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Being her own biographer – Su Meck's memoir *I Forgot to Remember* and the fallibility of memory from the perspective of neuroscience and cognitive psychology

Memory and memoir are in many ways inextricably linked together. The first connection is etymological as the English word 'memoir' comes from the middle French word "un mémoire" (meaning "a written record"), which itself derives from the French word "une mémoire" (meaning "memory"). In fact, many other languages, including Polish, display a similar connection between their equivalents of these two words or their synonyms (e.g. in Polish, "memoir" – "wspomnienie/-a" is related to the verb "wspominać" meaning "to recall," "to remember"). Secondly, memoirs depend on our memory: that is, to write a memoir, to tell the story of our lives, we have to remember our past. This common premise is expressed by Thomas Couser, a professor of English and Autobiography Studies, who asserts that "memoir can only concern someone known to, and remembered by, the author"[1] Su Meck's memoir challenges this seemingly obvious fact as, in the course of writing her life story, she seems to perform the role of a biographer rather than a memoirist because after an accident in her youth, she lost her memory and therefore has to rely either on stories of other people or documents in order to (re)construct her life narrative. Finally, although memoirs have been written for ages (St. Augustine's *Confessions*, which date back to the fourth century, is often deemed the first Western attempt at an autobiographical narrative), and although people's

[1] Thomas Couser, G. *Memoir: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 19.

interest in the nature of remembering is even longer, as it can be traced to Plato's *Theaetetus* (composed around 369 BCE) in which he raises the idea that memory might be compared to a wax tablet onto which our perceptions are stamped, recently we have witnessed a renewed interest in memory and memoir as both gained special popularity among both the general public and the scientific community towards the end of the twentieth century.

The 1990s was famously proclaimed by George W. Bush the decade of the brain. The rapid developments in neuroscience, mainly triggered by the new brain scanning technologies such as PET, CAT, and fMRI, contributed to the intense interest in brain functions, including that of memory. This scientific interest was soon reflected in cultural products, such as films, novels, and memoirs, which focused on remembering and forgetting. Fernando Vidal, for example, shows that the advancements in cognitive neuroscience resulted in a large number of movies taking up the topic of amnesia, such as *Bourne Identity* (1988, 2002), *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995), *Memento* (2000), or *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004).[2]

The period in question was also characterized by another phenomenon, related despite having a different origin, namely the Memory Wars. The Memory Wars began at the end of the 1980s with the advent of the incest recovery movement, the origin of which is often attributed to the publication of *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* in 1988.[3] Authored by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, the book suggests that people who are in their childhood frequently do not remember the abuse in adulthood. This and similar publications triggered the debate about the nature of the memory process. One model of memory, as Loftus and Ketcham explain, promotes a view of memory as a video-recorder and a belief in repression – a defense mechanism that allegedly erases painful experiences from one's consciousness.[4] The alternative model regards memory as a space of reconstruction where facts blend with fiction.[5] These Memory Wars, as Luckhurst illustrates, found reflection in cultural narratives of the 1990s, e.g., Jane Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres* (1991),

[2] Fernando Vidal, "Memory, Movies, and the Brain." *The Memory Process: Neuroscientific and Humanistic Perspectives*, Eds. Suzanne Nalbantian, Paul M. Matthews, and James L. McClelland (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2011), p. 395.

[3] For a detailed discussion, see Luckhurst, "Memory Recovered/Recovered Memory;" in: Literature and the Contemporary: *Fictions and Theories of the Present*, eds. Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks (Harlow, Essex, New York: Longman, 1999) as well as Elizabeth Loftus and Katherine Ketcham, *The Myths of Repressed Memory: False Memories and Allegation of Sexual Abuse* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).

[4] Elizabeth Loftus and Katherine Ketcham, *The Myth of Repressed Memory: False Memories and Allegations of Sexual Abuse* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), p. 5.

