

Constructing Credibility and Narrative Truth in Southern African Childhood Memoirs

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Abstract

A critical problem in life writing studies is the tendency to evaluate autobiographical truth through factual accuracy while paying insufficient attention to how credibility is narratively produced, particularly in representations of childhood reconstructed through retrospective adult consciousness. In southern African childhood memoirs, this problem is intensified by histories of colonialism, apartheid, racial violence, and socio-economic precarity, where memory becomes ethically charged and epistemologically unstable. Although existing scholarship acknowledges the doubleness of autobiographical voice, it has not sufficiently theorised the narrative mechanisms through which readers come to trust child narrators' experiences. Addressing this gap, this essay investigates how credibility and narrative truth are constructed in selected southern African childhood memoirs. The study employs a qualitative interpretive methodology grounded in close textual analysis and autobiographical criticism. It draws on three interrelated theoretical frameworks, the autobiographical pact, the relational pact, and the epistemic pact, to examine how memoirists establish trustworthiness through narrative form, ethical positioning, and reflexive engagements with memory. The analysis focuses on four memoirs: *Kaffir Boy*, *Born a Crime*, *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, and *Twenty Chickens for a Saddle*. The essay demonstrates that credibility in these texts emerges not from factual completeness but from a composite architecture of narrative strategies, including contractual self-positioning, material verification, communal

witnessing, double-voiced narration, and explicit acknowledgment of memory's limitations. These strategies enable memoirists to construct persuasive forms of narrative truth grounded in coherence, moral resonance, and epistemic honesty. By foregrounding the child's perspective within adult retrospection, the memoirs transform childhood from a condition of passive vulnerability into a site of ethical becoming, interpretive agency, and historical witnessing. The study contributes to autobiographical and childhood studies by redefining autobiographical truth as a dialogic and relational construct emerging through the interaction between memory, history, narration, and readerly trust. In doing so, it offers a more contextually grounded framework for understanding credibility in African life writing and expands critical discussions on childhood narration in postcolonial memoirs.

Keywords: Autobiographical Pact, Relational Credibility, Epistemic Truth, Childhood Memoirs, Narrative Agency

Introduction

Life writing has remained central to literary and cultural studies because of its capacity to mediate between personal memory, historical experience, and identity formation. Autobiographical truth has always, in life writing, been equated with factual accuracy, often privileging empirical verification over the narrative processes through which credibility and narrative truth are constructed. Writing childhood from an adult eye view has further raised persistent questions about memory, authority, and reliability, particularly where personal testimony intersects with colonial histories, racialized violence, and socio-economic precarity. It is further complicated by representations of childhood where memory is mediated by temporal distance, subjective reconstruction, and the interpretive lens of adult retrospection (Eakin, 1999; Lejeune, 1989). This study examines how southern African childhood memoirs negotiate credibility and narrative truth within the inherently unstable terrain of retrospective self-narration, and belief in factual accuracy. Rather than treating credibility as a fixed or verifiable quality, this paper reads it as a narrative achievement, produced through aesthetic strategies, ethical positioning, and reflexive acknowledgment of memory's limits, but still foregrounds the credibility and narrative truth. By analysing how memoirists frame uncertainty, select detail, and calibrate voice, the research shows how narrative truth in the purposively sampled texts emerges not from factual exhaustiveness but from persuasive coherence, moral resonance, and the careful staging of the child's perspective within adult hindsight. Across southern African memoirs, childhood is narrated not as passive endurance but as ethical becoming and harbinger for character and socio-economic transformation. This study considers these frameworks and

strategies, of autobiographical pact, relational witnessing, and epistemic pact, alongside double-voiced narration, to reconstitute a composite architecture through which credibility is narratively produced. They operate as interdependent processes that shape how life stories are told, received, and trusted. Through close readings of *Kaffir Boy* (Mathabane, 1986), *Born a Crime* (Noah, 2016), *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* (Kamkwamba & Mealer, 2009), and *Twenty Chickens for a Saddle* (Scott, 2008), this article demonstrates that southern African childhood memoirs construct narrative truth as a dialogic and relational phenomenon. In doing so, they reposition childhood not as a site of passive vulnerability, but as a space of ethical becoming and interpretive agency, thereby advancing a more nuanced and theoretically grounded understanding of credibility in life writing.

Credibility depends on the memoir's distinctive double voice since childhood narrative is always two-voiced, fusing the immediacy of a child's sensation with the explanatory powers of an adult consciousness (Eakin, 1999). Smith and Watson (2019), extend and systematise this insight within a broader rhetorical and narratological framework. Their model distinguishes between the 'narrating I' (the adult self who tells) and the 'narrated I' (the child self who is told). By formalising these two voices as textual positions rather than just psychological states, Smith and Watson make Eakin's idea more analytically usable. They also highlight how the interplay between these voices produces credibility, self-reflexivity, and ethical accountability in life writing. The memoirs studied here exploit this duality to generate a lively sway between innocence and insight such as Kamkwamba's wonder at a crackling radio is set beside an adult reflection on Malawi's energy poverty; Noah's terror in a police raid as reframed by later irony; Mathabane's first tennis lessons as glossed by political analysis; Scott's bush-school adventures which are tempered by ecological awareness. Far from undermining belief, this interaction of temporal perspectives reveals the process by which raw experience acquires meaning.

Credibility is further realized when testimony becomes communal. None of these narrators stands entirely alone. Mathabane's mother smuggles Western classics past Bantu-Education censors, Kamkwamba's neighbours contribute broken radios for his experiments, Scott's siblings road-test every entrepreneurial scheme, Noah's jokes are validated, sometimes painfully, by the reactions of peers, police, and parishioners. The presence of witnesses satisfies the interpersonal warrant of testimony (Ricoeur, 2004), relocating the truth-claim from the isolated mind to the social arena where it can be contested or confirmed. Each of the memoirs acknowledges what it cannot know with certainty. Gaps in the record, lapses in recollection, and overt moments of irony function not as flaws but as ethical disclosures of narrative limitation. In admitting uncertainty, over blurred timelines, forgotten dialogue, and even

exaggerated anecdotes, these writers invite readers to participate in, rather than silently consume, the construction of truth. Doubt becomes a token of honesty, a reminder that memory is a collaborative act between the narrator and the reader.

