

Butala, Sharon

**Remember this : transgression in memoirs : The Perfection of the Morning and The Girl in Saskatoon**

*Brno studies in English*. 2010, vol. 36, iss. 2, pp. [21]-37

ISSN 0524-6881 (print); ISSN 1805-0867 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/105065>

Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.



SHARON BUTALA

**REMEMBER THIS:  
TRANSGRESSION IN MEMOIRS:  
*THE PERFECTION OF THE MORNING* AND  
*THE GIRL IN SASKATOON***

**Abstract**

This paper uses the writer's own work to examine the transgressive nature of memoir. It categorizes memoirs as memoirs of family, career, childhood, war, illness, or as spiritual memoirs, to name a few, but concludes that these are not meaningful categories. The paper discusses *The Perfection of the Morning: An Apprenticeship in Nature*, which was perceived as transgressive because it revealed personal information about a spiritual journey which some readers felt made the writer "vulnerable," which shocked them, and was a violation of current social mores, but which did not leave the writer open to prosecution or physical danger, nor cause political unrest. But the transgressiveness of the second memoir, *The Girl in Saskatoon: A Meditation on Friendship, Memory and Murder*, caused her personal difficulty, including paranoia, and put her in physical danger, this to stop her from gathering information about the murder of Alexandra Wiwcharuk in 1962, and about the failed police investigation. The paper suggests that powerful people may be behind the effort to silence her, suggesting a possible scandal. Interviewees lied to her or withheld information, and memories were sometimes faulty, compromising the possibility of telling the factual truth. The (auto)biographer uses the same tools as the novelist, but memoirs are distinguished by the quality of voice. The paper concludes that literary transgressiveness means the breaking of cultural taboos, but that forms of (auto)biography are transgressive in nature and by definition, and thus alter the writer's perception of the world, as well as her life, but to find and tell the truth is the writer's role. (Auto)biography probes the human soul, offering the results to the community, and thus alleviates suffering caused by the belief that one is alone and unique in one's pain.

**Key words**

*Categories; isolation/isolated; memoir; method; memory; paranoia; remember; taboos; spiritual; transgressiveness/transgression; truth; voice; vulnerable*

---

As a non-academic I was surprised, pleased, and honoured to receive an invitation to take part in this conference, remembering as I do with the most profound respect, the long and proud history of universities and of the work done by the people in them. In particular, it is good to see a university recognizing artists as a legitimate and equal constituent of this community, and not merely objects whose products exist only to be devoured, criticized, destroyed, or elevated to high status, too often without the artist even knowing this is occurring. And so I thank the organizers of this conference for inviting me to participate.

I am a reader of biographies, but have never written anything that falls into that class except peripherally; I have never written a true autobiography either – the record of my life told from birth to the moment of writing – although I very much enjoy reading them. I have, however, written two memoirs, which I define as works telling about a particular time in the writer's life, or a theme within it, or about the writer's relationship with another person, institution, or place. I dare to call myself a student of the genre, and even more daringly, have taught the form many times – always short courses, and never for universities – and as far as I know, to people who wanted to write one, or were in the process of writing one, rather than to those who were solely students of literature.

So as teacher, writer and reader, I have made the effort more than once to draw parameters for the genre itself, and within such boundaries, to make distinctions, to find classes. This has turned out to be an impossible task, although I tell my students that there are those memoirs about a writer's personal struggle with, and eventual triumph over or acceptance of alcoholism, or drug addiction, or mental illness, or some debilitating condition, whose writers say, *This is what it is like to be me. Give me my humanity*. There are those written by writers who find themselves in circumstances which place them on the fringes of society, such as being an immigrant, especially an immigrant of a colour different from that of the majority of the people in the new country, or having to run away from home and to support oneself by prostitution (Evelyn Lau's *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid*), or something that can't be changed: Being born into a group that sets itself apart from the rest of society such as the Hutterites in Western Canada, or a fringe church such as the Plymouth Brethren; being raised by adoptive parents rather than by birth parents – almost any condition which the writer of the memoir perceives as making him or herself “different” from everyone else. Such writers cry out to be heard, to be recognized; to say, *I am real; I too exist*.

There are also those who write to tell about their brilliant careers: actors, generals, captains of industry, scientists, adventurers and spies, former prime ministers, presidents, and ambassadors, and so on, and whose books, on the whole, come sailing like ships into our ken, pausing long enough only to make the writer rich before quickly receding toward the distant horizon. There are those memoirs written exclusively to tell of the writer's spiritual progress, as well as their opposites, those written cynically, whether lying or truthful, about scandalous episodes

or themes in a life, and written only to excite and to sell, or sometimes, possibly, out of a childish, or even a pathological need to be acknowledged, even if only as a sinner. And also those written to explain, to be vindicated, to get even, to crow. From these vast ranks only a few books emerge and stay to become a part of our literature. As many of you will know, the American Ben Yagoda in his *Memoir: A History*, categorizes memoirs in this way.

