

How can publishers support the authors of trauma memoirs, as they unpack their pain for the public?

February 16 2023, by Kylie Cardell, Christiana Harous, Emma Maguire and Lydia Woodyatt



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Would you publish the worst thing that ever happened to you?

When Amani Haydar's mother was murdered by her father in an act of domestic violence, writing helped process the pain. At first, she wrote in private, journalling [as a way](#) "to express frustrations and insecurities I

feared couldn't be spoken out loud at the time."

Haydar is a trained lawyer; the chance to write a Victim Impact Statement reminded her how important survivor voices are within justice settings. More broadly, she found herself inspired by acclaimed memoirs and public testimonies of gendered violence.

She was inspired by [Bri Lee](#), who detailed the process of successfully bringing a legal complaint against her abuser in her memoir [Eggshell Skull](#). And by [Chanel Miller](#), whose victim impact statement addressing the fellow student who received a light sentence for sexually assaulting her went viral [on BuzzFeed](#). (Miller's memoir, [Know My Name](#), was published in 2019.)

When she undertook the difficult task of crafting her private pain into a story for an audience, Haydar was driven by the chance to honor her mother's story—and a desire to show other Muslim women the power of speaking out. She wanted to "document the way violence and trauma had affected my family more broadly," which was complicated by her identity as a Muslim woman, as well as the nature of memoir as a literary genre.

"The act of writing from lived experience as a trauma survivor involves making choices beyond the literary and political decisions a writer ordinarily makes. It carries added risks and can have emotional, psychological and practical consequences for the writer. This is particularly so for survivors from racialised communities [...] No matter how well or carefully it is done, writing about trauma entails the risk that audiences will bring their pre-existing attitudes and prejudices into their reading of a survivor's work."

Writing and then publishing her memoir, [The Mother Wound](#), demanded immense personal and psychological resilience. It was hard, risky work:

for her community, her family, and for her personal well-being.

Trauma-informed approaches

Haydar [used](#) a "trauma-informed" approach when writing her memoir:

"Understanding the effects of trauma and building a trauma-informed approach into my writing practice has allowed me to navigate some of these risks and foster a writing practice that facilitates personal healing despite the risk of re-traumatisation. "

When it was time to promote the book, she specifically worked through her fears with a coach and counselor.

While Haydar structured her approach to writing and publishing her memoir with trauma in mind, authors who write about trauma often do so without an industry framework to support their well-being. Writers who access psychological or other resources may then draw on their own networks or develop their own personal strategies for coping, as Haydar did.

But what is the responsibility of the publisher—and the broader community of readers hungry for trauma memoirs—towards the authors who re-live their trauma to write their books?

Guidelines for editors

Researcher Camilla Cripps recently wrote [in Books & Publishing](#) that despite our decades-long (and growing) appetite for trauma memoirs, Australia's professional editing organizations have no shared guidelines for editors working on trauma-based work. They neither provide shared guidelines for editing traumatic material, nor actively advocate a "do no

harm" approach in their codes of conduct—which, Cripps says, is essential.

Yet her research finds 87% of editors have worked on traumatic material and 60% have had trauma disclosed to them. One editor told us they've worked on several trauma memoirs, and are extremely conscious, and sometimes nervous, of the responsibility and risks.

"I know things about some of my authors they've rarely disclosed to anyone—they've shared in order to explain gaps in their text, or during intimate post-editing conversations. Editing a memoir can feel dangerously close to being the author's therapist sometimes. Especially when you need, as an editor, to question the motivations behind their "narrator's" actions. But you're not trained for it, of course. And you hope they're ready to ask those questions of themselves."

Formal training or guidelines for editors could help make this process safer, for editors and authors alike. Cripps fears a lack of regulation risks "negative effects" on author and editor well-being.

Cripps writes:

"in our editing practices and processes, we must take care to not re-traumatize or lay blame. Rather, we must champion messages of resilience and recovery, engage sensitively with authors and responsibly approach problematic texts in a manner that protects our own well-being."