[5] Ibid.

which features the protagonist who recovers the long-suppressed memories of paternal abuse, or Nicci French's *The Memory Game* (1997), which deals with the consequences of false-memory syndrome.[6]

The third development at the turn of the century relevant to this essay was the memoir boom. Julie Rak states that since the 1990s, "the writing and publishing of memoir has undergone a significant shift,"[7] namely memoirs by unknown people have become increasingly popular. She mentions such blockbuster memoirs as Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted* (1993), Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1998) or Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club* (1998) – all of them written by unknown authors who gained fame due to their narratives and their subsequent film adaptations. Ben Yagoda quotes a study showing that between 2004 and 2008 the sales of memoirs increased more than 400 per cent,[8] and concludes that "[a]utobiographically speaking, there has never been a time like it. Memoir has become the central part of the culture."[9]

Memory and memoir come together in Su Meck's book, which is basically a memoir about her loss of memory as a result of the brain injury that she suffered when a kitchen fan had fallen on her head. Twenty-two mother of two at the time of the accident, Meck never recovered her memories from before the incident, and, for some time after it, she was also unable to form any new memories. After the injury, she had to learn gradually everything – from the most basic skills to recognising her once-loved ones. In this dramatic account of the loss of memory, Meck tries to understand her experiences and to rebuild her sense of self. I describe the dire consequences of such a total memory failure, especially to one's sense of self. However, I also argue that this memoir is about the fallibility of memory in general, not only in such an extreme case as a brain injury. Trying to reconstruct her story, Meck discovers that others have either incomplete or conflicting stories to tell her. I *Forgot to Remember* brings the transient and biased nature of our own memories into sharp focus. However, Meck's narrative not only exposes the limitation of our memory and highlights its importance to our sense of self but also brings to light the fluid boundaries of various life writing genres and reveals the pitfalls of placing too much emphasis on memory in relation to self.

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[6] Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 205-207.

[7] Julie Rak, *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013), p. 9

[8] Ben Yagoda, *Memoir: A History* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), p. 7.

[9] Ibid., p. 28.

Most scientists and humanists interested in the phenomenon of memory agree that memory is a significant part of our identity. Prominent neuroscientist, Joseph LeDoux, in his book *Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are* (2002) asserts that "learning, and its synaptic result, memory, play major roles in gluing a coherent personality together as one goes through life."[10] Similarly, Walter Glannon, a professor of philosophy interested in bioethics and more recently in neuroethics, states that "In linking the past to the present and future, memory is […] essential to personal identity and the experience of persisting through time."[11] We therefore depend on our memory to construct a coherent sense of self, and although many scholars, especially those influenced by poststructuralist and postmodernist theories, argue that self is fluid, fragmentary, and changeable, in constructing our life stories we seem to need the semblance of coherence of our identity.

This instability of identity combined with the search for consistency is particularly evident in Su Meck's memoir. Meck claims to be a different person before and after the accident. She claims that there are two Sus with different dispositions, preferences, fears, and loves: "She rebelled; I conform. She broke the rules; I follow them. […] I like vegetables; she hated them. She loved to swim; I am absolutely terrified of water."[12] Writing about herself using a third person pronoun, Meck clearly implies that she feels estranged from her past self of which she does not have any recollection and which she can access only through the stories that her family and friends tell her. Meck also questions many of her former motives – like her decision to get married at nineteen and against her parents' will – that now seem alien to her.

Rarely do we experience such a total makeover of our personalities, but our inclinations and beliefs do change over time although frequently we are not aware of this fact due to the nature of memory which tries to adjust our memories so that they are in line with our current beliefs. Daniel Schacter quotes a study by Daniel Offer in which Offer conducted interviews with first-year high-school pupils and then interviewed the same people thirty-four years later. It turned out that the adult participants frequently misremembered what was important to them in adolescence. For instance, only one-quarter of the adults said that religion was helpful in their youth, while

[10] Joseph LeDoux, *Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are* (New York: Viking, 2002), p. 9.

[11] Walter Glannon, "The Neuroethics of Memory," in *The Memory Process: Neuroscientific and Humanistic Perspectives*, eds. Suzanne Nalbantian, Paul M. Matthews, and James L. McClelland (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2011), p. 233.

