



# Private lives

*Why we keep diaries*

BY JEANNE SCHINTO

I found a small maroon leather-bound diary in a secondhand shop on Broadway in Lawrence. The neatly inked entry for Wednesday, March 18, 1936, which begins with the words "Raining like hell," says: "At last the day has come and school is over for a spell, although a short one. I had two exams, one in French and the other in geometry. I did pretty well in the French, but I'm not too proud of the geometry. There is a *bare* chance of passing. Mother and Dad came up at about one o'clock, and we went into Boston. We had lunch at the Dutchland, and then mother and I went to the 'Met' to see Louis Armstrong and some picture. He was wonderful, although he must be a bit kookoo. He went through the most amazing actions. He sure is plenty fast. Mother was amazed. We drove home in the worst rain that I have ever seen. All that we could get on the radio was flood news. I am so sick of this flood that I could yell. There are plenty of cities buried."

If Boston was one of the cities submerged, this fact is nowhere else recorded in annals. How lucky we are to have this one eyewitness account. The diary is No. 5166, printed by the National Blank Book Company in Holyoke. It's signed Richard Osborn Jr., and from reading Osborn's faithful longhand report for 1936, I guessed that he had been a student at Phillips Academy in Andover at the time. I called Andover recently to check. He graduated in 1937, the alumni office told me, and began to give me his New York City address, then stopped: He had died in December 1981, leaving no spouse or other family record.

The diary cost me 50 cents. A fair price? It depends on how you feel about diaries, journals, notebooks, or "periodic life writings," to use the catchall phrase coined by Margo Culley, professor of English at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and editor of *A Day at a Time*, a book of excerpts from women's diaries. I have been a diary keeper for 27 years —

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Illustration by Jan Sawka

that is, since I was 8. Am I boasting or confessing? Once again, it depends on your point of view.

I wasn't sure of my feelings toward diaries, mine or anybody else's, until recently. The fact that I've kept a diary all these years is irrelevant. (I've also been a nail biter for just as long — that doesn't mean I like it.) I was particularly appalled by the earliest volumes that have survived, starting with one written at age 12. I had certainly contemplated chucking the lot of them, but something, half egotistical, half masochistic, always stopped me. Then, five years ago this September, a query in the back pages of the *New York Times Book Review* led me and my "girlhood diaries" — 12 volumes written between 1963 and 1971 — to a library at Radcliffe College.

Joan Jacobs Brumberg, then a fellow at the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History, at Harvard, had placed the ad. She was seeking diaries written by girls aged 13 to 21, in the years 1850 to the present. I wrote her, and she asked me to send photocopies of two volumes of my diaries.

Flattered, I sent them. She next urged that I donate these

and my other girlhood books to the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America. I was flattered again, but, at the same time, I shrank back. Letting a scholar look at these diaries and agreeing to my anonymity in anything Brumberg might write were one thing; putting them on a library shelf was quite another. Unsure of what value they had to me, I became unsure of the value the library was placing on them and what anybody reading them would make of them.

Nervously I thumbed through the books. Some items charmed me: September 13, 1964, for example: "*A Hard Day's Night* two more times. That makes five." Other times I snapped a volume shut in disgust, having encountered the copious leavings of a 13-year-old in the throes of such an apparent identity crisis that she had signed herself this many different ways in one three-month period: Baldy (after a haircut), Gladness, Bundle of Nerves, Amp & Pickup, The Poet, DO RE MI FA SOL, Puzzled, Glad Bug, The Journalist, ???, The Heathen, A Heartless One, The Pirate, The Blimp, Leaf Foliage, The Brain, The

Studious Type, Dumb Dreamer, Greenhorn, The Cosmopolitan, No Talent, The Scientist, The Photographer, A Happy Kid, Lead Guitarist To Be, A Sleepy Bug, Miss X, Confused, Puff (The Magic Dragon), George Harrison, and White Christmas Lover.

