CQUniversity, Australia

Donna Lee Brien

Pathways into an 'elaborate ecosystem': Ways of categorising the food memoir

Abstract
Contemporary food writing is currently gaining visibility, featuring across media platforms from publishing to television and online forms. Kathryn Hughes writes that food writing has 'evolved its own elaborate ecosystem, bristling with sub-genres, starting points, cross-currents and trip wires' (2010). In an attempt to negotiate the complexity of this ecosystem, this article defines and then suggests a range of ways of describing and grouping one sub-genre of food writing, the food memoir. These groupings include categorising by subject matter and content, as well as in terms of authorial approaches to writing these kinds of memoir.
Keywords: food writing, food memoir, memoir

Introduction

Contemporary food writing is currently gaining visibility, featuring across media platforms from publishing to television and online forms. Kathryn Hughes writes that food writing has 'evolved its own elaborate ecosystem, bristling with sub-genres, starting points, cross-currents and trip wires' (Hughes 2010). In an attempt to negotiate the complexity of this ecosystem, this article defines and then suggests a range of ways of describing and grouping one sub-genre of food writing, the food memoir. These groupings include categorising by subject matter and content, as well as in terms of authorial approaches to writing these kinds of memoir.

Although today the terms 'memoir' and 'autobiography' are often used interchangeably as categories by publishers, reviewers and readers, and the two literary forms have much in common, there are also significant differences between them in terms of genre characteristics and conventions. Most obviously, an autobiography tends to represent the whole of the life being written about, while memoir usually explores only one theme, period or aspect of the life under consideration (for discussion see Brien 2004). An autobiography is also always purportedly written by the subject him- or herself, whereas a memoirist can either take his or her own life as subject, or focus on relating someone else's life. In current publishing practice, however, most texts categorised as memoir are written autobiographically and could more properly be described as 'autobiographical memoirs'. On the other hand, when the main subject or subjects of the memoir are not the author, these texts can be referred to as 'biographical memoirs'. Of course, autobiographical memoir always includes aspects of biographical memoir in the information included about others. While most of the below discussion focuses on autobiographical

memoir as this is the form most commonly currently published, some examples of biographical memoirs are included. Both international and Australasian food memoirs are included in this discussion, which largely addresses relatively recent texts, with almost all examples published since 1990, a time when, as John Feather and Hazel Woodbridge suggest in their survey of British publishing, an 'undiminished human curiosity about other people's lives is clearly reflected in the popularity of autobiographies and biographies' (Feather & Woodbridge 2007: 218).

While a perusal of publishers' lists reveals a significant production and, presumably, a matching consumption of memoir, the often-proclaimed growth in popularity of the auto/biographical genre as a whole has been questioned.[1] Leaving the question of overall growth aside, it is apparent that certain types of memoir have become more popular over the past two decades. Many of the extremely popular memoirs that attracted public and critical attention in the 1990s had in common an approach to form and subject matter that has been characterised as the 'survival', 'confessional' or 'misery' memoir, and which Ben Yagoda describes as chronicles of 'dysfunction, abuse, poverty, addiction, mental illness, and/or bodily ruin' (Yagoda 2009: 228). Some critics indeed trace the contemporary interest in memoir as a literary form to the warmth with which William Styron's *Darkness Visible* (1990) – the *Sophie's Choice* author's account of his struggle with depression – was received (Gale 1998, Atlas 1996), while others cite the extraordinary critical attention and substantial book sales [2] attracted by Mary Karr's memoir about her troubled East Texan childhood, *The Liars' Club* (1995) (Garner 1997). Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir* (1996), the author's first book, gave a clear indication of the commercial power of these kinds of memoir [3] as one of only eleven American hardcover books published that year to sell more than one million copies and spending over two years on *The New York Times* bestseller list [4]. Such memoir remains popular today with readers, even though it has been criticised for more than a decade as a sign of 'exhibitionistic' (Buckley 1999: 45) or 'pathological' narcissism (hooks 1999: 76, see also Gass 1994), and authors are routinely taken to task by critics and concerned readers for exaggeration or outright fabrication of events or even identities in order to attract media interest and, therefore, book sales (see for a detailed discussion Brien 2006).

In this discussion of the food memoir, I am obviously positioning food writing, which is often classed as a practical and even banal journalistic mode of writing as, instead, a mode of literary creative production worthy of extended consideration. This relatively unusual approach, focusing on what these texts can reveal about their writers as creative producers, differs from most discussion of food memoir that reads these memoirs for what they can reveal about food cultures and society more broadly [5]. This is, in itself, a way of thinking about the food memoir's content – whether it is broadly externally focused on commenting on culture and society at large, more internally on relating the individual experience and emotions of the author, or a mixture of these two intents.

Ways of defining the food memoir

Subgenres of memoir are often identified in terms of their subject matter, such as the political or sports memoir. In relation to memoir that focuses on culinary matters, the terms most commonly used are 'food memoir' (which I am largely going to utilise) and 'culinary memoir'. Less often occurring is the term 'gastronomic memoir' as employed, for instance, in Madeline Kamman's memoir of her life in France and the dishes a series of influential women cooks

prepared for her, titled *When French Women Cook: A Gastronomic Memoir* (1976). The moniker 'cookbook memoir' and, even more rarely, 'memoir cookbook' are further refinements, both comprising an identifiable blend of food-based memoir and cookbook, although most food-based memoirs include some recipes. Both the cookbook memoir and memoir cookbook, however, almost always include a larger proportion of recipes than do the food, culinary or gastronomic memoir.

