

**RESEARCH SEMINAR**  
**Thursday 2 September, 2021**

**Cognitive Literary Explorations of Life-Writing:  
Memory, Emotion and the Autobiographical  
Exchange**

**Dr Merrill Howie**

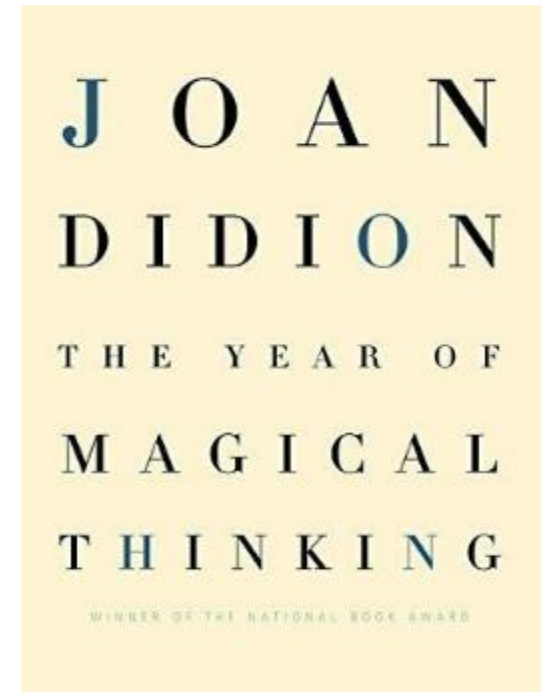
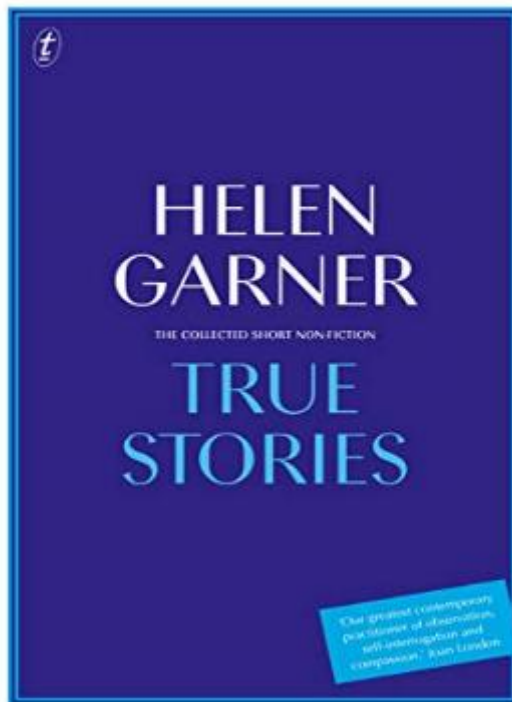
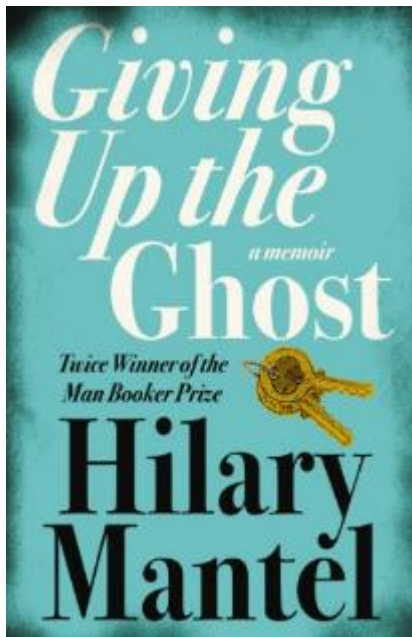
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- **“Reading autobiography makes us remember our own childhoods, our own families, our own experiences; it makes clear that we make sense of our own lives with reference to the lives of others” (David McCooey, *Artful Histories*, 4).**

# Two-Way Mirror





- **Hilary Mantel** (1952 - ) – British author of diverse oeuvre - novels short stories and autobiographical writing. Two-time Man Booker prize-winner for her Tudor novels *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012).
- **Janet Frame** (1924 – 2004) – Innovative New Zealand writer of novels, short stories, YA fiction and poetry. International recognition followed the publication of her autobiographical trilogy between 1983-85: *To the Is-land*, *An Angel at My Table* (adapted into an award-winning film by Jane Campion) and *The Envoy from Mirror City*.
- **Helen Garner** (1942 - ) – “one of Australia’s most gifted writers” (McDonald 269), experimental author, unconstrained by generic boundaries, producing award-winning works of fiction, non-fiction and film. Noted for the subjective stance she brings to her literary journalism.
- **Joan Didion** (1934 - ) – iconic Californian author of fiction, non-fiction and film. Defining contributor to the emergence of New Journalism: combining fictional techniques with personal subjectivity and objective commentary.

# Cognitive Literary Analysis of the Literary Memoir's Affective Architecture

- **Investigative Model:**
- **Foundation Stone: Autobiographical Memory**
- **Structural Pillars: Emotion and Empathy**
- **Analyses: sustained bifocal considerations of the representation (text) and potential impact (reader) of memory, emotion and empathy.**

- **“We are taught to be chary of early memories. [. . .] Though my early memories are patchy, I think they are not . . . a confabulation, and I believe this because of their overwhelming sensory power . . . As I say ‘I tasted’, I taste, and as I say ‘I heard’, I hear: I am not talking about a Proustian moment, but a Proustian cine-film” (Mantel, *Giving Up the Ghost*, 23-4).**

- **“I have an investment in accuracy [ . . . ] Part of our difficulty in trusting ourselves is that in talking of memory we are inclined to use geological metaphors. We talk about buried parts of our past and assume the most distant in time are the hardest to reach . . . I don’t think memory is like that: rather that it is like St Augustine’s ‘spreading limitless room’. Or a great plain, a steppe, where all the memories are laid side by side, at the same depth, like seeds under the soil” (Mantel, *Giving Up the Ghost*, 24-5).**



- “If I were alone could he come back to me on the smile?”
- Would he say get a table at Ernie’s?
- PSA and the smile no longer exist, sold to US Airways and then painted off the planes.
- Ernie’s no longer exists, but was briefly re-created by Alfred Hitchcock, for *Vertigo*. James Stewart first sees Kim Novak at Ernie’s.
- Later she falls from the bell tower (also re-created, an effect) at Mission San Juan Bautista.
- We were married at San Juan Bautista.
- On a January afternoon when the blossoms were showing in the orchards off 101.
- When there were still orchards off 101.
  
- No. The way you got sideswiped was by going back” (Didion, 52-3).

- “Reading autobiography”, as McCooey has observed, “makes us remember our own childhoods, our own families, our own experiences” (4). This study’s analytical model, which can be adapted for scholarship into other rhetorically persuasive, emotive texts, such as new journalism or poetry, allows a more detailed understanding of the cognitive and literary interrelationships that enable the two-way exchanges with life-writing to which McCooey refers.
- This multidisciplinary mode of enquiry can thereby enhance our knowledge of how the eloquent configuration of experience into art, can conversely engender memorable, emotional involvements that transform art into experience.

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