Yet, in my opinion this listing does not identify meaningful categories; possibly these don't constitute categories at all, for scientists and even movie stars write about what they have learned in life, however facilely, fatuously, accidentally, or profoundly. Still, I haven't been able to come up with any other way to categorize them except in the usual way, as family memoirs, memoirs of career, spiritual memoirs, memoirs about nature, war memoirs, illness memoirs, memoirs of childhood, and so on. That (auto)biography is a genre in itself is, of course, not in doubt; that it is or might be classified as a genre by its transgressiveness, I will come to later.

The first book I wrote in the genre of autobiography (which was classified by others as a memoir and which I accept as such) was *The Perfection of the Morning: An Apprenticeship in Nature*. This book is about my life as an urban woman teaching at a provincial university, a feminist, a divorcée, and single mother of one child, who gave up this highly competitive, but independent life to marry a cattle rancher and to move to his ranch in a remote rural community, there to lead a traditional life as a wife, and to accept the, at best, secondary role in his cattle operation. But it was in a place where I knew no one, had no relatives, and where everything in myself in which I took pride was of no value, and what was required of me there, I did not understand and did not know how to do. But rather than accepting the enormity of my mistake as a mistake (although I insist to this day it was not a mistake), and leaving to go back to the city, I stayed on, struggling to make a place for myself, and when that failed, struggling to understand my own complicity and hidden motivations that had brought me to this situation.

Such an effort required going back into my earliest memories and mulling them over, trying to be objective about them, trying to find a narrative thread through my own life, beginning with birth and bringing myself to the moment I found myself in my fifties, in a situation in which I felt disconnected from my own true self (whatever that might turn out to be). And yet, the remedy for my situation turned out to be that very inward search, out of which, eventually, there emerged a degree of understanding, if not a conclusion nor a cure. What was unique about this memoir (if indeed, it was unique) was the story of a developing relationship with nature it/her self, which was where the book began for me, and how it was marketed and how it is understood by most of my readers.

*The Perfection of the Morning* is undeniably the story of a spiritual journey. It is impossible to describe a spiritual journey without becoming exceedingly personal, being willing to be so personal. (Which brings us to the most constant

accusation against memoirists – that they are excessively self-involved, as well as to the interesting difference between North Americans and Europeans in their degrees of so-called self-involvement, North Americans being, famously, individualists, while Europeans, Czechs in particular, have a strong tendency to bring all such private stories back to the lives of the people, institutions, and travails of their countries. While we have had our trials in North America, we have had nothing – except possibly the American Civil War – to compare to the travails Europeans have been through. But as a North American I accept our predilection for dwelling on the individual life and don't apologize for it. Such a penchant becomes lamentable or laughable only when the writer never lifts her head from the study of her navel, never even acknowledges the people around her, or the world beyond her own image. Or, worse, when her ruminations remain shallow and filled with self-love.)

The response that I received from a number of readers of the book was that by being so personal I had “made myself vulnerable,” although I was never quite sure what that term meant in that context. Vulnerable to what? What did those readers so fear? What did they think would happen to me? But having made myself “vulnerable,” as they kept telling me, caused me no pain at all; it was those letters that caused me pain, from people who felt they needed to caution me, chastise me, or offer me advice, none of which I wanted or needed, the writers not understanding that you cannot write such a book until you have passed through the struggle and come out on the other side, that a memoir is by definition, a record of the past.

But clearly all those letter-writers felt that I had transgressed by telling the readers things about myself that the letter-writers would never have revealed about themselves. I had written words that they felt most emphatically should never be said, much less written for public consumption. That such forthrightness was not only foolhardy, but in bad taste, and a violation of public decency, or the current social mores. Not only did they think I had transgressed, but I had done so in a way that frightened them. But I think that they read into the “I” of the book what was in their own psyches, and that their letters said a good deal more about the writers' personalities and foibles, and especially about their fears, than they did about my own. However, I would add that they were usually very gentle letters, although full of unrecognized condescension toward this poor pathetic, and not very bright woman who didn't even know that one did not – ever – write or say such things. Nonetheless, the book stayed on the Canadian bestseller list for a year. Apparently, even if you weren't supposed to say such things, there were a great many people who wanted to read them.

I didn't personally feel that I had transgressed, and the letters only confirmed me in this stance, because I had made a rule for myself, first, that I would not reveal anyone else's story, thoughts, emotions or private life, and, second, that I would not ever say anything unpleasant about anyone else, but if need be, would let the anecdote speak for itself. Otherwise, I would simply leave out the people who I felt had treated me badly, or whom I disliked. And if I questioned my-

self about whether to put in writing for publication some personal detail about myself, a thought, idea, or intimate revelation, I was always aware of how our lives are at root very similar, that our most private thoughts have been thought already many, many times by many, many other people, that secrets of that sort are a joke.

