**Keepsakes**

**Mark Windsor**

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**Abstract:** Keepsakes are nostalgic objects par excellence. We value keepsakes because they prompt nostalgic memories of the past. But perhaps more importantly, we also value them because they afford a feeling of contact with that which they remind us of. Drawing on work in philosophy and psychology, this chapter aims to give an account of the nature and value of keepsakes as nostalgic objects. Keepsakes, it argues, are objects that bear a material continuity with some person, event, or place from one’s past to which one has a personal attachment. To understand the distinctive experiential value of keepsakes as nostalgic objects, however, the chapter argues that we need to invoke the imagination. Keepsakes manifest the presence of the past by prompting one to imaginatively project what a keepsake is historically connected with onto the object as one experiences it in the present.

**Introduction**

From childhood teddy bears, to jewellery that belonged to deceased relatives, to souvenirs from trips abroad, to gifts from loved ones bought to mark special occasions: most of us keep and treasure objects that remind us of people, events, or places from our past. Even the most commonplace and apparently worthless objects can be imbued with special significance: a ticket stub from a concert, say, or a worn-out item of baby clothing. Keepsakes are nostalgic objects par excellence. We value keepsakes because they prompt nostalgic memories of the past. But perhaps more importantly, we also value them because they afford a feeling of contact with that which they remind us of. Holding grandma’s brooch, one feels one is in touch with grandma. The ambivalence of nostalgia is heightened in the experience of a keepsake as one that involves an awareness of both the felt proximity of the past and its irrevocable absence.

Drawing on work in philosophy and psychology, this chapter aims to give an account of the nature and value of keepsakes as nostalgic objects. Keepsakes, it will be argued, are a kind of relics that bear a material continuity with some object, person, or event of special importance. What demarcates keepsakes as a species of relics is that what makes them valuable depends on one’s having a personal attachment to that which they are historically connected with. Keepsakes serve a mnemonic function by cuing episodes of nostalgic remembering. But unlike most stimuli that cue nostalgic memories, keepsakes feature in the episodes that they prompt remembrance of. To understand the distinctive experiential value of keepsakes as nostalgic objects, the chapter will argue that we need to invoke the imagination. Keepsakes manifest the presence of the past by prompting one to imaginatively project what a keepsake is historically connected with and that makes it special onto the object as one experiences it in the present. One feels one is in touch with grandma by imagining her holding or wearing her brooch that one is holding.

Before we turn to these matters, it will be important to first say something about the emotion that it is the primary purpose of keepsakes to evoke: nostalgia.

**Nostalgia**

For a long time, nostalgia has been seen as a negative emotion. The term “nostalgia” (from the Greek “*nostos*,” meaning “homecoming,” and “*algos*,” meaning “pain”) was coined in seventeenth-century medical literature to describe a pathological, and even potentially deadly, condition of homesickness (Illbruck, 2012; Starobinski, 1966). Since then, a substantial shift in the meaning of the term has occurred. The object of nostalgia came to be associated more with a time than a place, with the past rather than one’s home, and the feeling of nostalgia came to be seen as not only negative, but essentially ambivalent. Moreover, whereas the early medical discourse focussed on nostalgia as an individual condition, much of the more recent scholarship has viewed nostalgia as a social and cultural phenomenon, one that is intimately bound up with the conditions of modernity. As David Lowenthal writes, nostalgia is a “modern malaise concerning the past” (Lowenthal, 1989, p. 38). But whereas writers in the humanities have tended to see nostalgia in its modern incarnation as a chronic cultural disease, an “incurable sickness,” as Svetlana Boym puts it (Boym, 2001, p. 7), recent work in psychology presents us with a very different picture of nostalgia. Empirical studies show that we tend to experience the feeling of nostalgia as more positive than negative. Not only that, but nostalgia has many other positive effects: it makes us feel more confident, more sociable, and reinforces our sense of belonging and self-continuity (Routledge, 2016).

