

Speculative Fiction & Catharsis—A New Era of Memoirs

Speculative fiction is the centerpiece in sci-fi and dystopian novels as it allows stories to explore themes and content outside the norm of everyday life. This can be seen in novels such as the influential *The Hunger Games* (2008) by Suzanne Collins or *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood, both of which center around the speculation of 'what ifs.'

Shannon Gibney, however, created something new and experimental for memoirs with the use of speculative fiction in her novel, *The Girl I Am, Was, and Never Will Be* (2023). Gibney combined a non-fiction memoir while exploring the various 'what ifs' in her life. For an adopted child, there is one substantial choice that influences their life drastically. Shannon Gibney begins her memoir with this looming question: 'What if I wasn't adopted?'

In the premise of this part-memoir, part-speculative fiction, Gibney splits her timeline into two possibilities: her real-life events vs. a life with her biological mom. The author's creation of a wormhole connecting the two lives continues splitting off as more possibilities arise in the ever-changing story.

Gibney's memoir, *The Girl I Am, Was, and Never Will Be*, is told through candid moments of childhood and authentic documents, pictures, and letters which segue into how she interprets and understands her origin story. Adversity is natural in the life of an adopted child as they grow and develop with unanswered questions—the 'what ifs' in life—and having to piece together their story and history through fragments of documents and second-hand accounts; oftentimes never getting the whole truth.

Tropes of Adoption in Both Fiction & Memoirs

Shannon Gibney not only comments on the personal aspects of her experience and how being adopted has affected her, but she also starts with a broad critique of how adoption is viewed in the media. In literature, there is often a focus on tropes that represent the adopting parents as saviors along with their hardships, while diminishing the birth mother from the story and leaving little room for the adoptee's perspective.

The lack of representation of the tribulations that come with being adopted is due to the average historical representation of adoption in American literature. Carol J. Singley talks about the centrality of adoption in literature as it was used as a tool to construct the picture of White Christian salvation in the country.

Singley explains, "Although adoption meets practical needs by providing homes to orphans and offspring to the childless, throughout most of the nineteenth century adoption also carries the symbolic meaning of rescue or salvation, replicating a Christian doctrine" (Singley 81). The mother is seen as helpless, and the adopting parents are redeemers for the child and society. Gibney discusses this commonality throughout the media, spotlighting the saying that the birth mother "did the right thing" (Gibney 27), which is used as a way to soften the reality behind adoption and assure that the choice was made out of love, emphasizing the virtue of the new parents. In both media and real life, birth mothers disappear from the picture after adoption as though they are insignificant to the story, despite adoptees' desire to understand their identity.

Authors Harold D. Grotevant, Nora Dunbar, et al. discuss how adoption affects childhood development and explain that the lack of ancestry contact is due to the belief that “the success of an adoption is enhanced when children are like their adoptive parents” (Grotevant et al. 379). This belief has led to a disconnection between the adoptees and their heritage in order to nurture the connection to the adopting family.

However, this old belief harms adoptees by distancing them from their environment. It has created the feeling of being an outsider with the lack of self-understanding, which has been depicted in Gibney’s memoir of her own authentic feelings and experiences.

A New Evolving History in Memoirs

Like adoptees who have to search for the answers to their history, readers have to treat the plot as though it is a puzzle and piece the remixed timeline together in order to understand the whole picture. This narrative style can be found in different formats of media and will follow either one or both types—nonlinear storytelling or worldbuilding.

Authors Steven Willemsen and Miklós Kiss collaborated in a discussion about narration styles and the effects they can have on the viewers. They explain nonlinear storytelling as “when narration systematically presents events in an order that is different from their chronological occurrence” and nonlinear worldbuilding as “not the result of a non-chronological order of narration [...], but they form a feature of the diegetic fictional world that is narrated” (Willemsen and Kiss 174). Both can exist at the same time, but storytelling focuses on the order of events; in some narrations, the events are told sporadically or reversed. Worldbuilding showcases different events and plots taking place separate from

the central universe. Both of these types of linearity deviations can be found in the novel as Gibney tells the story with the departure into wormholes and other dimensions, while also jumping from different events and ages.

One of the most prominent uses of the unsystematic narrative is in worldbuilding; Gibney uses this tool to reveal to readers the speculative part of her life as authentic in order to highlight its significance in her upbringing as an adopted child. Unlike typical memoirs, Gibney follows two primary timelines: one where Shannon Gibney is adopted and one where she is not. The fictional narrative can be referenced as Erin Powers, the name she would have been assigned by her birth mother.

These two timelines are connected by a wormhole that is seen at different points in each life. One of the earliest experiences was in the bathroom mirror where Erin sees Shannon for the first time: “I reach out to where the spiral was only a moment before, but now it is just mirror” (Gibney 25). Gibney has her readers look into the life that she grew up speculating about and see the close parallels of both lives and how easily one could have been the other. We first read from Erin’s point of view, forcing readers to understand the multiple dimensions and further personify what originally was only speculation. There is also an intimate connection in how close the two variants are as Erin “reaches” out and is left with the “mirror,” showcasing both the physical closeness and the similarities of the two as they parallel each other in a reflection.