The overlapping procedures of contractual overture and material proof (Lejeune, 1989), double perspective and relational witnessing (Eakin, 1999; Smith & Watson, 2019), and reflexive and ethical gap (Fabry, 2025), therefore, form a composite architecture of credibility. They operate less as discrete stages than as interwoven threads, tightening and loosening as the child's story advances into the adult's reflection. Each of these threads are traced across *Kaffir Boy*, *Born a Crime*, *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, and *Twenty Chickens for a Saddle*, not to rank their truthfulness, but to show how narrative craft makes past lives both believable and richly significant. Lejeune (1989) suggests that the authority of life writing depends not solely on factual accuracy but on the reader's trust in the narrator's sincerity and self-positioning which extends this study's insight by emphasising how such trust is sustained through the open negotiation of knowledge limits. In this sense, doubt becomes integral to credibility, inviting readers into a participatory process in which truth is co-constructed rather than passively received. Central to this negotiation of credibility is the constitutive doubleness of autobiographical voice. Eakin (1999) argues that childhood narration is inherently two-voiced, combining the immediacy of the child's experience with the interpretive authority of the adult narrator. This insight is further refined by Smith and Watson (2019), who distinguish between the "narrating I" and the "narrated I" as textual positions that structure autobiographical discourse. Their formulation enables a more precise account of how credibility is rhetorically constructed through the interplay of temporal perspectives. In the memoirs examined, this duality generates a productive balance between innocence and retrospection whereby moments of childhood perception are reframed, reinterpreted, and sometimes ironised by the adult consciousness. Rather than undermining reliability, this dynamic foregrounds the processes through which experience is transformed into meaning, thereby enhancing the text's credibility.

Epistemic status of literary memoirs (Fabry, 2025) furthers this argument that memoirs should not be evaluated solely on their capacity for factual verification but on their ability to communicate experiential truth under conditions of epistemic constraint. This perspective reframes memoir as a site where knowledge is partial, situated, and interpretively mediated, thereby foregrounding the importance of narrative strategies that signal uncertainty, limitation, and perspectival honesty. In this sense, the epistemic pact operates as a tacit agreement in which narrators do not claim absolute knowledge but instead establish credibility through transparency about what can and cannot

be known. This framework is central to the present study, as it provides a basis for understanding how southern African childhood memoirs construct trust without recourse to empirical completeness. Also, relational and communal dimensions of testimony further reinforces credibility and narrative truth. These memoirs consistently situate personal experience within frameworks of social verification by involving family members, peers, and broader communities to operate as witnesses to narrated events. Such strategies resonate with Ricoeur's (2004) notion of the interpersonal warrant of testimony (pp. 163–168), in which truth claims are negotiated within a shared social world rather than confined to individual memory. In this sense, the relational pact operates not only as an ethical framework but also to foreground credibility and present individual narrative as a collective experience.

In conclusion, this paper contends that credibility in southern African childhood memoirs is not secured through factual verification alone, but through a dynamic interplay of narrative strategies that foreground relational accountability, epistemic transparency, and double-voiced self-representation. By integrating the autobiographical, relational, and epistemic pacts, the study demonstrates that narrative truth emerges as a negotiated, dialogic construct between narrator, text, and reader. The analyses that follow therefore move beyond questions of accuracy to illuminate how memoirists craft believable and ethically resonant accounts of childhood, ultimately redefining credibility as an interpretive and contextually grounded achievement in life writing.

Theoretical Frame

This research grounded on autobiographical theory to analyse its gathered data. Autobiographical theory originates primarily from the work of Philippe Lejeune and Georges Gusdorf in the 20th century, building on earlier autobiographical traditions represented by Saint Augustine and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and later expanded by scholars such as Paul John Eakin, Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson, and Paul Ricoeur. Autobiographical theory examines how individuals construct, represent, and interpret the self through narrative. It is treated as a transparent reflection of lived experience, and conceptualised as a discursive, performative, and relational practice, shaped by cultural, historical, and rhetorical conditions (Smith & Watson, 2019). Within this framework, the “self” is narratively spawned, and truth is understood not as scientifically produced but as a negotiated effect of storytelling. Recent developments in life writing studies further emphasise that autobiographical narratives operate within systems of expectation, trust, and interpretation, where meaning emerges through interactions between narrator, text, and reader (Lejeune, 1989; McLean et al., 2023; Smith & Watson, 2024; Fabry,

2025). It is within this broader theoretical orientation that this study hinges its analysis of credibility and narrative truth in southern African childhood memoirs. This study bases its discussion on the concepts of autobiographical pact (Lejeune, 1989), the relational pact advanced by Eakin (1999) and further elaborated by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2019), and the epistemic pact associated with Regina Fabry (2025), all of which mediate the relationship between self, truth, and readerly trust, and collectively provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how credibility and narrative truth are narratively reconstructed in childhood memoirs.

The concept of the autobiographical pact by Lejeune (1989) premises this study as it argues that autobiography is constituted through a tacit agreement between author and reader, grounded in the assumption of referential identity between the author, narrator, and protagonist. As Lejeune famously states, “the autobiographical pact is the contract of identity that is sealed by the proper name” (1989, p. 19). This contractual understanding establishes a horizon of expectation in which the reader approaches the narrative as a truthful account of real life. Lejeune further clarifies that autobiography is less about verifying facts than about maintaining “a relationship of trust between author and reader” (1989, p. 22). In this study, the autobiographical pact provides a foundational framework for understanding how memoirists establish credibility and narrative through acts of self-positioning and narrative disclosure. However, referential identity alone is insufficient to account for the complexity of autobiographical credibility, particularly in contexts where memory is fragmented and historically burdened. This limitation has led to the development of the situational or relational pact, advanced in the work of Eakin (1999) and further elaborated by Smith and Watson (2019). Eakin underscores the fundamentally dialogic nature of autobiographical narration, arguing that “all autobiography is relational” (p. 43), a claim that foregrounds the embeddedness of personal narratives within social contexts. This relationality is especially pronounced in childhood narratives, where the dual voice of narration reflects an interaction between past and present selves. Smith and Watson (2019) extend this insight by conceptualising autobiographical acts as situated performances addressed to specific audiences and shaped by particular contexts. They note that “life narratives are always produced in relation to others and to cultural scripts of identity” (p. 72). The situational pact therefore shifts the locus of credibility from individual memory to networks of social interaction, ethical accountability, and communal validation.

