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Memory and imagination



Where fiction begins

J. R. R. Tolkien once observed that a story ‘grows like a seed in the dark out of the leaf-mould of the mind; out of all that has been seen or thought or read’. The analogy provides us with a useful starting point, suggesting the interdependency of memory and imagination while also alerting us to the difference between them. The leaf-mould – the stuff of experience, laid down in memory – is essential for the growth of the seed, but the developing plant will be something different from the material in which it is rooted. The analogy can’t of course be taken as a direct reflection of the complex ways in which fiction writers progress from the recollection of personal experience to imaginative storytelling, but thinking about its broad implications – its suggestions of nourishment, assimilation, growth and transformation – will help you towards an understanding of the nature and purpose of the exercises in this section.

All fiction is rooted in memory. We may not always recognise our own experience in our fictions (it’s worth reminding ourselves here that, while some memories may be actively drawn from readily accessible levels of the mind, others may rise unbidden from deeper and darker reservoirs), but as writers we are all indebted to our memories. The familiar injunction ‘Write what you know’ presupposes an act of recollection; and although we shall be going on to suggest that the end result of a writing task may reveal something you didn’t know when you started, it will probably be obvious to you from your own practice that recollected experience is the basis of fiction-writing.

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We said at the outset that you should feel free to address the exercises in this book in the order you find most helpful, but in the case of this particular section there are significant advantages in following the sequence in which the exercises are set out. The section will take you, by gradual steps, from exercises that are firmly tied to your own experience through to exercises that necessarily engage the creative imagination. The idea is to show, firstly, how memory and imagination are related, and, secondly, how we can use our own remembered experience as a springboard, propelling ourselves into a wider imaginative space than memory alone allows.

Recollecting the past

As you move through this section you're likely to become increasingly aware of the difficulty of mapping the dividing line between recollection and imaginative recreation, but for the moment let's keep things simple, focusing more or less exclusively on recollected detail.

1.

- a) **Think about a place you remember from childhood – preferably not your home, which may provide you with too much detail, but a place you visited regularly or, alternatively, a place that you may only have visited once or twice but which made a deep impression on you. Possible locations might be your grandparents' home, or a local park, cinema, museum or café; or you might recall an inspiring landscape or your first sight of the sea. For this exercise, focus on the detail of the place itself rather than on the people in it, writing down your recollections in note form in whatever order they occur to you.**
- b) **Think about a person you knew in childhood – preferably not a family member but someone with whom you had a more limited, though not unimportant, connection: perhaps a class teacher, a schoolfriend or the owner of a local shop. For present purposes,**

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focus on the person's appearance rather than on their character or any interaction they may have had with you or others; we'll come to those matters later, but for now the task is simply to provide a portrait in words of the individual in question.

When you've addressed one or both of these tasks, take a few minutes to reflect on the process and the result. You may have found that you remembered more about your subject than you had anticipated when you began writing. Whether or not that happened in this instance, it's worth bearing in mind that the concentrated focus encouraged by an exercise of this kind can often stimulate memory, bringing buried material to the surface.

While we naturally hope that these two exercises held some interest for you, we'd understand entirely if you found yourself pushing at the constraints we've deliberately imposed. The piece you've written may well contain valuable detail but, assuming you followed the instructions we gave you, it won't tell a story. In Section 9 (Description) we shall address more fully the problems likely to arise with description that doesn't contribute to the development of a narrative; for the moment you may wish simply to note that, in the absence of a story, a series of remembered facts can eventually become tedious for both writer and reader.

So let's move on to our next exercise – still working with memory, but now with a story to tell.

2.

Cast your mind back to childhood again, this time coming up with a recollection of something that happened to you – a specific incident, involving at least one other person. It may be a dramatic event, but it doesn't have to be: revisit any incident that has significance for you. Then write it down as you remember it.

As you reflect on the exercise, you may want to consider the implications of that concluding phrase, 'as you remember it'. Our recollections are seldom, if ever, precise. Were there any details of the recollected experience that seemed unclear to you? Was

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the sequence of events gapped or uncertain? Would your account be readily understood by a reader with no prior knowledge of the event you describe?

It's probable that, to some extent at least, you filled in gaps and clarified detail, recognising, whether rationally or intuitively, that the uncertainties naturally present in our recollections may need to be firmed up or reconfigured in the interests of a coherent narrative. And in that case you'll understand that you're already treading the hazy boundary between recollected fact and acknowledged fiction.

Alternative viewpoints

With the benefit of an adult perspective you'll no doubt realise that others involved in the incident will remember it differently. You may recognise this scene: a family gathering; one person reminding the others of an experience from the family's shared history; another objecting that it wasn't like that at all, but like this.... Such conversations remind us not simply of the fallibility of memory but of the way our memories are coloured by the quirks and limitations of our own particular viewpoint.