I told what I told because I had something urgent to say and I was willing to risk a great deal to say it. I wasn't willing to risk all, though, which would have included my marriage, and my already tenuous place in the community, not to mention the possibility of being sued, beaten up, yelled at, or shunned. What I wrote was a very careful memoir, and it surprised me that people were shocked by it. I knew also, that my book might be seen as fitting into the tradition of memoir-writing going as far back as St. Augustine's remarkable *Confessions* which has now awed and sustained people for more than fifteen hundred years. I thought that I was hardly the first writer to do so, and I would never be the last, and if I had anything to say at all, it was that as human beings we disallow whole dimensions of ourselves, limiting our own humanity, and that I had learned this through my own experiences in nature – and that if it took courage to do so, then I would either have the courage to do it, or I would stop writing. *That* was the struggle I faced and “making myself vulnerable” was what I accepted as well worth the prize, as, perhaps, the prize in itself.

My own greatest fear – after the one about the book being a complete failure that nobody would ever read – was that people would dismiss me as a crazy person, or a stupid one, or both, and indeed, some did and do. I find that having expected that, I don't really mind, because I had far more response to the book from readers who said that I had spoken for them. I had discovered that I had a constituency – a constituency of fellow flakes – I used to say, jokingly.

But the publication of even this deeply revealing book wouldn't cause me to be arrested for past crimes, my own or anyone else's; it wouldn't bring down the government, or cause an epidemic of some vile disease; it wouldn't cause me to be assassinated by the state or any other agency; I would lose no friends over it. My transgressiveness consisted entirely of being very revealing about my own psychic life, and what I judged to be the condition of my soul.

I wrote a second book of (auto)biography called *The Girl in Saskatoon: A Meditation on Friendship, Memory and Murder*. It is to some degree an autobiography, and also, a not very detailed biography; perhaps it is better characterized as a memoir. It too, apparently, is very transgressive, although in a different way from my first memoir. After reading it, people wrote to me to congratulate me for having written the book many of them had been waiting for, usually as well to add their own memories to mine, or to tell me about things I didn't know that might have helped me in searching out answers to questions I couldn't answer. I received only one letter I can remember chastising me and this was for taking what the reader believed to be the wrong attitude to the subject.

The book was about the murder in 1962 of a girl with whom I had attended high school for four years in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, and its ensuing investigation. In the first book I had wanted to talk about the possibilities of a relationship with nature, how one might go about building such a relationship, and the results of success in terms of the human psyche. In the second book, I set out to tell a questioning public who Alexandra Wiwcharuk (the murdered girl) had really been, how she was shaped by family circumstances and by the era and place in which she was born – the same as mine – and why someone might have murdered her, what the truth was about what had happened the night she was beaten, raped and killed, what was done by way of the investigation of the murder, and why it failed. More, I wanted to explain to myself and to my readers why an entire city had kept the memory of the young woman, and of that night, alive for fifty years. This last because it seemed more remarkable to me than the murder did, murders of young, pretty women not being, in a general way, all that unusual.

If the first memoir was not transgressive in my own mind (except perhaps for some experiences in nature that bordered on the bizarre), the second had held from the moment I first thought of it, the potential to be transgressive in as outward a way as possible. If I didn't exercise the greatest care in what I chose to reveal, and how I worded that material, it would be capable of having me, at the least, sued, or sending me to prison, or of having me either assaulted to frighten me off or to punish me or, at the worst, even killed should I be seen as too dangerous to those who had something to hide, who had been hiding it successfully for fifty years. I haven't yet been murdered, and I will quickly add that neither have I been assaulted, nor on any occasion felt an assault was imminent. What have been the consequences of my refusal to be scared away and of my questioning, I will come to later.

Alexandra Wiwcharuk was the youngest of ten children of a Ukrainian farming family and was at least on one side, part of the first Canadian-born generation. I am the child of families who had been in the country, on my father's side since 1647, and on my mother's, since the turn of the nineteenth century, but we had in common that in our births, we both represented to the ruling elite of the nation, our province and our city – to the ruling ideas of how to live – *the Other*: Alex as indelibly Ukrainian, and I as French on my father's side, in a part of the country that lived by the ideas and ideals of England and, to some extent, the British Isles in general. She had been raised in poverty on a small farm in the forests of east-central Saskatchewan, as I had been, although my parents were there as owners of a sawmill, rather than as farmers (although they had both come from farms), and she knew the life of the homesteader in the bush as I did. At fourteen years she had been sent to the city to get a good education, impossible to do in those days in the bush, and as her older married sister lived in Saskatoon, rather than paying room and board – money I feel sure that her parents didn't have as mine did not – she went to live with her sister and her husband as helper in the household and babysitter to her sister's small children.



I arrived with my family in the city at roughly the same time, my parents having decided that opportunity for all of us lay there and not in the bush country, and in September of 1954, Alex and I registered on the same day at the same high school. It was the school to which the children of the working poor of the city went, and the children of immigrants. If the story I've been told is correct, and there is no way to prove it, a number of nice Ukrainian farm girls, all sent by their parents to the city to get the best possible education, were turned away from their parents' choice of the "best" high school for no reason I can deduce, and despite what was given as the reason, because they were merely Ukrainian farm girls. Because their presence in that school would have lowered its "tone."