How can we make sense of the diversity of uses to which the term “nostalgia” has been put? Even though it was only since the twentieth century that nostalgia came to be seen as bittersweet, the idea that nostalgia is essentially ambivalent appears to be indispensable to our contemporary understanding of it. One way of thinking of nostalgia is as a combination of two “basic” emotions; namely, joy and sadness (Prinz, 2004). However, it is certain that nostalgia cannot be defined only as a combination of positive and negative affect. Most things we feel both joyful and sad about, such as one’s child leaving for her first day at school, are not thereby objects of nostalgia.

Defining the proper object of nostalgia is perhaps the central philosophical problem that nostalgia presents us with (Casey, 1987; Howard, 2012; Sweeney, 2020). Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to elaborate such a definition in full, it is at least possible to offer a set of necessary conditions that gets us closer to one. To begin with, the object of nostalgia is always something absent, and it is always something one desires. Nostalgia is about longing. It is a peculiar feature of nostalgia that even if the absent object is not something that one experienced as joyful at the time, seen through the lens of nostalgic feeling, it acquires a positive cast. In his novel *In Search of Lost Time*, Marcel Proust yearns for his childhood years spent in Combray, at the same time that he describes those years as “a trifle depressing” (Howard, 2012; Proust, 1992, p. 65). Longing for something absent is not sufficient as a characterisation of nostalgia, however. Most absent things that we long for, such as a new car or a holiday in the sun, are not thereby objects of nostalgia. Rather, to feel nostalgic about something, it must be something that one identifies with, it must in some sense be one’s own. This is the conceptual truth that nostalgia is always, in a sense, about home.

This characterisation of nostalgia leaves open certain important questions. In particular, it leaves open whether nostalgia is necessarily directed towards to the past, and it leaves open whether it is necessarily directed towards something that one experienced. These questions are theoretically contentious (Sweeney, 2020). Nevertheless, it is evident that in ordinary usage, nostalgia is directed towards remembered episodes from one’s autobiographical past. Empirical studies investigating folk conceptions of nostalgia reveal a high degree of concurrence regarding what people understand nostalgia to be, and there is also evidence that this holds true across cultures (Hepper *et al.*, 2012; Hepper *et al.*, 2014). According to the lay conception, nostalgia is focussed on personally meaningful memories, typically associated with childhood or youth and close personal relationships, and combines feelings of happiness with feelings of longing or loss (Routledge, 2016). Thus, according to the folk conception, nostalgia is essentially past-oriented. Where several authors have suggested that nostalgia can be directed towards the present, this is always a present perceived or imagined from a future perspective (Batcho & Shikh, 2016; Boym, 2001; Jameson, 1991). Even when nostalgia is directed primarily towards a place, it is a place as one experienced it in the past. Returning to a place that one feels nostalgic about promises disappointment, for one tends to discover that it is not the same as one remembers it. On the other hand, we should perhaps not be too strict about the requirement that nostalgia is always directed towards something that one episodically remembers. For example, it may be appropriate to describe feeling nostalgic for something from one’s family’s past that one did not directly experience. Paula Sweeney asks you to imagine that your parents had to flee their country to escape an outbreak of war while you were still in your mother’s womb. While growing up, you regularly hear tales of what everyday life was like in your parents’ country. “You feel nostalgic for the past that you should have had, but never did.” (Sweeney, 2020, p. 189)

As commented on above, scholars, especially in the humanities and social sciences, are often primarily interested in nostalgia as a social and cultural phenomenon, rather than as an individual experience. Of course, individual and collective manifestations of nostalgia cannot be kept neatly apart, but rather they mutually inform one another. Nevertheless, this chapter is primarily concerned with nostalgia as an individual phenomenon. That is because keepsakes are, in essence, items of personal, not collective, significance. The next task is to understand what a keepsake is.

