

Meeting 12 Feb 13 2018, Corsham

Siblings: How do you survive the sibling relationship, and how do you write about it? Does sibling conflict teach you invaluable life-skills? In a family where one sibling is a writer, what are the implications for the others?

The meeting was attended by over twenty staff, MAs and PhD students. There were apologies from Kylie Fitzpatrick (in Australia), Emma Geen, Camila Fuentes Diaz, Alison Lee, Kate Rigby and Owain Jones.

11.20 am Dr Tracy Brain, who leads Bath Spa's very successful PhD Creative Writing programme. *The Second Sister* (2017) is her second novel written under the pseudonym of Claire Kendal, following *The Book of You*, a modern response to Richardson's *Clarissa*, which was a *Sunday Times* bestseller and a *Richard and Judy* choice. She is now writing a third Claire Kendal novel as part of another two-book deal. Tracy has also published a study of Sylvia Plath under her own name.

The Second Sister is narrated by a lookalike younger sister, Melanie, who, ten years after the disappearance of her elder sister, Miranda, is still obsessed with finding out what happened, and addresses the whole book to her sister in the second person. This is a portrait of a complex, competitive, critical but deeply loving sibling relationship, with Melanie obsessed with finding her sister – on the one hand, through a personal detective odyssey which brings her into great danger, but on the other hand by constantly talking to Miranda in her head, and keeping her alive through memory. As the narrator does this she tries to discover in what ways she resembles her sister, and in what ways she must be a different person to survive. Tracy Brain told us that she herself has a sister who still lives in the USA (born in America, Tracy moved away and now lives in the UK.) The relationship is a central one in Tracy's life; the two sisters are very close; so some of the energy in the book comes from life. But *The Second Sister* is not confessional/autobiographical in origin. All the same, Tracy admitted to nervousness when she first told her real-life sister that she'd written a novel about sisters. Tracy was relieved when her sister said, 'Great - put this in - and put that in' - though Tracy had to explain that she couldn't because they wouldn't fit the story! When Tracy's sister read it, she loved it and was very supportive and proud (Tracy said that though her sister might be prejudiced in her favour, she was in fact probably telling the truth, as she'd been blunt about previous attempts at novels that she hadn't liked!). This was interesting because often when a writer writes any kind of book based on family dynamics, however far from the facts of the original/birth family, siblings may think they recognise themselves, be unhappy and object – Tracy showed us this is not always true. However she told us that what might upset a sibling is unpredictable, and that is why self-censorship in writing is probably pointless. Tracy also spoke about other, less obvious strands in the novel drawn from her real-life sibling relationship – there was indeed a 'missing sister', since the Atlantic lay between them; and sometimes there had been an element of sorrow/anger that the two sisters who grew up together had been parted, which is much magnified in the feelings of Melanie in the novel.

11.40 am Deb McCormick, whose manuscript in its original form got a very high distinction on the 2016 MA. Though Deb's novel, *An Ancestry of Dolls Inside*, is quite different from Tracy Brain's, it also revolves around two sisters and around what is not known but must slowly be found out: in Deb's case childhood secrets, the things you don't realise until too late. I gave a trigger warning to the group because of the dark subject matter. The narrator manages to survive the selfish, neglectful parents, but the older sister, Celia, though growing up in the same family, does not know how to protect or look after herself, and is lost to the adult narrator, retreating into madness. (Maybe one reason why both books speak to us all is that in a way we all, as grownups, 'lose' those original childhood siblings, even if we stay close.)

Deb said that in her book she was exploring the way young children see what is in front of them but, without the necessary vocabulary, cannot understand it. How can the two narrators, the child Dora and the adult Dora, understand their own childhood, let alone their sister Celia's, when there is no corroboration for their memories? In this divided family where the siblings were set against each other from the start in deadly competition, finding the truth is a lifelong battle. Deb said she was asking, who owns the memories buried in families? Talking about the different way in which siblings see the same story, Deb quoted Gerald Scarfe, who in an interview with Professor Vincent Walsh of the Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience said 'All memory is story. We never tell the same story twice...and the stories we tell shape the way we see the world.'