Why had I *written down* all the stuff that accompanies those appellations? Why does anybody? And what worth do these or anybody's diaries actually have? I've discovered there is no simple answer to any of these questions, which must take into account at least some of the whole long tradition of our diary-keeping ways.

**I** never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read on the train.

— Gwendolen Fairfax to Cecily Cardew, in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*

In the book *I Touch the Future . . . The Story of Christa McAuliffe*, biographer Robert T. Hohler uses McAuliffe's proposed plan to keep a diary of her six-day journey into space as evidence that McAuliffe was the "girl next door." He was thinking of diaries in strictly modern terms. In the 1950s, when McAuliffe was growing up, girls kept diaries that locked; they were a place to hide away secrets and talk about oneself. McAuliffe's space diary, however, if tragedy hadn't struck, would have been a very public one, following a far older, and strikingly different, tradition.

Many of our diary-keeping ancestors in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries wrote knowing full well that their words would be read by friends, family, and future generations. That was their intent. These diarists acted as family and community historians, recording births, deaths, illnesses, visits, marriages, and "the unusual occurrences that made up the fabric of their lives," Culley, the UMass professor, writes in the introduction to her diary anthology.

Like McAuliffe's biographer, many of us tend to think of diarists as primarily girls and women, but this, too, is a modern trend. Annotated bibliographies of American diaries kept up until the Civil War show fewer than 10 percent written by women. Of course, this figure may not accurately reflect who actually kept diaries: It shows only which ones were preserved by families, historians, and archivists, and as feminists (including Culley) speculate, men's diaries may have been more highly regarded and so considered more worthy of preservation. Culley also notes, however, as does Joan Jacobs Brumberg, now director of women's studies at Cornell, that literacy and leisure were prerequisites to the diary-keeping habit. And neither of these was readily available to many women of generations past.

Travel journals, those public documents kept and shared upon a traveler's return — early-day snapshots in words (something McAuliffe's diary would have been for the citizenry in these still-young years of space travel) — were largely men's work, because men were the ones who did most of the traveling. We have the impression that American families made the quintessential American journey westward in covered wagons, but a closer look at that population reveals a predomination of men. And so more often than not it was men keeping journals of those frontier treks and sending them back to relatives when the trip was complete.

Andrew Gordon kept one. A young man from

Memphis, he had joined three women, six children, and 52 men starting out for California from St. Joseph, Missouri, on April 30, 1894. Ten weeks into the 2,000-mile pull, on July 12, he wrote, "I wish I could never hear the word lousy again. I am willing to bet that Tommy Plunket uses it fifty times a day, but he is no worse than the others. It is 'lousy' this and 'lousy' that. The rain is lousy, the trail is lousy, the bacon is lousy, some of the drivers are lousy, and Gus Thorpe, losing in the card game, has just said that he has had a lousy deal. Sometimes I think that I am going on a long journey with a traveling insane asylum, and that I am crazy myself. The thought of California still far away makes me want to puke."

Gordon, whose diary excerpts were included in *A Treasury of the World's Great Diaries*, edited by Philip Dunaway and Mel Evans and published by Doubleday, seems to have strayed from reporting on scenery and conditions to the modern mode of venting frustrations; this, like the diarist's habit of secrecy and preoccupation with "self," is a fairly new phenomenon.

I say "fairly" because one of the most treasureable diarists of all, England's Samuel Pepys — called "the Shakespeare of diarists" — confounds all generalizations. Writing 3,000 pages covering the years 1660-69, Pepys (pronounced "peeps") gave us not a bloodless public record, not a flavorless, plotless tome, but a picture so vivid it seems to move, starring himself as hero, sometimes antihero — eating, drinking, dancing, singing, coupling with his wife and others. Pouting his thickish lips, one chin resting on the pouch of his other, red ringlets draping his

shoulders, he possessed that rare ability to choose the perfect detail for illuminating a whole scene as well as his own state of mind. This from August 18, 1667, for example:

"... Walked towards White Hall, but, being wearied, turned into St. Dunstan's Church, where I heard an able sermon of the minister of the place; and stood by a pretty, modest maid, whom I did labour to take by the hand and the body; but she would not, but got further and further from me; and, at last I could perceive her to take pins out of her pocket to prick me if I should touch her again."

