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# ***Spilt Milk*: Memory, Real Life, and Knowing the Past in Historical Fiction**

Amanda Hodgkinson

Exegesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of a PhD By Publication, University of Huddersfield, accompanied by hard copies of *22 Britannia Road* (2011) and *Spilt Milk* (2014).

I am the sole author of the above works.  
Amanda Hodgkinson, September 2017.

Keywords: *Memory, Historical Fiction, Real Life, Spilt Milk, Novel, Writing the past.*

# SPILT MILK: MEMORY, REAL LIFE, AND KNOWING THE PAST IN HISTORICAL FICTION

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## Abstract

This PhD by Publication comprises two of my novels, *22 Britannia Road* and *Spilt Milk*, accompanied by a reflective and critical exegesis which investigates the process and context of writing my internationally published historical fiction novel *Spilt Milk*. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's theoretical approaches to memory and narrative as a means to consider the borderlines between lived life and fiction, I consider the ways in which historical fiction can represent versions of real life which contain human truths and emotions.

With this in mind, I argue that my novel writing (and reading) practice stem from the shared potential in what I term 'creative memory.' This site of potentiality is where worldliness and collaborative knowledge between writer and reader in response to the text exists, illustrating my own belief in the imagination as a place of creative communality. In examining this, I establish my own contribution to the ways in which memory and the imagination impact on the practice of creative writing, and reading fiction. Reflecting on my creative practices offers original and wider ways of understanding how literature represents, or even is, 'real life,' and thus has an important role in our lives today.

## Introduction

Speaking of the relationship between time and narrative fiction, Paul Ricoeur quotes Augustine, the great thinker on memory.<sup>1</sup> ‘What, then, is time?’ asks Augustine. ‘I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled’ (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 7).

I begin with Augustine because his question encapsulates what is at the heart of fiction writing: a constant attempt to find ways to say the unsayable. J. Hillis Miller, responding to Augustine’s dilemma, states that time ‘is a figurative expression for something unknowable’ (2003, p. 89). In this way, Augustine poses his question as a quandary of knowing and not knowing. If I replace ‘time’ with ‘real life and real life in fiction’ the core argument remains the same. So how do I explain real life in fiction? I know through experience what life is. I am a writer so I know what it is to write fiction. I know too, that when I read I enter into the world of the fiction. I care for the characters and invest emotionally in the story as if it is real, creating my own memories of the text that will impact on my personal memory and my understanding of the experience of life. Yet real life in fiction is clearly not actual lived life. So how do I try to explain why fictional representations can feel like ‘real life’ and how is knowledge within experience different to knowledge as articulated fictional representations?

In this exegesis I will explore, through an investigation into memory and the imagination, the ways in which my creative writing practice stems from the relationship between what is known through experience (such as time or real life), what can be known of the past (through documentary, testimony and archive) and what cannot be known of the past (because it is absent). I argue that from this relationship, my writing (and reading) is filtered and articulated via memory and the imagination. What I term creative memory as a reflective

human resource becomes what Ricoeur calls ‘the power of memory to make present an absent thing that happened previously’ (2006, p. 229). A conceptual notion of the past as something that is absent but still has the potential to be found or remembered, pinpoints the possibilities in which real life and the past can be known in endlessly different ways in fiction.

Just as I propose real life can be configured as fiction, so Ricoeur, in response to Augustine, states that time can be ‘configured as a narrative’ (Ricoeur, 1990, p. 6). He also states that narration in its turn, ‘implies memory’ (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 10). If memory is found in narrative, then fiction which is a form of narrative, must imply memory. Ricoeur also connects memory to the imagination, pointing out that since Greek Socratic philosophy began, memory has been aligned to the imagination in ways from which ‘we can never completely extricate ourselves’ (2006, p. 7). It is with this alignment between memory and the imagination and narrative and time, that I propose to consider my novel *Spilt Milk*, and the ways in which real life and ways of knowing the past can be recognised and made to feel emotionally tangible and vivid in writing and reading fiction.

Returning to the paradoxical problem of finding ways of saying the unsayable, it is important to understand that one of the processes common to writing fiction is rewriting. That is to say, fiction must be written and rewritten until the text forms as best it can, what the imagination and the memory have sought to articulate. It is in the rewriting that the writer recognises not only their own attempts to move closer to saying the unsayable but also the ways in which language itself step forwards with its mysterious power to ‘evoke a reality beyond its grasp, evoke a sense of what cannot be said’ (Robinson, 2012, p. 20). Here, Augustine’s question of articulating time can be understood to be asking a question of language in narrative. An enquiry into knowing time and the difficulty of expressing and/or recognising time in another form (e.g. in memory and the imagination), can be rephrased as a

question of knowing real life and recognizing it in the fictive realm. As a reader, I know I can find in fiction, limitless possibilities and potential for storytelling and narrative that connect the fictive convincingly to real life. In which case I am moved to ask how the writer convinces their reader that the story is believable (which is to say relevant to lived life even as it is known to be fiction)? Frank Kermode (2014) suggests that the relationship between reality and the novel depends on the imagination, which he calls a function of man's inescapable freedom. Clearly, fiction can *feel* like real life and it is the power of the imagination, and its indivisible relationship with memory and time in both writing and reading, that we find can experience (reality) in things which are not real.

If fiction is not the real, it is what Jacques Derrida terms 'the realm of the possible' (1978, p. 65). Fictional real life is found in the realm of what might-have-happened previously. It is therefore an imaginative presentation or representation of what we can believe in as a lived life. 'This use of the imagination carries our minds far beyond the sphere of the private and public memory into the range of the possible' (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 182). It is in the possible, I suggest, that there is a store of instinctive emotional and imaginative responses to narrative in relation to ourselves and others. Fictional representations can depict elements of experience such as a person's interior life, a concept such as time, and emotional aspects of life. This is why readers care about the characters in a novel. In fiction there is a potential, between what we know and what is known through the act of reading or writing the text, for constant new perceptions of real life and ways of knowing the world. Paul Ricoeur suggests the fictional (which is to say the empirically unreal and untrue) can be the linguistic site in which experiences of the real and the true can be articulated. (1984, pp. 274–296). In a similar way, Maria Margaronis asks if 'imaginative language can discover truths about the past which are unavailable to more discursive writing?' (2008, p. 138). I argue that our own lives may be far from (or near to) the experiences we write or read about in fiction but through the communal

potential for creative imagination, representations of experience in fiction can be understood as a dialectic between personal vision and collective vision, and forms of memory. In this way, the absent past is potentially available to us all. Furthermore, fiction can feel more real, in an emotionally, communally true sense of realness, than historical archive or the unnarrated individual lived life.

Defining the ways in which the imagination works in writing and reading is another difficult task, not because I don't instinctively know how it works but because the ways in which we have critically understood and valued the imagination have changed radically over time. <sup>2</sup>For the purpose of this exegesis, the imagination is that place where a productive or creative power frames and constructs its own versions of reality based on what is already known and the potential for more knowledge. The imagination refers to the image-making capacity of human beings and as Cocking and Murray (1991) state, the imaginative capacity 'manifests itself in dreams, fantasies and illusions, in creativity and invention, in the ordinary person's power to envisage the possibility of a better world or to imagine other lives' (p. xiii). I argue that the imagination (what I call creative memory) is integral to a person's conceptual system and is essential to us in writing and reading fiction. This is what Sebastian Barry asserts, when he states that 'the theatre that the novel exists in is the daily world and unknown rooms of the reader' (Faber & Faber, 2011). Barry's use of the word 'unknown,' suggests an imaginative connection between what is unsayable (remembering here, Augustine's inability to say what time is) and what can be articulated within language and recognised as emotionally real in fiction. Wolfgang Iser tells us that 'the borderlines of knowledge give rise to fictionalising' (2000, p. 313). And it is in these borderlines that the imagination comes into play, for both writer and reader. This place of the 'unknown' that Barry speaks of is where creative memory potentially connects writer, text and reader in what Marilynne Robinson aptly calls a 'community of the written word' (2012, p. 22).

As a novelist, I knowingly attend to this idea of a potential communal imaginative space in fiction for writers and readers. When I write, I aim to share a story with the reader in the hope that my fiction connects emotionally with them. When I read, I am aware of the writer's presence inasmuch as I experience their voice in the writing. I know I am being told a story and I delight in this even though I can become so involved in the characters that I forget the book is fictional and believe briefly that the world of the novel is a historically real world.

As I have discussed, memory and the imagination are embedded in fiction. In *Spilt Milk*, one of the main protagonists, Nellie, in the opening pages articulates this locus of memory as her own. The story begins at a family picnic by the river and this is where it will end too, at the same picnic. The storyworld then moves backwards in time from this opening scene set in the 1960s, to 1911, into memory and the story of Nellie and her sister's youth. The novel leads us chronologically through the sisters' lives and through the twentieth century to the 1960s ending on a last chapter where there is a return to the picnic scene that the novel began with. This governing structure of memory as storytelling is explicitly flagged up by the character of Nellie. She stands beside the river which will be a constant yet fluid site of memory and identity in the novel. 'The river that would flow on into the future. She remembered the young woman she had once been. Go on, she urged her memories, Go on. Swim!' (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 2). In this way the novel begins by introducing itself as memory. Just as Nellie calls up her memories, so writing this critical commentary is an act of recognition in itself, recalling and re-examining my writing of *Spilt Milk*. The doubling of memory found in the novel and in the recollections and analysis of the writing of it, serves to introduce the use of memory in my writing and in the structure of my fiction.

As a critical means of examining memory in this exegesis, I choose to consider and to modify Paul Ricoeur's studies on memory and history within a discussion of my own understanding of the relationship between my creative writing and the different forms of

memory in *Spilt Milk*. I feel a sense of recognition as a novelist when reading Ricoeur's approaches to memory as they connect to ways of understanding the difficulties of articulating life experience as identity and the relationship between collective and personal identity within fictional narrative. Each never loses sight of the other. This pragmatic path I argue, is crucial to my own writing practice. Ricoeur's work on narrative, memory and reconciliation is grounded in the history of lived life and personal and collective narratives. Fiction, I argue is also grounded in a desire to understand lived life. Ricoeur's work on narrative looks particularly at historical trauma where he 'challenges post conflict communities to an ethical discussion about the past' (Duffy, 2009, p.xi). I argue that fiction is always about human histories and it is also about reforming human histories within the imagination in order to move towards future notions of understanding about our existence and possible assimilation and reconciliations with the past. Ricoeur's 'admirable tendency to steer between extremes of abstractness and concreteness' (Peircey, 2010, p. 280) means his focus on the importance of narrative identity fits closely with my own belief in the ways in which fiction is relevant to real life experience. Furthermore, as Maria Duffy (2009) points out, Ricoeur's philosophical style has been described as dialectical, always engaging other viewpoints and texts with his own hermeneutics. I argue that this responsive thoughtfulness is in line with my own creative writing practice where the act of novel writing comes before conscious considerations of theory – even as theory and criticism interact with fiction and relate back to real life. With this in mind, Paul Ricoeur's analysis of memory and narrative provide a useful framework for a close reading of *Spilt Milk* and for my considerations of the writing process itself.

A memoried engagement with fiction is at the heart of my novel *Spilt Milk* and I will show how memory is relevant to the ways in which fiction represents our being in the world at any point in history. From this stance, my novel writing focuses on histories that I feel

should be told, creating imaginative memories of the past that feel authentic and emotionally real. As I stated, Ricoeur also writes powerfully of narrative as a potential place of reconciliation and this touches strongly on my own writing practice. Later in this exegesis I will examine reconciliation with the past as a strong theme in *Spilt Milk*.

So far, I have defined the paradoxical nature of real life and knowing the past in fiction and introduced memory and the imagination as central to my writing practice. By developing these connections, this exegesis will show new ways of looking at the writing process, freeing up creative writers from fears of writing what they do not know, and freeing readers to seek myriad connections between the world of the real, the fictive and the imaginary, unconstrained by a single, 'definitive,' interpretation.

Given Aristotle's statement that 'all memory is of the past' (cited in Ricoeur, 2006, p. 6) and given that *Spilt Milk* is a novel steeped in the past, in Chapter One, I examine the different forms of memory found in *Spilt Milk*. I look at time and memory, at memory as testimony, memory as history and I discuss definitions of historical fiction as the genre that my works fits within. I show memory situated in places and objects and within physical sensation. I examine memory as potentially good and potentially dangerous. I look at how choosing to forget can lead to reconciliation and also how forgetting as an absence of memory in *Spilt Milk* connects to moments of trauma for the characters. This creates a form of timelessness within the novel which then results in a move away from real life, creating a path into pure fantasy for the characters. I examine my own writing practice and how it is governed by the imagination even as it encompasses the real in research and personal experience. I also continue to develop the idea of community between writer and reader, fiction and the imagination, drawing upon the work of Wolfgang Iser, known for his theories on reader reception.<sup>3</sup>

I choose to prioritize an examination of different forms of memory in this exegesis instead of, say, psychoanalysis as a model of narrativised and dynamic memory, because examining the different ways in which memory is important in *Spilt Milk* better encompasses the possibilities of an ontological approach to representations of real life in fiction. This broad approach allows me to focus on my creative process offering a more useful and fluid interaction between theory and thought and the craft of writing. Following on from this, my interest in memory lies not in how it can be developed as a subject itself with its own political, social and theoretical branches,<sup>4</sup> but how my own writing process articulates different forms of memory as a means of examining the ways in which representations of real life can be written into fiction.

In Chapter Two, I consider my personal memory as a writer. Where are the beginnings and origins to *Spilt Milk* in my own memoried path as a writer? I investigate how my personal memory influenced the writing of *Spilt Milk* and look at the experiences of Sebastian Barry, Kate Grenville and Ian McEwan, who have written on their use of memory and family connections in their fiction. I ask what drew me to write *Spilt Milk*. What conscious or unconscious connections do I have to the stories I write? Can I only write about what I have directly experienced in order to write believable ‘real life’ in fiction?

