25. Writing Norah's Story

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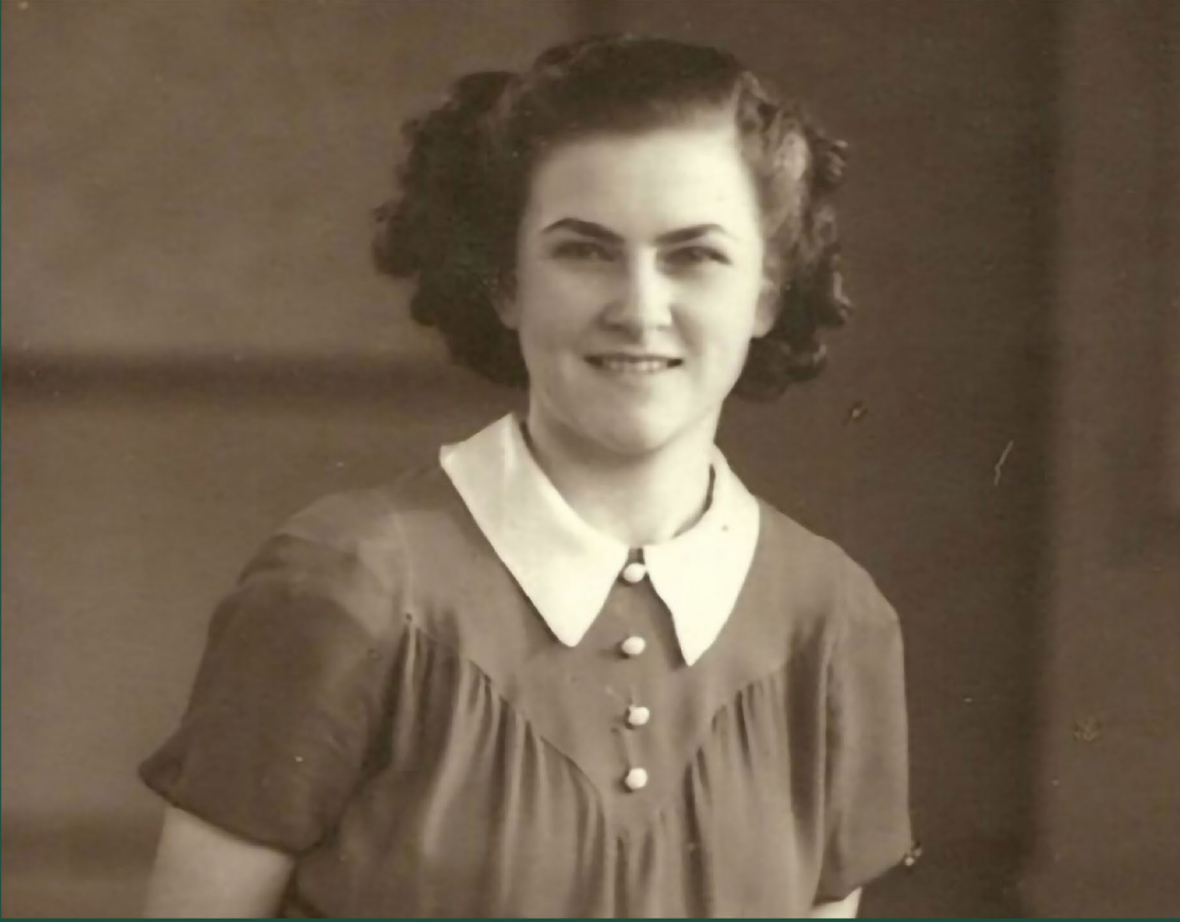
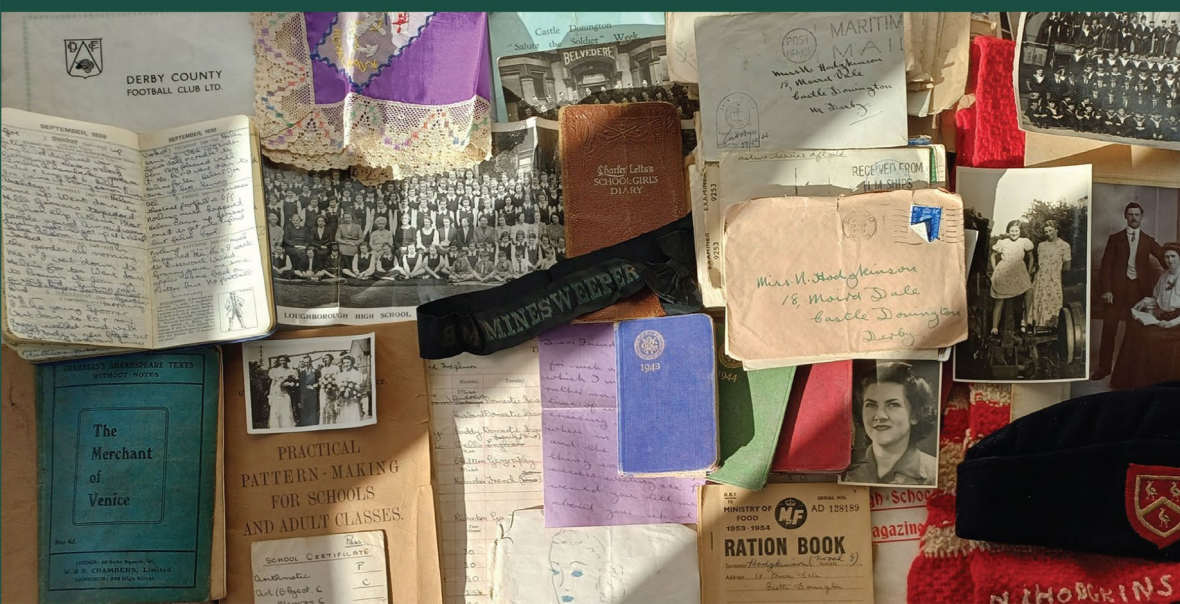


