

DOI: 10.31648/pl.10745

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## Nature Writing or Recovery Memoir: *The Outrun* by Amy Liptrot

### Przyrodopisarstwo czy wspomnienia o powrocie do trzeźwości: *The Outrun* autorstwa Amy Liptrot<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** alcoholism, sobriety, memoir, nature, autobiography

**Słowa kluczowe:** alkoholizm, trzeźwość, pamiętnik, natura, autobiografizm

#### Abstract

This article examines *The Outrun* (2016), Amy Liptrot's distinctive recovery memoir, which stands out amid the proliferation of similar works published in recent years. Most literary critics have focused on the memoir's setting and, consequently, categorised the book as nature writing, largely overlooking its engagement with recovery. The principal aim of this article is to view *The Outrun* first and foremost as a literary record of confronting addiction and discovering ways to live in sobriety. Particular attention is given to Liptrot's symbolic and metaphorical use of the natural world as a means of documenting her recovery.

Autobiographical writing does not necessarily imply a full account of one's life, as is often mistakenly believed, particularly when it takes the form of a memoir whose time frame covers a certain period, rather than entire lifetime. These can include stories of years of fame, authored by artists, influential figures, as well as all types of so-called celebrities whose memoirs are often "(ghost-)written for the sole purpose of staying in the headlines" (Manavis). Recent years, though,

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<sup>1</sup> The term *przyrodopisarstwo* was proposed by Joanna Durczak (2010: 9) as the Polish equivalent of *nature writing*; Liptrot's memoir was translated into Polish as *Wýgon* (Kaja Gucio 2024).

have also witnessed a boom in the memoirs penned by ordinary people (Barnett) of all walks of life, to such an extent that “celebrities have largely been left behind” (Walker).

There are, however, memoirs which serve purposes other than a mere record of the author’s life, including the ones which address and challenge past traumas, such as atrocities of war or being a victim of child abuse. Sven Birkerts proposes the term “traumatic memoir” (145) and discusses it further in the chapter titled “Trauma and Memory” (145–188). Similar focus can be found in a much more extended study, *Still Here: Memoirs of Trauma Illness and Loss* (2019), whose editors define trauma-focused memoirs as a “compelling and therapeutic form of storytelling” (Avieson et al. 12). Indeed, as Celia Hunt observes, “writers affirm improved physical or psychological well-being by passing on their story to others” (737). In such instances, memoirs can be a form of self-therapy, if not even a case of “recovering identity through writing” (Mercer 72). A good example are memoirs focalising addiction and, more so, the process of recovery. Most of them are authored by former alcoholics, but, contrary to what one might expect, they are not stylistically homogenous, for although alcohol dependence is the prime concern here, they do not always follow the same pattern. On the one hand, there can be memoirs graphically describing alcoholics who plunge into the gutter, as is the case with John Healy’s *The Grass Arena* (1988), in which, as Colin MacCabe describes it, Healy provides an “account of his own descent to hell” (258). On the other hand, there are narratives of functioning alcoholics, such as the one written by the British journalist and editor Rosie Boycott, titled *A Nice Girl Like Me* (2009). Moreover, there are memoirs which focalise, as it were, alcoholic correlates, one example being Jowita Bydlowska’s *Drunk Mom: A Memoir* (2013), which, as the title indicates, is as much about alcoholism as it is about maternity. The manner of narration may vary, but the common denominator in recovery memoirs is the fact that they concentrate on recording the process of sobering up and establishing a physical and mental equilibrium. Consequently, they are referred to as recovery memoirs, rather than alcoholic memoirs, a potentially misleading label suggesting a testimony of one’s drinking years. Whatever the focal point, there has been a deluge of recovery memoirs in the last two or three decades, most of them written by women, a fact which calls for a separate study of a more sociological nature.

One memoir which is undeniably dissimilar to the recovery accounts mentioned above is Amy Liptrot’s *The Outrun* (2016). Right after its publication it was unanimously hailed a literary accomplishment, but there were only singular voices labelling it simply as “an uncompromising account of addiction and

recovery” (Norbury). In fact, *The Outrun* proved to pose a definitional quandary, its idiosyncrasy most conspicuous in the critical responses, as it has provided fuel to all kinds of interpretations, including an anthropological perspective, in which Liptrot is labelled as “an epitome of Wild Woman Archetype” (Gururani 52). Even more *outré* seems the claim that in Liptrot’s memoir “neoliberalism connects to neo-imperialism”, and that it can be defined as “another first-person narration by an abject subject turning into a successful neoliberal self regardless of the problematic situation of post-crisis Britain” (Fischer 108, 111).

