

La Passion Simple d'Annie Ernaux: Autofiction and Private Memories as Public Archives

My best friend, Nithi, and I have always shared our love for literature. From routine trips to the library as children to exchanging feminist non-fiction as adults, the books we collectively loved have defined our relationship and our lives. Last year, she introduced me to the work of French autofictionalist Annie Ernaux, whom we have since been obsessed with. Ernaux's sentiments and writing have resonated with us so deeply that we dubbed her our grandmother. As young women, experiencing the minor crises of our lives and gender, we found a relatable voice in Ernaux, though written and lived in a completely different time. Her eccentricities, wit, and raw emotionality felt like a mirror to ourselves. Seeing her navigate through her life—successfully or not—in the connective world of her body of work from two decades (and over) ago, both moved and comforted us. Whether she wrote of her childhood and discovering her love for literature, or her complicated relationship with her mother, or romantic misadventures, it seemed to us like she was speaking directly to us, having lived some version of what we are now living through. Like us, Ernaux has resonated with millions of readers of post-generations. I argue in this paper that autofiction, through the passage of memories from private to public, acts as a method of archiving personal pasts into cultural memory, facilitating what I'd like to call 'the grandmother effect.'

I define 'the grandmother effect' as the prosthetic connection felt towards a lifewriter from a previous generation that takes effect through the consumption of memorial literature, or literature acting as a site of memory (Nora 1989, 12; Livesay 2016, 11). Performing a textual analysis of Ernaux's 1991 novella *A Simple Passion*, I aim to show the role of first-person narration in the dual process of archivization and memory prosthesis through the use of 'I' as interchangeably archival and transpersonal.

Contemporary French writer Annie Ernaux was born in 1940 in Normandy and grew up in a working-class family ("Biography – Annie Ernaux," n.d.). While she only published

her first book, *Cleaned Out*, 34 years later¹, her work has reflected on her entire life— from her childhood and the shame of a working-class upbringing, her illegal abortion at 24, her many love affairs, to her complex, lifelong relationships with her parents (Ibid.). Her work is largely autobiographical and has been described as “autosociobiographical” as it blends self-reflection with reflections on the social milieu (“Annie Ernaux,” n.d.). She is one of the foremost women writers of our time as well as a pioneering autofictionalist. Her work explores themes of womanhood, class, relationships, and the urban landscape through the veil of Ernaux’s own memory and experiences and flows between genres (Hutton 1998, 231). In *Cleaned Out*, she wrote of a backstreet abortion she had had a decade prior, though from a fictional lens, and only wrote of it autobiographically many years later in *Happening* in 2000 (Ibid.). As Ernaux progressed as a writer, she brought more of herself into her writing, but her work has almost always been written from a first-person perspective. It is contested within her body of work which books can be considered autobiographical and which cannot, which categorizes her writing in the blended genre of autofiction, blending true reflections with fiction.

Autofiction was coined and classified as a section of writing by French writer and critic Serge Doubrovsky in 1977, defined by the blurring of lines in lifewriting and testing the boundaries of fact and fiction (Gibbons 2019, 121; Jordan 2013, 76, 82-83). Doubrovsky christened it the “postmodern version of autobiography,” which appropriately marks its departure from traditional autobiographical writing (Gibbons 2019, 121). Autobiography specialist Philippe Lejeune defined autobiography as “a prose account that a real person tells about his or her own life, when it emphasizes his or her individual life” (Lejeune 1975, 14; translated from French). Where autofiction strays from this is in the added “language of

¹ At the height of autofiction in France (Gibbons 2019, 121).