A Place of Dreams

Desire, Deception and a Wartime Coming of Age

Alison Twells



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Cover image: Norah Hodgkinson, 1941, W.W. Winter, Derby. A selection from Norah's archive, Alison Twells, 2025. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.

25. Writing Norah's Story

My daughter's comment nags at me: *Would* Norah approve? It seems entirely plausible that she would take a dim view of some parts of this book, akin perhaps to the objections of my mother, who is less than thrilled with its final shape.

My mum would prefer a story entirely about Norah and her diaries. Beyond a bit of wartime context, she has zero interest in the other stuff – the historical debates, the questions of method, the politics, philosophising and clever-clog interest in life's imponderables of which I am so fond. When reading the manuscript, she homed in on Norah and skipped the rest. Norah's diary accounts of growing up in wartime Castle Donington: that's all the book needs.

I do love this sense of enough-ness, this rock-solid belief, in the face of all messages to the contrary, that ordinary lives are enough. Norah would feel the same. She would heartily approve of the story of a girl with a postman father and a mother who'd been in service, a girl who loved Derby County, Donington Park, playing cricket with the neighbourhood boys, who read *Picturegoer* while sunbathing in the orchard, killed piglets on Webb's farm, went bluebelling after school. A story set in a council house; she'd like that. An avid visitor to stately homes, Norah would agree that the homes of the poor and the lives of the men and women who lived in them are history too.

But Norah would have no truck with my analysing and agonising over social class, this business of working up, moving away, and the question of what goes with you when you do, whether it has a place and value in your new home, how it resonates down the years. It's an interest of mine, not hers: this plucking out and setting on another course – the struggle for self in this new environment – and our tendency to reduce it to the trivial: the wrongful assumption that the nation enjoys salad cream with its lettuce, maybe, or a lack of familiarity with courgettes.

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I catch every nuance of class, including the apparent absence of any sense of culture clash in her encounter with 'that school'. Other girls from her background felt the stretch, many dropped out, but Norah had none of their discomfort. For her, being a scholarship girl was uncomplicated, a benign good, part of progress and being modern. As her boxes of High School memorabilia suggest, it was key to her story of her life.

What Norah saw in straightforward terms – families becoming better off over time, kids getting into the grammar, the next generation going to university – I see with a social historian's eye. While her generation believed they were the start of a sea change that would result in the end of class inequality, their mobility had little impact on the social structure as a whole.[1] Maybe it wasn't meant to. She'd laugh at that. She'd think that for one so educated, I was unfathomably daft. Why would anybody want to stop children getting on in life? For Norah, it was all individual. She had good parents and she was bright enough. She could've worked harder and the white-collar job that followed was a bit of a let-down, but… end of.

Norah would also disapprove of my interest in the bigger picture as regards sex and love: how our lived experience feels so deeply personal yet is shaped by wider cultural trends. I imagine putting to her a compelling case – Eva Illouz's stance, maybe, that the interwar years saw happiness and success increasingly defined in terms of romantic love and erotic bonds, a new development that was intimately tied to consumer capitalism[2] – and picture her looking at me askance, like I'm a bit of a sad case, or have too much time on my hands. While she would no doubt agree that romantic love was the be-all and end-all, in the 1940s and after, she would consider that it just didn't need saying, was common sense, a natural fact of being human.

'That's just how it is', she'd say, vaguely exasperated. There was no point in analysing it, getting too clever.