Why did Pepys keep *his* diary? "Did he know in his heart of hearts that it would become one of the great books of our language?" asks one of his biographers, Richard Ollard. "Perhaps he did. But there is no evidence of it." Ollard, in *Pepys: A Biography*, reminds us that the diary was written "under strictest secrecy." Part shorthand, part phrases in "dog-Latin" and French, the volumes lay entirely unread — in fact, undeciphered — in the library of Pepys' alma mater, Magdalene College, Cambridge, until the 19th century. None of it was published until 1825.

If Pepys had been an ordinary man instead of the extraordinary one his diaries proved him to be, he might have done the usual thing for someone of his background. As a Puritan, that is, he might have sooner kept a *spiritual* record, a charting of his soul's progress toward salvation, instead of noting whether his wife wasn't wearing "drawers" (possible evidence that she was being unfaithful to him), the cost of periwigs, good laxative recipes, et cetera.

Diary keeping as a spiritual exercise has a long history. It's an important phenomenon, es-

pecially in the history of women's diary-keeping motives. In the 19th century, as part of the evangelical Christian movement, diaries were kept as spiritual records mainly by women.

By century's end, women began to catch up with and finally overtake men as the more prodigious diarists of all kinds. Victorian women, for example, may not have had the temperatures of their religious fevers to take, but they did keep many more diaries than their husbands did. Men may have kept the records when they were public ones, but now the "proper" tone of the diary was emotive, the "proper" content introspective. What had dictated these changes?

Freud's discovery of the unconscious, for one thing. Romanticism, its seeds sown in the 18th century, was another. But why did changing perceptions of "self" manifest themselves in the "feminization" of diary keeping? Were women considered better suited than men to this "inward" activity? And were they? Whatever the answers, it soon became fashionable for women to bare all to their diaries. Victorian etiquette books began to include "how-to" material about keeping a diary "right." The genteel "Dear Diary" salutation became formulaic at this time, too, according to research by Margo Culley, at UMass-Amherst.

Two of the most celebrated diarists of our century were women: Anne Frank and Anais Nin. Actually, Frank was just 13 years old when she began to write to "Dear Kitty," an imaginary friend, between 1942 and 1944, while she and her family hid from the Nazis in the upper stories of an Amsterdam office building. French-born fiction writer Nin also began to keep a diary during her adolescence. "The diary started when I was eleven on my way to America," she wrote in 1962, when she was 59. "It was the adventurer's log. It has reached its 103rd volume. It has served me as a notebook, sketchbook, and some extracts from it have served as material for stories."

As a much younger woman, in November 1933, Nin had a different outlook. "A sorrow made me create a protective cave, the journal," she wrote. It was a troubled time when she was preparing to abandon "this sorrow, this cave," during psychoanalysis with Otto Rank, the psychiatrist who was one of Freud's first students and with whom Nin had an affair. Rank told Nin he didn't want her to "analyze the analysis." Nin changed the course of diary-keeping history with her decision to disobey Rank and abandon him instead of her diary. She was to become a major influence on contemporary diary-keeping styles after she started publishing her diaries in 1966. As the women's movement took hold, women let Nin guide their pens, following her example of self-revelation and self-affirmation through the vehicle of the diary.

**A**pril 18, 1847: *I wrote down a lot of rules all of a sudden and wanted to follow them all, but I wasn't strong enough to do so. But now I want to set myself one rule only, and to add another one to it only when I've got used to following that one. The first rule which I prescribe is as follows: No. 1. Carry out everything you have resolved must be carried out. I haven't carried out this rule.*

— Leo Tolstoy, *Tolstoy's Diaries*, Volume 1, 1847-1894, edited and translated by R. F. Christian

Scan any listing of adult education classes, and your eye is apt to fall upon a local example of one of the most predominant influences on diary keeping today: The journal workshop. Textbooks for the courses include materials that might be called successors to prescriptive Victorian etiquette books, outlining ways to keep a diary best. But best for what? Why are these workshops popular? And why are the diaries that come out of them kept? This past spring I visited a workshop in hopes of finding some answers.

