

## **Praise for *Mother: A Memoir***

‘A tender and graceful study of parents and children, and a finely judged and measured attempt to capture the flitting, quicksilver shapes of what we keep and what we lose: the touch, the tone, the gaze of the past as it fades. It is a moving and beautifully achieved memoir, and a testament to the writer’s skill and generosity of spirit.’

**Hilary Mantel**

## **Praise for Nicholas Royle’s novels**

### ***An English Guide to Birdwatching***

‘This is a novel operating at the outer edges of the form, deep in the avant-garde...play[ing] brilliantly in the fertile ground between fiction and memoir. *An English Guide to Birdwatching* is Rachel Cusk rewritten by Georges Bataille, full of strange sex, sudden violence and surreal twists. Illuminated throughout with gorgeous illustrations by Natalia Gasson, this is a novel that will charm, unsettle and baffle in equal measure.’

**Alex Preston, *Financial Times***

‘Great books are still written, they just have to take place in Literature, the continent that never forgets. While reading *An English Guide to Birdwatching*, I travelled in all the time periods, places, countries of literature. It was more than an odyssey...’

**Hélène Cixous**

‘A metafictional fever dream.’

***The Guardian***

‘This is one of the strangest novels I’ve read in years. Digressive but coercive, impassioned but fey (digressive and coercive, impassioned and fey), it’s a curiously compelling investigation of the nature of writing and the writing of nature. I ended it moved in ways I could not explain; I also ended it rather dizzied and thoroughly gulled.’

**Robert Macfarlane**

‘An ambitious and far-reaching work that tackles many subjects ... but most of all, it’s about language: how vocabulary, tone, emphasis, linguistic provenance, double meanings, even rhythm define the way we consume every aspect of life... It’s also sexy, funny and, in quieter moments, very touching. There is heartfelt writing here... we come to think about the nature of love, and about our taking for granted the world beyond language; the sea, the sky, and the birds. Marvellous..’

***Big Issue***

‘Royle has achieved what no other British writer has yet managed to achieve: to write about birds, people, bankers, capitalism, and climate change all together and in a way that asks us not only to listen but also moves us to act upon what we hear.’

**Alex Lockwood**

‘This is a book that will bring delight to anyone who likes the idea of a novel in a novel in a novel... A fantastic work of literary fiction ... breaking boundaries and fourth walls to become something unique and highly enjoyable..’

***The Worm Hole***

‘A daring novel, both wickedly playful and deeply touching.’

**Alison Moore**

‘A mischievous, comic and inventive literary achievement.’

***Booktime* magazine**

## *Quilt*

‘A book of mythological power. *Quilt* is unforgettable, like all those great pieces of fiction that are fed by our immemorial root system, the human dream of metamorphosis.’

**Hélène Cixous**

‘It is quiet, lapidary, and teases out the tangled filaments that link figuration to fact and insight to feeling with the unnerving stealth of a submarine predator.’ **Will Self**

‘An intense study of grief and mental disintegration, a lexical celebration and a psychological conundrum ... Royle explores loss and alienation perceptively and inventively.’

***The Guardian***

‘Royle’s baroque, athletic prose ... confers a strong sense of the “strangeness” of English, “which, after all, belongs to no one” and should be continually reinvented ... Moments of delightfully eccentric humour and impressive linguistic experimentalism.’

***The Observer***

‘A work of remarkable imaginative energy.’

**Frank Kermode**

‘It is in those commonplace moments at the end of a life ... moments which Nicholas Royle describes with such piercing accuracy, when this novel is truly at its strangest.’

***Times Literary Supplement***

‘What deceptively begins as a more or less realistic piece of autobiographical fiction evolves into an astonishing narrative that puts into question the very notion of everyday reality. A highly readable and stunningly original experiment in literary form.’

**Leo Bersani**

‘Captures the absolute dislocating strangeness of bereavement. While the novel is bursting with inventive wordplay, Royle’s use of language is most agile and beautiful in his descriptions of rays... The shifts in point of view have a sort of fairground quality to them, suddenly lurching, demanding your compliance, but it is the way the storyline ultimately develops that takes the breath away.’

*New Statesman*

‘*Quilt* is one of those books I long for but come across rarely... It is strange, surprising, sui generis... with its overturning qualities, its ability to stick in the head while resisting resolution, and its determination not to leave the reader feeling that the end of the text is the end of the reading experience. What my reading life needs – what the literary world needs – is more *Quilts* and fewer comfort blankets.’

