

Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory + Imagination*.
London: Verso, 2002

Family Secrets

For permission to reprint photographs, thanks are due to Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, Hulton Deutsch Collection Ltd, Times Newspapers Ltd, and the Robert Hunt Library. Above all, I shall remain forever in debt to my late father, Henry Philip Kuhn, from whom I inherit an abiding fascination with and love of photography. It is thanks to his skills and enthusiasms as a photographer that I have been able to draw on such a rich fund of source material for this book. And it is with considerable pleasure that I see this 'invisible man' making a small mark on history.

Annette Kuhn
August 1994

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Family Secrets: an Introduction

Although we take stories of childhood and family literally, I think our recourse to this past is a way of reaching for myth, for the story that is deep enough to express the profound feelings we have in the present.

Most of us imagine the family as a place of safety, closeness, intimacy; a place where we can comfortably belong and be accepted just as we are. If we think of family ties as given, not chosen, they have this much at least in common with our other attachments: nation, race, class, gender. And yet we know quite well that in real life matters are rarely quite so simple. Just as for many family life is precarious, so these other allegiances are as often as not uncertain and mutable. And if it is we who, by imagining them, bring into being our 'imagined communities', we are undoubtedly formed by them, too. For in a way they actually are 'out there', they do pre-exist us. Disputing the givenness of social categories like class, race, gender identity and sexual preference confers no exemption from the necessity of negotiating their social meanings in daily life. While fully aware that femininity is a fabrication, for example, as far as the world is concerned – and indeed as far as I, too, am concerned – I am still a woman, and live with the very real consequences of a particular gender label. So it is with the identity conferred by family.

A family without secrets is rare indeed. People who live in

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families make every effort to keep certain things concealed from the rest of the world, and at times from each other as well. Things will be lied about, or simply never mentioned. Sometimes family secrets are so deeply buried that they elude the conscious awareness even of those most closely involved. From the involuntary amnesias of repression to the wilful forgetting of matters it might be less than convenient to recall, secrets inhabit the borderlands of memory. Secrets, perhaps, are a necessary condition of the stories we are prompted by memory to tell about our lives.

Telling stories about the past, our past, is a key moment in the making of our selves. To the extent that memory provides their raw material, such narratives of identity are shaped as much by what is left out of the account — whether forgotten or repressed — as by what is actually told. Secrets haunt our memory-stories, giving them pattern and shape. Family secrets are the other side of the family's public face, of the stories families tell themselves, and the world, about themselves. Characters and happenings that do not slot neatly into the flow of the family narrative are ruthlessly edited out.

But exactly what sort of family is at stake in this book, *Family Secrets*? A kinship group, a real-life one, the author's own, perhaps? Or the family as an *idea*, an abstraction that provides the model for so many forms of belonging? And what sort of secrets, for that matter? Each term — family, secrets — has so many meanings. If family secrets are to be disclosed, does this suggest some personal revelation, confession even (an alluring prospect, to be sure)? Or is a question more of what goes into the act of bringing the secrets to light? Am I making public what I have consciously known but never before revealed, or am I seeking knowledge that is as new to me as it is to you?

The family secrets are indeed mine, in a manner of speaking; and like all such things, they have roots in the past and reverberations in the present. None of which can be understood until the memories behind the secrets are brought to light and looked at closely. This calls for a certain amount of delving into

the past, and for a preparedness to meet the unexpected. What is required is an active and directed work of memory.

Since my family secrets are no doubt shaped by the same kinds of amnesias and repressions as other people's, their substance will very likely seem familiar, commonplace even. Few of my secrets are likely to be particularly out-of-the-ordinary. But if my family secrets are neither unique nor special, that is precisely the point. Neither, although they take an individual life as their starting point, are the stories that I have to tell autobiographical in any conventional sense of the word. I offer no life story organized as a linear narrative with a beginning, a middle and an end, in that order. Nor is the present the goal towards which my stories are inexorably directed. The present figures rather differently, in fact: indeed the memory work that makes the telling of my stories possible is probably more important, and certainly of greater practical use in the present, than their actual content. And yet, without any conscious intent on my part, these stories have a great deal in common — in the forms they assume, the ways they narrate themselves — with other memory texts which are neither confessions nor autobiographical writings.

