

# How Deep is Too Deep?

Roz Bellamy on dipping in and out of emotion in memoir

I am tentative when it comes to writing emotions. When I share drafts of my writing with other writers, I'm sure they're going to find something wrong with my internal monologue. As someone living with mental illness, and having experienced childhood trauma, I find it hard to regulate my emotions off the page, let alone on it. I wonder: Am I going too far? Will people assume the emotions I share on the page have pathological implications? Will they try to armchair diagnose me?

Often, though, the feedback I receive on my drafts is about something else entirely. 'You didn't really tell us how your friend's death affected you,' they tell me. Another time, a writer says, 'Tell us about the sex!'

I know they're right, but I'm a memoirist who likes privacy, a personal essay writer who still keeps secrets. Nonfiction is a strange choice considering I censored my teenage diary and password-protected Word documents.

There is emotion in my writing, but it sits between the lines. I'm scared it'll disappear if I look too closely. Instead I dip in and out again, teasingly.

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In my twenties, I had long depressive periods, during which I wrote little to nothing, followed by bursts of creativity, inspiration and productivity. It seems obvious to me now that that sounds like a mood disorder, but mental health professionals disagreed.

When I turned 30, I first started having my nonfiction published. It was thrilling to have such personal writing out in the world. It was public, no matter how other people – or I – felt about it.

A year later, my mental health changed and began to wreak havoc. I wanted some sense of permanence again, rather than one mood state swallowed by another. I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and it took years to work out how to manage my condition. Even when I'm well, I have

to monitor myself closely. I used to scrawl notes after therapy sessions and then read them later, as though doing homework would make me a better patient, as though I would be cured sooner.

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In 2015, I went to the National Young Writers' Festival. I was an artist at the festival – my first time – and I felt immense pride and anxiety that thrummed together and separately, two pulses.

On the final day, I joined a clifftop walking tour interspersed with short writing sessions. We sat together, looking out at the Ocean Baths, and I wrote, 'I never could have done this when I was their age.' At 31, I felt well past my use-by date, compared with all the confident younger writers I'd met during the festival.

I poured my heart out to my notebook, analysing the work I had put into my writing over the years alongside self-development. 'Really, I had the same problem in both areas, a learned dishonesty, a desperation to withhold,' I wrote. I described how I felt at this festival, and how differently I seemed to be perceived. 'And because I was so open, friendships bloomed the way I always wanted back then, when I wanted them but didn't know that honesty was part of it.'

It intrigues me to reflect on that self-judgement and shame, captured in countless notebooks and digital records. I was so hard on myself. I know now that it wasn't dishonesty; it was terror.

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One night, I bolt awake. My dreams are strange, medicine-induced and hallucination-hued, but I realise I know what it feels like to go deep and reach that place that feels too hard to access in my writing.

I remember a summer holiday swim on the Queensland coast as a child. An adult – maybe an uncle – told me about a creature that lurks on the

seabed. 'Don't put your feet all the way down, because if it opens its mouth and your foot is nearby, it'll bite it off.' It stayed with me. I learned there is a place that is too deep.

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I'm able to engage with emotions now. I am more open than I have ever been, not that that is a yardstick of mental health. I have better limits and boundaries. I try not to step over other people's limits and boundaries, and don't always manage to do so, but I try again the following time.

I stare at the mirage that is emotion in my work, less afraid it will disappear. Each time I do this, it lets me go a little further. Now I am fleshing out emotions and digging into grief, and even making progress with writing about sex.

Late last year, I boarded a flight to Melbourne after visiting my parents in New South Wales. As I wheeled my bag along the tarmac, tears ran down my cheeks. I hadn't cried back at the gate with my parents.

During the flight, I looked around for small, comforting details. The man next to me peeled a mandarin and offered a piece to his partner in the row in front of us. She turned and smiled at him and then they held hands between the seats.

In my writing folder on my phone, I typed: 'The joy of being offered a slice of mandarin by a loved one.' I read the line over and over. I didn't have to go too far beneath the surface to find the emotions. I thought about how it feels to distribute and to receive love and care.

Then he offered a slice of mandarin to me.

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