



Celebrating
Five Years of the
Life Writing Prize



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The Life Writing Prize has been made possible thanks to a generous donation by Joanna Munro.

We'd also like to thank the Goldsmiths Writers' Centre for their partnership on the Prize.

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FOREWORD

The Life Writing Prize was founded in 2016 following a serendipitous encounter between Spread the Word's Laura Kenwright and Prize funder Joanna Munro at Goldsmiths, University of London. The pair discussed how there was a dynamic fiction and poetry prize-scene in the UK, but nowhere near as much to celebrate and profile new writers of creative non-fiction, and those who write about and from their own lives. Spread the Word and Joanna made a plan to launch a new Prize solely for life writing and focused on work by unagented and unpublished writers. Blake Morrison came on board as the Prize's Patron of with Goldsmiths Writers' Centre partnering to support outreach to across the UK.

Since then, year on year, the Prize has grown in strength and stature – receiving nearly 4,000 entries from across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, supporting 60 writers who have reached the longlisting stage, several of whom have gone on to be agented and published, and perhaps most importantly helped establish life writing as a diverse and thriving creative art form. One that is as dynamic as the fiction and poetry prize-scenes Laura and Joanna first discussed.

To celebrate its fifth year, we have asked some of the Prize's judges to write short articles exploring the genre, and former winners to reflect on the impact of the Prize on their writing lives. This booklet also features extracts from three memoirs published

this year that began life as a Prize entry, and a resource list of books and articles that you might like to read to help develop your own life writing. We hope you enjoy it.

It has been a privilege for Spread the Word to manage the Life Writing Prize over the past five years and we would like to extend our many thanks to Joanna for her support and generosity, without which the Prize would not have been possible. From a recent conversation with her, she reflected on what the Prize has achieved:

‘Since we founded the Life Writing Prize in 2016, I have been consistently surprised and astounded by the quality of the stories that I read each year, and by the bravery of all the authors who submit their work. The Prize has given a platform to unpublished writers without the need to have a finished manuscript. From year on year, it has helped to establish life writing as a genre that is diverse, inclusive and open to all, and one that has grown in prominence with agents and publishers. It has been heartening to see several of the winners go on to be published authors. The Life Writing Prize has become what I wanted it to be – an aspirational national Prize for writers exploring their unique lives in their own unique voices.’

Bobby Nayyar
Spread the Word
May 2021

KEYNOTE

Blake Morrison

I'd never heard of the term 'life writing' before I applied for the post of Professor of Creative and Life Writing at Goldsmiths in 2003. And I'd no sense that two books I'd written, one about my dad and one about my mum, were part of a distinct genre. Since then, life writing has flourished to become an essential part of our literary landscape. The Life Writing Prize, founded five years ago, is a marker of that. This year it attracted nearly 1,000 entries; they came from all parts of the UK and reflected the experiences of many different age groups and ethnicities. The Prize not only recognizes the importance of life writing but, thanks to its mentoring scheme, has begun to nurture its development: three highly commended writers – Kerri ní Dochartaigh, Claire Lynch and Xanthi Barker – have gone on to publish books which grew from pieces they submitted to the Prize. Along with its near-relation, autofiction, life writing is now at the cutting edge of our culture.

Fresh and innovative though life writing is, the term dates back to the 1940s, when Virginia Woolf used it (with a hyphen: 'life-writing') in the course of an essay that describes how a writer's 'shock-receiving capacity' can blunt the 'horror' of recovering buried memories: 'a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. I feel that I have had a blow... and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to

hurt me.' Life writing encompasses many different forms (memoir, biography, autobiography, poetry, autofiction, travel writing, blogs) and goes by other names (narrative non-fiction, creative non-fiction, lyric essay) but it invariably serves the therapeutic purpose Virginia Woolf describes: by making sense of her experience through words, the author feels better, safer, less vulnerable.

Most authors I know disapprove of writing-as-therapy. It's suggestive of a narcissistic splurge: better to see a shrink, or confess to a priest, than inflict your woes on an innocent reader. But life writing can be as controlled, and as sensitive to its audience, as any novel or poem. And what's cathartic isn't the unburdening of raw experience but the discovery of a shape or structure to translate that experience into art. What's more, the therapeutic element can be mutual, as beneficial to the reader as the writer. At its best, life writing is an exchange, a two-way process, a selfless self-outing. Here's what I went through, the author confides – it may be painful and shaming and difficult for you to read about but it's what happened to me and I want to be honest about it. Thanks for your story, the reader responds: it's my story too, or could have been, and for you to have put it into words has helped me. Oh, and by the way, it wasn't all grief: you made me laugh as well.

Humour often plays a part in life writing. Some of the experiences which Jenny Diski describes in her memoirs *Skating*

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to *Antarctica* and *In Gratitude* are heart-rending: neglect, rape, depression, terminal illness. But she's never self-pitying, and against the odds she can be very funny. 'If a way to the better there be,' Thomas Hardy said, 'it exacts a full look at the worst.' The life writer doesn't shy away from bad stuff. But it helps to have jokes along the way. You don't want readers to feel battered or prurient.

Students I've worked with always worry about the reaction they'll get from those they've written about: what will their parents or sibling or ex think? Just do it, I tell them. Write first and worry later. While it's still a draft don't imagine that groping uncle or faithless lover peering over your shoulder. Say what you need to say. If the time comes to publish what you've written, you can consider your options. A change of name, physique or hair colour may protect you from outrage or libel suits while the emotional truth you're conveying remains intact. For his autofiction, Philip Roth liked to cite the small penis rule: give a male character a small penis and the real-life model he's based on won't dare to sue.