**John Self, *The Asylum***

# MOTHER

A Memoir

Nicholas Royle

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*For*  
*Sam, Sebastian, Alexi, Elena,*  
*William and Augustus*







## Pre-word

In my mind's eye she is sitting at the circular white Formica-top table in the corner. Morning sunlight fills the kitchen. She has a cup of milky Nescafé Gold Blend and is smoking a purple Silk Cut. She is dressed for comfort in floral bronze-and-brown blouse and blue jumper with light gray slacks and blue slippers. She is absorbed in a crossword (*The Times*) but not oblivious. She does what always takes me aback. She reads out one of the clues. As if I'd know the answer. Her gift for crosswords is alien to me. I get stuck at the first ambiguity or double-meaning. Whereas she sweeps through all illusions allusions red herrings and anagrams and is done most days by lunchtime. But her fondness for crossword puzzles is inseparable from my interest in words. Where they come from. What they might be doing. Earliest recorded use of 'In my mind's eye': Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (around 1599). Referring to the Ghost.

My mother died years ago. What has induced me to write about her after all this time remains mysterious to me. It is connected to the climate crisis. As the natural historian David Attenborough says: 'the collapse of our civilisations and the extinction of much of the natural world is on the horizon.' In ways I cannot pretend to fathom I have found that writing about my mother is bound up with writing about Mother Nature and Mother Earth. And no doubt it has to do also with my own ageing and the buried

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life of mourning. The strange timetables of realisation and loss. A memoir is 'a written record of a person's knowledge of events or of a person's own experiences'. 'A record of events written by a person having intimate knowledge of them and based on personal observation.' So the dictionaries tell us. But this memoir of my mother makes no attempt at a comprehensive record. It reveals very little about her early life or adolescence. Friends and lovers. Her education. Travel. Work. It doesn't offer any sort of rounded picture. It seems less a record of events than a grappling with what escapes words. Not just love and loss but fire and air and water and earth. Smell and music. Voice and touch.

I knew from the outset that I couldn't write a model kind of book. For reasons as plentiful as blackberries the classic memoir conforms to certain established principles. The linear and chronological. An orderly unfolding of information and impressions. In a conventional memoir there's no messing about with the strange materiality of writing or exploration of how 'memory' and 'mother' might be inseparable. A memoir has no business with the stuff of crosswords. Anagrams and palindromes. Puns and double-meaning. But in the case of my mother these things are in play from the beginning. MAM. *Mother: A Memoir*.

What is this *mother*? Who says it? To whom? First and foremost the title refers to my mother. But all of us have or had one. Does that distinction between past ('had') and present ('have') hold any real meaning? Isn't a mother not just for keeps but the very figure who keeps watch over keeping? *Mother: A Memoir*: the title might be construed as a sort of crossword clue. 'Memoir' comes from an Old French feminine noun for 'an act of commemoration,

## *Pre-word*

especially of the dead': *memoire*. Somewhere down the centuries the word became masculine. I am intrigued by this sense of a buried or repressed feminine. I am drawn to trying to explore the mystery of the mother of memory. Mother *as* memoir. As the act and passion of memory as such. 'Mother' has to do with birth. With the giving and gift of life. But she also has to do with the earth. The sea. The unconscious. Dreams. 'Mother' for me is not only a woman called Kathleen Beatrice McAdam. *Née* as people say. Nay. I love my mother's 'birth names': my father called her Kathleen while her sisters and most others called her Kate. But these names also seem a kind of violence and absurdity. She is prior to names. Pre-name. Pre-word.

## Marbles

I have lost plenty of people. Every loss is a lessening. Every loss makes one more aware of how much there is to lose. But the death of my mother was something else. I don't know when she died. She had dementia. For ten years she was among us in the midst of life cut off. An island going down under rising sea-levels. A skyscraper collapsing in a decade-long earthquake. A sunset sleepier than a druid's daydream. It began in her mid-sixties. It was over before her seventy-fifth birthday. It wasn't like an island or a skyscraper or a sunset. These similes are to no purpose. Nothing captures the pace of her descent into where she went.