[12] Su Meck with Daniel de Visé, *I Forgot to Remember* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), p. 6.

seventy per cent of them answered that question in affirmative when they were teenagers.[13]

This discrepancy is a result of one of the flaws of memory, namely bias, which Daniel Schacter discusses in his book *The Seven Sins of Memory*. He states:

> We often edit or entirely rewrite our previous experiences – unknowingly and unconsciously – in light of what we now know or believe. The result can be a skewed rendering of a specific incident, or even of an extended period of our lives, which says more about how we feel *now* than about what happened *then*.[14]

Meck's case shows that our brain determines considerably our characters and our inclinations, but also exposes the extent to which a normally functioning memory fills in gaps and alters memories so that we can experience ourselves as coherent. Meck is unable to edit her memories for a simple reason of not having any memories until 1988. Nonetheless, she feels an urge "to fit pieces together in an ever-changing life-size puzzle"[15] and "to present a narrative that feels real and whole,"[16] and attempting to do so, she has to rely on stories of others which brings to light two significant issues that often remain implicit in the autobiographies of 'healthy' individuals: the fact that identity is relational and memory, fallible.

Paul John Eakin, a distinguished critic of life writing, asserts that "autobiography promotes an illusion of self-determination: *I* write my story; *I* say who I am; *I* create my self" and he adds that "[t]he myth of the autonomy dies hard, and autobiography criticism has not yet fully addressed the extent to which the self is defined by – and lives in terms of – its relations with others."[17] In Meck's memoir this statement takes on a whole new meaning. Meck's life story, as she nicely puts it, "is stitched together from other people's memories,"[18] and her memoir is made up of reminiscences of her relatives and friends. Many of her sentences begin with: "Jim says," "Jim remembers," "Mom thinks" or "my mother recalls." On the one hand, Meck's reliance on others exposes the myth of the independent *I* in blatant ways; on the other, it shows dreadful repercussions to the sense of self be-

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[13] Daniel Schacter, *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), p. 3.

[14] Ibid., p. 5. Emphasis in original.

[15] Meck, *I Forgot to Remember*, p. 3.

[16] Ibid., p. 5.

[17] Paul J. Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 43.

[18] Meck, *I Forgot to Remember*, p. 5.

cause, as she rightly notes, "there are limits to what one person can really know of another."[19] It turns out that different people provide her with different versions of her life experiences. Meck explains:

> Because I depend solely on the stories of others to fill in decades of living, anecdotes about who I was, what I did, and how I lived, I have found that my life story varies depending to whom I talk to. And a lot of the time, accounts of a certain event don't just differ but totally contradict each other.[20]

She gives us examples of these conflicting stories. For instance, reconstructing the accident and trying to determine whether she was conscious or not, she splits the story into two versions. One told by her husband who claims that he does not remember her saying anything after she was hit by a fan; another by her friend Pam who claims to remember Su speaking to the paramedics.[21] A similar discrepancy appears when she narrates the moment when her husband Jim shared the news of her accident with her family. Jim recalls telling Su's mother that Su was in a very serious condition, but Su's mother does not remember him using "such dire language."[22]

Stephen Spender suggests that every life writer confronts two lives: one is the life that others observe – a social, historical person, another is "the self felt from the inside that the writer can never get 'outside of.'"[23] To further quote Spender: "We are seen from the outside by our neighbors; but we remain always at the back of our eyes and our senses, situated in our bodies, like a driver in the front seat of a car seeing other cars coming toward him."[24] Su Meck's case demonstrates consequences of no longer being 'a driver in the front seat' and relying on others to tell our story for us. Sidonie Smith uses Spender's metaphor to distinguish between biographers and autobiographers:

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[19] Ibid., p. 10.

[20] Ibid., p. 2.

[21] Ibid., p. 21.

[22] Ibid., p. 30. Meck's memoir exposes the sad consequences of not only depending on others for memories of our life, but also depending on others in more general sense. In the course of her story, Meck reveals the abuse she suffered at the hands of her husband who frequently insulted her and cheated on her. This aspect merits a further study, which is beyond the scope of this article.

[23] Spender qtd. in Sidonie Smith *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 3.

[24] Ibid., p. 5. This comment becomes even more relevant when we take into consideration what neurologists say about the fact that our brain accesses reality through our bodies. In the words of Antonio Damasio: "It is certainly true that the mind learns of the outside world via the brain, but it is equally true that the brain can be informed only via the body" (91).

