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Diaries are ‘better than novels, more accurate than histories, and even at times more dramatic than plays’: Revisiting the diary for creative writers

Abstract

This paper [1] revisits the diary form of first person narrative. The diary is often a major primary resource in the creation of autobiographies, biographies and scholarly research projects, documents and reports. It is also often a rich source of inspiration for fiction, used by many writers as a tool for recording working ideas and progress, and mobilised in teaching creative writing. We argue that, despite this importance in the writing field, the diary has slipped from view in terms of creative writing research and scholarship. By examining its form, historical evolution, uses and what diaries illuminate about writers and their worlds, we foreground unique aspects of the diary that can provide writing inspiration, assistance with production and avenues for further research

Keywords: creative writing, diary, journal, autobiography, creative writing research.

Diaries have their own contradictions and inadequacies as primary sources but they remain a valuable voice, a bridge between the past and the present and a precious resource (Simpson 2007)

Introduction

A diary is commonly regarded as a text that provides a personal record of various and selective aspects of the diarist’s daily life, with each entry self-contained and usually written during or soon after the event (Burt 1994; Cardell 2014). A diarist may make lists but entries can also be more discursive, and include descriptions and critical accounts of family, friends and acquaintances, work and home life, travel and nature, relationships and others’ characters (Maunsell 2011; O’Sullivan 2005; Alaszewski 2006). Diarists may also reflect upon their own past, present and future, and entries may shift in scope from the minutiae of the day to commentary about world events (Acton 2010; Alb 2010). The diary derives a measure of its impact from its observational immediacy, and in this it differs from the memoir, which may provide a reflective account of a diary’s contents but seen from a distance. In terms of the timing of entries, although some diarists write every day, others have weeks, months or even more time, between entries. Lejeune notes that ‘discontinuity is typical’ adding that:

Discontinuity, for that matter, is part and parcel of the diary's rhythm. There are two schools of diary-writers. There are those who write each day out of discipline or habit, who suffer when they skip a day and 'catch up' when they're behind, filling in omissions. And there are those who write, more or less regularly, when they need to. (Lejeune 2009: 193)

Importantly, Lejeune asserts that, within all these variables, the only constraint on defining the diary is temporally related: if a writer does not date the entries, then he or she is not keeping a diary (2009). While many diaries are begun, and kept, by the writer for a range of reasons, so-called 'solicited' diaries are written at the invitation of a clinician to provide relevant data for a specific study, or a therapist to facilitate self-exploration and understanding (Pennebaker & King 1999). The solicited diary is, therefore, basically a tool for gathering information, 'an account produced specifically at the researcher's request' (Bell 1998: 72) and is 'written with the full knowledge that they are for external consumption' (Bell 1998: 72). The diarist may (or may not) sporadically or regularly re-read past entries, but whether he or she does this or not, some measure of his or her daily life and thoughts are preserved within the diary and are available for later consumption and reflection. If the diary is preserved, the material it records can become available to others in the future.

The diary can be also described as a journal, and the two descriptors 'diarising' and 'journaling' are often used interchangeably for the same activity (see, for instance, the title and content of Joan R Neubauer's *Dear Diary: The Art and Craft of Writing a Creative Journal*, published in 1995). In relation to creative writing, the term 'journaling' has connotations of purposeful and/or professional practice, and has come to imply a measure of not only recording events and activities in relation to the writing life but also reflective writing that aims to enhance the writer's skills and abilities (see, for instance, Progoff 1992; Archer & Watts 2014; Hedley 2015). Despite this, in practice, texts called 'diaries' and 'journals' can be perfunctory listings of tasks, appointments or other commitments and/or deeply reflective and, therefore, instead of a clumsy composite term like 'diary/journal', this discussion uses the term 'diary', to encompass both.

The diary has been studied in many disciplines including literature, history, philosophy, medicine, genealogy, education, sociology, psychology, cultural anthropology and women's studies. Although diary writing is a common and popular form of writing, a recommended or mandated part of many creative writing programs, and a recognised component of a number of methodologies used in research into writing, only a relatively small amount of scholarly work has investigated the diary in terms of its relevance for creative writers. A search of the sixty-five issues of *TEXT* journal published since 1996 (38 general issues and 27 special issues) reveals only three articles mentioning diaries (Brien 2008; Ashley 2013; Brooks 2013) and none of these investigate the form in any depth. Lindsay Simpson's 'Lying Truths: Diaries as Historical Documents and the Craft of Fiction' in the *2007 Conference Proceedings of the Australasian Association of Creative Writing* is the only publication in the eight issues of these annual creative writing focused papers published to date to take diaries as its subject and include the term in its title. No conference papers include the term 'journal' or 'journaling' in their titles. Neither could we locate any articles in *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* (31 issues since 2004), although Angela France's poem 'Tailor's Chalk' (2014) mentions the diary as part of the writer's paraphernalia in the narrator's office: 'desk, keyboard, monitor ... diary and bulging files' (167). The new journal of the United Kingdom based National Association of Writers in Education, *Writing in Practice: The Journal of Creative Writing*