'Of course it isn't the truth,' DH Lawrence told his lover Jessie Chambers when she complained about his version of events in what became *Sons and Lovers*, 'It's an adaptation from life, as all art must be.' Life writing *does* aim to be truthful, even if the truth is subjective; that's what sets it apart from fiction. But it too adapts from life – selects, shapes, finds metaphors, seeks out authenticating detail. It too is a form of storytelling, with the author doubling up as narrator. When I began to write about my father after his death, my first instinct was to make it fiction and leave myself out of the story. But the book was, in part, about our relationship; I couldn't not be

there. And I came to see that whatever potency the story might have depended on the reader believing it. Fictionalising would be counter-productive. Cowardly, too, a desperate attempt to avoid upsetting my mother by pretending the man in the novel wasn't her husband. It's not as if she'd have been fooled. Better to come clean and show her the draft I'd written. Which I did – she read it, made a few corrections and allowed me to go ahead.

Whatever you write, you can't get away from ethical considerations: about appropriating what's arguably not yours; about exposing others; about your subjects' right to privacy as against your right to freedom of expression. What's permissible is a matter for the individual conscience. I continue to believe, perhaps naively, that the truth caps everything. But motive matters too. To set the record straight is one thing, to be vindictive another. Hagiography is the enemy of life writing: a book that presents its protagonists as saintly is bound to be dull. But character assassination is equally wearisome. The best memoirs and biographies are nuanced, transcending the binaries of like and dislike. Rather than confirming our prejudices, they stretch and surprise us.

Surprise is crucial with life writing. If you can defeat expectations by working *against* rather than with your material, you're on the right lines: not everything that happens round a death-bed is grim; not every wedding is a joyous occasion. Your job as writer is to describe what happened and let the reader supply the emotional content. You don't need to tell us how you feel; what you observe will do the telling for you.

At the end of our last workshop together, I used to give my Goldsmiths MA students a set of rules or 'ten(tative) commandments'; a shorter version is below. The tenth is the most important.

1. **Grab the reader's attention from the off.** Draw us in, establish a voice and hint at what lies ahead.
2. **Put us there.** Make us see, hear, smell, taste and touch. In general use dialogue rather than reported speech.
3. **Dramatise yourself as the narrator.** It's your story (or a story to do with your family or someone important to you) and as our guide you can't be a blank sheet.
4. **Be strict about point a view.** If you're writing from the vantage point of a child, create a voice that sounds like a child (in tone if not vocabulary).
5. **Think about your tense.** The present tense will create immediacy; the past tense offers measured reflection. Different sections may require different choices.
6. **God is in the detail.** For your story to speak to others, it has to be specific.
7. **Use the same storytelling devices that novelists use –** plot, character, voice, motif and structure.

8. **Give signposts.** Find ways to help the reader along, especially if you have a complex story and/or large cast list.

9. **Pace the story.** It can't be all showing and no telling. Be bold with chronology.

10. **Rules are there to be broken.**

The Starting Place

Catherine Cho

I remember being told that the difference between fiction and non-fiction was in where you began. A work of fiction searches for truth, but in writing about your life, you had to begin from the truth.

It was a writing professor who told me this. It was my second year at university in New York, and the city still felt unfamiliar. He was older – a former military man who kept his gray hair clipped short. He taught only one class, a course on writing personal essays. I remember that when he told us about starting from the truth, it sounded like a command.

There were 15 of us, sitting around a large oak table, taking notes while our professor spoke. I remember we would watch scenes of dialogue from films, DVDs that he would pause and replay again and again. We would underline sentences from novels, revel in the language, in the placement of a noun. We would read poems from the transcendentalists and imagine seeing the world in a blade of grass.

We did all this before we ever tried starting to write.

I would realise that the truth is simple, but it is unforgiving in its starkness. To begin with the truth is to begin in a place without shelter.

I could begin with the oak table – the way we sat carefully so as not to take up too much space. I could write about the girl who cried when she read her piece about her mother. Or the boy who said he was a

few blocks away when the planes hit the South Tower, that he ran and ran, but he was still covered in dust when he reached the bridge.

I could write about the professor, who spoke with a Carolina drawl and had a voice like gravel. He reminded me of my godfather, a Southern man who wore a heavy sheepskin coat, drank his bourbon neat, and taught me to shoot a rifle. He loved poetry and would memorize long stanzas that he would recite in the evenings. He taught me to build a wood fire, to listen for bluebirds.

I could write about his laugh, how he always chuckled when my mother and I came to visit him at the retirement home, because the other residents would peer over to try and figure out why these two Asian women were coming to visit.

We would take my godfather to the local diner, and he would make a joke about how he'd lived so frugally, just to end up paying for 'this damn nursing home.' I could write about the trip he and my godmother had planned to take when he retired. It was a trip that would take them around the world, but she fell while packing up the books from his office. Her broken hip led to surgery, and then there was a diagnosis of Alzheimer's, and so the trip was something that existed only in an imaginary future.

I could write about the walk on the way to my class, by the marble archway of Washington Square Park, past the buskers and the dancers who played hip-hop while they tumbled and did handstands. There was a man in the park who would shout at the students who walked by. 'You're late! Go on!' They called him the Timekeeper. He wore a watch on each wrist, and he would point

at them and then at the sky with a ferocity. ‘Come on, get to class, get to class!’

And I would find myself walking faster.

I could write about the men who played chess in the park, sitting on folding chairs, frowning at the black and white pieces. I would think of the chess sets at the retirement home, there was a man who moved the pieces one by one, playing against himself or perhaps he wasn’t playing at all.

I could write about the day I sat in the park on a bright summer morning. I’d heard that my godfather had died the evening before, sitting in his favourite chair by a window. And I could see the Timekeeper pointing at his wrists and at the sky.

