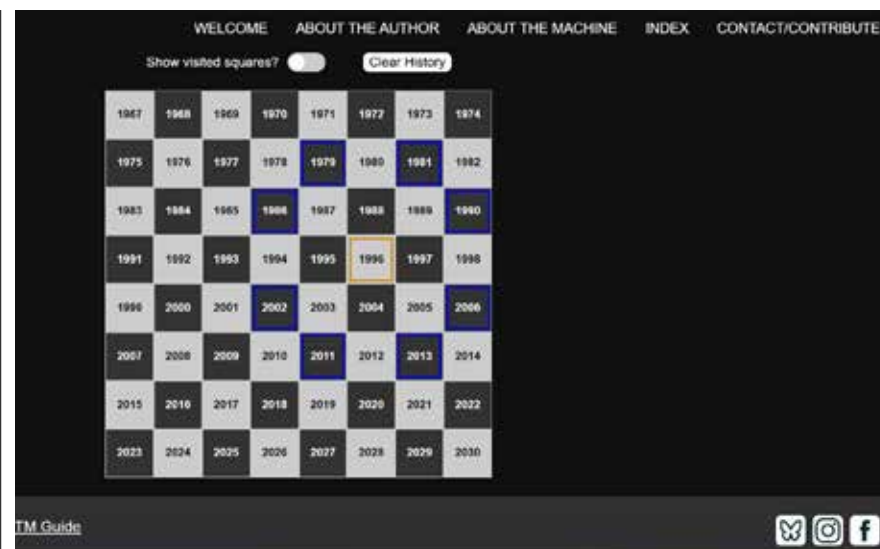


Fight against AI with a chessboard of memories for the world to enjoy

◆ The Universal Turing Machine is home to the memoir of Richard Beard, divided into 64 chapters of 1,000 words each. It is the first contribution to a project that aims to celebrate memory and life as each person has lived it. The author explains how it works and how it is an antidote to the threats of AI

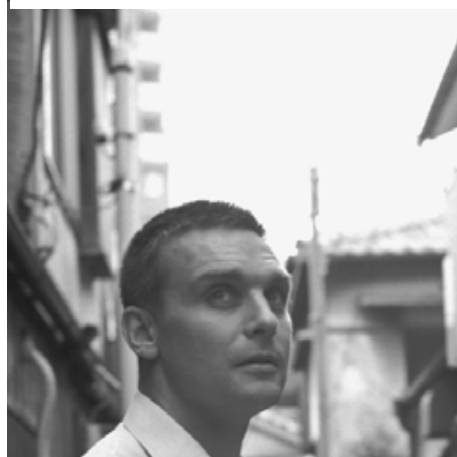
Everyone has memories. And according to the old saying, we all have a book in us. Put these thoughts together and everyone has a memoir in them. The blank page sits there waiting for the words to flow, the years ticking by and clicking up the volume on an always relevant question – if not now, when? The answer encouraged by this question is now. Record those memories in writing before it's too late. Safeguard your lived experience against forgetting, because if not you then who? Looks like it has to be you.

Unlike other kinds of books – a police procedural, say, or a romance novel – an AI can't assemble this material on your behalf. Off-the-peg solutions for character and plot aren't going to wash for real-life stories only you know because they happened to you. Unpredictable, occasionally unbelievable, the events that pepper most human lives defy the predictive powers of AI technology. To record the truth of what it has meant to be alive – honestly and in writing, without the help of Chat GPT or Claude or any of the other large language models – is therefore half-way to passing the Turing Test. In 1950 British computer pioneer



“I'm hopeful that the Universal Turing Machine can foster a community that feels like home for adventurous readers and aspiring writers everywhere

Alan Turing devised his famous test to distinguish between human thinking and computerised imitations of this rich but slippery process, and as AI increasingly features in life and art Turing's distinction has never felt more relevant. Subjective long-form writing, weighing in on the human side, is a defiant use of the human brain and proof of what the human brain can do. Writing in itself activates a distinctive mode of thinking, and alongside the facts – what happened where and with whom



Richard Beard aged two, top left; 13 in 1980 bottom, aged 26 in 1993, second row, top; aged 37 in 2004, left; the author today, main; his website, far left

– a memoir can bring into the light an emotional world that would otherwise be lost, the inner being that friends and family can't Google.

