

Insanity Helps

by

Indyana Horobin

Indyana: So...why have you written a book for your PhD? Why even do the PhD?

Indy: Those are loaded questions. There's a multitude of reasons I've written the book for.

Indyana: Expand on them.

Indy: I've written the book because I grew up with my family's stories, those stories need to be told, to be written. Narrative of how my grandfather escaped Army jail, of my great-grandmother surviving the war. They've circled around, encompassing my childhood, teenage-hood, adulthood. Perhaps, I feel lost without them. Adrift.

I've written the book because, as I like to tell people, 'if I'm going to write war stories, I'll never be out of a job.' It's true, I don't think I will ever be out of a job.

Indyana: And war is what you want to write? Just the one area?

Indy: Possibly. I know I'm not done with it. Even after this project - Ginger Cake and Lemon Icing, upon concluding my exegesis, when I submit this project and have it marked, returned, marked, returned, marked, and finally accepted, I know I still want to write war.

Indyana: Not family?

Indy: Maybe. I have the words. Sentences and phrases, paragraphs, pages, cut from this piece, pasted in junkyard documents. They're things that didn't make the final edit or were cut out in the drafts. Parts that got too biographical, too show-and-tell. Stylings that didn't fit the style – traveloging, The Germany research trip broken down into a play-by-play.

I know that with the things kept in, it's all relative to war. You know. Ernst was conscripted, Rudy was conscripted, Rodney conscripted, Janek put into Buchenwald, Erna into bomb shelters. A reluctance is present in the family history. Possibly, it's my job to not just stop at reluctance. Objection didn't stop Nazi Germany from holding a gun to Rudy's family, unwillingness didn't stop the Australian Government from sending Rod his National Service

letter. Perhaps a reason – one reason – is that it’s my job, our job, to not just be reluctant. The book is about gaining agency over the things our family didn’t have control of. It’s about taking a stand. Doing something meaningful.

Indyana: Cliché.

Indy: I know. That’s an issue. Nothing is original, not even the memories and stories in the book – because they’re memories. They’re a fabrication of a real event, tinged with subjectivity and flavoured with explanations. We read Rodrigo Quian Quiroga’s *The Forgetting Machine*. We read how ‘the Grandmother Neuron’ links all memory, it joins the senses, the perceptions, the unconscious – it all links by relativity. One item informs the next. Clichés are a risk because humans are fundamentally clichéd creatures. I’ve used commonly written phrases within *Ginger Cake* and *Lemon Icing*, it’s simply the nature of processed information in the mind.

There’s another reason for writing this. Like ‘the Grandmother Neuron’, my writing has relatively ping-ponged from one item to the next. Fiction in undergraduate years, then into non-fiction, Rod’s Vietnam War experience in the Honours degree, and now *Ginger Cake* and *Lemon Icing* for the PhD. The purpose simply grows and links, until the memories are there, present on the page.

Indyana: We’ve moved on from purpose now.

Indy: But I’m not done.

Indyana: We don’t have the word count.

Indy: There are more reasons, there are always more reasons.

Indyana: I’ve informed you. We don’t have the word count.

Indy:

Indyana:

Indy:

Indyana:

Indy: What about your purpose? Why go through this strange method of writing? Why fabricate an interview with yourself? Why create a duality of thoughts?

Indyana: Why not? It's our article. It's our take on how life gets in.

Indy:

Indyana: We interviewed Rodney and Jutta about their life stories. We conversed about all the things that fit into the project, and more. It makes sense. The one major person in the project that we haven't interviewed is ourselves.

Indy: Fine then!

Indyana: So...?

Indy: So, what?

Indyana: Ask the question.

Indy: So, Indyana, among your PhD project, how does life get in?

Indyana: Thank you for that, great question

Indy: You're the worst.

Indyana:

Indy:

Indyana: There are certain elements you have to understand, before moving into life around the PhD. The first is that the PhD is not just the project.

Indy: Go on.

Indyana: It's a combination of things. You, of course have the main project – which for mine...ours, is consisted of researching for a year, interviewing for half a year, and then writing for the rest of it. Along with this there are really five elements to also take care of: teaching, creative publishing, academic publishing, networking, and milestones.

Because while yes, you can just do the project, if you don't complete these other areas, when you graduate no one will know who you are. You need the teaching experience to show that you can function as a teaching academic. The creative publishing to establish your name in the wider world of literature, academic publications to establish your name in the academic world of literature. The networking is the thing that gets you the teaching and the publishing, and of course the milestones are the big check ins – while they're handy to summarise where

your work is standing, they also take a good couple of months away from doing anything else.

Indy: And...

Indyana: And, what? That's it.