In her landmark study, Barbara Frey Waxman uses both the terms 'food memoir' and 'culinary memoir' interchangeably. Waxman clearly states, however, that she focuses on a specific kind of memoir:

> the kind of culinary memoir that chronicles the growth and development of the memoirist through the lens of food memories, in narratives that either begin with childhood or that interpose frequent flashbacks to earliest formative experiences … that, like the *bildungsroman*, traces the evolution of the youth into a mature food aficionado, into a food professional, and (often) into a contented adult. (Waxman 2008: 364)

This focus is mobilised in order to explore how these memoirists create food-related identities in their texts through 'memory, family and culture … food experiences and food symbolism' (364) as well as to suggest how the food memoir can be used in the literature classroom [6]. Waxman is particularly interested in how this kind of food memoir can provide insights into what she calls the complex 'psychological dynamics of family life' (370), as well as how multicultural, cross-cultural and immigrant memoir can provide pathways to understanding and tolerance for readers, and a means to understanding the life situations of others. Waxman is explicit that she is only including memoirs that are grounded in childhood food experiences, and that she considers those texts that are not 'another form' (364) of food writing. She describes this alternate form as memoir that chronicles 'a writer's recent adult experiences with food' (364). She, moreover, does not exclude these texts from her discussion due to a lack of examples or a judgment that this form of memoir is not a valid form of writing – noting, instead, 'this type of food writing is also extremely popular and has literary merits' (364).

The professional food memoir

Working into the space this exclusion creates, the below specifically focuses on the form of memoir that details its writers' 'adult experiences with food'. In itself, this suggests two ways of categorising food (and other) memoirs: firstly by broad subject matter, in this case 'food-related', and secondly, in terms of whether an author views the life story through Waxman's 'lens of food memories', that is, childhood experience or whether the memoir is mostly anchored in adult experience. In this second 'adult experience' category, I am particularly interested in what I name the 'professional food memoir': food memoirs written by or about those working in food-related careers [7]. This is, indeed, another way of thinking about the food memoir: dividing texts into those by, and/or about, people who could be classed as professional in some food-related field, as opposed to those who are not. What is of particular interest in the professional food memoirs discussed below is that they all either exclude entirely, or pay only minimal attention to, childhood memories and their influence on the life story. Instead, it is the adult working life, and its influence on the author's personal life, which is the focus of these narratives. This is in contrast to what could be called the 'personal food memoir', popular

trends which include a plethora of contemporary food-based travel memoirs and those which use food preparation and eating as organising metaphors around which to build a life story detailing the author's search for happiness. Recent examples of the first type include texts such as: Australian food critic Stephen Downes' *Paris on a Plate: A Gastronomic Diary* (2006); New Zealander Peta Mathias' (who has written eight books on food and travel) *A Cook's Tour of New Zealand* (2005) and *French Toast: Eating and Laughing Your Way around France* (2006); and Beth Elton's *Tasting Tuscany: Exploring and Eating off the Beaten Track* (2006). This second category is epitomised in Giulia Melucci's *I Loved, I Lost, I Made Spaghetti: A Memoir of Good Food and Bad Boyfriends* (2010) and Elizabeth Gilbert's bestselling example *Eat, Pray, Love: One Women's Search for Everything* (2006) [8], which expresses Gilbert's life quest in terms of seeking pleasure, devotion and balance.

While memoirs that detail professional life range across almost all conceivable occupations, what could be called the 'professional survival memoir' is especially apparent in the memoirs of ordinary people who have endured what could be termed 'extraordinary' working lives. This set of memoirs include the life stories of prostitutes, strippers, criminals, terrorists, gamblers, police, paramedics, emergency service personnel, firemen, soldiers and medical staff. Each of these professional groups also has its own specialised subsets of memoir as, for instance, those dealing with exemplary, corrupt and undercover police, and the full range of medical staff from medical students and interns, to general practitioners, emergency room and women doctors, and transplant, heart and neuro- surgeons. These memoirs replay the recurring story of individual struggle against, and transcendence over, adversity that is a feature of the survival memoir more generally. However, in this case, the life arc is usually represented as having been played out against a dramatically compelling background of crime, sex, accident or medical misfortune. As in the category of 'misery' memoir more generally, these 'professional survival memoirs' often detail, and sometimes explicitly list, the lessons the authors have learned as a result of their life experiences, and which the author obviously believes may be useful for readers.

