

# Over the wall ...

**Alan Maley examines the wonders of memory and the terrors of forgetting.**

**M**emory, along with its twin, consciousness, is one of the 'hard' problems of the cognitive sciences, according to Susan Blackmore. And forgetting, along with obesity, is one of the epidemics facing all so-called 'developed' societies. So there are plenty of reasons why we might be interested in how things enter and leave our memories. There are, of course, many earlier, classic studies of memory. Sir Frederic Bartlett's *Remembering: A Study in Experimental Psychology*, which showed how schemata are built up and how we actively construct (and distort) memories, remains a highly clear and readable study. And Alan Baddeley's *Your Memory: A User's Guide* offers a standard and informative introduction to the subject.

## Speak, Memory

Vladimir Nabokov's autobiographical *Speak, Memory* covers his life in pre-Soviet Russia as the privileged child of a member of the land-owning aristocracy from 1900 to 1919 (Chapters 1–12), and his life in exile in Cambridge, Berlin, Paris, etc in the 1920s and 30s (Chapters 13–15). It is remarkable for at least two reasons. He writes brilliantly, sensitively and eccentrically in an adopted language. And he appears to be cursed with the fate

of total recall. We are treated to an endless succession of relatives, governesses, tutors, houses, country estates, landscapes, objects, events and sense impressions recounted in relentless detail. It is reminiscent of Funes, the Memorious in Jorge Luis Borges' story – a man fated to recall everything he has ever seen, and unable ever to forget it. Or of 'S', the subject of Alexander Luria's classic, *The Mind of a Mnemonist*. Nabokov's prose is like an Aladdin's cave, stuffed with jewels of sensory impressions (he is a synaesthete, which may help to explain the vividness of his visual, auditory, olfactory and other descriptions). This avalanche of memories raises the question of whether these are true memories or constructed ones. (As Frank Kermode reminds us, 'memory invents a past'.) It also prompts us to wonder whether a degree of forgetfulness or selectivity might not be an advantage! Whatever the case, Nabokov succeeds in resuscitating a world and a society long lost, with a wealth of moving impressions of childhood and exile.

## Memory: An Anthology

For a wide-ranging collection of writings on all aspects of memory, it would be hard to beat *Memory: An Anthology*, edited by Harriet Harvey Wood and A S

Byatt. Part I comprises nine, mostly specially-commissioned pieces, ranging from literature through science and evolution to a history of memory studies. The most interesting of these are Frank Kermode's 'Palaces of memory', Ulric Neisser on the unreliability of memory and Richard Holmes' 'A meander through memory and forgetting'. Unfortunately, this section is marred by a couple of self-consciously pretentious pieces, which contribute nothing of value.

Part II is both more varied and more interesting, in my view – an anthology with sections on *Memory and Childhood*; *The Idea of Memory* (what people have thought it was, from Plato onwards); *The Art of Memory* (covering aspects of mnemonics and outstanding instances of memorisation); *Memory and Science* (from the 17th to the 21st century); *Memory and Imagination* (including both literature and psychoanalysis); *False Memories* (including the obliteration of memory and the re-writing of history, and the power of the media to implant memories in the public mind); and *Forgetting*. This section ends with Billy Collins' evocative poem *Forgetfulness*.

The main criticism I would make of this collection is that it has attempted too much. The corresponding advantage, however, is that it covers virtually all aspects of memory: voluntary and

involuntary, personal and public, episodic and semantic, short-term and long-term, eidetic and haptic, unreliable and manipulated, retrospective and prospective, remembering and forgetting, conscious and unconscious, digital and human.

### **The Forgetting: Understanding Alzheimer's – A Biography of a Disease**

This book, by David Shenk, is essential reading for anyone wanting to understand more about what Alzheimer's disease is, how medical science has attempted to deal with it (so far, unsuccessfully) and what its implications are for those who suffer from it, for those who end up caring for them, and for society as a whole. It is in three parts: Part I Early Stage, Part II Middle Stage and Part III End Stage. These stages refer to two different aspects of Alzheimer's: the slow evolution of scientific understanding of it as a distinct disease (rather than regarding dementia as an inevitable consequence of ageing), together with the so-far fruitless search for a cure; and the description of the stages through which the disease passes – the way *'Alzheimer's drifts from one stage to the next in a slow haze'*.

What emerges is a disease which is difficult to diagnose, especially in the early stages, and which has no known cure. It is devastating for all who come into contact with it, especially the care givers. And it is likely to become the number one drain on public health funding: as the population ages, so there are larger numbers of people liable to contract it. And as the condition can last for up to 20 years (compared with around five years for cancer), expenditure is likely to rise even more sharply. The stages of 'reverse childhood' listed on pages 122–3 are terrifying, as the patient regresses inexorably back to infantile helplessness and eventual death.

The author raises some interesting questions about our Faustian bargain with technology. Will our dependence on electronic memory further weaken our capacity to use our own memories and thus hasten the onset of dementia? Will our obsession with prolonging human life, our pursuit of 'the death of death', be self-defeating, simply creating more problems in what Edward Tenner terms an ultimate *'revenge effect'*? Do we want perfect memories and endless lives? Shenk has an unusual suggestion for a

long-term strategy for coping with Alzheimer's, based on the courageous self-observation of an Alzheimer's sufferer, Morris Friedell. He suggests that the disease may in fact enhance our experience of life through its creation of a constant present moment. He speaks of *'not ... beating this disease with brain exercises, but about minimizing and slowing the cognitive loss by adapting to it'*. While this is poor consolation for anyone suffering from the condition, in the absence of a definitive cure it may be the best that can be hoped for.

### **Forget to Remember**

In *Forget to Remember* (in the *Cambridge Readers* series) I offer a fictional account which focuses on the corrosive effects of Alzheimer's on the fabric of family relationships. The story shows how two sisters, one poor, the other well-off, deal very differently with their mother's rapidly deteriorating condition. The story also shows how, even in cases where dementia is well-developed, there are also moments of lucidity, human love and humour. Hopefully, the storyline is interesting enough in itself, but it could also spark some lively discussion about how society copes, or fails to cope, with the scourge of dementia.




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### **Age-Proof Your Brain**

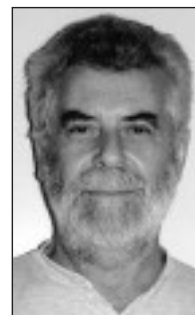
Finally, for those worried that ageing may be eroding their memories, Tony Buzan (inventor of mind-mapping) offers a programme of activities designed to sharpen up both memory and creativity. Like most self-help books, there is a degree of hype which not everyone will find congenial. But the main message of the book is that our brains do not inevitably deteriorate with age, and that the human brain is infinitely flexible and malleable. It is, therefore, in our interests to look after it properly: *'This is your brain: use it or lose it'* is the message. The techniques are familiar enough, such as mnemonics, mind-mapping, patterning and chunking, but he has

attempted to address different aspects of memory – episodic and semantic, short-term and long-term, etc – in a systematic way. There are also useful sections on diet and exercise as necessary complements to the memory exercises.



As human beings, we are constituted by our memories. As Luis Buñuel said, *'Life without memory is no life at all ... Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing.'* As teachers of language, we are concerned with a more restricted sense of memory, yet one which is crucial to the learning of a language. The problem of making memorisation enjoyable is one we have yet to solve adequately. The books reviewed in this article, therefore, speak to us both as human beings and as teachers (and learners!). 

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Luria, A R *The Mind of a Mnemonist* Harvard University Press 1968  
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