

**TRUTH-TELLING: A PASSAGE TO SURVIVAL  
IN DORIS BRETT'S *EATING THE UNDERWORLD*.  
A MEMOIR IN THREE VOICES**

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**Introduction**

DORIS Brett is a poet, writer and psychotherapist whose 2001 book, *Eating the Underworld. A Memoir in Three Voices*, tells three concurrent stories about survival. The author survives ovarian cancer and its return; she is the daughter of Holocaust survivors whose experiences are the background to her own childhood; and she describes herself as a survivor of childhood sibling abuse. The three stories have subterranean links which Brett uncovers in ways that raise ethical and psychological questions of great complexity. Layers of understanding about family and memory are knitted together through three different narrative strategies: poetry, journal writing and fairy tales. The result is as complex as a Fair Isle sweater. This multifaceted effort at truth-telling becomes Brett's passage to survival; through the processes of negotiating and narrating she constructs an identity that enables her to make sense of her life.

Brett's first story in *Eating the Underworld* is the intimately personal one of her physical and emotional experience of ovarian cancer, and its recurrence, which covers a period of several years. She tells us in detail about this experience, with unsentimental and graphic facts but also with emotional depth. In this story the body is always visible, a site of knowledge, sometimes obscured but never wrong. She struggles with the medicalisation and objectification of her body by doctors and nurses during her illnesses.

Brett's second narrative is motivated by and is a response to the writings of her sister Lily Brett. Lily, herself a well-established poet, short story writer and essayist, has written extensively as the child of Holocaust survivors. Lily's portrayal of her mother in poetry<sup>1</sup> and essays<sup>2</sup> is of a depressed and haunted woman whose anxieties focus on her over-weight unhappy elder daughter. Readers of Lily's powerful work have unfortunately often assumed that the 'mother of the poems is literally and unambiguously the real mother of Lily and Doris, making no allowance for creative license, subjective memory or poetic fiction. The writer of the entry on Lily Brett in the *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, for example, assumes that Rose (or Rooshka) Brett is one and the same with Renia Bensky (one of Lily's characters) - a woman described as vain, irritating, ordinary and venial. "This judgment is enshrined in a textbook, standard in libraries, schools and universities and read by thousands of people."<sup>3</sup>

Doris's own memories are very different. Early in *Eating the Underworld* she says of her mother that she "was like those characters in fairy tales - as good as she was beautiful. And she was."<sup>4</sup> Doris gives a brief but complex account of her mother - a bright Jewish girl in pre-war Poland who survives unimaginable Holocaust experiences, settles with her husband in Melbourne, and mothers two daughters.

As a psychologist Brett knows that memory is shaped by individual needs, perceptions and fantasies. She is accepting of the multiple truths implied by this statement.

The best that I can do is to recognize the complexity of the ways in which people remember and interpret their lives and know that I can speak only for my memories and understandings, and that others will have different ones.<sup>5</sup>

This position would appear to allow for Lily's and Doris's very different memories to exist side by side. At the same time, Doris seems to want to convince her readers that Lily is not merely different but wrong in her accounts of their mother. She feels compelled to set

<sup>1</sup> Lily Brett's published poetry includes (1986) *The Auschwitz Poems*, Victoria, Scribe, and (1987) *Poland and Other Poems*, Victoria, Scribe.

<sup>2</sup> Lily Brett's published essays include (1997) In *Full View. Essays*. New South Wales, Macmillan.

<sup>3</sup> Brett, Doris (2001), *Eating the Underworld. A Memoir in Three Voices*, Sydney, Vintage, p. 84.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. ix.

the record straight, by recording her own version of her family. "Our own experience is all that we have," she argues. "I must honour my own voice, my own truths."<sup>6</sup>

Readers of *Eating the Underworld* have no way to adjudicate between the two sisters' versions of their mother, but in choosing to write memoir rather than fiction, Doris has implicitly entered into a 'pact' with her readers. Philippe Lejeune and subsequent theorists of autobiography have proposed that there is an implied agreement or contract between writers and readers of life writing texts that specifies the genre of the text and the ways it should be read. Basic to this 'autobiographical pact' is the writer's intention to be truthful, and the reader's assumption that this is the writer's intention. The pact is reciprocal; it hinges on trust. Richard Freadman discusses the extent to which Doris and Lily Brett each operate within such a pact, and stresses "the ethical importance of the will to truth in narrative."<sup>7</sup>

What part can fairy tales possibly play in such 'will to truth'? Do fairy tales lie outside any autobiographical pact in Doris's memoir? If so, why has she included them and why does she give the very last words in the book to her fairy tale characters? What kind of narrative trust can include the use of fairy tales and how are readers expected to relate them to the journal and poetry sections of *Eating the Underworld*?