Relational understanding of memoirs has been re-emphasised by recent scholarship as it demonstrates how narrative identity is shaped by broader social and cultural frameworks. McLean, Pasupathi, and Syed (2023) argue that personal narratives are structured by “master narratives,” which

function as culturally shared templates that guide how individuals interpret and recount their experiences (p. 807). This perspective underscores the extent to which autobiographical meaning is socially mediated rather than individually determined. In southern African situation, childhood memoirs reference histories of colonialism, apartheid, and resistance, which inform crucial content and the credibility of personal testimony. Consequently, the situational pact foregrounds the understanding of how memoirists align their individual stories with collective histories to produce believable and meaningful accounts. Epistemic pact, as articulated by Fabry (2025) further complements the other frameworks by challenging the assumption that memoirs should be evaluated primarily in terms of factual accuracy, arguing instead that their value lies in their capacity to convey experiential truth under conditions of epistemic limitation. He notes that “literary memoirs often operate under constraints of partial knowledge and should be assessed in light of these epistemic conditions” (p. 6). This perspective reframes memoir not just as a site where complete, objective truth is simply recorded. Instead, it is a space where meaning is actively shaped and negotiated by the narrator. The epistemic pact thus emerges as a tacit agreement in which narrators establish credibility not by claiming certainty but by acknowledging the limits of their knowledge. As Fabry further suggests, “Epistemic humility can enhance rather than diminish the credibility of autobiographical narratives” (p. 9). In this study, the epistemic pact provides a critical lens for analysing how memoirists use uncertainty, gaps, and reflexivity as strategies of credibility.

The autobiographical theory, therefore, provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding how credibility and narrative truth are narratively produced in life writing, particular premised in southern African memoirs. While its conceptual frameworks of autobiographical pact establishes the conditions of referential trust, the situational pact foregrounds relational accountability, and the epistemic pact emphasises transparency about the limits of knowledge. These frameworks are further reinforced by the concept of double-voiced narration, where the interplay between the “narrating I” and the “narrated I” generates a layered and self-reflexive mode of storytelling (Smith & Watson, 2019, p. 60). These frameworks illuminate how credibility in southern African childhood memoirs is not a fixed attribute but a negotiated achievement, emerging through the dynamic interaction of narrative form, ethical positioning, and readerly engagement.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive-analytical research design to examine how credibility and narrative truth are constructed in southern African childhood memoirs. A descriptive-analytical design is particularly appropriate for literary studies because it enables the systematic description,

interpretation, and contextual analysis of textual phenomena while attending to the ideological, rhetorical, and aesthetic dimensions of representation (Kothari, 2004; Babbie, 2010; Creswell, 2014). The design allowed the study to investigate how autobiographical narration produces meaning through language, structure, memory, and retrospective self-representation rather than through empirical measurement. Since the study sought to interpret narrative strategies and epistemic constructions within memoirs, a qualitative approach was considered suitable because it facilitates in-depth engagement with subjective experience, symbolic meaning, and textual complexity.

The study utilised close reading as the primary method of textual analysis. Close reading involves sustained and detailed attention to textual elements such as diction, imagery, tone, symbolism, narrative structure, characterization, focalisation, temporal shifts, and rhetorical strategies in order to uncover implicit meanings and ideological assumptions embedded within literary texts (Brummett, 2019). In this study, close reading was conducted through multiple stages. First, the selected memoirs were read repeatedly to identify recurring patterns related to credibility, memory, childhood narration, and autobiographical truth. Second, passages relevant to retrospective narration, relational witnessing, epistemic uncertainty, and child-adult narrative interplay were identified, coded, and categorised according to emerging thematic concerns. Also, the identified textual excerpts were interpreted using the theoretical frameworks guiding the study, namely the autobiographical pact, relational witnessing, and the epistemic pact. Attention was therefore directed not only to what memoirists narrated but also to how narrative meaning and credibility were rhetorically and structurally produced. This process enabled a fine-grained examination of narrative techniques such as double-voiced narration, reflexive commentary, testimonial framing, temporal shifts, and explicit acknowledgment of memory limitations.

The target population of the study comprised childhood memoirs originating from southern African countries, particularly South Africa, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia, Mozambique, Lesotho, and Eswatini. From this broader corpus, a purposive sample of four memoirs was selected: *Kaffir Boy* by Mark Mathabane (1986), *Born a Crime* by Trevor Noah (2016), *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* by William Kamkwamba and Bryan Mealer (2009), and *Twenty Chickens for a Saddle* by Robyn Scott (2008). The sample size of four texts was considered adequate because qualitative literary analysis prioritises depth of interpretation rather than statistical generalisation. These memoirs were selected purposively because they provide information-rich representations of childhood reconstructed through adult retrospection and engage directly with themes of memory, credibility, socio-political violence, survival, and self-construction. Additionally, the texts represent diverse southern African experiences shaped by apartheid, poverty, technological

struggle, ecological realities, racial identity, and postcolonial transformation, thereby providing a broad comparative basis for examining autobiographical credibility. Purposive sampling was employed because it allows the researcher to select texts that are most relevant to the objectives and research questions of a study (Creswell, 2013; Ritchie et al., 2014). The selection criteria included: memoirs narrated retrospectively from adulthood; texts foregrounding childhood experience; memoirs situated within southern African socio-historical contexts; and texts demonstrating explicit engagement with memory, testimony, and autobiographical self-representation. The selected memoirs were therefore considered appropriate because they contain rich narrative material for examining how credibility and narrative truth are constructed through literary and rhetorical strategies.

Data analysis was conducted thematically and interpretively. After identifying relevant textual passages through close reading, the data were organised into thematic categories corresponding to the study objectives and theoretical frameworks. These categories included autobiographical self-positioning, double-voiced narration, relational witnessing, epistemic transparency, memory gaps, testimonial authority, and narrative truth construction. The analysis then examined how these thematic elements interacted within each memoir to produce credibility and readerly trust. Interpretive analysis was guided by autobiographical criticism and narrative theory, particularly concepts derived from Lejeune's autobiographical pact, Eakin's relational life writing, Ricoeur's theory of testimony, Smith and Watson's narrating/narrated self distinction, and Fabry's epistemic approach to memoir narration.

