**WRITING SELVES: UNDERSTANDING AUTOBIOGRAPHY ~ JOURNAL**

**Introduction**

The texts which I will be discussing in this journal are Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*, Primo Levi's *If This is a Man*, J. G. Ballard's *Empire of the Sun*, Lorna Sage's *Bad Blood*, and Albert Camus' *The First Man*. In my treatment of Rousseau's *Confessions*, I will explore the seminal ideas he puts forward about the nature of the self, with particular reference to the criticism of Linda Anderson.

Through the application of relevant concepts from Tzvetan Todorov's close analysis of moral life in the concentration camps to Levi's *If This is a Man*, I hope to demonstrate the way in which both his writing style and experience of nature necessarily differs from the views proffered by Rousseau.

Drawing on the literature of Alison Chisholm and Brenda Courtie, I will examine the blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction, which is such a problematic aspect of the autobiographical genre, in relation to Ballard's *Empire of the Sun*.

Applying the opinions of eighteenth century diarist James Boswell to the actions of Lorna Sage's grandfather, I aim to demonstrate how a retreat into journal writing is both a masculine pursuit and a requisite for the development of a stable self.

Finally, I will highlight the manner in which Camus' *The First Man* can be interpreted as exemplifying Derrida's logic behind his call for 'autobiography' to be redefined as 'thanatography'.

**Jean-Jacques Rousseau - *Confessions***

In one of the introductory sessions to the *Writing Selves: Understanding Autobiography* module, we read an excerpt from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*. I was immediately struck by the unbelievable self-absorption and egotism that was apparent in the extract:

Simply myself. I know my own heart and understand my fellow man. But I am made unlike any one I have ever met; I will even venture to say that I am like no one in the whole world.[[1]](#endnote-2)

Intrigued by Rousseau's stated belief in his own uniqueness, I bought a copy of his *Confessions* from the Waterstone's bookshop in Manchester and read it during the first week of February.

Having read the *Confessions* in its entirety, my overall impression of Jean-Jacques Rousseau is that he was an extremely competitive and sensuous individual. Rousseau's competitive spirit shines through when he charts his childhood development, repeatedly emphasising his own precociousness with regard to human emotions:

I had feelings before I had thoughts; that is the common lot of humanity. **But I was more affected by it than others are.** [...] By this dangerous method I acquired in a short time not only a marked facility for reading and comprehension, but also an understanding, **unique in one of my years, of the passions.[[2]](#endnote-3)**

The sensuous element to Rousseau's personality is shown through his love of women, music, walking, reading, and watching, for the sake of aesthetic pleasure:

[...] Women, for a start. When I had one, my senses were at peace but my heart never was. [...] Music was another of my passions, less stormy, but no less consuming because of the ardour with which I abandoned myself to it [...] And why include only the permanent features of this state, when every folly that crossed my fickle mind, the passing fancies of a single day, a journey, a concert, a supper, a walk to be taken, a novel to be read, a play to be seen [...][[3]](#endnote-4)

In the Introduction to the 2000 edition of this autobiography, Patrick Coleman states that "Rousseau's *Confessions* may justifiably be called the first modern autobiography because they combine for the first time two revolutionary ideas about the self"[[4]](#endnote-5). I intend now to provide examples from the text which support this argument, demonstrating how the competitive, solitude-loving Rousseau, with his high level of attention to detail in relation to his epicurean experience, came to produce a work of such seminal importance.

Patrick Coleman states that "one [revolutionary idea about the self] is the uniqueness of the individual personality, an irreducible sense of self which can be distinguished from all social, cultural, and religious identities, and which indeed is experienced most intensely in reaction against those identities."[[5]](#endnote-6) The fact that Rousseau only adopts a religion when it will aid him in some way demonstrates the fact that he believes his own sense of self is unaffected by his choice of religion. In 1728 Rousseau converted to Catholicism on the advice of a fellow resident at Mme de Warens' establishment, without ever believing in the Catholic 'dogma':

[...]I should go to Turin where, in a hospice that had been set up for the instruction of catechumens, I would, he said, receive temporal and spiritual support [...] A month later it was my turn; for this was the time it took to procure for my directors the honour of a difficult conversion, and they insisted on taking me again through every article of dogma, so that they might exult over my newfound docility.[[6]](#endnote-7)

In 1754, following the submission of his 'Second Discourse', which he dedicated to the city of Geneva, Rousseau returned to Geneva and embraced Calvinism in order to reclaim his rights as a citizen:

When I arrived in this latter city [Geneva] I abandoned myself entirely to the republican fervour that had brought me there. [...] Received with open arms [...] and, ashamed at being excluded from my rights as a citizen because I now professed a different creed than that of my forefathers, I decided to embrace this latter again openly.[[7]](#endnote-8)

Religion, for Rousseau, is not an end in itself, but a means through which he can improve his standard of living. Rousseau does not believe that faith in God is the key to a happy existence, or that God is the source of all truth; a point made by Linda Anderson:

[...] Rousseau addresses God as a source of emphasis at the beginning of his autobiography rather than turning to him, either here or elsewhere, as a pre-eminent and sufficient arbiter of a truth.[[8]](#endnote-9)

Indeed, Rousseau gives precedence to Nature, rather than religion, as the ultimate determinant of truth, and proposes that enlightenment can come only with self-knowledge, *videlicet* - knowledge of the true **nature** of the self:

I am resolved on an undertaking that has no model and will have no imitator. I want to show my fellow-men a man **in all the truth of nature**; and this man is to be myself.[[9]](#endnote-10)

[and]

I have often noticed that, even among those who most pride themselves on their knowledge of mankind, each of them knows scarcely anything apart from himself, **if indeed it is true that any of them knows even himself** [...][[10]](#endnote-11)

As can be seen from the above quotations, Rousseau's purpose in writing his autobiography was to illustrate the breadth of his self-knowledge. Particularly as the autobiography was published posthumously, Rousseau's motivation for writing his *Confessions* can be seen as exemplifying one of the "Reasons for Wanting to Write" detailed in the Introduction of *How to Write about Yourself*:

*Do you want to preserve something of the essence of your being for people who will read about it when you have gone?[[11]](#endnote-12)*

Anderson picks up on this point and argues that Rousseau believed his role as autobiographer involved nothing more than presenting the reader with all the available evidence:

His responsibility as autobiographer was to give the reader all the evidence that was available; all, therefore, that the reader should need in order to arrive at the correct judgement.[[12]](#endnote-13)

The manner in which Rousseau reacts against external influences on the construction of his identity is illustrated by his retreat to the Hermitage, a retreat into solitude in which he is able to follow his own pursuits and interests without the interruptions imposed upon him by the social duties inherent in community life:

[...] At last all my wishes have come true! My first task was to abandon myself wholly to my impressions of the rural objects that surrounded me. [...] The more I examined this charming retreat the more I felt that it had been made for me. Its site, lonely rather than wild, transported me in imagination to the ends of the earth [...] and, if you were suddenly transported there, you would never have believed yourself to be within four leagues of Paris.[[13]](#endnote-14)

Rousseau's determination that he alone will forge his identity, coupled with his happiness in solitude, is highlighted by Anderson:

Rousseau's refusal of other sources for himself and 'radical internalization' of personal identity makes him, for Williams, both 'novel' and 'influential' (Williams 1983:3). [...] Rousseau is at his happiest when he can escape into an unbounded state of reverie, when he can wander and think without encountering limit or obstruction.[[14]](#endnote-15)

According to Patrick Coleman, "The other [revolutionary idea about the self] is the mobility of that self, a capacity not only to play a wide variety of roles... but in addition to identify so passionately and successfully with a new role as to transform oneself, at least for a time, into a different person."[[15]](#endnote-16) The enormity of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's social mobility is illustrated by the numerous, diverse posts he holds during his lifetime. At various times of his life Rousseau is an apprentice engraver, a footman, an employee of the French embassy, an opera composer, an encyclopaedia contributor, an essay writer, and a novelist. Rousseau brings his irrepressible passions to each role, as the following textual examples demonstrate:

With my vocation thus decided, I was **apprenticed**; not, however, to a watchmaker, but **to an engraver**. [...] My new master, who was called M. Ducommun, was a coarse and violent young man, who succeeded in no time at all in dulling my childish brightness, in deadening my affectionate and lively nature, and reducing me, both in spirit and in status, to the rank of apprentice to which I properly belonged.[[16]](#endnote-17)

I was taken to see the lady by the servant who had told her about me. [...] I found myself in her service, not exactly as a favourite, but **as a footman**. [...] Such was the unexpected fulfilment of all my high hopes![[17]](#endnote-18)

Ever since the time of his predecessor, M. de Froulay, whose mind had become deranged, the French consul, whose name was M. Leblond, had looked after the **embassy's business** [...] This made my situation quite agreeable and prevented his gentlemen-in-waiting, who were Italian as were his pages and the majority of his servants, from disputing my pre-eminence in the household.[[18]](#endnote-19)

Music in Italy costs so little that there is no point in depriving yourself of it if you have any taste for it. [...] We tried out, too, some of the movements from **my *Gallant Muses***, and, either because he genuinely liked them or because he wanted to flatter me [...][[19]](#endnote-20)

These two authors [d'Alembert and Diderot] had **just started work on the *Encyclopaedic Dictionary*** [...] The latter wanted to involve me in some way [...] I accepted, and which I completed, very hurriedly and very badly, within the three months he had given me [...][[20]](#endnote-21)

One day I took the *Mercure de France* and, scanning it as I walked, happened upon the following question proposed by the **Academy of Dijon** for its prize the following year [...] The moment I read these words I saw another universe and I became another man.[[21]](#endnote-22)

Pleased at having drawn up my rough plan, I returned to the detail of the situations I had outlined; and from the order in which I arranged these, the first two parts of ***Julie* emerged, which I completed** and copied out during the course of that winter with indescribable pleasure [...][[22]](#endnote-23)

In conclusion, after my initial disbelief at Jean-Jacques Rousseau's apparent self-absorption, I realised that this is the whole point of his autobiography and really enjoyed reading it. I found his analytical power and attention to detail in recalling his past experiences to be extraordinary, and even a brief glance at the major events of Rousseau's life confirms his existence as much more exciting than your average man's. I believe that the best summary of this profound book can be found in Patrick Coleman's Introduction:

In the end, however, what gives the *Confessions* their enduring value is the tenacity with which Rousseau clings to his two contradictory but inseparable goals: to justify himself and his work in the eyes of society, and to affirm his own uniqueness, or rather, to achieve the one through the other. In an extreme form which highlights the pitfalls but also the seductive promise of the genre, Rousseau defined the contours of modern autobiography.[[23]](#endnote-24)

**Primo Levi - *If This is a Man***

An account of his wartime concentration camp experiences - "he [Levi] was imprisoned at Fossoli, a concentration camp, until February 1944, when he was deported to Buna-Monowitz, a satellite camp of Auschwitz, until the Red Army liberated prisoners at the end of the war (some 11 months later)"[[24]](#endnote-25) - Primo Levi's *If This is a Man* is a work which puts forward ideas about the self that conflict with those extolled by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Confessions*. These conflicting notions of the self are encapsulated in a writing style that focuses predominantly on events that are occurring in the external world, rather than the inner world of emotions that Rousseau obsessively describes. The differences in writing styles and the conclusions reached by Levi and Rousseau are borne of necessity - Levi could not afford to be completely self-absorbed during his time in the camps, when survival meant a daily struggle against tortuous conditions that he had to continually monitor in order to successfully react and adapt to. Put simply, opportunities to develop an 'irreducible sense of self', and aspirations of social mobility, are limited in a world where the avoidance of death requires absolute obedience to others' authority.

I read this autobiography during the second week of February and was surprised to find that- despite the absolute atrocities that he was both subject and witness to- Levi had produced such an objective, largely-unemotional relating of his wartime experiences. "Levi enrolled for a Chemistry degree at the University of Turin in 1937"[[25]](#endnote-26) and after his graduation "worked as a chemist."[[26]](#endnote-27) The clean, concise lexis which he employs is reflective of such a profession: clinical and detached. Levi states in his authorial preface that one of the reasons behind writing *If This is a Man* was to satisfy his uncontrollable 'need' to tell his story:

The book has been written to satisfy this need: first and foremost, therefore, as an interior liberation.[[27]](#endnote-28)

However, another- equally important- motivation behind his writing of this autobiography was to provide information that can be used to examine the human psyche. Levi is keen to point out that his autobiography is not intended to serve as a reference point for developing new theories concerning the attribution of blame for what took place in the concentration camps, and stresses the fact that such atrocities are the logical result when racist attitudes are allowed to dominate in society:

It has not been written in order to formulate new accusations; it should be able, rather, to furnish documentation for a quiet study of certain aspects of the human mind. [...] when the unspoken dogma becomes the major premiss in a syllogism, then, at the end of the chain, there is the Lager.[[28]](#endnote-29)

Thus, Levi wants merely to provide the ignorant public with the realities of concentration camp life in a non-accusatory way. His overall motivation for writing this autobiography can be summed up by one of the "Reasons for Wanting to Write" detailed in *How to Write about Yourself*, *videlicet:*

*Do you wish to describe some matter of general interest which you experienced firsthand?*[[29]](#endnote-30)

Throughout his autobiography, Levi writes with great dignity, and sometimes appears to be so untouched by his own emotions that he becomes almost depersonalized as a narrator, in the sense that he is deprived "of individual character or a sense of personal identity"[[30]](#endnote-31). Levi's depersonalized, mechanical description of the disgusting events that occur in the camp can be seen in the following:

It is not merely a question of a procession to a bucket; it is the rule that the last user of the bucket goes and empties it in the latrines; it is also the rule that at night one must not leave the hut except in night uniform (shirt and pants), giving one's number to the guard.[[31]](#endnote-32)

In *Facing the Extreme*, Tzvetan Todorov's detailed examination of moral life in the concentration camps, two key concepts are elaborated upon which are particularly relevant to a consideration of Primo Levi. One such notion is the nature of dignity. Primo Levi is grateful to Steinlauf for the lesson he gives Levi concerning the importance of washing oneself in order to retain the self-dignity afforded by making an effort to remain clean:

I must confess it: after only one week of prison, the instinct for cleanliness disappeared in me. [...] Why should I wash? Would I be better off than I am? [...] But Steinlauf interrupts me. [...] And without interrupting the operation he administers me a complete lesson. [...] So we must certainly wash our faces without soap in dirty water and dry ourselves on our jackets. We must polish our shoes, not because the regulation states it, but for dignity and propriety.[[32]](#endnote-33)

Levi and his fellow prisoners are forced to maintain a certain level of hygiene, as every evening "one had to undergo the control for lice and the control of washing one's feet"[[33]](#endnote-34); by choosing to wash himself and keep himself clean, Levi is able to exercise his own will and retain a level of human dignity. This simple act can be seen to illustrate Todorov's definition of dignity:

The preservation of dignity requires transforming a situation of constraint into one of freedom; where the constraint is extreme, such a transformation can amount to choosing to do something one is forced to do.[[34]](#endnote-35)

Lorenzo, an Italian civilian worker whom Levi befriends, is a dignified man who embodies Todorov's statement- following Bruno Bettelheim's line of thought- that the "important thing is to act out of the strength of one's will, to exert through one's initiative some influence, however minimal, on one's surroundings."[[35]](#endnote-36) Lorenzo gives Levi food every day for six months, writes a postcard on Levi's behalf to Italy and brings Levi the reply. He has made a conscious decision to act in a dignified manner despite the perilous daily life he faces, and "neither asked nor accepted any reward, because he was good and simple and did not think that one did good for a reward."[[36]](#endnote-37)

The second important concept that *Facing the Extreme* elaborates upon is the issue of depersonalization. As Todorov notes, depersonalization "was more a means of transforming individuals into the components of a project that transcended them."[[37]](#endnote-38) As Levi narrates an episode from his experience of work in Ka-Be, the absence of normal emotional reactions to a man in need of help and support is all too apparent:

He is Null Achtzehn. He is not called anything except that, Zero Eighteen, the last three figures of his entry number; as if everyone was aware that only a man is worthy of a name, and that Null Achtzehn is no longer a man. [...] Null Achtzehn is very young, which is a grave danger. [...] Null Achtzehn is not even particularly weak, but all avoid working with him.[[38]](#endnote-39)

Instead of coming to the aid of this young **man**, Levi and his fellow prisoners actively avoid contact with this young **number**; the process of depersonalization at the heart of the Nazi war regime is bearing fruit. Examining the techniques used in the process of depersonalization, Todorov writes:

There are other techniques, less brutal but no less effective. Each inmate is stripped of his name, that cardinal sign of human individuality, and given a number. When speaking of their prisoners, the guards avoid using words like *people* or *individuals* or *men*, referring to them instead as "pieces" ["The corporal saluted smartly and replied that there were six hundred and fifty 'pieces' and that all was in order"[[39]](#endnote-40)] or "items" or employing other impersonal turns of phrase.[[40]](#endnote-41)

In his penultimate chapter entitled "Telling, Judging, Understanding", Todorov provides a neat summary of Levi's position with regard to his concentration camp experience:

[...] he is beyond both hatred and resignation [...] By agreeing to talk to the enemy, we are refusing to allow the first ostracism - the one that excluded us - to be followed by a new but comparable one, aimed this time at him. [...] Indeed, his message to the Germans who survived the war is, "I would like to understand you in order to judge you" (174).[[41]](#endnote-42)

Todorov then goes on to probe the question of why Levi committed suicide, without considering the argument that he did not in fact take his own life - "There is an ongoing dispute about whether this death was suicide or not."[[42]](#endnote-43) Todorov examines the different types of 'shame' that survivors of the concentration camps are susceptible to, but does not discuss the possibility that Levi's suicide, if indeed he did end his own life, could be interpreted as an act of 'dignity'. It could be argued that the sixty-eight-year-old, qualified chemist Levi recognised the fact that death coming to him was biologically inevitable, and chose to commit suicide as an act of freedom, an exercise of his own will:

By committing suicide, one alters the course of events - if only for the last time in one's life - instead of simply reacting to them. Suicides of this kind are acts of defiance, not of desperation; they are a final freedom [...][[43]](#endnote-44)

In conclusion, Primo Levi's *If This is a Man* is an objective relation of Levi's own wartime concentration camp experiences. The dignified, predominantly unemotional lexis that Levi employs throughout the book is a testament to the success of the process of depersonalization that was at the heart of the Nazi war machine. Levi's desire to get the facts concerning the concentration camps into the public domain has certainly been achieved; I am now better informed as to the realities of concentration camp life, although I could not say that I enjoyed reading about the atrocities that man has inflicted upon his fellow man.

**J. G. Ballard - *Empire of the Sun***

Over the period from the 20th-27th February, I enjoyed reading J. G. Ballard's *Empire of the Sun*, a novel about the Second World War, a great deal more than I enjoyed reading Primo Levi's *If This is a Man*. I think this is largely down to the fact that the ravages of war depicted in *Empire of the Sun* are a lot more palatable because of their less graphic nature, and the manner in which the incidents happen to the young, fictionalized protagonist, Jim, in the third person, rather than to Primo Levi, the man, in the first person. Also, Jim goes on many more adventures around the camp than does the austere Levi, for whom such forays into forbidden areas of the camp would spell certain death. I found that I enjoyed identifying with the energetic, youthful Jim a great deal more than I did with the necessarily more restrained, stoical Levi.

As with Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, the question as to what extent *Empire of the Sun* is genuinely an autobiographical work can be raised. This issue immediately springs to mind when one reads the passage Ballard wrote as a sort of authorial preface to the novel:

*Empire of the Sun* **draws on my experiences** in Shanghai, China, during the Second World War, and in Lunghua C.A.C. (Civilian Assembly Centre) where I was interned from 1942-45.[[44]](#endnote-45)

The fact that it only 'draws on' his wartime experiences, and isn't set forth as an "account" of these, suggests that Ballard has given himself creative licence to invent, or embellish upon, some of his 'experiences'.

A major discrepancy between Jim's experiences of war as depicted in the novel, and the real-life conditions confronting Ballard during the Second World War, is that Ballard was interned with his parents.

After the Pearl Harbor attack, the Japanese occupied the International Settlement. In early spring 1943 they began interning Allied civilians, and Ballard was sent to the Lunghua Civilian Assembly Center **with his parents and younger sister**. [...] These experiences formed the basis of *Empire of the Sun*, although **Ballard exercised considerable artistic licence in writing the book (notably removing his parents from the bulk of the story)**.[[45]](#endnote-46)

In a "P.S." interview at the back of the 2006 edition of his autobiography, Ballard agrees with Travis Elborough when Elborough suggests that by "making Jim parentless"[[46]](#endnote-47) he was giving fictional expression to the "estrangement between my parents and myself that lasted all my life"[[47]](#endnote-48).

Taking into account the wealth of descriptive detail Ballard employs on the one hand, and his own statement that it only 'draws on' his own experiences on the other, it is probably safe to conclude that *Empire of the Sun* falls into the category of 'fictionalised autobiography', a conclusion that has been arrived at by the free online encyclopaedia, Wikipedia:

*Empire of the Sun* (1984, **fictionalised autobiography** of his adolescence in a Japanese internment camp in Shanghai)[[48]](#endnote-49)

The blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction is a problematic aspect of the autobiographical genre, and the following excerpts from the "Truth into Fiction" section of the prescriptive book *How to Write about Yourself* can be seen to be of particular relevance in a consideration of the historical veracity of *Empire of the Sun*:

If you decide to write a story, play or novel based entirely on your life experience, you need to know exactly how closely you will remain to the original. [...] But beware of writing nothing but the bare facts. If you wish to create a fiction, you will need to use a degree of licence with the truth. [...] expand on the truth, embroidering here and there to introduce more exciting effects.[[49]](#endnote-50)

It is fair to say that J. G. Ballard has indeed used 'a degree of licence with the truth', but an exact determination of how closely *Empire of the Sun* resembles the historical reality of events in his life is obviously impossible - only Ballard himself is privy to that information.

Unlike the depersonalized Levi, the character of Jim displays a stable, developing sense of self. Ballard conveys his childish perspective at the beginning of the war through Jim's wondering whether he could be the cause of the war. When Jim plays with a model aircraft as his family travel by car through a Japanese checkpoint before the outbreak of war, his dad insists that he cease flying his plane, flippantly adding, "you might even start the war."[[50]](#endnote-51) Ballard would only have been nine years old when World War II broke out, and he highlights his justifiably youthful outlook on life at this time through his portrayal of Jim being so intrigued by this comment as to seriously wonder, "could I?"[[51]](#endnote-52)

As he ages, Jim undertakes to be as active as possible during his time at, and between, the camps, becoming adept at many different tasks in his quest to survive. An example of this resolve comes during a long truck drive to Woosung Camp, when Jim realises that the prisoners "needed water, or one of them would die and they would all have to return to Shanghai."[[52]](#endnote-53) Jim decides that it is up to him to risk getting killed for his cheek in requesting water from a Japanese corporal. Jim succeeds in his task, and hands the water "to Dr. Ransome, who stared at him without comment."[[53]](#endnote-54)

Jim develops his survival instinct at the camps, recognizing both the importance of friendship and food in his battle to live through the ravages of war - "It was important to keep in with Basie, who had small but reliable sources of food."[[54]](#endnote-55) As Jim grows older he becomes more worldly-wise, and, having survived the Second World War, has a sophisticated insight into the potential for World War III: "one day China would punish the rest of the world, and take a frightening revenge."[[55]](#endnote-56)

In conclusion, I found that reading J. G. Ballard's *Empire of the Sun* gave me more pleasure than did Primo Levi's *If This is a Man*. Unlike Rousseau's *Confessions* and Levi's *If This is a Man*, *Empire of the Sun* is a fictionalized autobiography, written in the third person and focalized through young Jim. The question as to the extent of its autobiographical veracity will always be left open; one cannot know just how much creative licence J. G. Ballard employed.

**Lorna Sage - *Bad Blood***

I read Lorna Sage's *Bad Blood* from the 20th-27th of March and found it to be a light-hearted, often humorous portrayal of her difficult childhood in a village in North Wales. Unlike the problematic blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction that is evident in J. G. Ballard's *Empire of the Sun*, Lorna Sage's *Bad Blood* is a factual text dealing "with her childhood in Hanmer, [which] won the Whitbread prize for biography in 2001, shortly before her death at the age of 57."[[56]](#endnote-57) The following provides a synopsis of Sage's book, and an elaboration on the themes highlighted by these quotations will serve to illustrate the factual nature of *Bad Blood*:

The book evokes childhood and family life in a village in North Wales. Sage's grandfather was the Vicar of Hanmer, and she depicts him as an unhappy and frustrated man who turned all too often to drink and extra-marital affairs.

The book deals with three marriages, those of Sage's grandparents, her parents and her own. Sage had vowed never to marry, but her unexpected pregnancy was to lead to marriage at a very young age. However early motherhood and marriage did not prevent her from realising her academic ambitions, and both she and her husband graduated from Durham University with Firsts.[[57]](#endnote-58)

Sage herself says that "marriage, and its changing nature over the years, became one of the book's themes, and so did secrets and lies"[[58]](#endnote-59), and an examination of the marriage between Sage's grandparents will highlight both these themes.

On page three of *Bad Blood*, Sage paints a bleak picture of the marriage between her grandmother and grandfather, with strong hints of prolonged domestic violence and mutual dislike:

He'd [Lorna's grandfather] have liked to get further away, but petrol was rationed. The church was at least safe. My grandmother never went near it - except feet first in her coffin, but that was years later, when she was buried in the same grave with him. Rotting together for eternity, one flesh at the last after a lifetime's mutual loathing. [...] He had a scar down his hollow cheek too, which Grandma had done with the carving knife one of the many times when he came home pissed and incapable.[[59]](#endnote-60)

Sage further defines their chalk-and-cheese relationship when she describes her grandmother's antipathy to "the responsibilities of motherhood"[[60]](#endnote-61):

What made their marriage more than a run-of-the-mill case of domestic estrangement was her refusal to accept her lot. [...] Sex, genteel poverty [...] They were in her view stinking offences, devilish male plots to degrade her.[[61]](#endnote-62)

The grandfather's proclivity towards the vices of drink and other women are described in a series of passages, each more shocking than the last - "When he took to booze and other women [...] her loathing for him was perfected."[[62]](#endnote-63)

Lorna's grandma finds out about her husband's sexual misdemeanours when she finds his diaries chronicling his journey into extra-marital sin. Having blackmailed her husband with these two diaries during his lifetime, Lorna's father comes into possession of the instruments of extortion upon Grandma's death in 1963. Lorna, "with a bit of persuasion"[[63]](#endnote-64), persuades her father to hand them over to her, and the following examples of Grandpa yielding to lust are related with reference to the incriminating diaries:

Out of his depth, and *in his element*. He and Nurse Burgess, now MB for short in the diary, pedal to paradise every day of the week, including Sunday. [...] And they wrestle each other into submission, and relax a long moment, listening with half an ear to the trickling ditch the other side of the hedge, where duty calls.[[64]](#endnote-65)

She [MB] called shortly after the family's arrival and walked Hilda to the church 'for the first time' (as the diary records, possibly with irony). Instead of cooling down, their affair intensifies [...][[65]](#endnote-66)

After about ten days, when the level of intensive care must have been starting to look a bit excessive, a new and magical word turns up: massage. [...] Bliss, you might think, to be in her [MB's] capable hands.[[66]](#endnote-67)

At any rate, compared with MB, Marjorie (Marj for short) was a most suppressed and insubstantial ghost. When I asked about her people remembered her perfectly well, though. Marj was my schoolgirl mother's brand-new best friend. Valma, my mother, had just turned sixteen that spring of 1934, and Marj was a year or at most two years older.[[67]](#endnote-68)

Interestingly, grandpa confides in his diary at the end of 1933 that he is unsure as to what the future holds regarding the wife/nurse-on-the-side situation; he appears to be trying to resolve an inner conflict that cannot be expressed in public, and eventually places the matter in God's hands:

I have met MB too and therein hangs all the tale of the future. What will that be I wonder?? God knows since it is His doing that all this has come about. So then I commit the future to God.[[68]](#endnote-69)

The eighteenth century diarist James Boswell considered the keeping of a diary to be a masculine pursuit, believing that such a journal was the reference point that a man could turn to "in order to contemplate one's self, or one's 'character'".[[69]](#endnote-70) Linda Anderson's account of Boswell's views can be seen to be exemplified by Lorna's grandfather, as he retreats to his private diary in order to examine the different options open to him regarding his choice of sexual partner and the type of character he could adopt:

The subject, according to Boswell, looks to the journal in order to see a self which is not always the same: the private reflection may not fit the public gaze. The diary becomes the place where he can examine and discard aberrant identities [...] In the privacy of his journal Boswell can admit not only to faults of character, but to an instability which turns his choice of a 'proper' character into the adoption of another, possible dramatis personae.[[70]](#endnote-71)

Lorna's familial tie to her grandfather was strengthened by the fact that he encouraged her reading habits, and he even retained a strong posthumous grip on the young Lorna's imagination, as she wrote in an article about her grandfather before she died:

He died when I was only nine, but that strengthened his hold on my imagination. He did not let me down as he had all the others, starting with my grandmother and my mother, their daughter. Instead he vanished into the dark with his mystique intact.[[71]](#endnote-72)

Grandpa's lingering influence on the teenage Lorna was the cause of some consternation for her parents:

When, in my teens, I quarrelled with my mother, she would say in despair and disgust, "You're just like your grandfather," meaning that I was promiscuous, sex- obsessed, that the **bad blood** was coming out. My bookishness was part of that inheritance too [...] we all knew that books had a sinister, Grandpa side to them.[[72]](#endnote-73)

The marriage between Lorna's parents, and their rapture with Lorna's baby brother Clive, is depicted as a unit to which Lorna feels an outsider:

Clive was the child of our parents' reunion and of their married life together. Indeed, I was free to 'run wild' outdoors precisely because so much of their attention was focused inwards and on him.[[73]](#endnote-74)

Despite Grandma's verbal coercion to the contrary, Lorna's mother held strong views on marriage that remained positive throughout difficult times:

But my mother believed that marriage made you one. Like those ceremonies in the movies where a cowboy and an Indian slashed their wrists and bled into each other, it created a bond as ineluctable and intimate as biology. This infuriated Grandma [...][[74]](#endnote-75)

Lorna recalls the way she was frequently beaten by her father when she had strolled off absent-mindedly and frightened her mother half to death. This can be seen as another example that the marriage between Lorna's parents was solid - her father always took her mother's side:

[...] I wandered off and went missing, driving her [Lorna's mother] frantic with worry [...] I shouted at her, I may even have hit her. And when my father came home she told on me. [...] By now it's a set routine, there is no going back. [...] and smack me until I say I'm sorry, I won't do it again.[[75]](#endnote-76)

The "shotgun"[[76]](#endnote-77) marriage between Lorna and Vic Sage took place so early in their lives because Lorna became unexpectedly pregnant, aged sixteen. Vic gradually won Lorna's parents' affections, "the more my parents saw of Vic, the more they liked him"[[77]](#endnote-78), and they eventually gave their consent in light of the fact that "they weren't respectable or well-off enough for their objections to count."[[78]](#endnote-79) Lorna and Vic divorced in 1974, "although we've remained friends and colleagues ever since"[[79]](#endnote-80), and Lorna married again in 1979.

In conclusion, Lorna Sage's *Bad Blood* is an account of her difficult childhood in North Wales which tells of the vicissitudes befalling three generations of marriage. The stereotypical notion that women often "write of a relational self, in relation to other key figures"[[80]](#endnote-81) can be seen in the light of Lorna Sage's particular concern with the affairs of her grandfather, and her relative position within the extended family in which she lived, in contrast to, for example, Rousseau, who conforms more closely to the stereotypical male notion of relating "life because worth doing (i.e. important, insights, career, famous)."[[81]](#endnote-82)

**Appendix I: Albert Camus - *The First Man***

I have read a number of Camus' novels and essays, and the Penguin Books biography of Camus situated at the beginning of each work contains two lines describing *The First Man* that have always intrigued me:

His last novel, *Le Premier Homme* (*The First Man*), unfinished at the time of his death, appeared for the first time in 1994. An instant bestseller, the book received widespread critical acclaim, and has been translated and published in over thirty countries.[[82]](#endnote-83)

I finally decided to ask for this book as a birthday present, and read it from the 4th-11th March. Following a discussion in class concerning Derrida's concept pertaining to the "redefining of autobiography as 'thanatography' (*thanatos* Gk.- death), a writing not of a living but a dead author"[[83]](#endnote-84), I was reminded of the way that *The First Man* is inextricably linked with death. Linda Anderson clarifies Derrida's concept of 'thanatography' in the following passage:

For Derrida the question of the proper name or signature quickly takes on overtones of death since the name with which one signs will always outlive the bearer of that name. Indeed, to the extent that the proper name has a life of its own, it proclaims the death of its bearer every time it is used [...] Therefore, since autobiography doubles the attempt to live though the name by also taking the name into the title of the work, it also increases its own involvement with death.[[84]](#endnote-85)

In order to demonstrate that Camus' last work is relevant to the above quotation- in the sense that it belongs to the autobiographical genre- *The First Man*, according to the various citations contained on the first page of the book itself, is:

[...] the most brilliant semi-autobiographical account of an Algerian childhood [...] A marvel: a piece of rescued life. Camus' account of his childhood in Algeria is moving in a way that his fiction seldom is. [...] this has the ring of absolute authenticity.[[85]](#endnote-86)

Having established its relevance to the autobiographical genre, it can be seen that Albert Camus' *The First Man* is a prime example of Derrida's logic in wanting to redefine autobiography as 'thanatography'; the signature he used on his manuscript has outlived its bearer for over forty-five years, and continues to do so. The unfinished manuscript found in the car wreckage which ended Camus' life also highlights the fact that it is impossible to write a definitive autobiography, as nowhere in *Le Premier Homme* do the words "sacré bleu, je meurs parce qu'une voiture nous a frappé" occur!

In elaborating the way in which the "'I' is always a place of self-division for Derrida, an addressor *and* an addressee"[[86]](#endnote-87), Linda Anderson formulates a passage that can be seen as applying literally to Albert Camus' *The First Man*:

This gendered division within the subject makes the father, or the name of the father, always the sign of death, while the mother lives on as the 'living feminine'. [...] The mother is a metaphor for what is not metaphoric about language. Hers is the body through which language must pass to make itself heard; hers is the impetus to difference and to specificity. [...]

She gives rise to all the figures by losing herself in the background of the scene like an anonymous persona. Everything comes back to her, beginning with life; everything addresses and destines itself to her. She survives on the condition of remaining at the bottom.

(Derrida 1988: 38)[[87]](#endnote-88)

Considering the facts of Camus' life, his father is indeed 'the sign of death', having been killed in the war of 1914, whilst his mother certainly loses 'herself in the background of the scene like an anonymous person' and 'survives on the condition of remaining at bottom':

And immediately she turned away, went back into the apartment, and seated herself in the dining room that faced the street; she no longer seemed to be thinking of him nor for that matter of anything [...] just as for herself she endured the hard days of working in the service of others, washing floors on her knees, living without a man and without solace [...] a life without any sort of resentment, unaware, persevering, a life resigned to all kinds of suffering, her own as well as that of others.[[88]](#endnote-89)

The importance of Camus' mother is reinforced by his surrogate father figure and teacher, M. Bernard:

'Well!' he said. 'It's all settled. Your grandmother's a good woman. As for your mother...Ah!' he said. 'Don't you ever forget her.'[[89]](#endnote-90)

I intend to elaborate on certain sections of *The First Man* in order to highlight the text's autobiographical qualities, and the fact that it elucidates many of the concepts that were later to dominate Camus' work. In its unfinished, published form, *The First Man* is divided into two 'parts', with 'Part One' containing eight chapters and 'Part Two' containing four. The first chapter of 'Part One' is entitled *In Search of the Father*, and is dedicated to "Widow Camus [his mother] - To you who will never be able to read this book"[[90]](#endnote-91). This chapter describes the journey undertaken by the pregnant Lucie Cormery and her husband Henri, from Algiers to the farm near Bône, of which Henri is the new manager. Lucie gives birth to a boy, whom they decide to call Jacques.

Lucie Cormery is the name Camus gives to his mother in this text, a lady who in real life "was partly deaf, due to a stroke that permanently impaired her speech, but she was able to read lips."[[91]](#endnote-92) The following passage can be seen to bear witness to the fact that Lucie Cormery is the name Camus attributes to his mother in this work:

The wife [Lucie] smiled at him [the Arabic driver] without seeming to understand.

'She doesn't hear,' the man said. 'At the house, you'll have to shout out loud and make signs.'[[92]](#endnote-93)

Henri Cormery, the new farm owner, is the name that Camus uses to designate his father in this text:

Lucien Auguste Camus, his [Albert's] father, was an itinerant agricultural labourer. He died of his wounds in 1914 after the Battle of the Marne - Camus was less than a year old at that time. His body was never sent to Algeria.[[93]](#endnote-94)

Jacques Cormery is the name through which Camus refers to himself throughout this text. The Saint-Apôtre property that Henri seems set to manage is situated in Mondovi, Albert Camus' birthplace: "Albert Camus was born in Mondovi, Algeria, into a working-class family."[[94]](#endnote-95)

*Saint-Brieuc*, the next chapter, begins with the declaration that forty years have elapsed, and Jacques is setting off to visit his father's grave. The complimentary manner in which Camus describes Jacques' physical appearance is reminiscent of Jean-Baptiste Clamence's self-judgements in *The Fall*, a book which- according to Olivier Todd- is second only to *The First Man* in terms of being "lucidly and overtly autobiographical"[[95]](#endnote-96):

[the following autobiographical description of Camus' fictional self, Jacques Cormery...]

He stood with his hands firmly placed on the railing; leaning his weight on one hip, his torso at ease, he gave the impression of competence and vigour.[[96]](#endnote-97)

[...can be seen to have influenced the self-judgements of Jean-Baptiste Clamence in Camus' fictional novel, *The Fall*...]

By my stature, my shoulders, and this face that I have often been told was shy, I look rather like a football player, don't I?[[97]](#endnote-98)

Throughout *The First Man* there are several passages that can be interpreted as providing creative inspiration for the young Camus that would later resurface in his philosophical novels, *The Outsider* and his posthumously-published *A Happy Death*:

[the following hanging incident that occurred during Camus' childhood and made a lasting impression, related in *The First Man*...]

[...] the one circumstance that had made such an impression on him as a child, had pursued him throughout his life and even into his dreams, **his father getting up at three o'clock to attend the execution of a notorious criminal** [...] **Horrified public opinion demanded the death penalty**; it was readily granted, and **the execution took place before Barberousse prison in the presence of a considerable number of spectators**.[[98]](#endnote-99)

[...can be seen to resurface at the conclusion of his philosophical novel, *The Outsider*:]

For the final consummation and for me to feel less lonely, my last wish was **that there should be a crowd of spectators at my execution and that they should greet me with cries of hatred**.[[99]](#endnote-100)

[...the following description of the heat driving people crazy, resulting in murder, in *The First Man:*]

Oh yes, **the hot season was terrible**, and often it **drove almost everyone crazy**, nerves more on edge day by day [...] until, here and there in the sad and untamed neighbourhood, it exploded [...] **The barber had gone mad while shaving him, and with a single blow of his long razor had cut the exposed throat** [...][[100]](#endnote-101)

[...can be seen to resurface in a major plot element of *The Outsider*:]

My eyes were blinded by this veil of salty tears. All I could feel were the **cymbals the sun was clashing against my forehead** and, indistinctly, the dazzling spear still leaping up off the knife in front of me. It was **like a red-hot blade gnawing at my eyelashes and gouging out my stinging eyes**...My whole being went tense and **I tightened my grip on the gun. The trigger gave**...**And I fired four more times at a lifeless body**...[[101]](#endnote-102)

[...and, finally, this passage from *The First Man*, detailing the fictionalized Camus' expectation and acceptance of a dignified death...]

[...] today he felt life, youth, people slipping away from him, without being able to hold on to any of them, left with the blind hope that this obscure force that for so many years had raised him above the daily routine, nourished him unstintingly, and been equal to the most difficult circumstances - that, **as it had with endless generosity given him reason to live, it would also give him reason to grow old and die without rebellion**.[[102]](#endnote-103)

[...can be seen to influence Mersault's acceptance of life's one true inevitability in Camus' philosophical novel, *A Happy Death*:]

In that sudden shudder of which Mersault was conscious, his body indicated once more a complicity which had already won so many joys for them both...Conscious, he must be conscious without deception, without cowardice - alone, face to face - at grips with his body - **eyes open upon death**...Slowly, as though it came from his stomach, there rose inside him a stone which approached his throat...It rose steadily, higher and higher. He looked at Lucienne. He smiled without wincing, and this smile too came from inside himself... 'In a minute, in a second,' he thought. The ascent stopped. **And stone among the stones, he returned in the joy of his heart to the truth of the motionless worlds**.[[103]](#endnote-104)

In conclusion, it is fair to state that Albert Camus' *The First Man* is a semi-autobiographical account of his childhood in Algeria, with clear indications of the youthful experiences and passions that helped form the basis of his writing in later life. It is also an exemplary text in highlighting the logic of Derrida's belief that autobiography should be redefined as 'thanatography'.

**Conclusion**

The texts which I have discussed in this journal are: Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*; Primo Levi's *If This is a Man*; J. G. Ballard's *Empire of the Sun*; Lorna Sage's *Bad Blood*; and Albert Camus' *The First Man*.

In my treatment of Rousseau's *Confessions*, I explored the seminal ideas he puts forward about the nature of the self, with particular reference to the criticism of Linda Anderson in order to demonstrate Rousseau's belief that Nature, rather than God or society, takes pride of place at the head of his world order.

Through the application of relevant concepts from Tzvetan Todorov's close analysis of moral life in the concentration camps to Levi's *If This is a Man*, I demonstrated the way in which Levi and his fellow prisoners became depersonalized cogs in the Nazi war machine.

Drawing on the literature of Alison Chisholm and Brenda Courtie, I examined the blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction that is such a problematic aspect of the autobiographical genre, in relation to Ballard's *Empire of the Sun*, and concluded that only the author himself will ever know the full extent to which he remained true to real-life events.

Applying the opinions of eighteenth century diarist James Boswell to the actions of Lorna Sage's grandfather, I demonstrated how a retreat into journal writing is both a masculine pursuit and a requisite for the development of a stable self, but with potential pitfalls if one's other half comes across one's personal scribblings!

Finally, I highlighted the manner in which Camus' *The First Man* can be interpreted as exemplifying Derrida's logic behind his call for 'autobiography' to be redefined as 'thanatography', and demonstrated the inextricable interplay between 'autobiography' and 'fiction' by highlighting passages from the 'autobiographical' *The First Man* that unmistakeably shape and influence Camus' other 'fictional' works.

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101. Albert Camus. *The Outsider*. Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1984, p.60. [my emphasis] [↑](#endnote-ref-102)
102. Albert Camus. *The First Man*. London: Penguin Classics, 2001, p.221. [my emphasis] [↑](#endnote-ref-103)
103. Albert Camus. *A Happy Death*. London: Penguin Classics, 2002, pp.105-106. [my emphasis] [↑](#endnote-ref-104)