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Making stories of our own ends: two Australian memoirs of dying

Abstract:

An increasing number of end-of-life memoirs have been published over the past two decades. A number of these by American and British authors have received considerable notice and acclaim. There are, however, also a number of book-length published memoirs written by Australian narrators whose texts narrate their own dying. Despite achieving a measure of popularity with readers, few of these Australian works have been explored in detail or categorised as a discrete sub-set of the autobiographical memoir in Australia. This article discusses two Australian memoirs, *Dying: A Memoir* by Donald Horne and Myfanwy Horne (2007) and *Dying: A Memoir* by Cory Taylor (2016). Examining these texts contributes to understanding of both this revealing autobiographical practice and practices of writing and publishing popular memoir in Australia more generally. They also add to knowledge of the way individuals face, and deal with, the prospect of their own impending ends.

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> It takes courage to contemplate one's own death … it is inexpressibly lonely … In hospitals we don't talk about death, we talk about treatment (Taylor 2016: 13).

Introduction

An increasing number of autobiographical end-of-life memoirs have been published in English over the past two decades. A number of these by American and British authors have received considerable notice and acclaim. Here, I am thinking particularly of works by Paul Zweig (1986), Howard Brodkey (1996), John Diamond (1998), John Updike (2009), Tony Judt (2010), Christopher Hitchens (2012), Marjorie Williams (2005) and Jenny Diski (2016), but there are many others. Although these works have attracted considerable attention overseas by critics and reviewers overseas, scholarship on these works – both internationally and in Australasia – is currently an emerging area. Yet, these are fascinating pieces of writing for those interested in writing for, as Hussein Ibish has written, these are not easy texts to get right: 'Whether first-person or narrated by some long-suffering beloved, it seems almost impossible to strike a tone that is sufficiently moving and engaging, while simultaneously avoiding the maudlin, predictable or downright dull' (2012).

A number of important book-length published autobiographical memoirs have also been written by Australian narrators whose texts narrate the process of their own dying. Despite achieving a measure of popularity with readers, and being powerful and moving pieces of writing, few of these Australian works have been explored in detail or categorised as a discrete sub-set of the auto/biographical memoir in Australia. Examining these texts, mode of publication and public reception can contribute to our understanding of both this revealing autobiographical practice and practices of writing and publishing popular memoir in Australia more generally. Reading both critical and reader reviews also suggests that they can also add considerably to readers' knowledge of the way individuals can face, and deal with, the prospect of their own impending ends (see, Robertson 2016). They can also be utilised in self-help (Norcross et. al 2000), psychological and psychotherapy approaches to mental distress (Sommer 2003), bibliotherapy (Berns 2004) and various sociological research.

Such texts can also be used in teaching in terms of providing curriculum resources around dealing with grief and loss, and writing about death and dying (Berman 2007, Vance 2007). They can also be of assistance to trainee health professionals who will need to deal with palliative and other end-of-life care situations (Donohoe 2002) as well as those who plan to work in the funeral industry (Fowler 2014).

In the following, I concentrate on two Australian memoirs, both with the same arresting title, *Dying: A Memoir* published in Australia in the past decade. These volumes are *Dying: A Memoir* by Donald Horne and Myfanwy Horne (2007) and *Dying: A Memoir* by Cory Taylor (2016).

Memoirs about death and dying

Despite the often-repeated assertion that death is a taboo in modern Western society, contrary opinions are beginning to be asserted. Death and dying are certainly an enduring theme in works of fiction (Skelton 2003). In a recent collection of essays, Outi Hakola and Sari Kivistö summarise that death is ‘more than a physical or psychological experience in literature; it also highlights existential questions concerning humanity and storytelling’ (2014). Death and dying are also significant subjects in non-fiction writing, including in life writing. In their influential definitional listing of sixty genres of life writing, Smith and Watson include *autothanatography* to name that group of autobiographical texts that focus on (terminal) illness and dying (2010: 261). Susanna Egan notes that such texts emphasise ‘illness, pain and imminent death as crucial to the processes of that life’ (1999: 224) and illness memoirs – many of which include the dying process – are, indeed, a much-discussed sub-genre of memoir (see, for example, Frank 1995; Forché and Gerard 2001; Avrahami 2007; Couser 2007, 2011; Yagoda 2009). While such illness memoirs are, as identified by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson often autobiographical (2010: 261), but not always, there is also a closely associated form of memoir that can be described as *bereavement* memoirs – those memoirs which describe the actions performed and emotions felt by those experiencing, or after, the death of another.

