

Interview with geneatherapist Helen Parker-Drabble

1. You describe yourself as a geneatherapist. Can you tell me what that means?

‘Geneatherapy’ is the word I feel best reflects what I aim to achieve with my writing. It combines two of my greatest passions: I’m a counsellor by profession and a genealogist and family historian by experience. According to the online Cambridge dictionary one of the definitions of therapy is it is a ‘treatment that helps someone feel better or grow stronger’. So as a geneatherapist, I explore mental health, psychology, and neuroscience, to deepen my understanding of our ancestors, which in turn can benefit the present and future generations.

2. Why did you write *A Victorian’s Inheritance*?

It was the book I most wanted to read. When I was eleven, my grandfather came to live with us. I thought this would be my chance to hear all about his Victorian childhood and his adventures on the Canadian Prairies, but he was emotionally distant and kept his story largely to himself. I desperately wanted to know him, but I had to find another way to unearth his story.

3. What helped you to decide the story you wanted to tell?

My mum told me her father was a ‘Victorian fossil’, a distant parent she could never get close to. So, I set out to find what had stopped him from being an open, loving parent and grandparent. What had affected him most: Victorian values, Victorian English village life or his alcoholic mother? This became the bones of the story I decided to tell.

4. What did you discover?

I’d done the genealogical research, walked in my grandfather’s footsteps and immersed myself in social history, but if I wanted a deeper understanding of the man, I was asking the wrong questions. Granddad was once a child, like any of us, and I needed to look at what this Victorian boy had inherited from *his* ancestors. When I explored the life of his parents and grandparents a psychological inheritance unravelled, revealing intergenerational anxiety, trauma, loss, alcoholism, and depression. I think no family tree is without these.

5. Psychological inheritance? This is not a term most people are familiar with...

Psychological inheritance refers to the inherited traits, reactions, patterns of behaviour and our take on life, which are passed down through the generations and persist over time. We carry them with us, from situation to situation.

6. What might get passed on?

It can be something positive or negative. For example, they might have inherited patterns of anger, trauma, cruelty, avoidance, violence, fear or dissociation. On the other hand an ancestor might be endowed with optimism, gratitude, a love of nature, resilience, intelligence, self-esteem, talent, kindness, a spirit for adventure, humour, the ability to forgive and the capacity to love. This is what is meant by ‘epigenetics’ – the idea that our lived experience can affect our children and grandchildren. It’s sobering to think physiological and psychological trauma can affect not only the person involved but also successive generations. Ancestral trauma can even influence and shape a descendant who has no knowledge of it. All these ideas helped me

think about what Walter may have inherited – and what may have been passed down to me and my descendants.

7. So, there are two elements to the book: the psychological part where you outline and borrow from psychological studies and theory, and the historical aspect. What is it you are showing us through Walter that may apply in our own families?

That neuroscience explains how our ancestors' unique experiences, diet, and even their geographical location help construct the architecture of our brain. Genealogically speaking, the experiences of our grandparents and parents influence our own development. Cultural and family values are also transmitted through our families of origin, which in turn have their roots in past generations. And, because our psychological and biological characteristics are profoundly affected by the contexts in which we grow up, what happens to grandparents reverberates through the ages to affect their descendants.

8. Can you give me an example?

Walter's mother Ann was four when she lost her mother to consumption. Modern research shows us that a quarter of children develop serious psychological issues following a parent's death.ⁱ It seems a forlorn hope that Ann's environment was more protective than in recent times. By the time Ann married, only four of her nine full siblings were still alive. Her firstborn then died a slow, painful death at only 18 months old. It would make sense if these experiences affected her. Perhaps it explains her addiction to alcohol. She may have been self-soothing a depression born from her catastrophic losses. She might have found it difficult to bond with her children, fearful that they too would be taken from her. Walter may have learnt to keep himself emotionally contained, growing up with an alcoholic mother; and as I mentioned, this impacted his daughter – my mother.

9. Not everyone would think it is a good idea to share this history with the general public. What made you want to publish?

