

Reliving childhood life experiences: a memoir of complex family ties

Giuseppe Giordano

Azienda sociosanitaria ligure ASL 2, Savona, Italy

Article Info

Received: 05 Aug 2025,

Received in revised form: 03 Sep 2025,

Accepted: 08 Sep 2025,

Available online: 13 Sep 2025

Keywords— memoir, creative writing, life events, childhood, family relationships

©2025 The Author(s). Published by AI Publications. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

Abstract

A memoir can be defined as a written factual record of a person's life. It differs from autobiography, the biography of oneself narrated by oneself, which is less focused on emotional aspects and interpersonal relationships. Writing a memoir can be challenging as it refers to memories which might be actually true but are often biased. Biases emerge as a consequence of personal influences such as emotional reactions to the account of the experience and also because of the distorted memories of the other individuals involved (family, friends, etc.). The piece of writing presented here is an account of a premature personal experience which has been traumatic, although not immediately. The memoir has been conceived primarily as an invitation to reflect on a particular situation which is the negative influence of relatives on an individual's existence at an early period of life, that is, birth.

I. INTRODUCTION

A memoir is generally considered as a piece of writing which recounts one or more events of a person's life with a particular emphasis on a specific situation or theme (Admin., 2017). It is different from an autobiography that narrates the entire story of an individual's life, often in a chronological order. Moreover, memoirs focus primarily on emotions, description of scenes and on a peculiar theme rather than focusing on facts in an extensive and detailed way. However, writing a memoir can be challenging since it deals with memories which might be authentic, but they are often biased because of personal influences such as emotional reactions to the theme or event and in consideration of the possible distortions of memories expressed by other people. (Zining, 2025).

When writing a memoir on family, many aspects should be taken into consideration to prepare a good piece of work (NY Book Editors, 2019). First, be honest in narrating one's personal experience, as the truth must be told not fictional facts. Second, give a moral meaning to the story so that the reader may reflect on life lessons and common verities. Third, make your tale stimulating and appealing to the audience so as to engage people's interest and attention. Fourth, pay attention to include real facts as they occurred and describe extensively the different roles of the family members. Fifth, describe the characters globally not in a limited manner or only in relation to the main theme. Last, hold tight on your perspective and avoid being influenced by relatives's memories or accounts of the situation or event described.

The memoir I wrote and presented here has been conceived primarily as an invitation to the reader to reflect on a particular situation which is the negative influence of relatives on an individual, especially at an early period in life. The memoir focuses on a specific period of my life which is the first weeks after my birth. The memories I represent are not mine in origin as I was too young and unaware at the time to possibly remember anything. The facts depicted are rather the result of what I have been told, mainly by my mother, in several occasions in my life, particularly when I was an adolescent. Some distortions of these facts and/or personal memories have likely occurred in the story and have been undoubtedly influenced by the emotions connected to my future relationship with my father's mother. As a matter of fact, it was the connection with my grandmother that actually has always been dysfunctional, without affection and warmth as far as I could remember.

II. DISCUSSION

In the section, the reader will find the first chapter of my memoir in which I decided to emphasize my personal experience, the early and disturbing interaction with my grandmother as well as the complicated relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. In short, what happened is that my grandmother interfered in my life as she decided the name to give me when I was born. My mother wished to call me Pietro and indeed I was first named Pietro but, after two weeks, my name was changed to Giuseppe because of the arrogance and ignorance of a woman who had to impose her will on everybody, indisputably. I tried to highlight this intrusion by depicting my mother's disappointment and resignation on one side and my father's indifference and subjugation to his mother's will, on the other side. As Jerry Jenkins suggests in his online lesson (2020), I changed the names of the characters, thus giving more emphasis on their psychological features. Grandma's name was Filomena (Phyllis in English) but I turned it into a shortened form, Mena, which in Italian recalls the verb 'menare' (= to beat, to hit) which at the

third singular person is conjugated as 'lei mena' (= she beats). In addition, my mother's true name is Rita, but I changed it into Santina, an Italian name and short form of Santa (= female Saint) to emphasise her patience and virtue in this context. I have even changed the name of my birthplace into Peterborough as a way to recover, ironically, the name that was stolen from me. Moreover, I did not mention my father's name on purpose to underline his passive role in this story. Indeed, this event had a strong emotional impact on me as feelings of anger towards my grandmother have been present throughout my entire life. These feelings eventually led me to change the names of my family members for different reasons: firstly, to distance myself from this traumatic memory; secondly, to avoid the criticism of other relatives who had a good relationship with Filomena; thirdly, the truth must be told regardless of any fear of negative consequences (Lakin, 2018).