The child's view is often sharper and more immediate than the adult's, but it's also limited by a lack of experience and understanding. The adult view of an incident is likely to be characterised by a broader sense of context (this provides the backstory of a developed narrative) and a greater awareness of the views and feelings of others (providing scope for the exploration of character). With this in mind, let's move on to the next exercise, which will take you a step further from your own experience and a step closer to the writing of imaginative fiction.

This next exercise asks you to revisit the incident you've just described, but changing the point of view to that of someone else who was present. You can't know for sure what their experience was so you'll be asked to imagine this. Here's a hypothetical

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example, not intended to divert you from your own recollection, but simply to offer a useful illustration. Let's say your piece of writing recounted an occasion when you were asked to look after your younger brother in the garden. While you were searching for his scooter in the garage he opened the gate and went into the street. By the time you found the scooter he was nowhere to be seen. You ran in to tell your mother what had happened. She was furious with you, and although, after a search, your brother turned up safe and well in a neighbour's garden, her anger continued, casting a shadow over the whole morning.

Your initial recollection of the incident might have focused on the perceived unfairness of your mother's treatment of you. In searching for your brother's scooter weren't you simply trying to find a way of keeping him happily occupied, as your mother had suggested? Was it your fault if your brother had ignored your injunction to stay where he was while you went to the garage? And he hadn't come to any harm, had he? Why couldn't your mother have dropped the matter once he was found?

Now consider the incident from the mother's point of view. Think of her panic as she imagines what might have happened to her son. Has he been abducted? Hit by a car? Has he wandered down to the canal? Try to enter her mind as she runs up and down the street calling his name. For her, the quarter-hour before the boy is found seems an eternity, and the hours that follow are shadowed by self-recrimination, which she tries to deflect by blaming you.

Although the incident itself remains the same, you'll see that the second story is bound to be subtly but importantly different from the first, altered by the shift in perspective. When you come to write a short story or a novel it's worth giving careful consideration to the question of narrative viewpoint, asking yourself whether the viewpoint you're instinctively drawn to is simply the one that most closely conforms to your own experience. If so, experiment with other points of view, as this exercise invites you to do.

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With these ideas in mind, you should be ready to tackle the exercise.

3.

Returning to the incident recalled in exercise 2, write a new version of the narrative, this time from the point of view of one of the other people present (or, if only one other person was involved, from that person's viewpoint.) In setting down your own memory of the incident you'll almost certainly have described the experience in the first person; now make the other person the 'I' of your narrative, addressing the same incident from their point of view. The purpose of the exercise isn't to establish what the other person *actually thought or felt* (that information may not be available to you) but to explore imaginatively what that person's experience of the incident *might have been*, and how it might differ from your own experience, as originally described.

As soon as we begin to imagine a remembered event from a new perspective we're pushing beyond our own experience into an alternative world. We may still be drawing largely on memory, but now something else is happening. We're inventing, refashioning; we're entering, however tentatively, the realms of fiction.

Inventing the past

When you look back over your response to exercise 3, you may find that the liveliest elements are those you've had to imagine. There's usually an energising excitement in invention, the thrill of stepping out into a world which, though necessarily derived in part from our own experience, is in some important sense a new creation.

The next exercise encourages you to take your fiction-making a step further, giving you licence to alter and augment remembered details in the wider interests of your narrative. You'll still be keeping in view the incident you used as the basis for the two previous

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exercises, but this exercise moves you a step further from your own experience, encouraging you to explore more fully the ways in which the experience might be transformed.

By way of illustration, let's return to the hypothetical example used above, holding on to the core of the incident – the moment of inattention, the child going missing, the mother's frantic search – while considering, in broad terms, how a writer might amplify and shape that material to create a vivid and compelling piece of fiction. The possibilities are endless, but the following suggestions will help you to sharpen your focus on your own recollected material.

It's possible that you included dialogue in your original recollection of the incident, but more likely that you didn't: if speech figures at all in the stories we tell about our own past, it's usually in the form of reported speech. In the case of our illustrative example, we might expect something like this:

Mum began to shout at me, asking why I'd allowed it to happen, why I'd let him out of my sight at all. I told her it wasn't my fault, that I'd only been gone for a minute, but she wouldn't listen.

One of the reasons we tend to avoid dialogue when we recall past events is simply that we don't usually remember, word for word, what was said. But that needn't trouble us when we come to represent those events in our fictions. We shall be talking more generally in Section 4 about the value of dialogue, but for the moment let's just see how the passage above might be improved:

Mum flung the dishcloth at me. 'What were you thinking of?' she yelled. 'I told you not to take your eyes off him.'