When I think of my godfather now, so many years later, I remember the echo of his voice, the silver of his hair. I remember

👉👉 **The truth begins in many places. It’s not always at the beginning, and it isn’t always chronological. But to begin from the truth is to strip away the shadows that soften our memories.**

how he waved and tried to smile while we drove away down the hill. And then I remember the gravestones of smooth marble, his wife and daughter, and the bluebells he’d planted there.

The truth begins in many places. It’s not always at the beginning, and it isn’t always chronological. But to begin from the truth is to strip away the shadows that soften our memories.

When I write, I imagine I am at that oak table again. I think of those words about the starting place, and I look for a way to summon the truth.

LIST OF WINNERS, JUDGES AND MENTORS

Over the last five years the Life Writing Prize has received nearly 4,000 entries. Here are the winners, judges and mentors from each year. Click on the titles of the winning entries to link through to where you can read the piece on the Spread the Word website.

2021

Winner: **Santanu Bhattacharya**, *[The Nicer One](#)*

Highly Commended: **Carla Jenkins**, *[Carving](#)*

Highly Commended: **Matt Taylor**, *[Tromode House](#)*

Judges: **Catherine Cho, Damian Barr and Frances Wilson**

Mentors: **Katy Massey, Max Porter and Winnie M Li**

2020

Winner: **Lorelei Goulding**, *[Birdie](#)*

Highly Commended: **Joanna Brown**, *[Birds can be heard singing through open windows](#)*

Highly Commended: **Laurane Marchive**, *[For the Flesh is Sour](#)*

Judges: **Kerry Hudson, Nell Stevens and Sathnam Sanghera**

Mentors: **Colin Grant, Kerri ní Dochartaigh and Max Porter**

2019

Winner: **Charlotte Derrick**, *The Lady in Black*

Highly Commended: **Alison Marr**, *Fat Baby*

Highly Commended: **Helen Longstreth**, *The Joy of Cooking*

Judges: **Colin Grant, Inua Ellams and Ros Barber**

Mentors: **Jacqueline Crooks and Lily Dunn**

2018

Winner: **Danny Brunton**, *New Boy*

Highly Commended: **Laura Morgan**, *Small Talk*

Highly Commended: **Xanthi Barker**, *Paradoxical*

Judges: **Erica Wagner, Hannah Lowe and Kwaku Osei-Afrifa**

Mentors: **Cathy Rentzenbrink and Miranda Doyle**

2017

Winner: **Jon Paul Roberts**, *1955 – 2012*

Highly Commended: **Claire Lynch**, *The Year Dot*

Highly Commended: **Kerri ní Dochartaigh**, *Mudlarking*

Judges: **Blake Morrison, Katy Massey and Margaret Stead**

Mentors: **Amy Liptrot and Hannah Lowe**

Case Study

Joanna Brown



When this photograph was taken, it did not seem particularly significant. My mother and I were at a wedding. One of her nursing colleagues. It was the summer after my A levels and the day before my mother's fifty-second birthday. Four weeks later, the photograph became the last ever taken of the two of us.

Six weeks after that, my father died. Out of the blue, as they say.

(Blue was my father's favourite colour. The colour of his shirts; the colour of his eyes. He was an obsessive blues fan. I would come to believe that he married my mother because she reminded him of Bessie Smith. 'Am I Blue?' The only tune I remembering him playing on the white upright piano he bought for me for a fiver from an East End pub in 1979.)

Now, I was nobody's child. I no longer belonged to anyone and had no family that I knew of. (This knowledge would shift seismically over the following weeks and, thirty years later, continues to do so.)

So the photograph captures both an ending and a beginning. The ending of my life as a daughter. The beginning of a life alone in the world until I would start a family of my own. As we sit and smile for the camera, my mother and I are completely innocent of this knowledge. We were not planning for that eventuality. I was not, in that moment, afraid of its possibility. It seemed so much further away than it was. Had we felt it coming, what would we have been doing that day? Would we have been smiling?

The compulsion to write about losing my mother was driven by the realisation that her sudden death was not a single devastating event. It is a recurring event. It resurfaces again and again: her absence powerfully present, a difficult guest at subsequent life events. Graduating from university and choosing not to attend the ceremony. Giving birth as a single mother, my arms around my closest friend's neck as my son made his way into the world. Placing a gold ring on the finger of my beloved, the man who understood me, in the same spot where my parents had married. Birthing my girl, extending the mother-daughter line.

“ The compulsion to write about losing my mother was driven by the realisation that her sudden death was not a single devastating event. It is a recurring event.

* * *

Making sense of that painfully present absence returns me to a thread of work I have been following intermittently for years now: my mother's life history. Much of it is shrouded in shadow. What story there is, is scant, fragmentary, impressionistic.

My journey through the archives leads me to photographs, birth certificates, shipping registers. These documents carry clues to the mystery of my own history: they are the rubber stamps of officialdom that mark our entry into the archive. But the archive itself is a complex space, riddled with silences and illusions, contradictions and inconsistencies, especially when it comes to Black lives. Navigating the colonial archive is fraught with the risk of frustration and repeated loss.

Many questions will remain unanswered. Many of the 'facts' will remain inaccessible.

So how do I fill the gaps in my own family story? I use the word 'story' because I believe that we craft our family history as we do any story. We select, we add, we omit, reorganise and reshape events so that we can make sense of them. In reaching for coherence, we form narrative.

I wrote about my mother's death in order to better understand its significance for me. Entering the Spread the Word Life Writing Prize provided a framework within which to find some coherence at the heart of the experience that continues to resonate throughout my life. The process opened up a space where I could call myself a writer and granted my work a platform and a readership that I

had been hesitant to seek out alone. Readers' responses to the piece made it clear to me that even the most intimate and personal of life stories can hold significance and resonance for others. Forging that connection is, for me, the true purpose of writing.