The novelist and short story writer Sarah Hall remarks,

Literature is that odd paradox: an artifice that somehow truthfully engages the reader, the mind, the emotions, the self, in essential communion. The world of a story can seem more real than the cup of tea left to cool on the table while one reads (Granta, 2017, para. 4).

A novel can seem so real to the reader that they might think it is also real to the novelist, as if it might be autobiographical. This raises questions of memory as a direct form of experience. But do writers only write what they know? Through an examination of personal memory

within my writing practice, I will touch upon other forms of memory including postmemory and transgenerational memory, both of which suggest that the writer has an inroad into stories which stem from the direct memories of parents or other family members who have undergone trauma and need an authentic related voice to tell their stories. I argue that this move from personal memory to a kind of ghost memory with the writer acting as conduit to the past, translates itself at the point of writing into a form of recognition of the possibility of recreated past human realities which are relevant to our lived lives today.

Throughout this exegesis, I consider how writing and reading constantly overlap with forms of memory. I suggest that because fiction and language are communal and a site of endless perception, real life in fiction can never be neutral just as memory is never neutral and always involved in meaning making, consciously or subconsciously. Because of this, writing and reading historical fiction raises further questions. What is true and what is made-up? Does historical veracity matter if the fiction ‘feels’ emotionally real? As Nellie says in *Spilt Milk* on the subject of story-telling, ‘the truth of the story, if it needed one... [was] The way it made her feel like her heart was swollen and raw with love...’ (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 13).

## Chapter One: Memory in the Novel

In this chapter, I continue to look at creative memory as a communal potential between writer, reader and text. I look at the term ‘historical fiction’ and discuss why I place my novels within this genre. I look at language and historical detail in the novel and how an accumulation of detail offers emotionally complex and thus believable visions of the past.

Focussing on a close reading of my novel *Spilt Milk*, I look at remembering and forgetting, memory as testimony, collective memory, shared memory, traumatic memory and secrets, and what effect these forms of memory have on the story as a whole, thematically and structurally. I look at research, historical accuracy and how data and artefact also need to be refracted through memory and the imagination in order to give fictional life to the past. Finally, from this examination of the forms of memory in the novel, I open up a discussion about my personal memory in my writing practice which will lead to the next chapter.

I will begin with *Spilt Milk* and the uses of memory in the process of writing:

The sisters danced around the wash tub, a strange kind of excitement taking them over  
[...] Vivian turned [...] to stare into Nellie’s grey eyes, so like her own.

‘I had the strangest feeling when we met Joe Ferier’ [Nellie said]. ‘I thought I might fall in love with him.’

‘Oh no,’ [said Vivian] ‘no [...] not him’ (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 32).

What was her life now [...] on her own? Her sister was far away; her two husbands were lost to memories. She’d muddled through, one way or another. She’d been a great crowd-scarer as a child. A fast runner. Leaping through the bean fields, skirts all wet with dew  
[...] A fearless girl’ (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 277)

sun dappled through the willows [...] an old woman sat on a deckchair. Another woman stood beside her. She too was old [...] together they linked arms and went to the water's edge. (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 290)

I started writing *Spilt Milk* knowing I wanted the novel to span Nellie and Vivian Marsh's lives from young women full of potential to an old age full of memories. The novel encompasses the lives of generations of the Marsh family and examines the ways in which the past is collected and organised as a form of personal and familial identity. At that early stage when I had nothing more than a few ideas and some small scenes written, I did not think then that I was explicitly examining and experimenting with different forms of memory. As Margaret Atwood states, echoing my introduction where I touched up the relationship between theory and creative writing practice,

novelists begin with hints and images and scenes and voices, rather than with theories and grand schemes. Individual characters interacting with, and acted upon by the world that surrounds them, are what interests the novelist - the details, not the large pattern – although a large pattern does then emerge (1998, p. 1512).

In writing *Spilt Milk*, I had exactly this experience. The constant movement of my own imaginings back and forth between knowing and not knowing the story, resulted in a tentative joining up of narrative until, when I began delicately piecing the novel together, I began to understand that I was writing a book structured around the strengths and frailty of memory.

Just as my writing practice is steeped in memory, I suggest that the act of reading too, can encourage us to consider memory within real life experience and also in the ways fiction can seem like real life. In *Spilt Milk*, memory acts as a form of suspense and fictional possibility but not only that; the structure of the novel, as an investigation into the strengths and weaknesses of memory in the forming of family histories, is mirrored in the reading of it. Which is to say the reader, reflecting on the experiences of the characters, can consider how

we view family today in light of the ways in which family was constructed in the past. Later, in Chapter Two I will revisit this idea of generational change but here I suggest that reading *Spilt Milk* with its emphasis on memory, encourages the reader to consider imaginatively their relation to past generations and the ways in which we construct collective memories of belonging and kinship. This leads me back to my original suggestion that creative memory ‘operates in the wake of the imagination’ (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 5). Not only that but it operates from experience (reminding us again of Augustine’s experience of knowing time) so that we approach ‘the work of fiction without shedding the past and, instead, utilise that past towards a creative reading experience’ (Ardoin, 2013, p.1). What Ardoin means is that when we write or read, we come to fiction with our own consciousness and experience and it is from this standpoint that the imagination creatively connects with the text allowing us the potential to find expressions of experience in fiction, and ways of saying the unsayable. ‘The unknowable comes to me as I write and because I am also a reader, I know it comes to me as I read’ (Iser, 2000, p. 313). This is true of my own writing practice and is mirrored in my understanding of my position as a reader.

Returning to Augustine once again in order to bring the discussion back to the ways in which it might be possible to represent real life in fiction, I argue that creative memory, imaginative experience and the narrative power of storytelling, facilitate a folding in of new perceptions within understandings of the way in which the past and the future are contained in the present, bringing them into being in the text. As Mark Currie states in his book *About Time*, Augustine reflects upon time and memory, endowing

past, present and future with existence by translating them into memory, direct perception and expectation, since these things correspond to three things that clearly do have existence: the present of past things, the present of present things and the present of future things (Currie 2007, p, 68).

Memory in fiction works in the same way, that by endowing the text with a believable and imaginative potential for existence by creating memoried temporality and thus a world of memory and time-structured story, literary versions of real life can be experienced as emotionally real. If *Spilt Milk* explores histories of love, gender, identity, motherhood and family it also explores how histories of identity are made in memory, and can be lost in time.

How then does *Spilt Milk* show memory and time? In one example Birdie, Nellie's daughter exiled to Vivian's home for the duration of her concealed pregnancy, meets her future husband Charles. When she learns that he has already been shown, photographs of her as a child and as a young woman by her aunt, she is confused. 'How odd a feeling it was that he knew her. That he had seen photographs of her over the years. She had come here as a stranger and Mr Bell had recognized her as someone familiar' (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 169). Charles has pictorial memories of Birdie. He has an expectation of the faithfulness of memory (as photographic image) to present the 'absent thing that happened previously' (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 229). This is indirect memory. He does not know her but he has seen her grow up. The photographs represent historical time situated in artefacts of the past. He knows what Birdie looks like but if you ask him to explain what she is like as a person, he cannot. He knows her but he doesn't know how to say who she is. The photographs are data, documentary proof and historical record. Unless they become translated into something emotional and real for the characters, they will just represent evidence of the passing of time in both their lives. When Birdie meets Charles, her presence articulates her subjectivity beyond that of a photographic and biographical knowledge (what Vivian has told him about her). The reader, alive to the possibilities of chance in the novel, understands human experience as extending beyond historical data (the photographs) into the fictional realm of the possible. Suspense is thus created through the discrepancies of levels of memory and

knowledge between characters at the same time that the structure of the novel brings the past into the present, creating dramatic possibilities for future.

For the reader too, this division of memory acts as shared fictional knowledge in which they find themselves the primary holders of knowledge. In the scene where Birdie meets Charles, the reader knows Birdie in ways that Charles cannot yet know her. Will he find out about her pregnancy? Will she tell him about the father of her child? Will he judge her for being unmarried and pregnant? And more than that, the novel promises knowledge of these things. It has a beginning, a middle and an end in which knowledge of story, of characters and an opportunity for our own changed perceptions of experience will have accumulated within its pages. Understanding the movement between not knowing and the future possibilities of knowing are not necessarily available to us in our own lived lives in the way they are available in a novel. Perhaps it is between the bookmarked moment of potential and the project of an ongoing realisation of actions leading to an ending in the novel, in other words the ways in which fiction offers us the characters' past, present and future, that an articulation of experiential real life and ways of knowing the past become possible.

This small scene in *Spilt Milk* serves as an example of where the representation of real life in the text can be seen to be *more* than real life experience. In life, we can know the past and the present but not the future. In fiction, the present, which is to say the page you are reading, what can be called the bookmarked moment, shows us both the past in the present and the potential for future possibilities that we can reach towards. The structure of a novel always promises us a path towards an ending. The novel becomes a place where memory in the narrative interrogates the past and flags up possibilities for the characters in the fictional future of the text.

If the present of the story is where our perceptions as readers undergo change, then this can only happen in light of the historical past of the story. The present (in this case, the place

in the text either being written or being read, i.e., the bookmarked moment) becomes the site of changing perception. In his book *About Time*, (2007) Mark Currie reminds us that Roland Barthes believed that literature doesn't say it knows something but that it know *of* something, or better still that it knows *about* something. (p. 109) I propose here that it is not that the novel knows, but that writer and reader can know imaginatively, in the fictive realm, real worlds in which we might live. Writer and reader share the power of the imagination through the communality of the written word as a place for our own ways of knowing *of* something and *about* something.

A connection of, and about the past, present and future is crucial to writing and reading fiction and creates suspense, encouraging an emotional investment in the plot, the characters and the events of the novel. In *Spilt Milk* the imaginative desire for the future is found in the ways in which memories are formed by the characters. What will they remember of past events and how will what they remember affect their future actions? Vivian for example, cannot forget her first love Joe Ferrier, and the joy and grief he caused her. Her refusal to forget or to reconcile her memory of him as something past, shapes her identity and affects her whole life and indirectly, the lives of other family members. Memory in its different forms, both as positive and negative human forces structures the novel. The suspense in the novel hangs upon on remembering and forgetting. Between private memory and secrets and public declarations of memory as a form of desired familial identity, the ongoing suspense created between these conditions of life is what structures this novel around the histories of the lives of ordinary women in the twentieth century.

### **Private Memory.**

Joe Ferrier, the itinerant farmworker who seduces both sisters, is a turning point in Nellie and Vivian's lives and becomes the absent locus of a private memory, reminding the reader of the ways in which families are also built upon undivulged experiences and secrets, and

how private memory as a form of identity, can affect moral choices. Ricoeur, recalling Aristotle's statement that all memory is of the past, suggests that if memory is of the past then private memory belongs uniquely to an individual's private past.

In *Spilt Milk*, private memories of Joe Ferrier belong to the sisters in different ways even as they share, and guard, certain painful memories of how Joe Ferrier affected their relationship as siblings and damaged and changed their lives. Vivian's sense of owning her memories stem from her ownership of Joe as love object. Her private memory of Joe creates him as the love of her life. More than that, she had his child and 'nobody could take that away from her,' (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 114). This form of private memory allows Vivian a continuity of identity that can flow from the living present of her life back to the rupture that Joe caused, back to the moment of her falling in love and then forwards to the present, 'with nothing in principle preventing the pursuit of this memory without any end to its continuity' (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 96). One of the driving forces in *Spilt Milk* is how private memory affects the public lives of the characters in the passage of time. Also, the ways in which it unknowingly affects the lives of others. There is a constant sense in the novel that private memory in the lives of the characters is damaging. Perhaps because of this, there is an accompanying longing for confession. Vivian finally realises this when her lodger suggests they get married. 'And why not? He was a caring, careful kind of man. But he was not Joe. Perhaps love was not what she desired any more in any case. Forgiveness was what she craved. And only Nellie and Birdie could give her that' (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, pp. 231-232). For Vivian finally, confession, and in this a desire for forgiveness is, she realises, a longed-for state.

Here Rose too, comes to mind and the secret she kept from the sisters (that she is their mother rather than their sister). After Rose's death, Nellie and Vivian, innocent young women isolated in their rural existence, both fall in love with the enigmatic and destructive

Joe, who then disappears but returns in the novel as a dangerous memory for Nellie and as a romantic obsession for Vivian. Joe leaves Vivian pregnant while Nellie, unable to forgive her sister's betrayal of her, embarks on a new urban life. Joe Ferrier never returns and Vivian's baby dies. But the absence of the man and child haunt the novel until the closing pages. They never see Joe Ferrier again just as they never find out the truth about Rose. Even when Birdie is told the story of Rose, she will not recognise it as connected to her own family. When an old lady, the daughter of the midwife who delivered Nellie and Vivian, who is now a resident in the nursing home Birdie works at, tells her the story of Rose bringing up her children as her sisters, Birdie says 'that's a sad story' (Spilt Milk, 2014, p. 261), but does not recognise her own mother and aunt as being part of it. The old lady is not sharing her private memory as a form of confession. Thus, Birdie recognises the story as nothing more than a resident's private memories and sees them as cut off from her life entirely. This occurs without us knowing it in real life but in fiction, we can see the fragility of memory in action.

Rose dies early on in the novel. Joe disappears and the dead baby is weighed down with stones and given a burial in the river. Yet private memory keeps them all within the story. In this way, the absence (absence recreated as presence through memory) of Rose, Joe and the baby, structure the events that unfold within the novel and private memory maintains the past constantly in the present.

