

This interview appeared in The Nottingham Review, April 2019. The Nottingham Review and its website has now sadly closed.

Here is the original interview, reproduced with kind permission from The Nottingham Review interview editor, Julie Bull.

Author Interview: Sadie Nott talks to Interviews Editor Julie Bull about late starts, writing what you can't say, and avoiding labels.

Sadie Nott is a writer and a mother to two adult sons. In a former life she was a research psychologist. She had written two non-fiction books before first turning her hand to creative writing at the age of fifty. She is now seeking representation for her first novel A Ton of Feathers which has been shortlisted for a number of prizes. Sadie has also authored several pieces of short fiction. One will be published in an anthology A Wild and Precious Life which is currently being crowd-funded on Unbound and which takes recovery as its theme. The opening chapters of her completed novel will appear in a forthcoming TLC/AM Heath free reads anthology. She is a winner of a 2018 Creative Future Literary Award for under-represented writers.

I talked to her about coming to creative writing late, writing from life experience and about what being 'under-represented' means to her.



Tell me about your life before writing.

I wasn't someone who wrote stories as a child. I couldn't trace my desire to write back to those very early years. I chose psychology for my degree because I wanted to find out about people's inner lives and how they were impacted by outside events. I went on to do a PhD and halfway through it, I had my first child. I then wrote a non-fiction book about childbirth experiences, which drew on stories told to me during my research – story-gathering was very much a part of my method. After my PhD I took a break and had another child before getting my first academic post, so you could say I was starting late with a lot of things.

My professional research career then moved towards looking at experiences of health care and services and mental health services in particular. The 'stories' that are told around mental health are interesting to me, they can help and hinder. There's a medical story and a social story and it is different and nuanced, what flows from that for people. In terms of my own experience, I would say I have been a person with psychological troubles to some extent since I was a child and I have been engaged with services myself at certain times.

What was it that made you start writing? Or what stopped you doing it before?

The genesis of my writing was in my own psychotherapy. As part of this, at one point I wrote down about ten or twelve words about my childhood. They were a list that felt like the beginning of a story. Then I wrote about 800 words of a novel (the same novel I have written now, though these words aren't in it) and there it stopped. It was about two years after that I began writing properly.

I was fifty by this time and I was thinking what do I want to do with my life? My children were grown up. I had that greater freedom from not being a day-to-day mother. Fifty was a very big landmark. I thought, well I might live to a hundred but I might not. My own mother died when she was 66. I had this story I wanted to tell and I knew I wasn't actually going to do it at the same time as having a demanding job. The timing coincided with redundancy. I had a period of mourning for the academic me once I had given up but I have made a clear break now.

Tell us about the inspiration for your novel.

I think some of the hesitancy about writing came from knowing where to start. You sometimes wonder where a story begins. If you are writing a story that draws partly on your own life, it might start with you as a foetus or with your mother or grandmother. My novel- *A Ton of Feathers* - starts when the character is eight, which meant I was drawing on some things I could actually remember.

I had seen an image of a mother and child in a painting by Marlene Dumas and there was something about the image that seemed all wrong when I looked at it. I was interested in this idea that there's a space between a mother and child that goes too close and in the other direction too distant. I became interested in where the line should be, and what it is like for a child when that line is crossed.

My book is about this and the more extreme end of 1970's alternative therapies and about how when a parent is very involved in these, it can impact on a child. I feel this is relatively new territory, to write about the specifics of this.

How much of your personal story appears in your fiction? What do you see as the relationship between fiction and memoir?

Writing fiction has given me the freedom to explore my experiences and feelings. For me, writing fiction solves the issue about what people want to say and at the same time are driven not to say. You can express both in it. Rebecca Solnit in The

Faraway Nearby, says 'Writing is saying to no one and everyone the thing it is not possible to say to someone.'

Fiction is all about trying to capture the emotional truth of characters and events. In my own work, some of the events are similar to those in my own past, others are not. I like to think it's for me to keep to myself which is which. I am faithful to what I want to say, not to what happened. That's what makes it fiction not memoir but the distinction is sometimes a blurred one because in both types of writing there is an inevitable gap between what is experienced and written.

Short or long form?

I'm gradually finding my way into the short story form. The story that will appear in *Wild and Precious Life* was originally inspired by an image of Ophelia in the National Gallery in a painting by Odilon Redon, it was different from other depictions, less passive. I wrote a story prompted by it for a competition, where it was commended but not placed. The story is about identity and madness and the redemptive power of art. Later, when I saw the call for the *Wild and Precious Life* anthology, I saw the fit with my story and I really loved the anthology's title, which definitely spoke to some of what I had felt during that watershed moment when I turned fifty.

Your writing will appear in an anthology about recovery. I wondered if writing had played a part in your recovery and if you could reflect on that.

Someone, I can't now remember who, said that we write what we need to know. So through the process of writing we discover.

In some contexts the word 'recovery' has been co-opted and misused, so I'm not that keen on it. It has for example, been used as a way of discharging people from services, so it's a bit problematic.

Giving up my previous academic life was part of me wanting me to be a happier healthier person. As my career had progressed, I felt life in universities changed and I had little time to think, a lot of constraints. I have definitely felt freed by creative writing by comparison.

Writing is in some ways therapeutic. It's one of the things that has played a role in me feeling better. But all writers acknowledge the downsides. You are isolated, you have no external routine, no colleagues, and the rejection is sometimes hard – especially when the rejection can feel like a rejection of your personal story, a part of you. The delving around in darker issues is also hard, it's not a straightforward positive catharsis. The first draft of my novel was painful to write in many ways, but in the process of editing, there's something like laying things to rest happening, not quite but perhaps this sense of making something easier. Writing is a way to find metaphors for things that are inexpressible in other ways, and for the processing of memories. Sharing your work with other people and being heard is also of value.

You need to be supported though. The writing workshop I attend has been incredibly supportive throughout because it's a small trusting group, mostly of people that have been in it a long time.

What does it mean for you to be an 'underrepresented' writer?

The concept of under-representation is complicated. The Creative Future award was rare in including mental health issues as one dimension of what might make a writer under-represented. A lot of others simply subsume it under a label of disability which is a label which may or may not feel right. All labels can be both helpful and problematic.

I am keen to avoid being seen primarily as a writer with mental health issues though. I am a writer just the same as any other, who is interested in certain themes. I don't want to over emphasise the barriers I have faced because of mental health issues, though they exist. I am quite a private person so I don't want to talk about my mental health in every author profile. I am proud of myself and of other people who have faced similar issues to me, so I don't want to downplay it either. I am still working it out.

Your writing fairy godmother appears with a few wishes to grant. What are you going to ask her for?

I want my book to be out in the world. How it gets there I am open about. If I don't find an agent, I will look for an independent publisher. I just want it to be read, it doesn't matter to some degree about numbers. It's just that I want someone to find something in it.

The readings from the *Wild and Precious Life* anthology, the stories I have heard so far, have been moving and brilliantly written. So we are looking forward to getting fully funded.

[@SadieNott](http://www.sadienott.com)

If you want to pledge to the Wild and Precious Life anthology please go to
<https://unbound.com/books/recovery/>