Research (2015), does not include any articles on the diary.[2] Only one creative writing research higher degree thesis mentioning diaries in its title is available in the comprehensive TROVE repository; this single thesis is a fascinating study based on the analysis of a single historical diary for what light this can shed on the writing of a related creative work (Bruce 2013). There are no theses catalogued as addressing journaling in creative writing listed in TROVE (National Library of Australia 2015). Although this search, and its results, does not prove that such research does not exist, it does indicate that researchers are not targeting a primarily creative writing-focused readership in their dissemination or how they describe their findings.

This scarcity is counter-intuitive given the intense attention paid to life-writing and fact-informed fiction in creative writing research and practice, and the focus on the diary in studies of reading autobiographical writing (see, for example, Huff 2000; Smith & Watson 2010). This article, therefore, goes back to ‘first principles’ to examine the form and its historical evolution, as well as uses of the diary, to present a survey of the form prepared with creative writing and writers as its focus.

Evolution of the diary

The Latin word *diarium* referred ‘to one’s daily allowance or ration of food’ (O’Sullivan 2005: 55), derived from *dies*, which means day. This dual invocation of ‘days’ and ‘food’ suggests that diaries have long constituted a writing practice that not only took place daily and/or documented quotidian activities, but also offered some sustenance or nourishment for the writers of these texts. Early forms of the diary as iterative records of activities or events were created by literate elites, such as those created by European monks in the mediaeval monasteries (Alaszewski 2006) and, until the invention of the printing press in the early fourteenth century, were hand written and copied. Such documents related mostly to religious life, law and judicial matters, and administrative concerns. As practices of record-keeping increased, and personal reflections and observations began to be included alongside facts, figures and appointments in these records, the diary form and diary-writing, as we now understand it, began to emerge. The way in which we now understand and use the term ‘diary’ originated in the late sixteenth century, a period from which the earliest known surviving diaries in the English-speaking world date (Fothergill 1974).

Printed almanacs – which included a detailed monthly calendar, descriptions of local fairs, agricultural notes, routes between towns, medical, historical and astrological information (eg Smyth 2008) – were popular in the second half of the sixteenth century in England, and show evidence of the development of diary-practice, with both men and women owners often adding personal hand-written notes and other annotations on the blank pages known as ‘sorts’ in these volumes (Smyth 2008: 204). Isabella Twysden made abundant notes in this way in her almanac, for instance when she noted a death: ‘mrs denty a religious good woman and my very good friend left this life, for a better, the 30. of nov: 1647 [sic]’ (qtd in Smyth 2008: 230). Information recorded in these almanacs related to such concerns as family births and deaths, health issues, weather, travel, and matters related to employment, financial, legal and husbandry activities (Mackrill 2011; Smyth 2008) and, as such a repository, began to be used as a tool to plan and order its users’ lives (Smyth 2008), in a way not unlike the way the modern calendar-daily planner is used. Diaries evolved as these annotations were moved from one almanac to another, in the process undergoing an enriching process of revision and amendment. Many

proto-diaries of this time, therefore, were primarily the result of rewriting prior texts rather than the direct and spontaneous description of daily life in ‘real time’ (Smyth 2008), the writing process more akin to that of writing memoir or family history than personal diarising.

Two major historical developments increased the opportunity for individuals to create written records, including diaries, about aspects of their lives. The first of these was the increased access to formal education which, at least for some, led to enhanced increased levels of literacy (McKay 2005). As literacy increased, and the printing press created more printed materials, more people of the literate classes engaged in silent reading (as opposed to listening to writing being read aloud) and this encouraged quiet contemplation and the development of personal – and private – thoughts and opinions (O’Sullivan 2005). The Reformation, which heralded the rise of individualism (Alaszewski 2006; O’Sullivan 2005), likewise encouraged individuals to begin to consider their lives in ways beyond the Church’s teachings and edicts (Heldt 2005). Keeping a diary provided another avenue for such quiet contemplation, as well as a way of adapting to the individualism, capitalism, nationalism and industrialism that became distinguishing features of modern society (O’Sullivan 2005).