### **The Voices in the Text: (i) Poet and Journal Writer**

During her first cancer Doris Brett writes complex powerful poems, first published in 1996 in *In the Constellation of the Crab*. These poems are included at relevant points in the prose narrative of *Eating the Underworld*. During the recurrence of cancer she writes a diary which at first she imagines will be "a travel journal through chemo country."<sup>8</sup>

For Brett the body whether well or sick is not only a material object. Through the voices of poet and journal writer she pays attention to what some might dismiss as 'new age' interpretations of bodily events. One reviewer of the collection *In the Constellation of the Crab* speaks about "verse trapped in psychoanalytic paradigms coarsened by New Age truisms the effect of which is to close off the reader off from experience by replacing it with a foggy ecstatic contemplation."<sup>9</sup> For Brett, close links between body and psyche are part of reality. We see this in her use of hypnosis and its effectiveness; in the synchronicity of unexpected happenings; incidentally in runes, dreams, symbols and magic.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>7</sup> Freadman, Richard (2002), "Sister Pacts: Richard Freadman considers Doris Brett's recent memoir in the light of Lily Brett's earlier renditions of post-Holocaust Jewish family life", *Meanjin*, March, v. 61 no. 1, p. 186.

<sup>8</sup> Brett, Doris (2001), *Eating the Underworld. A Memoir in Three Voices*, Sydney, Vintage, p. 185.

<sup>9</sup> Croggon, Alison (1997), "The Necessity of True Speaking", *Quadrant*, Nov., v. 41 n. 11, p. 74.

In dealing with her cancer Brett soon realizes that she needs her journal not only as a record of 'chemo country' but also as a place where she can 'find the story of [her] illness':

In the face of a life-threatening illness, it is as if you live both forwards and backwards at once [...] You look behind you, trying to understand, examine the past [...] The topographical lines you draw on that landscape are the story lines of your life. You need those lines, because how else will you know where you are?<sup>10</sup>

Brett's story lines are about history, evidence, memory, experience, embodiment and identity - the construction of a self. Like all journal writing it is inescapably subjective and personal; it involves a self-conscious selection and interpretation of material to tell a particular story. "In an autobiography," says J M Bernstein, "the self narrated is a construction, not a representation; and in narrating a life, the act of narration acts back upon the narrating self."<sup>11</sup> Constructing a narrative means making connections between events by describing them in one way rather than another. This is the task Brett undertakes: to re-assess and re-interpret the events of her life in the face of its imminent closure. As a memoir *Eating the Underworld* is necessarily self-referential, because the writer is also the subject written about. Its hallmarks are self-interest, self-knowledge, self-consciousness. In addition, as Bernstein insists, the narrative of a life is always a moral narrative, whose meaning and intelligibility, like that of any story, only comes fully into view at the end. Brett foregrounds moral questions in the life she is constructing through her memoir.

Because the story of her cancer is from the beginning counter-pointed by stories of her mother, sister and father, Brett faces ethical questions about what is hers to tell, and what might be seen as an invasion of the privacy of other family members. She says:

I feel an intense discomfort in writing about my family. The life of an individual is as complex as a maze of reflecting mirrors; the life of a family is even more so. Each person has their own experience, interpretations and memories of it. Each person has their own truths. The difficulties come when these truths are not allowed to co-exist.<sup>12</sup>

But she has chosen to write because she believes that silence is deadly:

The experience of facing death also teaches you to face life. I have realized that silence may be golden, but it is the gold of that arch-villain of James Bond films - Auric Goldfinger, who painted his victims, brushstroke by brushstroke, in gold,

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<sup>10</sup> Brett, Doris (2001), *Eating the Underworld. A Memoir in Three Voices*, Sydney, Vintage, p. 185.