Before moving onto each of the two individual texts discussed herein, I begin by noting the following striking similarities between these books. Beyond sharing the same title, both memoirs were written by already published Australia writers who were known to readers, critics and publishers. Both memoirs are published by significant Australian publishers: Penguin/Viking for the Horne volume, and Text Publishers for the Taylor volume. Penguin published Horne’s first and, arguably, most famous book *The Lucky Country* (1964), while Text produced Taylor’s two acclaimed adult novels (2011, 2013). Both books were also originally published in hard copy volumes on heavy paper stock, with beautifully designed dust jackets, a mode of release which, given the size of the local market, has not always been the case for recent Australian writers’ memoirs. The print size and spacing of each volume is generous, and neither of these is long volumes, which adds to their poignancy. Interestingly, I found that, in conjunction with the subject matter and tone of the writing, the open spacing of the text on the page slowed down my reading of these works.

The overwhelming tone of both volumes, as might be expected, is sombre. The end of the story is, of course, known, and it is in no way a happy one. However, neither of these volumes is self-indulgent or in any way histrionic or hysterical. Both writers maintain an inspiring dignity in the face of their impending deaths, their musings upon which are one of the most striking elements of both these volumes. Both memoirs were glowingly reviewed. I will point out a number of other similarities, as well as differences, below.

Dying: A memoir by Donald Horne and Myfanwy Horne (2007)

Donald Horne, long recognized and widely respected as one of Australia’s leading public intellectuals, and author of the widely known *The Lucky Country* (1964), was

born in 1921 and died in 2005. Published after his death, *Dying: A Memoir* (2007), was Horne's 28th book, four earlier of which were memoirs – *The Education of Young Donald* (1967), *Confessions of a New Boy* (1985), *Portrait of an Optimist* (1988) and *Into the Open: Memoirs 1958–1999* (2000) – although all his books express a strong sense of the author's sensibility and personality. Horne also published many, many articles and other contributions to newspapers, magazines and journals, and worked as a journalist, editor of *The Bulletin*, *The Observer* and *Quadrant*, and academic as well as Chancellor of the University of Canberra, Chair of the Australia Council and various other influential roles on writing, arts and citizenship committees. His co-author of this memoir was his wife of almost 50 years, and lifetime editor of his published works, journalist and editor Myfanwy Horne, who herself died in 2013.

The Hornes' *Dying: A Memoir* has an elegant structure, organized into three parts. The first part is Horne's 'Journal of a terminal illness', narrating the period from January 2005 until just days before his death in September 2005 from pulmonary fibrosis, in which he describes his illness since he began to suffer breathlessness in 1997 producing, as Horne himself explains, 'a record of aspects of one person's situation as he approaches death' (45). This describes the various medical treatments and various practitioners involved in his care: 'the six doctors on my calling list, along with the blood tests, CT scans, X-rays, bone scans, ultrasounds, electrocardiograms, pulmonary function analyses, nuclear scans and a special heart test' (20). As their lives and house become more medicalised, the Hornes consult a lung doctor, a gerontologist, physiotherapist and a palliative care specialist and fit their home with various aids and instruments designed to make living (and dying) at home possible. These include oxygen cylinders, wheel chairs, a stair-lift and later devices to make being bed ridden more comfortable, including and a chair for taking a seated shower. The Hornes also employ increasing levels of home nursing help, until, in the final weeks of Horne's life, full-time nursing is organized.

Especially moving are the descriptions of changes to the Hornes' longstanding routines. Horne finds, for instance, that he cannot carry their breakfast tray upstairs to his wife as he had long been doing. After enjoying a lifetime of entertaining, they organize supplies of food specially prepared for 'in home invalids' (30). This is an example of how the couple initially resist such changes to their lives, but then accept these as necessary:

> At first we reject the idea, then the reality of our needs rids us of our pride in do-it-yourself home cooking … Now, with a supply in the deep freeze of beef goulash, spinach pancakes and chicken paprika, the microwave is earning its keep (31).

