

# A Curious Greed

*This endless hunt for meanings,  
Finally a kind of curious greed.*

Ian Wedde *Tales of Gotham City*.  
Auckland University Press, Oxford University Press.  
1984  
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Ian Free

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## ABSTRACT

This volume contains an Exegesis and a Creative Thesis, in this order. The Exegesis is an academic essay on the process used to produce the Thesis, which is a memoir. The memoir had its origin in a desire to explore the question of whether the author was in any way responsible for my wife becoming an alcoholic, a condition in which she died.

We met in Sweden where she was born, became engaged there and were married six months later in Hamilton, New Zealand. Her name was Gerd, which is pronounced with a soft G like a Y and rhymes with Scottish *laird*. We had two sons, we visited Sweden five times (as often as we could afford) and lived for four years in Melbourne, Australia. We were together for fifty years. Why did it have to end so abruptly?

We were very compatible. Our outlooks on existing things and our approaches to new things were remarkably similar. I admired her intelligence as well as her beauty, her passionate sense of social justice, her feeling for style, her robust sense of humour and her readiness for physical adventure. We communicated well in both English and Swedish. These matters are described in the memoir.

The memoir examines whether my basic personality was defective in some way, enough to make her disappointed in me. I examine some of the events of my youth and adolescence that formed my character. Or was it perhaps the undoubted culture shock of moving from the advanced welfare state of Sweden in the 1950s, with its emphasis on equality for men and women and its tolerance of individual differences, to small-town New Zealand where difference was frowned upon? She undoubtedly paid a big personal price in living here, though she was quick to praise and ready to support the virtues of Aotearoa. Did she feel at the end of her life that she had made a mistake in coming here and marrying me? On the evidence I searched to find, I do not think so. The authorities referred to in the Exegesis assisted my search immeasurably. So what went wrong for Gerd?

The conclusions I came to include a 'Not Guilty' verdict on the charge that I was responsible for her alcoholism, but I have to accept, I believe, a label of 'involuntary assistant' in the way she lived the last few years of her life. Our social drinking paved the way for her alcoholism. I conclude that other factors were also at work and I describe in the memoir the tragedy of her early dementia.

I am left with an enormous gratitude that I shared a long period of time with a remarkable person. Her richness informs me still.

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**ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signature.....

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Ian Free    EXEGESIS for MCW: Memoir. *A Curious Greed*

Biting my truant pen,  
Beating myself for spite:  
“Fool”, said my muse to me,  
“Look in thy heart and write”.

Philip Sidney (1554-1586)

I remember when I was a secondary schoolboy and it was cadet day; it was my turn to go to the shooting range and use a World War One weapon, an ancient .303 rifle. I found the prospect exciting, but when I was prone on the ground, there was a problem. The target was moving in and out of focus. I was right-handed but left-eyed, and even with my glasses on, I could not focus on the target when I held the rifle with my right hand on the trigger. Only when I put the rifle butt to my left shoulder and my left hand on the trigger and sighted with my left eye (and my right eye was squeezed shut) could I get a clear view of the target over the fore-sight.

Much the same has occurred in writing my memoir. I came into the course with 35,000 words already written and I was prepared to add to them with tales of events which were couched in a similar way. I planned a memoir consisting of three strands interwoven with each other to make a whole. The first of these strands would be an examination of the events and experiences which transformed a shallow, protected and white middle-class boy from a ‘good’ Wellington suburb into a person with an avid interest in global peoples and strong beliefs about equality of treatment, the disadvantages of indigenous peoples in colonial situations and the profound values involved in traditional ethnicities. The second strand was to be an exploration of the dynamic of living for fifty years with a woman from another culture, doing one’s best but seeing her, finally, self-destruct through alcoholism. The third strand, I thought, could be a description of my attitudes towards some of the social and political changes that have occurred in New Zealand and internationally during my lifetime: neoliberalism, the rise of an elite class, the rise of Eastern countries, changing communism, feminism, humanism and international relations.