However, most critics and scholars shifted their attention to the memoir’s setting being the Orkney Islands, where Liptrot struggles to stay sober. As a result, the undeniable fact that she is “blending searing memoir with sublime nature writing” (Johnstone 2016) became a premiss inviting enough to steer the critical analysis principally towards nature, often ignoring the fact that Liptrot’s fundamental rationale behind writing the memoir was her post-alcoholic recovery. What could have triggered such responses, or at least become an influential factor, was the fact that in 2016 *The Outrun* won the Wainwright Prize for Nature Writing, whose sponsors and partners are wildlife charities, such as The Wildlife Trusts or The National Trust. The prize certainly foregrounded this particular facet of Liptrot’s memoir and led some critics to pigeonhole the book as a model example of nonfictional writing about nature. Patrick Barkham, for instance, includes a fragment of the book in his 2021 collection titled *The Wild Isles: An Anthology of the Best of British and Irish Nature Writing*. Similarly, somehow ignoring Liptrot’s primary purpose of staying in the Orkney Islands, Pippa Marland concludes in her *Ecocriticism and the Island: Readings from the British-Irish Archipelago* (2023) that Liptrot “revisits and reassesses the culture and life of Orkney” and, in consequence, “opens a space for herself to acknowledge and claim her home” (179).

Admittedly, dissecting Liptrot’s memoir from the nature-oriented angle is tempting, to an extent even justifiable. After all, the setting is the Orkneys, where Liptrot’s self-reflection on the past and observations of the natural world help to harness her alcohol problem. This fact has been acknowledged by a number of critics and scholars researching nature writing, one example being Tim Haningan, who concludes that *The Outrun* “is plainly an exemplary text in the ‘healing female’ cluster within new nature writing” (22). In a similar vein, Jos Smith mentions *The Outrun* in his article titled “The New Nature Writing”, in which he points out that the genre has numerous variants:

“[n]ew modes have emerged in recent years, most prominently perhaps, the story of mental or physical recovery intertwined with a narrative about place or

animals” (268). In this context, it seems that Smith’s proposal to employ the term “place writing” (267) is much more inclusive and does justice to those memoirists who only utilise elements of nature writing in their memoirs, as well as, conversely, nature writers who use their writing as remedial means. This is exactly Richard Mabey’s intention in *Nature Cure* (2005), namely to overcome his depression, or to “exorcise” it, as he puts it, “by this kind of exposure” (224).

The present article aims to consider Liptrot’s book predominantly as a recovery memoir, but one which is atypical, for it partly fits into the mould of nature writing, though rather in the sense of ‘place writing’ suggested by Jos Smith. Consequently, the further analysis will acknowledge that *The Outrun* offers a “fusion of nature writing with a stark, moving memoir of addiction” (O’Donnell), but most of all this article will adhere to and agree with the claim that it is “a memoir of alcoholism and recovery that has a profoundly spatial dimension” (Will Self). Thus, without downsizing the importance of the nature element, this article will shift the weight of interest towards rehabilitation and recovery. The discussion will focus on Liptrot’s choice of recovery milieu and on her use of topographic symbolism and metaphors in documenting her recovery.

The title of Liptrot’s book does not patently suggest itself as a recovery memoir<sup>2</sup>, nor, in fact, a book which falls into the category of nature writing, for ‘outrun’ as a verb denotes *surpassing* or *running faster*, and as a noun it stands for part of the *ski jumping field* on which the jumpers land and come to a stop. Figuratively, one can apply both of them to the book, for Liptrot is trying to ‘outrun’ her addiction and put an end to it. However, what the eponymous *outrun* really is, is explained at the beginning of the memoir and refers to Liptrot’s family farm in the Orkney Islands. As she explains, it is “a stretch of coastland at the top of the farm where the grass is always short, pummelled by wind and sea spray year-round” (Liptrot 2). This stretch of land is important, but not because Liptrot decides to write about the natural beauty of the place where she grew up. While much of the memoir is filled with observations of nature, it has to be emphasised that Liptrot does not move there with the purpose of writing about it, for it happens as a byproduct in the wake of trying to stay sober after a period of rehabilitation in London. The choice of place, apart from a seemingly obvious return to her former home, has an escapist touch to it, one which plays a key role in her recovery process. Liptrot explains this by putting the accent on the remoteness of her retreat:

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<sup>2</sup> Recovery memoirs usually advertise their content in most revealing titles, two good examples being Tania Glyde’s *Cleaning Up: How I Gave Up Drinking and Lived* (2008) and Timothy Donohue’s *In the Open: Diary of a Homeless Alcoholic* (1996).