The sisters, particularly Vivian, form their lives through these memories. Memories that impact unknowingly on the lives of other family members for the next sixty years who, in turn, will have their own memories which haunt them and yet are specifically safeguarded. In this way, the novel itself is shaped and structured to ask questions of private memory. What should these women do? Should they live through memory or should they forget the past? Does the past even matter? Are there other ways to organise the past which might allow them to overcome trauma? The questions that the novel throws light on are the questions I asked

myself as I was writing. In this way, a novel, while representing real life in ways which overflow experience, is always a place of enquiry into real life, not an answer to it. And memory equally, becomes a place to question how representations of real life in fiction are as fragile and complex as memory in lived life.

### **Public Memory and Testimony.**

Just as memory can be fragile, and sometimes wrong, it can also be ignored as a form of familial protection against sharing memories which have been collectively forgotten. Midway through the novel *Lydia*, Nellie's elderly sister-in-law, publicly condemns Nellie by revealing who her daughter Birdie's father might really be. At this point, Nellie realises that the truth of this memory is not welcome. Nobody else is interested in making this public knowledge and, more to the point, the family are unsettled by Lydia's outburst. To what extent is testimony as memory, trustworthy? The novel asks this question, creating doubt in memory because here memory is potentially a site of conflict. Lydia's testimony creates suspicion in the other characters and a refusal to interrogate her declarations, rather than a desire for judgement and heard confession. The reader knows Lydia is telling the truth about Birdie's parentage. The other people in the room have always suspected this truth. But sometimes memories are not to be shared.

As a witness, Lydia expects what Ricoeur calls 'a critique of testimony' (2006, p. 164). Which is to say, she expects the others to question her in order to confirm her accusations. Memory as testimony must be challenged in order for it to be asserted. But nobody questions Lydia over the paternity of Birdie, thus effectively silencing history and Lydia's declarative memory. Lydia's memory is unwelcome. At the heart of it is her spiteful desire to avenge her own suffering, caused by a husband who left her. Nellie's happy life with not one but two men, creates in Lydia a poignant and unbearable desire to testify and to use memory as a weapon against others. In this scene, there is a tacit refusal to recognise memory, focusing instead on

the reluctance to share it. I use the word ‘recognise’ here because recognition is something I will return to as an important part of memory in fiction. Nobody in the family group wants to hear Lydia’s outcry:

They had turned away from [Lydia’s] words the way they might have looked away had she undressed in front of them, her outburst as shameful as dropped underskirts, slipped buttons, undone corsets. Things nobody should witness (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 211).

There is censorship in their response to her. The scene illustrates how the survival of memories requires public recognition and interrogation. Here though, the recognition of Lydia’s memory, which is an accusation of complicit knowledge (she insists that everybody must know who Birdie’s father really is) is refused. This refusal is a form of social constraint on truth.

Lydia’s outburst is not only ignored but it is also likened to nudity in a public place. If memory can be a shared platform for cohesion within a family, it can, by being denied, also force the opposite: complicit silence and a form of wilful forgetting. Furthermore, as an old woman, Lydia’s metaphorical unexpected public nudity, (i.e. voicing a socially awkward memory) becomes shameful and like public undressing, devoid/refused of sensuality. Not only her testimony, but her physicality of Being is denied. This scene and its depictions of family relations is an example of what Felski calls ‘social knowledge transmitted in a distinctively linguistic key’ (2008, p. 98). *Spilt Milk*, as a novel about family, shows how memory constructs the identity of the group – even if as in this case, memory (and historical truth) is refused. Through metaphor, Lydia’s outburst of unwanted memory is given a wider context of disapproval, as a critical social judgment on age, gender and behaviour. Not only does this scene show how consensus acts upon memory as testimony, but it also shows a deep-seated anxiety surrounding old age and women. To remain dressed (which in Lydia’s case means to not speak) is to dress in the robes of silence, of forgetting. Memory might be

truthful but if it is not interrogated or witnessed, or if it is seen as a culturally unsuitable truth, then forgetting is a powerful tool against remembering. Knowing openly, that Nellie has had her husband's brother's child is socially disgraceful which means that Lydia's memory is not welcome to the family. They do not want to know (publicly). This scene, with its ethical sensitivities, introduces the ways in which memory can be communally refused and controlled, just as easily as it can be communally shared and celebrated.

Returning to my writing practice, and drawing on the theme of Lydia's testimony and memory, I want to suggest that the relationship between writer, text and reader is as fragile as Lydia's experience. Creative memory as a source of imaginative potential born out of experience and constantly repositioned by life experience, allows a reader to engage with a novel and, just as easily, allows a reader (or public institution in the case of literary censorship) to reject a novel on the basis of not wanting to know. This scene, like the myriad ways in which we can respond to fiction, is complex. Lydia is cruel. But the silent response to her is also cruel. Here we have seen how memory in *Spilt Milk* is complex, as it is in real life. It can be both a place of safety and a place of danger. A place of silence and a place of declaration. I suggest that examining memory here is a way of examining real life because the scene sets up the kind of ethical questions that we ask of real life.<sup>5</sup>

### **History.**

If *Spilt Milk* is a novel about memory, it is also a novel about a historical past. A review by Jane Housham in *The Guardian* newspaper states that within its 'expertly paced' storytelling, *Spilt Milk* is also historically 'a survey of England from the eve of the great war to the mid 1960s' (2014). The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'survey' as to look closely and to examine something. It is also to record the features of a landscape in order to construct

a map, plan or description. The features of the landscape in *Spilt Milk* construct a description of the changing views on love and gender, motherhood and family in the twentieth century. Both my novels are set in a time before I was born. Perhaps then, survey is the right word – something done at a distance to the topography that is being recorded. It calls into question however, the ways in which a novelist writes what they do not know.

While I have emphasised the role of imagination, I want to look now at factual research, data, real life in fiction and ways of knowing the past. My attention to historical research is as careful and detailed as my writing practice. As historical novels, *22 Britannia Road* and *Spilt Milk* involved a great deal of research because I feel I need to know the past as completely as I can when I write. History as a place of fact-finding, is a productive garden and what we pick from it says more about who we are now, than it does about the past (which is past and absent). We can know the past in ways which are relevant to us in the now, reassembling history in the present. I approach research in an instinctive way, looking for particularities and also letting what I discover lead me onwards. This organic approach feels more creative than organising my research into set periods of time to be looked at. Lawrence De Maria, writing in the Huffington Post about *22 Britannia Road* said, ‘Hodgkinson’s depiction of British life and customs reflect her own upbringing in a small fishing village in Essex in the 1970’s. But her mastery of the sights, sounds, smells and minutia of life in Poland and France before and during the war suggests herculean research’ (2011). Much as I love researching a time period I know that research, while vital to the feel of real life and authenticity of the time of the story, is not enough to write a novel. Writing, I find what I am looking for in my research methods but I am directed by my creative instinct. Finally, when I put aside my research, I came to the first draft of *Spilt Milk* with a sense that I knew enough about the time I was writing in to let the research settle as part of my own knowledge. I let my new knowledge lead my initial understanding of my characters, their emotional motivations and

desires within their historical moment. Then I moved into writing an imaginative this-is-how and this-is-what-happened. As Ricoeur states, to call up the past as an image, is to ‘have the will to dream’ (2006, p. 25) so that any facts and artefacts in research need, like memory, to be situated and contextualised in the imagination. As I wrote, I had the sensation of putting story together from an almost dreamlike state, assembling memories and scenes that came to me, until they formed a narrative which then took on its own power to generate more layers of story. In this way, writing becomes a form of remembering and another form of creative memory.

If my novels look particularly at the history of private lives through periods of social change then it is through its emphasis on history and memory, that *Spilt Milk* examines how family groups express their own narratives/stories/memories, and which stories are passed on or forgotten. The novels have been marketed by my publishers as literary fiction, women’s fiction and historical fiction. I choose to call them historical fiction here, not just because the novel as an artefact becomes history as it is written, but because they are both set before I was born and are about creatively examining the past. Margaret Atwood defines historical fiction as ‘anything before the time at which the novel-writer came to consciousness’ (1998, p. 1356). Another definition, proposed by The Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction, suggests it is ‘writing which vividly records and brings to life the past’ (2017). Writing about a time before I was born means accessing that time imaginatively. Vividly bringing the past to life suggests a kind of re-animation, a bringing to life of what was once real. Breathing life into the past suggests a demand for an archival accuracy, for facts and figures, an attention to the details of events and the minutiae of lived life so as to bring the past to life exactly as it was. But surely this is not possible because the past where it does exist in archival data or in

memory is fragmented, broken and deracinated from present personal experience and ongoing forms of identity? Yet a review of the novel in *The Financial Times* highlights the histories in the novel as its fictional strength: ‘the novelist gives us her take on the real, gut-wrenching stories of the lost children in so many families; untold histories that ate away at our parents, grandparents and the generations before them’ (Berwick, 2014). Real individual experiences of the past are referred to by the reviewer under the auspices of a collective memory accessed via the fictional experiences of fictional characters.

So where does this leave memory in fiction, when it is not really the memory of real people, even as the reviewer suggests that the depictions of the past (of memory) feel true to life? What I do not have is direct memory of the beginning of the twentieth century. I simply was not there. But as I have been suggesting, if memory is the locus of the imagination then this allows us the potential to imaginatively (and emotionally) know the past in fiction and as a writer it frees me to give my take on the untold stories of love and loss in families throughout the generations.

As a creative writer, I suggest that stories choose me as the one who will ‘remember’ them and rewrite them into being, and that I write because I believe that there are some stories that need to be saved from forgetting. *Spilt Milk*, with its emphasis on the untold, private lives of ordinary women in the twentieth century, felt important to me. So how do I write about a past that I do not know experientially? I argue that in life as in fiction, memories constructed by others are not sealed off from those who did not have direct access to the events remembered. When the old woman in the nursing home tells Birdie about Rose and Nellie and Vivian she does not listen and the story is lost to her. The writer however, listens out for the past and writes it into being. It is in fiction that the past is available to all. ‘Any representations of real life in fiction must stem from the communal experience of memory and the imagination’ (Yates, 2001, p.

Bringing the past to life points towards an emotional re-rendering of the absent and perhaps it is here, in the emotional rendering of a story that a historical novel can seem vividly real. As the review in *The Financial Times* suggests, *Spilt Milk* constitutes an emotional wholeness as much as a record of historical accuracy. I would like to look now at an example in *Spilt Milk* of the ways in which the past is imbued with emotion and thus creates a sense of real life and the intimacy of untold histories: this is a scene involving Birdie with her son Framdsen and the Hubbard children James and Ella, playing in the river on a hot summer afternoon. The details bring the past to life vividly:

In the shallows, Framdsen and James held an old pickle jar and a shrimping net on a bamboo cane. Serious as scientists, they captured jet-black beetles, and mottled newts that moved like [...] silk ribbons in the water. They held the jar [...] up to the sun, squinting at their treasures, then submerged the jar again, watching the river creatures wriggle down into the mud-stirred water (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 243).

This is a depiction of childhood in 1950s rural Britain. To write it, I gathered memories of childhood from history, oral sources, photographs, literature and film and sifted through them to write the scene as I wanted it to be. Just as the children scientifically hold their river creatures to the light and then drop them back into the mud-stirred waters, so I gathered history as research and then let it go back into the past. I remembered my own 1970s rural childhood and spoke to my father about his upbringing in the country. In this way, history acted as a way of accessing a temporal mood of childhood. The past as research and experience, even if it is absent and fragmented by time, can be made whole within the story world of the novel, as the writer's personal take 'on the real, gut-wrenching stories' (Berwick, 2014) of the past. The scene by the river is vivid and involving in the same concentrated way that the characters James and Framdsen involve themselves in their examination of nature. I wanted the sunlight to act as magnifying glass to their observations

and offer a clarity of vision that is simple and childlike. In juxtaposition to this, the scene develops further but is filtered through Birdie's personal memories. Her take on the scene adds a different emotional depth to the moment:

In the mirage of late afternoon, the children appeared softly blurred... Lovely dancing limbs and sunburnt faces, freckled shoulders, polished cheekbones, their teeth white in grinning faces. Weren't they sweetness itself, these carefree water babies? [...] 'Now isn't she the spit of her mother,' [a] stranger might innocently say, comparing Birdie and Ella (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 243).

Birdie sees the children in a 'mirage' of sunshine. A mirage is both an optical illusion and an unrealistic hope. The children, who have been examining newts in the clarity of sunlight, are examined in their turn by Birdie but they are blurred into a form of familial idealism, an abstraction of themselves. Emotionally, they represent to Birdie her longing to have more children and the constant pain of loss. Birdie is obsessed with the thought that Ella might be the daughter she gave up for adoption. She sees the children through the lens of her own desires. She also craves a witness to the scene to create a memory of the day as a form of testimony, someone who might remember them as a family, a stranger who will see a physical resemblance between them and will believe (and remember) Birdie must be Ella's mother.

Here, it is in the affecting depiction of the detail that the emotional creates realistic dramatic human possibilities. As Margaret Atwood suggests 'in and of itself the past tells us nothing. We have to be listening first, before it will say a word' (1998, p. 1515). As writers, she means that we must find emotional direction and human dimensions in the past in order to make it alive to our present. Coming back to Augustine and his question of how to explain time, historical time can be seen as chronology, measured in calendars and clocks. Events can be marshalled by dates and names, as the historian might want to do to give chronological

order to the past (Ricoeur, 2006, pp155-156). But this ignores listening to the past in order to locate the untold stories of human life. Aristotle's belief in 'things are better remembered which have order in themselves' (cited in Yates, 2001, p. 97) suggest that the relationships between things (in themselves) is what is important to fiction. The word 'relationship' suggests a human emotional investment and connection. In other words, in fiction and narrative, time (and the past) can be defined by episodes which relate to other episodes in good, bad, sorrowful or joyful ways. Historical fiction can seem like real life because historical time and historical events are imbued with detail and given an emotional intensity in the present. Returning to Atwood's description of historical fiction and the Walter Scott Prize definition, I hope I have illustrated that between the synthesis of imagination, experience, memory and historical research, fiction needs, above all, an emotionally imbued rendering of events in order to bring the past to life in new and vivid ways which paradoxically allow us to recognise what has become forgotten to us.