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My mentor responded that this was in fact a plan for three memoirs and there was insufficient time in a one-year course to write so much. I should choose one strand. I finally chose the second strand as the most important, and the most challenging. Writing it has been almost like undertaking a self-supervised therapy programme, and the introspection required has cut deep.

Additionally, the more I looked into the task of writing such a memoir, the more I became aware of the strength of Virginia Woolf's (2002) perception of the difference between 'I now' (the narrator) and 'I then' (the narrator's earlier self). I asked myself whether I should write from the point of view of the younger person I was 'then', or incorporate a backward look, where necessary, and comment on how those events look now, sometimes nearly eighty years later. This would require me to rewrite the pages I had brought into the course. I think it was partly my reluctance to jettison most of my work produced over six or seven years that made it impossible for me, for a time, to write anything at all.

After struggling with the text for some time I came across Ian Wedde's rumination about memory and the writing of memoir in *The Grass Catcher* (2014), and I recognised what he was saying about 'paradoxical temporality' as being applicable to my task and accurately descriptive of the process I was learning to control:

Arriving at this moment in both our [Dave's and my] childhood story and my adult investigation of the meaning of home, I realise the extent to which this account has become a palimpsest. Its layers, erasures and additions begin with the simplest one, in which memory laminates the present where it acts and the past that is memory's resource. This laminate is paradoxical, ambiguous and unreliable. It may even be contradictory, as is the case with Dave's and my version of events. The palimpsest has layers that are at once temporal and spatial: memories can exist only in the present but will always refer to the past; and this paradoxical temporality moves forward along a spatial narrative track that goes from place to place, or resides in locations that themselves change, as homes and neighbourhoods do while children grow up in them. (Wedde, 2014, p. 183)

As I read further into the literature of 'self-narrative' I came to see how I might press

on towards the production of a text which both looked back at my activities as a younger man who was being created by my relationships with others (before I met my wife-to-be), and also (when describing some of the events of our life together) included my opinions of today, with the changed perspective of hindsight, as to the motivations of the people involved and the inevitability or otherwise of the actions taken.

The initial difficulty I had in confronting myself and the history of our relationship was slightly eased as I came to see that others had also grappled with this difficulty and that the problems I faced were widespread. Nor was it necessary for me to arrive at a 'happy ending', provided I avoided what Coulser (2011) calls "the tyranny of the comic plot" (p. 44), the defining element of which is that it ends well for the protagonist.

To write from a simple, personal point of view proved to be an unsatisfactory practice. So a wider reading of writers on the craft of self-narrative was clearly required. However, the more I read the more conflicts and even contradictions I found (despite large measures of agreement). I felt immobilised by the variety of professional opinion I was being offered. In order to get moving again, I realised that I had to be very clear, when I was writing, about the point of view I was writing from, 'I now' or 'I then'. Keeping this distinction firmly in mind, I was able to proceed again.

There is a great deal of advice available. I will not detail all the books that I read because not all of them are worthy, but I did find William Zinsser's 1989 book, *Inventing the Truth*, to be excellent value. He arranged for six memoir writers to each give a talk at the New York Public Library, and then edited their talks - including one of his own - to make the book. He recalls, in the talk he gave himself, how he discovered that "memory is one of the most unreliable of writers' tools." (p. xv). Introducing the five talks, he notes one common theme: "The writer of a memoir must become the editor of his own life. He must prune an unwieldy story and give it a narrative shape" (p. 9).

The shape of the memoir required much consideration. In order to bring Gerd to the attention of the reader quite early on, it was necessary to describe events in other than

chronological order. The fact that the incidents that shaped me before I met Gerd would make up most of the early part of the memoir seemed acceptable, but as the central focus of the work was to be our relationship, I deemed it necessary to put in sections in which she was the protagonist.

This decision was made easier after reading André Malraux' *Antimemoirs* (1968), a book of 490 pages which is organised around five characters (de Gaulle, Nehru, Mao, Arnaud and Mayrena). The settings move from France to South-East Asia, China and Japan, but there is art, philosophy, psychology and history in the telling, along with Malraux's views on literature and everything else. His publisher notes on the back cover,

Malraux has rejected chronological narrative for a free form of reminiscence, fluid and flexible, which allows him to range at will among the axes of time and space, covering the dramatic and moving events of his own life...it is a complete breakthrough in the writing of autobiography.