I am telling you something Canadian now, about that time and place, in that if we believed ourselves capable of anything – I'm not sure that we did – the school had already decided, long before we had even arrived, that we would be the workers of the world, and that is what it specialized in training us for. In a democratic country, from where did such an idea come? A new country that purported to be freer, classless, and full of opportunity for everyone as the hidebound and severely-classed Old Countries did not? I find I am still very angry about that, because despite where we came from, both Alex and I were smart, ambitious young girls, determined, exactly *not* to be mere workers.

I write of the ways in which our lives were similar, because it bordered on the impossible to get more facts about Alex's life – at least, publishable facts – and early on I hit on the device of explaining Alex through the period in our province's history, both of us born only about thirty-five years since the creation of the province and into pioneering families in the pioneering era (although in Europe the Second World War had begun), and in relatively the same place. And what I couldn't find out from others, I could surmise in a reasonably accurate way, because we shared life experiences, understood each others' lives whether we spoke of it or not. Thus, my book became autobiography as well as biography.

Alex and I were never in the same class at school, but we were in drama club together for either one or two years, and in choir also, so we knew each other well enough to say hi, and occasionally to chat, but we were never close friends, or even really friends. But for four years we trod the same halls, shared teachers and school experiences, and eventually, graduated on the same night, after which we never again saw each other. The next time I heard of Alex that I can remember was the day four years later that I read in the newspaper that she had disappeared, and thirteen days later, that her body had been found in a shallow grave on the riverbank, about a mile down the river from our old high school. Then I found out that, in the ensuing four years since our graduation, she had been a beauty queen or runner-up three times over, that she was a graduate nurse, that she worked at the same hospital where I had worked for two summers as a ward clerk, but before she had returned to nurse there.



She had been murdered on May 18, 1962, and on the day of the finding of her body, May 31<sup>st</sup>, the entire city came to a stop. There had been only a handful of murders there since its inception in 1882, and none had been of a beautiful and popular young woman who worked as a professional, and who was, even though Ukrainian – prejudice against Slavs ran high in Saskatoon in those days – Caucasian rather than Aboriginal. And, although all murders are savage, hers seemed particularly so. The murder was not solved then, and today, forty-eight years later, it has still not been solved despite its investigation having been re-primed more than once, and most recently only a few years ago. To this day, Saskatoon people still chat about her murder in hallways and at social gatherings; they still repeat their theories, or invent new ones; they still repeat the rumours they have heard about Alex, about who her killers were, and why her murder wasn't solved, they still worry about the case and, remembering Alex, whether they knew her or not, they still suffer for her and regret with the most profound of regrets, her terrible end. This event in the city's history has become iconic; it has become an integral part of the city's identity.

When I decided to write a book about the case, and about Alex, I found in very short order that there were those who didn't want me to ask any questions at all about what had happened, and who tried to frighten me into stopping (this included, eventually, two death threats), which tended only to make me more curious and to ask more questions, to speculate why it seemed I needed to be stopped. After all, Alex had been dead for nearly forty years at that time, most of the original investigating officers were dead or near-death, the police chief from the time was dead. Why did anyone care if I started asking questions? I was told that an unsolved murder case is never closed; information about open cases still in the hands of the police cannot be revealed to anyone but officers of that police force. I learned quickly that police forces do not like, in general, anyone "snooping around" in their cases; I learned at once that any information I wanted I would have to get directly from people who had been there; since it was still an open case, I couldn't even get documentation through the Freedom of Information Act.

And so, I set out to find those people. Family members had already gotten in touch with me of their own volition and had given me a great deal of information I would have had a very hard time getting anywhere else. Included in it were stories about unidentified people harassing the family members who were the most vocal in trying to get answers from the police. This included a terrifying night-time car chase of an entire family, and a bizarre midnight knife attack on the wife and mother, which resulted only in her having to get a few stitches on her arm when she might as easily have been killed. Incidents, it would seem, not related to anything, but even at the time considered by the family to be clearly designed to frighten them enough that they would stop asking questions.

I talked to some of the last people to see her alive; I talked to the two reporters who had reported the case, and eventually, to a third, first on the scene,

someone the public had never heard about. I talked to the child, now a middle-aged woman who had found Alex's body, and to the retired police officer who had searched fruitlessly for her body, passing by within a few feet of it, with a non-police-trained dog. I talked to the remaining coroner whose behaviour when I asked specific questions struck me as bordering on the bizarre. The one who had actually done the autopsy had died in 1969, and his beautiful and elegant widow got in touch with me and told me what she recalled, which was, essentially, nothing much. I talked to a couple of the girls who had been Alex's friends, to other family members, to her nursing school instructor, to men who had admired – were in love with her – but from a distance. I even talked to a person who had never told the police about seeing and talking to her the night she was killed, and I became the one who told that to the police.

Other than the family members who wanted to talk to me and who approached me, I didn't approach the people who were the most devastated by her death: the man who was said to be her boyfriend at the time, although I certainly have my doubts about that; or to her roommates, one of whom I couldn't find, one I didn't try to find, and one whose family I talked to, but who seemed to me to be to this day so devastated that I didn't wish to upset her further. The interconnections among these people sometimes startled me.