The opportunity to work with writer Colin Grant as my mentor was a gift that brought to the surface yet more of my own life stories and family histories that I am now exploring through the crafting of fiction. Now I can play in those spaces between what is known and unknown, I can speculate and wonder, write through the what ifs and the maybes, flesh out and make real the different versions of my story that hover at the edges of the family photographs, that lie in wait in the depths of the archival shadows.

Case Study

Charlotte Derrick

There is more representation than ever of the LGBTQ+ community in media. It's no longer a matter of acceptance and tolerance. It's celebrated, warmly welcomed – yet why is there still so little empathy when it comes to the death of queer people?

People in my life have argued that there are in fact empathetic representations of queer death and grief, but when asked to consider why that death happened, two conclusions were drawn: the death to character development for the central, usually cis-hetero character, and/or generally to move the story along, or it was trying to push a political message. The latter is understandable, but the hurt felt by the person/people who have to live on with this grief becomes cheap. It dehumanises an experience that is felt by everyone.

Cis-het people see their grief everywhere. Their pain is understood, empathy is abundant. Yet when it comes to the LGBTQ+ community, their feelings are non-existent. Support networks are focused on coming to terms with your sexuality, how to come out, how to explore your gender identity. This support is needed for some. It is integral to the individual in order to fully accept and be the person they were meant to be, but it must go beyond that.

When I finally reached out for help at eighteen to cope with how I was feeling, the counsellor I was assigned, who was LGBTQ+

friendly, didn't know how to offer support, nor did the counsellor I went to after that who specialised in spousal death. Both focused solely on my sexuality, when I was hurting after losing the woman who was and, nearly eight years later still is, the love of my life. I know I'm not alone in this feeling – 'I am queer, but I am in pain and I need help.'

Writing *The Lady in Black* was an important part of my healing and I will never regret writing it, but to have a pen and paper (or, in our more modern times, a laptop keyboard) as my only system of support was beyond isolating, and the fact that, two years later, I'm still debating appropriate support for queer people is a bloody shame. The death of a LGBTQ+ character in your favourite show may make you feel better about your own position in life, or give you a good cry at the weekend, but there are real people who are suffering deep losses. The people they have lost aren't expendable side characters that bring shock value or character development in their own life. They're husbands or wives or sisters or brothers. And if you could disregard their sexuality, their gender identity, all of that, you may realise that there's no difference in our pain at all.

Case Study

Lorelei Goulding

The first grown-up book I ever read was a biography of Helen Keller. I was seven years old when I borrowed it from the library and sat under the shade of an apple tree in the corner of my front lawn, consuming page after page. I remember lifting my head from my book and looking around – at the hot blue summer sky, at the stillness of the leaves on the branches, at the houses all around me on our suburban lane – and wondering what it would be like to not see any of it. I closed my eyes and made it all vanish into the black, and for the first time I briefly glimpsed what it might be like to be someone else. Helen Keller’s loneliness and isolation in her colourless and soundless world spoke to me, and her ultimate triumph over her circumstances filled me with a lightness I would later identify as hope.

I have always been drawn to ‘difficult’ stories, especially memoirs. I found so much of myself in the words written on these pages, even if the precise experiences were not the same as my own. From the moment I would pick up such a book, I could feel the potential for hope; heavy in my hands, tangible, weighted with possibility. Someone had survived *something* – loneliness, abuse, conflict, war – and was whole enough to write their story down and put it out in the world, a north star to help others navigate their private constellations of darkness.

In trying to make sense of myself and my life, I desperately needed these difficult stories. They connected me to the human

universal experiences of adversity and hope – and reassured me that I, too could survive and that I, too could overcome. *Birdie* is one such difficult story, and I wrote it thinking – hoping – it might help someone else navigate their own path of difficulty. Writing difficult stories and offering them to the world is a chance to interrogate and investigate the commonalities of our shared humanity, and – if an author gets it right – connect to that humanity in our readers.

Winning the Life Writing Prize for *Birdie* has proved to me that writing and reading difficult stories are absolutely essential for guidance, for empathy, for healing. Not only is there an audience for life writing and memoir, the vast demand for authenticity and for ‘real life’ stories to be told underscores our collective human need for reassurance – stories that say *I see you, I hear you, I have felt what you feel*. Stories that tell us yes, you can survive. Yes, you can triumph, here is the proof, within these words; I did it, the author says by the last page. The implication is that yes, so you can you, faithful reader. So can you.

After winning the Life Writing Prize last year, writing my own difficult memoir became a possibility – I signed with literary agent Marianne Gunn O’Connor; went on a week-long Arvon writing retreat courtesy of Spread the Word to write the first section; I worked closely with my Prize mentor – and now delightful friend – Kerri ní Dochartaigh to improve and shape my work. If I had not entered the Life Writing Prize, none of these things would have happened. I wouldn’t now have the chance to offer up my own story of adversity and hope to anyone who might need to hold a book in their hands the way I once held such books, the way I often still do – heavy in my hands, tangible, and weighted with possibility.

Case Study

Jon Paul Roberts

MICHELLE TEA

Push life in through your eyes and out your fingers. Is that what it means? An act of translation, A becomes – with effort – B, in which A is described. I read, recently, a male writer say that memoir isn't for everyone, read a tweet saying only certain people should get anywhere close to 'approximating' memoir. I find this to be banal, an opinion of little value. *Who gets to speak and why?* The question, it seems, still needs to be asked twenty years later.

