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No-one was watching: A collection of short fiction and Stories beyond the gates: An exegesis

Ann Elizabeth Horner
Edith Cowan University

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No-one was watching

A collection of short fiction

and

Stories beyond the gates

An exegesis

This thesis is presented for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Ann Elizabeth Horner

Edith Cowan University

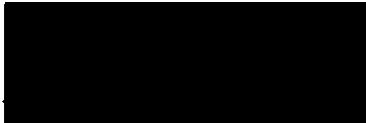
School of Arts and Humanities

2018

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Ann Elizabeth Horner

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Abstract

This research project asserts the primacy of creative practice as a key method of enquiry and explores how fictional stories, re-imagined from historical events of the mid-twentieth century, may provide different ways of viewing a world which was inhabited by once-silenced children, now known as the ‘forgotten Australians’. To this end, the thesis is made up of a creative component in the form of a book-length collection of short fiction that is accompanied by a critical component positioning the thesis contextually, theoretically and methodologically. The research reveals overwhelming evidence of a culture of endemic abuse within Australian child welfare organisations whereby harm was done to children in the context of policies and programmes that were designed to provide care and protection. During this era, ideologies underpinning community beliefs were patriarchal, conservative and insular. It was purported that children were ‘committed’ to imposing, regimentally run institutions ‘for their own good’. The project draws on sources from disciplines including history, psychology and literary studies, as the investigation exposes the blurred boundaries which exist between fiction and nonfiction; personal and social memory; official and unofficial narratives; knowing and not-knowing the past. In doing so, it argues that although there can be no single narrative of history, fictional narratives provide another conduit into stories from the past and have the potential to act as agents for social change.

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To my wonderful family Amy, Jessica, Drew and Kerra, a heart-felt thank you. You always barracked for me and believed that I could do it. And of course, to my amazing husband Ross whose unwavering belief has been extraordinary. Thank you for helping me achieve this goal. I couldn't have done it without your enduring love and support.

Dedication

For my father Stanley John Thomas.

A man who was always interested

List of Publications

The following papers were presented during the course of candidature:

Beyond the Gates: An Arts-based Investigation into the 'Forgotten Australians' 1940-1970.

Presented at 11th Annual *Limina* Conference Beyond Boundaries: Recognition, Tolerance, Change in Perth, Western Australia in July 2016.

No-one Was Watching: An arts-based investigation into the 'forgotten Australians' (c. 1940-1970).

Presented at the Australasian Society for the History of Children and Youth Conference (Re)Examining Historical Childhoods: Literary, Cultural, Social in Melbourne, Victoria in December 2016.

A full version of the conference papers was published during the course of candidature:

Beyond the Gates: An Arts-based Investigation into the 'Forgotten Australians'.

Published 2016 in *Limina: A Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies*, Volume 22.1

The creative manuscript has been accepted for publication.

No-one Was Watching – Accepted by Ginninderra Press, South Australia in February 2018.

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No-one was Watching: Stories Beyond the Gates.

An Arts-based Thesis.

Introduction

On December 15, 2017, after nearly five years of enquiry, the *Final Report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* was released to the public. This national response charged with investigating the harm experienced by children in institutions was the result of a range of reports and enquiries as well as the protracted advocacy campaigns from organisations like the Care Leavers Australia Network (CLAN). One of the most significant enquiries demanding this Royal Commission was the 2004 Federal Senate report entitled *Forgotten Australians: A report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children* (McLucas, 2004; hereafter cited as *Forgotten Australians* report). Some of the Royal Commission's findings had already been released via an *Interim Report* in June 2014, but it was the *Final Report* which consisted of 17 volumes and 409 recommendations that provided irrefutable evidence of violations perpetrated against individuals who as children spent part or all of their childhood in institutional or out-of-home care. News outlets reported the findings as 'shocking', with statistical evidence measuring the damage in figures: the number of victims who had testified; the number of perpetrators identified; the number of decades that such abuse had prevailed; the number of organisations implicated; and the number of predatory adults represented within various organisations. These figures rolled out by the media at each news report were staggering. The public was appalled. And this was only the 'tip of the iceberg', they were reminded by reporters. For all the stories of horror that had surfaced many more remained hidden. Secrecy and shame continued to silence victims whilst guilt and denial silenced their abusers.