Life becomes circumscribed to, at first, outings to the local shopping centre, then entertaining friends at home, then Horne's suite of rooms then his bedroom, and finally bed. He is eventually more comfortable in nightshirts and 'an elegant long navy velvet dressing gown made in Turkey' (46) – outdoor clothes are 'only for downstairs visitors and the odd outing' (46).

While certainly not shying away from the realities of his illness, treatment and inevitable and inexorable decline, this memoir is much more than a litany of physical decay. While the progress of the illness is described in detail, as Horne moves from

breathlessness to lung failure – of not being himself, but as he identified, 'a Lung Patient' (49), Horne also offers considerable reflection on his life, including expressions of gratitude for the positive aspects of his life and career, and especially his family. Horne also employs some instances of black humour – noting, for example: how if he had been 'lucky enough to get the disease in my forties, I could have had a lung transplant' (10). Ever the intellectual, Horne begins to make sense of his illness as he records his thoughts – working from the specific to the more universal, 'One of the things I find interesting in recording this history of my illness is thinking about illness in general … not just the medical symptoms' (93) and the importance of attempting to maintain 'a bit of imaginative life, wherein I could move around in thoughts away from my illness' (99). He notes that although understanding that some of the experiences he is recording in his journal are 'trivialities … they are a reminder that in our life here Myfanwy and I are having much the same experiences as people have anywhere' (94).

In this section, Horne also makes many comments about writing both in general, and in terms of what he knows to be his final manuscript. At times, Horne has his doubts about his ability to complete the manuscript, thinking 'I may be wasting my time … there may not be the time to do it' (20), but recognizing that the act of writing 'may help concentrate my mind' (20). He also wonders, 'how I would be able to write essays without knowing how long I had to live, and under what conditions' (33). He also remarks on a situation that any voracious, lifelong reader and writer would find heartbreaking: suffering 'periods of not being up to reading' (55) and losing his imaginative power when the prognosis of terminal illness was delivered:

> it obliterated the freshness and delight of my storytelling … I couldn't concentrate … couldn't think of anything very much other than the circumstances of my disease; the same concerns circulated over and over in my head, with no particular point. I became the illness (58).

Despite these limitations, he muses, however, that

> Probably foolishly, I have decided that before I die I want to complete enough essays to make a book (18) … It's always interesting to put on paper what one might believe, and to tell others about it, and I have always had a belief in the printed word (19).

Although he has no assurance the work will be published, there is, Horne states, a 'sense of fulfilment' (62) in dictating these essays onto tape. He does, however, recognize that, given what he recognizes is the 'peculiarities of the production of the work … there are going to be many missing bits' (71).

Near the end of this section, and most movingly, Horne writes of his feelings as his illness progresses, 'Not so much sorry as sadly accepting … sadness has become part of my bones, although its intensity varies' (80). In his final month, he is 'constantly thinking about the way my life is ending' (102) and relates how, although not fearing being dead, he is sorrowful. The final page and a half describe his feelings about moving onto the opiate regime that is the final stage of palliative care treatment, although he is still not quite ready for that step when the text ends.

Book Two comprises Myfanwy moving 'Requiem' for her dead husband, written in memory of their life together, although there is a focus on the last months from the time

when his condition was diagnosed as terminal. In this part of the memoir, she shares a significant amount of practical information in relation to offering palliative care at home: the realities of such care; who to phone and when if the patient dies at home; and, planning a funeral service and wake. Although fascinating, and certainly useful data to know, Horne's thoughts and feelings on first caring for her husband, and then coping after his death is are, for me, the most memorable pieces of writing in this section. In this, the tiniest details are sometimes the most potent, such as when she notes his growing weakness:

> He needs me to beside him to press the record and stop buttons on the tape recorder. I find it very moving to lie next to him and listen to his soft, slow, slightly slurred articulation, stoic and detached. Five days after his oldest friend's visit he gives up dictating and is noticeably quieter. Donald's only significant complaint has been 'It's a lot of trouble, isn't it? (131).