**What is a keepsake?**

Keepsakes can go by various names: souvenirs, mementos, tokens, memorabilia, heirlooms, relics. However, these terms are not coextensive. Keepsakes are souvenirs, but not all souvenirs are keepsakes. It is helpful here to draw a distinction between two different senses in which something can be a souvenir. Susan Stewart writes that we “must distinguish between souvenirs of external sights . . . which are most often representations and are purchasable, and souvenirs of individual experience, which are most often samples and are not available as general consumer goods.” (Stewart, 1993, p. 138) Keepsakes are what Stewart calls “souvenirs of individual experience.” Compare, for example, a fridge magnet and a pebble found on a beach. Both may be keepsakes or souvenirs in the latter sense, but only the fridge magnet is a souvenir in the former sense. Whereas almost anything can become a keepsake, commercial souvenirs are items produced expressly in order to become keepsakes. One purchases a fridge magnet in anticipation of it becoming a nostalgic object of one’s present experience. Commercial souvenirs and keepsakes possess different kinds of value. One fridge magnet for sale in a giftshop is interchangeable with any other; its value is that of a commodity. But once a fridge magnet has been purchased by an individual to mark a certain occasion, a holiday abroad, say, it acquires a different kind of value. The value that it acquires as a token of individual experience is non-transferrable and exists independently of whatever commodity value it has. It is for this reason that items devoid of commodity value, such as pebbles or ticket stubs, best exemplify what is essential to keepsakes: their wholly first-personal nature.

The essentially first-personal nature of keepsakes allows us to sort out the linguistic overlaps and points of departure noted at the start of this section. Whereas souvenirs, memorabilia, and relics can often adequately be described by reference only to shared history and culture, it is only when these acquire meaning and value as tokens of one’s own past that they acquire the status of keepsake. Thus, heirlooms, as opposed to “mere” antiques, generally are keepsakes, since what makes an antique an heirloom is its being passed down through one’s family. One can value an heirloom impersonally as an antique, but part of the value that an heirloom has as an heirloom is the meaningful connection it embodies with one’s family members. The tension between these two orders of meaning and value, the individual and the collective, becomes pronounced in some cases. Personal items for sale at a pawn shop, such as items of jewellery or watches, often seem to sit uncomfortably across the boundary between personal attachment and impersonal commodity; such is the feeling of sadness that often surrounds these objects.

Keepsakes, then, are items that possess personal meaning and value that attaches to them in virtue of their history. As a result, keepsakes signify differently than mass-produced souvenirs or memorabilia. Commercial souvenirs signify by means of external signs, and typically images. A fridge magnet depicts what it is a souvenir of. In contrast, one cannot usually tell what a keepsake is a keepsake of just by looking at it. To understand a keepsake, one must know its history. A pebble collected from a beach may be a treasured reminder of a special holiday, but to understand its meaning and value as a nostalgic object, one must know the story behind it. Otherwise, it just looks like an ordinary pebble. Like any relics, keepsakes are material traces of the past. As such, they operate metonymically: they signify in virtue of having been part of, or otherwise closely physically connected to, that which they represent (Runia, 2006; Stewart, 1993). A lock of hair signifies one’s beloved in virtue of its having formerly been a part of one’s beloved. A gift from a loved one signifies that personal relationship in virtue of having been given by one’s loved one to oneself.

To clarify what it means to say that keepsakes are material traces of the past, it will be helpful to compare them with photographs. Many writers have observed that photographic images, in contrast to hand-made pictures, have a special capacity to afford a feeling of contact with the subjects that they depict, and, moreover, that this is due to the causal, mind-independent nature of photographic representation (Barthes, 2014; Bazin, 1960; Walton, 1984). Photographs are “visible traces” of the past (Currie, 1999). It is for this reason that photographs often make potent nostalgic objects, and that they are especially apt to become keepsakes. But the way that photographs put us in touch with the past is different from the way that material traces do. Photographic images are abstract entities that can be instantiated any number of times (Martin, 2012). Keepsakes, on the other hand, as material traces of the past, cannot be reproduced. Thus, if a photograph is a keepsake, it is never merely as a photographic image, but rather as a material object, a print of some kind. To illustrate, consider that one may treasure an old photograph of one’s grandfather taken during the war. As a photographic image, the photograph can be reproduced without loss to the feeling of contact it affords with one’s grandfather. But the value that the photograph has as a keepsake, an object treasured and handed down through generations of one’s family, is essentially bound up with its material identity and history.

