this type of memoir is that it will make readers think about the books that have helped shape them.

The experience of reading a bibliomemoir can also be compared to entering a stranger's house and checking out their bookcases to find out what sort of person they are. Lucy Scholes says "a bibliomemoir is an open invitation to scour the shelves of another person's library."<sup>15</sup> Bibliomemoirs can be enjoyed even when the memoir writer is not hitherto known to the reader. However, I think the best bibliomemoirs provide a strong narrative voice which makes you curious about the memoirist themselves, and you will want to read more by these writers, on whatever topic they write about. Veteran Australian broadcaster Ramona Koval, author of *By the Book: A Reader's Guide to Life*, has such skill in storytelling that I went on to read her memoir *Bloodhound*, about her hunt for her true father.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Rick Gekoski, *Tolkien's Gown: And Other Stories of Great Authors and Rare Books* (London: Constable 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Jackie McMillan, "Rick Gekoski: In Conversation."

<sup>14</sup> Publisher's blurb in Jane Sullivan, *Storytime: Growing Up with Books* (Edgecliff, NSW: Ventura Press, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> Scholes, "Close Readings: The Rise of the Bibliomemoir."

<sup>16</sup> Ramona Koval, *Bloodhound: Searching for My Father* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2015).

And the prose in bibliomemoirs can often be a joy to read: sharp, evocative, funny, self-deprecating, quotable, and reflecting the influence of reading from which the writer has learnt their craft. In fact, what Delia Falconer says about why we read would be equally true for the reader of bibliomemoirs: “it is these little hits of extraordinary prose the true reader is always reading for, and which she treasures, even more than the most perfectly formed story.”<sup>17</sup>

Although there is no magic formula for the bibliomemoir, writers will, more likely than not, explore in particular detail their childhood joy of voracious and indiscriminate reading. English journalist Lucy Mangan, in her bibliomemoir *Bookworm: A Memoir of Childhood Reading*, concentrates solely on the books of her youth. Like the books which she read voraciously, her book is also one of those which you can swallow whole; her humour and prose style drove me to want to keep reading, and I found its style similar to Bill Bryson’s, with descriptions of characters, including family members, who are perhaps greatly exaggerated.

Many novelists and journalists have tried out the genre. Some, like *New York Times Book Review* editor Pamela Paul, examine the ideas that they have engaged with whilst reading, and how these ideas have permeated their own thinking. Each week, Pamela Paul interviews a writer for the *Review’s* feature “By the Book.” These interviews are like mini-bibliomemoirs, and Paul has edited a collection of them in a book of the same name.<sup>18</sup> In order to write her own bibliomemoir she examined “BOB,” her personal Book of Books, which she has kept since 1988, her first year in high school, to track her psychological development.<sup>19</sup>

Other bibliomemoir writers consider specific books that have helped them with their mental health and wellbeing. Will Schwalbe, who was made famous by his memoir of reading with his dying mother, *The End of Your Life Book Club*, has also published more recently *Books for Living* which considers twenty-four books that have helped him. The books he mentions, like *Zen in the Art of Archery*,<sup>20</sup> may not be ones I wish to read, but his writing about reading is thoughtful and insightful. He says reading is an art, not a skill: “every time you read, you are learning how to read. Reading is an art we practise our whole lives.... The more we read, the better at reading we become.”<sup>21</sup> Reading, he says, is “how I escape, but it’s also how I engage, ... reading should spur further engagement. Reading brings with it responsibility.”<sup>22</sup> In a similar vein, Jane Tompkins, an American literary

<sup>17</sup> Delia Falconer, “‘This Stuff Tastes of Window’: Reading as a Writer” in *The Simple Act of Reading* ed. Debra Adelaide (Sydney: Vintage Books, 2015), 195.

<sup>18</sup> Pamela Paul, ed. *By the Book: Writers on Literature and the Literary Life from the New York Times Book Review* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Pamela Paul, *My Life with Bob: Flawed Heroine Keeps Book of Books, Plot Ensues* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (New York: Pantheon, 1953).

<sup>21</sup> Will Schwalbe, *Books for Living: A Reader’s Guide to Life* (London: Two Roads, 2017), 179–80.

<sup>22</sup> Schwalbe, *Books for Living*, 255–56.

scholar, who was struck by a debilitating illness, writes about her realisation that “if you look at how you’re responding to the book in your hand, you’ll see that your response is telling its own story—about you.”<sup>23</sup>

Some bibliomemoirists consider the inspiration offered to them by reading about fictional characters, or real people in biographies. British playwright and writer Samantha Ellis humorously pits heroines against each other: Jane Eyre versus Cathy Earnshaw, Anne Shirley versus Jo March. She considers, in *How to be a Heroine: Or, What I’ve Learned from Reading Too Much*, both the positive and negative influences of her heroines. She also examines the influence that women writers, such as Sylvia Plath, have had upon her. Ellis sets out to reread the books she read as a child and young adult. This is a nostalgic tale, which not only considers the classics, but also the popular or cult classics of the 1970s and 80s.