<sup>11</sup> Bernstein, J.M. (1990), "Self-knowledge as praxis: narrative and narration in psychoanalysis" in Nash, Christopher (ed.), *Narrative in Culture: the Uses of Storytelling in the Sciences, Philosophy and Literature*, New York, Routledge, p. 65.

<sup>12</sup> Brett, Doris (2001), *Eating the Underworld. A Memoir in Three Voices*, Sydney, Vintage, p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.



until the final stroke covered the body's last opening to the world and they suffocated and died, prisoners in their own gilded bodies.<sup>13</sup>

Brett's account of her initial responses to Lily's writing - her silences, her confrontation with published statements by strangers about their mother, her reasons for writing an open letter to the *Bulletin* magazine - all lead her to a closer examination of her childhood with her sister. Ultimately, *Eating the Underworld* is as much about sibling relations and about surviving sibling abuse, as it is about surviving cancer. Living with Lily, who is four years older and was much bigger, was, Doris says, "like living on the foothills of an active volcano."<sup>14</sup> She describes an incident when she was six, when Lily deliberately and secretly took Doris's friend to a much longed-for toy fair, leaving Doris at home.

I still remember the feeling of finding out. My six-year-old self is struck dumb, literally. I have no words. Within the shock is a feeling I struggle to understand. It is not anger, not the frustration of a child who has had a treat taken away. It is something much more frightening. It is a recognition. A gaping, horrifying hole in my universe that has suddenly opened up. It is too frightening to look at for long. So I don't.<sup>15</sup>

The feeling is repressed. Doris continues to hope for a different, loving relationship with her sister, but, she says, at real psychological cost: "It is the hope that keeps me going and also the hope that nearly destroys me."<sup>16</sup>

In choosing to write about such painful and personal events in her life Brett none the less does not feel at liberty to tell everything. When she needs to talk about another significant event between herself and her sister, when she was eighteen, she writes:

The events of that evening are clearly etched in my mind, but I am not at liberty to give them words. It is one of those tricky conjugations of rights - the writer's right to explore his or her own life versus the individual's right to privacy.

Yet because of its position as a turning point, this is one event that cannot simply be submerged into the unseen layers of the story. What do I do with it? Do I pretend it didn't happen? Soften it? Change it? Shift the turning point to something else? No. All of these things belie my truths. I would be worse than voiceless; I would be inauthentic.<sup>17</sup>

Brett makes visible the ethical dilemma that many life writers face. She explains the process by which she decides not to include the particular story. Then she is able to speak about the effects of the incident:

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287

I am forced to recognise what I have spent years twisting myself inside out to deny - the painful truth about my relationship with my sister. It is a harsh reality to face and yet with it comes an odd kind of relief. Because I know the truth. And the truth is freeing.<sup>18</sup>

This is the truth-telling, the passage to survival, that is spoken in the voice of the journal writer. Ultimately for Brett the experience of cancer is understood not just as an illness (though it is always that) but also as a lesson from which she must learn profound truths. Towards the end of the book she speaks of the Greek roots of the word carcinoma -*karkinoia*, hard growth.

Hard growth. The word keeps reverberating through my mind. It has been a season of hard growth. A season that began with the diagnosis of carcinoma, but that has led to a different kind of growth [...]

It is the quest that cancer has sent me on [...] the ball of twine is leading me to territories far from its origins, making me walk through the shadowy places I had feared to go.<sup>19</sup>

She speaks of the loss of innocence, the loss of her own personal 'fairy tale'- the belief that for her at least life would be fair.

My journey through cancer was supposed to be a simple one, picture book style, along the lines of St George fighting the dragon. Instead, it led me to revelations about the underside, the flawedness, of all things - myself, my family, my friends, my world. Recognising and accepting these has required far more courage than facing cancer. It is what I never expected; fought hard to avoid - and yet perhaps it has been the truest gift to come out of all this.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Voices of the Text: (ii) Fairy Tales**

What does the third voice in *Eating the Underworld* - the voice of fairy tale - add to Brett's truth-telling passage to survival? Brett claims fairy tales as part of her depiction of self, just as much as the first person narrative sections are. She sets the scene with an early description of her mother as if she were an idealized fairy tale princess. Here, Brett is far more critical of herself as an unthinking child at the centre of her mother's world and later as a typically self-absorbed teenager, than she is of anything at all about her mother. But she also acknowledges the superficiality of such a view: "It's only as an adult that I'm

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 289.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 378.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 394.