The findings were presented analytically and thematically through integrated textual discussion. Relevant textual excerpts from the memoirs were cited and interpreted in relation to the study's conceptual frameworks and research objectives. Rather than presenting findings statistically, the study relied on interpretive exposition in which textual evidence was closely analysed to demonstrate how narrative credibility emerges through rhetorical, relational, and epistemic strategies. This method enabled the study to foreground the interaction between textual form, autobiographical memory, and readerly trust within southern African childhood memoirs.

Therefore, the combination of qualitative descriptive-analytical design, purposive sampling, close reading, and thematic interpretive analysis enabled the study to generate a nuanced understanding of how credibility and narrative truth are constructed in southern African childhood memoirs. The methodology therefore provided an appropriate framework for examining the intersections between memory, retrospection, ethics, and autobiographical narration within contemporary life writing studies.

Narrative Pacts and the Construction of Credibility in Southern African Childhood Memoirs

This section examines how credibility and narrative truth are negotiated within childhood memoirs by anchoring the discussion in autobiographical theory as the central framework through which childhood is narrated in southern African contexts. Rather than treating memoir as a transparent transcription of lived experience, this study approaches life writing as an ethically mediated form in which truth emerges through implicit agreements between narrator, text, and reader. Drawing on Lejeune's (1989) autobiographical pact, Smith and Watson's (2019) relational ethics, Eakin's (2008) theory of relational selfhood, and Fabry's (2025) epistemic model, credibility is understood not as empirical accuracy but as a performed narrative commitment. In contexts shaped by apartheid, colonial education, racial violence, famine, and socioeconomic marginality, these pacts acquire heightened ethical urgency. Childhood recollection in such environments must justify not only who speaks but how memory can speak credibly on behalf of silenced histories. The memoirs of Mark Mathabane, William Kamkwamba, Trevor Noah, and Robyn Scott demonstrate that credibility is not given but constructed through retrospective self-positioning, relational accountability, and epistemic transparency. These selected texts, together, reveal memoir as a dialogic form in which truth is produced through negotiation rather than verification, and authority emerges from ethical responsiveness to others and to history.

Autobiographical pact grounds credibility in the explicit alignment of author, narrator, and protagonist, assuring the reader that the narrating "I" refers to a historically verifiable subject (Lejeune, 1989). In southern African childhood memoirs, this pact goes beyond formal identification to become a narrative act of self-representation, especially in contexts that represent Black childhoods as marginalized and denied recognition. In *Kaffir Boy*, Mark Mathabane mobilizes the autobiographical pact both paratextually and narratively. The subtitle, "*The True Story of a Black Youth*," together with the retention of his real name, foregrounds a referential claim anchored in lived apartheid experience. This claim is intensified as Mathabane positions his narrative as an act of a bearing witness: "My story is intended to show...a world he would otherwise not see" (Mathabane, 1986, p. 4). The credibility of this claim is further reinforced through sensory immediacy and spatial specificity, for instance in his recollection of township precarity, he says, "The streets were filled with dust and the smell of decay...children with swollen bellies wandered aimlessly" (p. 18). Such descriptive density substantiates the referential promise of the autobiographical pact by grounding memory in embodied experience. Similarly, *Born a Crime* by Trevor Noah extends the autobiographical pact by integrating legal discourse into personal narrative.

The memoir opens with the legal prohibition of interracial relationships, immediately situating Noah's birth within a juridical framework: "Under apartheid...my existence was illegal" (Noah, 2016, p. 2). This fusion of statutory history and personal memory transforms the narrating body into documentary evidence. The pact is thus reinforced not only through identity alignment but through the convergence of legal fact and lived reality, positioning autobiography as both personal testimony and historical archive.

In *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, William Kamkwamba anchors credibility in material and procedural detail. His narrative foregrounds process over abstraction, as seen in his account of early experimentation, "I tried and failed many times...each attempt teaching me something new" (Kamkwamba & Mealer, 2009, p. 152) emerging credibility through iterative action rather than declarative assertion. The windmill itself functions as both empirical artifact and narrative proof, exemplifying what Eakin (1999) terms the performative dimension of autobiographical truth, where lived action substantiates narrative identity. Robyn Scott's *Twenty Chickens for a Saddle* also intentionally admits limits of memory by emphasising the fragmentary nature of recollection instead of asserting ability to totally recall the experiences. She confesses, "Some memories remain vivid, others dissolve into impressions" (Scott, 2008, p. 12). This acknowledgment of narrative partiality strengthens credibility by foregrounding mediation. Her depiction of childhood disorientation in Botswana, "Everything felt strange...as though the world had shifted beneath my feet" (p. 7), situates the autobiographical "I" within affective immediacy while simultaneously signaling retrospective reconstruction. Credibility here derives from reflexive honesty rather than exhaustive accuracy.

While the autobiographical pact secures referential identity, the relational pact, articulated by Smith and Watson (2019) and Eakin (2008), locates credibility within networks of social and ethical accountability. In *Kaffir Boy*, Mathabane constructs an implied readership whose recognition is integral to the narrative's authority. His appeal to shared moral consciousness is evident in moments of familial vulnerability. He writes, "My mother's silence spoke louder than words...her suffering was something we all carried" (Mathabane, 1986, p. 30). Such scenes transform experience into relational knowledge, inviting readers into an ethical engagement that underwrites credibility. In *Born a Crime*, relational credibility is most powerfully mediated through Noah's relationship with his mother, Patricia. Her actions repeatedly shape the narrative's moral framework, as when Noah reflects on her resilience, "She believed the world could be better, and she lived that belief every day" (Noah, 2016, p. 52). The memoir thus disperses authority across relational bonds, illustrating that autobiographical truth is co-constructed rather than individually possessed.

Kamkwamba's also confesses communal and institutional domains where external validation emerges through recognition by others, as when villagers respond to his invention. He writes, "People gathered around, amazed that the lights had come on" (Kamkwamba & Mealer, 2009, p. 223). This collective witnessing transforms personal achievement into socially ratified knowledge, reinforcing the relational dimensions of autobiographical truth. Additionally, Scott's memoir enacts a quieter relational pact through ethical transparency and narrative self-correction. Her admission of selective narration, "There were things I chose not to say at the time" (Scott, 2008, p. 40), invites readers into a space of interpretive collaboration. Credibility here is negotiated through openness about omission, aligning with Ricoeur's (2004) conception of memory as inherently selective yet meaningful.