Book Three, the beautifully named, 'A last look around: essays and talking points', represents the series of essays Horne describes dictating in the first part of the memoir. These are thoughtful meditations on a series of subjects which were of interest, and importance, to him at the end of his life and form, as he describes as 'a sort of last look at some critical issues' (61). These subjects range from his thoughts on the importance and pleasures of reading to war in general and specific wars in particular. He also writes of his admiration for American intellectual endeavour and publishing, as well as his ideas about democracy, criticism, perception and faith. He also muses upon the humanism which has motivated much of his work – 'how people behave, what they believe, the way they see things, how they do things, how they distinguish themselves from each other, the importance of culture' (98).

Book One is prefaced with an excerpt from the Hornes' son Nick Horne's eulogy at his father's funeral (2), Book Three with a quote from their daughter Julia's Horne's eulogy (170). The book finishes with an Acknowledgements section by Myfanwy Horne which explains how the manuscript was readied for publication posthumously. The journal component was dictated onto tape, and then transcribed by Nick Horne, who also 'worked on revisions to early drafts of the essays' (265). Penguin's interest encouraged Myfanwy to progress with the manuscript (265) who 'put together' (264) the volume which, before publication, was read by a number of readers whose suggestions were taken into account, and who included the publisher's editor.

In many ways, this book describes what is largely characterized as 'a good death'. Although he describes a series of bad dreams, some bodily indignities, and some low periods, Horne – who died in a hospice of his choosing at the age of 83 – lived all but one of his last days at home. His end was peaceful. Myfanwy Horne's requiem ends with mixing her husband's ashes, moistened with good champagne, into the soil of the garden that he had loved so much.

Dying: A memoir by Cory Taylor (2016)

Dying: A Memoir was Taylor's third book for adults, published only months before her death from melanoma-related cancer in July this year – 2016. This memoir describes

how, after a lifetime of writing, and wanting to write, her first adult novel, *Me and Mr Booker* (2011) won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize (Pacific Region) in 2012, while her second, *My Beautiful Enemy* (2013) was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award in 2014. Taylor was also a scriptwriter and author of the 'Bandaged Bear' children's series for Scholastic Press (2001a, b, 2002).

Taylor's *Dying: A Memoir* also has an elegant structure and is again divided into three sections. Her memoir, however, instead of a description of her illness, opens with an arresting reference to one of its main themes, the argument that the dying have a right to an assisted death. She relates how she had, herself, purchased an euthanasia drug online from China. She also describes how she found out that she could also purchase this in Mexico or Peru from a vet, saying it was for a sick animal. Setting the tone for how she thinks about her death in these opening pages, she describes how that it was only when she began her treatment that she realized there were so many people around her, and – like them – she was as 'unprepared as anyone could be. It was as if I had stumbled out of a land of make-believe into the realm of the real' (9). And, that is why she decided to begin to write this memoir, in order to contribute to a discussion of death that was unavailable to her:

> Things are not as they should be. For so many of us, death has become the unmentionable thing, a monstrous silence. But this is no help to the dying, who are probably lonelier now than they've ever been. At least that's how it feels to me (9).

This is central to her text, for like many in Australia, Taylor admits that she had never witnessed anyone's death and rarely, indeed, ever even seen anyone gravely sick. Her doctors – she attests – never discussed the topic of death generally, or her death in particular, with her; this was left to the palliative care specialists. Taylor felt this lack keenly and her memoir can be read as an extended engagement with this topic, both for herself and her readers.

In common with Horne, Taylor reflects on her gratefulness for the love of her family and past pleasures. She notes, profoundly, that even unhappiness is an intrinsic part of an authentic life and should be recognised as such: 'When you're dying, even your unhappiest memories can induce a kind of fondness, as if delight is not confined to the good times, but is woven through your days like a skein of gold thread' (25). Also like Horne, Taylor describes herself, and her life, as a writer and, a number of times, how central and intrinsic writing has always been to her in making sense of the world: 'I'm never happier than when I'm writing, or thinking about writing, or watching the world as a writer (33). Writing provides both company, 'I still write so as not to feel alone in the world' (120) and, pleasure, which is evidenced when she describes the joy of holding her first published novel. Taylor also reflects upon how the writing thus produced achieves a degree of immortality for the author, a way of, as she states, cheating death.