And then there's Carolyn Heilbrun's claim in her classic book *Writing a Woman's Life*, that while the biographies of men focus on their worldly quests, often with scant reference to their domestic affairs, women are judged relationally, made someone by a husband or children. Only during courtship, the period of women's lives most constantly and most vividly present in films, novels, magazines and advertising, are women truly, briefly, active and agent, in the limelight of their own lives. But,

Heilbrun says, it is little more than an illusion: the young woman 'must entrap the man to ensure herself a center for her life'. And then her killer line: 'The rest is aging and regret'.[3] I wouldn't dare hit her up with this one, but for the years of Norah's girlhood and young womanhood, I am with Heilbrun all the same.

We can be sure, nonetheless, that Norah would love being reacquainted with her teenage self, with the girl who wrote her list of crushes in her *Letts's School-girl's Diary* in 1938, who knitted socks for a sailor at the start of the war and fell in love with Danny the airman. She would no doubt feel wistful for the glamorous young woman in the New Look coat, who went off to Rome, Switzerland, Yugoslavia, learned French and then German at night school, who made bookcases and flower gardens, who swam and danced and flirted with men. We think that she wouldn't object to the discussions of her love life; she liked being desired and didn't mind who knew it.

And Norah would surely agree that the ignorance about sex in which girls were kept was nothing short of an outrage. That the guilt and shame they were encouraged to feel made such an unnecessary misery of it. But beyond this, she wouldn't venture. There are points of real fury in Norah's diaries: those everlasting men at work and their back-patting promotions, the car maintenance night class teacher who told her that women weren't allowed to progress to the next level. But Norah was no feminist. She was happy enough with the mid-century roles allotted to women and men. She believed men needed to be played, that it was best to pander to their egos, to flatter them, baby them a bit.

'Men don't like to be told anything, don't like women to lead the way', she said on witnessing some domestic altercation in the early 2000s. 'You have to let him think it's his idea'. When I assured her I absolutely could not be bothered with that, she looked at me with pity in her eyes.

The 'return' for all of this was the stuff that she valued: a bit of chivalry, being wooed, feeling feminine. (This is *in theory* at least, because in practice, as we've seen, nobody looked after her and Norah could do everything, from decorating to joinery to mending the car. I didn't say it wasn't contradictory.) The absence of romance made her unhappy, whether in the form of Danny's scrappier letters, Vic's lack of attentiveness, her laments about her humdrum existence with Eddy or her old-age wish for a more

cossetted life. She just needed men to keep their side of the bargain. She was unlucky with that. The ones she chose never did.

And Eddy? I have tried my best here, really I have. Norah's diary descriptions of him are a very mixed bag. I have been faithful to the passion and excitement of their early dates, his offer of a different life; to Norah and her Grace Kelly look, the years when she was a princess who had captured her prince. But it was complicated, not only by his existing wife, but because he was a deeply (war-?) damaged man. And because before long, passion all spent, she was weighed down with drudgery, tending to his every need, wondering if there shouldn't be more to life than this. But – again, lots of 'buts' – the relationship gave her a role, made her matter. *Happy Birthday Norah,* Eddy wrote in a flowery card that she kept, *with all my love from your very thankful Duck.* And another: *lots of love from your dependent Eddy/Duck.* So he did appreciate all she did for him. At least one day a year. ('Duck': a private joke, a shared send-up of an East Midlands term of endearment.)

So Eddy would be a real sticking point. To Norah, he was the way he was because he'd had such a bad war (poor chap) and women put up with much worse. But to my mum and me, her niece and great-niece, he was a brute. She lived in an unmarried trap, hemmed in by respectablility, secrecy and shame (Miss Hodgkinson still) and a legal status which decreed that if she left, she'd go empty-handed. But: I have said less than I could have here. Norah would want to protect him. Let's leave it at that.

What would she say about Danny and Jim? That Jim was a bad egg, that both had done her wrong, but – I don't doubt – that boys will be boys, men will be men. On a minesweeper in the North Sea, or a series of air raids over Europe, they didn't know if they were going to live or die. You had to make allowances, forgive some bad behaviour. It was just her bad luck (again!) to have fallen prey to them. Hopefully, after the war was over, they made good husbands and fathers, lived decent and honest lives.[4]

Did they groom her? To me, it's as clear as day. But I am well aware that Norah and I would operate in different frames. She was born too early for the confessional, 'expressive revolution' of the 1960s or for feminist analyses of sex.[5] How would she see it? The excitement of

wartime romance, the thrill of desire. But disappointment and sadness too, I'm sure of that.