III. MEMOIR

The first days of my life

*These are the first days of my life
when I learnt too soon
how life can be absurd
how ignorance gallops
and arrogance is king.
The burden of family ties
crushes the first wails
of a new life
leaving an everlasting mark.
That's when you say:
"My dearest relatives".*

It was a cold December afternoon in Peterborough, New Hampshire. The icy air of the last days of autumn anticipated the arrival of the winter season. The recent snowstorms had already whitened the streets and roofs of the houses, forcing people to stay indoors and take a break from social relations until spring, the season of rebirth that will carry the warmth and glow that reawaken minds and souls.

In the maternity ward of St. Joseph's hospital my mother, Santina, an Italian woman short but robust, with red hair and green eyes,

gave birth to her third child. "Doctor, this time it's been easier and faster", she commented. Dr. Patella, the gynaecologist, said, "Hmm Mrs. Giordano, it's another boy". Mum replied, "Ooh, I see. Well, thanks. That's fine for me". She welcomed the little baby with her large and warm arms and called me Pietro. Pietro was the name of mum's father, my grandpa. I never had the chance to meet him in my life because he died many years before I was born. Mum wanted so much to name me after him because I was her third baby boy and my two brothers were already given names from my father's side of the family. This thing meant very much to her as, I believe, she wanted to keep a connection with her beloved parent. She had shown me once the picture of my grandpa. Even if the yellowed photo was in black and white, the bright colour of his eyes was remarkable. She sometimes told me about him, that he was very handsome, had blond hair and blue eyes. A man of honour she used to say, devoted to family, father of ten children, coherent and honest, someone who always kept his promises.

When a mother has a baby, it's quite common that relatives and friends come to visit to congratulate and make those usual comments. "How cute, he looks like his mum", "No, he took after his father". Well, everybody came to give their best wishes, all my relatives except one, my father's mother, grandma Mena. Of Italian roots, Mena was born in Argentina where she lived part of her childhood before moving to Naples, Italy where she eventually met her husband Pasquale, set up a family and gave birth to seven children, three girls and four boys. My father is the youngest boy of this large family. There came a time in my grandma's life when she decided to move to the United States of America even though she had a good job in Naples. She held a permanent, full-time position as a janitor in a primary school. I was told that my grandparents didn't get along that much and that she was tired of being the only one of her family to work and look after all the kids. She eventually decided to emigrate with her two younger children, my father and his little sister, to settle in the district of Bronx, NY. She's the only grandparent I have ever met. She was short and round, had always an austere expression on her face, with two dark circles

under her eyes. Not a nice person to look at, not a pleasant person to relate to. She rarely smiled. She always used to sing me a song that talked about a fat boy who had a big butt. And I was fat at the time. I hated that song, those words and the melody as well which were very offensive for a little boy who was overweight and wore glasses. I was different from my two elder brothers who were so skinny you could see their bones under the skin.

Well, two weeks had passed after my birth. I was at home with my family, but grandma hadn't come yet to visit her new grandchild. "How strange!", my mum said to my father and added, "Why didn't she come yet to see the baby?". The answers she received from Dad, and his sisters were always vague and ambiguous, "Ooh, she doesn't feel very well, that's why". It happened that my mum understood that grandma's health wasn't the real reason for her delay but the fact that she didn't agree with the name she gave to me. She wanted me to be named after her son, Giuseppe, who had died two months before my birth. How kind to relate me to a dead person. Well, the decision was taken.

There always comes a time in life when the truth is revealed although one tries not to disclose it lest the risk to break someone's heart. What changed in my mum's relationship with her mother-in-law had also been kept secretly. No open manifestation of her disappointment even many years later. This episode in my life shows who holds the sceptre in a matriarchal family and eventually revealed the real character of individuals. Selfishness and arrogance on one side, resignation and patience on the other. I never knew if she was disillusioned, upset, hurt, offended or submissive. We all have a pain in our hearts that we don't allow anyone to know about. What is certain is that for the family's sake, Santana decided to change my name. Consequently, my birth certificate bears a correction sheet in which it's clearly stated that the first name has been changed into Giuseppe and that "mother wishes to change name". How humiliating, unfair and untrue, I'd like to tell Mena.

