

Formed by Forgetting: Reading *The Smoking Book*

Jane Sloane

Lesley Stern's *The Smoking Book* is a hybrid creation that traverses memoir and cultural history, essay and story, and it's a fitting form as she's interested in evoking what she has elsewhere identified as "the liveliness of movement (movement of bodies, stories, desires)."¹ This is a narrative that looks at themes of craving and passionate attachment, for which smoking provides the ideal metaphor. It also explores the ephemeral and elusive experiences of remembering and loving and writing, using smoking to figure the interconnectedness of these ways of being.

Stern creates moments of rupture and interruption suggesting that the interplay of text and person is no straightforward matter—due to the unreliable nature of memory we find that in trying to write about life we end up with not only documentation but invention and fabrication.² Her book is one composed of what I'd call autobiographical moments reflecting the idea that any act of recollection is only ever partial and incomplete. It thereby resists the kinds of scholarly efforts compelled by the need to seek definite answers or the certainty of closure. But more than this, the way certain portions of the text seem to break off, or be broken off, points not only to the impossibility of recuperating selfhood through writing³, but to the fact that this is also a book about forgetting. I first read *The Smoking Book* believing that it was about remembering and identity, only to discover later that in fact it was a book about *forgetting* and identity.

Now I'm the kind of reader who's intrigued with why I'm drawn to particular books, why they preoccupy me. When I was trying to finish my PhD on academic women's autobiography I became—not surprisingly, for me—distracted by two texts that I didn't have the time or space to properly work on. One was Lorna Sage's *Bad Blood* and the other was Stern's. They intruded and niggled at me. In a section I called 'Interlude' I spent a few hundred words trying to puzzle out the uncanny, at-one-step-removed relationship I had with the former. For, as it turned out, Sage's story of growing up in England in many important instances closely resembled my mother's life. In subsequent conversations during which we talked

about *Bad Blood* I was told certain family secrets that—I soon came to realise—through the strange process of transgenerational haunting, had become phantoms in my own life.

But *The Smoking Book*?... Well, I relegated that to a footnote. A long footnote, admittedly, but a footnote nonetheless. As I acknowledged at the time, agreeing with Leo Bersani, what's written beneath the line, as it were, speaks of repressed desire. It was only from this place that I could finally admit I felt 'impossibly envious' of Stern: she'd written the kind of book I'd only dreamt of writing. I found her work witty, inspiringly associative, eloquent, and intelligent without being arrogant or condescending. I wanted it for myself.

I subsequently found out that envy is a difficult passion to control. And it motivated my initial impulse to 'analyse' the book, for I was looking for the kind of engagement that would produce understanding or explanation as a means of control.⁴ In other words, I think my envy produced the urge for some kind of mastery or power over the text. When I realised this I was I determined to resist, as far as I was able, but how to envisage a proper form of response? What would the sort of commentary in which I admitted these feelings, but was critically engaged, actually be like?

This is where the value of what I've elsewhere theorised as 'autofictocriticism' lies. A rather ugly and clumsy compound, I know, but, briefly, in bringing together the autobiographical, the fictional and the critical, the autofictocritical creates a space in which the reader's attachments to, and identifications with, the texts they study are acknowledged, articulated and interrogated. I feel awkward as I'm cannibalising myself here—which somehow seems like cheating—but as I explained in my thesis: autofictocriticism remarks on the intensity of our encounters with texts: the pain and exhilaration we feel as we work with and on them. It attempts to capture the fugitive and capricious thoughts that arise during the process of being both reader and writer, and does so in a manner that translates the excitements and movements involved in such participatory awakenings in order to effect similar feelings in the reader.⁵

Both Stern and I grew up with smoke, albeit different kinds, but smoke nonetheless: she on her family's tobacco farm in Rhodesia, and I, well... let me explain:

I have a photograph my mother gave me: the view is from a slag heap looking out over the city of Stoke-on-Trent. There is no horizon; just a series of massy

clouds in varying shades of grey, which are in fact the smoke from the chimneys that blot the foreground with their dark, symmetrical shapes. There are also patches in the image, like holes torn out of the paper, where white smoke streams.

This is the place of my childhood, one of the towns of the Potteries in Arnold Bennett's England. Here you find the waste of the industrial Midlands laid out under louring iron skies, red brick walls overlaid with the grime of soot, damp backyards filled with shards of broken china that you find if you dig down a few inches (which we do because we're children, and we're curious).

I also have a photograph of my grandmother sitting around with the other women who work on the factory floor. They're on their tea break. Escaping trails of smoke rise from their cigarettes.

I sit on my grandfather's knee playing with his hands. I think his fingers look as though they're rusting away at the ends. He breathes beer and fags when he sings to me; the scent of comfort.

When I return to England in my 20s I find myself a lover who smells exactly the same; sometimes, when he's talking, I nestle into him so I can feel the sonorous resonance of his voice (or is it my grandfather's?) vibrating through me.

In an interview she gave, Stern said of her book, "I wanted to write smokily." But what could it possibly mean, 'to write smokily'⁶? What kind of poetics would 'writing smokily' give rise to? And what has this to do with ways of telling the self, of exploring the theme of habit and how this may relate to forgetting?

The form of the book is, in part, determined by her approaching the object of her inquiry from a number of different angles: she wants to situate the cultures that arise from the use of tobacco and other drugs within contexts that range through the familial, the historical and the personal.

It is tempting to speak of the book in terms of a fluidity of genre between reminiscence, cultural history, film critique and meditative essay, but that would be to belie Stern's intentions. For in her idiosyncratic, at times polemical, and strikingly lyrical way, she is proposing an alternative form of *écriture féminine*. One based not on a corporeally derived economy of fluids but in a different kind of lived experience. Her fascination is with tracing the dispersing, evaporative trails created by the kinds of narratives we tell ourselves, and others, in an effort to connect us with our bodies, our pasts, our intellects, and our desires when we find we are compelled to acts of renunciation.

She's interested in ways of telling a self that is no longer felt to be familiar, and which therefore seems, at least at some level, inenarrable. Her style of writing is a response to the gap that has opened up between the I who narrates and the now unfamiliar self who she's trying to narrate.

In *The Smoking Book* Stern explores what happens to identity when we give things up. She is intent on evoking the fragility of our sense of continuity at those moments when we no longer exist in relation to a habituated way of living. In the process she is asking us to think about who are we—and how are we to live?—when we no longer do those things it feels we've *always* done and through which we have comprehended our being.

For it would seem that our sense of self is under threat of becoming undone if we no longer inhabit our world in ways that seem familiar to us. And this is particularly the case in regard to the kinds of intimacies that smoking, loving, and writing engender as not only do they link us to others but, perhaps more importantly, they link us to *ourselves*. Such intimate entanglements mean, as she describes: "When you give up smoking [...] stories die: you go mad or you can no longer write, you are bereft of memories transformable into stories."⁷

If smoking, loving and writing are the means by which we know ourselves then to live without them produces states of unknowing. And if, as Stern says "ash bears testimony to memory and the memorial aspects of smoking"⁸ and if the ritual of "smoking [for her] is a way of preserving the past"⁹ then to not smoke means to be in a state of forgetting.

Because Stern is someone who has renounced cigarettes, left her lover, and who no longer writes then this makes for a smudgy or blurred kind of writing. A writing in which we feel the mingled, thin, silky threads of desire—by which her identities as author/smoker/lover are intertwined—beginning to dissolve into vanishing wreaths.

What the book also recognises, by its refusal of "the authority of a single, all-embracing narrative"¹⁰, is that all acts of memory have as their counterpart an aspect of forgetting. And more so if they are capturing what it is to be not only homesick but to be displaced from oneself by the intrusion of desires that are denied their familiar forms of satisfaction.

Stern's work is animated by certain rhythms, semantic shifts and changes of intonation which reflect the disorientations and discomforts that occur with the loss of the her habitual relationships. The structure of the book is one that repeats

the interruptions, irruptions and disruptions occasioned by giving things up—it mimics the way one's thoughts are constantly drawn back to the lover you are no longer with, which in turn reminds you of those others who you also felt intensely intimate with; it returns again and again to the demands of craving that flood the body and mind distracting you from your work, making it impossible to think clearly. The past intrudes into the present, and complicated and unforeseen connections force themselves upon the narrator.

In another context Stern wrote:

Involuntary memory pertains to sensation, the sense of touch, sight, smell, hearing—rather than intellectual recognition. Some sensation in the present [...] summons an experience of the past [...] The repetitions that spark off involuntary memory so often return us to home [...], but simultaneously they are almost posited on the impossibility of recovery, of returning home. This is perhaps why, although the revelations of involuntary memory are usually marked by an experience of extreme joy, of overwhelming plenitude, they might sometimes evoke pain.¹¹

In *The Smoking Book* she reiterates the importance of embodied memory. Eating, drinking and cigarettes all, at times, provide unexpected or unforeseen access to the past: but to a past, as she says, “traced already by loss”¹² and a past that is indistinct, shadowy, ambiguous and therefore not open to straightforward recollection. The sensations related to incorporation offer no guarantee of being able to recapture what has become history. For example, the smell of tobacco, Stern states, not only summons aspects of a childhood long gone but, also “opens up a hunger, a pit in the stomach that craves feeding”¹³; and yet the act of writing, in attempting to assuage that hunger, to fill the self, further exacerbates this particular emptiness.

Regarding her relationship to smoking, writing and loving it is clear that they are profoundly important to her because of the access they have given her to her past. Smoking has chained her to her sister, her father, her childhood in Rhodesia, various lovers, films she's seen, books she's read and things she's written. In sections of the book she writes about herself using the third person, effectively becoming a character within her own narrative, to indicate the alienation she feels through not smoking. To not-smoke means that these relationships are now at risk of becoming forgotten; she describes how “she begins to forget: her father, [...] the taste of cigarettes”¹⁴.

In demonstrating that we are always exiled from our pasts Stern's is very much a book about homesickness. But as I have shown, she writes about homesickness as not only the sense of being alienated from one's country, culture and family but also as a form of self-exile, as being exiled from *one's own life* in the present.

When I was finishing my PhD I think *The Smoking Book* held the allure of a promise—that one day I would definitely and finally be freed from the strange and ultimately unknowable imperatives the thesis had created and from the relationships I'd damaged along the way (those with others and with myself). *The Smoking Book* also gave me faith that soon, soon, I would be able to write differently. It prefigured the kinds of letting go I could only allow myself to imagine in the abstract: the giving up of certain addictions and identifications that were constitutive of a self that now seemed somewhat redundant.

With sadness and elation I realised I could no longer wish to write *The Smoking Book* as I had once enviously dreamed of doing. And I was left with an image, one that teased me with feelings of regret *and* relief: that the end of love is forever two spent cigarettes in a saucer on a desk beside a laptop and a book, and a white door closing.

-
- ¹. Lesley Stern, *The Scorsese Connection* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 4.
 - ². Marina Warner, 'Introduction', in Lorna Sage, *Moments of Truth: Twelve Twentieth-Century Women Writers*, (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), ix.
 - ³. J Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982), 12.
 - ⁴. Georgia Albert, 'Introduction', in Hans-Jost Frey, *Interruptions* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), xi.
 - ⁵. Jane Sloan, 'Affective Affinities: Possibilities for Autofictocriticism', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2002, 23.
 - ⁶. Interview with Rachel Mattson, 'Voice Literary Supplement: Writers on the Verge', in *Village Voice*, Available from <http://www.villagevoice.com/vls/161/writers.shtml>
 - ⁷. Lesley Stern, *The Smoking Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 96.
 - ⁸. Stern, *The Smoking Book*, 13.
 - ⁹. Stern, *The Smoking Book*, 15.
 - ¹⁰. Leslie Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London: Routledge, 1997), 5.
 - ¹¹. Stern, *The Scorsese Connection*, 39.
 - ¹². Stern, *The Smoking Book*, 10.
 - ¹³. Stern, *The Smoking Book*. 13.
 - ¹⁴. Stern, *The Smoking Book*, 106.