Although I write in the here and now of my creativity, my novels, by the time they reach bookstores and readers, are, in another sense, historical. It took me several years to write *Spilt Milk*, therefore I can also say that the novel is a result of my own memory and histories and ongoing possibilities that can be known as the future. 'The novel that's contemporary in the sense of being wholly of now is an impossibility, if only because novels may take years to write, so the 'now' with which they begin will be defunct by the time they're finished' (Swift, 2011). Of course, the 'now' of writing always passes into memory – remembering how I wrote *Spilt Milk* is an active work of memory. At the same time, the act of reading a novel brings it into the now of the reader's perceptions. Rereading a novel brings it into another now. Then there is the writer's notion of the historical time they have set the novel in. *Spilt Milk* is a historical novel but it is written by a contemporary writer. It contains within it the complexities of life viewed through a historical lens, even as this lens is my take on the past.

I argue that it is exactly this tension between memory, historical data and the imagination in which the creative memory works, bringing these strands together as ways of knowing the past in fiction.

### **Forgetting.**

So far, I have attempted to show the ways in which memory and the imagination are essential to representations of real life and knowing the past in fiction. Just as Augustine's memory of time needs the imagination in order to articulate that knowledge as narrative, so forgetting is also connected to the imagination. In *Spilt Milk* forgetting comes in different forms. There is choosing to forget as a form of reconciliation and forgetting as an articulation of trauma.

Forgetting as a form of reconciling the past is seen clearly towards the end of the novel. The elderly sisters Nellie and Vivian have chosen to let the past go into forgetting. Not only that but there is a new baby in the family with new possibilities for the future, for belonging and different visions of motherhood and childhood than the ones Nellie and Vivian have known. The novel returns to the picnic scene it opened with. The family gather to admire Framsdén and Judith's new baby. Reconciliation comes as a form of desired forgetting for the sisters and there is a great sense of ease in letting go of the past. As they walk across the fields to the riverside picnic, their hands brush against the day's fragile bloom of field poppies, 'all the...crimson petals falling at their touch' (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p.1). This is a strikingly visual image of commemorative memory (poppies being the symbol of Remembrance Day). It connects metaphorically with the ways in which memories can be kept or lost. Poppies as a symbol of remembering, flag up not only historical images of war but also the power of memorial and the desire to work against forgetting the past. The image of red poppy fields brings the scene into a wider historical consciousness and is thus coloured by reference to lived life and communal memory, positioning the fictional Marsh family

within actual histories of real life. Yet the sisters choose to run their hands through the flowers, knocking the petals to the ground, as if in doing so they are freed from any notion of public memory and can choose to forget, which indeed they do.

And if they choose to forget certain things, they actively choose to remember other things. The Marsh family joyfully, nostalgically look back to memories of the past of ‘seasons remembered, harvests and ploughing, the days of childhood...winters long ago gone, whose legendary harshness was in retrospect to be marvelled at and even doubted a little,’ (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 1). The scene becomes a site of reconciliation between historical time (the seasons past) and choosing to how to remember time within narrative. The characters appear to understand that memory is a fictional tool and open to doubt. This doubt is seen positively, suggesting that storytelling is important to familial mythmaking and belonging, here evoked in the memories of ‘legendary’ winters. Forgetting as an articulation of trauma is different and affects narrative in different ways. Far from the enjoyable storytelling of farming seasons, trauma leads to the kind of forgetting which leads to timelessness. When time leaves the novel, the characters fall out of real life into fantasy. When Rose dies, Nellie and Vivian briefly live an enchanted life as if they are held in some place beyond memory and time, a place of unconscious forgetfulness and a place where the structure of their lives becomes fragmented.

They felt lost and uncertain. [They] let the clock run down. Rose had kept the pantry door locked [...] Vivian opened its doors wide. She took out jars of cherries and made a blancmange with their juices. They ate the sweet sticky fruit [...] until their mouths were stained red and their bellies ached (*Spilt Milk* 2014, p. 24).

Memory of the sisters’ previous, organised life, is lost to them. Forgetting to wind the clock makes their world literally timeless and thus they move into a world of fantasy. They sleep

and eat and weep, gorging on fruit as if trauma has awakened a hunger they cannot control. The river offers them frogs who squat ‘in the butler sink in the pantry belching loudly [...] Green newts shimmied in under the cracks in the door’ (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 24). The sisters return these creatures to the water’s edge every day but still the frogs come back, as if the river itself is calling them back to memory in the form of ‘modalities of habit’ (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 40). Since childhood the lives of the women have been invested in routine and habit and what Rose called ‘the glory of work’ (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 5). With the death of Rose these points of reference disappear and their lives become as fantastic as fairy tales. The frogs returning daily recall the chronology of chores Rose ensured their lives were centred around. The frogs also position the river as a holder of the memory of habit but the sisters refuse this time-bound memory, delivering the creatures back to the water. Without Rose, there is no habitual memory in which to position the sisters within either the known past or the present which effectively denies them a possible future. As the days go by memory is no use to them and the house too falls under the spell of timelessness and forgetfulness. ‘Day after day, the glaring sun scorched the land. The cottage was a waterless ship then, beached and cracking in the drying afternoons. Bedding hung from open windows like windless sails; the doors and window frames shrank ever more crooked’ (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 25). This is the point at which the sisters forgetful state is beached and run aground. What eventually returns them to memory (and time) is the appearance of the farmer’s wife, bringing them back to the world of work, offering them jobs on the farm. It is Nellie who recognises the need to work and shows a desire to reinvest herself within the past in order to position them both again in the ongoing potential for a future. ‘We’ll do it,’ she says. ‘We’d be glad to’ (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 25). There follows a change in the descriptive nature of their lives.

They collected jugs of tea and parcels of bread and cheese [...] crossing the water meadows, following [...] other women with their arms full of picnics. All along the river

[...] men were working [...] Church bells for a wedding pealed in the distant village  
(*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 25).

Here, the sisters are restored to a world of action, memory, work and routine, and time. They carry picnics to the men in the fields. There are other women carrying picnics, and this too returns the sisters to their roles as women in a rural society. Their selfhood is restored by the memory of work. Church bells toll for a wedding, returning the reader to the memory of Rose's fears for the sisters' futures. 'That single men looked for wives [...] A woman could be bought for seven shillings and sixpence. The cost of a marriage licence. A married man got himself a better wage on a farm than a single one' (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 7). As the sisters remember themselves through work, memory is restored within the novel and the historically gendered world of the novel is also remembered and returned to itself.

Looking again at Ricoeur's comment about the indivision of memory and the imagination, this scene shows what happens when memory is symbolically removed from the imagination and replaced with forgetfulness. The sisters' forgetful life after Rose's death makes for a strange world of timelessness and fantasy. So here, memory also connects to language as the conduit for the imagination within representations of real life.

A similar movement from trauma into timelessness occurs when Nellie and the war-damaged Sergeant Henry Farr, watch a news film reel at the village hall during the First World War. Henry finds the detail of the event too much, the noise, the closeness of people and the images of war are too terrible for him to contemplate. He staggers out into the road:

He gulped the air [...] He shivered and shook. Children gathered, curious to see a grown man falling to the ground. When he stopped shaking Nellie was there, talking to him. Her words came and went in his ears. She was explaining about the birds she liked to watch,

how they flew in the wind like rags. How she felt like that too sometimes, all ragged and lost (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 97).

This is a physical scene but also a scene of trauma which is divested of time by its inability to be understood by the characters even as Nellie tries to liken her own experiences to Henry's shellshock. There is the evoking of the weight of a man falling, of children gathering, looking down, surprised by the adult world suddenly found at their feet. The word 'falling' denotes action but it is a strange world where a man falls at the feet of children. This tumbling into *medias res*, suggests that Henry might be falling perhaps from the sky itself.

This moment can also be seen as an example of Ricoeur's transgenerational memory which as I mentioned, I will discuss further in the next chapter. There is potential in the language to position the children as the holders of historical memory. Nellie and Henry are timeless in their otherworldly descriptions where birds are rags and men fall from the sky but the children can be seen to be rescuing the scene from timelessness because they are witness to shellshock and become the holders of 'memory fractured by history' (Ricoeur 2006, p. 393). Henry falling can be seen as a metaphor for a generation suffering post-war trauma. And indeed, *Spilt Milk* and my debut novel *22 Britannia Road* are both, I argue, preoccupied with the ways in which war impacts on family identity and on our expectations of love, childhood, motherhood and gender.

The scene is not only a moment of recreated trauma but also of a shift between two damaged people into a possible future deeper emotional bond. It is possible to imagine the feel of Nellie's mouth close to Henry, as she speaks in his ear. Her words coming and going echo her memories of birds. The image of birds flying is a detail that lifts us from the ground to the sky, an opposite image to that of a man falling. But the sense of flying and the birds as a possible freedom of movement is cut short by feathers turning to rags and the real life of the novel turning to timeless fantasy.

Later, after they have married, Nellie and Henry sit together in the kitchen of the cottage and once again physical sensation is evoked as a means to show the effect of traumatic memory in the present. Nellie wants to understand Henry's shellshock as something she can touch and heal.

Mrs Henry Farr. Friendship seemed to shine out of that name like a lamp lit in the dark [...] Nellie is sure they can be happy. A muscle twitched in Henry's cheek. She reached out her hand very slowly so as not to frighten him, and stroked his face (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 101).

The words themselves are as careful as Nellie's touch. It is a poignant, slowly realised scene, made more poignant by Nellie's decision that they can be happy in the future. Time has been restored to their lives in the present so that the future, engendered through hope, becomes once again possible.

J Hillis Miller suggests that the imaginary worlds of fiction, are made of words from 'the everyday.' These words are used to name by mimesis, 'as invention or discovery, a virtual reality that has no referential counterpart, even though real persons, places, and events may often be transposed into the fictive' (2013, p.26). In the above excerpts, I have shown how ordinary language can tie itself to otherworldly imagery, taking the text into a realm of forgetfulness. Hillis Miller also suggests that the imaginary can transgress language, as it does here. He calls upon Wolfgang Iser in order to contemplate other ways than mimesis of looking at the fictive and the imaginary. Iser proposes three elements to representations of real life in fiction: the real, the fictive and the imaginary (Hillis Miller, 2013, p. 28). For me, as a writer and reader, these elements underpin my understanding of what I call creative memory. I see 'the real' as the writer and the reader in the world (life experience), and the 'fictive' as language which is created out of an interaction between experience and the

imaginary. Finally, Iser's imaginary, I translate into memory; this too flows easily between experience and language and the imagination, as a form of knowing and not knowing.<sup>6</sup>

I am drawn to the idea that the writer and reader both come to fiction from a place of experience, memory and imagination. Not because this place (creative memory) allows specific readings or understandings of the fictive but because it frees the fictive to be a place where 'the imaginary reveals itself as the generative matrix of the text,' and as 'the mothering source' (Hillis Miller, 2013, p. 28). The imagination is something common to all human beings and mothering is a fertile space for origins. It is the birthplace if you like, of the imaginary. Iser points out that 'literature stands in need of interpretation' (1993, p. ix). To do this, cognitive frames of reference are needed. It is our own perceptions which come into play when we consider real life and fiction. In this way representations of real life in fiction are understood via the reader's 'reflection on the moment of representation' (Ricoeur, 2006. p. 233). In other words, as social agents we seek to understand the world both through experience and through representation of that experience. Here in the representation of real life in fiction is where language can overflow its own meanings in the shared site of the imagination. 'Language is profoundly communal, and in the mere fact of speaking, then writing, a wealth of language grows and thrives among us that has enabled thought and knowledge in a degree we could never calculate.' (Robinson, 2012, p. 23). In other words, we agree to find in the fictive, important aspects of our real life which enrich our experience of ourselves and of others. If life is real to us in endless possible ways then fiction must be real, in its own particular ways.

If creative memory is, as I have suggested, available as a potential for imaginative responses to fiction then the writer's imaginative responses to the text are as important to the text as the reader's. There is no need to isolate them in the hope of reading purely through language because, as I have stated, language is communal. Ricoeur, speaking of theories of collective

memory, suggests that ‘to remember we need others’ (2006, p.120). Writing *Spilt Milk*, I realised that I was explicitly calling upon the reader as witness to the story. The novel is structured as an investigation into how memory operates against forgetting in such ways that fictional representations of the historical the past can feel authentic. Fiction is uniquely placed to offer us the opportunity to remember collectively and individually through the experiential element of language and I will repeat here, Ricoeur’s notion that to remember we need others.

### **Ways of remembering.**

When characters in the novel remember events in their lives, the process of remembering becomes an act against forgetting. When Vivian lays her old wedding dress out on the bed, her own narrative history is held in her hands. ‘The rippling satin spread across the counterpane, a creamy lake of fabric the colour of *Spilt Milk*. And no use crying over it either, she thought. You couldn’t get time back once it was gone’ (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 193). In fiction and in the shared creative memory of narrative, we are offered the chance to do exactly this. We can call time back to us imaginatively. In this way memory connects the present to the past and allows a space for reconciliation with the past. This is possible even as we know it is an artistic illusion. After all, writing ‘is not the real and it is not fictive language but the multiplicitous availability of the imaginary’ (Iser cited in Hillis Miller, 2013, p. 27). Precisely because *Spilt Milk* is fiction, it can be more than a historical record. As a novel, it is a work of imaginative memory and a story of emotional life.

The representations of real life, in this case a wedding dress as a symbol of sexuality, love, hope, family, duty and forgotten dreams, connect the physical with the historic and with the psychological, emotional response of the character contemplating time. The heavy satin of the dress in Vivian’s hands becomes a sensory fictional experience. This encourages a

similar moment of reflection for the reader. I argue we build memories of real life in this way, connecting and translating physical experience into emotional memory and narrative.

