Involuntary Autobiographical Memories

We often remember personal experiences without any conscious effort. A piece of music heard on the radio may stir a memory of a moment from the past. Such occurrences are known as involuntary autobiographical memories. They often occur in response to environmental stimuli or aspects of current thought. Until recently, they were treated almost exclusively as a clinical phenomenon, as a sign of distress or a mark of trauma. In this innovative new work, however, Dorthe Berntsen argues that involuntary memories are predominantly positive and far more common than previously believed. She argues that they reflect a basic mode of remembering that predates the more advanced strategic retrieval mode, and that their primary function may simply be to prevent us from living in the present. Reviewing a variety of cognitive, clinical, and aesthetic approaches, this monograph will be of immense interest to anyone seeking to better understand this misunderstood phenomenon.

DORTHE BERNTSEN is a Professor in the Department of Psychology at the Aarhus University.

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An Introduction to the Unbidden Past

DORTHE BERNTSEN

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Contents

Figures

Tables

Preface

"You want everything finished before you have even started." I was trying to write a book, thinking about how to begin, when suddenly my grandmother's slightly irritated voice entered my memory. What I remembered was a common situation in my childhood, in which she tried to teach me how to knit or stitch. Frankly, I was never very good at either, and since I was impatient as well, my behavior often prompted this remark. Where did this memory come from and why at this particular moment? Was it because I was trying to plan my new book project in far too many details? I was trying to think it through to the end. So in a sense she was right. I wanted it finished before I had even started. No matter, I had not searched for the memory. The memory was involuntary. It came out of the blue and yet with a clear and unmistakable reference to my personal past. This book is about such involuntary memories.

My own way into this research topic was somewhat accidental. One might almost say involuntary, in the sense that it was not the result of a determined and rational decision. I had just finished my Master's degree in psychology and I wanted to apply for a Ph.D. scholarship. I had a long-standing interest in literature, notably poetic metaphors and how they are created. Yet my mentor thought that this would be too narrow for a Ph.D. in psychology. He encouraged me to think of something "clearly psychological," as he put it. I decided that autobiographical memory fulfilled that criterion, and I stumbled over a phenomenon that appeared to bridge my interest in literature with my interest in autobiographical memory. It was loosely described in many contexts and variously designated as spontaneous memories, unbidden memories, passive memories, intrusive memories, and involuntary memories. I chose the label *involuntary autobiographical memories*, because it seemed to be the one that best captured the

phenomenon and at the same time seemed relatively neutral with regard to theory.

Once you start paying attention to them, you will realize that involuntary autobiographical memories are common in daily life. Most of them deal with recent episodes. Others may bring back more remote experiences, as in the example just given. When I got interested in involuntary autobiographical memories, they had been observed and described by novelists and artists for a long time. Some of these artistic observations had found their way into psychology, notably the French author Marcel Proust's vivid and engaging descriptions. Memories that come unbidden had also been observed in clinical psychology and associated with a range of disorders, ranging from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder to near-death experiences. However, cognitive psychologists were essentially silent about them.

Now roughly fifteen years have passed. Several psychological studies of involuntary autobiographical memories have appeared in the literature. People studying this intriguing phenomenon are no longer "out in the woods" by themselves. We are now beginning to see the contours of a field. It is therefore a good time to review the work and attempt to integrate the findings, which is the purpose of this book.

I owe a lot of people thanks. My first acknowledgement goes to Steen Folke Larsen, who encouraged and supported my work until his tragic death in 1999. I thank the Memory and Cognition group, my present and former students and colleagues at the Department of Psychology at Aarhus University for their inspiration, help, and collaboration. Special thanks are due to my former student Nicoline M. Hall, for whom involuntary memories have been a long-standing interest and who conducted some of the first brain-imaging studies on this phenomenon and helped to move the field forward. Also many thanks to Annette Bohn, Malene K. Bohni, Lars Hem, Anne S. Jacobsen, Kim B. E. Johannessen, Peter Krøjgaard, Anne S. Rasmussen, Dorthe K. Thomsen, and Yvonne Thomsen for collaboration and discussions. In particular, I thank Annette Bohn,

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