Like others near and dear I pretended it wasn't happening. I'd ask if she would like a coffee. I'd suggest we go shopping or take a drive down to the sea. I'd say these things as if she was right as rain. I appeared to be unscathed. Not sinking an inch. I would see that she wasn't answering but act as if the pause in the footage was someone else's problem. A technical glitch. It could be ignored. It would come clear in a moment. I could see that she was not listening. She was looking out of the window at the birds around the bird-table. I would repeat the question. She would turn to me with whorls in her eyes. She would look in my direction as if. As if *if*. As if if I could just repeat the question one more time – just once more – it would connect. Repetition the mother of memory. As if if things could just rewind this era might start over. Here we are. Regained. We'd drive

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down to the coast. Walk arm in arm past the fishermen's huts along the dark Jurassic shore. Drive over the fragile medieval bridge into the little town and sit in one of her favourite pubs. She would have her cup of coffee. I would have my pint of beer.

When does a mother die?

*I'm losing my marbles.*

So she said one autumn morning in Devon. It was in the kitchen. I had just taken a coffee bean out of the machine and was chewing it slowly.

Losing her marbles. In the past she might have said this of an old friend or elderly family member. My grandfather's cousin or my mother's great-aunt in Scotland whom we would not see for several years at a time. She and I would head north. Like a band on tour. A duo without audience. We would drive through the Great Glen. Listening to the jiggling charm and melancholy of Mark Knopfler's *Local Hero* or the road-to-nowhere *Little Creatures* album by Talking Heads. We would stop on Skye or Mull. Or we'd go up east – away past Loch Ness and down again. We would stay in bed-and-breakfasts. Sharing a twin room. At some point on the tour (as arranged in advance by letter) we visited Cousin Nessie in her time-capsule of a cottage on the Square at Drymen. Cups and saucers clinked and teaspoons tinkled. The clock of ages on the mantelpiece stumped up the hour and the half- and the quarter-hours in strange accusation. What is the past? What is a family? It made our hearts knock together. After tea and scones we left and my mother remarked that Nessie was losing her marbles. She said it with all the peremptoriness of a High Court judge. The verdict was sound.

On other occasions the loss of marbles escaped me. I had to reconsider what had taken place. The gestures. The

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looks. Things said. With a friend of my father's in Somerset it had not been clear. But my mother had picked it up. Visible as an item of litter in an otherwise spotless National Trust garden. She was Acute personified. A bloodhound for lunacy in others. She would note a detail. A failure to retain something just said. An absence of attention. A lower score on the conversation chart. I always imagined her judging what others said – assessing their ability in the arena of wit and recollection and story-telling fast as lightning. And about my father's friend my mother was right. Within months he went from absent-minded to pit-stop care home to pushing up the daisies.

There must have been a point at which we failed to go back to see Cousin Nessie. Solitary in her time-capsule at Hillview Cottage. Her name cropped up only later. She'd passed away. The British way is with 'away'. Americans go without it. She'd *passed*. The *away* may be superfluous but the American idiom has a Christian tint: when people *pass* they pass to the Lord God or to heaven. And 'away' is such a dreamy two-in-one word. Fleet but longing. These details matter. The matter of my *mater*. Matador killing metaphor. My mother's every utterance was a play before the law of written or printed matter. As if her voice threw round each word a gentle mantle of quotation marks. As if she spoke from a love for the provisional that understood that no locution was ever playful enough. A mind mid-clue. On occasion my mother would say that someone had died or passed away. But more often she would fling up some funny everyday idiom. Her father's cousin in the Central Region was *pushing up the daisies* like the man in Somerset. She had *popped her clogs*.

Besides a fine nose for marble-loss my mother had a great taste for irony. 'Irony': I picture the word wrought

## Marbles

and looped – gappy and splendid in the manner of the fencing in her beloved Richmond Park. Just another word for the invisible cloaks and lassos thrown. Many people failed to get her. A shopkeeper or dog-owner caught up in conversation could very soon be immobilised by her tongue. Impossible to ascertain the status of what this quick-witted woman had just said. *They should all be strung up*. Did she mean it? *You look so much younger*. Did she mean it? She could pull herself to pieces in a minute twenty times a day but did she ever mean any of it?

Still I don't recall her ever saying in jest: *I'm losing my marbles*. For example at having mislaid the car key. Or forgetting an optician's appointment. Which made the declaration that bright autumn morning with the intensity of the Colombian coffee bean disintegrating in my mouth all the more sickening.