*The Politics and Poetics of Passage in Canadian and Australian Culture and Fiction*

learning that fairytales are complex and many-layered; that magical gifts, even those of love, can backfire and that the top layer of the story is only the beginning."<sup>21</sup>

Brett adopts an alter ego whom she names Rachel, and signals these sections of the book with a change of font, a section heading and a small sketch (an open book, an elaborate crown, a grandfather clock, a beanstalk and a goose). In the first section, Rachel summarizes her attitude towards fairy tales generally. She tells us about a process of reading and reflection that leads to new understandings that defy explanation. As Brett weaves the story of her diagnosis with cancer, her treatment, recurrence, further treatment and recovery, with the story of her troubled relationships with her sister Lily and her father, she uses fairy tales to bring home what she experiences as deep truths about human psychology, and to uncover gradually a range of very particular values that she believes these stories encapsulate.

The summary below charts the way Brett structures the fairy tales.

Section	Title of section	Picture	Events in the diary section	The fairy tale	The message of the fairy tale
Part 1. p. 37	Detecting	Open book	Diagnosis of cancer	No fairy tale; the power of fairy tales in a troubled world	Stories help you to understand
Part 1. p. 124	The Frog Prince	A crown	The first operation	The Frog Prince 3 versions	Facing the true cost
Part 2. p. 202.	The first minute after midnight	Grandfather clock	The recurrence of cancer	The King of the Golden Mountain	Waiting in darkness for transformation
Part 3 p. 331	What happened to the giant's wife?	Beanstalk	Chemotherapy	Jack and the Beanstalk	The need to see the most painful of truths. The need to rebel
Part 4. p. 397	The Goose Girl	Goose	Health	The Goose Girl	She knew who she was, her own truth

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

Brett's work with fairy tales can be seen as a literary device, but also fits into the context of the 1980s debate about the meaning of fairy tales. Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976) argues that when adults tell traditional fairy tales to children, they give children a powerful and appropriately indirect tool for dealing with the normal psychological processes involved in growing up. Children experience fear of separation from their mother and jealousy for brothers and sisters, Bettelheim says; they have to learn to deal with feelings of anger, disappointment and frustration. Children have to resolve conflicts between dependency and independence, develop a sense of a worthwhile self and a sexual identity, and cope with greediness, aggression and violence both internally and from outside. The wisdom of fairy tales is to allow the child to do this at an unconscious level, while consciously they simply enjoy a well-told tale. Children take what they need from a story; the storyteller never tries to explain.

When all the child's wishful thinking gets embodied in a good fairy; all his [sic] destructive wishes in an evil witch; all his fears in a voracious wolf; all the demands of his conscience in a wise man encountered on an adventure; all his jealous anger in some animal that pecks out the eyes of his rivals - then the child can begin to sort out his contradictory tendencies. Once this starts, the child will be less and less engulfed by unmanageable chaos.<sup>22</sup>

Bettelheim analyses a range of popular fairy tales (including "The Frog Prince", "The Three Little Pigs", "Snow White", "Cinderella", "Hansel and Gretel") to illustrate the kinds of lessons they might teach.

The "Frog Prince" is the first fairy tale that Brett uses. She takes it in a different direction from Bettelheim. In this fairy tale the little princess is playing with her golden ball when it falls into a well. A frog appears, and offers to get it for her, but she must promise to let the frog be her companion, eat from her plate and sleep in her bed. She promises, but once she has the ball she runs off. That evening the frog comes to the palace. The king insists that the princess keeps her promise, so she puts the frog on the table and it eats from her plate. Then the frog insists on sleeping in her bed, on her pillow.

There are different versions of what happens next. Some say that the princess kisses the frog and it turns into a prince. In another version, the princess lets the frog sleep on her pillow for three nights, and then it turns into a prince. The oldest version says that the princess picks up the frog in anger and throws it against the wall - and it turns into a prince. Each telling validates a different quality in the princess: in the first, pity or love or sentimentality; in the second, endurance; and in the third, the expression of anger or powerful feelings.

Bettelheim suggests that this story deals unconsciously with a child's questions or anxiety about sexuality. It is about the transformation of a child's repugnance at the idea of adult sexuality, into the capacity for mature sexual relations and true love.