CHRIS KRAUS

Sat on a ratty sofa in 2017, a call from an unknown number. When I answered, I expected a rejection call from a job waiting tables. Instead, it was Laura. She asked how I am? She said I had won the Prize I entered, the essay about my dad's death. We talked for fifteen minutes; she said nice things as I wandered, as I do on the phone, back and forth. After we hung up, I questioned it, stood in the silence leftover now two people, on opposite ends of London, had gone back to their day. There was value in what I'd written. Laura told me I got to speak and gave me a reason why.

The night before, at a pub near Euston, M's bag was stolen; her wallet, keys, and laptop gone. I told her the news while she was lying in bed, wondering how she'd meet her deadlines. When she got home the night before, she cried, and we ordered junk food. In that small, over-priced flat in NW, something was going on with luck. One robbed and the other now with money to pay the rent.

Does luck come into it? I sometimes think, then chastise myself

for doing so, if my dad hadn't died when he did, would I write? Is that luck? I wouldn't have written the essay (might not have written at all), and I wouldn't have written about my life because what would there be to write about. There's a chance I might have chosen fiction, instead, but *Once you have suffered sufficiently, the idea of making up John and Jane and having them do things together seems utterly ridiculous.*

RACHEL CUSK

Physics - the subject my dad taught - doesn't trade in luck, only in what can be proven. Perhaps, I write to figure out if luck plays a part or to see if, like Joan Didion wondered in the seventies, if any of it means anything. Perhaps, I write to prove it does, to pull experience like teeth and offer something of value made from those bloodied studs. That may sound violent, but the way I write can be. It may lead to beauty, but violence comes first. The furious typing, the fact-checking, the ongoing battle with the gas-like truth which can't be held but can be used to numb. The wrangling of experience before the calm. Then, a necklace, perhaps? A bracelet? All made of bloodied teeth, yet somehow beautiful.

Thin Places

Kerri ní Dochartaigh

The piece of life writing I entered to Spread the Word's fantastic competition in its first year was the seed that grew into my first book – *Thin Places* – published by Canongate in January 2021. That piece was called *Mudlarking* and appears in almost unedited form in the second chapter of *Thin Places* as *The Bridge of Sorrows*. In my Spread the Word entry I touched upon the idea that when we come from a place that is bogged down by things like sorrow, loss, violence and intergenerational trauma – like my hometown of Derry – it can be very hard to find our way through; to make our way safely out of thick, crow-black muck. Our sense of self might feel unanchored; our ideas of who and what we are muddied.

I grew up, to start with, in a terraced house on a rough grey council estate. Rather, I started my growing up in the garden of that house, spending as much time knee-deep in the mud that never really dried out due to the unstoppable rain that swept in from the Atlantic. Ours is a past steeped in rust, a history bathed in thick black squelch, mudlarking, always, for our sense of self.

Through the writing of *Mudlarking*, and the incredible support both of my mentor Amp Liptrot and the entire team at Spread the Word, I grew more confident in unearthing that sense of self. I grew more keen on trying to make my way back up from the silt; into the light.

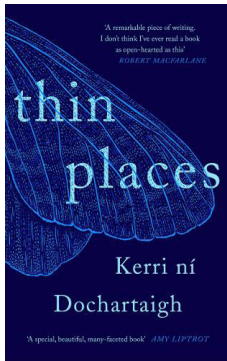
Writing of any form can be a difficult, emotional and isolating process – perhaps the most extreme of all is the writing of a difficult past – and *Thin Places* would not be the book it is today without the support, guidance and care offered to me through this prize. It can feel so daunting to take those first steps of putting words on a page at any point but when they are the hardest words you might ever write; that needs a whole lot more that you can manage on your own. Mentorship coupled with the knowledge that my words – despite feeling dark and heavy to me – mattered to others. What I wrote held power to bring hope to others and without that sense of hope the Life Writing Prize offered me I would never have carried on through many of the hard times involved in growing the piece from a short essay into a full-length memoir. I will never stop being grateful for everything that came about because of this support.

“ Writing of any form can be a difficult, emotional and isolating process – perhaps the most extreme of all is the writing of a difficult past

An Extract from *Thin Places*

I was half the age I am now when I left my hometown. The year that I moved back, the UK voted to leave the EU. Despite the words about unity, solidarity and strength in togetherness, lots of people decided they wanted to choose a different path. Derry – my border town in the north-west of Ireland – known for being the place ‘the

Troubles' began, voted to remain. There is a very particular type of wisdom that is born out of witnessing unimaginable cruelty, out of the experience of dark, harrowing sorrow. I remember standing on this same beach just after that vote and weeping, memories surging through my insides like hidden tributaries. No more, no more, no more – we have all had enough already, enough for many lifetimes. That border has become a thread in the lives of so many more people between that day in 2016 and this one, three and a



half years later. The fog has lifted a little; to the right of me, its silky grey veil is still laid too low to allow the outline of Scotland to come into view. Now, just below the lighthouse, the crotach – the curlews – grace the middle part of the sky again. They are heading round the curve of the bay towards Greencastle, maybe even onwards yet. Maybe they are flying away from here, where Lough

Foyle floods into the Atlantic Ocean, to follow the flow of the river across the border and into the North. Or maybe they will turn the other way, chart a path over fossil-traced bog-land, above gorse and ceannbhán – bog-cotton – where butterflies and moths have left fragments of their tissue wings. Maybe today they will choose to fly above estuary and stream, over the mountains of the Donegal Gaeltacht, their cries blending together with words in the native tongue of those they fly above, in the South. They nest all over this land, those of them that are left, on both sides of the border. The

season is turning; I felt it so fully in the water today. November's full moon marks the birth of a new Celtic year, at the same time as symbolising an end, the death of the old year. It is known as the mourning moon in Pagan tradition. In many cultures, this full moon is intimately connected with death and loss, on both a literal and symbolic level. Some folk call it the snow or fog moon, and I can both feel and see why, today, as I shiver beneath sea fog that hides the sun away. There is a pale yellow-grey hue to it, and a softness that could easily bring the snow. My ancestors knew it as the reed moon. I watch as the *giolcach* – the reeds – move about in the icy breeze, and I imagine my ancestors watching too, from a place, like the full moon, that I cannot see....