The rise of the chef's memoir

Many professional food memoirs also display these characteristics, and could be classed as 'professional food survival memoirs'. This subset of the food memoir became popular with readers with the publication of a number of memoirs by chefs. This kind of memoir is epitomised by Anthony Bourdain's *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly* (2000), which spent fourteen weeks on *The New York Times* non-fiction bestselling list and is still in print after more than a decade. The success of this book can be seen as marking a paradigm shift in world food writing more generally, which, until *Kitchen Confidential*, can be seen to have largely either focused on the practical (as in cookbooks and magazine recipe writing) or more self-consciously literary, gastronomically inflected forms. *Kitchen Confidential*, on the other hand, takes a 'gonzo' approach to reporting on the world of the restaurant. In the book's preface, Bourdain explains:

> I didn't have time to craft artful lies and evasions even if I'd wanted to. I wasn't intending to write an exposé … I was not – and am not – an advocate for change in the restaurant business… What I set out to do was write a book that my fellow cooks and restaurant lifers would find entertaining and true. (Bourdain 2000: xi)

He explains his use of highly colloquial language:

> I wanted it to sound like me talking, at say … ten o'clock on a Saturday night after a dinner rush, me and a few cooks hanging around the kitchen, knocking back a few beers… I wanted to write in Kitchenese, the secret language of cooks… We're used to using language that many would find … offensive, to say the least… (Bourdain 2000: xii)

…finding the celebrity chef phenomena ironic because, 'few people are less suited to be suddenly thrown into the public eye than chefs. We're used to doing what we do in private' (xii). Bourdain has expressed a view on why his text proved so popular – simply because so many people work, or have worked, in the restaurant business, and miss the anarchistic and satisfying elements of this labour:

> It was the last time they could say what they liked in the workplace. The last time they could behave like savages, go home feeling proud and tired at the same time… The last time they found themselves close to people from every corner of the world, of every race, proclivity, religion and background. (Bourdain 2000: xvi)

The restaurant business is, indeed, according to Bourdain, 'the last meritocracy – where what we do is all that matters' (xii), and the closing lines of *Kitchen Confidential* confirm his fondness for it, despite the marks it has left on his body and psyche:

> I'll be right here. Until they drag me off the line. I'm not going anywhere. I hope. It's been an adventure. We took some casualties over the year. Things got broken. Things got lost. / But I wouldn't have missed it for the world. (Bourdain 2000: 302)

Bourdain's hard-boiled prose style and drugs-sex-and-violence infused content have inspired a series of food memoirists hoping to emulate the success of *Kitchen Confidential*. These memoirs, most of which are built around narrative tropes of suffering and survival against the odds, include *Cutting it Fine: Inside the Restaurant Business* (2001) by UK chef Andrew Parkinson with writer Jonathan Green. *Cutting it Fine* emulates *Kitchen Confidential* in detailing the grueling nature of many aspects of professional cooking in a self-deprecating Bourdainian tone:

> Cooking as the new rock and roll? Bullshit. Not the fashion and fun side, anyway. Or the money. It's not rock and roll when you go in to work every Saturday night when your friends are out on the town. It's not rock and roll with the work rotas, the heat, the noise, the unsociable hours, the lousy pay when you are starting out … the amazing pressure which you get in a kitchen. (Parkinson & Green 2000: 176-77)

Other examples are the rags-to-riches memoirs of notoriously foul-mouthed UK chef, Gordon Ramsay, *Humble Pie* (2006) – published in the USA as *Roasting in Hell's Kitchen: Temper Tantrums, F Words, and the Pursuit of Perfection* (2006) – and *Playing with Fire* (2007). Marco Pierre White, the first British (and the world's youngest) chef to win three Michelin stars, and widely described as the 'original enfant terrible of the kitchen' (Barton 2006), published his ghostwritten *White Slave* in 2006 (reissued as *The Devil in the*

Kitchen in 2007), detailing his ascendancy from 'poverty to wealth, from obscurity to fame' (White 2007:1). White was the prototypical wild-boy contemporary chef sex-god whose public image denied Parkinson and Green's claim that cooking was not the 'new rock and roll'. However, while White is (and was) outwardly enormously self-confident, his book does detail some of the insecurities he and others at the top ranks of the profession feel, including how some chefs face an anxiety similar to writer's block:

> there are many chefs who suffer a fear of the stove… They might be great cooks, with heads full of culinary knowledge, but the minute they are thrown into the kitchen they wobble, lose it and need bailing out. (White 2007: 64)

James Beard award-winning food writer, Jason Sheehan's *Cooking Dirty: A Story of Life, Sex, Love and Death in the Kitchen* (2009) relates his progress from pizza pan scraper to a chef of no real distinction, yet wears his experience proudly, advising early in the text:

> if you're looking for some four-star confessional, for the cooking secrets of master chefs or some effervescent, champagne-and-twinkle-lights twaddle about bright knives, foie gras and sweaty love among the white jackets, go find another book. (Sheehan 2009: 26)

Head chef and owner of New York City eatery, The Waverly Inn, John DeLucie's *The Hunger: A Story of Food, Desire, and Ambition* (2009) melds the two common threads that run through most of these male-authored chef memoirs, detailing the roller-coaster ride of pitfalls and successes involved in cooking for a living as well as a similarly complicated and disaster-prone personal life, a journey that leads to self-awareness, and finally, triumph in both arenas. In common with almost all the chefs in these memoirs, DeLucie hits rock bottom (in his case, two thirds of the way through *The Hunger*), but recognises his own role in his downfall:

> Depressed, out of work, and with no place to go every night … reflecting on what a messy and unnecessary end to my marriage I had brought about. My behaviour was inexcusable, rash and irresponsible … I deserved what I got … I was now among the other single, starving, out-of-work artists, writers, actors, and cooks on the street. (DeLucie 2009: 146-7)

From this moment of self-awareness, however, his life begins to improve. More recently, female writers have joined this milieu, with Dalia Jurgensen's *Spiced* (2009) chronicling, as the subtitle promises 'true stories of trials by fire, after-hours exploits, and what really goes on in the kitchen', by this pastry chef who once worked for Martha Stewart. Julie Powell's sequel to *Julie and Julia: My Year of Cooking Dangerously* (2006), *Cleaving: A Story of Meat, Marriage and Obsession* (2009), not only details the difficulties involved in her apprenticeship to become a butcher and her dissolving marriage but, in common with Jurgensen's and other female cooking and food preparation stories, a belief that such a professional skill is both a pathway to, and a display of, female empowerment (see Parry 2010).

Extreme eating

Closely related to this largely gendered 'toughing-it-out' survival food memoir is what could be characterised as 'global extreme eating'. Examples here

include Bourdain's *A Cook's Tour: Global Adventures in Extreme Cuisines* (2002) and *The Nasty Bits: Collected Varietal Cuts, Usable Trim, Scraps, and Bones* (2006); James D Campbell's *Mr Chilehead: Adventures in the Taste of Pain* (2003); Jerry Hopkins' *Extreme Cuisine: The Weird & Wonderful Foods That People Eat* (with a foreword by Bourdain) (2005); Stefan Gates' *Gastronaut: Adventures in Food for the Romantic, the Foolhardy, and the Brave* (2005); and Tom Parker Bowles' *The Year of Eating Dangerously: A Global Adventure in Search of Culinary Extremes* (2006). As indicated by these titles, these volumes involve their authors in eating a series of unusual, and even at times bizarre, items. At their best, these memoirs involve a measure of reflection on why some cultures consume foods such as insects and certain mammals and others do not, why food taboos have developed, and whether future food security depends on widening our food choices. At their worst, they read as prurient and adolescent, filled with racial stereotyping and written from a culturally superior point of view.

Fuchsia Dunlop's *Shark's Fin & Sichuan Pepper: A Sweet Sour Memoir of Eating in China* (2008) is a very different text in this context. Although Dunlop, who vowed to eat everything she was offered *before* she went to live in China, narrates how she consumed a range of foods that many Western eaters may find unpalatable, her fascinating story is infused with erudite and culturally sensitive scholarship and expressed in compelling prose. This mixture has led to comparisons with luminary culinary anthropologists who are known for the superior quality of their writing, such as Elizabeth David and Claudia Roden (see for instance Kapoor 2001). Also fitting into this 'extreme eating' category is a series of memoirs about competitive eating. These works include Jason Fagone's *Horsemen of the Esophagus: Competitive Eating and the Big Fat American Dream* (2006) which is his record of spending a year with competitive eaters, the USA uniquely hosting two organised professional leagues, each with corporate sponsorship, live television broadcasts and substantial cash prizes. Freelance journalist Ryan Nerz's *Eat This Book: A Year of Gorging and Glory on the Competitive Eating Circuit* (2006) covers similar territory, combining his own story with the biographical memoirs of the competitive eaters whose stories he chronicles. Both these books are authored by journalists who alight on a food-related topic and adopt an immersion research technique – as described and practiced by Lee Gutkind (1996, 1997) – in order to uncover these narratives.

Writer-turned-chef-turned-memoirist

Another variation on the chef's memoir is that which is written from the point of view of a chef or cook, but by an author who is already a writer and possesses as much, or usually more, knowledge about the publishing industry than the food world. Bill Buford's chronicle of suffering to learn to cook, *Heat: An Amateur's Adventures as Kitchen Slave, Line Cook, Pasta Maker, and Apprentice to a Dante-Quoting Butcher in Tuscany* (2006), while fitting stylistically into the mode of Bourdain's machismo tales of kitchen survival, is a good example here, as Buford was an editor on the *New Yorker* magazine before undertaking the 'adventures' narrated in this volume. Michael Ruhlman's three memoirs, *The Making of a Chef: Mastering Heat at the Culinary Institute of America* (1997), *The Soul of a Chef: The Journey Towards Perfection* (2001) and *The Reach of a Chef: Beyond the Kitchen* (2006), while offering a much gentler and thoughtful chronicle of the life of a chef from training onwards, fits into this category of experienced writer-turned-chef-turned-memoirist. Kathleen Flinn's *The Sharper Your Knife, the Less You Cry: Love, Laughter, and Tears in Paris at the World's Most Famous Cooking*

School (2008) follows Ruhlman and Buford in chronicling the hardships involved in learning to cook to a professional level, in her case at the Cordon Bleu cookery school in Paris. Flinn moves into the world of food when she is made redundant from her corporate position while on holiday, but she also has a background in writing professionally as a journalist, restaurant critic and food writer. Like Julie Powell, writing is Flinn's overarching vocation, learning to cook a means of generating content, as reported in her application to Cordon Bleu:

> I believe this training will give me greater understanding and perspective… It is my dream to write books about food, about cooking… I don't know that I want to be a chef. (Flinn 2008: 13)

Even more established as a professional writer, Bob Spitz, music journalist and author of five books including best-selling biographies of Bob Dylan and The Beatles, sought relief from what reads as a mid-life crisis (turning fifty, finishing a lengthy book project, getting divorced, starting and ending a new relationship) in a trip to Europe, where he undertook a series of courses in cooking schools in picturesque locations and wrote about the experience. While it is entertaining, and includes some useful recipes and cooking tips, the result, *The Saucier's Apprentice: One Long Strange Trip through the Great Cooking Schools of Europe* (2008) reads as a memoir which has studiously learned the lessons of the texts that preceded it, and sought to follow their formula. It duly incorporates culinary information (travel-related, gastronomic detail, cookery instruction) as well as a series of colourful character sketches and a troublesome romance, however, the book divided readers' opinions, some of whom were disappointed with how Spitz portrayed himself. In relation to this issue, one reviewer raises an important question:

> Do you have to like the author of a memoir in order to like the book itself? Bob Spitz isn't the most likable of characters. He's whiny, self-important and a tad self-pitying. But the fact that he seems to be self-aware enough to know these things makes this book an enjoyable read. (Woollard 2011)

Importantly, many of these chef's memoirs feature a highly unattractive protagonist.

The professional personas of chef and author can also be enmeshed during the period being described in the memoir. Well-known food writer and editor, Ruth Reichl, published the first of her three memoirs, *Tender at the Bone: Growing Up at the Table* in 1998, detailing her early career as both chef and food writer. In late 2007, Australian Matthew Evans, who had been a chef but was then a freelance food writer and decade-long restaurant critic for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, published a memoir of his years as a chef (Evans 2007a) and a cookery book (Evans 2007b). Evans has now become a multi-platform memoirist – with a television show, *Gourmet Farmer* (with two series to date, shown on SBS in 2010 and 2011) and related books (Evans 2010, 2011a) following his latest food-related career move to a farm in rural Tasmania. Evans is also a contributor to Australian food magazines, with *Delicious* magazine featuring an avowedly farm-inspired recipe from the farm each month and the new magazine, *Feast*, including several of Evans' seasonal, regional recipes in his regular column 'From the farm'. Although their ostensible subject matter is food, the writing in these programs, books and columns focuses on Evans' thoughts and feelings as he learns more about growing, harvesting and cooking farm-produced produce.

> We move the clocks in October, but I think the days are already long enough… I adore this season with asparagus pushing its green nose up through the soil… It's lambing season too. At Puggle Farm, we don't kill our lambs until they are at least a year old… For something sweet, I'll be making shortbread and a cumquat scented trifle. (Evans 2011b: 28)

Gabrielle Hamilton's *Blood, Bones & Butter: The Inadvertent Education of a Reluctant Chef* (2011), by chef-owner of popular New York restaurant Prune, documents perhaps the next logical step in the development of this type of food memoir produced by professional writers. Hamilton is not only the proprietor of a top eatery but the holder of an MFA in (fiction) writing. *The New York Times* reviewer Michiko Kakutani identified the impact of this training:

> Though Ms. Hamilton's brilliantly written new memoir, *Blood, Bones & Butter*, is rhapsodic about food … the book is hardly just for foodies. Ms. Hamilton, who has an M.F.A. in fiction writing from the University of Michigan, is as evocative writing about people and places as she is at writing about cooking. (Kakutani 2011)

Mimi Sheraton, long-time restaurant reviewer for *New York* magazine, identifies this shift from chefs who write to writers who chef and then write about it, in a quote used on the cover and in the book's publicity campaign: 'I have long considered Gabrielle Hamilton a writer in cook's clothing… Her writing is every bit as delectable and satisfying as her food' (Hamilton 2011: cover blurb). Celebrity chef Mario Batali also recognises this in his endorsement of the book, proclaiming that Hamilton 'raised the bar for all books about eating and cooking' while Bourdain went even further, judging *Blood, Bones & Butter* 'Simply the best memoir by a chef ever. Ever' (both quoted in Ozersky 2011).

Other professional food memoir

There are also memoirs by chefs' spouses, children and other family members. Some of these memoirists present their personal stories in terms of their contribution to social and culinary history such as Patricia Volk's *Stuffed: Adventures of a Restaurant Family* (2002), which chronicles how her dysfunctional Jewish-American family played a role in shaping the Jewish delicatessen phenomenon in the USA. Others, such as Courtney Febbroriello's *Wife of the Chef: The True Story of a Restaurant and Romance* (2003), are much more focused on the professional and personal dramas played in, and around, one particular restaurant – in Febbroriello's case, the one she had owned with her chef husband, Chris, for some three years at the time of writing her book. Febbroriello's story confirms that while the role of the spouse of the chef may appear to be one of glamour and gourmet adventure, it is as hard work as that of the chef him- or herself. The long hours at work establishing a business mean, for instance, that while their restaurant and its kitchen is scrupulously clean, their home is rarely that and, public opinion to the contrary, being married to a chef means their refrigerator is usually empty and their dining table has never been used. 'I cook all day long, and don't want to cook at home' (Febbroriello 2003: 270) being Chris' quite sensible reason for this state of affairs. Febbroriello also includes examples of the chauvinism that pervades the restaurant industry as, for example, when suppliers ask to speak to her husband regarding business matters, uncomprehending that she is joint owner of their business. Despite the multifaceted labour involved in the

contemporary restaurant, it is still the chef who reigns supreme in the public mind.