What is it that one values about the old photograph of one’s grandfather that does not carry over to its reproduction? Walter Benjamin famously claimed that objects possess a certain quality, an “aura,” that is necessarily lost when objects are mechanically reproduced. “Aura” refers to an object’s material identity and history, “its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be,” and includes changes in its physical condition and ownership (Benjamin, 2007, p. 220). Although Benjamin used “aura” to refer objects’ material existence, he also used it to refer to an experiential quality of objects, a phenomenon of “presence.”

It might be tempting to try to explain the value that the old photograph has as a keepsake in terms of its aura. However, difficulties arise when we try to cash out the value of keepsakes, or any relics, using Benjamin’s (2007) account. It is not clear what Benjamin means when he says that “aura” refers to an object’s “unique existence.” Often, when we describe an object as “unique,” we mean something like “rare,” which is to say that it is unusual for its kind. Stradivarius violins are unique in this sense, since it is unusual among violins to be made by the Stradivari family (Bradford, 2023). But Benjamin does not wish to restrict aura to objects that are rare or unusual. Nor can he intend “aura” to refer to objects’ logical uniqueness, since this is necessarily something that all objects possess. Everything is what it is, and this applies to reproductions no less than objects that are reproduced. Rather, it appears that what Benjamin understands by “aura” is whatever belongs to any object’s material identity and history that would be lost if it were to be reproduced. The problem with this, however, is that it picks out too broad of a category of properties to be useful for explaining keepsakes or other material traces of the past. The objects that you see in front of you contain countless properties that are unreproducible, without affording any special nostalgic encounter or phenomenon of presence. What is more, valuing an object’s connection to the past does not entail valuing what makes that object logically unique. The fact that keepsakes are unreproducible does not imply that they are irreplaceable (Matthes, 2013). Imagine, for example, that you have two old prints of the photograph of your grandfather that were made at the same time and kept together ever since in the same album. Other things being equal, one of the prints will be interchangeable for the other. This is because both prints possess the just same historical features that make them valuable as keepsakes; each has the same history of being treasured and handed down through generations of one’s family.

Despite these difficulties pertaining to Benjamin’s concept of “aura,” philosophers and psychologists more recently have turned to closely related concepts of “genuineness” and “authenticity” in seeking to account for objects that connect us with the past. Carolyn Korsmeyer (2019) has developed a philosophical account of objects that put us “in touch with the past,” in which she claims that we can understand the value of these objects in terms of a property of genuineness. Although Korsmeyer is mostly interested objects that have collective historical significance, she is also interested in objects that have only personal value, which is to say, keepsakes. Genuine historical artefacts and items of personal attachment afford an emotional encounter that perfect reproductions do not: “a shiver, a thrill, a poignant acknowledgement, a small dose of awe in the presence of the real thing” (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 28). Psychologists, on the other hand, have tended to describe objects that have a valuable connection to the past as being those that are “authentic” (Frazier *et al.*, 2009; Gjersoe *et al.*, 2014; Newman, 2019). The authors of one study, for example, write that authentic objects are “those that have an historical link to a person, event, time, or place of some significance” (Frazier *et al.*, 2009, p. 1).

It may be convenient to call objects that have a valuable connection with the past those that are “genuine” or “authentic.” It is also true that the genuine or authentic objects afford nostalgic encounters with the past that reproductions do not. However, it would be a mistake to think that we can explain the value of keepsakes or other kinds of relics in terms of genuineness or authenticity. Any object can be genuine in one sense and not genuine in another sense (Dutton, 2003). A reproduction of the old photograph of one’s grandfather is not the genuine photograph that was handed down through one’s family. Nevertheless, it is a genuine photograph, and it is a genuine photograph of one’s grandfather. It is for this reason that we cannot make sense of genuineness or authenticity as stand-alone qualities of objects (Currie & Robson, 2023; Thomas, 2023; Windsor, 2023). Rather, describing any object as “genuine” or “authentic” is always a matter of asserting some salient description of it. When I have a nostalgic encounter with the old photograph of my grandfather, what I appreciate is the history of the object that makes it special to me: the connections it has with me and my family. It is these historical features of the photograph that explain why I value it as a keepsake; the photograph’s genuineness or authenticity is incidental to explaining this (Windsor, 2023).