'I didn't. Well, only for a minute. I just went to –'

'You left him?'

'I thought –'

But she was already rushing down the path towards the open gate. 'You go that way,' she shouted, gesturing towards the high street. 'Check the gardens as you go.' She hurried off in the direction of the canal.

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The most obvious lesson here is that direct speech can provide an energy missing from reported speech. The imagined dialogue creates a sense of immediacy, allowing the reader to participate more fully in the experience described. And it's not only the reader who benefits: when a writer puts words into the mouths of her characters – when she gives them their voices and listens to what she has made them say – she is also likely to imagine the scene more clearly and in greater detail. In this instance the detail of the flung dishcloth grew out of, or alongside, the mother's angry speech, while the mother's headlong rush down the path suggested itself as an appropriate physical expression of the anxiety and impatience implied by her interruptions.

But in sending these two characters off in opposite directions, haven't we put an end to the possibility of dialogue? Not at all: we can continue to develop our fictional world as the needs of our story dictate, perhaps sending the older child into the garden of an elderly widow who stubbornly refuses to allow a search of her premises; or into the garden of a young mother whose sympathy and well-meaning questions hold up the search while the minutes tick away. These characters may have no counterpart in the original incident, but their imagined voices can enrich this new narrative.

While these examples show how we can modify our material to create opportunities for dialogue, they also lead us on to another question you might want to consider as you reconfigure your own childhood memory: how can we catch and hold the attention of our readers? The 'lost child' incident is by its nature dramatic, but the way we shape the story in our telling of it will determine the level of tension and suspense, and therefore the degree to which readers are involved in the drama. If our protagonist walks into the street, hears the lost child calling from a garden, goes through the garden gate and finds him, we have a happy ending but a slender and unengaging story. If, on the other hand, we set up obstacles to the discovery, deferring and perhaps even throwing into doubt the happy outcome, we're likely to engage the reader more fully.

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The point is obvious enough, and indeed you may realise that, even when casually recounting the events of the day to a group of friends or a family member, you're naturally inclined to shape and elaborate your material in the interests of holding your audience's attention. But it's also the case that our memories can keep us in thrall, tying us closely to the facts – or what we remember as the facts – when our narrative might be better served by a looser relationship with them. As writers of fiction we need to give ourselves licence to slacken the ties, to move beyond our own particular experience into a world of expanded possibility.

4. **Return to the incident recollected in exercises 2 and 3. Write a narrative that retains the core of the incident but departs from the surrounding detail in whatever ways best serve your story.**

Too much information

When we revisit a childhood experience we often find that the passage of time has worn it down, in memory, to its essentials; if that's the case, our shaping of it will be primarily a matter of addition and elaboration. But not all memories have been refined in this way, and we may sometimes find ourselves dealing with a large amount of remembered material, not all of it helpful to our narrative. The memory of an incident that took place yesterday may be as valuable a resource as the memory of a childhood incident, but our approach to it will probably have to be more actively selective. The next exercise encourages you to think about the shedding of unhelpful detail in the interests of a well-shaped story.

For example, let's suppose you remember that one of two other people involved in the incident was sitting on a pale blue button-back sofa, leaning on an embroidered cushion, holding a pencil in one hand and a notebook in the other. Of course detail can add colour and life to a scene, but you might ask yourself whether your narrative is well served by the inclusion of all of

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these details; you may even come to see that the person on the sofa plays so small a part that he can be omitted from the narrative entirely, and that your story, far from being damaged by the omission, is enhanced by it.

5.

First, take a few minutes to set out in note form what you recall of a recent incident in which you were involved. Jot down the details as they come to you, without at this stage worrying about their order or their relative importance.

When you've done this, write a narrative that takes the notes as its core material; as in exercise 4, you should feel free to invent detail. With an awareness of how details serve (or don't serve) the story, think carefully about what can be left out as well as what might be included.

You may have become aware as you worked on this exercise that the sharp focus on what is to be omitted is a little artificial: we're highlighting for illustrative purposes a matter that can't, in practice, be neatly separated from other aspects of the shaping process. We can't say of any particular detail that it's *inherently* unusable: the decision to omit it – or to retain it – is dependent on its relationship with everything else that goes into the making of the narrative.

Wider explorations

Stored in our own minds are the memories transmitted to us by others – your mother's account of an incident from her school-days, perhaps, or your grandfather's account of his wartime experience. Such memories can be a particularly valuable resource for the fiction writer. You'll have your own examples, and may want to explore these later, but for present purposes we'll focus on the memories provided below. These are designed to stimulate your imagination, not to provide you with a ready-made story.