The epistemic pact conceptualised by Fabry (2025) reconstructs autobiographical credibility away from referential accuracy towards the conditions under which knowledge about the past is produced, limited, and communicated. Rather than asking whether the narrated events really happened, the epistemic pact interrogates how the narrator comes to know, interpret, and retrospectively organise experience. It foregrounds the distance between the experiencing child and the narrating adult, insisting that credibility emerges through the explicit negotiation of this gap. Autobiographical truth, in this sense, is not evidentiary but hermeneutic because it depends on the narrator's capacity to render the processes of knowing visible, including uncertainty, revision, and interpretive framing. Trevor Noah, for instance, constructs an epistemic pact through humour as a mode of critical cognition. His ironic self-description, "I was born into a world that declared me impossible" (Noah, 2016, p. 6), does more than recount a biographical fact; it reframes apartheid's legal logic as epistemologically absurd. Humour here operates as an interpretive filter that exposes the incoherence of racial classification while simultaneously asserting narrative control. This strategy recurs when Noah reflects on racial identity categories. He writes, "In South Africa, we were always trying to define ourselves by what we weren't" (p. 74). Such moments reveal knowledge not as immediate possession but as retrospective critique. The narrator's authority thus derives from his ability to translate lived contradiction into intelligible insight. By signalling how the story should be understood, humour functions as an epistemic guide, aligning reader and narrator within a shared framework of critical interpretation rather than unmediated facticity.

A similar epistemic structure governs William Kamkwamba's *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, though here the emphasis falls on cognitive development and experiential learning. Kamkwamba repeatedly stages scenes in which childhood incomprehension is preserved rather than erased. For instance, he recalls, "When I first saw the dynamo, I couldn't understand how

turning it made the light glow” (Kamkwamba & Mealer, 2009, p. 101). This initial confusion is not corrected immediately but revisited through the lens of later understanding, as he gradually grasps the principles of energy conversion. The narrative thus layers temporal perspectives, juxtaposing innocent perception with acquired knowledge. Further, his engagement with textual knowledge, “I studied the diagrams carefully, even though I didn’t know all the English words” (p. 137), highlights the partial and effortful nature of learning. Credibility here is produced through the transparent staging of epistemic struggle. By making the process of discovery visible, Kamkwamba fulfils the epistemic pact’s demand that autobiographical narration disclose not only what is known, but how it comes to be known. Mathabane brings in the gradual politicisation of consciousness by tracing a process from experiential immediacy to critical awareness, marking key moments where understanding emerges belatedly. For example, he reflects: “At the time I accepted it as part of life, but later I realised how deeply unjust it was” (Mathabane, 1986, p. 84). This retrospective qualification signals a shift from unexamined experience to analytical recognition. Similarly, his encounters with education catalyse epistemic transformation: “Books opened a window to a world I had never imagined” (p. 146). Knowledge in this sense is explicitly mediated, and acquired through reading, reflection, and comparison. The memoir’s credibility therefore rests not on the immediacy of childhood perception but on the narrator’s capacity to reinterpret that perception within a broader socio-political framework. By foregrounding this process, Mathabane aligns with Fabry’s contention that autobiographical truth is secured through interpretive labour rather than the illusion of direct access to the past.

In southern African memoirs the epistemic pact operates as a structuring principle that governs how knowledge is narrated, revised, and authorised. Noah’s humour, Kamkwamba’s iterative learning, and Mathabane’s retrospective politicisation each exemplify different modes of epistemic disclosure. What unites them is a shared refusal of transparency. The past is not presented as fully knowable in the moment of experience but as something reconstructed through reflection. In this way, credibility is relocated from factual verification to epistemological integrity, grounded in the narrator’s willingness to expose the limits, gaps, and processes that shape autobiographical knowing.

In conclusion, *Kaffir Boy*, *Born a Crime*, *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, and *Twenty Chickens for a Saddle* demonstrate that autobiographical, relational, and epistemic pacts function as dynamic and intersecting frameworks. Credibility is not secured solely through factual correspondence but through ethical positioning, relational engagement, and interpretive transparency. Southern African childhood memoirs thus reconfigure life

writing as a dialogic practice in which truth emerges through the interplay of memory, history, and readerly trust.

Material Objects, Cultural Artefacts, and Historical and Apartheid Paraphernalia

Material objects in southern African childhood memoirs operate as evidentiary anchors that validate memory, substantiate trauma, and translate subjective recollection into publicly recognisable proof. Across *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, *Kaffir Boy*, *Born a Crime*, and *Twenty Chickens for a Saddle*, objects do not function as decorative detail but as material witnesses that mediate credibility and truth (Lejeune, 1989). Their credibility arises from sensory specificity, cultural recognisability, and extra-textual corroboration. Rather than treating each memoir discretely, this section analyses how shared categories of objects generate credibility through comparison and contrast.

Cultural artefacts such as music media, religious texts, and global popular icons function as credibility-enhancing objects because they draw on shared material memory. Their recognisability allows readers to verify the plausibility of narrated experience beyond the text. Material artefacts operate as key mechanisms through which childhood narration advances a credible truth claim. Rather than relying on retrospective moral authority, the narrators anchor their accounts in culturally recognisable objects whose material specificity invites readerly verification (Fabry, 2025). In *Born a Crime*, Trevor Noah's pirated cassette tapes exemplify this strategy. His recollection foregrounds the physical attributes of the objects themselves, "Maxell cassettes with handwritten track lists folded into the plastic cases" that he duplicated and sold (Noah, 2016, p. 177). These details situate the narrative within South Africa's well-documented 1990s informal music economy (Primo & Lloyd, 2011), thereby strengthening credibility through historical congruence rather than autobiographical insistence. The truth claim of Noah's childhood entrepreneurship is thus grounded in material culture that readers familiar with the period can recognise as plausible and socially embedded.