Trying to be fair to each generation, the adult Dora in the novel speculates about how the Second World War had affected her parents; they were only 17 when war broke out and perhaps it 'stunted their growth' – they remained like 'feckless teenagers'. The end result in the book was that the narrator became the carer and copier who mothered her mother. Though that was clearly unfair, it also taught her to survive, whereas her sister retreated into psychosis. Dora, by contrast, learns what she needs to know through loving her own children. In their reflection she can look back and see what was missing, and finally understand her own past and that of her sister.

By writing this story, Deb feels that she made 'a life for silent Celia - making some sense of what went on.' Dora, Celia's sibling, 'wants to bear witness because the lost ones never have a voice. Celia has no children. At the end she still has no say. She will disappear as if she had never been because she never got away.' But she inhabits Deb's book, in which there are two sisters - 'One of us grew up too early. One of us never grew up.'

12.00 am Linda Blair *who grew up in 50's and 60's America, then came to England and trained as a researcher, then a clinical psychologist. She studied family relationships first in primates (MRC Cambridge), then in humans (Harvard and Maudsley). She worked in the NHS, for the MRC, and doing private work while raising three children for 30 years, during which time she also began radio broadcasting. Then she was invited to write as an 'agony aunt', at first for Psychologies and Woman magazines. About ten years ago she began writing advice columns first for the Guardian ('Private Lives'), then The Times ('On the Couch'), The Daily Mail ('On the Couch') and currently the Telegraph ('Mind Healing'). She has also written five self-help books along the way, on parenting, anxiety management, and mindfulness. Her most recent book, and the one that inspired today's Empathy Group, is called Siblings: How to handle sibling rivalry to create strong and loving bonds.*

Linda's talk had two strands: one, how does having siblings – or not having siblings – relate to the development of empathy? She sees sibling relationships as the motivation for learning to be empathic – because when several people are fighting for their share of the same 'pot of goods' – viz parental attention – learning to take the other person's point of view increases the chances of finding a way to get what you want and need. 'Empathy emerges from rivalry,' she said. Sibling relationships were so important partly because 'the first five years of life are when neural patterns are made' – the foundations of understanding and the basis people might fall back on, though Linda also said that patterns can be changed or elaborated as we form and re-form new identities. Also, one reason why siblings are so important is that though people change throughout their adult life, usually siblings remain the only people who remember, and thus serve as a link to, our earlier identities. 'After 60, it's one of the most important relationships in our life.' What about only children, then? Linda saw the situation of the only child as having changed greatly over the decades. When she was growing up, only children were rare, and were therefore sometimes viewed as odd, or felt left out, or felt they were missing out. Now she thinks more and more people are choosing only to have one child, and thus not only are they no longer seen as odd, but parents are more aware nowadays of the importance of peer relationships and as a result, have developed all sorts of strategies for making sure only children can form close

relationships with other children, so they don't miss out on the early training ground for empathy.

Secondly, what IS the self-help genre, and why DO people read self-help books? 'There are more than 45,000 self-help books out there and it's a growing market', she said, one which has built on the massive success of authors such as Dale Carnegie, Eckhart Tolle, Tony Robbins, and Stephen Covey in the USA and elsewhere. Yet research shows that people's behaviour is not significantly changed over time by the advice they read in these books, and also that if you buy one self-help book, you are likely to buy others on the same or allied topics. Linda said that reading self-help 'isn't about curing.' Self-help readers tend to be middle-aged (40s to 60s) and are predominantly female, whereas the writers are predominantly male. But she added that buying and reading self-help is a sign of hopefulness: 'it gives people hope that personal problems can be overcome, and it offers them "rules" when most of us no longer find those rules elsewhere, for example through religion.' Also maybe the rules for 'becoming your best self' help people to answer the question 'What makes me a valuable person?'

Can you write self-help without putting yourself into it? She says it's a similar question to that asked about therapists – can (and should) therapists keep themselves out of the room? 'Psychologists have three years of training to try to learn to keep their personal views and experiences out of the consulting room'. However, in the case of this book, Linda is one of six siblings, so she had the privilege of writing about something she had experienced in large measure. Finally, she described how one of her sibling relationships had magically and surprisingly flowered recently, with a long visit from an adult sister.