Chronology can also be difficult to follow as it jumps from various people in different years, often adapting to new information. This forces the readers to speculate on the unanswered questions of Gibney’s life, many of which will remain unsolved. This tool can frequently be found in detective

novels in order to add mystery and plot twists, but for Gibney, whose life is filled with unanswered questions, many of the unknowns are never revealed.

The Telephoned Birth Story

Gibney recounts what she believes to be her and Erin's birth story, describing the hospital's refusal to allow Patricia, her birth mother, to hold her after being born. She narrates being taken away from her mother just after birth, expressing, "We register my mother's sobs, and they lodge permanently at the base of our spine" (Gibney 52). In the time that she was born, 1975, the separation of blood to promote connection with adoptive parents was only just being challenged (Grotevant et al. 380). As a result, Gibney assumes there was immediate separation. In this assumption, Gibney feels the pain of her mother giving her up so strongly that the pain is physically attached to her; however, when someone contradicts that ending sentiment, the speculation is stricken from the record.

A game of telephone is played with Shannon Gibney's birth story as she hears part of it through her adoptive mother, who heard it from Patricia's sister, who told them that, "Patricia kept [Shannon] with her for a couple of days after" (Gibney 57). Gibney then restates the same imagined birth story again, but this time, a line crosses out every word. In this style, readers are coerced to change their perspective on certain events as new information is given, and other information is never told.

New information can come in different formats, secondary accounts or documents, at various points in life, emphasizing the way adoptees slowly learn their selfhood and the way it is constantly altering. Gibney recounts the documents she obtained after months of attempting to get information; she describes it as "the story of my life—or at least the story of my life as I have come to know it"

(Gibney 64). She is driven to make assumptions about her life and genealogical identity from documents that are depicted in the novel as banal—an ordinary envelope torn open.

The information given for her birth father noted he “was of Afro-American descent [...] He played the guitar in a band. He was discharged from the U.S. Air Force for psychiatric reasons” (Gibney 68). Three short and vague statements about her paternal heritage are given to her, depicting the ordeals in piecing together a chronology. The small amount of data is unsatisfying and only creates more speculation, as Grotevant states, “Even in the absence of information about or contact with birthparents, adolescents will construct a narrative, although it may not be as coherent as one based on real people and events” (Grotevant et al. 383).

The Catharsis of Memoirs

There is a lot of missing information in an adoptee's life. Shannon Gibney uses her career as an author and her passion not only to spread awareness of these hardships, but to help heal in her own way. Never meeting her father has led to most questions remaining unanswered. So in order to reach a sort of catharsis, Shannon Gibney makes it possible through her speculative fiction.

Through her wormhole and the possibility of this other version, Gibney is able to meet her father—a man seen as parallel to her own personality. He has an interest in sci-fi elements and is smart enough to create the multi-dimensional portal.

Her father spends the entirety of the fiction side of the memoir watching her and loving her from a distant world. In this life, he is still gone, still dead as Gibney had learned during her youth, but now there is a connection and knowledge of each other.

In the life of an adopted child, information that is significant in one's identity growing up is not typically available. Instead, it needs to be searched for with pieces given in an unchronological order that is abnormal for children growing up with their birth parents. Usually, there is always going to be essential information still unanswered or changing accounts that affect perspectives. Gibney writes in a nonlinear narrative by using different dimensions for various possibilities and shuffling through different years in order to illustrate the life of an adoptee.

The genuine and constant speculations on what could have been, and the desire to understand heritage, are only given bits of information through vague documents and second-hand accounts. The life of an adoptee, their tribulations with belonging and identity, is often disregarded or forgotten in media, as the focus is typically on the chosen family dynamics and the relationship between the child and adopting parents.

Gibney helps readers see and understand the struggles with identity in her memoir. Even 'successful' adoptees face battles due to the industry standards and lack of attention to the well-being of the developing children. Gibney, in her transformative writing, has perhaps set a new standard for memoirs in the way they represent and connect to audiences.

Works Cited

- Gibney, Shannon. *The Girl I Am, Was, and Never Will Be*. Penguin Random House. 2023.
- Grotevant, Harold D., et al. "Adoptive Identity: How Contexts within and beyond the Family Shape Developmental Pathways." *Family Relations*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2000, pp. 379–87. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/585833>. Accessed 12 May 2025.
- Singley, Carol J. "Teaching American Literature: The Centrality of Adoption." *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1/2, 2004, pp. 76–83. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4150058>. Accessed 12 May 2025.
- Willemsen, Steven, and Miklós Kiss. "Keeping Track of Time: The Role of Spatial and Embodied Cognition in the Comprehension of Nonlinear Storyworlds." *Style*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2020, pp. 172–98. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.5325/style.54.2.0172>. Accessed 12 May 2025.