The famed diary kept by English civil servant Samuel Pepys from 1660 to 1669 – wherein Pepys preferred to record the personal pleasures and professional intimacies of his life rather than to engage in self-reproach over his religious faults and failings – heralded the modern form of diary. Although his astute observations of everyday events and experiences describe a period of major, social, cultural, economic and ideological change, it is not only this content (as information) that ensures they remain a source of enjoyable, as well as enlightening, reading, but also his candid, confessional reflections. In this, the Pepys diaries contrast with both earlier and contemporaneous diaries which primarily functioned as tools for noting, planning and classifying events – with the creators of these diaries/records in some respects acting as archivists rather than (creative) writers, as Smyth notes, ‘curators, not artists’ (2008: 214). Pepys’ diaries, instead, present readers with a more considered and constructed narrative as he sought to both define a sense of himself, and fashion an engaging chronicle, from his observations of daily life. During this period, increased access to writing tools (pencils, pens and paper), enabled others to similarly tap into what McKay has characterised as a ‘trend for recording individual life’ (2005: 204) and in the period from c.1500 to c.1700, diary writing also became popular among those in certain occupations – particularly the military and navy (McKay 2005: 200).

Uses of the diary

When the English embarked overseas to explore, trade and claim foreign territories, the diary became an instrument for adapting to required roles and identities, coping with the unknown, and recording and interpreting events and observations for later reference (Delany 1969, and see, for instance, Johnson & Suedfeld 1996). These were also often externally focused texts, with the large numbers of published diaries of this period suggesting a significant readership hungry for these expeditionary tales. Government and military officials, the reading public as well as the emergent forms of the press all had an interest in the new cultures, practices and beliefs, as well as the unfamiliar animals, plants and landscapes diarists encountered, and the challenges, triumphs and disasters experienced during their journeys. Many captains, governors, explorers, naturalists and others were duly commissioned before they left port to publish

the journals they would write about their travels and this necessarily affected the style and content of these diaries. The information in these diaries (both manuscript and published versions, if they exist) are key primary sources for historians, natural scientists, geologists and others looking for evidence, but there is also an argument that these accounts of exotic adventure influenced the development of the novel as, for example, in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) [3] which is, of course, presented in the form of an autobiography (Hutchins 1925).

With the establishment of European communities in North America in the mid-to late-1600s, and in Australia a century later, writing diaries also provided an outlet for mental and emotional stresses that for various reasons could not be shared with others (McKay 2005). Diaries helped travellers and colonial settlers of both sexes to acknowledge and examine the daily challenges to be met, including loneliness and homesickness, and to cultivate a sense of identity in what were commonly perceived as alien environments (see Frost 1984; Holmes 1983; Clarke & Spender 1992; Robinson 1999; Brien 2008). For those living in isolated and remote locations without an appropriate confidante, the diary served as a friend in the absence of company. In the 1870s, Catherine Currie and her husband John were pioneer settlers in Gippsland in eastern Victoria, Australia. Catherine kept a diary for thirty years, describing the isolation she suffered and the challenges of living on the land and raising five children (one who drowned at the age of five). She also wrote of the effects of two psychotic episodes she experienced, and which required desperate management from the only people available to help – immediate family. On 16 January 1894, after her admission to a Melbourne mental asylum, Catherine wrote of her sons:

They are good boys but they care no more for me than I do for the old pig ... I have never had their respect since Father shut me up in a Lunatic Asylum ... tied in an old Corn Sack, is it any wonder I raved ... I am always thinking of it when they vex me. I always put it down to that or I could have won their respect. (qtd in Sheehan 1999: 928)

Three years later, she notes in her diary that she feels she is of 'no more consequence than a log of wood ... [I] only talk to my heavenly father ... all I love think me mad' (17 February 1897, qtd in Sheehan 1999: 934). Perhaps because of the absence of others to communicate with, Catherine Currie wrote with total abandon and her diaries can also be read as an attempt to express and bring order to her thoughts. It is clear from even these brief excerpts that Currie felt unacknowledged and misunderstood, however, her diaries provide the reader with a rare insight into her life and sensibility, as well as the times in which she lived, both aspects of interest to creative writers. As resources, these texts provide a rich vein of personal and historical data and intriguing, often unresolved, plot points. An entire novel could, for instance, be inspired by that single arresting phrase 'since Father shut me up in a Lunatic Asylum ... tied in an old Corn Sack, is it any wonder I raved', with many plot points to be resolved, including: why, exactly, was she in that corn sack?; what indignities did she suffer?; and, what did the staff of the asylum think when she arrived at their institution so trussed? Diaries have also provided a place for expressions of raw emotion, and much can be learned from the power of these narratives.