Other professional food memoirs include those by non-cooking restaurant staff. Debra Ginsberg's *Waiting: The True Confessions of a Waitress* (originally published in 2000) is an early example here, and the book was duly compared by many reviewers to Bourdain's *Kitchen Confidential* in its revelation of the world out of sight of the diner. As one reviewer wrote:

> Sex thrives in the close quarters and steamy atmosphere of a typical restaurant (not to mention with the high-drama personalities who work there). Fans of *Kitchen Confidential* will be relieved to know there's as much bad behavior among the floor staff as there is in the back of the house. (Park 2001)

Ginsberg's story provides, however, much more than this, and includes her musings on life as a single mother, development as a writer and, at times, quite poetic reflection on how her work as a waitress influenced how she thinks about life in general:

> perhaps the most valuable lesson I'd learned was that the act of waiting itself is an active one. That period of time between the anticipation and the beginning of life's events is when everything really happens – the time when actual living occurs. (Ginsberg 2001: 286)

In 2007, Phoebe Damrosc's memoir, *Service Included: Four-Star Secrets of an Eavesdropping Waiter* (2007), fitted into the space carved out by Ginsberg, chronicling her experiences at Michelin-starred chef Thomas Keller's Manhattan restaurant Per Se. Damrosc's text was, however, read by reviewers at least as much a biographical memoir (for what it revealed about Keller) as an autobiographical narrative of Damrosc's experience. Sean Wilsey's very complimentary review of the book in *The New York Times*, for example, opens with a quote from George Orwell's classic observation of Paris waiters in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, and then spends most of the rest of the first third of the review discussing Keller. The middle third of the review is devoted to the book, but the final third moves back to Keller and the restaurant which the reviewer visited as a result of reading the book, finding it 'impossible' to read *Service Included* and 'not want to have dinner' (Wilsey 2007). Interestingly, Wilsey expends more text in this mini restaurant review on the atmosphere, food and his experience of the meal, than the waitstaff and any insight into them that he had gained from Damrosc's book. This could be read as the power of the (biographical) narrative of Keller as super-chef.

In comparison, as a result of the media attention given to Steve Dublanica's *Waiter Rant: Thanks for the Tip. Confessions of a Cynical Waiter* (2009) – originally published anonymously and which focuses on the author's relationships with chefs, other waiters and customers – and its sequel memoir, *Keep the Change: A Clueless Tipper's Quest to Become the Guru of the Gratuity* (2010), Dublanica is interviewed regularly about issues to do with restaurant waitstaff and has been characterised as 'the voice for many of the two million waiters in the United States' (see for instance Good Reads 2011). This difference in reception from Damrosc's text may be due to readers' perceptions of Dublanica's authority in terms of this subject. Like Powell's *Julie and Julia* (2006), *Waiter Rant* is what is known as a 'blook', publishing in book format the material from Dublanica's very popular blog, *WaiterRant.net*, which Dublanica began in 2004 and which won the 'Best Writing in a Weblog' Bloggie Award in 2006.

In contrast to these memoirs by, and about, chefs and their restaurants, there is even a very well received [9] memoir by the lowliest restaurant employee of all, the dishwasher. Pete Jordan's *Dishwasher: One Man's Quest to Wash Dishes in All Fifty States* (2007) functions as an autoethnographic study of what *The New York Times* book reviewer, Dwight Garner, identified as an 'American subculture' (Garner 2007b). Despite the unprepossessing subject matter, Jordan (aka 'Dishwasher Pete') produces a memoir that is, to my mind, a model volume of creative nonfiction. Reflecting on his more than a decade-long working journey washing dishes in thirty-three states of the USA, Jordan also integrates into his text a mass of surprisingly compelling factual information about dishwashing and famous dishwashers, achieving what Gutkind terms the 'mission' of creative nonfiction – to write principally about a subject and 'to gather and present information, to teach readers about a person, place, idea or situation' (Gutkind 1997: 70). Despite a survey of 740 occupations in which dishwashing ranks number 735 (reported by Jordan), Jordan's story of restaurant working life is uplifting as the narrative focuses on the positives of his chosen profession, including that he actually enjoyed the work and appreciated the down time between meal services, the free food (usually diners' leftovers) and abundance of work available. Like Dublancia and Powell, Jordan established a readership for his story before his book was released through the popularity of the 16 issues of his zine, *Dishwasher*. The book venture began modestly with 'a run of 10 copies, hand-delivered to stores in January 1992' (D'Amico 2007) but, by the fifteenth issue, his audience had grown so significantly that he printed 10,000 copies (D'Amico 2007).