I talked to law professors, provincial and city librarians and archivists, and eventually, to two psychics who found me, and one man who had a theory he wanted to tell me, and who asked me to call him "Elvis." ("That's what my kids call me," he said.) He had me meet him at a fast food place and arrived on foot so I wouldn't see his license plate and wouldn't be able to find out who he was. I received phone calls at two in the morning from a drunken retired police officer who had been a homicide detective and who knew things other police officers wouldn't know, and who told me a couple of them. I was followed by the police in marked cars (so I would know they were following me – an implicit threat), and when we all had a narrowly-avoided accident on the highway, I saw that one officer was a Saskatoon City Police officer and the other was a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, which in itself deserved investigation, I thought. My phone was tapped for a short period in 2003 with some sort of old technology so that I could hear the tap and thus would know that I was being listened to. I complained to ex-justice ministers and was sent to the director of the Board of Provincial Police Commissioners to complain, where I said, "I want this on the record that I was here and why." Even as I write all this I find myself laughing in astonishment and disbelief, and a faint horror, although, probably foolishly, I can't quite muster genuine fear.

I was yelled at, laughed at, treated with shocking rudeness, lied to, refused information over and over again, hung up on, and eventually, had even my editor suggest that I had lost my mind over this case, because I couldn't stop thinking and talking about it and insisted on seeing links apparently only I could see.

Eventually, people in high places helped me find information by getting me access to three or four documents that I would never otherwise have been able to see. But then I began to be afraid that the documents, which contained information that would have meant legal trouble for at least one other dignitary, I would be foolish to use, because I was by this time wary enough to suspect that the material might be put there to catch me, not to catch the dignitary. That if I reported it, the information would disappear, and then I could be sued, my book discredited because I was a liar. I told myself that it was their job to expose the dignitary in question, not mine. But I asked myself, in those “bad old days,” as the police officers liked to refer to 1962 to me, how many people went to jail and stayed there as a result of collusion between officials? What kind of a vipers’ nest was I discovering?

And after all of this, I still published my book; errors of fact had crept in, caused by the lies – to me – of certain witnesses, and the obfuscation of others, and my own failures and laziness as a novice investigator. And I saw intense pain in the faces of some of those who attended my readings across Western Canada, who had known Alex, but who didn’t necessarily talk to me, and I wondered what it was they knew, what it was they would not tell me.

The harassment would have died away eventually if, after I received the phone call from the drunken officer at two in the morning, and because I had begun to be afraid, I hadn’t decided to call in a national television investigative program called “*the fifth estate*,” who agreed to take on the case and who have so far (January, 2010), aired two programs about it (2004 and 2008), and who apparently will do another should there be something more to report, and whose involvement, I think, has saved me from whatever danger I might have been in. In the meantime, four sisters in their fifties and sixties, Alex’s nieces, children at the time of her death and whose families were profoundly traumatized – changed forever – by Alex’s murder, publicly announced that they had begun an intense investigation of their aunt’s murder and were determined not to stop until the murderer or murderers were found and brought to justice. So publicity remained high and anybody who knew anything at all about the case continued to have a place – other than the police, who were trusted, rightly or wrongly, by nobody who had known Alex – to take their information.

And yet, despite the book having been out for two years this spring, and partly because of the continuing in-depth investigation by the four nieces, very surprisingly to me, my involvement isn’t over yet. In November of 2009 I attended a formal dinner in Saskatoon where I was a guest of honour, and there a very high official approached me about the book and the case, in a friendly and informal way, but who followed up later with a long phone call in which I told him what puzzled me about the investigation, and who then arranged for the Chief of Investigations of the Saskatoon Police Service to phone me so that I might ask him my questions. That same night – the night of the dinner – I realized that the old friend and long-time Saskatoon resident who among family members was my guest that night, was in on the scheme to find out what I knew and that I almost certainly

couldn't trust him either. Which was the point at which, after I had told her this, my editor decided I had stepped over the line into paranoia.

I realized that through the whole trajectory of this business going back into the mid-to-late nineties when I became determined to write this book, people had first tried to frighten me off, then they had lied or obfuscated. After that, they had given me information in which I was supposed to get entangled and thus to discredit myself, and last of all, I am convinced that they began to try to find in my past, any habits or incidents which could be used to blackmail me, both to ensure my silence, and to punish me for – as they seemed to think – continuing to dig for information. All of which has led me to believe, and held me steadfast (sort of) in that belief that there is something about this murder and the subsequent investigation that certain people in positions of influence within the city and, apparently, the province, do not want revealed. (Although I am sure that there are also some high-level people who want it revealed, and even that is suspect. Is this now about politics, and which party could be firmly and perhaps permanently discredited? And am I to be the agent?) They do not want to catch Alex's killer or killers because all the rest of the hidden story, whatever it is, would then come tumbling out. All of this because on May 18, 1962, a young woman who had never done anything of note herself, who came from "nowhere," and was "nobody," was murdered, and the murderer wasn't caught. Murdered in a time and a place where there had never been such a murder before – or since.