*Spilt Milk* is an archive of memory which in its turn, through its written form, detailed and complex, becomes a fictional document, creating a history of a family and a site of remembering the past. Here I want to address the ways in which language works as accumulated detail in knowing the past in historical fiction. Vivian's memories are stirred and returned to her by the sensuality of the heavy satin of her wedding dress in her hands. Here memory is about touch and physical sensation. These associations are 'intensely connected to the specific places and objects along with which they are experienced' (Henaff, 2009, p. 100). As reader, we can feel the satin in our own hands. It is a sensuous, corporeal memory, situating the sensation of the past within the body through touch – what I want to call an onomatopoeic memory of intimacy. As a writer, I aim to find ways of locating the physical in the linguistic. I seek it out when I read other novels for the pleasure of the reading, and I attempt to find ways of achieving this when I write, desiring what the poet Robert Hass calls 'language as alive as the current of a river or the touch of a living body' (2012, p. 278).

The wedding dress becomes for Vivian, the fabric of memory. She had wanted to be married again. This had carried her along for years. 'It had been a project and she realised she needed projects, pilgrimages, acts of faith, whatever she wanted to call these private ambitions that gave meaning to her life' (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 191). In this way, I suggest that our own lives are lived at the metaphorical level of the sentence, small details of meaning which are built narratively into who we think we are and what we might see as possible for the future. *Spilt Milk* fictionally mirrors the ways in which the real life of personal narrative is created, the structure of the novel reflecting on the gaps between real life and representations

of real life in fiction, ‘so as to bring it closer to the organisational aspect of real life personal narrative’ (Duffy, 2009, pp. 34-36).

Ricoeur states that literary works depict reality by augmenting it with meanings that themselves depend upon the virtues of abbreviation, saturation, and culmination. (1984, pp. 80-81). This can be seen working in *Spilt Milk* and is an example of how real life in fictional language creates ways of articulating human experience through detail and the physicality of language. The writer and reader can recognise, feel and know real life at a shared level which broadens experience, moving us from personal recognition of our own place in the world to potentially experiencing and recognising what it might be to be the other. This I argue, creates empathy and belief in the storyworld. Language in the novel creates way of knowing the past from direct emotional response. Again, this is the past adhering to the present and thus creative writing becomes an act of remembering.

### **Remembering and Forgetting in the Writer.**

This idea of remembering story is something common to writers and allows me to recall Augustine’s unarticulated instinctive knowledge of time. The beginning notion of the novel is already known to the writer even if at first, the writing (the articulating) of the story seems potentially baffling. Yet still, there is some known experience of the story. ‘Some writers experience elements of déjà vu, as if they find or recall, rather than make, some part of what they write (a character, a voice, a situation)’ (Neale, 2011, p. 951). Even with this idea of stories already there, waiting for the writer, it is never a given that just by turning up at your desk, the stories will arrive even as instinct calls upon them. Yet many writers attest to this sense of waiting for the story to come. Tim Winton describes the uncertain writing process as

that of the magician fearing failure: for him writing is ‘fearful and fearsome. ‘You spend your day pulling this rabbit out of a hat and some days you are not even sure you have the hat, let alone the rabbit in the hat’ (Leonard, 2008). What is well known to me when I am writing is that everything I experience becomes relevant to the novel. Everything external to me seems to be filled with potential as research or knowledge or insight which will be relevant in some way to the thinking space that the novel inhabits in me during the writing of it. This too is filled with the sense of writing as déjà vu, as memory that can be ‘found’ in the writing process. Other writers feel this too; Anne Enright says she loves the feeling of being at a stage with her writing where everything is connected to the book, ‘I keep bumping into it’ (2016). Writing can be a process that, as Seamus Heaney points out, can begin somewhere before language. ‘The crucial action is pre-verbal, to be able to allow the first alertness or come-hither, sensed in a blurred or incomplete way, to dilate and approach as a thought or a theme or a phrase’ (2000, pp. 158-160). Interviewed in *Granta*, Tessa Hadley suggests she chooses a story or the story chooses her: ‘in every sentence at some level of awareness I’m negotiating with that underlying point’ (2017). As a writer, my creative memory is comfortable with this dreamlike state. Once this memory-state of found stories and of the past, become written into fiction, they become documents. And in this way, fiction itself becomes history and the text a permanent document, an artefact and an imaginative history that can be examined and returned to. I want to suggest here, that in this way, historical fiction can know the past through the act of being written and becoming known. Thus, knowing the past in fiction is knowing the power of the imagination in memory.

When I began writing the opening images of *Spilt Milk*, they came to me as a form of memory. I was walking by a long narrow river at dusk. I cannot resist setting the scene: the river at dusk, a constant movement of ripples made by the current and by ducks bobbing back and forth. Against a horizon of pink sunset and darkening trees, the river turns silver and a

mirrored blackness fragments across its surface, the kind of seductive dance of light and shadow that impending evening gives to water. Here, I imagined a young woman running on the riverbank towards me. She wore long skirts that suggested a way of dressing that belonged to the early twentieth century. She picked up her skirts so as to be able to run more easily. She was barefoot and in her early twenties. The incompleteness of the scene struck me, as if it were empty of context but full of potential for story. All I had was detail, the way she seemed encumbered by her skirts, her desire to run. It is important to mention the way the image unrolled because these incomplete scenes (and details) are where creative memory is at its most free and this is what is also carried into the novel and the text. The woman running was my character Nellie Marsh. Here was the mystery of the unknown, yet also in the first glimpse of a character, a sense of recognition in the memory of a woman who had never existed, yet, through the process of writing, would soon exist in a published novel, present and permanent.

If I only saw Nellie in a fleeting manner it was because I needed to write her into being. That same day I wrote this description; ‘Her shoulder length dark brown hair was plaited in a tight style that pulled at the corners of her eyes. She was strong-looking. Moon-faced with the smooth features of a carved saint’ (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p.7). ‘As a child [...] she had been the fastest runner at school, with or without her hobnail boots’ (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 77). Already, Nellie was running through memories, forming into a character who would be recognisable and complete.

This movement from a found image to a written character is what Ricoeur calls ‘memory in action’ (2006, p. 48). He speaks of the having-been of the remembered past as being the ultimate referent of the memory in action. Equally, within the structure of *Spilt Milk*, the movement between the action of a scene and the way it became memory (by having been written as an event) is a way of showing how the real life of the characters have layers of

private experience. Ricoeur says that what passes to the forefront of memory in action is a split between the real and the unreal. I take this to mean a split between the real and the imagined, which calls to mind again the paradoxical nature of writing what seems like real life in fiction. Even what we remember as direct memory of an event is the real but it is also inevitably filtered through imagination and through the context in which the memory is called to mind (2006, p. 49). In my fiction writing, I found this showed itself in the writing of the actual event, and then the subsequent perception of it by the characters. This brings me back to my earlier discussion on how reading a novel (and writing one) brings into focus the connections between past, present and future within the text. Here as I have suggested, creative memory is a site of imaginative desire for a narrative driven suspense which will be rewarded as the novel progresses and the future of the characters flows towards a site of ending and a feeling of having known the real life of the characters. Structurally, the effects and consequences of the plot of a novel follow a ‘memory’ path, creating causality, suspense and drama.

When *Spilt Milk* was published, I gave public talks and readings, and attended book signings as part of the role my publishers expect me to play as a writer. As a writer I was brought into the public eye and publicly connected to the text and the readers. I talked with many readers about Nellie Marsh and her life as if she had really existed. Readers shared their own stories of family in the light of having read *Spilt Milk*. This is the pact we have with fiction: to believe in it as a form of real life even as we know it is made up.

This is also the pact that the creative memory makes with the writer, reader and text. It is not that we share the same creative memory but that it is a place where the potential for an imaginative experience of fiction moves between writer, text and reader. The fusion of these horizons <sup>7</sup>occurs within the text which has its part to play in the unrolling of perception in both writer and reader. Writing a novel, the text grows longer, filling pages and chapters, and

thus gains in complexity. As the reader reads, the text becomes a locus of experience and memory. Memory projects representations of the past into the present of the reader. It becomes possible to see historical fiction as a place for remembering. One of the driving forces of my writing is a desire to move my characters towards a state of knowingness and a brief experience of completeness.

In storytelling, we attempt to create for ourselves what Aristotle calls completeness – stories which have beginnings, middles and endings (1996, p. 13). For *Spilt Milk*, I chose a form that implies that completeness by deliberately eschewing this structure. Therefore, for Nellie, Vivian and Birdie, completeness comes not through a totally resolved ending (because the absent ones are still absent) but through the sense of possible reconciliation with the past and a hopefulness for the future. For the reader, the story ends when they see and know the story in a more complete way than the characters themselves. Reconciliation is understood by the reader even as it has not been explicitly articulated by the characters themselves. The story does not close down the future in its last pages, but the main characters are given an ending in which they are reconciled to their memories.

So far in this exegesis, I have laid out, like Vivian's symbolic wedding dress, the broad cloth of my writing practice. I have moved from defining my work as historical fiction, to examining the ways in which memory is found in *Spilt Milk*. I have looked at the ways in which memory as detail creates emotional real life in the novel. I have examined the relationship between writer, text and reader as a form of creative memory which I believe creates a freedom of experience in reading fiction and allows for ways of knowing the past imaginatively. I have shown how connecting the writer and reader to the text as a shared site of memory, allows writing and reading fiction to be part of real life just as real life is involved in the creation of fiction. The world of the text is a way of being-in-the-world and this connects writer, reader and text within an ontological exploration of our relationship to

others, to being, and to being in the world. The representation of real life in fiction, while it is illusory, is also relevant to lived experience.

Coming back to my own experience as a writer and my experience of writing *Spilt Milk*, I have ended this chapter with the beginnings of an examination of my personal memory and how it connects with, or directs, my fiction writing. On relating how my character Nellie Marsh came to me in a dreamlike state, as I walked along a riverbank, I have introduced another thread of memory that passes between this chapter into the next and which will go on to generate memories of my own family and examine how my personal memory interacts with my fiction writing.

## Chapter Two: The Writer, Real life and Fiction

Having argued that life experience connects to creative memory in ways of finding real life and knowing the past in fiction, I must now ask how the writer's personal life experience connects to the novels they choose to write. Elizabeth Strout states, 'there's autobiography in all fiction' (Strout cited in Hoby, 2016) and in this chapter, I discuss the ways in which a writer might inhabit her own novels. How do I consider my own memory in relation to the writing of *Spilt Milk*? I examine here, personal memory as a path to writing my novels. I also consider the ways in which other writers discuss memory in relation to their novels. I explore my personal memory and novel writing via an examination of postmemory and transgenerational memory suggesting that recognition is part of personal memory and is also vital to my writing practice in differing ways. I then move to look at the important role of recognition in *Spilt Milk*. From recognition of emotional space, I move to look at geographic spaces of memory in the novel, highlighting the role of the river as depository of memory for all the characters and as a metaphor for generational experience. Ultimately, in this chapter, I show how personal experience, both my own and the ways in which personal memory is examined in *Spilt Milk*, is a necessary part of the creative approach to memory and to the task of writing fiction.

I knew I wanted to write a novel about families before I began *Spilt Milk*. Perhaps if I had been interested in another theme, I might have been directed by my imagination differently and 'seen' a different character in a different setting, other than Nellie on the riverbank. So where do the beginnings of *Spilt Milk* originate? If I look for memory in my own path to writing *Spilt Milk* and to writing my debut novel *22 Britannia Road*, I find them in my mother's personal story. Just as family is a site of powerful memorial transmission within

*Spilt Milk*, so my personal life and life as a writer is alive to the possibilities of memorial transmission. My mother's story shadowed my own childhood and has found a home in my writing as a preoccupation with motherhood, belonging, and not belonging. My first novel, *22 Britannia Road*, was, among other things, the story of a woman who rescues a child (or steals it depending on how you choose to interpret her drastic act) to replace the loss of her own. Sarah Towers in the *New York Times* said of the novel that 'it is Hodgkinson's portrait of the primal bond between mother and child, her visceral understanding of the gorgeous, terrible weight of love mothers must carry, war or no war, secret or no secret, that leaves an indelible impression' (2011). *22 Britannia Road* and *Spilt Milk* reveal my interests in the experiences of motherhood throughout the twentieth century but even as I freely connect my experience and my memories of my mother with my writing practice, neither novel reveals wholly, my mother's story.

Here then is my mother's story in a few words. Her entry into the world and her subsequent abandonment was told to me when I was a teenager. I know little more about it today than that she was a war baby – a love child, the sum of sexual passion between a soldier and a young woman. She was born in October 1942. Her birth mother abandoned her as did her father whom she never knew, not even by name. My mother was brought up by her grandparents whom she thought for many years were her parents. The woman she knew as her distant, grown up sister was, she discovered much later, her birth mother. Perhaps it is through empathy for my mother's beginnings and the mystery of my unknown maternal grandfather, his memory presenting itself as a memory of absence, that a complex understanding of belonging and not belonging infuses my fiction.

I want to mention now, what Marianne Hirsch calls 'postmemory,' which 'describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute

memories in their own right' (2008, p.103). This exploration of memory in fiction writing, turns the focus now towards the writer herself as a conduit to a real past.