This category of professional food memoir also encompasses workers in less elite dining spaces including those in the fast food industry, such as Spencer TT Palmer's *Food Jockey: The World of a Fast Food Worker* (2003), which includes a detailed account of Palmer's year working at a fast food chain from the day he applied for the position, and Michael Gates Gill's *How Starbucks Saved My Life* (2007), which follows Gill's plummet from high-salaried position with JWT advertising agency, stable marriage and happy family life to being made redundant at 53, getting divorced and being diagnosed with a slow-growing brain tumour. From that position, which Gill describes as the shift from 'drinking lattes to serving them' (Gill 2007: 1), his memoir details how he finds, through a job in the Starbucks chain and the friendships he builds with the people he meets there, a new way of understanding life and himself. By the end of the memoir, Gill has found happiness through this knowledge. Palmer's memoir is similarly focused on a more internal journey to selfhood that those set in the elite restaurant world where more attention is paid to external elements such as professional fame and fortune and intimate (although rarely private) relationships.

The professional food writers' memoir

As food writing of all kinds becomes more visible, food writers are, themselves, becoming increasingly noticeable as authors and are embracing the range of opportunities that arise from their various food writing practices. These opportunities include publishing-related activities such as producing collections of their food writing, writing cookbooks, judging influential book awards and prizes, appearing at writers' festivals and being retained as commissioning editors by publishing houses. It also, increasingly, includes activities outside the direct ambit of writing and publishing such as presenting and starring in television programs, appearing at food and other lifestyle events and festivals, featuring in advertising campaigns, and/or being accorded public intellectual status and the range of professional benefits that brings. The public

interest in these professional food writers as creative and socially important individuals is confirmed and, some would add, encouraged (see for instance Goldsworthy 2011 on memoir in general) by the proliferation of the final subset of the food memoir to be discussed here – a set of texts that can be described as the 'food writer's memoir'.

Many food writers' memoirs focus on childhood experience, and thus come under Waxman's description of food memoir that 'traces the evolution of the youth into a mature food aficionado, into a food professional' (Waxman 2008: 364) and will not be considered here. This type of memoir includes: UK food writer Nigel Slater's award-winning *Toast: The Story of A Boy's Hunger* (2003), the superbly told story of his early love of food, family relationships and developing sexuality; cookbook author Madhur Jaffrey's powerful *Climbing the Mango Trees: A Memoir of a Childhood in India* (2005); and American food critic Molly O'Neill's compelling recollection of finding her creative path while growing up in a baseball-mad family of five brothers, *Mostly True: A Memoir of Family, Food, and Baseball* (2006). What I will consider here, instead, are those food writers' memoirs that are primarily about adult professional life, and so fit into this broad category of professional food memoir.

Fitting well into this category, Ruth Reichl's two later volumes of memoir, *Comfort Me With Apples: More Adventures at the Table* (2001) and *Garlic and Sapphires: The Secret Life of a Critic in Disguise* (2005), concentrate in detail on her life as restaurant critic for *New West* and *California* magazines, *The Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times*, providing a wealth of interesting detail about how restaurant reviewing is conducted for these publications. Most notably, in *Garlic and Sapphires*, Reichl narrates the experience of disguising herself in wigs and costumes in order to dine anonymously, and so assess the experience offered to the average customer in her review. Canadian-based James Chatto's third book, the memoir *The Man Who Ate Toronto, Memoirs of a Restaurant Lover* (1998), is similarly outwardly focused, providing an overview of the growth of Toronto's restaurant culture from the mid-1950s through the prism of his personal point of view as a food writer. These three memoirs are alike in their focus on plotting the individual professional journeys of a single food writer against the background of the development of the food media and dining-out culture of their respective countries.

In contrast, Gael Greene's *Insatiable: Tales from a Life of Delicious Excess* (2006), her memoir of more than thirty years as the *New York Magazine*'s'Insatiable Critic', extends and elaborates on what is already known of her hedonistic character and love life through her columns and as author of the gently salacious volumes, *Bite: A New York Restaurant Strategy for Hedonists, Masochists, Selective Penny Pinchers and the Upwardly Mobile* (1971) and *Delicious Sex: A Gourmet Guide for Women and the Men Who Want to Love Them Better* (1986). *San Francisco Chronicle* and *New York Times* food writer, Kim Severson, organises her even more confessional *Spoon Fed: How Eight Cooks Saved My Life* (2010) around the idea of the life lessons she learned from eight female cooks. The book narrates how she looked to Californian food writer Marion Cunningham, Chez Panisse chef Alice Waters, her predecessor at the *New York Times*, Ruth Reichl and television chef Rachael Ray as examples when dealing with personal problems that include alcoholism and drug taking, as well as the difficulties she encountered in coming out as a lesbian.