Marilyn Zuckerman, a poet and fiction writer who conducts a workshop called "Self-Creation" in her Arlington living room, showed a journal of her own to five students — all women — one weekday night. It was a lined composition notebook scrawled across in black ink. "You can see by the handwriting that this is a 'catharsis' book," she said.

The women who had met with Zuckerman for the first time that evening would meet once a week for seven more weeks, at a cost of \$80. Outside class, Zuckerman told me that she hadn't kept a girlhood diary. Why not? "I thought they were silly, like autograph books. They were for girls that I didn't think I was like." Then, 20 years ago, studying poetry at Sarah Lawrence College's Center for Continuing Education, she was given the assignment to keep a journal. She has kept one ever since and now says that as a feminist she self-consciously promotes the writing of journals by women — as a political act — to effect change, large and small, in the individual and in society.

Even so, she delivered no heavy-handed message that evening. The women had come for reasons of their own, some emphasizing the "creative" part of the course title (three hoped journal writing would be a warm-up for fiction), others stressing the "self" (two had left therapy and wanted to try journal writing as a self-cure).

Zuckerman showed the group her journal, she said, "not to say 'follow me,' but to show how open-ended this process is." And she displayed not only her catharsis book, in which she often simply lists things that make her angry or fearful; she showed three other kinds of journals she keeps. One is a dream book. She said that at breakfast she jots down the essentials of her dreams on index

cards and then analyzes them later at her leisure in the notebook. When she travels, she carries a small, spiral-bound book that fits into her purse. She also uses a sketchbook and colored pencils to record experiences that "may not be sayable," such as an encounter with a fox at a beach.

The course is a workshop, not a seminar. Accordingly, the group did two impromptu exercises that first evening. First, they were instructed to write "whatever is on the tip of your pen," and the bent heads worked in concentrated silence for 10 minutes. "What you've just done is the major mode of the journal," Zuckerman said when the time was up, admitting that "writing in company is not the usual," but explaining that it was meant to "force you to write and keep writing — no excuses." Zuckerman then handed out sketch paper and asked the women to draw the three house plants she had put on the floor. The sketching, she said, would help expand possibilities of description.

Zuckerman encourages her groups to read published women's diaries, and she handed out a bibliography and offered to

lend her own copies of books. She noted especially the journals of May Sarton ("some of the best"), Virginia Woolf ("full of gossip"), Alice James ("one of the world's major hypochondriacs"), Sylvia Plath ("enough to raise the hackles on the back of your neck"), and Charlotte L. Forten ("the only slave journal that I know of").

Then she assigned homework. "For a week carry a notebook with you, and perhaps you can expand your way of seeing things," she said. "Sketch people's faces on a lunch break. Describe people. If you're feeling very chaotic, write for 10 minutes. Write as fast as you can if you find you're getting stuck."

That evening Zuckerman also talked about what she termed "the technical books," those for the most part produced in the last 10 years on the techniques of diary keeping. One of the first and best known is Tristine Rainer's *The New Diary: How to Use a Journal for Self-Guidance and Expanded Creativity*. Published in 1977, it includes an introduction by Anais Nin written shortly before she died. Rainer and Nin taught one of the country's

first journal workshops together, at the International College, in Los Angeles, in the early 1970s. Like Zuckerman's students, diary keepers who follow this guide will find two motives entwined, because Rainer and her followers see the diary as a creative outlet as well as a form of self-therapy.

**I** had plenty of work to do, but I spent most of the time trying to convince Huffard that my pajamas were better than his.