Keepsakes are a kind of relics, of material traces of the past. More specifically, they are “sentimental” or “idiosyncratic” relics (Hales, 2023, p. 11). What makes them valuable depends on one’s having a personal attachment to their history. Joseph Raz describes how attachments confer value on their objects, as long as the attachments themselves are valuable (Raz, 2001). We primarily form attachments to people, of course, to those whom we love. But often and in the same way, we also form attachments to objects. Human beings are valuable as people, and teddy bears are valuable as teddy bears. But a human being who is one’s romantic partner, and a teddy bear who is one’s childhood teddy, gain value as bearers of those very attachments. Not all attachments are valuable, however, and therefore not all attachments confer value on their objects. A pathological hoarder, for instance, cannot help but form unhealthy attachments to objects, which may cause distress to the individual. Some would deny that attachments can ever be a good thing. There is also evidence for cross-cultural differences in the extent to which we tend to value objects because of their historical connection with people (Gjersoe *et al.*, 2014). But for many of us, it seems, many of the attachments we have for objects contribute to a life well lived. Comparing keepsakes with interpersonal relationships justifies the value that attaches to individual objects that does not carry over to indiscernible twins. Valuing one’s childhood teddy over a look-a-like teddy is, in principle, no more puzzling than preferring one’s romantic partner to his doppelganger.

The value that our attachments confer on objects from our past exists independently of the experience that those objects afford. Often keepsakes are kept out of sight in storage: a wedding dress at the back of a wardrobe, a school photograph at the bottom of a drawer, childhood toys in a box in an attic. One might feel reluctant to throw away such objects, even if one was, for some reason, unable to ever experience them again. Even so, a large part of why we value keepsakes is the experience they afford. Keepsakes serve a mnemonic function by prompting nostalgic journeys into the past. Following a cake recipe in my grandmother’s old cookbook prompts nostalgic memories of using the cookbook to bake cakes with my mother when I was a child. But all sorts of things can cue nostalgic memories. Baking a cake using any recipe, or catching a whiff of a cake baking, might prompt the same nostalgic transports. What is special about the cookbook, both as a keepsake and as a nostalgic object, is the way that it seems to carry its past with it into the present. A large part of why I treasure the cookbook is due to what Joshua Lewis Thomas calls its “contact value”: the experience of connection that it affords with past times and absent loved ones (Thomas, 2023). Leafing through its foxed and dog-eared pages that bear the traces of recipes followed decades before I was born has the effect of bringing the past almost tangibly into the present. The cookbook embodies the presence of those who used it in the past: my grandmother, my mother, my younger self. Korsmeyer (2019) describes this as a phenomenon of “transitivity.” This is the idea that by touching an object, one feels one is part of an unbroken chain that links one to all that the object has been in contact with. By touching my grandmother’s cookbook, I experience being in touch with my grandmother.

To better understand the value of keepsakes as nostalgic objects, we need to understand what this experience of contact consists in.

**The experiential value of keepsakes**

As much as we can surely all relate to this phenomenon of contact that keepsakes afford, speaking of objects as having a power of “transitivity” is no less figurative than speaking of the past being brought alive in the present. Of course, I cannot literally touch my grandmother by touching her cookbook. And it is here, in this phenomenon of contact that objects afford with what is absent, that the danger of irrationalism looms. Anthropologists working in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries formulated what they called “laws of sympathetic magic,” which aimed to describe the belief system underpinning ritual practices of so-called “primitive” cultures (Frazer, 1959; Mauss, 2001; Tylor, 1974). One of these laws, the “law of contagion,” describes how objects carry imperceptible “essences” of that which they have been in contact with. The law states, “once in contact, always in contact.” To illustrate, consider that a nail paring may be used in a magical practice to perform an action on whom the paring belonged to.