Indy: Outside of that, you need to live your life.

Indyana: No, actually, you need to live your life inside of it. Inside of all of it.

You start by shifting your routines. If you watch television to relax, you now only watch shows relative to the PhD work, movies too. If you like to read, which you do, you now read only books relative, say it with me...

Indy and Indyana: To the PhD.

Indyana: Good. If you play videogames-

Indy: You play ones relative to th-

Indyana: No, you play ones that require minimal attention, something that numbs your mind a bit, something you can react instinctively to, and while you do it you listen to audiobooks that you need to get through for the project.

If there's anything that can be done with minimal focus, your focus is on the project. You're expected to work a minimum of forty hours a week, but this is well below what you actually work. The PhD is invasive. Every thought now relates back to it all. You work, as the Beatles say 'eight days a week'. When you shower, you think about how the water rushing on your shoulders and dripping off your arms is like the rains you write about, gushing down upon your great-grandfather in the trenches of World War 1. You keep an eye on the news headlines – what war is next, what war is coming?

Meanwhile, you continue your war on blank digital pages, assaulting them with words upon words. Shooting them from your fingers onto the keyboard, punching in sixty, seventy words per minute. Then fifty, forty, twenty, one, one, one.

The brain fog exists in time, not location. It blankets out weeks, yet you type one word, just one word a minute, an hour, a day.

You attend things, of course. Events, birthdays, hang outs – but there's the project, looming in the back of the mind.

The PhD has ruined you. It has ruined all other jobs for you. Because nothing has been, nothing will be as all-consuming as the project. It is everything. Your life moulds around it and is layered underneath as the habits of studying life enclose over the habits that once used to be just that. A shower. A game. A book. A movie.

Indy: Sounds pleasant.

Indyana: Are you kidding? It's amazing.

Indy: You make it sound overwhelming.

Indyana: Oh, it is. It's so perfectly overwhelming.

Indy: But, we're getting it done. We're getting close to submitting, wrapping up a lot of the work. Getting it where it needs to go. And we've done this article.

Indyana: No thanks to you.

Indy: I'm the one writing this.

Indyana: As am I. But I think you're still a step behind.

Indy: What do you mean?

Indyana: I'm afraid, you don't quite understand yet. You're the villain. Not in Ginger Cake, in that you're the hero, aren't you! The one who gets to sit and listen and write the memories and say 'Oh this was hard, and it makes me sad', and 'oh, the intergenerational trauma is too much to bear!' Like experience second-hand even comes close to experiencing war first-person, seeing the person next to you turn into pink mist because they stepped on a landmine, or physically seeing your home destroyed, seeing your neighbours murdered and eviscerated. Here, in this piece, you're the villain. It's you, Indy, the person who procrastinated, who did other things when you should have been spending every second on the writing. Tried to wrap in your routines into work. Sure, I've explained it, a couple of paragraphs above, but I'm just examining what you did. And look, you even set my name to orange, and yours to blue. Why, because orange is a much more aggressive colour than blue? Presumptuous!

Indy: The PhD is more than just writing.

Indyana: *ThE PhD Is MoRe ThAn JuSt WrItInG.*

Indy: And now, we're utilizing an outdated modicum of popular culture. Using alternating capitalisation and non-capitalisation to represent sarcasm.

We're not allowed to disagree, we don't have dissociative identity disorder, we're mentally the same person.

Indyana: We're absolutely allowed to disagree.

Indy: No, we're not.

Indyana: I am the version of you who's academic.

Indy: *I aM tHe VeRsIoN oF yOu WhO's AcAdEmIc.*

Indyana: I'm the one who consistently has a thesaurus open, who's constantly aware of your sections of writing that are too casual, too pandering. I'm the part that reinforces your imposter syndrome. What you're writing isn't good enough. Your ideas aren't meaningful. You've lucked your way in. You shouldn't be writing. You're the one who says non-academic things like 'yeah, nah, good to see ya champ, ahh nice, nice, yeah good job, that's pretty tight, nice'. You're the one who tells people to call you Indy, because you don't feel professional enough to go by Indyana. Because you feel like an imposter in the PhD, you're always waiting for the other shoe to drop. You should dose yourself with your anxiety medications and quieten down.

Indy: That's not nice.

Indyana: Yeah, well I'm you.

Indy: And yet, here we are. Writing the article. Using this self-interview method. Why don't we just be done with it? Send it in. Let people read it.

Indyana: You know what, screw you!

Indy: Yeah! Screw you too, what you ever do for me?

Just send the damn thing in.

References

Quiroga, Rodrigo Quian (2017), *The Forgetting Machine: Memory, Perception, and the 'Jennifer Anniston Neuron'*, Random House US.