— Richard Osborn Jr.,  
January 31, 1936

From my reading of it, I didn't get the sense that any teacher had suggested to Andover student Osborn that he keep a diary, but in schools these days, teachers often not only encourage but assign the task. Keeping a journal for class is perhaps our most current diary-keeping trend — kids keeping diaries because they have to.

Some people, not just kids, aren't too happy about it. The conservative right, for example, associates the practice with secular humanism and liberal teaching practices. Phyllis Schlafly, president of the Eagle

Forum, an organization of volunteers that says it has been "leading the profamily movement since 1972," strongly objects to "teachers ordering children to keep diaries about personal information, about their families. That's invasion of privacy. And it has nothing to do with writing skills. They say this teaches them writing. I think it encourages bad writing. They say, 'Don't worry about spelling or grammar.' What's good about that?" Does Schlafly keep a diary herself? No, she answers dismissively.

As the ranks of diary keepers steadily grow (5 million blank books are sold each year, manufacturers estimate, to say nothing of scribblers' using all sorts of other surfaces), non-diarists from all points along the political spectrum can be heard objecting to diary keeping in general. Diarists, to some, simply suffer a nasty vice. They are victims of an unfortunate obsession, like washing one's hands over and over again. It is self-indulgent preoccupation, the sport of narcissists.

Anyone who has read another person's diary usually cannot help but be impressed (or repulsed) by the sheer im-

minuteness of tiny detail, the minutest business filling up the pages. "Diariied a lot of nonsense," Thomas Edison wrote in his diary one day of the day before. Even Tolstoy can be a bore. R. F. Christian, who recently published a new translation of Tolstoy's diaries, remarks: "They cannot by any stretch of the imagination be considered literature."

A friend who keeps a diary acknowledges the possibility of indulging in "cheap catharsis," but asks, "Isn't diary writing a step above mere mute staring into space?" To which I would add: Aren't people talking incessantly about themselves much more of a curse to us all than a silent diary keeper scratching away?

I'll be the first to admit, however, that a diary keeper faces a problem that a windbag, no matter how big, never will. Once the words are written, then what? Once the writer has gotten from them what he or she will, then what should be done with them?

When Joan Jacobs Brumberg put out her call for girls' diaries through the *Times*, she received a 12-year-old girl's diary from a former New York

City sanitation worker who had found it in the trash. Brumberg says she is "moved" by the idea that "this man answered my ad, and now the diary sits on a shelf in a women's history library." Brumberg threw out her own girlhood diaries when she was in her 20s. "I found them embarrassing," she says of her five or six lost volumes. "I didn't want to be associated with them. Now as a historian, this saddens me." But the historian was elated when she received more than 100 responses to her *Times* query, mostly from people in the Northeast, many of them offering family items from generations back. Planning to use the materials solely for her own research at first, Brumberg soon realized she had more than she could use, and she urged the owners of the diaries she considered valuable to donate them to the Schlesinger library, so they would be available to other scholars.

**I**n May 1983 I decided I would lend my diaries — to see how it felt, before I let them go completely. One day this past March I went to Schlesinger to look at the manuscript card catalog and see what company I was keeping.

Susan B. Anthony, the suffragist; Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the early feminist author; and poet Adrienne Rich all have diaries in the manuscript division of the library, which, since its founding 40 years ago, has been collecting research materials, particularly private papers, that document women's contribution to history. A large portion of that history, however, pertains not to those who became "famous" for one reason or another but to "ordinary" women — a fact well reflected in the other 150 diarists whose words the library has preserved.

There is, for example, Mary Jane Walker's school journal, kept in 1848-49 while she attended West Newton Normal School. Also, Wisconsin schoolteacher Dema M. Higbee's diary from 1864 to 1867; a 1901-02 diary of a US Army officer's wife, written partly in East Asia, partly in Worcester; and a 39-year-old Ohio country woman's 1913 volume, "noting excursions to surrounding towns and social calls," according to the Schlesinger precis.