“Britain is an island off Europe, Orkney is an island off Britain, Westray is an island off Orkney, Papay is an island off Westray and the Holm of Papay is at yet another remove” (201).

However, apart from geographically distancing herself from London, where Liptrot plunged into binge drinking and later into a full-scale dependence, the choice of remote seclusion has a more symbolic dimension. Her destination pertains to a sense of bond and connection, a feature often present in memoirs, which, as Helga Schwam observes, “locate a self in the world, suggesting a certain belonging” (24). Liptrot signals it in her memoir every now and again, most straightforwardly in her reference to the local custom of sounding out one’s identity cohesion: “the old Orkadian way to ask someone where they come from: ‘Where do you belong?’” (18). This sense of connection and affinity is something which Liptrot lost when she went to London and became alcohol dependent. She explains this in the following way:

When first I left Orkney, my friend Sean gave me a compass. I used to wear it round my neck at parties, and when people asked about it, I would tell them it was so I could find my way home. Wherever I was, north was always home. I left the compass somewhere one night. Then I was totally lost (167).

When pondering upon the Orkneys being a point of destination, Liptrot remarks that “[i]ncomers to islands, these days, are still either looking for or running away from something” (227). She seems to conjoin the two, because her return is part of her recovery and at the same time she wants to leave her London experience behind. After some time spent in the Orkneys, Liptrot remarks that her “centre of gravity has moved north” (149), which is not merely about changing her geographic coordinates, but, more figuratively, about finding a psychosomatic equipoise after alcoholic years spent in London.

The spatial shift is particularly significant because Liptrot’s memoir is more about nurturing sobriety than dissecting the years of heavy drinking: “[g]etting sober is one thing ... but staying sober is a daily challenge” (80). It is this challenge her memoir focuses on in particular. In consequence, Liptrot does not dwell heavily on the past, but on the recovery phase which is central to the story. While she interweaves past and present by means of “manipulations of chronology and sequence” (Hogg and Simonsen 1) in a kind of circular narrative, with fragmented flashbacks of her turbulent time in London, such alcoholic vignettes are subsidiary to the here-and-now musings on addiction. Adrian Gill, in his wittily titled memoir *Pour Me* (2016), writes about undertaking “an emotional archeology” (8) and a kind of research aimed to find out whether his own alcoholism was “a cause

or a symptom” (240), numbing of existential pains or being their source. In a similar vein, Liptrot turns retrospective, her temporal shifts evoking childhood and the unfortunate twists of her early adulthood: “I was a girl on a farm on an island and I’d woken up to find it was twelve years later and for some reason I was in a rehabilitation centre in London” (66). She acknowledges that there is a correlation between her “addictive and obsessive tendencies” (191) and her binge drinking as well as concomitant behavioural patterns which unfolded in London:

I was a physically brave and foolhardy child. I climbed up stone dykes and onto shed roofs. I threw my body from high rafters onto hay or wool bags below. Later I plunged myself into parties – alcohol, drugs, relationships, sex – wanting to taste the extremes, not worrying about the consequences, always seeking sensation and raging against those who warned me away from the edge. My life was rough and windy and tangled (20).

As has been said, Liptrot’s retrospectives to her turbulent period in London are just a handful of graphic, occasionally revulsive images allowing the reader to visualise the extent to which she gradually degraded herself:

I’ve been trying to remember my last drink, almost two years ago, the weekend before I started the detox programme. It must have been the dregs of someone else’s, picked up at the end of the night in a pub in south London as I stumbled around desperately (209).

However, instead of clichéd images of an alcoholic much more valuable are reflections on the recovery process, in particular the rehabilitation centres Liptrot frequented in London, whose methods and procedures she questions:

The essential paradox of AA/NA, and the treatment centre, is that the thing we are trying to eradicate from our lives – the thing we used obsessively to seek out and consume – is the very thing we spend all day discussing, analysing, reminiscing about. Many would say that it is simply replacing one way of being fixated with it for another (206).

In consequence, Liptrot rejects the AA’s *modus operandi* as well as its jargon, or what she calls “therapy platitudes” (99). In other words, hers is a plan not to follow the stream for fear of not being able “to leave the world of addiction”, simply because within the frame of the AA programme she feels she will remain “defined by alcohol – or, more accurately, *defined by its absence*” (206). Even her humorous remark concerning lexical repertoire confirms the above comment: “In the treatment centre, saying ‘Cheers,’ instead of ‘Thanks,’ was a risky territory” (69).

