



## READING GUIDE

### **Pathologies: A Life in Essays**

Susan Olding  
Freehand Books

#### **ABOUT THE BOOK**

“In simple terms, pathology is the scientific study of the way things go wrong.”

In these fifteen searingly honest personal essays, Susan Olding takes us on an unforgettable journey into the complex heart of being human. Each essay dissects an aspect of Olding’s life experience—from her vexed relationship with her father to her tricky dealings with her female peers; from her work as a counsellor and teacher to her persistent desire, despite struggles with infertility, to have children of her own. In a suite of essays forming the emotional climax of the book, Olding bravely recounts the adoption of her daughter, Maia, from an orphanage in China, and tells us the story of Maia’s difficult adaptation to the unfamiliar state of being loved.

Written with as much lyricism, detail, and artfulness as the best short stories, the essays in *Pathologies* provide all the pleasures of fiction combined with the enrichment derived from the careful presentation of fact. Susan Olding is indisputably one of Canada’s finest new writers, one who has taken the challenging, much-underused form of the literary essay and made it her own.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Susan Olding was recently named one of *The New Quarterly’s* “Most Loved Living Writers” alongside authors including Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro. Her poetry and prose have appeared widely in literary journals and anthologies across Canada and the United States. She has been a finalist for a National Magazine Award, two Western Magazine Awards, and a CBC Literary Award; she is also a two-time winner of the Event Creative Non-fiction Contest and a winner of the Prairie Fire Non-fiction Contest.

Susan earned a B.A. in Philosophy from the University of Toronto, a Bachelor of Education from Queen’s University, and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia. She has been a frequent contributor to several discussion groups, workshops, and web resources for adoptive parents. Her work has also appeared in such anthologies as *Body Breakdowns: Tales of Illness and Recovery* (Anvil Press), *The Lucky Ones: Our Stories of Adopting Children from China* (ECW Press), *Between Interruptions: Mothers Write on Guilt, Anxiety, Ambition, and More* (Key Porter), and *Double Lives: Writing and Motherhood* (McGill-Queens UP).

Born in Toronto, Susan Olding currently lives with her family in Kingston, Ontario.

## A CONVERSATION WITH SUSAN OLDING

**1) Writing about loved ones is a difficult balancing act which requires constant negotiation between telling a story and invading the privacy of others. Unsurprisingly, this type of writing often elicits very strong reactions from readers. For example, in “Mama’s Voices,” you quote feedback given by fellow classmates at a writing conference on a personal essay about your daughter, Maia:**

**Hard to say how you could do this; you’re still in the middle of it.**

**It’s not your story. It’s your daughter’s story.**

**You shouldn’t write this. It’s too risky for your child.**

**You’ll ruin your daughter’s life.**

**Can’t see this as a book.**

**It’s wrong to write about a child.**

**Don’t worry. You’ll find other subjects.**

**If you must write this, put it in a drawer.**

**You’ve now written and published several essays concerning Maia. Have those pieces provoked similar reactions? How have readers’ reactions met and/or differed from your expectations of how the book would be received? If you could go back, and be a student in that same workshop, what advice would you give yourself?**

Ordinary readers seem less concerned about this issue than writers. They may be curious; they often ask how my family members feel about my writing. But they tend not to judge. Instead, they often thank me for my honesty. Often these expressions of gratitude come from people I wouldn’t expect—including some family members.

I’ve learned from this that we can’t know in advance how others will react to our writing. We can never predict who will be moved or changed. And I believe, with Nadine Gordimer, that a writer’s duty is simply to go on writing the truth as she sees it. If we can write about a difficult subject, we should write about it. We do owe a responsibility to the people in our lives and I think it is wrong to write about others out of hatred or revenge. But we also owe a responsibility to our stories.

If I could go back and talk to my former self, I’d tell her to muster the courage to ask the other writers in the class who they were really talking to. Even then I knew that their cautions and objections had less to do with what I’d written than with their fears about the possible reception of their own work. Having said that—I came away from that workshop with at least two good ideas, one of which has already resulted in writing (“Mama’s Voices”) and another, which I hope may someday result in a very different (and much better) book than the one I’d originally planned. Those ideas would not have come to me had I never heard my classmates’ critical responses. So in the end, I’m grateful for the experience.

**2) In “Purple Hearts” you write in the first person, present tense, from the perspective of your teenage self, whereas in “Answering Moneta” you write in the first person, past tense, about your teenage self. Why did you choose to narrate different parts of your life in different ways? Are these technical choices indicative of different ways of remembering? Do you strive to reconcile the self as narrator and the self as narrated?**

The self as narrated is always a construct, and on some level I’m aware of that as I work. But mostly these choices aren’t conscious. I’m aiming for a certain mood or tone and I listen for the voice that will allow me to tell the story best. Having said that, I can try to reconstruct what might have been going on in my head if I’d actually been aware of what I was doing, as long you’ll grant me some latitude for after-the-fact rationalizations!

I think it may be true that different technical decisions reflect different ways of remembering. The present tense puts us in the thick of things. It's ragged and rough and sometimes a little bit raw. The past tense is the storyteller's voice, an authoritative voice that invites us to lean back and listen. Any of us, in looking back on a particular period of our lives, can do so from either of these perspectives.

In "Purple Hearts" I hoped to situate the reader in the moment. It's a story about teenage friendship and bullying—both subtle and blatant. The piece is mostly "show" rather than "tell"—almost fictional in its heavy reliance on scene. I wanted readers to feel what it's like to stand in a field and fend off a barrage of rotten vegetables thrown by classmates and peers. At the same time, I wanted to poke a bit of fun at my teenage self, and here, in addition to offering immediacy, the present seemed naturally to give rise to a certain amount of humour. Perhaps I could afford to leave a lot implicit because most readers can be assumed to be well past their own teenage years and to come equipped with their own ironic distance on that period of life. It's as if they're already wearing 3-D glasses and don't need them supplied at the theatre entrance.

