

# A Q&A with Nicholas Royle, author of *Mother: A Memoir*

by Samantha Harrold

**Samantha Harrold:** *Can you explain a little about the archival and writing process?*

**Nicholas Royle:** I first conceived writing *Mother* without any 'archival images' – I envisaged citing a few letters and other written documents, but not reproducing any photographs or other visual material. But then, when I'd written what I thought was the text – which amounted to around 28,000 words – my editor at Myriad, Candida Lacey, proposed that I double the length and incorporate some images (up to around thirty-five). So that changed everything. I had in a sense to start again. I gathered a pool or gallery (who knows what the most appropriate figure would be for talking about this?) of photos and other material, relying in particular on what I had to hand, as well as a fair amount of material kindly provided by my cousin Dr Michael Morgan, the only son of my mother's youngest and closest sister. It was very difficult to get started with this second draft – mostly because I had to think long and carefully about how to address or incorporate the visual material. Where to begin? How to go about it? In fact as is evident from reading, say, T. J. Clark's *The Sight of Death*, any picture tells many stories, and any one story can change from one day or even one minute to the next. And this can include stories that may seem, at first, merely peripheral or even completely heterogeneous to the picture itself. In other words, there's no shortage of things to say. On the contrary – and I think this is something Barthes negotiates with great deftness in *Camera Lucida* – the challenge is to contain, to keep a kind of tightness that might also respect the singularity and solitude of a photograph. It's a question of how one lets or tries to let the archive speak, knowing there is no common measure for this any more than there is for mourning.

**SH:** *What were the ethical challenges you faced when writing the book?*

**NR:** I didn't think about this at all. I was just writing a book about my mother. Of course, one can amass questions and doubts about the ethical dimensions of what one is doing or what

one has done, but for me that's not part of the writing. The book was written in a state as close as possible to sleep. I'm trying to write in my sleep, or just coming out of it, and mostly I write without looking at the screen or inserting punctuation, and I keep going until I'm exhausted. Then I will edit and revise. But I wasn't thinking about 'ethical challenges' as I was writing.

**SH:** *In the chapter 'Marbles', you write:*

*"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."*

*In terms of your own memory of this moment, how important is the coffee bean? And, at moments like this, when you were writing from your own memories, how reliable did you feel those memories were?*

**NR:** I am committed to the idea of writing (whether this is deemed 'critical' or 'creative') as 'making the truth'. This is the Augustinian motif of 'confession' that perhaps most haunts me. One writes because one wants to make the truth. I want to draw on 'facts', on what I've felt and experienced, on what I remember. I am not interested in 'falsifying evidence' or 'alternative facts' or 'counterfactual thinking'. But this desire to make the truth is, for me, a form of veering. I don't mean 'for me' in a personal way, I mean the concept of veering (as I've written about it at length elsewhere) is a sort of guiding light for how one must proceed. I'm sure there are important correspondences here with the principle of free association in psychoanalysis and the idea that digression can provide the most effective possibilities for discovery and enlightenment. So let me tell you – since you have homed in on this coffee bean in a rather uncanny way, or so it feels to me, you've located a koan in the text, a coffee koan or koan in the coffee bean – let me tell you that this crunching of the coffee bean (it was Colombian, if the detail helps) did not happen at this moment when my mother was saying these words, and the subject of the crunching was not myself but my brother. My brother came into the kitchen one morning when we all knew he was dying and picked a bean out of the grinder before grinding the remaining beans. He chewed it in front of me and my mother and no one said anything. Being a Colombian bean, of course, it was quite strong – difficult to chew, hard to swallow. My brother consumed it without any indication of trouble or bitterness. It was terrible. It was a tiny but awful, heart-wrenching piece of

family theatre, conducted entirely in silence, like the mute show in *Hamlet*. Later – I can't remember if it was the same day, or a day or two afterwards – alone in the kitchen I tried to chew one of these beans and I retched and couldn't do it. Everything about it was, if I can put it this way, mortifying. So, it's not a matter of 'screen memory', I don't believe, it's more a case of writing in a hypnagogic state about the worst and most terrifying thing my mother ever said about herself and trying to apprehend the enormity of that by identifying myself with my brother, resurrecting him or letting him be there still alive (as he always is in me), in an unspoken fashion, in order to be the composite 'I' who was subjected to this thing she said. You might call this a kind of dishonesty or a problematic twisting of how things were (at least, you might now that I have told you these details), but for me at the time of writing – and also during the process of revising and finalising the text – it seemed right, it felt true.