> The biographer," she says, "can circle the car with the driver in it to record the history, character, and motivations of the driver, the traffic, the vehicle, and the facts of transportation. But only the life narrator knows the experience of traffic rushing toward her and makes an interpretation of that situation, that is, writes her subjectivity.[25]

Meck's memoir challenges this sharp division for she is devoid of any memories from before the accident and the ones following it are blurred. She depends on evidence that is usually available to biographers such as documents, medical records, photographs, and interviews with her family members and friends, and these are used not to trigger her memory but to construct her story. Meck assembles these pieces of information together to create a coherent narrative. Although it is a memoir, we do not get Meck's subjective reminiscences and impressions about her past. Instead we read descriptions of her early years provided by others, interspersed with Meck's speculations about what was likely to happen.

In reconstructing her story, Meck often stresses that the events she recounts from before the accident are not the actual events but their possible versions. Her memoir is not assertive but full of doubts, questions, and gaps. She draws attention to the unreliability of her narrative, particularly in the introductory part. Instead of writing "we made love," "we talked," she says "we may have … made love," "we may have talked," or uses phrases like "probably," "it is highly unlikely," thus alerting us to the hypothetical nature of her writing and conjectural character of the past she narrates. She also poses a lot of questions and leaves many of them unanswered, like in the following fragment describing the circumstances of her release from a hospital: "Did I know who I was?… Did I know Jim, Benjamin and Patrick [her husband and two sons]? Did I understand *husband? Marriage? Son? Brother? Mother? Father?*[26] Finally, she deduces how things might have unfolded on the basis of what she knows about her habits. For example, reconstructing the day of the accident, she relates that it was Sunday and she lists things that she customarily does on a typical Sunday, like going to church.[27]

Meck might be grasping here instinctively the nature of our memory as in reconstructing our stories we depend on the amalgam of similar events. "A memory," McClelland says, "does not exist in its own separate locations – its residue in the brain is distributed over many synaptic connec-

[25] Ibid. p. 5.

[26] Meck, *I Forgot to Remember*, p. 69.

[27] Despite all these efforts to communicate her unusual circumstances, Meck creates a rather typical life narrative, by which I mean a linear and chronological story that is very easy to read. Apart from the mentioned examples, Meck does not use any techniques that would somehow make the form of her memoir parallel the experiences she had.

tions, whose values have also been shaped by many other experiences."[28] Daniel Schacter illustrates this using an example of recurring events such as Thanksgiving dinners. He explains that when people recall their most recent Thanksgiving dinner, they can usually remember the overall outline of the event but rarely remember the details such as the clothes the people wore or the conversations they had. He claims that when talking about Thanksgiving we rely on the general knowledge of all the previous feasts, while the particulars of a specific occasion fade due to transience – another of the seven sins of memory listed by Schacter – which "involves a gradual switch from reproductive and specific recollections to reconstructive and more general descriptions."[29] Therefore Meck's memoir brings to light what every autobiographer faces, namely, the fragility of memory and its biased nature, although not every writer is willing to acknowledge it. In fact, many autobiographers, especially those who wrote before the twentieth century, endeavoured to convince us about the unfailing powers of their memory. As Diane Bjorklund explains, many "nineteenth-century autobiographers viewed the act of remembrance as a simple matter of 'searching the storehouse of memory for those facts then laid up in it for future use.'"[30] This and similar declarations were undoubtedly supposed to confirm the veracity and trustworthiness of the authors' stories. Such a simple understanding of memory, though already questioned in the nineteenth century, and sometimes even earlier, was dismantled in the twentieth-century.[31] The neuroscientific research, combined with psychology studies, modernist literature, and poststructuralist theories, has challenged many certainties, including that of infallible memory.

Nowadays, most scholars, whether in humanities or sciences, agree on the transient, biased and constructive quality of our memory. James L. McClelland says that memory researchers have been aware of the constructive nature of memory since the publication of Bartlett's *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* in 1932.[32] Bartlett told people folktales from foreign countries and then asked them to recount them. He noticed that the related stories were not only shorter but also altered so

[28] James L. McClelland, "Memory as a Constructive Process: The Parallel Distributed Processing Approach," in *The Memory Process: Neuroscientific and Humanistic Perspectives*, eds. Suzanne Nalbantian, Paul M. Matthews, and James L. McClelland (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2011), p. 139.