I found a similar readiness to move away from a chronological approach in the writings of some critics of the genre. Their reasons for doing so are interesting; Hyvärinen et al. in *Beyond Narrative Coherence* (2010) say:

the key... classical, Aristotelian ... notion (of the) function of narrative is seen to be the creation of coherence. Recently, this conception has faced increasing criticism both from the ranks of narratology and in particular, from scholars who study "naturally occurring", oral narratives. The normative mission to find and value coherence marginalizes many narrative phenomena, omits non-fitting narrators, encourages scholars to read narratives obsessively from the perspective of coherence, and poses ethically questionable pressures upon narrators who have experienced severe political or other trauma. (Hyvärinen et al., 2001, p. 1)

On the basis of the above insights, and others, I decided to heed advice from any writer *if it seemed appropriate to me*, and to regard the different viewpoints and advice from other writers, not as errors, but as virtues, characteristic of the differing sensibilities of the writers concerned. I likened this process of selection to that of crossing a bush stream by hopping from rock to rock, choosing stones of varying sizes, being grateful to those previous trampers who had put them there and glad the stones did not turn under my

boots as I resumed my journey. Essentially, I must not lose my nerve that I would get across reasonably dry-footed,

I now knew where I was going: rather than just writing of events in our lives, I would explore the question of whether I was responsible, even in part, for my wife finishing her days as an alcoholic. Anything that did not contribute to an understanding of this question would not be included.

I came to regard myself, my 'self', not as a completed personality, but as an 'awareness in progress'. Professor Jeanne Perrault of the University of Calgary, Canada, when reviewing Paul John Eakin's (1999) *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, noted that "he (Eakin) prefers 'to think of self less as an entity and more as a kind of awareness in progress'" (Perrault, 2004, pp. 145-146). The density of this phrase is teased out by Eakin's later examination of the fundamental nature of "the relational dimension of identity experience" (p. 133). Philip Douglas (2001) in his outline of Eakin's book, quotes him as saying that much contemporary work in biography "...reflects a more flexible conception of self" (p. 532).

My initial inclination towards a chronological approach now seemed inappropriate and I replaced it with a more problem-centred method (this method is discussed later in this exegesis). I was not aiming to write an autobiography, because I regard autobiography as something that aims at completeness, objectivity and factual accuracy. And there was no way I could generate a complete autobiography, covering over 80 years of life, during a one-year course. My journey was goal-oriented in that it would aim to answer the question of my responsibility, if any, for my wife's alcoholic behaviour. This would be the goal of the memoir, but I was under no illusion that it was a final summit to be climbed. Rather, it could be called a false summit because, as trampers know, once such a summit is gained it only makes possible a view of higher summits, further on. And so it has been with me.

A number of writers on memoir have emphasised the personal changes awaiting a

memoirist (Atwood, 2003; Larson, 2007; Prose, 2006; Rainer, 1998), although Lopate (2013) appreciates that the extent of the changes may be limited.

It's true that we make up our selves from moment to moment ... but it is also true that we have far less leeway in remaking ourselves and our *personae* on the page than we might first imagine. (Lopate, 2013, p. 145)

Barrington's (2000) comment was telling because she talks of the writer having to be on a quest for answers, and this is exactly how I see my present position:

If the charm of memoir is that we, the readers, see the author struggling to understand her past, then we must also see the author trying out opinions she may later shoot down, only to try out others as she takes a position about the meaning of her story. The memoirist need not necessarily know what she thinks about her subject but she must be on an intellectual and emotional quest for answers. Without this attempt to make a judgment, the voice lacks interest, the stories, becalmed in the doldrums of neutrality, become neither fiction nor memoir, and the reader loses respect for the writer who claims the privilege of being the hero in her own story without meeting her responsibility to pursue meaning. Self revelation without analysis or understanding becomes merely an embarrassment to both reader and writer. (Barrington, 2000, p. 22)

Encouraged by these remarks, I set out to write a memoir that would put in front of the reader some aspects of the inner landscape of our relationship as well as descriptions of some of the outer events and occasions we shared. I did not know in advance what the meanings of all my, and our, experiences were. But I had a degree of faith that by putting down what happened at selected times I might find patterns that could hint at, or even display, meanings.