The capricious human brain, however, seems instinctively daunted by the emptiness of a blank white page. So how best to begin? The Universal Turing Machine, an online project launched this month, is designed to help answer that question.

The Universal Turing Machine provides a template for writing a memoir that asks for separate sections of a thousand words for each year of a life. These thousand-word stories or essays, when available online, are placed behind the squares of an 8 x 8 grid, like a chessboard. By clicking on a square, in any order, the reader can access the writing about that particular year. This format helps writers get started – a thousand words is a manageable target. The template is then flexible enough to allow for unique creative responses. Writers can label the squares with any span of years, conflate or repeat years, but the total number of sections is fixed at 64 so that a growing anthology of memoirs can be tiled together in an ever-expanding grid. Each memoir will exist in the context and company of others. Like people.

Despite the AI anxieties of the age, today's technology remains a gateway to fresh possibility, in this case an ambitious collective writing project that extends beyond the conventional boundaries of the printed book. The Universal Turing Machine can be home to a free-to-access collection of varied real-life memoirs assembled and interlinked on a single website. Readers can take advantage of this innovative structure to read individual sections in isolation, like medium-length pieces in a magazine: skip between years and from one life to another, or follow an indexed subject wherever it appears across different memoirs. The ability to navigate randomly from section to section, year to year, generates almost infinite routes through the grid, endlessly variable approaches to what each of us has done or left undone.

The Universal Turing Machine will be co-operative, interactive, but at its core it remains a reading experience more than either a game or a puzzle. There's no right answer to this collection of lives, nor any decisive final level. There is instead the joy and wonder that reading has always promoted, of relating to other people, so different yet also somehow the same.

Like the rest of the future, The Universal Turing Machine doesn't yet exist, but from this month submissions are open for the first expansion phase to be published in June 2026. Everyone is invited to contribute, of any age and from anywhere in the world – change the span of years, change the language, include years yet to come: imagining the future is as universal a human occupation as remembering the past. Eventually all human life will be here, and for free, on

the principle that everyone's life-story is equally valid.

As a new platform for memoir, open to all, the Universal Turing Machine is intended one day to house in a single place a unique and uniquely important store of authentic non-AI generated human experience, in written form. This will be an online space where memory and imagination – human consciousness – can remind us of its brilliant range through creative writing and reading.

In the long run I'm hopeful that the Universal Turing Machine can foster a community that feels like home for adventurous readers and aspiring writers everywhere. Come on in, I want to say, and see how the format champions writing as a journey of discovery in itself. A memoir is a chance to preserve a voice – yours – but also an opportunity to find that voice. Retelling a life through yearly highlights allows patterns to reveal themselves – morals and motivations, influences and ambitions. The task of writing all 64 squares isn't easy, and won't get done in an afternoon, but if it were easy everyone would do it (rather than just thinking about it).

My experience over the years as a writer and teacher has shown me how much well-written and fascinating material is out there, struggling for publication. The Universal Turing Machine is where some of that material, in the field of memoir, can find a readership.

As the Turing Machine grows online, memoir by memoir, our collected experiences and imaginings will become a subjective Domesday book of this time in history, in a form that maps onto the human experience of thought as an apparently random set of leaps, back into the past, forwards into the future. And in the future the Universal Turing Machine can exist as a written neural network that connects human beings alive at this time now, joining into a larger project that like life itself allows for surprise encounters and astonishing coincidences.

Anyone who wants to be a part of this antidote to AI-generated text – by making a written record of a unique life – is welcome to join The Universal Turing Machine's rebel cluster of stubborn humanity within the internet, an anthology of defiantly true and improbable lives. The project officially launched in early September, when full details and guidelines for writing to the UTM format were shared, including a deadline for completed submissions of January 2026.

Start thinking about filling in those 1000-word squares, and for inspiration browse a model already available for free, my own whole-life memoir spanning the years 1967-2030. Readable online now at www.universalturingmachine.co.uk

Richard Beard, formerly Director of The National Academy of Writing, is a writer of novels and the memoirs *The Day That Went Missing* and *Sad Little Men*. The Universal Turing Machine is available to read free online at www.universalturingmachining.co.uk