A parallel truth-authenticating function is performed by Patricia Noah's Bible. Noah repeatedly emphasises its worn condition, its underlined passages, annotations, and constant presence in domestic and public spaces (Noah, 2016, pp. 55-56). The Bible functions not merely as a symbolic object but as a durable artefact of lived religious practice within black South African Christianity. Its physical deterioration registers habitual use over time, allowing moral credibility to emerge as an effect of material continuity rather than authorial evaluation (Miller, 2010). The object thus substantiates the ethical claims of the narrative by embedding belief within routine practice.

Kamkwamba's account mobilises a comparable strategy while producing a distinct mode of credibility. His Rambo-style commando knife,

though inspired by global popular culture, is described as locally fabricated from scrap metal and agricultural refuse (Kamkwamba & Mealer, 2009, pp. 34-35). This convergence of cinematic fantasy and rural improvisation reinforces the truth claim of the narrative by demonstrating how global imaginaries are materially reconstituted under conditions of scarcity. Credibility here arises from the tension between aspiration and material constraint, a tension that readers would recognise as characteristic of rural childhoods. In these texts, cultural artefacts function as evidentiary anchors that mediate between private memory and collective recognition. By allowing objects to bear the weight of verification, the memoirs advance truth claims that are experiential rather than declarative, strengthening narrative credibility without recourse to overt claims of authenticity. In this way, material culture becomes central to the ethical and epistemological work of childhood retrospection.

Certain objects in memoirs carry an inherent credibility by virtue of their historical function, especially those tied to systems of governance, regulation, and social control. In *Born a Crime*, Trevor Noah foregrounds material artefacts that function as documentary evidence, bridging the personal and the historical, and establishing a truth claim grounded in lived experience. One of the most explicit examples is the passbook, the legal identification document that controlled the movement of Black South Africans under apartheid. Noah provides meticulous physical description of the passbook as its worn pages, official stamps, and the bureaucratic precision of its entries (Noah, 2016, pp. 22-24). By emphasizing these details, the memoir does more than evoke personal experience; it situates the narrative within a verifiable historical framework. Readers familiar with archival photographs, government records, or secondary histories of apartheid immediately recognize the passbook's existence and function. The repetition of the passbook in the narrative reinforces its status as a material witness to systemic oppression, validating the memoir's historical truth claim (Sparks, 2014).

Similarly, other objects, although less formally bureaucratic, function as markers of socio-economic constraint and historical reality. For instance, Noah's Volkswagen Beetle, described as chronically malfunctioning and unreliable (Noah, 2016, pp. 57-59), embodies the limitations imposed by structural poverty in post-apartheid South Africa. While not legally mandated like the passbook, the car's persistent fragility documents the material conditions of racialized disadvantage. Its repeated breakdowns, vivid technical descriptions, and centrality to everyday mobility transform it into a symbolic document, linking personal experience to broader social inequities. Housing and neighborhood infrastructures also carry documentary weight. Noah details the cramped, unstable, and often improvised dwellings of Alexandra township (pp. 45-48), which not only reflect personal hardship but also serve as

corroborated evidence of systemic neglect documented in sociological and historical records (Christopher, 1994). The convergence of these objects, passbooks, cars, houses, demonstrates a layered approach to credibility. Formal bureaucratic artefacts provide direct documentary authority, while recurring material traces of inequality supply indirect but verifiable testimony.

Educational and Technical Objects as Material Proof

Educational materials and technical devices in southern African childhood memoirs function as more than descriptive props. They act as epistemic artefacts that convert subjective experience into materially legible evidence. Within life writing, such objects anchor credibility by externalising knowledge, skill, and learning processes in forms that can be imaginatively verified by the reader. Lejeune (1989) argues, that autobiographical truth depends not only on identity alignment but on the capacity of the narrative to produce referential effects. These are moments where the reader can recognise the narrated world as materially and cognitively plausible. Educational and technical objects become evidentiary placement within the narrative and easily invite scrutiny, reconstruction, and verification, positioning the memoirist simultaneously as actor, observer, and demonstrator of knowledge.

Kamkwamba's *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* constructs credibility through sustained attention to procedural detail, transforming technical objects into sites of epistemic demonstration. His engagement with discarded radios, for instance, is narrated not as a symbolic gesture but as a methodical process of inquiry. He says, "I took apart the radio piece by piece, trying to understand how each part worked" (Kamkwamba & Mealer, 2009, p. 46). The emphasis here is not merely on possession but on disassembly as a mode of knowing. This logic intensifies in his account of experimentation with electrical components, "I connected wires to the dynamo and turned it slowly...a small light flickered" (p. 69). The incremental nature of this discovery as marked by trial, error, and partial success, renders the narrative cognitively traceable. Further, when constructing the windmill, Kamkwamba foregrounds both improvisation and constraint. He says that he used blue gum trees for the frame and an old bicycle for parts (p. 173). The specificity of materials, coupled with the sequencing of actions, enables the reader to reconstruct the procedure, thereby testing its plausibility. Such moments exemplify performative dimension of autobiography (Eakin, 1999) where identity is constituted through demonstrable acts rather than declarative claims. Kamkwamba's technical objects thus function as material proofs of competence that translate abstract intelligence into observable practice. The narrative's credibility emerges not from asserting ingenuity but from staging it as a process that can be followed, evaluated, and imaginatively replicated.

In this sense, the windmill is not merely an outcome but an epistemic object that embodies the labour of knowing.

Conversely, *Twenty Chickens for a Saddle* by Robyn Scott mobilises educational materials to construct a different, yet equally compelling, form of credibility. Scott's dog-eared exercise books, filled with "scribbled sums, half-finished drawings, and notes in the margins" (Scott, 2008, p. 28), do not demonstrate technical mastery in a conventional sense. Instead, they bear the marks of an improvisational and experiential pedagogy. The irregularity of entries as the "pages that shifted from mathematics to sketches of animals within a few lines" (p. 102) which signals a learning environment that resists formal standardisation. Here, the material object does not verify precision but traces process: it records the movement of a child's attention, curiosity, and adaptation. Importantly, the worn quality of these books, "corners folded, pages smudged with dust and ink" (p. 29), functions as an index of use, embedding the narrative in a tactile reality emerging credibility through material traces that attest to lived experience beyond narrative assertion (Smith & Watson, 2010). Scott's exercise books operate precisely in this matrix because they authenticate an alternative mode of education grounded in observation, experimentation, and environmental engagement. The absence of formal structure does not diminish epistemic authority; rather, it reconfigures it, suggesting that knowledge can be validated through adaptive practice and embodied interaction with the world.

