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‘Siobhan Harvey, What We Remember, What We Forget’

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Siobhan Harvey, *What We Remember, What We Forget* (Otago University Press, 2025), 192pp. Paperback. NZ\$35. ISBN: 978-1-9913-4820-3.

This is only the second autobiographical book that I have ever reviewed in the over one hundred books that I have done so in my career thus far. The main reason for this is that I am not a literature expert but specialise in history, law, and politics. However, as with the subject matter of the other book that I reviewed this book really caught my eye and I am glad to have read it, despite its sometimes quite difficult subject matter. Siobhan Harvey's memoir covers her entire life from being a baby in Staffordshire, England, United Kingdom to her being a mother herself to an adult child in Aotearoa New Zealand several decades later.

However, Harvey's book does not take the 'usual' approach to writing memoirs, i.e. a chronological one. Although the memoir is broadly chronological, its focus is thematic, and more specifically the book very much focuses on memory. So, it would be more accurate to say that the book is a collection of memories. These include very traumatic ones of Harvey overdosing on her Mum's medication when she was not even two. The trauma of this experience and the fact that her Mum blamed her for it and many things subsequently is a recurring theme in the book. The book also explores Postpartum depression (PPD) (which can affect new mothers up to a year after giving birth). This is something Harvey is convinced that her mother had. And she also suffered from it herself when she became a mother to her son some decades later. Her own experience of PPD actually gave her the insight that her own Mum most likely suffered from this when she was a baby.

Being the mother of a neurodiverse child who was mercilessly bullied by his classmates at a religious school is another recurring theme in the book. You really feel the pain that Harvey and her partner felt at witnessing some of this bullying when dropping or collecting their son from school or attending school functions etc., and despite raising the issue repeatedly with the school authorities nothing really being done to help their child. It was only after their son had left the school and Harvey and her partner had pursued a long and gruelling fight for accountability at the highest levels that they finally achieved this, and most importantly their son received an apology.

The workplace bullying that Harvey also received from a former manager is another recurring theme that the book explores. The immense impact – physical, psychological, and emotional that workplace bullying can take on an individual comes across very clearly. This is something that I unfortunately experienced myself recently and so Harvey's experience really resonated with me. Actually talking about themes in the book that I could personally identify with, the bullying of her son also hit quite close to home, as I was also mercilessly bullied when I was in High School many years ago now. The trauma of that experience sadly always stays with you but managing to come out of it on the other end is also an incredible source of strength, which I am confident Harvey's son also feels.

Another thing that resonated with me is the importance that the book places on memories. I have always described myself as having the memory of an Elephant, i.e. I remember everything, and I mean *everything*. For example, I can relate an interaction with a friend in a coffee shop to the smallest detail from nearly two decades ago. Having such strong memory recall is a strength in many ways, but it is not always a good thing, especially when you can remember traumatic memories in incredible detail. You find yourself reliving the trauma every time. That is why I found

Harvey's discussion of not only *what we remember* but *what we forget* (the title of her memoir) very thought-provoking.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the beautiful and intimate writing style that Harvey has, and this most definitely explains her many books which have received numerous prizes, and the prominent fellowships that she has held during her illustrious career. I thoroughly recommend this book to readers. It will make you think and reflect, which in my opinion is what a book should do. And I want to thank Siobhan Harvey for her bravery in sharing her memories, as a memoir is such a deeply personal exercise and you leave yourself quite exposed and vulnerable.

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