In literature, transgressiveness can only mean the breaking of cultural taboos about what one can write about. And since everything seems to already have been written by someone somewhere, from acknowledgment of the worst vices to the deepest personal secrets about sins and wrong-doing, virtually the only place left where, for the most part, taboos remain unbroken, is in the realm of the legal. Although legal parameters are arguable in court, and vary from country to country, the punishment for breaching them can be severe and few writers or publishers do so deliberately. I held back at many junctures, and re-worded and re-wrote, and very often simply left out things that might have bolstered my argument or my story, in order to avoid libel issues.

I never suggested that Alex might have been involved in something illegal or immoral although I had heard rumours that she had been (which I didn't believe), and although I learned a Wiwcharuk family secret, I have never told it to anyone and never will, as irrelevant to the case and not mine to tell, and since my focus was on Alex and what had happened to her, and on the society in which we grew up, I had no temptation to tell any secrets about myself or my family. There was no need for me to transgress in this personal way in matters concerning either Alex or her family, or myself and mine. I am also mindful of the American writer and memoirist, Annie Dillard, who has written with reference to family memoirs that, "writing is an art, but it isn't a martial art."

Odd that my first memoir, *The Perfection of the Morning*, which was, according to some readers and critics, transgressive in that it revealed too much of my psychic and spiritual life, was for the most part accepted, even cherished, while my second memoir, which broke no taboos at all about personal and private lives, but went against the wishes of the powerful, has caused me so much trouble, and has, indeed, changed my life forever.

To write a transgressive memoir of this type is to alter your own perception of the world.

When bureaucrats and politicians are afraid that their sins, done behind the scenes and not necessarily for personal profits, but nonetheless against the rules and procedures and sometimes against the law, are about to be revealed, they react with time-proven and predictable strategies: They find people whose job is to frighten you off, they try to catch you in some kind of disreputable behaviour – sexual, financial, personal – the disclosure of which will ruin your career and possibly your life, even though any such behaviour has nothing to do with your life as a writer, and if they find nothing – no deviant or illegal behaviour – then they offer you temptation, they set you up. But in the very hiding of the behaviour that causes the inquiry in the first place, those officials become guilty of the major crimes of collusion and conspiracy, and that makes them all the more determined that the truth will never be known, that the writer will be discredited. (The only place in the country where I got a bad review for this book – and it was nasty – was in the newspapers that serve Saskatchewan.) Years pass and the conspiracy – if there is one – involves more and more people.

The writer can prove none of this and as the years pass, she becomes more suspicious of people, her view of the world darkens, she becomes more and more isolated. The tentacles of those who would stop her reach further and further into every corner of her life, polluting it, and continue to even after she has long since stopped asking questions, long after the book is published, the work is done. And when she tries to tell people about her ordeal, they think that she is merely crazy, that she has lost her mind, that she is “suspicious of everybody,” when she is merely suspicious of bureaucrats, politicians, and their lackeys.

But then, there is the moment when she has to face that, just possibly, she is indeed becoming paranoid, that she is too involved, too entangled in the material and its endless unanswered questions, the moment when she wonders herself if she is losing her mind, that the lack of firm answers and the endless suspicions won't drive her mad in themselves. The moment when she even considers the profoundly disabling thought that perhaps it is too late, that solving the crime, answering the questions would, perhaps, do the world more harm than good, a perception from which she draws back in an existential horror.

In my own case I have no regrets for writing the book; my only regret is that I couldn't somehow (because of libel laws) delineate the picture I believe to be the whole story, and the one that comes closest to the truth about what happened to

Alexandra Wiwcharuk and what happened to the investigation so that it failed and after nearly fifty years, continues to fail. I think myself, that I stumbled upon a cesspool under the ordinary political and governmental life of Saskatchewan, a province of only a million people, with no particular power in the country, and up until now, little wealth. A backwoods. And that, as with the novels of the American writer John Grisham, and a number of popular films coming out of Hollywood, the “little guy” might win the battle, but she will never win the war. There is just too much at stake, even if she can only guess at what that is, and too many people who will fight to the limit of their strength and wit, and beyond even that, to keep the dishonourable secrets, secret.

As for me, the book I am working on now is a novel, but my having returned to novel-writing is more a product of the death of my husband, the loss of my country home and my closeness with nature, and of an entire way of life, than it does with the travails associated with *The Girl in Saskatoon*. I would say only that if a writer takes on a cause, even unwittingly, as I did, and is tenacious in its pursuit, then said writer had better be both wily and obstinate, lead a blameless life, and have friends in high places. And yet, is this not the task of a writer? To seek out the truth and to tell it to everyone? Is this not the moment when all the literary confections that sell in the millions, and even some that win literary prizes, must be separated from the ones that try to tell a truth about the world? The ones that seek justice?