Liptrot's memoir is interspersed with various reflections and comments on her rehabilitation period in London institutions, but, more importantly, she arrives at a conclusion which somehow justifies the alternative form of therapy she is seeking in the Orkneys: "I stopped drinking to do things, rather than to spend my time talking about stopping drinking"(164). Indeed, activity in lieu of passive brooding over the progress of recovery is what Liptrot does in the Orkneys, particularly that, as she observes in her reflections on alcohol dependence, her own case to be exact, the urge to be active not only reflects character but is also a form of transference, which she explains in the following manner: "'[c]ross-addiction' is the idea that, in the absence of drink, alcoholics will transfer their addictive behaviour to something else" (189). Reminiscing about her London period, Liptrot admits the intensity of her addiction: "I was wasted but I wanted more" (28). In the Orkneys, she finds numerous substitutions, sometimes seemingly simple, yet requiring some experience and expertise, as mending drystone walls: "I'm repairing these dykes at the same time as I'm putting myself back together" (90). Yet, the best example in this context is her joining "an eccentric group called the Orkney Polar Bears who, every Saturday morning year-round, go swimming in the sea at different locations around the island" (193), of which she writes extensively in the chapter titled "Sea Swimming" (193–200). Her remark that "chilly immersion is addictive" (196) is paralleled with various aspects of alcoholism treatment to which she refers. In this particular case, she defines the new experience as her "own method of hydrotherapy, historically used in the treatment of alcoholics" (199). Although the comment by one of *The Outrun*'s reviewers that "extremes are where Liptrot feels she wants to be" (Addies 2016) applies to her memoir in general, "Sea Swimming" is a chapter which perfectly reflects this feature of her character.

Place-wise, the Orkneys, as Liptrot's internal monologues reveal, signify the very core of her (self)-exploration: "I was chasing a promise that never delivered and now I'm looking to the surprises of my natural surroundings to stir my imagination" (100). Liptrot's reflections on addiction and sobriety interweave a motif of place as well as that of a journey, which she employs figuratively to write about her recovery: "I was finding that being sober could be kind of a trip" (73). The very same metaphor is applied to (her) alcoholism, though in this case she defines it as "a journey that never reaches its destination" (218). This motif of a journey is well-expounded in her memoir, literally and metaphorically defining her transformation, almost an alcoholic's quantum leap, as it were: "I've swung from active alcoholism to strict sobriety, from inner city to outer isle" (274). Liptrot is emphatic on the importance of this locational shift, which she uses to define her



change. The manner of her referential comments about the alcoholic past and sober present is both corresponding and contrastive. Liptrot's reaction to various natural phenomena and topography is often a revelation, as if she were discovering a new reality: "I am exploring a very strange environment, like being in space. It reminds me of the thrill I got the first time I went to a dark nightclub under the railway arches in the city, seeing ornate Goths and pierced metallers" (256). Eugene Walter observes that "[t]he real "sense" of a place ... is twofold. On the one hand, people feel it; on the other hand, they grasp its meaning" (2). It seems that Liptrot's choice of her 'sobering environment' allows her to oscillate between the two: she feels the place, the more so because she spent her childhood and teens here, but she also realises the more symbolic dimension, one which is relevant in her own case. One aspect, for instance, is the barrenness of the Orkney Islands, something Liptrot emphasises at the very beginning of her memoir, yet in a manner in which this "abundance of space" (3) functions as a liberating agent in the process of Liptrot's recovery. In the final part of her memoir, she summarises her activity in the Orkneys as "visiting increasingly remote northern places, following the map to the edge" (239). This stands in sharp contrast to the urban landscape, which used to entice her with the easy access to alcohol. As Liptrot recalls, she "knew the location of every twenty-four-hour garage and off-licence in a five-mile radius" (40). The Orkneys' geographical remoteness and seclusion is of much help whenever Liptrot has a moment of alcohol craving, for "it's good thing the island has no twenty-four-hour off-licences." (129).