Hirsch writes about the 'living connection,' and 'acts of transfer,' between generations, particularly in fictional representations of war and survival and trauma. In that context, post memory is a complex way of a writer 'owning' the past of her parents or a previous generation, or at least owning a lineage with them. Ricoeur speaks of history as a matter of 'men in time,' implying a fundamental relationship between the present and the past (2006, p. 170) and between memory and time. In writing *Spilt Milk*, my own familial connections to the twentieth century through family, gave me a way-in to history and to the writing of my novel.<sup>8</sup> I accessed the past through personal memory, emotional investment in transgenerational memory and a belief in postmemory. Ruth Browne, writing in the South African newspaper *The Cape Times*, states that '*Spilt Milk* belongs to that class of novel precisely invested in femininity, motherhood and the weight of succeeding generations. Like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the characters are rooted in the traumas that have come to define them' (2014, p. 11). My feelings about my mother and her own traumatic past, which as her daughter defines her for me in many ways, can be known as a postmemory. This is to say that I do not know her memories of her childhood because she never spoke much about it but I have an emotional connection to her life as her daughter which I believe allows me to know in the imaginative memory, what she endured as a child. I 'know' only a sketchy outline of what she lived through yet I have an instinctive knowledge that it was a difficult, lonely childhood for her. Postmemory means that her memories, without being expressly articulated, become accessed in my writing as a form of emotional verisimilitude. I suggest too, that we all have (in differing ways) this fundamental generational relationship and trace with the past. I maintain that in historical fiction there is the potential for recognition of the past, and for reassessing our own relation to history and ways of knowing the past because of the ways in

which memory can be shared imaginatively between generations and emotionally carried forwards. Even when memory is not shared in detail, because after all, my mother's memory of her childhood is in many ways a private memory, then in this space there is still a potential bridging between historic silence and a new voice. Writing the past as historical fiction is a way of giving an imaginative voice to hidden histories. In this way, and in the ways, I already discussed regarding memory and time and historical fact, fiction is an imaginative and communal space between personal vision and collective vision and is intimately connected with different forms of memory. As I show in *Spilt Milk*, there is potential too in this, for finding ways of situating reconciliation in the present within memories of the past.

In Chapter One, I mentioned my father's memories of rural childhood in the 1940s and 1950s, and how they informed certain scenes in *Spilt Milk*. Perhaps because his story is not the central emotional underpinning of my writing, I have never examined his familial past in the same way in which I have considered my mother's history, particularly in my writing of *Spilt Milk*. Because of this I might say that his personal memories are more accessible to me as documentary research and as anecdote. In *22 Britannia Road*, I called upon his memory of egg-collecting as a boy. The rules and regulations that he and his schoolmates imposed upon themselves, to me, as a person from another historical moment, seemed quaint and old-fashioned, reminding me of the natural history museums he took me to as a child. To my daughters who are another generation again, the mere thought of taking birds' eggs from their nests seems entirely barbaric. I mention this here because these are examples of historical details which connect generations, often through differences in understandings and attitudes. So here, memory and history created through oral testimony is inscribed in 'the relation between past and present, in the movement of understanding the one by the other' (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 170). Historical fiction connects the past to the present in historical and personal ways.

My father's memories, his 'vestiges of the past' (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 170) are reorganized and articulated in the fictive realm to show both the poignant construction of the relationship Aurek has with his father Janusz, the man he called the enemy when he first arrives from Poland, and Aurek's desire to be a normal child for his father, and fit in with their new life in England. Here, Aurek is 'bird-nesting:'

Take only one egg – except from rooks' nests, where you can take as many as you like, because everybody knows they are the devil's birds [...] There are important rules [...] If a bird is sitting on the nest you must leave it be. Most birds nest in bushes and thick hedgerows so expect scratches and nettle stings. These things are proof of your bravery (22 *Britannia Road*, 2012, p. 212).

There is an earnest quality to the boy's desire to follow the rules and a sense that bravery is important in this historically situated notion of masculinity. Importantly, this is Aurek trying to fit in with his father's desire for him to be like other boys. 'The enemy says egg collecting is part of learning about nature and every boy should be interested in Britain's wildlife, fauna and flora' (22 *Britannia Road*, 2012, p. 213). For Aurek, it is also a step away from his own memories of life during the war when he simply ate any birds' eggs he found. But Aurek will 'never tell the enemy he ate the eggs he found. [...] Even a child he knows it is shameful to admit to that kind of hunger' (22 *Britannia Road*, 2012, p. 212).

This form of memory detail, accessed through my father's oral testimony, differs from postmemory in that it is memory shared and reorganized into *new* context but is maintained as an authentic memory of the past. My father's story of his egg-collecting as a child in the 1950s is an insight into the past which is socially interesting as anecdote. The anecdote, according to Marcel Henaff's essay on 'Truth in Detail' is set apart from other forms of memory because it is composed of 'real-world events.' It is both 'a small but meaningful fact' or a 'revealing detail,' (2009, p. 99). An anecdote serves in a particular moment as a

historical event replayed. Here, though, I have asked myself what I can take from it. The anecdote has been severed from its past and given a new emotional weight through the repositioning of it as the memory of characters in the novel. In this way memory can be seen to need context in order for it to be part of ways of knowing the past in fiction. At the same time, it also shows clearly how fiction is composed not only of the fictive, but of small moments of history rescued from forgetfulness.

Returning to the ways in which memories of my mother inform my writing, I want to look again at postmemory as a literary trace between generations and examine further the idea of generational connections within fiction. A sense of 'being' and knowing the past through transference and emotional, familial connections can be a powerful beginning for a writer, giving a strong focus to their storytelling. The Australian writer Kate Grenville is another example of a novelist finding a path from the trace of personal memory to the novel. Researching a distant British relative gave her the inspiration to write *The Secret River* (2005), her beautiful but desolate novel of violent colonialism and clashing cultures. She states that her great-great-great grandfather's story opened up the past of her own place for her. Like myself, her own family connections to her novel writing were a starting point to her novel. Yet her research took her far beyond her family story, into the larger story of black/white relations in early Australia. 'The real man, my ancestor, faded from view and was replaced by another man. He was a fictional construction called William Thornhill, and telling his story became an obsession for the next few years' (Grenville, 2017).

Another writer who calls upon the memory of his father as a form of personal memory is Ian McEwan, whose novel *Atonement* (2001), McEwan speaks of his father's history as being part of his writing memory: 'When I came to write *Atonement*, my father's stories, with automatic ease, dictated the structure' (McEwan, 2006).

This returns us to the idea that fiction is there to be ‘found’ for the writer, waiting to be heard, in this case through the ‘ghost’ voice of McEwan’s father and through personal memory. Ricoeur states that transgenerational memory, which is close to postmemory, is not necessarily memory of those who are no longer living. He refers to this as a form of memory that even while it belongs to our elders, alive or dead, places us in communication with the experiences of a generation other than our own. (2006, p. 395). He speaks of children who learn to situate themselves within the generations. This surely, is a description of the writer’s role – not the need for blood connections necessarily, but for kinship, for the ability to ‘move’ freely and imaginatively between the memories of generations while also being part of their own generational moment. Historical memory is passed on, or seen as belonging to familial frameworks and this is more or less what happens in *Spilt Milk*, in its movement between generations. ‘You and me,’ Nellie says to Framsdén. ‘We share our beginnings [...] we’re river children’ (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 253).

Postmemory suggests direct access to history through belief in the power of the imagination, namely through ‘the particular relation to a parental past described, evoked, and analysed’ (Hirsch 2008, p. 105). This form of memory Hirsch notes, comes under many terms including, absent and inherited memory, belated memory, prosthetic memory ‘*mémoire trouée*, *mémoire des cendres*, vicarious witnessing, received history and postmemory’ (2008, p. 105). These terms all open the way to deeper analysis between memory, fiction and history, allowing the writer to claim connections to potentially traumatic and politically sensitive pasts just as Kate Grenville does in her novel *The Secret River* (2006) and as Ian McEwan does when he ‘hears’ his father dictating the structure of his novel.

As I wrote *Spilt Milk*, I was consciously aware of my postmemoried approach. However, I did not want to tell my mother’s personal story (which I believe is her story to tell while she is alive, not mine) but still, I wanted to connect it as an emotional starting point to stories that

touch on the experiences of women, motherhood and love in the twentieth century. *Spilt Milk* is a novel about motherhood, sisters and enduring sibling love and therefore postmemory suggests itself to me as a writing process. I have a sister. I am a daughter and I am mother of two daughters. Yet I would argue that the novel is not purely about my autobiographical beliefs and experiences. *Spilt Milk* 'straddles three generations of a family of misfit women, using a multiplicity of vivid viewpoints' (Hore, 2014) The novel addresses themes of motherhood and childhood, but they are not specific to my mother's story nor to mine. This is because my writing voice is the one asking questions of the past (that go beyond knowing to a point of not knowing) which demand imaginative (and therefore fictional) responses. As a writer, I need to tell more than I know. The imaginative, as I have argued, is essential to fiction. My writing asks questions of knowledge, moving between the what-happened of history and the what-might-have-happened of fiction. Writing fiction requires the constant asking of what-if? and what-could-be?

This seems a good moment to move back into a discussion surrounding the fictional and the ways memory works within representations of real life and knowing the past. With the knowledge of how my personal experience informed the writing of *Spilt Milk*, I come back to an examination of its fictional structure. Real life articulated as memory in *Spilt Milk* is represented within the domestic and familial narrative spaces in the text. The origins of memory in the novel take place in the socially important landmarks of childhood and marriage, in houses and in spaces which are clearly situated within the framework of the family, particularly the pub, the cottage, Vivian's town house and Charles' farmhouse built on the site of the cottage by the river. Above all, it is the river which will act as a bringer and holder of memory. Things remembered in *Spilt Milk* are intrinsically linked to places of narrative intensity. These memory places are monuments to the characters' lives and become a reference for historical knowledge in the structure of the story. Like the river in *Spilt Milk*

which flows endlessly as a depository of memories, so I suggest that fiction is an endless site of human connections to the self and to the other. In this way, family space and geography become not just a way of creating a recognisably real fictional world but a mapped world of memory.

The river floods twice in the book and each time it overflows, it brings change to the characters' lives. The first time, the front door of the sisters' cottage is broken open by flood waters and a monster – a three-foot-long pike – enters the cottage on the gushing flood waters: 'it came through the broken slats, fat and fast as tarnished coins from a ripped purse' (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 16). Nellie believes that the fish is an omen, a sign of luck that must be returned to the river. But can the fish really be seen as a good luck omen in the later light of what happens in the novel? The sisters are isolated in their cottage. The fish brings them to the notice of Joe Ferrier, the man they will both fall in love with, resulting in disastrous consequences for them both.

At the end of the novel this scene is replayed – the memory revisited – but differently. Here, another flood brings change to the Marsh family and this time it is Nellie's daughter Birdie and her son Framsdén who are in the house as the waters rise. This brings remembering. Nellie's story of the pike returns in Framsdén's memory in many ways as a postmemory and a particular relation to a familial past described, evoked, and analysed. When the flood waters rush in to the house they bring something that Framsdén thinks might be a 'huge fish. A whale. A kind of monster [...] He thought of his grandmother [...] her stories of river monsters [...] the giant pike' (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p.267). In fact, it is Framsdén's wooden rowing boat that he sees bursting into the flooded house, and more than a good luck sign this time, it becomes the means for him and his mother to survive the flood. In this way, the novel returns the memories of flood and fish and good luck omens. Framsdén finds himself, with the reader, interrogating the original memory of monsters and family

legend, reinterpreting it as he and his mother are caught up in the memory-rich waters of the river.

The river is privy to all the memories woven within the novel while the characters are only aware of what they know directly. Nellie knows it as a place she has always loved to swim in. ‘Even in winter, she braved its heart-stopping coldness’ (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 6). Vivian knows the river as a place of mystery – she is frightened by a fish the same day as she loses her virginity to Joe Ferrier under the willow trees. There was ‘a loud splash [...] A quick flicker of silver hovered in the air above the water. It flashed like a secret catching the light, a shard of mirror that dazzled the eye and was gone’ (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 43). Later the river will be the holder of more of Vivian’s memories – this time as a secret grave for her baby, recalling the memory of the fish like a secret catching the light. Framsdén too, as a young man, will see a fish and be enchanted by the natural world of the river (as he was in childhood, catching newts in his pickle jar). ‘A fish leapt for a fly and he was spooked by the sudden movement [...] it shocked him to see a fish leaping, defying its watery life, plunging upwards into his world’ (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 253). In this strangeness, the memory of the dead baby is evoked – as if its ghost is present for all of them, knowingly or otherwise. Birdie also finds enchantment in the river. When swans fly along its length, Charles tells her that if a woman hears a swan chorus she will have a new baby by the end of the year. Birdie thinks this is the kind of folkish memory her mother might come up with. Yet the birds are so beautiful she understands ‘why people believe they heralded some kind of magic’ (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 244). The memories Birdie gathers at the river’s edge are the imagined and desired memories of the daughter she gave up for adoption. The river also carries her desire for more children. Vivian, who has also experienced losing a child and sites the memory of it in the river, finds it comforting that Birdie now lives by the river ‘as if she had become the guardian

of the past' (*Spilt Milk*, 204, p. 209). The river as a shared site becomes a witness against forgetting.

As a metaphor for the representation of real life in fiction, rivers characteristically offer an account of perpetual change, a fluid ontological movement within the novel's structures. A river flows continuously, so that time, perception and memory can be likened to the experience of standing in a river in the shallows while the water that is flowing past 'is in front of one's eyes, and the water that did flow past them is now downstream' (Currie, 2007, p.145). In which case, as he points out, the movement and the experience of past, present and future is clearly shown. This brings me back to the idea that memory and time are found in the now of the novel in the bookmarked moment where perception is informed by the events of the novel which 'flow or pass' (Currie 2007, p. 145).

As a creative writing strategy, the traces of memory, such as the river flooding and then flooding again, are linguistically woven into the structural fabric of *Spilt Milk* offering the reader (and the characters) the potential to 'relate these indices' (the events within the novel) 'to an environment' (here, the river as a depository of memory) 'that [...] carries with it its having-been' (Ricoeur 2006, p.377). In other words, the novel as a textual record, works towards its own permanence thus becoming recognisable within its own sphere as a form of history which offers its own semblances to real life.