After considering a great many memoirs and thinking hard about my own, I conclude that the memoir is not merely occasionally transgressive, or transgressive to some degree or other, but that the memoir is transgressive by its very nature; it is transgressive by definition. It isn't possible to write a memoir, in my opinion, that doesn't transgress in some way, the difference between the transgression of a memoir, and that of a novel, being that concept of the one being true, a record of real events and their consequences, and the other being, by agreement, something that is true of the world only in the larger sense and is known to be invented in its particulars. Such writing is also transgressive, but as it claims to be invented, to have come out of the writers' imagination, it is rarely subject to laws concerning libel, and its transgressiveness is more or less dismissed, at least, in legal terms. I believe that if I had written a novel rather than a memoir about the death of Alexandra Wiwcharuk and the investigation of her murder, none of the things that happened to me would have happened. But neither would the book have roused so much emotion, nor would it have been read by the same people. And it seems unlikely that, as a novel, it would have changed my life and altered my very view of the world. As for the wider categories we are meeting here to speak about – autobiography and biography – I think that they are also transgressive by definition.

The question of autobiography as method is more puzzling. “Method” surely implies purpose, as “method” can't exist in a vacuum, and so the question is,



method to do – what? To write – for once – a book that will sell many copies and make the writer rich and famous? To reveal and ensnare wrong-doers? To reveal truths about a time, a place, a particular event? To rouse sympathy and thus gain assistance? To change the world? One, or all of these at once? And is the method of the transgressive (auto)biography different than the method used in writing other genres?

I tell my memoir-writing students that they have only the same tools as the fiction-writer: the language, style, literary tropes, traditional structures and approaches to form, the story itself and how compelling it is. But the memoir stands or falls to a large extent on the voice the writer fashions to tell the story, and this is perhaps more true of this form than any other. Yet a teacher cannot teach the literary voice, but can only discuss what it is, and offer examples from the wealth of gripping voices already published. Beyond this, there is only – as with the fiction writer – description, narration, exposition, inner ruminations, and dialogue.

As method, of course, the major question is how much of a memoir (or autobiography) is true, how much can it be trusted to tell the truth? Because the human memory are fallible, and witnesses to events usually have different experiences of the same event, and only the most significant moments of the ordinary human's life is recorded reliably anywhere: birth, school graduation dates, marriage, birth of children, occasional incidents that make the newspapers, and then death – nearly everything else offered as “true,” is arguable. Some memoirists choose to invent conversations without identifying them as only most likely what was said twenty or more years earlier. Some memoirists avoid trying to write scenes or conversations as if reliably remembered, while others write nearly the entire book as a fiction writer would have done, but still naming the product as “true.” (I omit those writers whose books have been discredited as all or largely invented – even the so-called “facts.” I consider it reprehensible to write a novel and then call it a memoir, although not the reverse.)

I also tell my students that because of the unreliability of human memory and the tendency of witnesses to see different things, to place the emphasis in different places, and to select different facets as the more important, it is the job of the memoirist to be clear about whose story he/she is telling, and to make it clear also that the memoir is one individual's impressions of his/her life, that the memoirist is trying to tell his/her version of “becoming,” as a person. The most important truth is the private, personal truth, and it must be acknowledged as such. A memoir is the story of how one person has negotiated life; it is about consciousness in the world, and the absolute accuracy of “facts” is definitely secondary to such an endeavour.

Do fiction writers and (auto)biographers have different goals when they set out to write a manuscript, and if they do, what is the difference? Does an (auto)biographer have in mind first, the creation of art? Or is the first thought to tell the story – the truth – about something? Annie Dillard has come down firmly on the side of



what she calls, “creating a text,” as the memoirist’s first goal, and hasn’t hesitated to select and move events, and even (possibly) to use incidents that didn’t happen to her in pursuit of that goal, while, one expects, keeping true to the substantive material in her work. Other (auto)biographers have felt more keenly the need to be true to the story as the first goal, and to let the interests of the text play a secondary role. As a memoirist, I belong to the latter group.

In the cases of both my memoirs, I began with a powerful need to tell my readers about something I knew that I thought they ought to know. It wasn’t until I had organized my material and begun writing, that my attention turned to the creation of artful manuscripts, but my first imperative was always to tell the world this thing that I knew that I felt strongly, even passionately, that the world should know too. When I set out to write a novel, I concentrate on finding ways to artfully create an imaginary universe, and only as I work my way through the manuscript do I remember that I must also have things to say about the world, and try to find ways to express them within the story, or sometimes I discover them already there in the characters or the situation. When I write short stories, my first thought (after the original material that I think might work as a short story) is about form. How do I shape this material so that it will fulfill the requirements of the short story form as it is given? And with the writing of plays – (I’ve written and had produced five of them) – of course, the form is never separate from the material, and always remains a first consideration.

All of this is of course very difficult to discern even in one’s own practice as a writer, never mind in the works of others, and I find myself arguing with myself even about what my own practice really is. I have, though, felt envious of those writers whose first concern is always the creation of a text, the artful use of the material, and the emphasis first on the art, rather than on the material itself. I’ve been envious because such writers, it seems to me, have found a way into their art as divorced from mundane considerations of daily life in the world, from which, try as I do, I cannot separate myself. Nor can I put the shaping of art ahead of my desire to tell the world some important thing I think I know, or more likely, that I consider, and want my readers to consider.