Discussing Liptrot's memoir, Jessica White accentuates the "relationships between internal and external nature" (98). Indeed, this connection is pervading throughout the whole memoir. Its function is twofold: firstly, it is a reminder of Liptrot's past self-destructive force; secondly, it allows to draw an analogy between the destructive power of nature and the devastating effects of Liptrot's addiction. As Daniel Mogford observes, "Liptrot draws an extended metaphor linking her evolving recovery with the unfinished geology of the land to which she has returned" (402). Liptrot's contemplation of the land and natural forces instantly evokes memories of her own predicament, though this may not be overt: "I think about the forces that I have experienced living on the island" (...) I think of erosion and corrosion" (...) "I think about entropy, the concept behind the inevitable decline from order to disorder" (216). However, there are also direct comparisons between forces of nature and her own alcoholic plight, as in the images of boats being shipwrecked in the Orkneys, which Liptrot repeatedly mentions, as if reiterating the importance of the parallel. She does it, for instance, in a detailed depiction of what she herself witnesses: "down below, a large fishing



boat was balancing on a sloping outcrop of rock. With each incoming wave the vessel rocked, unsure whether to be washed back out to sea or be pushed the other way, into the cliff” (53). Liptrot’s follow-up is to provide a similitude, linking the image of the boat to her own alcoholic experience: “Almost twenty years later, like the boat, I was in a precarious position. The division between my appearance-maintaining daytime reality and the secrets of my nights was slipping. The cracks were showing” (55). Similar juxtapositions are evoked by the waves Liptrot is observing and ‘dissecting’ lexically, as if she were trying to pinpoint different type of impact they could have: “There are different types of breaking waves – spilling, collapsing, surging – but although they collapse in different manners, there is only as much height any wave can sustain before it comes crashing down” (214). Here again, the destructive power of the sea, much as other natural phenomena depicted in the memoir, echoes Liptrot’s earlier recollections, which from the very beginning of her memoir are figuratively equated to her alcoholic past: “The alcohol I’d been pouring into myself for years was like the repeated action of the waves on the cliffs and it was beginning to cause physical damage” (14). Finally, a more personal affinity, as it were, “a whale corpse” she finds “decomposing” (95), and beached whales “collapsing under their own weight” (96). This concept of being “washed-up” (97) seems to reverberate in Liptrot’s reflections and becomes quite symbolic of her own transformation. Referring to her arrival in the Orkneys, Liptrot recalls the following: “When I first came back to Orkney I felt like the strandings of jellyfish, laid out on the rocks for all to see. I was washed-up” (265). In the closing passages of her memoir she returns to the alcohol-induced havoc wreaked on her body and mind, this time concluding that the London years are behind her and that she can now have a different perspective, one of a conscious abstainer: “I might have been washed-up but I can be renewed” (276).

## Conclusion

As has been mentioned, Amy Liptrot’s singular style of memoir stirred much critical interest<sup>3</sup>. In general, recovery memoirs focus on graphic depictions of the drinking years and provide accounts of therapeutic means to achieve a lasting sobriety. Most memoirists chronicle with precision alcoholic degradation and the

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, even the film industry showed an interest, as the adaptation of the book, directed by Nora Fingscheidt, was premiered in January 2024.

subsequent rehabilitation treatment, often considering a recovery memoir as a form of catharsis. In the case of Amy Liptrot the cathartic effect stems not so much from writing per se, but from the experience of the time she spent in her Orkadian ‘rehabilitation centre’, where, to use her own expression, she found “anchorages” (110).

Nature and geographic location play a key role not only in her recovery as such, but also in establishing a perspective. Liptrot “uses meditations on place and identity as a way of trying to understand her own descent into the maelstrom of addictive illness” (Will Self), and this seems the very core of her memoir. However, Liptrot’s memoir is not only about recovering from alcohol dependence, for it is also “a story of personality formation” (Schwam 12). Her long-lasting communion with nature and its physicality has a restorative power, but also fuels her with stamina. “I am strengthening new pathways in my brain” (90) is the phrase she uses to define this gradual transformation. As she explains about her London years, “drinking took hold of [her]” (39) and now, after a long period spent in the Orkneys, she finally realises that it is the place which is “holding [her] together and keeping [her] up” (137) and “holding onto [her]” (143).

Perhaps Daniel Mogford offers a most conciliative definition which should satisfy all perspectives on Liptrot’s memoir, also in terms of its generic identity: “*The Outrun* is a story of addiction and recovery, an account of dislocation from and rediscovery of origins, and an ode to the rugged Scottish Isles” (402). The extent to which *The Outrun* can be read from the nature writing vantage point can be a matter of readers’ and critics’ interpretation, but it is certainly first and foremost a recovery memoir, though one which is firmly embedded in the landscape and wildlife of the Orkneys, using the setting in a both literal and figurative manner to provide the story of Liptrot’s recovery.

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