This has required me to not only describe a scene as I lived it (I-then), but sometimes to comment on events with the changed perspective of hindsight (I-now). At some times, the zeitgeist of the time is allowed to appear in the narrative without comment, while at others I have brought to bear my, and our, later experiences. It is me who is remembering and the question of 'Why did I do that?' and 'Why did that happen?' is what this memoir is concerned with. As I re-examine the events of our lives I have found it necessary to touch again on some of the philosophical and existential questions that intrigued me as a student; a process which has ultimately brought a measure of satisfaction. However, I

hope that the text does not make me seem self-satisfied, for there have been some occasions when I failed, or achieved less than I wanted and I deleted those sections from the draft. I was conscious of Barrington's (2000) remarks:

The writer must have done her work, made her peace with the facts, and be telling the story for the story's sake. Although the writing may incidentally turn out to be another step in her recovery, that must not be her visible motivation: literary writing is not therapy. Her first allegiance must be to the telling of the story and I, as the reader, must feel that I'm in the hands of a competent writer who needs nothing from me except my attention. (Barrington, 2000, p. 57)

The search for answers to 'Why?' continues, supported by 'a kind of curious greed' to know what I might discover, as the endless hunt for meaning in life goes on.

And any meaning I find might be quite wrong, or at least not considered reasonable by the reader, and I must not flinch from that prospect.

The practice of memoir-writing, at first, came slowly to me as I worked, and then gathered speed as I found the courage to press on with the story of these two intertwined lives.

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The differences between autobiography and memoir are significant. Barrington (2000) said, "Autobiography is the story of a life; memoir is a story from a life" (p. 12), and that is a summary I regularly returned to as a compass-bearing to keep me moving in what I believed to be the right direction.

But there is more to be said. Douglas (2001) draws attention to the fact that Eakin (1999):

... argues that in the act of narration one is engaged in a process of *making* a self. As distinct from the self-determined, autonomous self assumed by traditional models of "life writing", much contemporary biography and autobiography "reflects a more flexible

conception of self". (Eakin, 1999, p. 76)

I did find that my 'conception of self' lost focus. The depression that accompanied the loss of focus stopped me in my tracks and scuppered my writing for a time, a very painful situation. Even though the duration of this depression was only about seven or eight days, it seemed extremely lengthy. It is a measure of how low I felt that I could not write, nor read anything of greater intellectual weight than the daily newspaper. Not only was I learning to cope with the 'I then' and 'I now', difficulty, but I was having to create the 'I' applicable to the tasks.

But at least this new 'I' was not obliged, writers on the memoir like Couser (2011) were assuring me, to give up all my deeply held beliefs.

But memoir's weakness, from an aesthetic point of view - its location on the border between the literary and the quasi-, sub-, or outright nonliterary - is also its strength. From a more comprehensive perspective, William Dean Howells said it best over a hundred years ago, when he referred to it as "the most democratic province in the republic of letters." It's an inherently democratic genre, accessible to nearly everyone and thus inclusive of many different kinds of people. It's the genre that best represents our individualistic, egalitarian ethos, (Couser, 2011, p. 36).

It was in the 1960s in Melbourne that I first met a slogan, used by my late friend, Dr Stephen Murray-Smith of the University of Melbourne, as a description of the approach of his literary magazine, *Overland*; "Bias, Australian; temper, democratic". It appeared on the title page of each issue. My reaction to it was one of admiration and respect: Stephen had found what I judged an admirable way of expressing his pride in both his country and his political viewpoint. From then on my catechism was 'Bias, New Zealand; temper democratic'. I was glad to think I could write a memoir that used these values as its basis.

I was also glad to have confirmed my desire to produce something literary, not gossipy.