Both as writer and reader, I find recognition in fiction a site of emotional pleasure, a piecing together of story and a playful interaction with the text. Even when recognition entails a realisation of tragedy or danger, it creates suspense and new perceptions of what has gone before. Ricoeur describes this emotional response as the moment when we see 'a photo album or have an unexpected encounter with a familiar person, or in the silent evocation of a

being who is absent [...] the cry escapes, ‘that is her! That is him!’ (2006, p. 496). Reading fiction and writing fiction, allows for this moment of recognition. Jacques Derrida (1974, p. 158) suggests that the ‘writer writes in a language and in a logic whose proper system, laws and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely’ which I take to mean that the writer is governed and affected by a world which is too vast to ever be fully conscious of at any one time, in lived experience and also in the way language connects and makes space for endlessness. The sense of surprise then in recognition, in the moment when the text speaks to us profoundly, is where we recognise anew, elements of real life within its fictional worlds.

Recognition is essential to memory and in *Spilt Milk* there is a constant desire for recognition between the characters as a form of searching for and creating family identity. Because of the loss of children and the secrets of the family, characters attempt to recognise each other in meaningful ways:

resemblances were strong among them, and Nellie often thought the missing ones...would...have inherited the same stubborn streak [...] the same deep eyes [...] the overfull upper lip [...] what they called the ‘Marsh sisters look (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 2).

The family resemblances Nellie finds so important create in the novel, a philosophy of belonging and a desire for recognition. Like Wittgenstein’s ‘family resemblance’ which suggests that things which are considered to be connected by one essential common feature may in fact be connected by a series of overlapping similarities (Blackburn, 2016), Nellie attempts a gathering in of elements, a collecting of similarities which might form an umbrella term of family for them all. Calling up these connections is a way of making present in memory those who were absent, such as Joe, and the baby, Peter, with whom Birdie has a child, and, of course, Birdie’s adopted daughter whose appearance is always possible, right up to the last pages in the novel when Judith sees a woman with grey eyes (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 289) like the Marsh sisters’ grey eyes, standing vigil outside Vivian’s guesthouse.

In *Spilt Milk*, recognition is not failsafe either. Like memory, it can be mistaken and it can be fragile. It can also be dangerous. Birdie has persuaded herself that her neighbour Kathleen's daughter Ella, for whom she has for many years been a kind of unpaid nanny, is in fact her daughter. One of her arguments for this is that Ella bears no family resemblance to Kathleen and her husband. Ella is close to Birdie growing up and a bond is formed. Or at least Birdie, through her secret desire to be united with her child, believes this to be the case.

When Birdie decides to confess to Charles and Framsdén about the daughter she gave away, she confronts Kathleen first. But when Ella arrives at the scene, Birdie is shocked at how grown up she has become and the ways in which she previously 'recognised' the girl as her daughter suddenly fail her. Recognition as false memory, created through Birdie's loss and desire to be reunited with her daughter, falls into instant forgetting: 'Ella, I hardly recognised you,' she said' (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 264). There is a torrential rainstorm as Birdie, traumatised by the moment, leaves the Hubbard's house. The river is flooding fast and by the time she returns home, Birdie is so emotionally devoid of memory (because her trust in it has gone), she hardly even recognises her own son. 'He looked small [...] vaguely discernible...his body turning to rain, slipping through her fingers' (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 264). Memory falls apart for Birdie at this point. Yet this failure of recognition is also her only chance to let go of her desires for her absent daughter and replace the obsessive desire for recognition (for finding her lost daughter) with a more realistic way of being where she accepts the absence of the girl in her life.

Another failure of recognition occurs when, after the flood has receded, Birdie's son Framsdén walks to the river and finds a smooth fragment washed up on its banks: 'what looked like bone. It was very thin, curved like an eggshell, and green staining patterned its fissured surface' (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 269). The detailed attention to the description of the

bone is like the description of a discovered treasure or an archaeological find. He holds it in the palm of his hand, a brief moment of poignant connection.

Framsden [...] considered keeping it. As a child, he had liked collecting things; feathers, sloughed snake skins, oak apples. But he wasn't a child now. [...] All that was behind him. [...] He dropped the scrap of bone into the river, back where he thought it belonged (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 269-270).

For Framsdén, the bone is not a site of memory whereas he believes the river is home to memory. He returns the bone to the river, thinking that this is where it belonged. Instinctive memory creates a kind of ghost trace between him and the memory of the dead baby. Perhaps this is the same kind of instinctive imagination that allows the writer to experience postmemory as a way in to writing about the past? For the reader of the novel, there is every chance the bone is indeed a remnant of the skull of the baby. The reader is given space to link and connect memories and to bear witness to the memories that the river flows over.

Framsden's failure to recognise the bone takes place in a space of forgetting, of not knowing. He does not recognise the bone as anything significant yet he returns it to the river instinctively. But can a bone be more than it is in any case? Ricoeur (2006, pp 389 -393) suggests that something real, an object, (a bone for example), could be read as a present object with only its value in the present, devoid of history. Or it could be read as something imbued with history and thus depicting a past or an absence. So fiction can depict objects as objects but also as representations of the past and also, as in this case, as a site of memory.

Here, the work of remembering falls upon the reader. The memory that the reader is engaged in moves against the flow of Framsdén's knowledge. The reader recognises too, earlier scenes of his aunt's childhood, how she liked to collect things and her musing on the structure of feathers which echoes the same curiosity in which Framsdén examines the bone.

She'd counted the number of fine fronds that made up an owl's wing feather, noting that a feather might be soft as a girl's cheek, but it was also as dry as a corn stalk, strong enough to carry a bird in flight and as light as a whisper' (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 41)

Here is the family resemblance I spoke of earlier, seen in her desire to seek out similarities between the natural world and human life. It is also again, desire for recognition and both scenes contain within them, the family desire for belonging, for connections, which rises constantly to the surface of the novel.

If the river into which Framsdén throws the bone acts like an enchanted river Lethe where all is forgotten to him, the reader swims against the currents of forgetting, creating memorial in their act of reading just as the river flows on 'over silt and mud and memories' (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 290). As I wrote the novel, I felt more and more strongly that I was writing against the human ache of historical distance.

*Spilt Milk* is a novel about a constant search for origins and the fear of being culturally orphaned. The desires and motives of the characters in the novel become enmeshed in connective histories, through the construction of particular memories and the fear of memory too. By recreating and revealing the family's intimate secrets and desires, the novel follows an inevitable path to recognition or forgetfulness which the structure of fiction desires in order to create completeness. The characters yearn to belong and be connected but manage to exile themselves from one another constantly. At the same time, all of them have the capacity to find small sources of personal happiness and love in their lives. And it is here that my own feelings about my mother lean over my shoulder as I write. My own desire to reconcile her past and the past of my grandmother and great grandparents, is in some small way assuaged by creating an unconnected story; another world which examines and hopes to help understand the changing ways in which sisterhood and motherhood, love and family were culturally constructed in the twentieth century.

This desire for reconciliation, and whether it might be possible through fiction, is explicitly explored in Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* where he attempts an unwrapping of fiction itself, highlighting the way we create the past through memory and how frail memory can be. The protagonist, Briony, grows up in an English stately home. Robbie, a young man sponsored educationally by the family, sends the wrong love letter to Briony's elder sister, giving it to Briony to pass on. She opens it and the shock of the letter's contents – its sexually explicit language and particularly the word 'cunt,' leads her to wrongly accuse Robbie of attacking another young girl staying at the family home. Like the young boy in L P Hartley's *The Go Between* (2004) adult life with all its knowingness is put into the hands of the unknowing young, with disastrous results. At the end of *Atonement*, we realise Briony is the old woman who has written the novel we are reading. She has made up the past in order to change the present, creating memories that are yearned for when the real life of the novel, what actually happened, is harder to face. The novel creates happy endings for her sister and Robbie – and it also reveals the happy endings to be fictional. It flags up the limitations of fiction and also its possibilities, using past and present as a form of reconciliation between the two. Both *Spilt Milk* and *Atonement* raise questions about reconciliation. *Atonement*, with its depictions of class and social structures in the twentieth century and its attention to the Second World War, is historical and it is also revealing its fictional stand, its own literary historiography. *Atonement* attempts to atone again and again for the past, both historically and within the realms of fantasy. Ricoeur suggests, when talking of memory and imagination, that memories belong to the 'world of experience.' And that the 'worlds of fantasy' belong to 'irreality' (2006 p. 49) He suggests the world of history is a common one known to us all, while fantasy has what he calls undetermined free horizons. 'In principle then,' he states, 'they cannot be confused or mistaken one for the other' (2006, p. 49). Real life and fantasy are distinct in many ways but in historical fiction, when moving between memory and

fantasy, as McEwan does, fiction can also be revealed as both fake historical record (which must be a kind of timelessness) and imagination-derived fantasy. At which point, it becomes very hard to make such clear distinctions. Fiction here shows its own powers to create layers of complexity in fictional memory. ‘McEwan’s use of history in *Atonement* has at least as much to do with his interest in narrative and the possibilities of fiction as a desire to understand the past’ (Margeronis, 2014 p.158). My own desires to understand the past in *Spilt Milk* are also a way of exploring the possibilities of fictional real life and its relationship with lived experience. *Spilt Milk* creates hope for the fictional possibilities of the future because the characters’ desires are founded in hope. The Marsh family hope to do the right thing for each other against a back drop of difficult choices even as the reader might suggest they get things wrong between them. Consider the way they are introduced in the opening paragraph of the novel:

The Marsh family in *Spilt Milk* are ‘a mend and make-do kind of family and you had to love them for it. For their patchwork quilt of births, deaths and marriages, the mistakes and foolish regrets, and all the pretty little silken scraps of good things too (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p.1).

The characters live their lives folding regrets and good things into their memories. There are happy memories in the way that Ricoeur describes happiness as ‘a small sliver of the past, wrestled away, as we say, from oblivion’ (2006, p. 417). And yet, even in the common language of wartime Britain, the Marsh family don’t manage to conform. The well-known phrase is not ‘mend-and-make-do’ but ‘Make Do and Mend.’ This was a pamphlet issued by the British Ministry of Information in World War Two. It was intended to provide housewives with useful tips on how to be both frugal and stylish in times of harsh rationing. An updated version of the book was recently released to coincide with the economic recession, offering similar frugal advice for 21<sup>st</sup> century families. (The British Library,

2016). The reference to this information pamphlet, which was widely distributed in the 1940s, brings together an authentic historical document, and, by getting its title wrong, creates an emotional history that draws the reader into the muddled yet worthwhile lives of the novel's characters who deserve to be loved simply for having tried to be what they believed they should be.

The act of fictionalising has to 'impart the imaginary with a sense of the real' (Brook, 2008, p. 621) and here, through poetic description, the family in *Spilt Milk* are gathered within a domestic image of quilts,<sup>9</sup> beds and sexuality, lineage and memory. Rather than the story flowing entirely from me as a site of generational resonance and connections, writing the novel felt like entering a world that grew up around me as I wrote. As a site of creative memory *Spilt Milk*, is a place of continuous small recognitions and remembering until finally, at the end of the novel, there is a reconciliation with the past.

The final reconciliation in *Spilt Milk*, occurs when Nellie and Vivian are old women. They return to the river with the hagstone (a stone with a naturally occurring hole running through it).<sup>10</sup> Nellie and Vivian have passed this hagstone between them all their lives and finally, they take it to the river. This stone has been an *ars memoriae* for them both. It has been the keeper of both good and bad memories. Nellie and Vivian believe that if they keep the stone, passing it between them, then Vivian's dead baby, buried in the river, will stay hidden. The stone acts as a way of remembering the child and also as a way of repressing memories of her. They are afraid of the bodily return of the baby, its re-remembering. The stone protects and also acts as way of connecting the sisters in a bond of love even when they are apart. At the end of the novel the hagstone is not needed because the sisters no longer fear the past nor do they need to be afraid of forgetting the possible return of the child any longer.

Together they linked arms and went to the water's edge [...] The river flowed on over silt and mud and memories. The sisters dropped the stone into the river and watched it sink down, down, down, until it was completely gone from view (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 291).

Dropping the hagstone into the river becomes a way of letting go of the past, allowing the women to make an oath to forgiveness and reconciliation, to a desired forgetting. For the sisters, this stone has been a part of their memories. It is something they can hold in their hands and is connected to their childhood and to their early ways of seeing the world. It recalls too, the moment when Framsdén finds the bone by the river and holds it in his hand. Can a bone be more than just a piece of bone? What memory traces can it contain? For the reader, the bone is an *ars memoriae*, just as the hagstone is for the sisters. The sisters have believed in the power of the stone as a memory keeper.

Here, my own personal experience as the writer of the novel is brought into play, my own understanding of the power of objects to carry meaning, projected onto Nellie and Vivian. Growing up in rural Suffolk, where the novel is set, I know all about hag stones. When I first met my partner, he gave me a hagstone as a gift, explaining that in Suffolk people had once believed they kept away evil spirits. Although it is just a small stone with a hole through it and nothing more than that, I am enchanted by the idea of it being a kind of memory holder. For me, the memory of a precious moment in my personal life is concentrated within the stone.

As I began the writing of *Spilt Milk*, I hunted through the house and found the stone in a drawer. I kept the stone on my desk until the novel was finished. I held it in my hand when I imagined the sisters passing a stone of their own back and forth. Some days when writing was hard, I found the stone comforting. It connected me to my own memories and also to the characters in the novel. When I finished writing the novel, I put the stone away to keep it safe. In the novel, when the sisters decide they don't need to hold onto the stone anymore,

because they are together again at last and have managed to forgive themselves for Joesphine's accidental death, they let go of the past as they see it, still contained in the stone. The stone slipping into the waters is like a baptism of ritual forgetting, not of the baby as a real part of their lives, but of the past dangers inherent in the memory of the baby.