A great deal of the focus in news stories was on religious organisations; the abuse of power and the duplicity of clergy implicated at all levels of the church hierarchy, as well as the protections afforded by canonical law. However, it must be emphasised that the abuse under scrutiny was endemic in state, private and church facilities. This was not just about celibate priests. The terms of reference for this Royal Commission addressed cases of sexual abuse, yet this type of abuse was just one of a raft of other abuses, both physical and psychological, that were perpetrated against vulnerable children, many of whom belong to the cohort known variously as 'forgotten Australians', 'care leavers' or 'care survivors'. Unlike the news reports, this research project contains few figures. As powerful as these numbers may be, and as valid in terms of quantitative research, the

premise of this thesis relies on qualitative enquiry and the power of words. To be precise, the power of words which construct narratives.

Entitled *No-one Was Watching: Stories Beyond the Gates*, this thesis constructs fictional stories in a creative response to the *Forgotten Australians* report. It posits fiction as a way of providing new knowledge by inviting different ways of seeing the world and our place within that world. The research project is underpinned by the tenet that the creative arts in general have the capacity to “disturb and disrupt the familiar and commonplace, to question that which seems to have been answered conclusively, and to redirect conversations regarding important social issues” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 101). As an arts-based research project, it claims the power of fictional stories as vehicles for social transformation, thus echoing the sentiments of human rights advocates Richard Hil and Elizabeth Branigan when they say “we share a moral and political imperative that research and writing should be used to argue for social change” (Hil & Branigan, 2010, p. ix). Hil and Branigan do not speak specifically of fiction but this thesis advances that fiction has the capacity to capture important meanings and truths about past historical events. Arts-based methodology asserts the primacy of creative practice as a key method of enquiry and usually comprises a creative work plus an exegesis positioning the artefact contextually and theoretically (Nelson, 2013, p. 8). Thus, this type of research declares that certain kinds of knowledge can be created only through practice; that “symbolic data work performatively ... [T]hey not only express the research, but in that expression become the research itself” (Haseman, 2006, p. 102). Employing “aesthetics, methods, and practices of the literary, performance, and visual arts” to address issues of social inequity, such research may be considered as an activist approach to enquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 415). This choice of research methodology has relevance to the creative and ethical agenda of the project: the claim that using methods and practices of imaginative writing can create new knowledge and thus inform social policy. Engaging in this process suggests a continuity between fiction and nonfiction and builds on a fundamental precept that all recollections of the past contain elements of invention: that all stories are “fictional constructions emerging from novel arrangements of real-world facts” (Liebet, 2010, p. 179).

Consequently, this is a project about stories, once hidden stories from the past; stories searching beyond the barricades behind which children dwelt in orphanages, children’s homes or some other form of out-of-home care. It’s about high walls and

imposing gates which rendered these children invisible. It's about the deep shame which has silenced voices for decades. By re-imagining the lives and circumstances surrounding these Australian children, the creative component of this research project takes the form of a collection of short fiction entitled *No-one Was Watching*. The work does not claim to speak for the men and women who as children were hidden from public view behind towering walls and locked gates. Nor does it claim to legitimatise or popularise care leavers' first-person accounts. Rather, it seeks to complement and provide another conduit for their many voices, voices that are finally being rendered audible. The precise numbers may never be known, but the *Forgotten Australians* report estimates at least 500,000 children were institutionalised in more than 800 homes during the mid-twentieth century across Australia (McLucas, 2004, p. xxvii). The 'forgotten Australians' were predominantly of Anglo-Saxon background and it was this cohort which made up the majority of institutionalised children. The other cohorts were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children known as the 'Stolen generation' (estimated at 50,000) and the unaccompanied children who arrived from Britain and Malta known as 'child migrants' (numbered at approximately 7000; National Museum of Australia, 2013).