There are places – like this one – which are so thin that you meet yourself in the still point. Like the lifting of the silky veil on Samhain, you are held in the space in between. No matter the past, the present or what is yet to come. There is nothing you can do but listen for the gap in the silence, the change in the wind. The right moment, when it comes, calls you up, up; calls you into a wind that lifts you. A wind that carries you with it, on its tails. Watch. First the curlews, next the moth, and now – you.

small: on motherhoods

Claire Lynch

I wrote *The Year Dot* as a sort of test, wondering if I had it in me to write openly about my experiences of becoming a mother. I wanted to describe what being a non-birth mother was like, to explore the sometimes funny, sometimes hurtful ways, my partner and I were treated in fertility clinics, antenatal classes, hospital wards. Mostly, I wanted to capture the reality of early parenthood, fleeting moments grasped in small fragments of text.

It was an incredible surprise when *The Year Dot* was highly-commended in the inaugural Life Writing Prize. Receiving feedback from the judges, and being given the chance to read my work to an audience for the first time, was thrilling and terrifying in equal parts. While I was working on my first full draft, the brilliant Emma Finn of C+W agency found the piece on the Spread the Word website and gave me a call.

Being taken on by Emma was the beginning of a steep learning curve. While many of the editors we shared the first proposal with were enthusiastic about my writing, there was caution about the theme. Was a story of queer parenting too niche? Would it sell? In the end we decided to put the project on hold. I got on with my life, my day job, we had another baby.

A year later, during lockdown, I saw, at last, the book I needed to write. In the few years since the Life Writing Prize my life and my writing had changed. I knew now that I wanted to write about

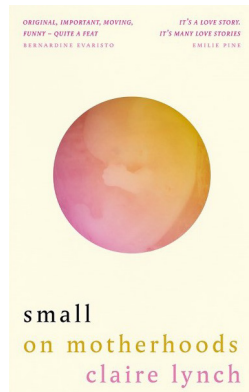
family life in a way that took children and childhood seriously. I wanted to let the language and form capture what it felt like to sit

“ The Life Writing Prize gave me permission to start writing and the confidence to keep going.”

beside an incubator or stay awake all night with a teething baby. It seems absurd now that I wrote a book in these circumstances, both adults working full time from home, three children under five, all the chaos of being under the same roof together for all that time. Yet somehow, in

June 2020, I felt ready to get back in touch with Emma. I asked her if she'd be willing to read a few pages.

My book *small: on motherhoods* will be published on 24th June 2021, a year to the day since that email was sent. There have been months of frantic work in between. Working closely with Romilly Morgan, my brilliant editor at Brazen, and the team who have worked so hard to bring this book into the world. When I read back through the original piece now I can see the handful of lines that have endured, the things I have changed, or cut. The Life Writing Prize gave me permission to start writing and the confidence to keep going. I kept it in the back of my mind as I wrote during those strange lockdown months, a small vote of confidence to send me on my way.



Extract from *small: on motherhoods*

hours

Night, you call it, although the birds outside sound fairly sure it's morning.

The baby, still waking, awake again.

Bewildered mid-dream, her arms reaching up to you.

The injustice of being left alone.

You try all the usual things,

rocking,

walking,

singing,

begging.

You work thorough the checklist of baby woes, trying to coax her back to sleep.

You are the only two people awake in the whole world.

It's not the crying babies, but the sleeping ones, that break your spirit. Crying babies are chemical reactions, milking you for adrenaline, rage, self-pity. The real test comes on the nights you find yourself trapped under the feather-weight of a baby curled in sleep, afraid to move,

breathing as quietly as you can to survive. That's when you hear them. All the sounds of the night, the crowbars prising open your kitchen window, the melody of all your self-doubt ringing in your ears.

If it were a love affair you would leave it, this mess of power and control you're caught up in. Sitting once more in the straight-backed armchair, you think of all the hours you have spent like this. This baby, the others. All the secrets you have stored in the curves of their tiny seashell ears. All of the impossible promises you have made.

The room is made strange by shadows. The folds of the curtain, the patterns on wallpaper, and all the things they turn into at night.

Is this why the baby won't sleep?

o

These hours are not empty. The nights not free from adventure. You abridge the list to a highlight reel:

The night you tripped on the stairs, spraying formula milk in an arc on the wall.

The night you found, with horror, a slug on the kitchen work surface as you made up a bottle.

The night you heard teenagers coming home as the night tipped into light. Singing and pushing each other into the empty road.

All the nights that you and the baby have seen. All the nights you will remember, all the nights she won't, in this time before memory. All the small hours you have spent awake, and not.

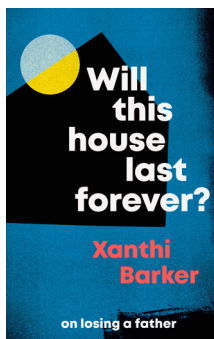
In that place where memories find you. Lurking. The names of friends from school, lost in time. Song lyrics you can't shake off. The memory of your brother's pet goldfish that everyone forgot to bury. Found years later in the garden shed, a skeleton in a matchbox.

And when she sleeps, her body resting on the slope of your chest, her head in the crook of your neck, then you think, surely, this has been well designed.