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I tell you about my imagined disagreements with Norah because I am uneasy with the power I have, as the writer of her story, to make my interpretation stick. There is no doubt that I knew her as well as anybody did, and a good deal better than most. Our lives were bound, as great-aunt and great-niece, god-mother and god-daughter, two women born forty years apart who grew up on the same street. We shared an umbilical attachment to a place, a village where our family – or mine, the Twells side – has centuries of history, but where neither of us wound up living. But who am I to coax Norah's dreams and desires from her daily accounts? To write an intimate story that gives the final shape to her life? How do I stitch it up in a way that doesn't nip and tuck, smooth out all the pleats and folds, that keeps some frayed edges and wayward threads and resists a seamless untruth?

I have a colleague who makes life history recordings with cancer patients in palliative care. Sometimes, after telling their stories, for themselves, and for their families, once they've gone, they panic. 'We can erase', my colleague reassures. 'You can take bits out before you pass it on'. And wipe they do, a grumble cut here, an affair or two shaved there, a greater homing in on the joys of a marriage, a contentment with family life. We don't arrive easily at 'narrative closure', that place of 'psychic equilibrium' when, the pieces laid out, loose strands tied up, we reach a feeling of composure, a satisfying end.[6]

Even without a sense of audience or such looming finality, we reshape our lives. Sometimes it is the culture at large that gives us permission to change our tune. Eddy's daughter, Dinah, tells me about her childhood self in the years following her mother's early death. 'The idea that a child had an emotional life, it was unthinkable then', she says, but the cultural shift that saw the appearance of shelves of memoirs about unhappy childhoods in WH Smith has made hers more than a personal pain. Something similar has happened with veterans who've been quiet for decades about the less heroic aspects of their wartime pasts, now given a voice by recent discussions about military service and PTSD. How does

Norah's experience look in the context of #MeToo? Is it anachronistic, to use a current reckoning as a lens through which to look at the past? Or does it throw a new light, provide a new entry point, a clearer perception? Is it only now that we can really see the grooming that went on in 1941, even though without a language born of feminism or the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, it happened all the same?[7]

Our slippery, shape-shifting lives, so tricky to catch and fix in place. I think of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and the many selves 'built up, one on top of the other, as plates are piled on a waiter's hand'.[8] Do they change, decade by decade, relationship by relationship, year by year, child by (no) child? Do we make our own main stories or, like those wooden sorter toys for toddlers, are we slotted into pre-existing shapes at different points in history and in our own lives?

So: all of this. But mostly, I want to feel that I have behaved honourably towards Norah, that I've done justice to her memory, let her speak for herself. That, as Alain Corbin writes in his history of an unknown man in nineteenth-century France, she would 'forgive me' for the various ways in which a reader may imagine the girl and woman she was, because of my account.[9] That my words allow the reader to see her as she saw herself.

But there is always a conflict. Life story writing 'always means you are playing with another person's life', writes Ken Plummer. It involves 'accurately yet imaginatively' picking up on their understandings of their place in the world, analysing their expressions, presenting them in convincing ways, and 'being critically aware of the immense difficulties such tasks bring'.[10] But *their understandings* and *your analysis* often do not match and the latter – academic analyses at least – can feel very far removed from the experience of living.

Sharing this project with my mother has helped no end here. 'Knowing with' her, rather than simply 'knowing from' her, has shaken up my understanding of Norah's life.[11] In our little authorial collective of two, my voice is decentred, some of my 'tendencies' toned down. Yet still I can't resist asking questions in which Norah and my mother (would) have no interest. I try to suppress them, but they return, time and again.

I can only be honest here, wear my commitments openly, insist again that the histories we write come from somewhere, even those we persist in telling in the third person, in the detached and impersonal academic style. Who we are, our place in the world, what we care about: all shape

the questions we ask and the stories we tell about the past. 'Writing cannot be done in a state of desirelessness', as Janet Malcolm states. We might try to conceal the autobiographical 'I', to dismiss it as self-indulgent, solipsistic or lacking in rigour. But it seeps through, in the quiet way perhaps that Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *A Midwife's Tale* is shaped by the life of her pioneer grandmother, an Idaho homesteader and a mother of twelve. Or like Jill Lepore, oblivious to the many 'interlacings' with her own childhood at the time of writing, but suddenly aware that her account of Jane Franklin's life was 'a book about my mother'.[12]

'Transference is an occupational hazard for historians', Carolyn Steedman writes, 'but I do not see how we would ever get going on anything, were it not available as a device for disinterring our historical subjects'.[13] But after we have 'got going', after we have acknowledged the researcher's life as the basis for how other lives are viewed, we surely must strive to move beyond a too-easy resonance and relatability, to enter the 'different country' that is history, puzzling at and then seeing more clearly the constraints and opportunities of a life lived in another time. As well as hoping that the reader might see Norah as she saw herself, it was my wish that through writing her life, I might too.