[29] Schacter, *Seven Sins of Memory*, p. 16

[30] Thomas 1840, p. 252 qtd. in Diane Bjorklund, *Interpreting the Self: Two Hundred Years of American Autobiography* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 28.

[31] Of course, there are many notable people prior to the twentieth century who exhibited great self-reflexivity about the nature of remembering – Rousseau or Henry James being just two of them.

[32] McClelland, "Memory as a Constructive Process," p. 129.

that they fit Western narratives. He concluded that "[r]emembering is not the re-excitation of innumerable fixed, lifeless and fragmentary traces. It is an imaginative reconstruction, or construction, built out of the relation of our attitude towards a whole active mass of organized past reactions or experience."[33] This view is upheld by many contemporary theorists, like Antonio Damasio, a renowned neuroscientist who, in his book *Self Comes to Mind* from 2012, draws a similar conclusion to the one made by Bartlett eighty years earlier. Damasio says:

> Our memories of certain objects are governed by our past knowledge of comparable objects or of situations similar to the one we are experiencing. Our memories are prejudiced [...] by our past history and beliefs. Perfectly faithful memory is a myth, applicable only to trivial objects. The notion that the brain ever holds anything like an isolated "memory of the object" seems untenable.[34]

Meck not only describes the complete loss of her own memory but also quotes striking cases of misremembering by others. She says, for instance, that until recently she assigned a wrong date to her accident because her husband had misremembered it, and for many years she believed that the accident had taken place on a February afternoon in 1988, most likely a weekday, but when she inspected her medical records it turned out that the accident had occurred on 22 May, a Sunday. She comments: "Isn't it sad, not knowing the precise moment when your life changed forever?"[35] The fact that Meck's husband, allegedly one of the closest people in her life, does not remember such a significant date reveals the erosions of our memories but also acts as a warning to those who attempt to recount the stories of others. There is an increasing number of memoirs written about people who depend on others to tell their story – such as disabled, illiterate, or terminally ill people.[36] Even if authors of such stories are relatives and act in good faith, they need to bear in mind the transient, biased, and also egocentric nature of their own memories.

The egocentric bias sifts memories through the subjective lenses of our experience. This psychological assumption is noticed by Jonathan Franzen, the novelist and the author of the essay "My Father's Brain," who, attempting to tell the story of his father suffering from Alzheimer's, observes: "My

[33] Frederic Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), p. 132.

[34] Antonio Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* (London: Vintage, 2012), p. 133.

[35] Meck, *I Forgot to Remember*, p. 8.

[36] For details see: Thomas Couser, *Vulnerbale Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing*.

memories of the years of my father's initial decline are vividly about things other than him. Indeed, I'm somewhat appalled by how large I loom in my own memories."[37] Therefore we may ask how much Su Meck we get in the accounts of others. As Schacter notes: "The self's preeminent role in encoding and retrieval, combined with powerful tendency for people to view themselves positively, creates fertile ground for memory biases that allow people to remember past experiences in a self-enhancing light."[38]

Apart from the stories of others, Meck also has official documents at her disposal. Yet even they do not seem to give her access to the truth. Meck mentions that she examined her medical records "hoping, for those records to somehow hold *the key* that would give me answers and fill in the gaps,"[39] but the official documents are full of contradictory or wrong information. For instance, her medical records say she was struck on the left temple, while she was hit on the right side. She is also surprised to discover that she was discharged a day after it had been observed that she had impaired memory and communication and dysfunctional mobility. Her records therefore leave her with more questions than answers, and she does not find in them the Su she is looking for.

Piecing her story together and establishing herself as its subject, Meck relies on medical theories to understand better the nature of memory and to explain what she has gone through. In this respect, her memoir inscribes itself in the tradition of pathographies – narratives devoted to the experience of illness – which very often include the medical findings to either contest them or use them for self-understanding. Meck's memoir was co-authored with Daniel de Visé, who, according to the preface, was responsible for investigating the theories of memory and amnesia and explaining them to Meck.