She calls for publishing to draw on the knowledge of other industries.

"Trauma-informed practice is a strengths-based framework that guides the service provisions of the Australian healthcare and education sectors."

What do trauma memoirs cost their writers?

Like Amani Haydar, journalist and writer Lucia Osborne-Crowley [was inspired](#) by Bri Lee's *Eggshell Skull*: reading the book encouraged her to acknowledge her own sexual assaults. Osborne-Crowley later published her own memoir, [I Choose Elena](#), about how comprehensively her childhood and adolescent sexual assaults impacted her life—even (and especially) when she attempted to ignore them.

She's since become a #MeToo activist, reporting on the trials of [Johnny Depp vs. Amber Heard](#) and [Ghislain Maxwell](#). This week, she reported on Twitter she'd been checked into a residential trauma rehab facility, partly as a result of reporting on the details on the Epstein case, which "no matter how hard I try, tap into some of my own memories of childhood sexual abuse."

Osborne-Crowley's experience speaks to the dangerous side of writing about trauma for survivors. While it can be a useful way to process experience and channel it into the public good, it risks triggering mental health issues around the very incidents drawn on.

Terri White is the author of [Coming Undone](#), a memoir that detailed, among other things, an abusive childhood and a mental health breakdown that landed her in a psychiatric ward.

She [wrote in the Guardian](#) in February 2023 that the publication process—being edited, having your book legalised, and the reviews, media and live events—can be retraumatizing.

For her, the lowest point was when, "The lawyer (doing their job), wanted to remove an incident of sexual abuse, as there was no proof." It was a reminder of the nature of childhood sexual abuse: there *is* often no proof, and you're "violated, then silenced."

It is not enough, she says, to "rely on single good people." Instead, [she suggests](#) shared resources that could be routinely provided as part of the process of memoir publishing, such as "a set of agreed principles and harm-reduction guidelines" and a "directory of counselors, therapists, helplines and specific support organizations."

What do trauma memoirs give us?

Since the 2000s, there's been a rise of life narrative by "ordinary" subjects as a form of activism and social justice, connected to several significant social movements of the 21st century—especially, perhaps, #MeToo.

Think: Amani Haydar, Bri Lee, Lucia Osborne-Crowley, Terri White.

And Gunai/Kurnai former police officer, Veronica Gorrie. [Black and Blue](#) is her memoir of a difficult childhood shaped by colonial racism and disadvantage, followed by a damaging stint as a Queensland police officer, where she experienced further systemic racism.

In Australia, personal testimony has been a critical element in creating frameworks for reconciliation. Gillian Whitlock [calls it](#) "active remembrance"—and it has particular significance in understanding and reckoning with the violent legacy of colonialism for Indigenous people.

Life narratives can illuminate the realities of injustices that occur in private spheres—like child abuse and sexual assault—and injustices that happen "elsewhere," like war crimes. Such stories can humanize people who have been dehumanized by popular media or politicians.

When we read about someone else's painful experience, we are offering the writer the opportunity for recognition and to be heard. This can be an important reparative act, within contexts of institutional or social failure.

And it can have tangible outcomes, [like](#) "improvements in policies for prevention and response."

Why do writers risk telling difficult stories?

The act of writing has been associated with many benefits for mental health and well-being. Research has supported the [therapeutic benefits](#) of expressive writing for both health and mental health.

But expressive writing and published memoir are not the same. Writing about trauma has its own challenges, and publication amplifies these.

Over a decade ago, in 2011, Kate Holden wrote a reflection [on the aftermath](#) of publishing her widely acclaimed 2005 memoir of sex work and drug addiction, [In Your Skin](#). It was Holden's first book and she had little real idea about what its publication would entail.

There were some remarkable highs: prizes, attention, the chance to properly pursue a writing career. She gained emotional benefits and a sense of contributing to social progress and change. Readers confided in her. The memoir changed their mind, opened their eyes, created empathy or understanding. The opportunity to advocate was exhilarating.