In nineteenth century diaries, often little more than the date of the death of a child may be noted, and then that of the funeral service, but these would be noted again with similar heartbreaking brevity a year later (Bunkers 1987) – an excellent example of the considerable narrative power that 'what is not said' can possess. The diaries kept by Emily Hawley Gillepsie between 1858 and

1888, for instance, illustrate her selective use of speech and silence. Gillepsie lived on a farm in Iowa and noted such everyday aspects of life as the weather, crops and social events. After she had married and that relationship began to deteriorate, however, she began to share her struggles in her diary, confiding: ‘I only hope Sarah [her daughter] may not see the trouble I have’ (Bunkers 1987: 12). A writer could also read these diaries with an enhanced sense of empathy for people in similar situations, and gain personal insights into how to relay such emotional intensity in their own creative work.

Diaries, as a form of autobiographical record, are a type of expression that, conferred on its composers, as Yorkshire yeoman James Fretwell recognised in 1781, ‘a sort of immortality’ (Fretwell 1879: 165) in acting as ‘repositories of memory’ (Perrot & Martin-Fugier 1990: 265). Sixteen-year-old Frenchwoman Gabrielle Laguin started a diary in 1890 with the premise that it would survive, writing: ‘Many years from now, perhaps I shall feel pleasure on my reading these scribblings, begun in a time of youth and joy’ and ‘Later, when I am quite old, it will amuse me to reread this diary, to see myself in the mirror of the past as I was then’ (qtd in Perrot & Martin-Fugier 1990: 265). Fifteen-year-old Etta Call, writing in the American midwest, expressed a similar thought in 1881: ‘In this diary, I shall put down all my experiences and trials, sorrows and fun, so that, in after years I can read this book and recall to my mind all that happened during my school days, and who knows how much pleasure it may afford me’ (qtd in Bunkers 2001: 66).

In addition to performing the functions of archive, site for confession, repository for reflection, and confidante outlined above, during the Victorian and Edwardian periods and immediately after (between 1850 and 1920), the diary also became a resource for, as Fothergill states, the ‘pleasures of recollection’ (1974: 72). It has been suggested, that at this time, some women and girls were reading Romantic novels and their diaries were duly inspired by these narratives in terms of both subject matter and tone (O’Sullivan 2005). There was not, however, a seamless transition from religious moralism to heady fantasy, as the development of a sound moral character was a preoccupation that also characterised this period, particularly in the middle classes. O’Sullivan argues that, in line with other Victorian control mechanisms, diaries became at this time ‘regulators of behavior and testimonies of sustained virtue’ (2005: 61). In this way, diary keeping was understood to provide (girls in particular) with ‘a means of self-discipline and a safeguard against idleness’ (O’Sullivan 2005: 61), although this surveillance role was somewhat mitigated by diaries’ role as secret confidante and its potential to be a receptacle for Romantic imaginings. At this time, the diary thus became a slippery and subversive form, providing an outlet for diarists to both conform to and express, but also escape, the confining cultural expectations of the Victorian age.

The mid-nineteenth century diary that Kate Summerscale utilises, and quotes widely from, in her biographical study, *Mrs Robinson’s Disgrace* (2012), casts its writer, Isabella Robinson, as reviewer Alexander Harris recognises, as ‘the heroine of her own romantic novel’ (Harris 2012) at a time when women’s finances, bodies and even their diaries were regulated and not their own. Alice James (1848-92), part of a family in which several males were noted for their literary prowess – Henry James Sr, William and Henry James Jr – had severe health challenges, and began writing a diary three years before her death. This text not only offers readers insights into a woman coping as best she can with her health issues in a bid to validate her life (Boyer 2013: 34), but also offers writers an example of the language in which such emotions can be conveyed. Dorothy Wordsworth’s diaries similarly express her hopes and frustrations, and

have been thus used and interpreted by her biographer Frances Wilson (2008, see also Millim 2010; Brien 2015).