Like many other Australians, I was unaware of the history of institutionalised care for children and it was an individual's life story that initially alerted me to the existence of 'forgotten Australians'. At a social gathering, I overheard a conversation from a woman aged about sixty. She was describing her long awaited kitchen renovation which had been funded by a 'payout'. She revealed that this compensation was the result of abuse suffered as a 'Homie': a child living in an institution. Between the ages of four and eighteen years, a Home had been her home and like most of the other residents, she was not an orphan; she was 'in care' because her mother had died. Against all odds, she had married and successfully raised her own family. She was a resilient and courageous survivor of what I went on to discover was a shameful chapter in a system ostensibly created to provide care and protection for defenceless children. My response to her story was incredulity. I had lived my entire life in the same region of Australia and during the same era as this woman and had no knowledge of the existence of children who lived in places other than a conventional suburban home with a mum, a dad, siblings, chooks and a pet dog. It was at this moment I resolved to find out more about this little-known history. When was this happening? How many children were institutionalised? Where were these Homes ?

This episode was the catalyst for my project, and although there is a character in the stories whose new kitchen is funded by a compensation payout, the creative artefact is not this real woman's personal story. It is constructed from the many, many stories of care survivors, yet the experiences are common to most. Archival evidence shows that large numbers of these children had lost a parent – either temporarily to illness or disability, or permanently to death or desertion – that siblings were separated, that little or no communication with families was possible, and that abuse in all its forms was the norm. There is also evidence that some care survivors were resilient enough to eventually lead functional and satisfying adult lives although many more suffered the debilitating and life-long legacies of childhood trauma. It was at this early stage that I discussed with the woman concerned my interest in writing about the collective experiences of 'forgotten Australians'. I explained that it was not *her* story that I would recount, rather the combined stories of the many people who had experienced childhoods like hers. She concurred that more people needed to know about the little-known history and expressed support for my endeavour. So began my research journey into the past welfare policies and programmes intended to protect children whose own families were deemed unable to do so by the prevailing societal structures.

Data collection via interviews, questionnaires, surveys, case studies and focus groups was eschewed, because to have engaged in such ethnographic methodology would immediately have limited how such stories could be told: the stories would belong to individuals and thus it would be ethically problematic to fictionally shape them in order to create evocative narratives. Although my goal was to reimagine the social and emotional consequences of childhood trauma, the aim of capturing a collective past via fiction required a distancing from individual cases. Thus, my ethics declaration to the Human Research Ethics Committee (ECU) stated my intention to collect only data available in the public domain. Archival research was my chief tool and I soon uncovered a vast body of evidence from publicly available sources which had been compiled over many decades via various reports and enquiries. One of the most powerful was the already mentioned *Forgotten Australians* report. Its bleak conclusion was that children institutionalised during the mid-twentieth century suffered an enduring and tragic legacy as a result of their childhood experiences. The desperate circumstances of the children in care revealed in this report also demonstrated the immense courage required for care leavers to put their life stories on public record. Recommendations from this seminal report included making

the history of the ‘forgotten Australians’ more visible, and an evocative travelling and on-line exhibition entitled *Inside: Life in Children’s Homes and Institutions* was curated by the National Museum of Australia in 2013 as a result.

My purpose is to complement such sources by adding to the variety of ways this history may be circulated. According to Mary-Jo Morgan, former manager of Find & Connect WA, literary responses to the stories of ‘forgotten Australians’ are few, despite this being the largest cohort of institutionalised children (M. Morgan, personal communication, January 23, 2015). My own research also identified this gap. From the outset, my intent has been to tell these unknown stories, not by adding to the existing body of nonfiction but through the imaginative realm of fiction. The primary goal is to invite perceptive readers to revisit the world from a new direction: to listen for voices within the gaps and silences, both from the past and in the present, and to “participate empathetically in events that would otherwise be beyond their reach” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 8). A re-imagined fictional account of historical events concerning ‘forgotten Australians’ enables a glimpse into past child welfare practices exposing human injustices and challenging complacent and at times complicit social attitudes. Ultimately, as a research project the thesis also addresses the final recommendations of the *Forgotten Australians* report, which urge that this history be acknowledged and disseminated in a range of ways, including “through incorporating the study of the effects of institutional care on Australian society into courses of study at universities” (Penglase, 2007, p. 349).

In creating a collection of short fiction, I have re-imagined a woman similar to the one I have described earlier: her siblings, her family, and other people whose lives were entwined with hers. I named this woman Janet. She and the characters who inhabit her world are composites of real people whose testimonies I have read. The experiences my characters enact are based on real events and real locations. My creative and ethical commitment has been to capture a collective re-presentation of past events, thus pledging anonymity to both individuals and organisations. By exploring deeper into the complexities and nuances of the human condition as well as the workings of culture and society, the creative work aims to be affecting and invite reflection rather than to replicate journalistic reportage regarding victims of violence.