adventure,” fictional additions and omissions from the ‘objective truth’ for the sake of the story (Gibbons 2019, 121). The freedom of fictive elements, through “autofictional distancing,” allows for a better expression of negative or painful memories and subsequently the production of a subjective truth (Baronian 2010, 206; Gibbons 2019, 121; Jordan 2013, 76; Smith and Watson 2021, 18-19). In this subjective and selectively fictional presentation of the self, the protagonist— or the ‘I’ figure— becomes “a version of [the self] that exists only in the text” (Douglas 2015, 55). This further creates autofictional distancing, allowing the author to express unrestricted vulnerability, secrecy, and privacy, which translates affectively (Baronian 2010, 207; Jordan 2013, 84). In return, the reader/s, by becoming privy to such personal vulnerabilities, is as intimately involved in this reflection as the author speaks with “autorité inouïe” (unheard-of authority) and “force illocutoire” (illocutionary force) (Jordan 2013, 79). In the years since the formation and popularization of the genre in France, it has become globally popular (Gibbons 2019, 121). Ernaux’s writing too has received global popularity after the translation of her books into English and reached a new generation of readers, especially since receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature. She was awarded this honor in 2022, for her unique contributions to the field and “for the courage and clinical acuity with which she uncovers the roots, estrangements, and collective restraints of personal memory” (“The Nobel Prize in Literature 2022”). In her unique style of blending the deeply personal and fictional using “memory [as her] instrument and... time [as her] material,” Ernaux is able to talk of social taboos like her affairs and her abortion (Louisiana Channel 2023).

Temporality is an essential part of Ernaux’s writing, where it feels at once both recollective and presently experienced, using writing as a method of memory preservation (Ibid.). Her books act as the textual capturing of representational memory, posited by philosopher Henri Bergson as the recording of events as they occur, but whose recollection

must be done imaginatively (Bergson 1896, 81). The body of her work, capturing events past and present from her life, guided by her memories and references to the diaries she maintained while living them, acts as an interconnected personal archive up for public access (Smith and Watson 2021, 28). While some of her works are written from the moment she's living them until after, some are written decades later— in both cases, we see a hankering for the past. There is a noticeable theme of imminent ruin or a ruin long occurred, and a desperate yearning for the preservation of the memory before it turns into mere ruin.

We see Ernaux employ this need to preserve a fragment of her memory in her 1991 autofictional novella, *Simple Passion*, detailing her passionate love affair with a married man and her own feelings and desire for him. *Simple Passion* is one of many of her books written on her romantic relationships and features brutally vulnerable writing from an intimately personal perspective. The book is written two months after a period of separation from the man, anonymized as “A” in the book, while she is plagued by his memories. Brought on by a recollection of him prompted by looking at a bathrobe he once wore, she writes, “when I began to write, I wanted to stay in that age of passion... By writing this, I may also be wanting to save the bathrobe from oblivion,” later adding “this book is only the remainder...” (Ernaux 1991, 47, 53). The purpose of writing this is to memorialize this affair that would otherwise remain at the level of abstract feelings or reminders embedded in other material objects, like the bathrobe. The textual preservation of memories allows her to revisit these memories, *re-reflect*, and even interpret them alternatively (Smith and Watson 2021, 24).

Autobiography scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson say that life-writing becomes an affective archival imaginary in the mediation of experience as “subjective truth” and reflective self-inquiry (Smith and Watson 2021, 18-19, 28). Her intimate yet mundane narration of her feelings embeds her exact feelings through lines such as

“In the course of conversation, the only subjects that escaped my indifference were those related to this man...” (Ernaux 1991, 4-5)

“As soon as he left, I would be overcome by a wave of fatigue.” (Ibid, 9)

“I shall probably never see him again... I didn’t care if I lived or died.” (Ibid. 39)

Written in both past and present tense, there is also no temporal cohesion, rather creating temporal disparity of a ““then” and a ““now” generated within a single text.”” and emphasizing its archive effect (Baron 2013, 18, 22). Such first-hand descriptions spoken through this “I” – the “archiving ‘I’” – cement her memories into a proper, archival text and at the same time allow the addition of extratextual engagement with her memories through their archivization (Baron 2013, 22). Through this archivization, these intimate thoughts and memories take on archival affect as well, in the emotional response that could be generated towards her words, words that are based on her own feelings, even if fictionalized (Baron 2013, 21). Through the freedom of minor fictionalization and “language of adventure,” Ernaux is able to express such dramatic thoughts as “I didn’t care if I lived or died,” allowing her to express utmost vulnerability and thus also generate an equal level of affect from us, to the extent of feeling kinship with her. As she expresses such thoughts which could not be shared with people in her life – “I feared I would also be considered abnormal if I had said: “I’m having a passionate love affair.”” – we, as readers, feel a deep sense of intimacy, connection, and resonance with her (Ernaux 1991, 13).