Kamkwamba's technical apparatus and Scott's educational materials reveal the diverse ways in which objects mediate autobiographical truth. In Kamkwamba's narrative, credibility is anchored in procedural rigor and replicable technique, in Scott's, it resides in the visible traces of learning as an open-ended, adaptive process. Yet in both cases, objects function as epistemic bridges between memory and materiality. They allow readers to move beyond the narrator's claim to knowledge and into a position of evaluative engagement, reconstructing actions, assessing plausibility, and recognising the textures of lived experience.

These material artefacts, therefore, collapse the distance between narration and verification. By rendering knowledge visible and processual, they transform memoir from a purely retrospective account into a quasi-demonstrative practice. Credibility, in this framework, is neither abstract nor solely textual. It is grounded in the physical instantiation of knowing. Educational and technical objects, therefore, do not merely support autobiographical truth claims, they actively produce them by converting subjective memory into materially testable evidence.

Domestic, Farmstead, and Household Objects as Ethical Witnesses

Domestic and farmstead objects in childhood memoirs derive their credibility not from spectacle but from habitual use, repetition, and embodied proximity. Their authority lies in their familiarity, which anchors narrative truth in shared, recognisable everyday objects. Unlike singular or extraordinary artefacts, these objects accrue evidentiary force through duration: they are handled, worn, repaired, and re-encountered across time. As such, they function less as symbols than as ethical witnesses, registering the conditions of living through their persistence within routines of care, labour, and survival.

In *Twenty Chickens for a Saddle*, Robyn Scott constructs childhood consciousness through sustained attention to domestic and farmstead materiality. Objects such as feeding buckets, dust baths, and improvised toys are rendered with tactile precision, situating memory within the rhythms of rural life rather than retrospective idealisation. For instance, her account of chickens' dust-bathing, "they flung themselves into the dry earth, wings beating, feathers coated in fine powder" (Scott, 2008, p. 35), does more than describe animal behaviour. It situates the observing child within a cycle of repetition that demands attentiveness. The scene's emphasis on bodily motion and recurrence resists artistic beautification, but foregrounds a disciplined mode of witnessing in which ethical awareness emerges from sustained observation. This ethic of attentiveness extends to objects of play and making. Scott recalls collecting seed pods that were "brittle in the hand, their surfaces rough and uneven" (p. 89), transforming them into ornaments or toys. The descriptive focus on texture and fragility underscores a pedagogy of improvisation in which value is not inherent but produced through interaction. Such objects testify to a childhood structured by resourcefulness rather than consumption. Their temporariness that makes them liable to breakages, decay, or be discarded, further resists nostalgic closure, insisting on the temporality of use. As a result, credibility is anchored not in the object's permanence but in its integration into lived practice. The chickens themselves also operate as living material witnesses. Scott's attention to their individual behaviours, "one hen refused to roost with the others, pacing restlessly at dusk" (p. 119), transforms them into agents within the narrative's ethical field. Episodes of injury or death are narrated without sentimental excess but registered as moments of moral instruction. In recounting the loss of a bird, Scott notes that "its absence was immediate, a gap in the routine that could not be ignored" (p. 121). The emphasis here falls on disruption of habit rather than emotional spectacle. Through daily acts of feeding, cleaning, and observation, the child narrator acquires authority not by claiming knowledge but by remaining in proximity to processes of care and loss. Credibility, therefore, emerges

through a sustained engagement with material and nonhuman life that disciplines perception and ethical response.

Mathabane's *Kaffir Boy* also constructs credibility through worn household objects that register deprivation through endurance. Items such as school uniforms and shoes recur not as isolated details but as accumulative markers of economic precarity. Mathabane recalls that his uniform was "patched so many times that it no longer resembled its original form" (Mathabane, 1986, p. 64), foregrounding repair as a condition of continued use. Similarly, his shoes are described as "split at the sides, the soles thinning with each day's walk" (p. 98). These objects do not require interpretive amplification. Their material condition speaks directly to the constraints of lived experience. The repetitive appearance of these items across the memoir such as, "I wore the same shoes until they could no longer hold together" (p. 141), produces a sense of duration that anchors memory in embodied continuity. As Eakin (2008) argues, autobiographical credibility is often secured through the temporal extension of experience, where recurring details establish the persistence of conditions over time. Mathabane's refusal to aestheticise these objects, linking them instead to discomfort, shame, and perseverance, further reinforces their evidentiary status. They function as ethical witnesses precisely because they are ordinary, recognisable, and resistant to narrative embellishment.

In conclusion, the domestic and household objects, in these memoirs, stabilise autobiographical truth by anchoring it in practices that must be learned, repeated, and endured. Their credibility does not arise from declarative claims but from their integration into habitual action. By foregrounding use over symbolism, these memoirs align with Paul Ricoeur's (2004) conception of memory as embedded in lived temporality, where meaning emerges through repetition and re-engagement rather than isolated events. Domestic objects thus function as ethical anchors that tether the narrative to the material conditions of existence, ensuring that recollection remains accountable to the rhythms and constraints of everyday life.

Extra-textual Corroboration and Public Witness

While domestic objects secure credibility within the narrative, certain artefacts extend this authority beyond the text into the public domain, where they function as sites of extra-textual corroboration. As Smith & Watson (2010) observe, autobiographical truth is often reinforced through the circulation of narrative elements across multiple media, producing distributed witnessing. In such cases, objects and achievements referenced in the memoir acquire independent visibility, enabling readers to verify claims through external recognition.