At the turn of the twentieth century, the diary takes on a more (private and public) political function. During the First World War, soldiers and other service personnel such as nurses and doctors were encouraged to keep diaries (Hallett 2007). This appears to have served many functions. It was an accessible, cheap and quiet form of distraction, expression and entertainment. A diary could maintain a line of communication with family, even though the records would not be seen until a later and safer time. It perhaps provided a grounding for one's personal values, hopes and desires that the realities of war may have threatened to obliterate. Thus it may have encouraged fortitude and endurance, and later, the diaries would not just be illuminating for others, but might provide evidence, when all other data had been lost. In the second world war, the use of diaries were widely encouraged, perhaps because having learned of their value in the previous war, they were thought to provide comfort to those in hiding or otherwise suppressed. For people such as Jewish children in hiding, victims of anti-semitism and gross dehumanisation, the diary became a tool to preserve one's humanity, one's worth (Zapruder 2002). On 12 June 1942, Anne Frank wrote, 'I hope I will be able to confide everything to you, as I have never been able to confide in anyone, and I hope you will be a great source of comfort and support' (Frank 1952). For Frank and numerous other diarists, their diary writing becomes an important way to cope in times of hardship and difficulty. Not only did the diary thus become a powerful weapon for individuals to bear witness, but their later widespread dissemination politicised millions of readers who were exposed to these diaries.

What could be described as 'functional' or 'practically-focused' diaries relate to a wide range of human endeavours, and focus on the development of a skill or area of expertise, encompassing scientific observations, artistic note taking, or planning a short story. For other diarists, the diary can become a repository of intensely confidential thoughts and feelings. Fanny Kemble, wife of an American slave owner, for instance, wrote in her diary the revulsion she felt toward her husband's treatment of their slaves, as she felt only this textual form offered her the freedom to explore the thoughts and feelings which were at odds with those of the society in which she lived (Cooper 1987). In November 1933, Anaïs Nin, expressed in her diary a similar sentiment:

Playing so many roles, dutiful daughter, devoted sister, mistress, protector, my father's new found illusion, Henry's needed, all-purpose friend, I had to find one place of truth, one dialogue without falsity. (Nin 1966: 286)

In the above cases, diaries became safe places for writers to describe thoughts and feelings that they felt could not be aired more publically and, thus, became repositories of fascinating secrets (Alexander 2010). This role can also, of course, be directly related to other creative writers in terms of the both life and writerly problems faced and how diaries (and journals) can be used as the place wherein these issues are articulated and, hopefully, worked through.

The diary can thus be a functional informational tool in a range of contexts that can be relevant to writers looking for inspiration, evidence or support, and to researchers searching for both material and methodological tools in the field. Even the most practically-focused chronicles have potential in this regard. Keeping a task or workflow diary to encourage time management has been shown to be useful for people prone to severe depression (Baikie, Geerligs & Wilhelm 2012: 318), but these diaries can also be utilised in managing the workload pressures that teaching academics and other writers often attest to

feeling in terms of finding the time to write. Specifically-focused diaries such as food diaries, used in various forms of dietary analysis and regulation from allergy to weight control (Beintner, Jacobi & Taylor 2012), and gardening diaries, kept to track what planting and tending strategies worked or failed in a particular season or year, could form the basis for a personal memoir or biographical study, or provide vivid images and metaphors for a range of creative writing narratives. Both solicited and unsolicited diaries are also used to improve understanding of many illnesses, including those that are chronic and/or relating to mental health (Fletcher & Wilson 2013). As the diary enables the patient's experience to be captured in real time, as well as the opportunity to observe the environmental influences and other factors affecting everyday life, they can provide a rich source of data that may not be able to be revealed in any other way (Bartlett 2012; Bernays, Rhodes & Jankovic Terzic 2014; Bolger, Davis & Rafaeli 2003; Plummer 2001). Through such diaries, creative writers and writing researchers can gain access to personal knowledge that is otherwise unfeasible or unethical to assess or research directly (Stopka et al 2004), and that can then be applied to creative or research projects.

As each diary entry is set in a particular moment in time, it can reveal something of the variation and fullness of everyday life, and can provide a depth of detail about the past that is unavailable in more official documents or resources. The diaries of both well- and lesser-known figures preserved in libraries, museums and other archives can thus be rich sources of material for historical fiction writers and memoirists in developing characters or plots and describing settings and other historical elements. (Almanacs could also be used in this way.) As Cooper writes, 'The daily diary is all the more instructive because it is more like raw data than synthesized memory' (1987: 95) and this is not only in its descriptions of events and people, but also in the relationships, behaviour, values, morals, tastes and desires it captures (Maunsell 2011). As an artefact that attempts to represent the diarist's concerns and interests, the diary cannot, of course, provide a perfect replica of time past but it can add to the knowledge about that past and is, importantly, expressed in the voice of the individual who lived at that time (Acton 2010). Ponsonby has described personal diaries as 'better than novels, more accurate than histories, and even at times more dramatic than plays' (Ponsonby 1923: 4) for the richness they provide.