Two reasons: first, a lot of family historians try to make sense of a relative. The psychological theories I use to understand my grandfather could help others think differently about their own families. The second reason is that I looked for examples of family history writing and found very little. I hope this book motivates and encourages people interested in their family history to pass on what they have painstakingly uncovered, to pass on a record to future generations. Because research shows that children who have the most self-confidence have a strong 'intergenerational self'. They know they belong to something bigger than themselves.ⁱⁱ Above all, sharing stories has a powerful impact on all family members, especially on adolescent identity and well-being.ⁱⁱⁱ

10. Why publish now?

There has never been more opportunity to challenge and reflect on the way we live our lives. More people than ever are struggling with anxiety, addiction, and depression. Many are looking at what they can do to improve their own and others' health and live positively. Mental health is finally being talked about and there's an enormous amount of research being published from nutrition and its effect on mood, to how trauma can be reversed.

New understanding and the tools to implement it can help us live well and leave a healthier legacy.

11. How can your book help with mental health?

Family history can be a powerful antidote against adverse life experiences. It builds resilience. All of us have ancestors who overcame disaster and survived tough times. Learning their stories helps us to see we too can survive. I hope *A Victorian's Inheritance* shows how developing an understanding of *why* people may behave as they do could promote self-awareness and encourage families to break cycles of abuse or misery. By looking at the past people may discover they're more resilient than they know. Our forebears survived war, poverty, trauma, and pandemics. So can we.

12. I understand it took you four years to write the book. Was it worth it?

Absolutely, and without concentrating on my grandfather's dogged persistence, his resilience, and his inability to give up, I may never have finished it! I would encourage all family historians to put what they know in print, especially the stories. It's the only way family history survives. It could be a photo book with captions, a journal or diary, mini-biographies, scrapbooking – anything that can be passed down the family line.

13. Aside from the psychological side, I would like to talk about the more traditional family history aspect of your work. You are not a professional historian, but you have made some excellent points. There is a great deal of genuinely original research in your book. Can you tell me more about your research process?

The Internet gives armchair genealogists access to a vast number of records. Generous, passionate professionals provide tips to structure research, how to prove online records are accurate (or not) and ways to overcome brick walls. If you want to put flesh on the bones, nothing beats walking the streets of your ancestors. Google Earth can give you a flavour if you can't visit in person. There are also many online archival records you can immerse yourself in. I was fortunate enough to complete the research before coronavirus forced archives to close. You may even get lucky and find living family who can help you fill in some blanks.

For an historical overview of the book, I consulted an academic historian, Dr George Regkouko. George was enormously encouraging and validating, and was able to point me in directions I hadn't considered.

To go deeper in my understanding, I turned to psychological theories of human development, identity, and social behaviour. I extended my understanding of neuroscience and neuropsychology: the crossover between science and psychology. This led me to epigenetics, the study of nature (our genes) and nurture (our environment). Epigenetics seeks to explain how our environment and life experiences trigger on-off mechanisms in our genes, which can affect us and our descendants, physically and psychologically.

14. What's next for you?

This is the first book of three. All will include psychological theory and research to show the impact Walter's experiences might have had on him. The next book takes Walter to Canada, where I look at the psychology of migration and the emotional costs and rewards

of starting a new life far from where one was raised. I explore homesteading from the bachelor point of view, World War 1, and how Walter kept in touch with family and life in Thorney village.

15. If people are interested in finding out more about you, what should they do next?

They can visit:

- www.helenparkerdrabble.com and read the first two chapters for free (this includes the index and endnotes of these chapters)
- Read articles here: <https://www.helenparkerdrabble.com/blog/>
- To buy Who Do I Think You Were?[®] *A Victorian's Inheritance*:
<https://geni.us/6SNCT5>.

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ⁱ Worden, J. and Silverman, P. (1996). 'Parental death and the adjustment of school-age children'. *OMEGA – Journal of Death and Dying*, 33(2), pp. 91–102.

ⁱⁱ Hardy, R. (2017). *Why children need to know their family history*. [online] the Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/jan/14/children-family-histories-true> [Accessed 1 Aug. 2019].

ⁱⁱⁱ Duke, M.P., Lazarus, A., & Fivush, R. (2008). Knowledge of family history as a clinically useful index of psychological well-being and prognosis: A brief report. *Psychotherapy Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 45, 268-272.