Yet, "for every ten letters praising my book, there would be one calling me spiteful names, aiming personal insults and offering unsolicited judgment on the life I'd lived."

Speaking about her story in public again and again became exhausting, as did defending her memoir against its critics. Holden found herself struggling emotionally, experiencing a kind of psychological splitting. For a while, she vowed to never write memoir again. (She did: [The Romantic](#), in 2010.)

[Samantha Van Zweden observes in an essay](#) on the challenges for writers of personal stories: "Honest, raw stories can be taxing to the mental health of those who write them. Sometimes that's because they deal explicitly with [mental health issues](#). Sometimes it's because the most vulnerable people do the heaviest lifting in telling difficult stories."

How should publishers support writers?

Our research aims to address the question of how publishers can support writers. A starting point is to pay attention to what writers themselves are saying about the well-being and mental health challenges of publishing memoir.

Writing about trauma can involve very specific craft skills: for example, how to maintain an emotional register without overwhelming a reader; how to negotiate legal or ethical constraints on what can be said.

There is a lot to be gained by societies in the production and consumption of "difficult" memoirs. But what are the costs of writing these stories? What tools and scaffolding might the arts and culture industries need to alleviate some of the damaging effects of writing and publishing trauma?

And how should authors take care of themselves in the process of writing and publishing—especially when they are putting their lives or those of vulnerable others on the page?

Writers and well-being

Psychological skills and knowledge can help address typical issues that might arise when writing about difficult topics, and support mental health and well-being. It's important to train people [in these skills](#).

Mental health and well-being can be considered two-dimensional (the [dual-continua model](#) of mental health). People can experience higher or lower symptoms of psychopathology, such as anxiety, depression, obsessions, sleeplessness, rumination or panic.

At the same time, they can experience higher or lower well-being, such as feeling satisfied with life, connected to others, a sense of meaning, agency, or growth. Symptoms of psychopathology need to be assessed separately from satisfaction (hedonic) and growth-orientated (eudaimonic) aspects of well-being.

Different stages of writing and publication may have different types of impact on well-being. A writer might need different types of skills and supports as they move through different parts of the writing and publishing cycle. For example, while writing may have therapeutic benefits, being exposed to critique—from book editors, the media and readers—may have problematic impacts.

Declining well-being can be a risk factor for the onset of mental illness. So strategies that help writers cultivate well-being [across their life](#) may reduce risk of onset of mental illness.

But mental health and well-being cannot be considered in isolation from systemic issues, such as poverty, working conditions, racism and prejudice, being culturally valued for one's work, and having access to communities of support.

Samantha van Zweden, author of [Eating With my Mouth Open](#), a memoir about her relationship to food, [explained](#) has written about some of the challenges authors (of any kind) typically face, including:

"insecure work and income, an inability to access expensive or exclusive treatment, isolated working conditions, a lack of benefits including sick

leave and holiday pay, and a culture that often encourages burnout."

Such challenges are amplified for writers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, or who may also be navigating disability or illness.

Researching how industry can support writers

How can we better prepare, support and sustain the work of memoirists and others who write about difficult personal material?

A growing chorus of those writers are calling for an industry response to issues they've raised, including within [their own published memoirs](#).

To amplify these voices, we are conducting qualitative research, which will show how writers experience their profession and map the nature of the psychological challenges to well-being they face.

Our research sets out to better understand whether writers might benefit from different sets of tools, or have different experiences of resilience at different stages of the writing and publishing process.

This kind of knowledge about the lived experience and well-being needs of working writers can inform publishers and other industry professionals: including editors, but also reviewers, interviewers, or even festival goers. It can facilitate the creation of community-centered resources, guidelines and programs to engage and support writers.

Working with writers, writing organizations and publishing industry representatives will help find solutions to these problems—and give writers a voice on how their experiences shape them.

If you are a writer and would like to participate in our research, you can

[click here.](#)

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