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<sup>22</sup> Bettelheim, Bruno (1976), *The Uses of Enchantment*. London, Thames and Hudson, p. 66.



## *The Politics and Poetics of Passage in Canadian and Australian Culture and Fiction*

Brett links the story to the idea of a covenant. The princess has made the agreement with the frog, all by herself - she has not been forced, she is not a victim. But she has done so without understanding the cost. She is then forced to face the true cost of what she has agreed to and is made to see that it is unbearable. The princess had made an agreement that she could never, should never keep. And she had not wanted to know. That was why violence was necessary. It was the energy needed to break free.

Brett does not explicitly make the link here with her own life. But gradually we understand that she has (at some level) made a pact with herself as a child, in relation to her sister Lily: a pact whose cost she could not know, and which she should never keep. We begin to see a connection that Brett is making between this pact - a psychological adjustment made in childhood - and her cancer. The link between body, mind and spirit constantly recurs in this memoir about survival.

In her reflections on the second fairy tale, "The King of the Golden Mountain", Rachel makes links between her experience of chemotherapy, and those fairytales in which the hero wants to go back to a remembered past. But in this past the hero is not recognized; s/he has no existence. This is a story about the destructiveness of being possessed by a longing to return to the past, and the impossibility of doing so. It is also about the loss of hope. Rachel learns that her task as she faces chemotherapy after the recurrence of her cancer, is not to find hope, or light, but to wait in darkness and "not knowing whether it would ever happen, trust in the first minute after midnight."<sup>23</sup> Transformation, she realizes, takes place in the dark.

When she reads "Jack and the Beanstalk", Rachel at first thinks mostly about the giant's wife, an innocent victim of Jack's adventure, whose kindness to him results in the theft of her possessions and the death of her husband. Then Rachel thinks about Jack's absent father - the kindly man who is often not mentioned in different versions of the tale, but who was robbed and killed by the giant. People can be divided into two groups, Rachel decides: the givers and the takers. Her own mother, like the giant's wife, was a giver. But unlike the giant's wife, she refused to allow herself to see the reality of evil and therefore was powerless to do anything about it. Why was this so? Because Rachel's mother had experienced so much evil that she needed more than anything else to create a sanctuary where she could nourish her children in a place free from evil. She became blind to evil when it appeared in her own house, in the form of her elder daughter's jealousy and cruelty towards her sister. Unlike the giant's wife or Jack's mother, she refused to see what was there under her own roof; she did not act against it. Unlike her mother, Rachel knows that there is no place that evil or darkness cannot enter; darkness and light are part of each other's definition and one cannot exist without the other. This lesson is something that the body already knows, Rachel thinks. The body lives with death, unsentimentally; in fact only death allows the body to live. Dark and light create the miracle of the world.

<sup>23</sup> Brett, Doris (2001), *Eating the Underworld. A Memoir in Three Voices*. Sydney, Vintage, p. 211.

In her own journal voice, Doris thinks about her parents, and why they did not intervene between her sister and herself. Brett's parents were both survivors of the Auschwitz concentration camp. Lily was born in a displaced persons camp in 1946. Brett assumes that her readers know enough about the Holocaust for her not to have to explain or give a history lesson. Of her mother, Doris says:

I cannot even begin to imagine the horror of living through the holocaust or how one keeps sane in its aftermath [...] I think of my mother who was plunged into this sadistic maelstrom of brutality, death and humiliation when merely a girl in her mid-teens. Her whole family died; she was the sole survivor. She went from the terrible deprivations and dangers of the ghetto to the nightmare of the concentration camps. I am aghast at the idea of having to cope with even one millionth of this experience - and yet she coped with it all.<sup>24</sup>

Brett's mother coped with this history in part by never talking about it to her children. But of course such a history has its effects. Brett attributes her mother's passivity in the face of Lily's abusive behaviour, to the blocking off of this terrible past. This passivity has its own consequences, leaves its own legacy: "It is difficult for me to admit that she failed me in this way, in not intervening between Lily and me. And she failed my sister too, in not helping her set limits on her behaviour."<sup>25</sup>

Brett's father copes with his Holocaust history through the appeasement of violence. He cannot stand up for the memory of his beloved dead wife in the face of Lily's anger, and is prepared to cut off contact with Doris. He seems split between threatening never to see her again, and retreating to a bland denial of anything emotionally difficult, acting as if nothing has happened.