Even the physical form of the diary can provide useful information. For biographers, historians and others, the choice of type of volume and writing implement, as well as the writing style and length and frequency of entry, provides clues to the writer's condition of life and state of mind. A hand-written diary can reveal a great deal about its writer in terms of changes in handwriting throughout the text while the diary itself as physical object may show signs of its storage and treatment, and reveal the perceived or expressed need for privacy, as in the presence of a lock or a label marking it as private and personal. On-line diaries potentially hold an equivalent, but obviously different, evidential value, provided that they are adequately archived (O'Sullivan 2005: 54).

While scholars in the fields of literature and history tend to utilise unsolicited diaries (Alaszewski 2006; Mackrill 2008), both types of diary hold potential for writers and writing-based research. In the unsolicited diary, the writer freely explores their own thoughts and feelings on an unfettered range of subjects while, in the solicited version, the thoughts, feelings and/or observations are focused on certain subjects, and entries can be more consciously constructed. Although the solicited diary, whereby researchers invite participants to keep diaries about a specific interest area, has been noted to be especially useful in qualitative psychotherapy research (Mackrill 2008), they have broad

application in a range of contexts. Solicited diaries can be, for example, of use to researchers concerned about the ethics of utilising another's stories in their own writing (see Patai 1987; Eakin 1999, for discussion), and also address the retrospective recall 'problem' (Jacelon & Imperio 2005) of all memory, as diary data is generally recorded closer to the event than retrospective interviews or questionnaires and is, therefore, presumed to improve the accuracy of the data thus collected (Milligan, Bingley & Gatrell 2005). Studies using diaries allow the participant to describe their thoughts and feelings in their own words, which could open up a range of new lines of inquiry for the writing researcher wanting to investigate reader or audience reception (Mackrill 2008).

Writers keeping diaries

As a private site for 'working things out', the diary can serve many purposes for creative artists – including writers – who may use the process of keeping a diary to foster the creative process.[4] For writers, the self-reflective aspects of diary writing are important because, as Mascuch states, the ability to set oneself apart as the subject of one's life is integral to developing an individual identity (qtd in McKay 2005: 195). This idea of an identity is obviously important for the creative writer finding their voice and preferred mode of expression. Katz refers to the diary of the English poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning to illustrate the diary's significance as not only a private record, but how writing it was also a psychologically meaningful act for her as a writer whose texts might endure in the public realm (Katz 2010). On 4 June 1831, Browning, then aged 25, wrote:

I wonder if I shall burn this sheet of paper like most others I have begun in the same way. To write a diary, I have thought of very often at far & near distances of time: but how could I write a diary without throwing upon paper my thoughts, all of my thoughts – the thoughts of my heart as well as of my head? – & then how could I bear to look on them after they were written?... Well! but I will write; I must write – & the oftener wrong I know myself to be, the less wrong I shall be in one thing – the less vain I shall be! (Browning 1974: 61)

This extract shows Browning struggling with the idea of the diary as both private, but lasting and therefore possibly public, document. She is keenly aware that, for herself, as others, the diary will record her thoughts for perpetuity, but also believes the process of writing, and reflection on these texts, will be instructive. This also shows how, as a genre, diaries stand between the realms of the public and private: both an insight into the more private interior world of the writer and an exterior, public expression of the writer's life and thoughts (Holmes 1992).

Questions of identity and identity formation can be read in, and modeled from, other writers' diarising practices, for instance, in the early diaries of British feminist and pacifist Vera Brittain, who was born in 1893. Brittain's diary entries explore issues of love, loss and potential as she develops into adulthood and as a writer. In the First World War she worked as a nurse and lost a fiancé, brothers and friends, and these events are discussed with deeply painful clarity in *The Testament of Youth* (Brittain 1933). In this memoir, Brittain commented that her diaries kept during wartime provided a place in which she could express her sadness and pent-up beliefs about the meaninglessness of war that were not safe to articulate elsewhere. This diary writing also helped to clarify

her own values and intentions, as evidenced when Brittain controversially became a peace activist during the Second World War (Berry & Bostridge 1995).

Virginia Woolf began to write a diary regularly in 1915 and continued the practice until days before her death in 1941 (see Woolf 1954). Besides describing what she did and her observations of people and the life around her, Woolf used her diary as a platform on which to draft and test ideas relating to her work as a writer and an artist. A volume of extracts from her diaries, edited by her husband, Leonard Woolf, and published after her death, focus on her writing, as the title, *A Writer's Diary* (1954) suggests. More complete versions have since been published. *Anais Nin*, who penned her first diary at the age of eleven and continued the practice for more than sixty years, wrote and re-wrote her diaries with the reader in mind, and these not only became the foundation for her literary works but, in themselves, became works of intense interest for both their content and way they were written (Rendall 1986: 59).