Engaging in a creative response to historical events means that I have committed to a research project that is arts-based, and as such, challenges the traditional border between art and academia. Jenny Wilson (2018) believes that “there is still a discrepancy between artistic research and academia”, suggesting that there needs to be increased advocacy for innovative ways to document, publish, disseminate and evaluate research outcomes (Wilson, 2018, p. x). In the meantime, the relationship between art and academia continues to be “constantly renegotiated and transgressed ... unstable and contested” (Schwab & Borgdorff, 2014, p. 9). Despite differences in opinion regarding many aspects of creative research, there appears some consensus regarding the expositional component of an arts-based thesis. Mostly, it is considered an exegesis whose function is to position the artefact contextually and theoretically. However, this component may alternatively be described as a dissertation and often these two terms are used interchangeably. Siobhan Murphy (2014) teases out differences between these two terms, and my critical work seeks to embrace elements from both forms of academic discourse. For Murphy an exegesis can be defined as “a leading or bringing out of the meaning, exposition; the science of interpretation, especially of the Scriptures; explanatory” and she defines a dissertation as “a discussion, academic discourse or treatise, literally a joining together of ideas that suits the subject at hand” (Murphy, 2014, pp. 179-180). There is no suggestion that a dissertation interprets the art, rather it clarifies and draws pertinent, original connections between the contextual field and the practice (Murphy, 2014, p. 181). It is my intention that the critical component speaks to, but not for, the artefact. It does not seek a definitive interpretation: the creative work is left to speak for itself. The critical discourse thus ponders the choice and role of short story as genre, reviews the function of fiction as cultural discourse, and scrutinizes the use of voice, characterisation, setting and theme. It also engages in scholarly discussion around context, theory and methodology. The artefact and the academic text therefore complement one another in the research context, each contributing to new understandings.

In clarifying my research process, it is useful to consider the four main elements outlined by Michael Crotty: epistemology, theory, methodology and methods (Crotty, 1998, p. 2). As this project exposes past child abuse and exploitation, a critical theory approach is undertaken which explores inequality and oppression within society. The foundations upon which this enquiry rests are Marxist in origin with the claim that

dominant discourses are not just discursive, they are also material: “the material interests of the dominant social class determine how people see human existence, individual and collective” (Selden & Widdowson, 1993, p. 71). Kincheloe and his co-authors speak of a reconceptualised critical theory that questions the notion that a country like Australia is unproblematically democratic and free (Kincheloe, McLaren & Steinberg, 2011, p. 163). My epistemological stance maintains that socio-economic relations inform the way people function within cultural spaces and the thesis speaks to the social conditions of mid-twentieth century Australia where the prevailing dominant discourses were patriarchal, paternalistic, Christian and conservative. Legal, educational, political and religious structures reflected these values and espoused a monologic narrative about an ordered and moral society where poverty, family breakdown, mental illness and aberrant behaviours were considered undesirable and contaminating. From these ruling institutions came the decisions to place children from such circumstances in Homes where they were out of the public eye and could be converted into useful citizens. Early colonial models of welfare had set the pattern for the establishment of orphanages, industrial and reformatory schools where abandoned, neglected and delinquent children were placed (Musgrove, 2013, p. 9). Therefore in the early and mid-twentieth century the continued institutionalisation of children deemed at risk was never questioned and accountability never demanded. Thus a system which facilitated secrecy, denial and discrimination prevailed. My thesis undertakes the process of critiquing the historically dominant narrative that purported a fair and democratic society, as it unpicks the circumstances surrounding the incarceration and abuse of children.

