

How to Knit a Human – Artist Talk

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Abstract

My work 'How to Knit a Human – the Interactive version' draws on the themes present in *Everywhen*, where the past, present, and future are living together in one point of time. For example, I use Twine to create a 'choose-your-own-adventure' for the reader, where multiple choices are representative of the different possibilities that existed in my memory(loss) after forced Electroconvulsive Therapy treatments in 2011. The pathways the reader can take represent the inconsistencies of memory from the severe episode of psychosis I experienced, and these forced Electroconvulsive Therapy treatments. My work also responds to the sub-theme 'Resilient Stories' and my act of storytelling challenges existing paradigms through its non-linear and branching timeline. Acknowledging artistic works that psychiatric survivors create through transmedial or cross-arts storytelling as a way of new knowledge production and as new ways of knowing, will help bring the voices of 'mad' people to the forefront. Storytelling through transmedial and cross-arts forms such as electronic literature creates more conditions for the reader to become immersed in the text from the perspective of the person with experiential knowledge. Our narratives can then create the foundation work for better understanding by others.

Keywords

Non-linear Narratives, Interactive Storytelling, Memory, Resilient Storytelling.

Introduction

The impetus for this project was to write of the splintering of my memory and self after psychosis in 2011. I had two selves – part one: before the madness, and part two: after the madness. The madness itself is a void that has no memory and I have had to knit and braid myself around its form. I began a process of understanding and an attempt at reclamation and agency of my experience and weaving the memories that I did have around the gaps of memories that I had lost. There was no one way to try this, except through knitting and assemblage with words and art. 'How to Knit a Human – the Interactive Version' was created with choice-based digital storytelling, through the Twine platform. The creative process for the interactive version began with my adaptation of my memoir manuscript. As I

developed this piece of electronic literature, I incorporated the visual along with the text, creating my own animations, drawings, and scans for an immersive experience. The reader can engage in these parts of my story and actively participate in the losing and regaining of agency through my narrative perspective, to gain a better understanding of my experience. As a result, this work could also benefit mental health professionals as an important resource, to empathise with one example of a patient's journey through the psychiatric hospital system. Through the digital form, I allowed my experience to travel beyond what a traditional text can do by utilising multiple choices that link to different alternatives and possibilities that exist in my memory. By taking power in my own valuable lived experience, I aim to reduce the stigma in wider society, and institutions.

Transmedial storytelling incorporates engagement with cross-media genres and art forms. As a psychiatric survivor, I am representing my story with agency, and the transmedial mode helps to forge connections and generate conditions for empathy. This transmedial approach has the capacity not only to express the lived experience of a diversity of writers and artists of other mediums but enables the sharing of stories with readers in new and engaging ways. It is only when institutions and society listen to this diversity, not just through literary forms of storytelling, but through transmedial approaches, that stigma is reduced in medicine and education. The significance of transmedial modes is important to recognise, as this form allows for greater diversity and flexibility when explored by survivors and patients because of its interdisciplinary approach. I acknowledge my voice is only one voice, and encourage more survivors if they so wish, to share their lived experiences and experiment with transmedial narrative on their own terms. As a result, not only will individuals continue to find expression for their experiences in powerful ways, but we will also regain agency for our own narratives through this diverse storytelling form.

Reflection

Focusing on my braided memoir manuscript, I compare this to my experience of creating the shorter *Twine* version, which focuses on one timeline—my split self from 2011. At the beginning of my PhD, in February 2020, I had planned to travel back to Melbourne, the place of my unravelling, and write of my experience and journey there. However, I soon realised the larger focus of my memoir was on the structural element of braiding my selves back together and did not have to end with a trip to Melbourne. The reason for writing my memoir is twofold: agency for my self and providing representation and encouragement for others to share their stories. My hospitalisation, psychosis, and memory loss in 2011 was a complete loss of agency and control. Writing my memoir gives me back my sense of agency and control and lets me reclaim my story and selves as a whole: a braid of the different types of losing, and gaining, of control and agency.

Braided Structure

Early in my writing I had produced 24 000 words of my creative work and had several concerns. Writing the chapters out as dot points in an Excel chart made me realise how choppy the structure was in terms of timelines. I was changing too quickly between scenes and spending barely a page on each timeline—the scenes from the past were more like poetry vignettes than creative nonfiction prose. I also needed to make my writing more accessible for the reader. In the first draft of my memoir, I had initially started with a spring-cleaning scene. I didn't want this to be a metaphor for the book, and so I decided to choose a metaphor and structure that best represented my experience. I used the detective structure to open with the memory-loss as the 'murder' of my self. This way, I could represent my own experience of piecing my self back together with clues. Waking up in hospital was where this self began, and so I decided to start with that scene, rather than tell my story in a chronological order because the chronological order does not represent my experience.