While we may not believe, at least not on any explicit level, that it is possible to act on individuals remotely in the way that the law of contagion prescribes, we do regularly respond to and behave towards objects as though they carried such invisible essences of that which they have been in contact with. Psychologists have amassed a large body of data showing that we are disposed to behave towards objects in ways that are consistent with the law of contagion (Nemeroff & Rozin, 1994; Nemeroff & Rozin, 2000). The relevance to keepsakes is plain to see. Several of the studies investigating manifestations of magical thinking in contemporary Western society surveyed individuals’ attitudes towards personal items, such as items of clothing. Whereas we tend to desire to wear clothing belonging to romantic partners, we feel resistance or even disgust towards wearing clothing belonging to people we do not like (Nemeroff & Rozin, 1994; Rozin *et al.*, 1989). The psychologist Bruce Hood gained notoriety for brandishing a cardigan that belonged to the British serial killer Fred West at a science festival and asking the audience if they would be prepared to wear it. Many audience members showed signs of shock and revulsion (Hood, 2009). Psychologists also advert to this “contagion” effect to explain the value that people attach to items that belonged to celebrities (Newman, Diesendruck, & Bloom, 2011).

It appears, then, that the experiential value that keepsakes have depends on this contagion effect, or what Korsmeyer describes as a phenomenon of transitivity. But if so, it also appears that a large part of the value of keepsakes as nostalgic objects depends on us systematically misattributing properties to objects that we know they do not possess. I know that my grandmother’s cookbook does not contain the essence of my grandmother, but a big part of why I treasure it as a keepsake is that I experience it as though it does. Is it not irrational to experience objects in this way?

In the previous section, we saw that what makes an object a keepsake depends on one’s having an attachment to its history, and that it is for this reason that keepsakes are by nature unreproducible (if not also unreplaceable). It follows from this that what is special about the experience of keepsakes, the way that they manifest the presence of the past, cannot be explained in terms of their perceptible features. A preproduction of the old photograph of one’s grandfather might be falsely aged so that it looks just like the original, but it does not afford the same feeling of connection with one’s family members who treasured it and passed it down. In one way or another, one’s belief about a keepsake’s history changes the way that one experiences it. The question is how this happens.

One way of explaining this is to say that, at some level, one does believe that the object carries the essence of that which it has been in contact with and that makes it special. The psychologists who spearheaded research on manifestations of magical thinking in contemporary Western society, Carol Nemeroff and Paul Rozin, propose such an explanation. They define magic “in terms of a belief or set of related beliefs” that attribute “imperceptible forces or essences” to objects in ways that are consistent with the laws of sympathetic magic and contradict prevalent scientific understanding. These beliefs “may be held at different levels of explicitness, ranging from spontaneous, vague, ‘as if’ feelings, all the way to explicit, culturally taught beliefs” (Nemeroff & Rozin, 2000, p. 5). According to this explanation, while I may not explicitly believe that my grandmother’s cookbook contains the essence of my grandmother, at some less consciously explicit level, I believe that it does, and this accounts for the way that, by holding the cookbook, I experience being in touch with my grandmother. One potentially undesirable consequence of this explanation is that, since it involves holding inconsistent beliefs, it implies that we are irrational when we experience being in contact with something connected with an object’s past. However, it is not clear that this explanation is consistent with the facts. If, for example, my grandmother’s cookbook deteriorated well past the point of repair, I might decide the best thing is to give up my attachment to it and throw it out. But if I had any doubt that the cookbook might contain the essence of my grandmother, surely the very possibility would be unconscionable.