As she engages and re-engages with her memories, *Simple Passion* exists not as a “static repository” but a dynamic one (Smith and Watson 2021, 37). By presenting this subjective memorialization of the affair to a public, she also lets us in on the process of dynamic remembering – “these pages will always mean something to me, to others too maybe, whereas the bathrobe – which only matters to me – will lose all significance one day

and will be added to a bundle of rags.” (Ernaux 1991, 47). By capturing her memories into a public archive, she ensures their eternal existence in cultural memory. In the transference of memories into writing, the ‘I’ in *Simple Passion* is both witness and performer, but then the archival “passage from private to the public,” also allows the ‘I’ to become transpersonal, allowing us as readers to project ourselves onto her feelings and memories, adding an extratextual, public, cultural experience to her personal, archived memories (Baron 2013, 22; Derrida 1995, 3; Jordan 2013, 82).

In the 1990s, women lifewriters were still “censored both ideologically and aesthetically” (Lejeune 1993, 131). Such documentation of women’s lives exists otherwise only as fragmentary memorabilia, personal diaries, and oral history (Smith and Watson 2021, 17-19). Thus, *Simple Passion* is a powerful, feminist archive of taboo feelings. Now, 30-plus years later, the world has caught up to her, and the readership for such writing is larger than ever. Ernaux’s writing has found a large audience in young women who seek to find literature that mirrors their feelings and helps them navigate through it (Fig. 1, 2).



Fig 1. “Girls when they see their unexplainable, complicated feelings in literature” Pinterest. <https://in.pinterest.com/pin/9148005520919128/>.



Fig 2. “Therapy is nice. But...” Pinterest.
<https://in.pinterest.com/pin/165788830026134264/>.

Young women express their appreciation and empathy for Ernaux, and specifically *Simple Passion*, online. One Twitter user said, ““when I was among other women, at the supermarket checkout or at the bank, I wondered whether they too were wrapped up in a man.” I want to give Annie Ernaux the biggest hug” (@alexandrredumas 2025). Another expressed feeling kinship to her, saying “happy mother's day elena ferrante annie ernaux my mother gilka machado florbel espanca cate blanchett jessie ware suene my sister & all the women i love and are mother figures to me” (@lispectareii 2025; translated from Portuguese). Another tweeted, “After finishing reading *Simple Passion* by Annie Ernaux, I feel as if all my thoughts had been read and expressed in such correct and precise words.” (@chxcolistofresa 2025; translated from French). This, precisely, is what I call the grandmother effect, the ability of this textual, affective archive of one woman’s memories to resonate with readers regardless of temporal context, so many generations after. Similar to Stephan Feuchtwang’s concept of “haunting memory,” this relates us to memories that feel like our own through kinship and intimate interaction with those whose memories they are (2014, 271-274).

The transpersonal ‘I’ allows for a transference of self onto the memories of Ernaux, pushing us to relive unlived memories. In her Nobel speech, she says “...the desire to use the

‘I’ – a form both masculine and feminine – as an exploratory tool that captures sensations: those which memory has buried, those which the world around us keeps on giving, everywhere and all the time... if the ‘I’ of the book becomes transparent, in a sense, and the ‘I’ of the reader comes to occupy it. If this ‘I’, to put it another way, becomes transpersonal.” (Ernaux 2023, 20-21). Thus, Ernaux’s process of archiving this affair, or any of the events in her life and their memories, goes beyond just preserving the memories but in co-creating a space to process such complex emotions. Autofiction as archive is “iterative, interactive, intersubjective” (Smith and Watson 2020, 11).

By embedding this dying/dead memory in a public experience, what would otherwise exist perhaps only as oral history in her immediate circle, now exists in our cultural memory as affective archive. As we live through the years that Ernaux has experienced, generations before us, Nithi and I, like many other young women, use her books as a prosthetic version of wisdom from our ancestors, palimpsestically embedding our own memories onto hers as we grow.

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