The possible structural shapes I considered were:

- A branch, with past and present leaves branching off—either chronologically or organically
- A wave effect, washing from present to past to present to past.
- A braid: one strand for each of my three time-line selves, braided into one whole.

By visualising the structure of my memoir to determine what the core of the story was about, this helped me 'see' the structure and form I wanted. I did this by creating an animation and I felt I could then tackle the writing by

progressing the story through braiding my selves. However, at first when I began writing from the perspective of these selves, timelines, and cities, the memories that existed in the past appeared more evocative and descriptive. The memories from the present day, however, were more of an account and diary-like. I wanted both voices to be evocative, and so had to work harder at the 'After' self to achieve this feeling of evocation.

I created an Excel spreadsheet of the main plot points and colour coded the timelines based on my selves. I experimented with different orders by moving the blocks in the spreadsheet and within the manuscript to make sure I wasn't moving too quickly between timelines. This process also helped create a sense of balance between the selves throughout and I began to see visually how this could be improved. Blue represented my split self, yellow represented my 'After' self, and the red represented my 'Before' self.

I utilised more narrative and descriptive techniques and created more flow between each sequence. The final structure replicates the closest I could reach to how I perceived the events and my memory during this time. For instance, when I came out of hospital, I was continually trying to find memories from my 'Before' self and it wasn't until later that I remembered my Melbourne trip. The weaving of these selves is therefore important in telling my story for how form aligns with memory, and this final structure most closely resembles the way I remembered my own narrative and story.

Memory

Memory and place strengthen the metaphor of split selves. My original plan was to revisit Melbourne when the travel restrictions lifted and document my experience in the final chapters. My memory loss from my time in Melbourne gradually came back with the aid of my diary entries from 2011, however I did not know what other memories returning to this place would bring. Therefore, I thought my explorations of memory would add to the complexity and depth of split selves, and how these selves can be portrayed in complex ways through creative nonfiction. However, due to the pandemic this was not possible, and I have since realised that going back to the place I first became unwell, while it would have been an interesting exercise, would not necessarily help me or my story.

I recognise that recovery oscillates. I started writing as soon as I was released from hospital, while still experiencing residual effects from psychosis and memory loss from ECT treatments. My experience of hospitalisation was extremely negative regarding the hospital staff and the lack of agency. It is because I have recovered from psychosis that I am able to add my voice to literature and scholarship. I felt like I had

no memory and no self when I was mad, and therefore, it was as though I did not exist during this time. I have no desire to return to this state and my memoir is an attempt to recognise these fears, while braiding my self back together, giving myself agency, and encouraging others to share their stories.

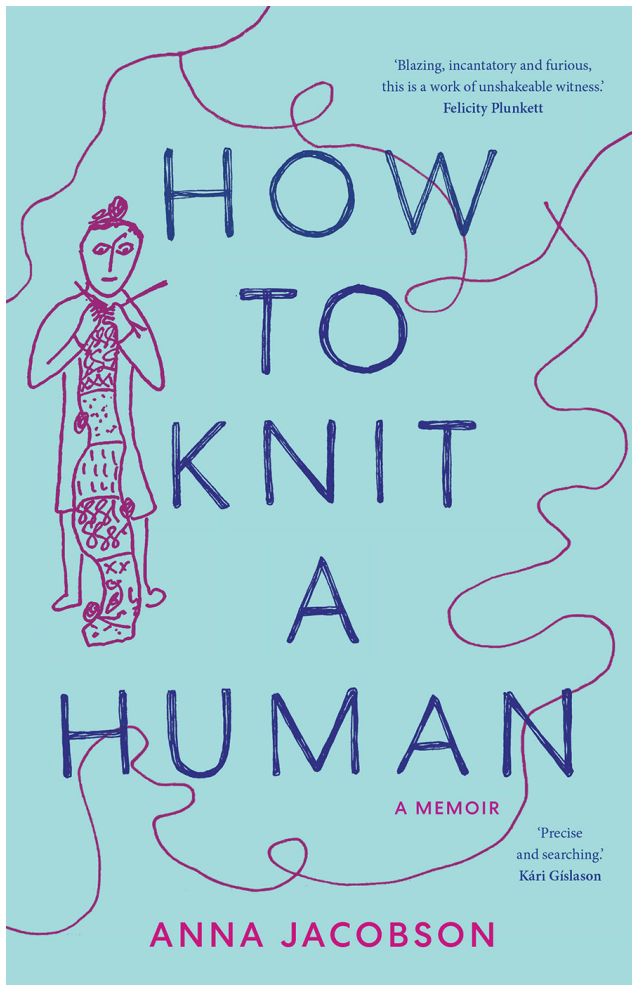


Figure 1. Book cover of *How to Knit a Human*, NewSouth, 2024 ©Illustrations Anna Jacobson

The creative process for ‘How to Knit a Human’ (the interactive memoir) began with my adaptation of my unpublished memoir manuscript, which has since been published as a book by NewSouth in 2024 (see Figure 1). As I was adapting my own memoir into an interactive work, this was interesting as an investigation into the differences between the two forms. I discovered my selves both branch off and merge in the interactive form, however these selves are firmly separated in the manuscript in terms of braiding distinct character and memory arcs across several timelines.