As a result, the memoir makes frequent use of medical and psychological models pertaining to the process of remembering and forgetting. Meck mentions various parts of the brain that are usually associated with making and retrieving memories. She comments on different forms of amnesia: retrograde amnesia – the inability to remember things from before an incident – and anterograde amnesia – the inability to form new memories, and she states that she has suffered from both conditions. She also describes the division of memories into episodic and semantic. Episodic memories are memories about our personal experiences; semantic memories are facts

[37] Jonathan Franzen, "My Father's Brain: What Alzheimer's Take Away" (*The New Yorker*. September, 10, 2001), p. 2.

[38] Schacter, *Seven Sins of Memory*, p. 151.

[39] Meck, *I Forgot to Remember*, p. 25.

that we learn at school, like that Paris is the capital of France. Meck rightly notes that her "memories of childhood are semantic memories that have been told to [her]"[40] – they are learned rather than experienced, and they are provided by other people. And while sometimes entire pages are devoted to guiding us through the intricacies of medical theories, Meck also incorporates them in a more implicit way, weaving them into her narrative, like in the following fragment: "When people remember stuff, it's usually the remarkable or shocking things, and the first part of that day was utterly unremarkable."[41] She refers here to a theory – widely accepted in the neuroscientific and psychological community – that emotional arousal contributes to memory consolidation and that people are more likely to remember events about which they felt strongly.[42]

However, despite the fact that Meck understating is informed by recent findings in neuroscience and cognitive psychology, her memoir also criticises the medical establishment. Meck mentions that her case was puzzling to medical practitioners because the scans of her brain did not show any visible damage, and some physicians insisted that her amnesia had to be psychological. On the one hand, her memoir gives her a chance to deal with the frustration of not being believed and treated seriously; on the other, it allows her to validate her story and to share it with those who might have similar experiences – the common goals of many pathographies.

To conclude, there are many reasons to question the idea that memory is important to our sense of self, although this notion is deeply ingrained in our culture. As Vidal explains, the view that memory is a shorthand for identity derives from John Lock, who, in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, insisted that personal identity requires the continuity of memory and consciousness.[43] However, we should not overemphasise the role of memory in the formation of identity, as it can have tragic consequences especially nowadays, in the era of aging community, with more and more people suffering from senile dementia or Alzheimer's. Putting our memory on a par with our identity, we are one step from saying that those who are devoid of memory are devoid of selfhood. Su Meck's memoir demonstrates that even though she does not have any memories of her past life and had to reacquire many basic skills, she was able to function, although often ineptly, in a society. So although our autobiographical self is incredibly significant, as it gives us a sense of identity and continuity, it

[40] Ibid., pp. 54–55.
[41] Ibid., p. 8
[42] See for example chapters by Robert Stickgold or Fernando Vidal in *The Memory Process*.
[43] Vidal Fernando "Memory, Movies, and the Brain", p. 399.

is not the only mode of existence available to human beings. Su Meck's memoir serves as a cautionary tale. It should remind life narrators that their memory is transient and biased; it should sensitize biographers to the fact that even documents and official records are not reliable sources of knowledge; it should make medical professionals aware of the fact that we cannot be reduced to our brains and that every patient needs to be treated in an individual way.

Anita Jarczok

Being her own biographer – Su Meck's memoir *I Forgot to Remember* and the fallibility of memory from the perspective of neuroscience and cognitive psychology

Su Meck's memoir relates her loss of memory as a result of the brain injury that she suffered when a kitchen fan fell on her head. Meck never recovered her memories from before the incident, and for some time after it she was also unable to form any new memories. In this dramatic account of the loss of memory, Meck tries to understand her experiences and to rebuild her sense of self. I describe the dire consequences of such a total memory failure, especially to our sense of self. However, I also argue that this memoir is about the fallibility of memory in general, not only in such an extreme case as the brain injury. Trying to reconstruct her story, Meck discovers that others have either incomplete or conflicting stories to tell her. I *Forgot to Remember* brings the transient and biased nature of our own memories into sharp focus. However, Meck's narrative not only exposes the limitation of our memory and highlights its importance to our sense of self but also brings to light the fluid boundaries of various life writing genres and reveals the pitfalls of placing too much emphasis on memory in relation to self.

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