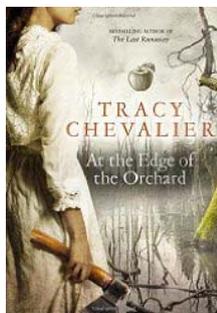


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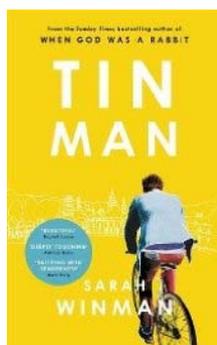
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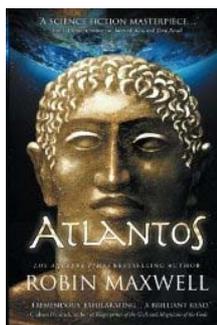
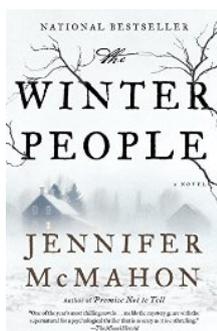
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20 JULY 2017

Guest Post: Patti Miller - author of Writing True Stories - on whether memoirs are more popular than novels

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In today's guest post, Patti Miller, award-winning memoirist, nonfiction writer and author of *Writing True Stories* is going to explore whether memoirs have become more popular than the novel.

Is memoir more popular than the novel? It's a question that implies a rather jealous inter-genre competition between the novel and memoir to be the 'favourite', the most admired. It's a notion I've always rejected. Even though I have spent the last almost 30 years writing and teaching memoir and non-fiction, to me, the novel and memoir, along with poetry, essays and drama, are equally beloved.

Historically, there has been a shift in attitudes towards various genres. In the 18th century, poetry and essays had a higher standing than the novel, which was looked down upon as a rather frivolous form. But I suspect the question is not really about standing or value, but about the cold hard facts of sales figures. Which genre sells most?

There's been an explosion in memoir publications since the 1970s, particularly in memoirs by 'ordinary' people, i.e. people not already famous for something else. But 'ordinary' is a misnomer, because most of memoirists who sell hundreds of thousands of books, have had extraordinary lives. According to Hachette Australia publisher, Sophie Hamley, certain memoirs such as **Anh Do's *The Happiest Refugee*** and **Deng Adut's *Songs of a War Boy*** have spectacular sales, much higher than literary fiction sales.

But if popular memoir is compared to popular fiction, then the figures even out. Literary memoir sells about the same as literary fiction - I should add that the terms 'popular' and 'literary' are not usually applied to memoir, but the distinction clearly exists. There are literary memoir such as **Caroline Baum's *Only***, where the language and sensibility are central, and there's **Albert Facey's *A Fortunate Life*** - published in 1981 and still one of the highest selling books in Australia, 800,000 at last count - where story and character are central.

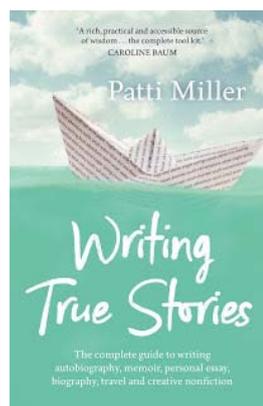
But I suspect both kinds of memoir appeal to readers for the same reasons. Fundamentally, despite our various evils, human beings want to relate and feel with others - we are empathetic - and memoir gives us direct access to the feelings of others in a way that is perhaps more mediated in novels.

Also, we want to know how others have survived hardship so that we may learn how to do it ourselves - the triumph of the human spirit over adversity is probably the strongest single theme in any best-selling memoir.

And finally, we are sticky-beaks - we are curious about what it is like to be someone else, especially when they have lived a life very different from ours - a movie star or call girl or child soldier.

What is it like to have lived your life? To me, that's the most interesting question. It is why, I, at least, like to read memoir.

Thanks so much for your insights Patti. *Writing True Stories* is Patti's guide to writing autobiography, memoir, personal essay, biography, travel and creative



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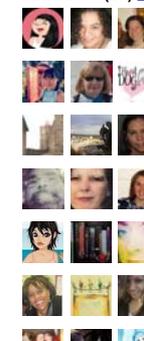
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18 Jul



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