If pressed to slot these pieces of memory work, my memory texts, into some sort of category, I would hazard first of all that they tread a line between cultural criticism and cultural production; or rather that they try to span the gulf between those who comment on the productions of culture and those who actually do the producing. As such, they are driven by two sets of concerns. The first has to do with the ways memory shapes the stories we tell, in the present, about the past — especially stories about our own lives. The second has to do with what it is that makes us remember: the prompts, the pretexts, of memory; the reminders of the past that remain in the present. If *Family Secrets* has a prime objective, it is to unravel the connections between memory, its traces, and the stories we tell about the past, especially — though not exclusively — about the past of living memory.

The past is gone for ever. We cannot return to it, nor can we

reclaim it now as it was. But that does not mean it is lost to us. The past is like the scene of a crime: if the deed itself is irrecoverable, its traces may still remain. From these traces, markers that point towards a past presence, to something that has happened in this place, a (re)construction, if not a simulacrum, of the event can be pieced together. Memory work has a great deal in common with forms of inquiry which — like detective work and archaeology, say — involve working backwards — searching for clues, deciphering signs and traces, making deductions, patching together reconstructions out of fragments of evidence.

The clues that form the starting point of my excursions into memory work are traces of my own past: for the most part, images and the memories associated with them. The images are both 'private' (family photographs) and 'public' (films, news photographs, a painting); though, as far as memory at least is concerned, private and public turn out in practice less readily separable than conventional wisdom would have us believe. Each of the essays that follow is a case history in its own right: an image, images, or memories are at the heart of a radiating web of associations, reflections and interpretations. But if the memories are one individual's, their associations extend far beyond the personal. They spread into an extended network of meanings that bring together the personal with the familial, the cultural, the economic, the social, and the historical. Memory work makes it possible to explore connections between 'public' historical events, structures of feeling, family dramas, relations of class, national identity and gender, and 'personal' memory. In these case histories outer and inner, social and personal, historical and psychological, coalesce; and the web of interconnections that binds them together is made visible.

In working on these case histories, I have made a number of discoveries. I have seen how memory shapes not just our inner worlds but also the outer world of public expression and circulation of memory-stories. I find, too, that 'memory texts' — cultural productions across a range of media which, like the fruits of my own memory work, are in effect secondary revisions

of the source materials of memory — appear to be a cultural phenomenon, a genre even, in their own right. Memory, it turns out, has its own modes of expression: these are characterized by the fragmentary, non-linear quality of moments recalled out of time. Visual flashes, vignettes, a certain anecdotal quality, mark memory texts as diverse as oral history accounts, unrevised written memoirs, scholarly writings like *The Uses of Literacy*, and even a film like *Distant Voices, Still Lives*.

I observe, too, the unfolding in memory texts of connections between memory and the past, memory and time, memory and place, memory and experience, memory and images, memory and the Unconscious. And I note, finally, that in all memory texts, personal and collective remembering emerge again and again as continuous with one another. If these discoveries call to mind the liberationist and feminist slogan 'The personal is political', they offer a far more profound understanding of that statement than any sloganizing would grant. Clearly, if in a way my memories belong to me, I am certainly not their sole owner. All memory texts — and that includes the essays in this book — constantly call to mind the collective nature of the activity of remembering.

In unearthing some of 'my' family secrets, I have learned in the most practical and immediate way that, with the proper motivation, memory work, especially when it draws on the readily available resource of the family album, is easy to do, offers methodological rigour, and can be fruitful in countless, and often unexpected, ways. As the veils of forgetfulness are drawn aside, layer upon layer of meaning and association peel away, revealing not ultimate truth, but greater knowledge. Memory work has about it the quality of pursuing the enigma in a mystery novel that turns on characters remembering things buried deep in their past and long forgotten: except that in a novel there is always an ending, and usually a resolution. Memory work, on the other hand, is potentially interminable: at every turn, as further questions are raised, there is always something else to look into. Every one of the case histories in this book could have been, and one day might well be, pursued further.