My father and I had understood for months that something terrible was happening. You've been losing them for a good while (one of us might well have retorted). They've been rolling around scattering this way and that – slipping under the skirting-boards disappearing into previously unknown nooks and crannies whizzed off without a murmur every which way in a muted nightmare pinball – for a good while already. Nothing good about it. A terrible while. Hideous wile of a while. For you too must have known. And we had said nothing. Too choked to say. But now for the first time you were saying it yourself.

They were the saddest words ever spoken to me. I wanted it to be a duo's refrain. *I'm losing my marbles*. A playful echo of other times. A riff of her old self making light of fetid fate. I wanted it to be immediately untrue. I wanted the judge to remove her wig and laugh the moment down the plughole. When my brother Simon and I shared

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a bedroom as boys and at night pleaded with her to come and frighten us by entering the room in different costumes – one minute a sheeted spectre – the next a fortune-teller – the next a shadowy crocodile – how we thrilled to be frightened. Knowing it was our mother in disguise. And now she was making a throwaway colloquialism scarier than a declaration of nuclear war. I was chilled to the marrow. Moribund metaphor. Icing on the cadaver cake. Cold clammy ivy wrapped my innards in an instant. And tears fell from my face incongruous as hot ice. I swallowed the fragments of the coffee bean. I prepared to vomit.

Nothing came. What to say? Rolling down my cheeks. My water marbles.

Ludicrous to pretend: *No of course you're not. Don't be daft darling mother.* Or to effuse: *Yes yes of course. We had noticed. That's why we've been trying to set up an appointment with the doctor. So that we can get you a proper diagnosis and see what medication might be prescribed.*

My father and I were like hooded birds. Seeling our own fates.

Until then I'd never been shot through by dementia. In my late teens I had done some voluntary work at a local mental hospital. I spent afternoons in the company of the raving and sedated. Watched them watching the test card on the television screen from one hour to the next. Listened in fear to their anguished moans and cries. I played chess with madmen. I sang songs on request to old women. And in later years I visited friends who had undergone breakdowns and been sectioned. But I had never felt overtaken – submerged – rooted out by the reality of another's madness. Mad judgment of the judge of madness. Trial of lunacy by lunacy. All the time headlong down a slide with no ground in sight.

## If you can't remember

A little boy's prime concern is to be alone in the presence of his mother. Alone. All one. In later years there was the quiet joy of sitting at home or in the pub reading aloud to her. I see that in reading I have never grown up. Whenever I love what I am reading I am in her presence. And then everything is in the voice in which I would read for her. Alone. I sit and read a book with my mother. I read back over these words with her now.

*I'm losing my marbles.* She never before or again talked of her madness. As if the words had announced her own death-sentence. But when will she have died? This question affects anybody who has lost a loved one to dementia. My mother carried on living. And I was far away dealing with children of my own. It was left to my father to look after her. He was *such a brick*. So my aunt Marion called him. It wore the life out of him. He survived my mother by just a couple of years. She became a phantom-like puppet. The battered shell of a self still harbouring a body. She passed away – passed off – passed through – day after day. She could no longer drive – not after being discovered miles from home with the car slumped in the hedgerow. It seemed a miracle she'd emerged in one piece. The police found her still sitting at the wheel of the 1973 yellow-ochre Opel Kadett. Smoke pouring out of the engine. Flames

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flickering up from under the bonnet. She seemed not to realise what had happened. She was unhurt. But she would never drive again.

My mother's ability to speak and interact with others withered away. If she had believed in a God and could articulate such a question she might have asked how He could have come up with dementia. Not just invented it as a personal exit strategy for a human being but designed it in such a way that the suffering it produced could linger and deepen and extend – month after month – year after year. Some Gawd that. What is the purpose of an elderly woman mad and sad as locked-up monkeys?

In my mind's eye she is surrounded by fire. A roaring fire. The conflagration of the world. And other images are at work. Like a perpetual flame she is weaving in my words.

*Pyromaniac* I joked one day. A terrible moment. I realised that she no longer had any idea what the word meant. She continued to smoke cigarettes and my father had a constant fear of her setting the house alight. This was foreshadowed by memories of ten years earlier when an electric blanket caught fire in the night. I was living abroad at the time. I was not informed. But next time I was home it was hard not to notice the new carpets and repainted walls. And that was foreshadowed again by the time in my early adolescence when my mother forked out all of her hard-earned savings on a cream-coloured leather three-piece suite and no sooner turned her back than my father chose to light a fire in the fireplace without first checking on the state of the chimney. When she came home from work that evening her brand-new sofa and chairs were covered in a film of soot that resisted all attempts at making good again. Shadow to shadow. In her latter days the possibility

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of a cigarette setting fire to herself – or to the house – meant that my father had to shadow her from one room to another. Never a moment's peace.