According to Martha Nussbaum 'all of human life [...] is a going beyond the facts, an acceptance of generous fancies, a projection of our own sentiments and inner activities onto the forms we perceive about us' (Cited in Peircey, 2010, p. 280) This is true of the writing of *Spilt Milk* and also of our life experience. With my own hagstone, my personal experience is not reproduced in the novel but it acts as reference to the ways in which real life and fiction share common ground. In this way, any reference to my experience of life in the world becomes a possible site for fictional representations of real life in the world of the novel. In other words, fiction, which is not the real, can carry its own imaginative truths and beliefs because it is intrinsically connected to our lived lives.

When I finished writing *Spilt Milk*, I dedicated it to my daughters. By calling on the memory of my daughters, the dedication provided a form of transgenerational memory; my mother and I connecting to future generations while evoking and acknowledging the past.

Kate Grenville, whose distant relative had provided the initial interest for the writing of *The Secret River* dedicated the novel, not to her distant relative, but to 'the Aboriginal people of Australia: past, present and future' (Grenville, 2005, p. 1) Just as my dedication suggests a desire to acknowledge generational transmission, so her dedication suggests a desire to acknowledge the relationship that the past has with the present and the possible future.

My feelings about my mother's abandonment led me to the beginnings of writing *Spilt Milk* but, like McEwan and Grenville, I remained free to move from that point. Personal experience is part of the necessary creative approach to memory, and to the task of writing

fiction. This must equally be the case for reading fiction too because readers cannot help but bring their specific memories to the text, and go beyond them, just as the writer does.

‘Fictionalizing,’ to use Iser’s term, is the meeting of creative memory in the writer, the text and the reader. ‘It begins where knowledge leaves off and this dividing line turns out to be the fountainhead of fictions by means of which we extend ourselves beyond ourselves’ (Iser, 2000, p. 313). For me, this imaginative connection is where the potential for saying the unsayable is available to writers and to readers. I conclude that because memory is fluid and complex and is indivisible with knowledge and the dynamic imagination, then my job as a writer (and reader) is to understand that the ways in which the past and real life are alive to us in fiction. In which case, my role as a writer of historical fiction is to write between what I know and what I do not know, between experience and articulating experience, between fact and fantasy, between real life, the imagination and the fictive realm.

## Conclusion

In this exegesis, I have looked at the different forms of memory found in *Spilt Milk*. I have considered how my writing process, the structuring of *Spilt Milk*, and the lives of the characters in my historical fiction novel as well as the act of reading, are acts of memory, of time as history, and of the imagination. I have discussed my own personal memories and life experience and how they should not be separated from my writing practice. I suggest that embracing an autobiographical certainty as a writer is a positive approach to creative writing. It admits to the connections between lived life and fiction and shows how writer, text and reader can connect through experience and the power of the imagination, so as to create a kinship in the potential for new perceptions of ourselves and of others. This kinship that I first mentioned in the introduction, extends to fiction as a shared artistic platform. ‘We all share a sense that fiction has a unique capacity to live on in, even form, our imagination’ (Mullan, 2006, p. 4). Margaret Atwood suggests that ‘fiction is where individual memory and experience and collective memory and experience come together, in greater or lesser proportions’ (1998, p. 1504).

This exegesis then, has stood as a conceptualisation of writing practice – in this case of writing novels – via understandings of personal and collective memory and the ways in which ‘real life’ and knowing the past in fiction are produced not just by the writer but through a shared process of writing and reception. Here, Atwood’s almost incidental ‘greater or lesser proportions’ has become something to interrogate, helping me as a writer, reader, and sharer of memories to reflect on where memories reside in the borderlands of fact and fiction.

In these chapters I have connected memory to remembering and the ways in which remembering can be an imaginative fictive act which involves recognition of emotional truths. I have suggested writing (and rewriting) reinforces the constructive act of imagining the past and thus creates a relationship between the realm of the possible and the permanence of the novel. Human action, represented in the novel as action in time, is recognised by the reader as memory because action can be seen to have occurred and thus can be transformed into memory. The novel becomes a document and a locus for memory shared between writer and reader. In *Spilt Milk* for example, I showed how the monster pike that washed up in the sister's cottage during the flood became a form of memory that is passed on through generations. It connects family myth making and desire for shared memories between generations. In this way, fiction can be a common narrative space for identification and ways of knowing the other.

The exegesis began with the notion of time as experience and the problem of saying what time is. Ricoeur, in response to Augustine, stated that time can be 'configured as a narrative' (Ricoeur, 1990, p. 6) and that narration implies memory. He connected memory to the imagination and it was from these connections that I proceeded to examine the writing of *Spilt Milk* and ways of understanding real life and knowing the past in fiction.

I have attempted to show how fiction allows us to talk *about* time as an aspect of real life and the ways in which trauma affects time in *Spilt Milk*, moving the novel away from real life into fantasy. Mark Currie (2007, p. 2) states that according to Ricoeur, all fictional narratives place characters in a storyline and this storyline is where the text's structural transformation takes place – in time. *Spilt Milk* for instance, can be said to be a story of women's experiences in the time of the twentieth century. Stories can also be 'about' time, which is to say that the fiction relates directly to the experience of time. Clearly this is a subtle distinction and leads to discussions about the way time works in language specifically.

Currie sees a 'philosophical need to ask what domain of understanding or knowledge might be occupied by the contemporary novel on the subject of time, or what effects these structures might exert in the world' (2007, p. 1). I would argue that for the creative writer, it is more useful to consider time not as a uniquely philosophical problem, but as something that can be articulated within the writing process as integral to emotional experience and ways of being in the world. Therefore, via the imagination and memory, fiction is always 'of time. Paul Ricoeur argues that 'time is anthropomorphised when it is organised as a narrative because narratives portray the temporal features of experience' (Ciorogar, 2016, p. 145). Fiction is a way of articulating human experience and finding ways in which to say the unsayable. In which case my connections between time, memory, the imagination and ways in which fiction and real-life experience are related, becomes less about what Currie calls the boundary between 'of' and 'about' time (2007, p. 2) and more about ways in which to articulate the embodied experience of the writing and reading process. If memory is central to writing and reading fiction it is because the act of remembering is a product of time itself and fiction therefore, becomes a site for reinterpretations of the past.

In *Memory, History Forgetting* (2006), Ricoeur discusses the relationship between remembering and forgetting, looking at historical experience and the ways in which historical narrative is produced. In *Spilt Milk*, I have shown how remembering and forgetting are central to the narrative, and the movement between the two becomes key to the characters' lives. Why do Nellie and Vivian work so hard to remember Joe Ferrier? Is it better that Birdie should actively forget her adopted daughter? Ricoeur also questions how a memory in the present can be of something absent and again, this is a question that can be asked of historical fiction and particularly of the characters' ways of remembering and forgetting in *Spilt Milk*. As I have shown, the characters are held in a tension between the desire to remember and to forget. According to Ricoeur, 'time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through

a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal experience' (1984, p. 52). The power of the productive imagination then, is both a semantic strength (the potential for finding in the written word, ways of saying the unsayable) and a practical tool for both writer and reader. Equally, when temporal experience is questioned, when time is forgotten, then we lose our ability to articulate real life in fiction and, as in *Spilt Milk*, fiction moves into the realm of fantasy, into trauma and into a place of imaginative response where ways of knowing the past fall away too.

On discussing writing practice Derek Neale points out:

writers often suggest that it is impossible or undesirable to narrate the creative process – while paradoxically trying to talk about it. They resist using theoretical terms about their work, yet their considerations often reveal an idiosyncratic technical eloquence, together with an intimate, sometimes paradoxical relationship between writing and remembering (2011, p. 951).

From a practitioner's point of view and within my considerations of the ways in which I wrote *Spilt Milk*, I have sought to bring about an exploration of modes of memory, prioritizing my experience as a writer as central to the discussion of writing and reading. I have followed Ricoeur's approach of considering time not as a philosophical problem only but as something which cannot be separated from memory and the imagination. I have revealed the ways in which memory works within my novel; how time, narrative, memory and the imagination when filtered through the lens of experience, implicate real life in fiction as something believable, offering us ways of knowing the past in both the present and the future of narrative structure.

*Spilt Milk* is, as Rachel Hore, writing in *The Independent* newspaper states, 'a story that explores motherhood and sisterhood with great subtlety and power [...] strong storytelling,

haunting characters and beautiful, supple prose' (2014). It is also in this relationship between real life, language, storytelling and the world of characters where empathy and emotional truth work to connect real life to fiction. I have maintained here, that writing fiction and reading fiction is a memoried act of shared identification and offers the potential for locating human experience within narrative. Writing and reading fiction constitutes a dynamic act that involves both the real and the imagined. By looking at the different forms of memory in *Spilt Milk*. I have shown in differing ways how writer, text and reader can connect through memory and through the imagination, so as to create further meanings and imaginative kinship without ever claiming to be the other.

Anecdotally or fictionally, I have shown how narrative is real life re-witnessed, remembered, reimagined, recreated, reinvented, reformed and thus made real again on different meaningful levels through our storytelling and production of culture. I have argued that life is organised on the level of narrative, incorporating time and structuring the telling of our lives in such a way as to make sense of the chaos of experience in differing ways depending on our vision of what 'sense' might be.

Although I have discussed recognition in this exegesis, there is, I believe, more to be said on writing, reading and recognition as a means to understanding the ways in which fiction 'overflows that of the knowable' (Ricoeur, 2006, p.155). In her essay, *Narrative and Enaction: The Social Nature of Literary Narrative Understanding*, Yanna Popova suggests that there is a gap in existing research on narrative as a form of intersubjective process of sense-making between the storyteller and the reader:

The interactive experience that narrative affords and necessitates at the same time, serves to highlight the active yet cooperative and communal nature of human sociality, expressed in the many forms than human beings interact in, including literary ones (2014, p, 185).

As well as bringing the writer back into the critical fold, this approach can offer other new and original ways of understanding writing and reading fiction.

Writing *Spilt Milk*, I accessed the past through creative memory, which is a source of personal memory, emotional investment (as transgenerational memory), research, language, the imagination and a desire to tell the untold stories of ordinary women's lives in the twentieth century, in both rural and urban contexts. I have argued that fiction is an imaginative place for untold histories to come to light within an ontological framework which connects representations of real life to our lived lives in imaginative and endless ways. Real life in the novel is thus, always connected to lived life. Ricoeur, speaking of time and history – the problem of articulating time being where this exegesis began – suggests that time can be organised in different ways; by clocks and calendars or, as historians might do, by order of events as a function of series and dates and names. History contains systems of notation that go beyond the calendar. The noted episodes are defined by their relation to other episodes, a succession of unique, good or bad, joyful or sorrowful events (Ricoeur, 2006, p.156). This is where the fiction writer pricks up her ears. Here, in the connections between the order of events, there are for the writer, potential stories of human experience. This is time as human life and a place of recognition of real life and potential for ways remembering in new ways for the reader.

Finally, I want to admit that writing is a solitary occupation but I would like to point out that the source of writing is communal because it is found in experience and in the relationships between time, memory and the imagination. Writers come to novels with the idea that stories must already be in the world, available through the imagination, remembered, forgotten or created through world connections. Here too, I argue, is the narrative space where the absent can be reimagined in the present, creating ways of knowing the past in fiction which can feel like real life. In this way, writing *Spilt Milk* was a creative

attempt to work against historical forgetting. As Anna Moats, the illiterate midwife in *Spilt Milk* says, 'If I had book learning I might have written books so nobody could forget how things were' (*Spilt Milk*, 2014, p. 61).

Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Few thinkers have pondered more deeply on the problems of memory and the soul than Augustine, the pagan teacher of rhetoric' (Yates, 2001. p. 59).

<sup>2</sup> See the Editor's introduction p, vii, for an overview of the history of the imagination in the arts. (Grow, 2005. pp. 250-251).

<sup>3</sup> Buchanan (2010). Iser, Wolfgang. In *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*. Oxford University Press. Retrieved from <http://www.oxfordreference.com.libaccess.hud.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780199532919.001.0001/acref-9780199532919-e-370>.

<sup>4</sup> Studies of memory in the humanities has emerged as a subject in itself. For a broad overview see Vermeulen, P. Craps, S. Crownshaw, R. De Graaf, O. Huysen, A. Liska, V. & Miller, D. (2012, pp. 223-239). My interest in memory lies not in how it can be developed as a subject itself with its own political social and theoretical branches, but how my own writing process articulates different forms of memory in narrative as a means of enlarging my understanding of representations of real life in fiction. My work on memory here is focussed on storytelling and on the communal aspects of literature and poetic language.

<sup>5</sup> Piercey suggests that suggests that the reader plays a role in interpreting ethical considerations in fiction: 'we need to see literary works as having specific ethical content, without claiming that this content instructs readers in deterministic ways' (2010, p. 283).

<sup>6</sup> J Hillis Miller speaks of Iser's notion of the real, the fictive and the imaginary. His brief discussion is worth reading for considerations of the memoried acts of writing and reading. I see the real' as the writer and the reader in the world, the 'fictive' as language which is created out of a flow between the real and the fictive, and the imaginary. The imaginary I translate into memory; the place Iser believes is filled with 'exclusively human potential' (Hillis Miller, 2013, p. 12-32).

<sup>7</sup> Hans George Gadamer spoke of the fusion of horizons between writer and reader. Best known as the leading figure in the theory of hermeneutics and ways of interpretation, his work interests me as a writer because of the emphasis on the endless relationship between

writer, text and reader, between layers of understanding and the shared nature of language. See (Simms, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> The family is a privileged site of memorial transmission. The ‘group memory’ [...] is based on the familial transfer of embodied experience to the next generation: it is intergenerational’ see (Hirsh, 2003, p. 110) for Aleida Assman’s definition of family as a site of memory passed on through generations.

<sup>9</sup> Quilt work has long been associated with history and memory, fragments of time, sewing together scraps of material like ‘arranging little morsels of daily existence” into a good life. See (Witzling, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Hagstones are a flint stone with a naturally occurring hole. In the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, hagstones were said to ward off witches. See (Ewart, 1977, p. 181).

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