There appear to be only three "contemporary" diarists represented, including myself and the 12-year-old girl whose 1959 volume was rescued by the sanitation worker. The third is Midwesterner Catherine Bly Cox, who was born in 1949. All three of our diaries are there as a result of the Brumberg query.

The Schlesinger has given the unknown author of the trash cache the pseudonym of "Ruth Teischman." The Teischman diary and some of Catherine Cox's three books all sounded quite familiar. Teischman was inspired by seeing *The Diary of Anne Frank* at the movies; a few years later, in 1964, I commented about seeing the movie on TV. On October 1, 1959, Teischman wrote: "Dear Di — Today I have something to tell you which I do not understand." On November 29, 1966, I typed the words: "Today I am going to analyze my day since it was a very confusing day. And in doing this I hope to un-confuse it, if that is at all possible." Cox measured her maturity on January 4, 1963, writing: "You know, I was reading my last year's diary over a few days ago, and I've sure changed from a year ago. I haven't noticed it, but I feel a lot older than that sounds." Catching a glimpse of a former self and thereby charting my own growth was definitely one of the attractions I found in keeping up



my own diary.

Seeing my diaries in the context of lives similar to my own, then, I understand much better how I am part of a historical picture — a genre, a movement, a trend — and I can step back and appreciate more objectively, less self-consciously, the value of things such as high school conversations I recorded verbatim. A 1966 excerpt: B.: “Are you going to say hi to me today?” J.: “I don’t know, you might not like the way I say it. Are you talking to me now?” B.: “Well, you usually just say hi, not like you mean it.” J.: “No, I don’t.” B.: “Yes, you do.” J.: “Yes, I guess I do.”

It’s not literature, but it sure is an authentic example of a teen-age boy-girl interaction of the time. Someday some historian may be grateful for that. As Eva S. Moseley, curator of manuscripts at Schlesinger since 1972, says, “In the past so much has disappeared. This is part of [women’s] new self-consciousness. We collect for the long haul, whether it’s of someone who’s making history or leading a typical ordinary life, or doing a little of both as it so often happens.”

Recently I also have come to consider diaries a kind of folk art, one that has evolved in particular ways over time, and diary writing a manifestation of the impulse to produce it. The fact that I bought it for 50 cents notwithstanding, the Osborn book is not only “an innocent historical document,” as diaries are sometimes called by scholars; Osborn’s careful, old-fashioned penmanship is also visually pleasing.

Moseley is a diarist herself, and when she showed one of her volumes, I was struck once more by the idea of diary keeping as a kind of craft. She says she kept girlhood diaries only because she was given volumes for Christmas. “I still have them, too, kept when I was 11, 12, and 13,” she says. “They’re funny and sad ... they’re touching.” Much later, she took up the practice of diary keeping again when she was going through a divorce. “I was in a tight spot,” she recalls. “It was a way of keeping track of what was going on. Of putting things out in front of me, so that I could see them better. It was also the obvious thing: keeping a record.” And so at the age of 39, she took out one of her adolescent diaries, a five-year book, and used a blank year. “The days of the week were the same. A numerologist would have fun with that.” As for Moseley herself, she merely attributes the coincidence to her frugal tendencies, and that she attributes to her Eastern European background.

Her mother, a Russian emigre who was living in Vienna when Moseley was born, died in San Francisco not long after Moseley’s husband left. When Moseley went to San Francisco to settle her mother’s things, she threw out her mother’s papers, something she has regretted ever since. But while her life was in such turmoil, Moseley says, it wasn’t on her mind to be saving things.

One thing she did save was a small, navy-blue leather-bound blank book. It was given to her mother as a gift on her 12th birthday, in 1913. Moseley’s mother’s brother, 16 years old then, inked in clever calligraphy the German word *stammbuch*, meaning “album,” on the inside front cover, along with Moseley’s mother’s initials. The book was never written in until 60 years later, however, when Moseley used it for her second volume of diary keeping as an adult, and now, covering up every inch of every marginless page is Moseley’s tiny, scrolly script. More frugality, she says with a shrug, but to me it looks like lace. •