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Not all of my discoveries are congenial. I was made quite forcibly aware of the murderous hostility towards the mother implicit in the standpoint which I recognize (and indeed celebrate) as my own, that of the questioning, challenging daughter: of the losses, as well as the gains, of growing out of infancy, learning to speak and becoming an entity, a self, separate from a world that has hitherto met every need; of the narrowing of possibilities as schooling trammels the free-ranging imaginings of childhood into the confines of curricular knowledge; of an uprooting, a rejection of a birthright, the price of trying on a new social class identity; of the amnesias, the repressions, that make possible a sense of belonging, fragile and ambivalent as it might be, to class, family, nation, and to a dominant racial group. But it is not, surely, to be concluded from this that the past is better left undisturbed. These 'shadows' are a proper part of life, and must not — indeed they cannot — be split off from what is more agreeable or acceptable, and simply hidden from sight. For the repressed will always return, and more often than not in some infinitely more ugly guise. Bringing the secrets and the shadows into the open, allows the deeper meanings of the family drama's mythic aspects to be reflected upon, confronted, understood. This in turn helps in coming to terms with the feelings of the present, and so in living more fully in the present.

Memory work requires the most minimal resources and the very simplest procedures. Making do with what is to hand — its raw materials are almost universally available — is the hallmark of memory work's pragmatism and democracy. Anyone who has a family photograph that exerts an enigmatic fascination or arouses an inexplicable depth of emotion could find memory work rewarding. In working on my own memory materials, and on photographs especially, I have drawn freely on the very useful protocols set out by Rosy Martin and Jo Spence for their phototherapy and family album work. As a first step towards eliciting as wide a range of associations as might be appropriate

in the circumstances, these help the memory work practitioner to separate out a photograph's various contexts:

1. Consider the human subject(s) of the photograph. Start with a simple description, and then move into an account in which you take up the position of the subject. In this part of the exercise, it is helpful to use the third person ('she', rather than 'I', for instance). To bring out the feelings associated with the photograph, you may visualize yourself as the subject as she was at that moment, in the picture: this can be done in turn with all of the photograph's human subjects, if there is more than one, and even with inanimate objects in the picture.
2. Consider the picture's context of production. Where, when, how, by whom and why was the photograph taken?
3. Consider the context in which an image of this sort would have been made. What photographic technologies were used? What are the aesthetics of the image? Does it conform with certain photographic conventions?
4. Consider the photograph's currency in its context or contexts of reception. Who or what was the photograph made for? Who has it now, and where is it kept? Who saw it then, and who sees it now?

Memories and associations generated in the course of this exercise can stand on their own as discoveries, or may feed into reflective, interpretive or analytical phases of memory work. They also help the practitioner move beyond a purely personal response and towards a consideration of the photograph's cultural and historical embeddedness, its broader meanings, and — very importantly — the responses it generates. All this calls to mind John Berger's contention that the incorporation of photography into social and political memory calls for a radical approach to reading, as much as to making: photographs: 'A radial system has to be constructed around the photograph,' says Berger, 'so that it may be seen in terms which are simultaneously personal, political, economic, dramatic,

everyday and historic.'

As with photographs, so with other memory prompts: the democratic quality of memory work makes it a powerful practical instrument of 'conscientization', the awakening of critical consciousness, through their own activities of reflection and learning, among those who lack power; and the development of a critical and questioning attitude towards their own lives and the lives of those around them. As a practice that begins with the practitioner's own material – her memories, her photographs – memory work offers a route to a critical consciousness that embraces the heart as well as the intellect; one that resonates, in feeling and thinking ways, across the individual and the collective, the personal and the political.

Memory work is a method and a practice of unearthing and making public untold stories, stories of 'lives lived out on the borderlands, lives for which the central interpretive devices of the culture don't quite work'. These are the lives of those whose ways of knowing and ways of seeing the world are rarely acknowledged, let alone celebrated, in the expressions of a hegemonic culture. Practitioners of memory work may be conscientized simply through learning that they do indeed have stories to tell, and that their stories have value and significance in the wider world. At the same time, as an aid to radicalized remembering, memory work can create new understandings of both past and present, while yet refusing a nostalgia that embalms the past in a perfect, irretrievable, moment. Engaging as it does the psychic and the social, memory work bridges the divide between inner and outer worlds. It demonstrates that political action need not be undertaken at the cost of the inner life, nor that attention to matters of the psyche necessarily entails a retreat from the world of collective action.

The case studies in *Family Secrets* are capable of being read in a number of ways: for the stories they tell about a particular life, stories which will perhaps speak with a peculiar urgency to readers in whom they elicit recognition of a shared history; as a

contribution towards understanding how memory works culturally; for what they offer more generally to theories of culture and methods of cultural analysis; and perhaps most important of all, as a recipe, a toolkit, even an inspiration, for the reader's own memory work.