In fact, I have gone much further than that. On the day that I visited the Provincial Board of Police Commissioners to complain about my phone having been tapped, and despite my efforts to remain aloof from the situation and to reveal nothing of my emotions, never mind of what I suspected, or what I really thought about our interview and about the reason for the tap or the culprits who had done it, I found myself eventually incapable of maintaining artifice. I have used the word “guile,” about this, and have said of that interview, that I could not maintain “guile,” and that in answer to his questioning of me, and of our conversation, I finally said to the officer/bureaucrat that I would not stop asking questions or trying to find the answers. “I am a writer,” I said. “*This* is what writers do.”

By which I meant, it is the writer’s job to seek the truth and to tell it. I meant more: I also meant that this is what artists do: Seek the truth, and try to express

it. Up until that moment, I had not known I believed that, or how deeply I held that belief.

I started to write a book about a time and place, using a single incident and person as the focus of what I had to say. In the course of my investigations the world came swelling over me like a giant wave sweeps a sailboat and swamps it. I was nearly swamped – may still be. And one or two of the critics said of the book I wrote, that the girl about whose life and death I was writing was swamped, was lost in the material, and I accept that criticism as at least partly true. She was not my best friend, I barely knew her, although she was part of the background of all my high school years and we must have had conversations and shared experiences. But what was our relationship? And who was she?

“Lost in the mists of time,” as people like to say, is any significant exchange, any spark of emotion between us. Except that is, for one moment in our senior year, 1957–58, as we each left the school auditorium, she with her friends, and I with mine, and she looked back over her shoulder, not at me or anyone else, but into the middle distance, with a look in her eyes that seemed to me deeply sad, mixed, perhaps with a touch of resigned discontent, a look someone so young should never have to have. It seemed to me to say, one day I will be free, although right now my life is circumscribed to such a degree that I lose hope that I will ever be allowed to be my own person in the world, that I will ever escape from all these strictures that keep me prisoner. In that instant, she seemed to me fully adult, and far too sad for one so young.

I remember watching her in that gesture and thinking, even then, why am I watching this? And later, why do I insist on remembering that meaningless picture that happened an hour ago? A day ago? Years ago? That meant nothing, that had nothing to do with anything, and that – now, fifty years later – I still cannot erase from my mind? At that time I thought that the indelibility of that gesture I had caused myself out of my own foolishness, my own need for drama in my life, or perhaps my nearly desperate need for meaning, and nothing more. That I too, was starved for life, for a degree of freedom not allowed in those days to girls, and that I had subconsciously recognized in Alex’s expression what was lodged in my heart, even though I had thought that only I suffered, inarticulately, from it. And it seems to me now, fifty years later, that a voice in my head, a voiceless voice, was saying to me, “Remember this.” For it was in that moment that Alex came to be and has remained as a single, unique human, and it is out of that moment from which the memoir I finally wrote, with all its attendant indignities, both to her memory, and to me, was driven to completion.

But I believe that all (auto)biographies of literary intent, no matter how successful they might or might not be, share the same goals: To probe the human psyche and soul, to offer this as a gift to our human community, to recognize its suffering, struggles, and its moments of illumination. At their best, books of autobiography and biography alleviate suffering borne of the belief that one is

isolated, alone, and unique in one's pain; they help advance the individual's ideas about what it means to be human, what one's possibilities are, and what one's responsibilities as a member of the human race might be.

## References

- Butala, Sharon (2008) *The Girl in Saskatoon: A Meditation on Friendship, Memory and Murder*. Toronto: Harper Collins.
- Butala, Sharon (1994) *The Perfection of the Morning: An Apprenticeship in Nature*. Toronto: Harper Collins.
- Lau, Evelyn (2001) *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid*. Toronto: Harper Collins.
- Yagoda, Ben (2009) *Memoir: A History*. New York: Riverhead Books.

SHARON BUTALA has spent nearly all her life in Saskatchewan where she was born and was educated. She began writing in 1978, published her first book in 1984, and has published in total six novels, three short story collections and seven books of non-fiction, as well as magazine and newspaper articles, and has had five plays produced. She is interested in particular in the lives of women and in Western Canadian rural, agricultural people. In 1998 she received the Marian Engel Award, among other prizes and awards, including Western Magazine Awards, a National Magazine Award for fiction, and an Author's Award for Paperback Fiction. She has been shortlisted twice for the Governor General's Award and once for the Commonwealth Prize. Several of her books have been on national bestseller lists, her memoir *The Perfection of the Morning* for a year. She has also read, taught workshops, and lectured all over Canada, and in the United States. In 2002 she became an Officer in the Order of Canada and in 2009, a recipient of the Saskatchewan Order of Merit, as well as having received two honorary doctorates. The Butalas have received five conservation awards. In 2007 her husband died, and she moved to Calgary, Alberta to be near her son, his wife, and her two grandchildren, but continues to dream of some day moving back to Saskatchewan.

For contact information, see [www.sharonbutala.com](http://www.sharonbutala.com) [email: [sharon.butala4@gmail.com](mailto:sharon.butala4@gmail.com)]