"Answering Moneta" comes close to the end of the book; although there are moments of light humour, overall the piece has a more meditative, retrospective tone. The braided narrative of Keats's short and painful life and death provides ironic contrast with my own, far less heroic story. For this piece, the past tense seemed an obvious choice.

One of the advantages of writing a memoir in essays (as opposed to a continuous narrative) was that I could adopt each of these voices for different parts of the book. The essay form allowed me to take the same or related material and examine it in different ways. I hope this results in a more richly textured reading experience.

**3) In the past few decades, the concept of family has changed, and a growing number of alternatives to the nuclear, biological family unit now exist. Yet, you write in "The Easy Way" that "the idea that blood is thicker than water, that biological relationship trumps all, dies hard." How do you define family?**

I grew up as a member of a small, two-parent nuclear family in a big, homogenous suburb; for years now I've been a member of a larger, blended, adoptive family living in an urban setting. So my childhood certainly didn't prepare me for the life I have. But then, whose did? The change I've lived only reflects the changes I see all around me. When I think about my closest friends, none lives in a "Leave It to Beaver" family.

Instead, they are single by choice, divorced, remarried, or in common law relationships. Some are gay. Some have formed partnerships with men or women of a different generation. Some are happily childless; some are childless by circumstance. Kids may be biological, conceived through donor insemination, step, or adopted. Some of my adult friends are caring for aging relatives. All the families I know best are multi-ethnic. Many are also transracial. This kind of diversity has now become the norm.

When asked about her favourite babysitters, my daughter names her uncle (my brother), her much older siblings (my step-children)—and my husband's ex-wife. It's become a truism to observe that fewer of us these days are able to rely on extended family as it's traditionally been defined. Yet, as this example illustrates, we're forming our own extended networks. These networks can be complicated, and are sometimes the cause of a great deal of stress. Most of us have no models for what we are doing. But the challenges, while undeniable, also represent opportunities. In these relationships we grow and change. We come up against our own limitations and then surprise ourselves with strengths we didn't know were ours.

So the idea of family for me includes, but is not limited to, our biological relatives. It means the people

we are committed to, the people who are part of the daily fabric of our lives, the people we stretch ourselves to love. And these days, more and more of us are willing to stretch further.

We tend to think of family as accomplished fact—as something that’s simply there, like it or lump it. But families are created. They always were. Recent changes in the ways that many of us live have merely made the fact more obvious. How might our new, diverse family constellations change our self-definitions and our sense of what it means to belong? How might they influence our wider communities over time? I think these are important questions. I’ll be exploring them more fully in my next book, a novel.

**4) Much of your writing contains a self-reflexive element. In “How to Be a Volunteer” you state:**

**Feeling stuck with this piece. Story or essay or whatever it is. I write it one way, then write it the other. I resist and resist. I split it at the root, then put it back together again. Maybe it could work, but so far, it doesn’t.**

**Why did you choose to draw the reader’s attention to the constructed nature of the essay? How do you think this affects or augments a reading of the essay?**

The personal essay has long been celebrated for its intimacy. An “essai” is an attempt, a trial. So all essays share in a provisional quality. They also offer scope for meditation and reflection in a way that fiction, for example, rarely can. The whole point and pleasure of an essay is to embody the pattern of thought. Since my own thoughts seldom proceed in an unbroken, linear fashion, neither do my essays.

“How to Be a Volunteer” is in part an examination of the ethics of writing about other people. It consists of several braided narratives, interspersed with journal entries and quotations from various sources. The effect of all this, I hope, is to slow the reader down and create some space for him or her to engage with the questions I’m raising—and question the stories I tell. I want to move the piece beyond a single voice or a single version and towards a sort of polyphonic effect, in which the reader participates in the conversation.

**5) In a 2005 *New York Times* article, William Grimes paraphrases an argument made by John Eakin, Professor Emeritus at Indiana University:**

**[H]uman beings continuously engage in a process of self-creation and self-discovery by constructing autobiographical narratives. In a sense, we are the stories—multiple, shifting and constantly evolving—that we weave about ourselves, and this storytelling urge may even be hard-wired.**

**Do you think that autobiographical writing plays a fundamental role in identity formation? If you publish your autobiographical writing, as you have, are you in any sense bound to a particular definition of yourself?**

I hope I’m not bound to any particular definition of myself. That would be far too limiting! I plan to do a lot more growing and changing before I die. But I do think autobiographical writing plays a part in identity formation—not only for writers but also for readers. This is because every memoir is at least in part an attempt to obey the Socratic dictum: Know Thyself, and every good memoir models for readers a way of making sense of the messy stuff of experience.

A paradox of the writing life is that strangers often respond most powerfully to the work that seems most personal or idiosyncratic, to those stories that the writer fears won’t be of interest to anybody else. In part this is because, as Montaigne put it, each of us contains the entire human condition, and our feelings, if not the facts of our lives, are broadly shared. But in any case, our appreciation of memoir doesn’t depend

on shared experience with the author. For it is the structural elements of the genre, its careful balancing of narrative perspectives, that stimulates our recognition of the patterns in our own lives and wakens us to their deeper meaning. As long as a writer is visibly working hard to make sense of her experience, we willingly “walk the same steps as the author.” (Keats) And in walking those steps, we come away with renewed self-understanding. That’s the special gift that literary memoir bestows, and it explains why the recurring charges of solipsism and self-indulgence levelled against the genre are so misplaced.