Despite this insight, she writes openly about feeling fear and sadness about dying, but then charts her resignation and acceptance: 'I'm used to dying now. It's become ordinary and unremarkable … If I'm afraid of anything it of dying badly … I haven't died before, so sometimes I get a bad case of beginners nerves, but they soon pass' (39). There is also a weariness that is profoundly moving in its matter-of-factness, 'I will not

miss dying. It is by far the hardest thing I have ever done, and I will be glad when it's over' (51).

Taylor also includes a discussion of her relationship with Brisbane journalist and editor, Susan Addison, whose story of her young son's death from brain cancer, *Mother Lode, stories of home life and home death*, was published by the University of Queensland Press in 2003. Taylor met Addison when, feeling a desire to leave the story of her life for her children, she found out her home-nursing service employed volunteer biographers who could visit the terminally ill to 'record their stories, then put together a bound copy of the finished product to present to the families' (Taylor 2016: 25). Once a week for more than three months, Addison visited Taylor in this role, and they became friends, sharing their love of books and writing and knowledge of the Sydney scriptwriting world. Reading *Mother Lode* and discussing their lives, Taylor thinks Addison 'understood that she wasn't just my chronicler, but my guide, my travel advisor to that bitter county she had already traversed a number of times before me' (27). When Addison unexpectedly suffered a stroke and died, Taylor is moved to write about the shock and unfairness of this sudden death, and how it has led her to realising that her own 'slow' death had given her the opportunity 'to say a long goodbye …. You have a lot of time to talk, to tell people how you feel, to try and make sense of the whole thing … both for yourself and for those who remain (29). In this spirit, Taylor agreed to be interviewed for a television program talking about taboo topics (ABC 2016) and a number of radio programs, speaking about her experience of dying (Fidler 2016). In those interviews, she described how this book was written in only a few weeks, and in the Acknowledgements section of the memoir, recognises the help her palliative care/hospice nurses and carers gave her in finalising the manuscript.

The second part of her memoir focuses on her parents' stories, seeking to make sense of her past through these narratives. She also describes her life with her husband as one of frequent travel between Australia and Japan, finding powerful metaphors in this movement between countries and cultures. She also describes both her mother's and father's deaths and the uncomfortable aftermaths these caused for she and her siblings. The final part of her memoir describes her childhood, and living in Fiji including the pleasures of the sun and her discovery of sexual desire and some early perceptive truths about race and power. Here, Taylor's ability as a compelling storyteller animates these reflections.

Unlike the Horne volume, Taylor's death is not described in the memoir. In the final line, she borrows from her scriptwriting: 'Fade to black' (147). It was noted online that 'Cory died on 5 July [2016], without pain, and surrounded by her family' (Fidler 2016).

Conclusion

While Taylor's memoir is wholly autobiographical – that is, where the subject is the narrator who is the author – the Hornes' memoir mixes the subject's autobiographical memoir with the biographical reflection of his wife, son and daughter. While no-one is ready to die, and even over 80 years does not seem a long life today, Donald Horne's death can be seen to be a good one. He died peacefully, as a grandfather, loved by those around him, having produced almost 30 wonderful books, with enough funds to pay for

the medical and other comforts available, and enough knowledge to seek out the care available. Taylor's death, on the other hand, at just 60 years of age, having only recently found her voice as a novelist and with so much promise in that area – seems far too young. As remarked above, while Horne's death is most movingly described, that Taylor's is not makes her memoir even more haunting.

Both these volumes are moving examples of the genre. Both are reflective but forward looking, unsentimental but heartbreakingly filled with genuine human emotion. Both authors certainly describe not wanting to die, but finally accept their fates with a directness that makes the sense of their loss even more vivid. Both memoirists also relate a sense of the process their soon-to-be bereaved are undergoing to understand the impending death of their loved ones and, through the knowledge of the subjects gained through these memoirs, readers are placed among these bereaved. This animates the situation that Nancy K. Miller has noted in relation to these memoirs: 'Whatever our singular destinies, such memoirs offer the reader an occasion to reflect autobiographically on … and how to make sense of [death, dying and loss]' (2000: xi).

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