The Holocaust that the parents survived and do not speak about, remains as a silent presence in their lives and in the lives of their children.

The fairytale with which Brett concludes her memoir is "The Goose Girl". In this story the mild and gentle princess, sent forth by her mother on a journey to her future husband, is abused and cheated by her maid. The maid steals the princess's horse Falada and takes her place beside the prince. The true princess is sent off to mind the geese. She says nothing. Falada is killed, and still she says nothing. Rachel is angry with the princess's meekness until she realizes that this young woman has been forced into silence under threat of death. Furthermore, Rachel realizes that there was no one who would listen to, who would hear, what the princess had to say. Finally the princess actively resists the advances of a goose boy; through this action she is eventually saved and restored to her rightful place. The princess resists the boy, Rachel realizes, because in spite of her silence and apparent passivity, her sense of self - of *who she is* - is strong. She possesses this

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

strong knowledge because of her mother's love, demonstrated every day of her life. This knowledge is the queen's real gift to her daughter. What is true for the goose girl is understood to be true also for Doris: "Her mother's love had not been enough to protect her, but it had given her something even more precious. The words, the simple recognitions, the daily quiet reminders of her own truth."<sup>26</sup>

Central to Brett's passage to survival is this re-told story of her relationship with her mother. Her mother was not able to protect her from Lily's damaging abuse because she did not let herself see it. But she gave Doris the most precious gift of knowing who she was - a girl who was loved, and was worthy of that love.

The Goose Girl fairy tale gives Brett an indirect way of affirming her truth about her mother as a good and loving woman. Around this truth, in this story, she has constructed her identity.

## Conclusion

In Alisdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory*, the underlying metaphor for the construction of self comes from drama:

We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making. Each of us being a main character in his [sic] own drama plays subordinate roles in the dramas of others, and each drama constrains the others.<sup>27</sup>

Doris Brett in *Eating the Underworld* explores the drama of the family into which she was born, in order to better understand her own life story and especially her 'experiences of health and illness. The story necessarily involves her in a narrative reconstruction of her identity, and as part of that process, a calling to account of the other actors in her drama:

What the narrative concept of selfhood requires is [...] twofold. On the one hand, I am what I may justifiably be taken to be in the course of living out a story that runs from my birth to my death; I am the subject of a history that is my own and no one else's, that has its own particular meaning [...] The other aspect of narrative selfhood is correlative: I am not only accountable, I am one who can always ask others for account, who can put the question. I am part of their story, as they are part of mine.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 413.

<sup>27</sup> MacIntyre, Alisdair (1981), *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, p. 213.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217.

Doris in particular calls to account her sister Lily, for Lily's published versions of their shared family life.

Doris writes as a survivor. Survivor narrative is sometimes seen as a special sub-genre of autobiographical writing, with its own defining characteristics. It may include personal disclosure and the expression of personal emotions, but it moves beyond those to an act of witnessing, that is, the giving of testimony that draws attention to the perpetrator's act and critiques larger cultural forces. It may imply the possibility of impartial adjudication of conflicting evidence. Doris Brett can be seen as witnessing: she wants to set the record straight because the three survivals in her book - of cancer, of the Holocaust, of sibling abuse - are so closely interwoven.

To call Brett's memoir a survivor narrative does not limit its extensive appeal as a memoir, a record of personal experience. For Nancy Miller, the heart of memoir lies in the root meaning of the word 'record':

To record means literally to call to mind, to call up from the heart. At the same time, record means to set down in writing, to make official. What resides in the province of the heart is also what is exhibited in the public space of the world.<sup>29</sup>

Doris Brett has painfully traversed a passage that takes her from silence to a very public telling of her own story; from illness to survival; from illusion to a hard truth that is almost heroic in its transgression of cultural norms about privacy. Fairy tales are one of her tools of narrative self-construction. They are an indirect but powerful device to shift the reader beyond the personal intimate voice of the poet and journal writer, towards what Brett perceives to be a simpler but deeper, more universal cultural narrative about what it is to be a self.

<sup>29</sup> Miller, Nancy K. (1996), *Bequest and Betrayal. Memoirs of a Parent's Death*, New York, Oxford University Press, p. 43

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