**SH:** *How authentically do you feel that you have been able to represent your mother in the text?*

**NR:** Perhaps I've begun to respond to this question already. I'm wary of the language of authenticity. 'Making truth' in the perhaps rather perverse sense in which I read Augustine is something quite different from 'authenticating'. The notion of representation is likewise difficult and in some ways misleading, I think. It implies an original, a source, a subject that can and should be represented. Writing would be, according to this schema, a matter of faithful (or unfaithful) representation. But this is to overlook certain crucial elements that are in play. First, I'm thinking of the strangeness of writing as figuring, bodying forth, affectivity and so on. It's uncanny – the thought and feeling that someone, in a sense, wouldn't be identifiable or remembered without this piece of writing. That was a starting point for me. My mother was an amazing person and if I didn't write about her, well, people wouldn't even know she had existed! Writing in this sense is a much more radical form of 'life-writing' than that term might conventionally imply. I wanted people to know her, to have a sense of how she was. At the same time – and this would be the second remark I'd like to make in this context – I was impelled by a desire to be faithful to what seemed and still seems to me one of the most extraordinary things about her, namely her mercurial shifting otherness and mystery. How do you 'represent' a musical garden, a psychic waterfall, a secret sea, the face of poetry? These elements are, perhaps, not of the order of representation.

**SH:** *To what extent do you consider Mother (from writing process to finished book) to be part of your own work of mourning?*

**NR:** One of the horrible things about writing is that it can appear to 'fix' (this is in keeping with the effects of 'representation' mentioned a moment ago), whereas 'making the truth' as I've been calling it here has to do with veering, flickering, giving over to the other, losing oneself. As you know, mourning is a very paradoxical, contradictory kind of thing. It has to do with 'forgetting well', as I call it (in the book *In Memory of Jacques Derrida*). All writing is about mourning, and the work of mourning is interminable. Writing *Mother* was a profound experience for me, because it was something I knew I had to do, it was part of the work of mourning, as you suggest, but it operated according to a timeframe quite beyond my understanding or control. I wanted to write about my mother long ago – very soon after her death in fact – and I tried to do so, but I couldn't. As it turned out I had to wait fifteen years and then – in a completely unplanned way – I started, or it started. Really it felt like that – the writing started and took me along with it. I woke up one morning in Seattle and got a cup of coffee and sat at my laptop and had no idea what I was going to do, but this book about my mother began to come out on the screen.

**SH:** *You mention in the pre-word of the book that your desire to write the memoir was connected to the climate crisis. In writing this in the opening breath of the book, how might your readers' shared experience of environmentally based grief align them with your own mourning process in the words that follow?*

**NR:** This is a really formidable question that I am still puzzling over. In the book I've just finished, which has the working title *My Life with David Bowie, Enid Blyton and Her Lover*, I try to think about misogyny – about how profoundly the world (I mean humanity and all that it has produced and all the destructiveness it continues to generate and oversee) is based not only on patriarchy and phallogocentrism, but on a logic of misogyny. And this is very much about the question of the mother and how we think about motherhood. Environmental destructiveness, it seems to me, is intimately linked to man, to what men have done and do, with how men relate to the earth. That's why, when I teach my undergraduate course on 'literature and the environment', I begin with Hélène Cixous' 'The Laugh of the Medusa': any ecological thinking, it seems to me, has to be eco-feminist, it has

to expose and confront, criticise and undermine forces of misogyny along with or as much as the far more often invoked 'forces of capitalism'.

**SH:** *For your readers who have not yet experienced the loss of their mother, how might (Derridean) anticipatory maternal mourning play a part in connecting them with the text?*

**NR:** 'Forgetting Well' is an essay I wrote about Derrida and mourning. In order to mourn, one has to 'forget well', he suggests. What does this mean? How on earth can one make sense of this idea? That is what I spent a long time trying to explore in that essay, especially in relation to Derrida, but also Shakespeare. Autobiography seems to begin on the basis of a missing mother: that's Mary Jacobus's suggestion, which I cite, I think, at some point in *Mother*. Derrida's 'Circumfession', the singular autobiographical or autobiothanatoheterographical text written in the shadow of his own mother's death, is a remarkable case in point. 'I mourn, therefore I am,' says Derrida elsewhere (in *Points*) – and there's no 'I am' without the mother whom one is supposed to be able to do without. Just as mourning is the condition of love (one only loves what is mortal, as Derrida says in *Memoirs of the Blind*, 'Aphorism Countertime' and numerous other texts), love of the mother is also shadowed by madness, as he argues in *Monolingualism of the Other*. The mother's madness (Alzheimer's or whatever it may be called) is not merely a tragic but a necessary possibility, a haunting other of the mother that is there from the beginning.

**SH:** *How authentically do you feel you were able to represent your mother's identity in the passages that focus upon her later life when she was living with memory loss? In other words, do you feel that you were able to capture her memory loss identity?*

**NR:** This is another vast question that I hardly know where to begin trying to answer. Perhaps I could simply come back to the thought I've just noted – that the madness of the mother, the loss of the mother to herself and to others, is always a possibility. Without getting back into the issues of 'authenticity' and 'representation of identity' discussed earlier, I'd say the capture you evoke has to be a kind of madness itself. All sense of sovereignty disintegrates. It reminds me of a particularly striking sentence in *Monolingualism of the Other*: 'When a mother loses her reason and common sense, the experience of it is as frightening as when a king becomes mad.'