Resting on the epistemological edifice is a theoretical perspective which interrogates how narrative structure may not be a neutral vehicle for disseminating knowledge and may in fact act for or against a hegemonic cultural group. The notion that narrative is an omnipresent, international, transhistorical and transcultural vehicle for knowledge is central to the discussion (Barthes, 1977, p. 79). An essential element of narrative is the presence of *voice* and the complex functions of this phenomenon are explored. Archival source material draws from official reports, enquiries, autobiographies, memoirs and academic works that contain narratives from survivors who recall their traumatic experiences as children in institutional care. Other sources cross boundaries, bridging disciplines of history, psychology, sociology, philosophy and literary studies, a connecting thread being “the extent to which human intelligence itself is

rooted in narrative ways of knowing, interacting and communicating” (Herman, 2009, p. 9). As Herman goes on to claim, “researchers have pointed to a ‘narrative turn’ unfolding across multiple fields of enquiry over the past several decades” (Herman, 2009, p. 23). Thus, utilising fictional writing as a research method “contributes to this cross-disciplinary concern with stories and storytelling” (Herman, 2009, p. 23). Writing fictional stories that respond to archival material also queries notions of fact and fiction, the ‘truth’ of history, how narrative shapes historical record, whose story is being told and, of course, who is telling the story. My thesis explores these ambiguities as it challenges the binary oppositions of invention and fact that position fiction and nonfiction as mutually exclusive and unambiguous.

As already flagged, the over-arching methodology for this project is arts-based enquiry. This approach undertakes to create an artefact as a form of interpretation of the data: the artefact can thus be considered as a new cultural discourse. Linking this objective back to a Marxist perspective is Louis Althusser’s observation that “art makes us *see* ... the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes” (Althusser cited in Selden & Widdowson, 1993, p. 89). The final element is the choice of methods used to gather and interpret data. In this project there are two main methods, archival and autoethnographic. The archival retrieval of lived narratives identifies the dominant discourses which prevailed during the period investigated. Engagement with autoethnography signals the presence of the researcher in the interpretive process. This reflexivity exposes the author’s political and ideological position which in turn informs the artefact.

The *Forgotten Australians* report sought to interrogate an overarching two-part question: firstly, how could children within a mid-twentieth century (c. 1940-1970) Australian welfare system suffer endemic abuse for decades, and secondly, how was such a culture of abuse possible without official intervention and broader community awareness? Through an exploration of contextual and conceptual data, the critical and creative components of the thesis speak via an interpretative research perspective to this same question, but at a deeper level the investigative process seeks to interrogate three specific research questions:

- how can a short story collection function as a way of telling many versions of historical ‘truth’ by employing multiple voices?
- how are contemporary values reflected in this process of creative re-imaging?
- how can fictional stories re-imagined from recent historical events function as significant cultural texts?

The complete thesis is arranged as follows: Part I consists of the artefact ‘No-one Was Watching’. Part II is the dissertation ‘Stories Beyond the Gates’, which is further divided into chapters. Chapter One, ‘Once Upon a Time’, addresses the artefact directly reflecting on both the process and the production of the creative work. Chapter Two, ‘Places and Spaces’, positions the artefact in time, place and epistemology. Chapter Three, ‘Telling Stories’, explores the theoretical influences underpinning the thesis. Chapter Four, ‘Finding Out’, explains the methodology and methods employed, and Chapter Five, ‘Denouement’ sums up the outcomes of the research.

Part I: No-One Was Watching

Author's note

Although I have met several people who endured living in out-of-home 'care' during part or all of their childhood, I have not experienced such a childhood. These stories do not intend to speak for these individuals but instead to provide an alternative, imaginative *entre* into this once hidden Australian history. Hence, this is a work of fiction, and although informed by factual events, all the characters and their encounters are my invention.

The work is a creative response to a seminal Senate report of 2004 entitled *Forgotten Australians*. Just as earlier reports had revealed serious abuses perpetrated against Indigenous children (*Bringing Them Home* report, 1997) and the unaccompanied children sent as migrants from Britain and Malta (*Lost Innocence* report, 2001), this report found that the same types of violations were committed against institutionalised Australian-born, non-Indigenous children. The men and women who experienced such childhoods self-identify as 'forgotten Australians', 'care-leavers', 'care-survivors', 'Homies' or 'Wardies'.

Cast of characters in alphabetical order

Amber (1990 –). A young woman who rails against hypocrisy and superficial bullshit.

Belinda (1952 –). A doll with rose-bud lips and an amazing memory.

Bev (1954 –) and **Dave** (1952 –). Amber's next-door neighbours. Bev is a care-survivor.

Billy Marshall (1946 –). Janet's older brother and care-survivor who watches life from the margins.

Diane (1945 – 2005). