



## The Hidden Genre: Diaries and Time

Julie Rak

In 2015, I was driving my car and listening to CBC Radio Two, one of the stations owned by Canada’s national public broadcaster. The show was “Grown-ups Read Things They Wrote as Kids.” The premise of the show was that across the country, “brave adults” – as host Dan Misener calls them – get on stages and read from diaries or other writing they wrote when they were younger. First up was a woman named Ali. Here is how the segment opens:

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Dan Misener: When Ali was in elementary school, she kept a diary, and she wrote about all kinds of stuff, including...boys.

Ali: And for people who can’t see me, I am gayer than Christmas. [audience laughter] Dear Diary! All the boys at school are stupid and dumb and especially ugly love Ali. [audience claps and cheers] Okay and “stupid,” the word stupid is spelled s-t-u-p-i-t. Perfect! [audience laughter and cheers]

DM: That’s Ali reading from the diary she kept when she was in grade three. And this is Grown-ups Read Things They Wrote as Kids. I’m Dan Misener. (Ali, “Grown-ups”)

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Ali read this excerpt and others in a boisterous cheerful voice and the audience laughed and cheered as they heard Ali’s eight year-old self say that she is “big now because I am in Grade three. Not grade two. Not grade one. I got a lot of diarrhea at camp this summer. Love Ali!” (Ali, “Grown-ups”). Audience members dissolved in laughter. Me too. I laughed so hard I had to pull over to the side of the road. I heard more adults read descriptions from their diaries of playing spin the bottle (a kissing game for preteens) and teen school dances. Some of the readers were interviewed later, and they talked about reconnecting with their

child selves and finding that as children, they were able to express their feelings in their diaries in unmediated ways. In her interview, Ali says that the “floating, weirdo eccentric energy” children have can keep adults happy too if they recall who they were.

As an adult reader, Ali was delighted by the juxtaposition of honesty, inconsistency and even eccentricity of her writing. The incongruity within Ali’s second entry is for her an example of how creative and confident she was as a child. But the first entry is not like that. The humour in that entry comes from the commentary of the adult Ali, who says that she is “gayer than Christmas.” In that light, the child Ali’s dislike of boys—and her cheerful signature “love Ali,” read very fast after her comment about ugliness—is funny because the adult Ali has told us that she is a lesbian. Adult Ali reads her adult self back into childhood, but the current self does not map onto the child self completely. Rather, the boisterous child self appears to send a message to Ali as an adult, telling her then what she knows now, without a trace of self-consciousness or embarrassment. As a lesbian myself, I understand my early antipathy to boys and girlish behaviour in similar ways, and I have learned to tell an autobiographical story of myself that makes sense of my personality in terms of my past behaviour. But Ali’s reading-out of her diary does not completely tell such a story. In her second entry, she is “big now” at about eight years old and writes about this seriously, but then writes about diarrhea, a non sequitur. We cannot know everything about why Ali does this. Her past motives must remain closed to us, and to Ali in the present. The juxtaposition is so incongruous in its utter sincerity that it becomes a source of humour. It is why I laughed so hard in my car: I both did and did not recognize myself in Ali’s diary entries.

I see Ali’s reading as an instance of the power of the diary form when it is unleashed in a venue its author had never imagined: public performance. Philippe Lejeune has pointed out in his brilliant essay about his own beginnings as a secret diarist, “Lucullus Dines with Lucullus,” that for him as a lonely fifteen year-old adolescent, the diary form was “a protected space” (Lejeune 333) where he could befriend himself and make his own rules for how to become the kind of writer he wanted to be. The pages of the diary became a way for Lejeune to show hospitality to himself, to tell the truth to “his soul” even if the writing was not in fact very good and he felt shame that it was not what he wished it to be. That early diary was, Lejeune writes, “a bubble, a diving bell” for that young writer. It protected him from the world (334). But read later, the diary takes on another function. It becomes “an archive in time,” that the child writer has left for a future reader, without realizing it at the time. Lejeune’s

adolescent diary is a way to show his future self who he was and wanted to be in its quotidian detail:

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I escape the present, and make contact with a vast future. I lay by provisions for a future writer, and leave traces for a future adult whom I am helping by recording his history, someone who will later help me better understand the confusion I'm experiencing. We are helping each other across time. (Lejeune 334)

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The diary is a trace of a life, since it records only what its author wishes. Diary-keeping does not adhere to many rules, although diaries do have material or digital affordances that affect how they are kept, as Lejeune and others have pointed out. It does not have a conventional audience, a market or even a subject. Until they are edited, published or (in the case of Ali's diary) performed, they remain traces of a present moment that the writer may no longer recall, moments recorded that may not even make sense years later to the writer (or to Ali's audience). But when diaries are read later, as Lejeune himself takes up his early entries and copies them to understand that younger writer, and to understand too how diarists participated in the development of self-consciousness during the eighteenth century in Europe (330), then an aspect of pastness in diaries becomes activated, for the present. The trace is retraced. Diaries from our past can show us something of ourselves that is not subject to the stories of others, and that we ourselves may not have incorporated into our own story of our lives. They can show us that the story of ourselves is not what we have learned to tell. They are, Lejeune says, a promise from a child writer to the adult the child will become, because the future self will be able to understand what the child self cannot. This is why Ali tells her audience, humorously, that she is "gayer than Christmas" for context, but it is also why her entry is so charming: her child self's abrupt value judgement of "boys" can be read in the present not just as the exuberant dismissal of boys by a girl who was not attracted to them at age eight, but also as early evidence of the exuberance of the adult Ali, who gleefully reads the passage as evidence of what would become her lesbian identity.

Elsewhere, I have written about why the diary is not like most other forms of life writing (Rak 2018). Unlike published memoirs, they are not narratives and they are not composed retrospectively. They may not be edited. Their rhetoric and forms are not taught to their authors, who may never have read another diary before they begin theirs, and so there may be rhetorical features in one diary that are not present in another. The diary form may even be dictated by the material circumstances of composition, as cartoonist Alison Bechdel's was when her father gave her

a calendar and told her to write in each day, an incident Bechdel recounts in her autobiographical comic, *Fun Home* (Bechdel 140). Diaries can just record the pleasure of writing for oneself, and do not even have to make sense to readers. They may never even be read once they are written. And so, diaries are, as Lejeune has said in “The Diary as Antifiction,” a nonfictional form which does not make use of storytelling devices such as plot twists or even invented events, because diarists have no audience but paper, a screen, or themselves. They are written to the future, but their authors cannot know what that future holds (Lejeune 202). They are records of processes, and not products that can be bought and sold: Lejeune even says that when diaries are edited and published, that they cease to be diaries at all (Lejeune 207). They do not even end: in “How do diaries end?” Lejeune writes that they just stop when the writer stops writing them for any number of reasons, including death itself (Lejeune 198).

But for me, most of all, diaries are a fascinating genre because so many unknown and ordinary people keep them. Whether diarists are prosaic like my own grandfather, who simply recorded the weather conditions each day for decades until he died, or exuberant like Ali as a child diary writer, diaries are like no other writing, a hidden genre used by millions who write their observations in secret, however they want. In an era where social media has built into its affordances an ethic of “sharing” and people worldwide publicize the intimate details of their lives, diaries represent a kind of private writing and thinking that can serve as a sanctuary from and even a refusal of contemporary life, a place of slow reflection that cannot be made subject to the demands and desires of others, a possible space of resistance and recuperation.

I was Ali’s age the first time I began to keep a diary. I was given the diary, a small blue book with a lock on it that said “My Diary” in gold, by one of my grandmothers, the more conventional one, who no doubt saw it as a traditional gift to give a young girl. Perhaps she was hoping (as she sometimes did, out loud) that it would make me act more like a girl and less like a tomboy. But what my grandmother could not know was that the experience of writing for no audience, but for the pleasure of just making the cursive words on paper, did not make me more girlish. It made me into a writer. I no longer have that diary with its little lock and key that so delighted me, but I remember my first entry. In it, I am furious: “Dear Diary, I HATED today. It was raining. I couldn’t get a friend on the phone. And my feet are wet!” I recall the entry so vividly because I remember writing it, sitting by myself at a little school desk my dad had painted yellow, the kind of desk with an attached chair and a hole for an inkwell (I had to ask my mother what that was for) and a lid you could lift so that you store books and treasures inside it. I remember how my feet felt moist and

clammy, and how it was Saturday, and it was raining, and I knew I would not be able to go and play with my friend, Kathleen Henahan, who lived on the next street over from me. And I remember how my anger disappeared as I wrote, like magic, and that I could read the words on the page back and know I had made them myself. I pressed down as I made the exclamation point at the end. This is how I *felt*, exactly. This was not like drawing a picture, which I would have to show my mother later. I could lock this book away and no one would see what I wrote, except myself. Without my diary, I would not have experienced the magic of transforming the everyday into an address to myself, and once I began, I did it all the time. Like Lejeune's first diary, my diary became a sanctuary, a place where I could speak with myself, where no one could tell me what to say or how to say it. Like Alison Bechdel, or Philippe Lejeune, the form of the diary made me into a subject who could create, who would one day help my future self across time.

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Julie Rak is a Professor in the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta, and she lives and works on Treaty 6 and Metis territory. Julie holds an Eccles Fellowship at the British Library for 2017–2018 and is also a Killam Professor at the University of Alberta for 2017–28. She is the author of *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market* (2013) and *Negotiated Memory: Doukhobor Autobiographical Discourse* (2004) as well as many essays about life writing and popular culture. She is the editor of *Autobiography in Canada* (2005) and has co-edited with Anna Poletti *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online* (2014). With Keavy Martin she edited the reissue of Mini Aodla Freeman's landmark Inuit memoir, *Life Among the Qallunaat* (2014). With Jeremy Popkin, she edited a collection of Philippe Lejeune's essays translated into English, *On Diary* (2009). She is completing a book manuscript called "Social Climbing: Gender in Mountaineering Expedition Narratives" for McGill-Queens University Press.