But memoir can also be looked at as the most literary form of something most of us engage in, actively or passively, most of our lives and even after our deaths. I refer here to what academics call

“life writing.” It’s not a very satisfactory term - I prefer “life narrative” or even “life representation” - but it’s a useful one. Here are some things that constitute it: photographic; biopics and bio-dramas; documentary films about individuals or groups of people; birth announcements, marriage announcements, and death notices; college application essays and school transcripts; personal ads; résumés; any kind of personal dossier; scrapbooks; anecdotes and family stories; family albums and home movies; *People* and *US Week*; *This American Life*; the Story Corps project; anything on the Biography channel; personal email; most tweets; Facebook; last, but not least, gossip - the original social medium. (Couser, 2011, p.74)

This passage gave me support because it reflected the behaviour of Gerd and me over many years. We have kept detailed journals of all our overseas and some of our local travels, usually illustrated by the day’s purchases of coloured postcards, taped into a hard-backed exercise book before we went to sleep. We made annual scrapbooks from collected trivia and printed ephemera; we wrote a two-page annual letter which reviewed the year’s events – personal, political and international – and which was edited into its final form only after passionate negotiation between us. We both had résumés. We both prided ourselves on the high literary quality of our annual family letters, our emails and our texts.

We both had literary experiences of a limited range. We were each invited to write a chapter for a book on New Zealand which was published in Sweden. Gerd wrote on Māori, I wrote on New Zealand’s future prospects. We had both done reports on functions, and also book, art and theatre reviews. I looked forward to a longer writing task.

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Having determined to write a memoir that attempted to settle a question which consumed me, I sought out other examples of memoir which took the same approach. Larson (2007) is presented to the reading public in a wrapper on which the publisher makes the claim, “The memoir is the most popular and expressive literary form of our time.” In choosing the genre of memoir, it might seem that I had inadvertently ‘struck it lucky’ and would be in the fortunate position of having a rich field from which to select. However, examples of the particular version of memoir that is described as goal-oriented or problem-centred are not exactly thick upon the ground. A greater number of recent



memoir are narratives of the writers' lives, rather than explorations which are searches for answers to burning questions.

And Coulser (2011) again speaks persuasively:

Rather than thinking about memoirs as being variants of *either* autobiography *or* biography - as if these were totally distinct - we may think of them as situated on a continuum from those focused on the author to those focused on an other. Texts found near the middle of this continuum may take as their subject neither the author nor some proximate other person but rather the relationship between them. (Coulser, 2011, p.21)

Lloyd Jones' *A History of Silence*, published in Auckland in 2013, is an exception to the statement that many recent memoirs are narratives. Jones goes on a search for information about his antecedents. His family of origin never spoke about earlier generations or told the stories of their doings. There were no pictures of them on the walls of the family home. As Christchurch lay in ruins after the catastrophic earthquake of February 2011, Lloyd Jones began a search for his past, a search that takes him through childhood memories of puzzling events, to Pembroke Dock in Wales, and finally to the discovery of a devastating court transcript, which he reads in Archives New Zealand in Wellington.

On this extraordinary journey, he pieces together the fragments of a story that has been buried in his family for a lifetime. A mother who gave up her daughter (the daughter was Jones's mother, who stalked *her* mother by sitting in the car, with a young Lloyd for company, outside her mother's house); a naval captain drowned at sea (untrue, he jumped ship); a marriage to save a child. And a truth that changes everything (a court report).

While in the Archives New Zealand reading room in Wellington, Jones meditates on different styles of reading, a subject that resonated with me because, as a result of writing this memoir, I have found it necessary to 'read like a writer', something I have not done previously, despite having been professionally involved with reading all my life, as a student, a bookseller, an editor and a teacher. This is what Jones (2013) says:

Different ways of reading (a court transcript): quickly; more carefully; to link details; with a jurist's attention; with glee; with an emerging sense of embarrassment; with an open mind; with imagination; in such a way that I found myself reconsidering everything that I'd known about my grandmother". (Jones, 2013 p. 190)

Jones, then, is an example of a 'goal-oriented' memoir. Another is Joan Didion's *Blue Nights* (2011), in which she sets out to describe the situation of the death of her daughter, Quintana Roos. The question around which the book is organised is, "How could I have missed what was clearly there to be seen?" (p. 27). This is the cry from the heart of any parent who has lost a child. But many clinicians and other professional medical and psychological consultants had examined Quintana Roos and not found signs or symptoms 'clearly there to be seen', so this reader began to detect an element of over-writing, a disappointing shrillness of tone.

