

Are genres gendered?

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A memoir is described as a collection of memories belonging to an individual or group, compiled in the form of a story or a book. As a genre, memoir may sound as if it doesn't differ from a biography or an autobiography. But in popular culture, there seems to be a distinct attraction to memoir by women, as opposed to men, who are drawn to writing autobiographies, also detailing their memories but in a less emotional manner than the memoir.

In an interview, well-known American author and university professor, Roxane Gay, has claimed that women are asked to write memoirs more than their male counterparts – who are left to write novels about crime and intelligence. Does this broad statement relate to South Africa as well? South African publisher Melinda Ferguson, who specialises in publishing memoir, agrees with this statement.

“Ninety, or maybe even 95 percent, of the memoirs that I’ve published have been written by women,” says Ferguson. “I’ve published two by men and they really were not the ones that sold the best.” It comes as no surprise that Ferguson says when it comes to audience, women are the ones reading memoir – and they much prefer it when another woman has written the book they’re reading.

One of the reasons for the high number of women reading memoir is based on the desire to relate to the details of what one is reading. Sisonke Msimang is the author of *Always Another Country* (Jonathan Ball), a memoir about her life living in exile as her anti-apartheid activist parents moved from country to country from the 70s to avoid the wrath of the South African apartheid government. Msimang says she decided to write a memoir not only because she was most comfortable writing about herself, but because she was tired of seeing so many autobiographies of what she calls “big men”.

She says: “I wanted to produce something that reflected on kind of an ordinary life rather than somebody special like [Nelson] Mandela or whatever. I thought why not write about sort of an aspect of growing up that is not someone who’s famous or a “big shot”, just myself.” Since its release, Msimang has done many a book interview, which reflects what her book means to the average South African woman who might relate more to her book than, say, Mandela’s bestseller *Long Walk to Freedom*.

A reader of Msimang’s book feels the same as the author, saying that she related on a deep level with her, which made her feel moved by the writing. “I felt as though I shared a unique connection with Msimang, which, when you think about it, was probably just as unique as every one of her readers that is female and has ever been in love or had big life decisions to make.”

Ferguson is not only publishing memoir, she is teaching the average person how to write their very own. She runs writing workshops in two major South African cities twice a year and she says the demographics of the people who sign up is proof of how female-centric the genre really is.

“One poor guy will arrive, who wants to talk about his story and it’s such a strange thing for me. Because usually that guy gets so much out of it but I’m sure he has thoughts about what he’s doing there and how he will probably be the only man at the workshop before signing up. There is an assumption that, because we talk about ourselves and our feelings easily, most men don’t naturally do the same.”

One woman who was part of Ferguson’s workshop, Christy Chilimigras, opens up about her experience as the sexually-abused daughter of a drug-addicted man in her memoir, *Things Even González Can’t Fix*. She writes in a blog post about writing her memoir, and how deeply painful yet cathartic it was: “I wrote things that were uncomfortable and that I didn’t want to write, and after writing them, I sat back and tried to appreciate them as my ‘work’, and not as my stories. I was

adamant that my love for the craft of writing not be overshadowed by the fact that I was writing about my own life so intimately.”

So, does it come as a surprise that females take so much space in the art of memoir? To support this claim, in the middle of June 2018, the top five bestsellers on the New York Times list consist of four men and one woman. The number one bestseller is by Bill Clinton and James Patterson and the title is *The President is Missing*. One can already anticipate the action, intelligence work and suspense that is to take place in this novel, which could be considered former US President Clinton’s version of a more fictional memoir.

While all of us may not be Clinton or Mandela, we still have stories to tell that could relate to or change the world of even one reader out there. Memoir allows for that space of being brutally honest with the reader about your life experiences without the fear of being judged. But even the strongest of women still needs the time to destress and deactivate, and for these moments of escaping the chaos of the world, a good old Stephen King novel is just what’s needed for the soul.