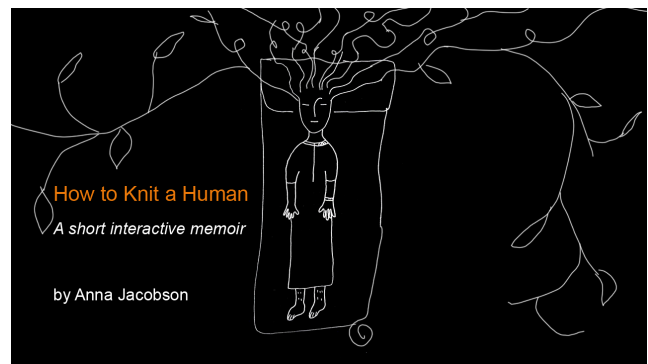


Figure 2. The opening image of *How to Knit a Human* – the Interactive Version, 2021 ©Anna Jacobson

‘How to Knit a Human’ opens with an animation of a girl lying in a hospital bed, her hair growing out and curling around her like a forest (see Figure 2). The story branches from here and coils back on itself in parts as the reader/player makes their choices. My questionings in memory open alternate pathways for the reader to follow and engage with. Throughout the interactive mode of ‘How to Knit a Human’ I created inventories of the objects I found in my hospital bag and the women I remembered on my ward. The creation of the interactive text was liberating and reveals the flexibility of this different form, which allowed me to include as many images as necessary and create animated GIFs. The interactive storytelling lets the reader explore and gain more knowledge through further readings and retellings.

In my interactive ‘How to Knit a Human’, no matter which choice the reader makes, the player is still pushed towards the continuation of the story. I opened the text into choices the reader can make – choices that exist for me as questionings in my memory. The reason I give choices and alternatives in the interactive version and do not meditate on the possible choices in my literary manuscript is because when I woke up in hospital, there seemed a set of definite events by me as a character. It was only my future self that began to realise the alternatives.

My experience with memory loss is exemplified in the interactive form through its choice-branching storytelling mode. Mapping out these choices in the user-back-end of the Twine interface made it easier for me to see how the narrative branched out. As a writer and artist, I can provide juxtaposition and play poetically between text and image and have these displayed online. I scanned pages from my visual diary and created a digital version that the reader could flick through as clues to my experiential knowledge. The reader is taken through my hospital experience, psychiatrist appointments and meetings with my case manager. The reader can immerse themselves in these parts of my story and participate in the losing and regaining of

agency through my narrative perspective, to gain a better understanding of my experience. I have made my transmedial browser-based creative work *How to Knit a Human* freely available in the 'projects' section of my website: www.annajacobson.com.au.

Conclusion

I went from needing memory games for my recovery in 2011, to creating my own interactive choice-based text in 2020 that demonstrated my experience of memory loss. Through this transmedial form, I allowed my experience to travel beyond what a literary text can do by utilising multiple choices that link to different alternatives and possibilities that exist in my memory. This is not to say that interactive works are better than traditional literary texts; however, I do argue that cross-arts forms and non-linear storytelling can provide a method for giving voice to a wider range of survivor experiences that can bring about a shift in questioning, growth, and inclusivity.

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Author Biography

Anna Jacobson is an award-winning writer and artist from Meanjin (Brisbane). Anna's memoir *How to Knit a Human* was published with NewSouth in 2024. *Amnesia Findings* (UQP, 2019), her first full-length poetry collection, won the 2018 Thomas Shapcott Poetry Prize. Her second illustrated poetry collection is *Anxious in a Sweet Store* (Upswell, 2023). She was awarded the 2023 Fryer Library Fellowship and was the recipient of the Nillumbik Prize for Contemporary Writing, a Queensland Writers Fellowship, and a Queensland Premier's Young Publishers and Writers Award. Anna was shortlisted in the 2022 Poetry and Digital Innovation Categories in the Woollahra Digital Literary Award. Her highest qualification is a Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Writing from QUT (2023). She was a finalist in the 65th Blake Art Prize, 2019 Marie Ellis OAM Prize for Drawing and 2009 Olive Cotton Award for Photographic Portraiture. Her website is www.annajacobson.com.au