Another American memoir which is organised around a focusing question is A.M. Holmes' *The Mistress's Daughter* (2007). The writer is the illegitimate daughter of a 22-year-old mother, who gave her away for adoption before she was born. The mother was having an affair with an older man who already had a wife and family, and who was unwilling to take either his mistress or his daughter by that mistress into that family. But three decades later both her mother and her father came looking for the writer, and brought into focus the question, 'Who am I?' which she seeks to answer by the text. The power of this question to bring focus to the activities of the writer was a forceful example and an encouragement for me to keep a similar focus in my own writing.

Ian Wedde's recent memoir, *The Grass Catcher* (2014) is sub-titled *A Digression About Home*, and involves the search for what home means for him, and where it is to be found (among the many places he has lived around the world). In this book the central question is not a question of birth or identity, but an examination of an abstract concept. In promoting this book, its publisher justly draws attention, on the dust-wrapper, to the fact that it is "affectionate, funny, sad and analytical, but above all honest." In coming to grips with honesty in my own memoir, I have, if anything, erred on the side of frankness

in the belief that only by getting a description of the events on paper would I be able to see any patterns they might make, to which I could assign or perceive such meanings as seemed undeniable.

An unexpected pattern appeared after reading Couser's (2011) contribution to Eakin (2004), where the ethics of life writing is the subject of the whole book and Eakin makes the claim that 'ethics [is] the deep subject of autobiographical discourse'(p. 6). Couser (2011) states:

What I call euthanography – narratives in which euthanasia (in any form) is considered (but not necessarily committed) – is a distinct subset of the specialized (but expanding) subgenre of narratives by suicide “survivors” (where the term applies not to someone who attempts suicide and “fails” but rather to someone who is bereaved by the suicide of a loved one). (Couser, 2011, p. 196)

So I am a ‘suicide survivor’. I can accept that. I had formed the view that Gerd's realisation that she was showing signs of early dementia had led her to a decision to bring about an early death by over-drinking. This view came to me only after her death, and it commended itself to me because it showed Gerd in the light in which we both liked to view her – as rational, intelligent and unafraid of holding views that others, even the majority, might deem to be unacceptable.

Support for this view of her as tough-minded and courageous came from my finding, in 2014, her signed card, provided by the Voluntary Euthanasia Society (Auckland) Inc., dated 30 September 1995. It states, *inter alia*, “If the time comes when I can no longer take part in decisions for my own future...I request that I be allowed to die and not...be kept alive by artificial means....”

The question of whether I have any responsibility for Gerd's alcoholism I answer with a ‘No’; our relationship was characterised by a high degree of personal freedom provided that we were honest with each other. But Couser also describes a role he calls “suicide assistant” (Couser, 2011, p. 198), someone who assists in another person's suicide. Unfortunately, I believe I must accept this role. Not because I knew that she was trying to

commit suicide, I didn't, but because I made it easier for her to have access to drink, I drank socially myself, and I supplied her with drink because the unwanted alternative was that we would have to go our separate ways.

To conclude, I found helpful comments in Zaretsky's 2013 publication, *A Life Worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning*. Camus applied the touchstone of 'the absurd' in his search for reliable meaning in life. Camus is shown as a clear-thinking moralist: his life and works make sense to me. In particular, I like his acceptance of the simultaneous presence and validity of the absurdity of life (the world does not regard an individual as important), and the beauty of the world (which provides meaning to an individual's existence). These views Gerd and I shared; it made our time together exciting and full of potential. The default position to new suggestions was usually, 'Why not, if you want to'. Being her partner for fifty years has left me with a strong sense of having had a fortunate life.

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