It is often necessary for bibliomemoir writers to reread the books they write about, as Ellis does, not simply to be sure of details, but to compare memory with actuality. This inevitably has the effect of comparing the younger self with the older self. This is what gives the best bibliomemoirs their psychological depth. We would all like the ability to travel back in time—and a reader’s ability to recall their first reading during the act of rereading (even if the first “reading” occurred when they were quite young) is one of the few ways humans can effectively ‘time travel’, to the extent of having in real time the same mental experience. I think bibliomemoirs offer more than just nostalgia, because the act of rereading shows how readers can measure change in themselves, by comparing their reactions to reading the same thing at different times in their lives. Francis Spufford, in his memoir *The Child that Books Built*, says as he re-read he “tried to become again the reader I had been when I encountered each [book] for the first time.”<sup>24</sup> Bibliomemoirs work on two levels: as psychoanalysis of the writer, and to signal how all readers can measure their own development.

Thus far I have considered bibliomemoirs that have included childhood development through to whole-of-life bibliomemoir. But there are other forms of bibliomemoir, including those that focus on the influence of one book or one author upon an individual, collections of mini-bibliomemoirs which focus on the influence of reading, annotated reading diaries, and the reading challenge in a set timeframe (the latter referred to occasionally as a type of “stunt book.”) These bibliomemoirs all serve as a historical record of reading trends in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century in the English-speaking world.

A leader in the mini-bibliomemoir, and perhaps the inspiration for many full-length bibliomemoirs published since, is *The Pleasure of Reading*, edited by Lady Antonia Fraser. This book, when first published in 1992, was a handsome illustrated book which included forty essays by internationally famous writers

<sup>23</sup>Jane Tompkins, *Reading Through the Night* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2018), 22.

<sup>24</sup>Francis Spufford, *The Child that Books Built* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 21.

on their discovery of reading and the books that inspired them. The 2015 trade paperback edition includes three more essays and was published without illustrations, with sales in aid of the book charity, Give a Book.<sup>25</sup> A similar book, also published in 2015, is *The Simple Act of Reading* edited by Debra Adelaide, with profits donated to The Sydney Story Factory, a book-related not-for-profit organisation. It too is a collection of essays, this time by a range of Australian writers for children and adults. Published also in Australia the following year is *The Book that Made Me*, edited by Judith Ridge for Walker Books. This is the first bibliomemoir that I have seen that is intended to be read by young people, and the collection of thirty-two short essays includes five essays by New Zealand writers of young adult novels. Finally, bibliomemoirs, albeit in the shorter essay form, are being written here in New Zealand, though published in Australia.

Reading diaries by better known literary figures, such as Alberto Manguel,<sup>26</sup> Clive James<sup>27</sup> and Susan Hill, are about the serendipitous and yet transient nature of reading. These record what most of us actually do when choosing our next book; that is to say, we do not have a reading plan and we pick up the next book that grabs our fancy. In her two bibliomemoirs, *Howards End is on the Landing* and *Jacob's Room is Full of Books*, British novelist Susan Hill considers everything she reads in a year. In her case—and as the titles suggest—many of her reading choices are rereadings of books from her own bookshelves.

Andy Miller's personal "List of Betterment" (or the books he had always meant to read) grew from ten books to fifty, and they became the basis for *A Year of Reading Dangerously: How Fifty Great Books (and Two Not-so-great Ones) Saved My Life*. Miller's bibliomemoir is a "reading challenge" and his reading choices signify books that have cultural cachet in the early twenty-first century. Miller originally recorded his thoughts for a blog and then turned that into a book. This book differs from a recommended reading list, in that Miller reflects upon the personal challenge of becoming a reader again after some years of neglect, and also on the act of reading outside of his own comfort zone. Like many young parents, Miller felt like he had forgotten how to read; that is, he had forgotten what it is like to get lost in a good book.

Miller's book addresses the fact that in the present day the experience of reading is changing and under threat. He notes that he is often the only commuter on his train reading a book, he cannot buy a copy of *Moby Dick* on the High Street, and he purchases and uses an ebook reader during the course of his reading challenge (but he emphasises that he is reading). Most writers of bibliomemoirs have an eye on the changes around them; they are not just looking back and reminiscing. Susan Hill notes that the sales of ebooks are declining, and that ebooks have not

<sup>25</sup> Antonia Fraser, ed., *The Pleasure of Reading*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> Alberto Manguel, *A Reading Diary: A Year of Favourite Books* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2004).

<sup>27</sup> Clive James, *Latest Readings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

affected the sales of hardbacks and paperbacks, but she does blame ebooks and the internet for the decline of the second-hand and antiquarian book market.

These books inevitably address the impact of information technology upon reading and what we will lose if we do not continue to read physical books. But they are not angry rants and rages against the prevailing tide, but gentle exhortations to continue to read. Bibliomemoirs personally testify and exemplify what C. S. Lewis said: "Those of us who have been true readers all our life seldom fully realise the enormous extension of our being which we owe to authors."<sup>28</sup> In response to the ongoing changes in literate culture, the vogue for the bibliomemoir can help us realise this more fully and less seldom.

*Dunedin Public Libraries*

<sup>28</sup> C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 140.

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### **Mini-Bibliomemoirs: Edited Collections**

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