In my mind's eye she is surrounded by water. I see my mother in the sea in streams and rivers weirs and waterfalls. I see her when I am taking a shower or in the bath. When it rains. When I turn on a tap to fill the kettle. When I fill a hot-water bottle. In the 1960s and early 1970s she and her younger sister Marion used to take me and Simon and Cousin Michael up to North Berwick in Scotland to visit their eldest sister Peggy. Peggy was married to her first cousin Jim. They had no children. On our earlier trips we would stay with them on their farm just outside the town. In later years we shared their bungalow by the sea. For weeks we would inhabit this marine-edged existence unlike any other. We would walk early in the morning or in the long summer evenings along the great pale gold stretches of sand looking out to Bass Rock in the far distance and Craig Leith and Fidra and the Lamb closer to shore. We would wander for miles along the sands searching for the little cowrie shells that washed up every day. Sometimes we might each find as many as fifty. We called them *buddies*. Tiny shells given up by the sea. Looking for buddies was another way of reading with her.

My mother could be ruthless. And despite her claims to lack of education or knowledge of books her reading was voracious. The cottage in Devon had a large garden that needed plentiful attention. Which she gave it when the weather allowed or she wasn't sitting at the kitchen table cruciverbalising or reading a novel or daydreaming or making a shopping list. She must have spent at least six hours every day at that white Formica-top table. She would smoke at least one packet of fags and drink up to nine

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cups of milky instant coffee a day. Even late in the evening she would drink coffee. And every day she would do the crossword. The *Daily Telegraph* or *The Times*. Neither of these newspapers was appealing to her. My mother's politics were to the left of the left. The paper was just for the crossword. Sometimes I would read to her from the *Telegraph* letters page and we would laugh aloud together. The *Telegraph* letters were funnier than the ones in *The Times* but both could produce a hilarity that stayed with us for hours. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan once said that if you want to know how the unconscious works – do crosswords. Often my mother would finish the puzzle by mid-morning. Then the rest of the day could be given over to novel-reading. Interspersed with gardening or a trip out to the local shops or housework or having a natter and a coffee or two with Marion or someone else who had dropped by.

She got through far more books than I did. Considering I was at that time 'reading English' at university I ought to have been embarrassed. But just as I never thought of reading without her so I never thought of her reading without me. When she'd read a book I felt I'd somehow done so too. A mobile library *folie à deux*. She worked her way through Trollope with a sense of purpose I found staggering. Alexander Solzhenitsyn Doris Lessing Thomas Hardy George Eliot Virginia Woolf – nothing seemed to deter her. She would always begin by reading the last page. At the time I found this incomprehensible. A poor final page would not prevent her from turning back to the beginning. She read with a dogged loyalty. But she was never afraid to be outspoken in her judgement. I remember a period when she was reading Iris Murdoch. She'd already swept like one of the ten plagues of Egypt through several

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of her books. And now she was on *The Sea, The Sea*. One afternoon I asked her what she thought of it. She was very close to finishing it. *Drivel* she said. Just that one word.

It is an irony that Murdoch and my mother succumbed to the same form of insanity. I met her a couple of times. She was married to my PhD supervisor John Bayley. I remember phoning him on occasion at their home in Steeple Aston in Oxfordshire. I never went there but as I write I realise I imagined it as a version of the Devon cottage to which my parents had retreated. Sometimes Iris picked up and sometimes John but it was always a case of staying on the phone for several minutes before one of them answered. I pictured the simple but marvellous lethargy preventing anyone from journeying to the phone. It was the same when I was telephoning home. Even when my father was in his study with the machine ringing right next to him on his desk he would not answer if he thought his wife was in the house. And my mother would never rush – even if she was expecting a call or knew her husband was not at home. The phone was not an object of integrated pseudo-urgency and command as it is today. If the reason for the call were pressing the caller would try again later. My mother liked to recall something her father used to say. *If you can't remember it can't have been important*. This saying was important enough to remember. A way of organising her economy of forgetfulness. Of dedicating her forgetting and not forgetting to the memory of her father.