Korsmeyer (2019) proposes a different kind of explanation to cash out the phenomenon she describes as one of transitivity in terms of the cognitive penetration of perception. “Cognitive penetration” refers to a mechanism by which cognitive states, such as thoughts or beliefs, can influence the phenomenal character of perceptual states (Zeimbekis & Raftopoulos, 2015). For example, one’s colour perception of an object may be influenced by one’s expectations about what the object is; an apple-shape may appear to be redder than an oval-shape, even though the two shapes are the same hue (Delk & Fillenbaum, 1965). Applying this to the present context, the proposal is that one’s cognitive state of believing an object to have an historical connection to some special person, event, or place from one’s past “penetrates” one’s perception of the object, changing its subjective appearance. In the case of the cookbook, knowing the cookbook’s historical connection with my grandmother changes the way that it looks and feels to me when I hold it. This explanation, unlike the one above, has the potential benefit that it does not entail that we are irrational when we experience being in touch with something connected with an object’s past. The problem, however, is that it is not evident how one’s perception of a keepsake can change to in such a way that would explain the phenomenon of contact it affords. It may be true that the visual and tactual qualities of the cookbook are in some way altered by my knowledge of its history. But the cookbook does not take on the visual or tactual appearance of my grandmother. Rather, it still very much looks and feels like what it is: an old cookbook.

A third and, this chapter argues, better explanation for the phenomenon invokes the power of imagination. We have seen that in its central usage, nostalgia is directed towards remembered episodes from one’s autobiographical past. Part of the value of keepsakes is that they prompt these nostalgic memories. But unlike most stimuli that cue nostalgic memories, keepsakes feature in the episodes they prompt remembrance of. This suggests a way of making sense of the feeling of contact that keepsakes afford with what is absent, which also has the benefit of circumventing the charge of irrationalism noted above. Nostalgia in general can be understood in terms of what psychologists call “mental time travel” (Routledge, 2016). Episodic remembering is one form of mental time travel, a form of travelling into the past as one experienced it. Keepsakes, however, also involve a different kind of time travelling, one where the past travels forward to meet one in the present: such is the feeling of contact that keepsakes afford with the people, events, or places that they are historically connected with (Matthes, 2013). The mental faculty responsible for travelling forward in time is the imagination.

According to this proposal, one imaginatively projects what a keepsake is historically connected with onto the object as one experiences it in the present (Windsor, forthcoming). My grandmother’s cookbook prompts memories of my grandmother and of leaning to bake cakes with my mother when I was a child. It also prompts me to imaginatively direct the content of these memories onto the cookbook. As I leaf through its foxed and dog-eared pages, I imagine my grandmother doing just the same decades ago; as I follow a recipe for Victoria sponge, I imagine myself following the same recipe when I was learning to bake with my mother as a child. Imagining these things of the cookbook affords a tangible connection with the people and events the cookbook is historically connected with and that make it special. Keepsakes not only prompt nostalgic memories, then, they also serve the role of props that facilitate imaginative reconstructions of those memories in the present (Walton, 1990). Thus, keepsakes are like props used in historical re-enactments. But unlike most theatrical props, the fictional role that keepsakes fulfil is one that truly belongs to the objects’ histories. It is true that my grandmother leafed through the pages of the cookbook just as I do now, and it is true that I followed the same recipe for Victoria sponge when I was a child. What is fictional, what is imagined, is that one experiences these events happening in the here and now. Memory supplies the content, and imagination applies it to the present.

**Conclusion**

Keepsakes, this chapter has argued, are a kind of relics that have a material connection to something from one’s autobiographical past to which one has a personal attachment. Part of the value of keepsakes is that they prompt nostalgic memories of that which makes them special. Remembering is one way of manifesting the past in the present. But in another sense, remembering is less about bringing the past into the present than it is about going backwards in time to meet it. What is special about keepsakes as nostalgic objects is the way that they bring the past forward in time to meet us. To understand how keepsakes bring about this phenomenon, the chapter has argued, we need to invoke the imagination. Keepsakes not only prompt nostalgic memories, but they also prompt us to reconstruct the content of those memories, using them as props in imaginative re-enactments of their past. In doing so, keepsakes accentuate nostalgia’s essential ambivalence, its play of presence and absence, joy and sadness. Animated through the imagination, keepsakes bring the past almost tangibly within reach, at the same time that they affirm its literal absence.

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