The windmill in *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* functions as a key site of extra-textual corroboration. Within the memoir, its construction culminates in a moment of communal validation. When Kamkwamba says, “When I finally switched it on, the bulbs lit up and people shouted in disbelief” (Kamkwamba & Mealer, 2009, p. 214), this scene is not only presented as narrative climax, but also as an intra-textual witnessing, where credibility is immediately socialised through the presence of others who observe and respond to the event. This extra-textual verification is also captured in the memoir’s documented afterlives. Kamkwamba explicitly notes his invitation to present the windmill at wider forums, marking its transition from local artefact to publicly recognised innovation. He writes, “I was asked to speak about my windmill at a conference...people from all over the world came to see it” (p. 246). He also adds in the epilogue, “In June 2008, I travelled to Cape Town, South Africa, for the World Economic Forum on Africa, and spoke about technology in emerging countries. I was part of a panel discussion moderated by Dan Shine from Advanced Micro Devices Initiative.” These inclusions are crucial because they provide textual evidence of the object’s movement into institutional visibility. The windmill is no longer confined to memory or village recognition but enters a network of global validation, where its existence is independently witnessed, recorded, and circulated. These instances validate the windmill’s existence beyond the memoir as a publicly documented artefact. In this sense, its credibility is not asserted but distributed across multiple platforms of witnessing, textual, communal, institutional, and medial and emphasises the demonstrable fact that the memoir itself records the object’s transition into broader circuits of recognition. The windmill becomes a corroborative artefact precisely because it is traceable across narrative, event, and representation, allowing autobiographical memory to align with independently verifiable forms of public evidence.

In *Kaffir Boy*, tennis functions not only as lived experience but as a pathway into institutional visibility and mobility that can be textually substantiated. Within the memoir, Mathabane frames tennis as an escape from structural violence: “...tennis became my only escape from the suffocating limits of the ghetto” (Mathabane, 1986, p. 172). Crucially, this escape is not left at the level of aspiration but is narratively extended into concrete opportunities mediated by institutional actors. He recounts how his talent attracts external support, noting that “my tennis began to open doors I had never imagined possible” (p. 180). This is further reinforced when he describes receiving assistance that enables him to pursue education abroad, marking a transition from local survival to transnational mobility: “I was given the chance to go to America...a chance I knew I could not waste” (p. 238). These moments provide textual evidence of institutional recognition, from coaches, sponsors, and educational structures, which validate the narrative of

self-transformation. The memoir therefore forms cycle of verification in which Mathabane's account of escaping apartheid poverty through tennis is substantiated by the very opportunities it narrates. This trajectory is embedded within a broader political and historical framework, as he references the repression of resistance movements, like "the ANC had been forced underground and outlawed" (p. 229), and the symbolic impact of figures such as Arthur Ashe, whose visit to South Africa (p. 231) links personal aspiration to global circuits of recognition. In this sense, autobiographical credibility is not secured by isolated testimony but by its extra alignment with institutional pathways of sporting, educational, and political, which are themselves socially verifiable. The narrative becomes legible as truth precisely because it traces a movement from marginalisation to recognition through structures that exist beyond the self.

Noah's construction of extra-textual corroboration in *Born a Crime* is grounded in the memoir's own reflexive awareness of storytelling as a performative and repeatable act. Noah explicitly frames narrative as something shaped for audience reception, noting that "stories are how we make sense of things" (Noah, 2016, p. 12). This meta-commentary positions the memoir not as a closed account but as part of an ongoing process of narration that extends into other public forms. His foundational claim, "I was born a crime" (p. 3), is not confined to the memoir but recurs as a central explanatory motif in his public storytelling, including stand-up performances such as Trevor Noah: African American and interviews conducted during his tenure on *The Daily Show* (Showtime, 2013). In these contexts, Noah retells episodes of his childhood, particularly those concerning racial classification, policing, and maternal defiance, in ways that are recognisably continuous with the memoir's narrative structure. These repetitions produce a process of public validation where credibility is reinforced through recognisability and coherence rather than assumed factuality. The audience's response, often laughter, does not trivialise the narrative but signals comprehension and shared recognition of its internal logic. As such, the autobiographical self is not only narrated but re-narrated across platforms, with each iteration contributing to a cumulative framework of verification grounded in consistency, visibility, and receptivity.

Robyn Scott's *Twenty Chickens for a Saddle* extends this logic through a quieter but equally significant register of material corroboration. The memoir's depictions of rural Botswana life such as domestic labour, veterinary improvisation, and farmstead survival, are anchored in practices that remain materially legible outside the text. Objects such as veterinary tools, livestock enclosures, and improvised household materials gain their evidentiary force through recognisability within rural economies of practice. Scott's recollections of caring for animals, where "injuries were treated with whatever

could be found in the kitchen or shed” (Scott, 2008, p. 118), gain credibility not through technical precision alone but through their resonance with what scholars describe as local or indigenous knowledge systems like forms of practical, experience-based knowledge developed outside formal institutions (Agrawal, 1995; Sillitoe, 1998). Such practices, often documented in studies of rural subsistence and informal veterinary care, rely on improvisation, observation, and resourcefulness rather than codified expertise. The memoir’s authority thus derives from its alignment with these recognisable knowledge practices, even where it does not explicitly name them. In this way, the text participates in a dispersed network of verification in which lived experience is continually cross-referenced with external knowledge systems.

In summary, extra-textual corroboration in the selected memoirs functions as a mechanism through which autobiographical truth is stabilised beyond narrative closure. Whether through Kamkwamba’s globally visible windmill, Mathabane’s institutionally validated athletic trajectory, Noah’s transmedia performance circulation, or Scott’s materially recognisable rural lifeworld, credibility is reinforced through public witnessing. In each case, the memoir does not stand alone as the sole guarantor of truth, but also operates within a wider ecology of evidence in which objects, achievements, performances, and social recognitions collectively authenticate the narrated self. Autobiographical authority, therefore, emerges not from isolated testimony but from the sustained interaction between memory, materiality, and public legibility.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that credibility in southern African childhood memoirs is neither a given nor a simple by-product of fact-checking, but a crafted effect produced through multiple, overlapping strategies. First, the autobiographical pact is sealed by contractual overtures, technical catalogues, legal artefacts, forbidden texts, and confessional prefaces that invite the reader’s trust before a single scene unfolds. Second, material proof emerges as objects become tactile vouchers of presence such as knives, radios, chickens, and seed-pods bear the imprint of child protagonists at work, converting private memory into public evidence. Finally, reflexive gaps and irony acknowledge what cannot be known with certainty together with lost details, provisional statistics, and ironic omissions, thereby converting doubt into a sign of ethical transparency rather than weakness. Therefore, these five dimensions of contractuality, materiality, perspectivity, sociability, and reflexivity, form a composite architecture of trust that transforms individual testimony into a shared, verifiable, and ethically charged narrative

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