Maunsell discusses how the writer Susan Sontag, whose diaries comprise almost 100 notebooks, used the practice of diary writing to hone her writing style as well as organise her daily activities, in line with her aspirations to be a better writer. In her case, the diary became a place where Sontag – as a writer – could both engage in a process of self-assessment and also take on the challenge of transitioning her identity from the inner idealized self to the outer ‘real’ self she envisioned (Maunsell 2011). In this activity, her diary provided Sontag with a place in which she could log, sort and study her doubts and dreams, and process these. The bid to blend her dreams with the realities of life and to create an ‘identity just out of reach in the future’ (Maunsell 2011: 13) was, for Sontag, not only a lifelong process but, apparently, a key part of her creative journey.

Rainer states that diary writing helps to develop many parts of the mind including memory, imagination, feelings and intuition (Rainer 1978: xii), and these aspects of diary keeping may be practically useful for writers, as well as researchers. Mascuch has identified that the diary can be a matchless record of:

the subjective side of mental development. The first stirring of an interest, its growth, perhaps to the state of an absorbing passion, and its decline, can be traced. The turning points in a life are exposed to view, set, as they out to be, in the everyday frame of unaccentuated routine. (Mascuch 1997: 88)

Understanding the diary in these terms – as a mode of writing/composition that can lead to enhanced self-understanding – has led to the diary being seen as a self-help tool, and criticised in these terms. This has been caricatured by fiction writers, as in Helen Fielding’s comic romance *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996) and its sequel *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (2004), where the eponymous heroine repeatedly tries to relieve her woes with a new approach to life which she documents in her diary. Some, however, criticised the fictional Bridget’s diary keeping, as it thrived on – and perhaps resulted from – a lack of self-belief and a propensity for making unwise decisions (Marsh 2004).

Using diaries as fictional narrative form

The diary form has been used as a narrative frame in fiction for over 250 years. Known as ‘fictional diaries’, ‘fictive diaries’ or ‘diary novels’, these works – while of sustained interest in literary studies (see, for instance, Prince 1975; Abbott 1984; Martens 1985; Duyfhuizen 1986; Field 1989; Hassam 1992;

Brindle 2010; Ferguson 2014) – have attracted much less attention from scholars of creative writing, and thus we know much more about potential readings of these works, than the circumstances of their production. The diary was included in Samuel Richardson’s early novel, *Pamela: or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) in which the eponymous heroine keeps a diary of her (mis)adventures. Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) is shaped around diary entries, as are the comic classics *Diary of a Nobody* by George and Weedon Grossmith (1892) and Anita Loos’ *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925). Diaries are also common framing and narrative devices in Gothic fiction, with three diaries included in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). They are also used in this way in contemporary crime fiction, as a convenient device for revealing secrets to the reader but not the narrator or investigating team. Diaries are used, for instance, as pivotal plot points in: Carolyn Keene’s *The Clue in the Diary* (1932) (the seventh volume in the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories series), Agatha Christie’s *Crooked House* (1949) and Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* (2012).[5] Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’ Diary* (1996), discussed above, has spawned sequels and a movie series and the diary is a popular format in children’s fiction series – with Sue Townsend’s *Secret Diary of Adrian Mole* (1982-2009), Meg Cabot’s *The Princess Diaries* (2000-2009) and Jeff Kinney’s *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (2007-2015) books all popular with readers. The diary form is also used in a series of literary metafictional works including Mick Jackson’s *The Underground Man* (1997), Sarah Waters’ *Affinity* (1999) and Katie Roiphe’s *Still She Haunts Me* (2001) (see Brindle 2010).

The diary is also used as a device in fan fiction, whereby readers become writers and imagine backstories, or extensions or other elaborations for their favourite works. Blythe Flynn, for example, powerfully imagines the diaries Susanna Kaysen (may have) kept to write the now-classic memoir *Girl, Interrupted* (1993), in the process commenting on the complex and hidden issues of self-harm, ambivalence, self-loathing, and dissociation that are characteristic of Borderline Personality Disorder in Kaysen’s work, as well as drawing attention to the key role that diaries play in memoir writing, and the diary itself as a literary form:

Ah, blood at long last. It took me forever to find a sharp big enough to break the skin... I feel so disturbed... I think I may have hit a thicker vein with my sharp ... woohoo. My blood is such a watery shade of pale, my anaemia is clearly written across the page in pallid red... Years from now I’ll publish this diary ... perhaps someone will find it provocative and intriguing ... maybe even thought provoking ... right, my life is so interesting, folks will be lined up ‘round the block to see ‘The Diary of Me’ in print, available everywhere. / I know what it’s like to want to die. How it hurts to smile. How you try to fit in, but you can’t. How you hurt yourself on the outside to try to kill the thing on the inside. (Flynn 2005)

In this text, Flynn draws attention to how memoirists utilise diaries in the development of their narratives. There are other examples of this. Thomas Larson provides a revealing discussion about the process of composing memoir from his personal diary (Larson 2007) and winner of the Whitbread Award for Biography in the year it was published, Alexander Masters’ *Stuart: A Life Backwards* (2005), chronicles the life of Stuart Shorter, an activist who had once been both homeless and a violent criminal, by including reproductions of Shorter’s drawings, photographs and diary extracts. These diary entries were notable in terms of revealing Shorter’s actions, but also his state of mind (Nørgaard 2009, see also Brien 2014).

Conclusion

For more than 500 years in the English-speaking world, the diary has been employed in multiple ways, including as record-keeper, list-maker, observation and reflective tool, coping resource, creative platform and research method. Literacy was essential for the diary's conception and the result has been not only an autobiographical textual form but also a tool, information source and model for creative writers. The diary's functions include expression (to release and communicate), reflection (to analyse oneself and to deliberate), memory (a method of freezing time in a series of daily snapshots) and pleasure (of both writing and giving shape to one's life). Besides preserving accounts of domestic and other quotidian life events, the diary has thus become a favoured instrument for self-exploration, self-expression, and self-construction, and as such is a perfect form for creative writers to utilise in their practice, model in their work and research.

As a fascinating example of an evolving narrative, the diary is a genre of writing with many layers of interest and applications for writers and those teaching and researching the form to consider. As a tool in developing writing practices, style, observational abilities and self-reflection, a journal for a particular project (wherein character, plot, narrative are experimentally laid out and tested), and a teaching and research resource, the diary has much to offer. The qualities of the diary as a written text – its realistic, everyday observed detail illuminating an evolving discontinuous narrative – are also of formal interest to writers, as these qualities help the reader form a special relationship with this form of narrative, and its narrator, and this aspect of diaries is a rich area for further research.

In surveying the diary form of narrative in terms of its definition, historical evolution, uses and value for writers and creative writing researchers, we hope this mapping of the form has suggested that the diary as a generic form, its use and scholarly investigation, deserves a richer role in creative writing practice and studies. As there is still much work to be conducted on this element of the writer's practice and toolkit, we look forward to further research and writing on this form of autobiographical writing.

Notes

[1] The quotation in the title comes from Ponsonby (1923: 4). [return to text](#)

[2] The important US-based Association of Writers and Writing Programs, while providing the peak professional organisational for 500 college and university creative writing programs produces a popular and influential magazine, *The Writers Chronicle* (2015), but does not publish a refereed, scholarly journal. The esteemed American journals *College Composition and Communication* (2015) and *College English* (2015) both focus on teaching writing rather than writing research. An early article regarding the use of the diary in teaching writing appeared in 1969, when Natalie Korbel Stroh discussed how she used her own childhood diary in a primary school creative writing class, finding the diary a persuasive instrument to encourage reluctant writers to begin to express themselves in a similar form (Stroh 1969). Since then, a series of other teachers have detailed how creative writing teachers can use the journal in primary and secondary classrooms. [return to text](#)

[3] Originally published as *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, Of York, Mariner: Who lived Eight and Twenty Years, all alone in an un-inhabited Island on the Coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great River of Oroonoke; Having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, wherein all the Men perished but himself. With An Account how he was at last as strangely deliver'd by Pyrates*. [return to text](#)

[4] Self-help writers have also stepped into this space as, for example, in Tristine Rainer's *The New Diary: How to Use a Journal for Self-guidance and Expanded Creativity* (1978). Rainer outlines numerous possibilities for using the diary in this way, promoting the diary as a site 'to clarify goals, visualize the future, and focus ... energies; a means of freeing ... intuition and imagination; a workbook for exploring your dreams, your past, and your present life' (back cover). This has remained a standard claim for books on how to journal – as for example, in Stephanie Dowrick's *Creative Journal Writing: The Art and Heart of Reflection* (2007). return to text

[5] A warm thank you to crime fiction scholar Dr Rachel Franks for her assistance on this point. return to text

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