

Memories are made of this

Anna Funder is looking forward to not-quite-total recall.

IVAN THE TERRIBLE STARTED LIFE AS A CHILD, a fact that troubled his later personality.” This nugget from a collection of American high-school student essays used to make me laugh. But recently, listening to my children remembering things I’d rather hoped they’d forgotten, that laugh has become a nervous titter. I’m scared some parts of their childhoods may come to trouble their later personalities.

Instead of remembering how it felt to sing in the school choir at the Sydney Opera House or swim in an idyllic sea, they remember how their lunch box grew green things and stank (after being “lost” a long time) or how Mum burst into tears when “Not-Me” scrawled fat texta art all over the couch.

Last year, I took my eight-year-old to Iceland for her birthday: we rode ponies, swam in hot spas in lava fields and gazed at volcanoes. When we got home, she wrote an essay about the trip. She called it “The Line.” It was entirely and only about the 90 minutes we spent shuffling at midnight in the immigration queue at New York’s JFK airport coming home, my little one so tired she dozed on a coat on the lino floor. “And then Mum kicked me on...” she wrote, of my gentle attempts to move us forward. “Then she kicked me again...”

Parents now say, “Let’s make some memories!” to their children. It’s as if whatever we’re doing is no longer for its own sake, but some deliberate act of stuffing the psyches of the next generation like a haggis or a Christmas stocking, as if by inoculating them with “good memories” we might leave no room for bad ones.

“Making memories” is one of those absurdities of contemporary thought that will go one of two ways. It will either become a metaphor about how we think about abstract things that are so accepted as to be a truth (like “the Unconscious” – that convenient hold-all concept into which we can put lots of stuff we don’t own up to, but which we nevertheless claim controls us). Or it might disappear entirely, leaving no trace in anyone’s mind whatsoever.

The phrase made me wonder how in control of making our own memories we are, let



alone anyone else’s. Professor David Gallo, psychologist and director of the Memory Research Laboratory at the University of Chicago, says “we do have a lot of control” – at least over our own memories. Experiments show that if, after experiencing something, we retell it, reimagine it or repeat it, this “basically gives the brain another chance to encode it” and that will make the memory stronger. “It’s not so much what we do in the initial event,” he says, “but the reviewing. For example, bringing out family slides and everybody looking at them and reminiscing. You’re selectively rehearsing that information and reconsolidating it, so that later on you’ll be more likely to retrieve it.”

Reviewing not only cements the memory, it can also change it. “When you retrieve that memory, it reawakens that memory,” says Gallo. “That memory is now in a labile or malleable state where, depending on how you embellish or think about that event, you can set down another memory trace that is then remembered as part of the original. It then becomes very difficult to differentiate the two. If the way you are thinking

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about the memory the second time is different than the way it happened the first time, it’s a way to potentially introduce biases or distortions in how we remember.”

THESE DAYS, WE DON’T HAVE MEMORY-MAKING slide nights. Instead, we have a constant “slide-show” on our computer screensavers, the infinite streaming of thousands of photos rendering the past ever-present, as well as reams of video. Gallo says this surfeit of images, as well as the outsourcing of our memory into our smartphones, “is definitely going to have an effect” on our memories, even if “we don’t have any idea what that effect will be. The mechanisms we have in our brain evolved in the course of human evolution at a time before we had this technology.

“Basically, we’re using software in our brains that was programmed by evolution to solve a very different problem than this new problem that you’re throwing at it: bombardment by all these images that span across time.”

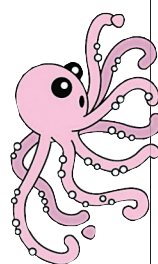
On the upside, says Gallo, “We usually take photos of events that are meaningful or otherwise positive. If you’ve just had a fight, no one pulls out the iPhone for a snapshot. So one distorting factor is going to be a positivity bias in thinking about your childhood. And that’s not a bad thing.” He pauses. “Repeatedly showing people images of a positive childhood: maybe we’ll all be a little bit happier?” He laughs.

In fact, there is fascinating evidence, with or without a slideshow, for a “positivity shift” as we age. Gallo cites his own and other research showing that older adults on average generate more positive memories than younger ones. “They probably don’t have more positive experiences, but they’re just more motivated to process information in a positive direction. When we’re younger we’re very detail-oriented, always trying to be very accurate and navigating through the world. Whereas as we get older, we realise the importance of regulating our own emotions, and that sometimes it’s more important to have a positive state of mind than it is to remember all the details.” Like “The Line”.

So, good news all round. We took no photos of “The Line”. I can make sure the pictures of pony rides, spas and volcanoes, the Opera House and the beach, are on constant, memory-cementing rotation on the screensaver. And I’m looking forward to my own personal “positivity shift”. Like ageing itself, apparently it happens to just about everyone. **GW**



THE QUIZ



COMPILED BY
STEPHEN SAMUELSON

1. How many square metres are in a hectare?

2. Which ancient Greek mathematician would you associate with the exclamation of “Eureka!”?

3. The names of which city in Northern Cape Province, South Africa, and which region of Western Australia, were both inspired by the same English politician?

4. What colour blood does an octopus have?

5. Since 2009, what is the maximum number of films that can be nominated each year for Best Picture at the Academy Awards?

6. Finish the title of Deborah Rodriguez’s best-selling novel from 2011, *The Little Coffee Shop of...*

7. How many points is a “super goal” worth in the AFL’s pre-season cup competition?

8. Which musical features the song *Don’t Cry for Me Argentina*?

9. Name four countries beginning with the letter “M” and ending with the letter “O”.

10. Trinity, King’s and St John’s are three royal colleges that can be found at which university?



11. In which city was the television drama *Breaking Bad* (above) set?

12. Who was the director of the 1974 film *Chinatown*?

13. Which historical figure was exiled to the islands of Elba and St Helena?

14. What sex and breed was the fictional dog Lassie?

15. Which genus of plant does hemp belong to?

16. Musical artist Marshall Mathers III is better known as...?

17. Of the 12 animals in the Chinese zodiac, which has the shortest name?

18. On which two surfaces are sports practised at the Winter Olympics?

19. In the entertainment industry, what do the initials BAFTA stand for?

20. Which planet in the solar system has the thinnest atmosphere?

GET IT?

BY GREG BAKES

Use the sequence of pictures to guess the answer

LEFT STRANDED OR ABANDONED



FOR SUDOKU, QUIZ ANSWERS AND GET IT? SOLUTION, SEE PAGE 36