Although a baby may seem unaware of his surroundings, the decision to change my

name after fifteen days had lasting consequences. At the time, it may have appeared harmless, but years (and tears!) later, my grandmother's interference caused serious problems. Giving a name to a baby and then changing it after fifteen days may appear harmless and innocuous because at this age a baby is unaware of what happens around him and most of all, he won't remember this event as he grows up. Maybe I hadn't been hurt as my mum, but I had to face the consequences of such ignorance and prevarication.

When I had to apply to university in Naples, the city where my family moved in 1977, I had to deal with a big problem that I had never imagined occurring to me. Among the documents to submit for my application, a birth certificate was required. No problem so far but the document which had been transmitted some years before from the United States to the Register Office in Naples bore incorrect information: the name of the person was Pietro Giordano. That meant that I did not exist. What was this? Was fate was making fun of me? No document meant an incomplete registration with the risk of not being accepted by university. I was furious, angry, out of mind. I was so desperate that I didn't know what to do. I was suggested by an employer of the Register office that the only way to solve the situation was to bring a civil action to get the name corrected on the certificate. Nice to hear but who oversaw this lawsuit? Only me, only me. It took three months for this lawsuit to be concluded, ninety days of anxieties, uncertainties and confusion. But most of all, I was angry against everybody: my grandma because of her previous tantrums, my mother for not being protective towards her son, my father for not taking a position and finally the employers of the office in Naples for their misunderstanding and superficiality in dealing with the registration of a foreign document.

IV. CONCLUSION

To conclude, a memoir is a personal narrative that focuses on specific life events or themes, often emphasizing emotions and subjective experiences rather than the accuracy of facts. Differently from autobiographies, which

depict an entire life chronologically, memoirs deal with particular situations and can be influenced by memory distortions and the negative influence of emotions. Writing a memoir about family requires loyalty, moral reflection, readers' engagement, a sensible description of characters, and a strong personal perspective. The memoir presented here focuses mainly on the emotional and psychological impact of early family dynamics, specifically the interference of a grandmother immediately after her grandson's birth. As a matter of fact, this relative changed the newborn's name against the mother's wishes, thus representing a strong familial interference and related emotional dysfunction. This act of renaming also had important legal consequences on the future life of the child, thus reinforcing the emotional distancing with family members, grandson and grandmother on one side, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law on the other side. In the end, the memoir invites the audience to reflect on dysfunctional ties and on the prevarication of old, ignorant and arrogant family members over defenceless and submissive relatives.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bell J (2001). The Creative Writing Coursebook: Forty-Five Authors Share Advice and Exercises for Fiction and Poetry – Macmillan
- [2] Moskowitz C (1998). The self as source: creative writing generated from personal reflection. In: Hunt, Celia Sampson, Fiona eds. At <https://tuonline.tees.ac.uk/d2/le/content/t2575/viewContent/175143/View>
- [3] Oke M (2005). Times of Our Lives - The Essential Companion for Writing your own Life Story. How to Books
- [4] Roorbach B (2008). Writing Life Stories: How To Make Memories into Memoirs, Ideas into Essays And Life into Literature. Penguin Publishing Group
- [5] Admin. (2017, October 22). Memoir - Examples and definition of memoir. Literary Devices. <https://literarydevices.net/memoir/>
- [6] NY Book Editors. (2019, August 30). How to write a memoir about your family. <https://nybookeditors.com/2019/01/memoir-about-your-family/>
- [7] Jenkins, J B (2020, Dec 18). How to Write a Memoir. [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bQn7FREub4Y>

- [8] Lakin C S (2018). Protecting Yourself and Others When Writing a Memoir. At <https://www.livewritethrive.com/2018/01/25/protecting-yourself-and-others-when-writing-a-memoir/>
- [9] Zining, M (2025). How to Write a Memoir: Examples and a Step-by-Step Guide. At How to Write a Memoir: Examples and a Step-by-Step Guide | Writers.com