And when you sleep, finally, you find your sleep has changed. You sleep too close to the surface, alert and electric. Waking with a start, thinking you have smothered a baby. Digging at the covers, searching under pillows, until the voice beside you says Stop. A hand on your arm, pulling you back under the sheets. It's ok, she's safe in her cot, look. Look.

Will This House Last Forever

Xanthi Barker



‘Paradoxical’ was written in one go and I entered it almost unedited for the 2018 Life Writing Prize. I was trying to put into words something that had been troubling me for years, this feeling that to say my dad was dead was a lie and I could not go on pretending it was true. When I wrote it, I felt certain that I had proved this to be the case — I was thinking of the piece almost

as a philosophical argument — but later on it was more like the opposite. Especially after it was published, I didn’t feel the same way anymore. My dad was really gone, and for a while I resented what was written because of that.

When Spread the Word introduced me to my mentor, Cathy Rentzenbrink, I had an assortment of half-formed things I had written about my dad in the years since he had died – a mixture of journals and letters and stories. I showed some to Cathy and it was her enthusiasm, decisiveness and encouragement

“ Once I had written all the pieces, I tried to arrange them in some kind of order. It felt like a huge task to find a thread that would make sense but stay faithful to the shattering experience of grief.

– she said, more or less, stop whatever else you’re working on and do this, now, and get on with it – that put a kind of force in me to imagine and write the rest. I knew ‘Paradoxical’ would be part of it, but in the end it functioned also as a springboard, directing me towards memories and experiences that were important for the story of the book, that is, the story of my relationship with my dad when he was alive and after he died.

Once I had written all the pieces, I tried to arrange them in some kind of order. It felt like a huge task to find a thread that would make sense but stay faithful to the shattering experience of grief. This was something that I returned to later with my editor from Tinder Press. I’m pleased that ‘Paradoxical’ remains in the final book, if slightly shorter. I’m also pleased that the paradox is never resolved but finds a mirror in the end of the book, as, years later, sometimes I think again that it’s not true he died.

I’m incredibly grateful for the support of Cathy Rentzenbrink and Spread the Word. It’s certain that without them this book would not have made it beyond the destructive force of my inner critic. I find it terrifying to publish anything I’ve written, but something this personal and connected to some of the most difficult times of my life is even more so. But in this case the early encouragement of the Life Writing Prize functioned as a soothing balm any time I wanted to throw it all away.

Extract from *Will This House Last Forever*

You didn't pack any shoes.

You were travelling in slippers and you didn't pack any shoes.

You had your leather bag and it was flopped over because there was nothing in it except copies of your new book, a selection of fine-liners, a can of SprayMount, two pairs of underpants and a wash bag. Then at the last moment you added a photocopy of the next three days' schedules from the *Radio Times*.

I said, 'Daddy, aren't you taking any shoes?'

You looked at me like I'd suggested we take a limousine.

'Shoes? I hadn't thought of that.'

'What if you want to go outside? What if there's an emergency?'

You looked at me and I understood everything I was too stupid to know five seconds earlier. Then I made a face so we could both forget.

'What about clothes, then? You could use an extra set, at least.'

We were going away for four days.

You nodded and shuffled and said I was quite right and looked at your wife who rushed upstairs to find you some and I blushed in the cold hallway with my feet still in the shoes I hadn't taken off, considering how shoes are not a thing it occurs to a person they will no longer need.

Then I said, 'So this is where I learned to pack light.'

I wanted to make you laugh and I almost did. Your smile gave way but a second later you were clutching the table, gasping that you needed to sit down.

I held out my arm and you took it, patting my shoulder with your free hand to cancel out our shame, and I helped you into the green armchair in the next room where snail trails ran superhighways across the carpet. You sat down and your head fell forward so your chin hit your sternum as your eyes shut, concentrating on getting your breath back. Fluttering sounds came from your chest, like – and it would not have been unlike you – you were keeping a menagerie of birds inside.

You sat in that chair, your hips door-wide though you'd lost so much weight. Last year's pride at your slim figure turned to baggy clothes, child-size bowls of cereal, ice cream you wouldn't eat because you said it tasted like cement. But I would have said you were built out of cement. The hugeness of you never felt fat to me but somehow heroic, necessary for your gravity, the sign of the house you built out of rubble on a mountainside built into you. I thought that was what *Dad* meant: man made of hardwood, made to last forever. I thought you looked as stately and collected and wise as a man could, who had been told he might die any day.

FURTHER READING

A list curated by Miranda Doyle – includes books written by Life Writing Prize Judges, Mentors and winners in this genre.

LIFE WRITING & MEMOIR

Xanthi Barker

Will This House Last Forever? (2021) London: Tinder Press

Damian Barr

Maggie & Me (2014) London: Bloomsbury

Alan Bennett

Writing Home (1994) London: Faber & Faber

Catherine Cho

Inferno: A Memoir of Motherhood and Madness (2021)

London: Bloomsbury

Joan Didion

The White Album (1979) London: Wiedenfield & Nicholson

Kerri ní Dochartaigh

Thin Places (2021) Edinburgh: Canongate

Miranda Doyle

A Book of Untruths (2018) London: Faber & Faber

Marguerite Duras

The Lover (1986) London: Flamingo

Dave Eggers

A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius (2000)

London: Macmillan

Colin Grant

Bageye at the Wheel: A 1970s Childhood in Suburbia (2013)

London: Vintage

Maxine Hong Kingston

A Woman Warrior (1981) London: Picador

Kerry Hudson

Lowborn: Growing Up, Getting Away and Returning to Britain's

Poorest Towns (2020) London: Vintage

Deborah Levy

The Cost of Living (2018) London: Penguin

Amy Liptrot

The Outrun (2015) Edinburgh: Canongate

Hannah Lowe

Long Time No See (2015) Reading: Periscope

Claire Lynch

small: on motherhoods (2021) London: Brazen

Carmen Maria Machado

In the Dream House (2020) London: Profile

Katy Massey

Are We Home Yet? (2020) London: Jacaranda Books

Blake Morrison

And When Did you Last see your Father? (1993) London: Granta

Maggie Nelson

The Argonauts (2015) London: Melville House

Michael Ondaatje

Running in the Family (1982) London: Macmillan

Cathy Rentzenbrink

The Last Act of Love: The Story of My Brother and His Sister (2016)

London: Picador

Sathnam Sanghera

The Boy with the Topknot: A Memoir of Love, Secrets and Lies (2009)
London: Penguin

David Sedaris

Me Talk Pretty One Day (2001) London: Abacus

Lemn Sissay

My Name is Why (2019) Edinburgh: Canongate

Nell Stevens

Bleaker House: Chasing My Novel to the End of the World (2018)
London: Picador

Natasha Trethewey

Memorial Drive (2021) London: Bloomsbury

Virginia Woolf

A Room of One's Own (1929) London: Penguin

BOOKS & ARTICLES ON WRITING

Vivian Gornick

The Situation and the Story (2002) New York: Macmillan

Lee Gutkind

You Can't Make This Stuff Up (2012) Boston: First Da Capo

Stephen King

On Writing (2000) London: Hodder & Stoughton

Phillip Lopate

To Show and To Tell (2013) New York: Free Press

Blake Morrison

'You must write a memoir as if you're writing a novel.'

Janet Malcolm

The Journalist and the Murderer (1991) London: Bloomsbury

George Orwell

Why I write

Nikesh Shukla (ed.)

The Good Immigrant (2017) London: Unbound

Jesmyn Ward

Structure and Memoir

BIOGRAPHIES



Blake Morrison is a poet, novelist, memoirist and journalist. His non-fiction books include *And When Did You Last See Your Father?*, which won the J. R. Ackerley Prize and the Esquire/Volvo/Waterstone's Non-Fiction Book Award, *As If*, about the murder of the toddler James Bulger in Liverpool in 1993, and a memoir of his mother, *Things My Mother Never Told Me*. His poetry includes the collections *Dark Glasses*, winner of a Somerset Maugham Award. Since 2003, Blake has been Professor of Creative and Life Writing at Goldsmiths College. He is patron of the Life Writing Prize.



Catherine Cho is a literary agent and author of *Inferno: A Memoir*. Originally from the US, she lives in London with her family.



Joanna Brown writes and teaches with a focus on Black history, writing and lives. Her recent work includes the development of an education programme for the literature festival Africa Writes, and creative writing workshops at the British Library, where she currently holds an Eccles Centre Research Fellowship.

At the time of writing, she is a Masters student in Creative Writing at Royal Holloway and is about to embark on a PhD. She is drawn to the spaces between life writing and fiction, and the role of the archive in the creation of memory.



Charlotte Derrick is an emerging prose writer/poet from Belfast, Northern Ireland. They were the winner of Spread the Word's Life Writing Prize 2019, and were shortlisted for the V.S Pritchett Short Story Prize. Their work has been featured in *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *The Elevation Review*, *The Honest Ulsterman*, *The Esthetic Apostle*, etc.



Lorelei Goulding is originally from Long Island, New York and studied English Literature at university as an undergraduate. After stints in Buffalo, Seattle, and Manhattan, she moved to London for work in 1998 and has remained in England since. She will graduate with an MSc in Public Health from the University of the West in Bristol in November 2021. After winning the Spread the Word Life Writing Prize last year, she was signed by literary agent Marianne Gunn O'Connor and is now working on her memoir, *Birdie*. She lives in a speck of a hamlet in rural Somerset with her husband and three teenage children who all keep her on her toes. She loves swimming in the quarry, singing in the car, and quiet early mornings in the sunlight.



Jon Paul Roberts is a writer and critic from Chester. Their work has appeared in publications such as *The Spool*, *Another North*, *The Doe*, *Brightest Young Things*, *Metro*, *Huffington Post*, and others. They are currently working on an autobiographical novel and various essays, as well as their PhD focusing on experience and politics within life writing. They occasionally teach writing at Liverpool John Moores University.



Kerri ní Dochartaigh is from the North West of Ireland but now lives in the middle, in an old railway cottage with her partner and dog. She has written for *The Guardian*, *The Irish Times*, *Winter Papers*, *Caught By The River* and others. She is the author of *Thin Places* (Canongate, 2021).



Claire Lynch studied at the universities of Kent and Oxford. She works as a university lecturer and is the author of two academic books and numerous scholarly articles and chapters. *small* (Brazen, 2021) is her first book for a general audience.



Xanthi Barker lives in London with her partner and son. Her novelette *One Thing* was published in 2019 by Open Pen. *Will this house last forever?* is her first book.

ABOUT SPREAD THE WORD

Spread the Word is London's writer development agency and a National Portfolio client of Arts Council England. It is funded to help London's writers make their mark on the page, the screen and in the world and build strategic partnerships to foster a literature ecology which reflects the cultural diversity of contemporary Britain. Spread the Word has a national and international reputation for initiating change-making research and developing programmes for writers that have equity and social justice at their heart. In 2015 it launched, *Writing the Future: Black and Asian Writers and Publishers in the UK Market Place*. In 2020 it launched *Rethinking 'Diversity' in Publishing* by Dr Anamik Saha and Dr Sandra van Lente, Goldsmiths, University of London, in partnership with *The Bookseller* and Words of Colour. Spread the Word's programmes include: the Young People's Laureate for London, the London Writers Awards and the national Life Writing Prize.

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