Australian Margaret Fulton's *I Sang for My Supper: Memories of a Food Writer* (1999) is an example of the professional food writer's memoir that details both professional and personal stories through the lens of food. This

memoir follows Fulton's sixty-year long career, most of which is in food writing, describing her writing over twenty popular cookbooks and many thousands of weekly magazine columns in the emergent Australian mediascape of the second half of the twentieth century. Alongside this prodigious output of cookery writing in books, magazines and newspapers, Fulton also wrote food advertising for television, when it was the 'new media', and appeared in many advertisements in print and audiovisual formats. She also held a number of high profile food-related positions including: establishing and heading a gourmet dining club for women in Sydney; running Berida Manor, which is often described as Australia's first luxury health resort (Blackwell 1977); and, as food consultant for Ansett Airlines, designing then revolutionary snack boxes of sandwiches and fresh fruit for short flights. Despite her extremely high profile as one of Australia's most prolific and respected food writers, however, it was not until the publication of *I Sang for My Supper* that the range and scale of her professional achievements and her many personal and financial misfortunes were revealed to readers. With so many millions of her words in print, it was as if the literary form of the memoir gave Fulton a space in which she could ruminate at length upon the entirety of her professional and personal life.

Concluding remarks

With memoir a seemingly enduring component of our contemporary literary landscape, the above presents a range of ways to group and discuss memoirs of professional lives in the culinary sphere. It does not aim to provide any kind of definitive or final definitions or categories. Indeed, while proposing these various sub-groupings, it was instructive to see how fluid they needed to be, as many of the memoirs discussed above can fit into a number of categories. Instead of attempting to proscribe inflexible definitions and categories, this investigation was instead motivated by my belief that finding additional ways of discussing and contextualising food memoir may provide a way into how food memoir writers function and understand themselves as creative professionals. As such an exercise, moreover, it provides a workable means of mapping and thinking about these writers' career trajectories; it may also assist in determining training and experiential pathways for those wishing to enter the field, or develop their existing careers, in food writing.

Notes

1. In a 2008 study, for instance, Susan Currie and I found no evidence of either a short, or longer, term growth in readership of auto/biographical texts over in comparison with types of texts during the whole of the last century. Instead, we found that the widely heralded boom in life writing could be the combined result of an expanded understanding of what is included in the genre as well as an increase in interest in the genre by public commentators, critics, and academics (Currie & Brien 2008). return to text

2. By 1997, with 17 printings and almost 400,000 copies in print, *The Liars Club* had been in the *New York Times* paperback bestseller lists for over a year. return to text

3. McCourt was clear about his approach to life story writing on the first page of *Angela's Ashes*: 'When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I managed to survive at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while' (McCourt 1996: 1). return to text

4. *Angela's Ashes* also topped many newspapers' lists of the year's best books and won many prizes including the National Book Critic's Circle Award for Biography/Autobiography and the

1997 Pulitzer Prize for Biography. The book re-entered the lists again in 2000 with the release of the film version directed by Alan Parker. return to text

5. See, as an example, Lourdes Lopez-Ropero's discussion (2004) of Austin Clarke's culinary memoir *Pigtails 'n Breadfruit: Rituals of Slave Food – A Barbadian Memoir* (1999) which, framed by ethnic minority and feminist politics, challenges the evaluation of autobiographical texts by ethnographic discourse. return to text

6. Waxman posits that the food memoir can be used in the literature classroom to teach the use of metaphor, satire and erotica, as a basis for exploring how autobiographical texts are constructed and shaped, and to discuss aspects of autobiographical theory, in particular, autoethnography. return to text

7. I first presented a paper on this concept at the *Creativity, Writing and Culture Symposium* at the University of Winchester, UK, in November 2010, and thank the participants for their formative comments at that event (see Brien 2010). return to text

8.Lynda Hawryluk has discussed how *Eat, Pray, Love* transformed Gilbert 'from an award-winning but little-known journalist and non-fiction writer into a star author in a matter of months after its debut' (Hawryluk 2009). return to text

9. After dismissing the book unread in his column as a 'witless stunt' (Garner 2007a), the *New York Times* book reviewer Dwight Garner, in response to outraged readers' comments, purchased and read the book and revised his opinion, writing: 'it's exceedingly well-written and explores an American subculture, one Jordan has been working in for more than a decade, with real tact and feeling and humor' (Garner 2007b). return to text

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Donna Lee Brien, BEd (Deakin), MA (UTS), PhD (QUT), GCHigherEd (UNE), is Professor of Creative Industries at CQUniversity, Australia. Widely published in the areas of writing praxis and pedagogy, creative nonfiction and collaborative practice, her biography John Power 1881-1943*(1991) remains the standard work on this expatriate artist and benefactor. Donna is co-author with Tess Brady of* Girl's Guide to Real Estate: How to Enjoy Investing in Property*, 2002 and* Girl's Guide to Work and Life: How to Create the Life you Want*, 2004 (both Allen & Unwin). Founding Editor of* dotlit: the Online Journal of Creative Writing *(2000-2004) and Assistant Editor of* Imago: New Writing *(1999-2003), Donna is currently Special Issues Editor for* TEXT: The Journal of Writing and Writing Programs*, an Editorial Board member of* LOCALE: The Australasian-Pacific Journal of Regional Food Studies *and* New

Writing: the International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, and Past President of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs. Donna has been writing about food writers and their influence in scholarly and popular publications since 2006.*

TEXT
Vol 15 No 2 October 2011
http://www.textjournal.com.au
Editors: Nigel Krauth & Kevin Brophy
Text@griffith.edu.au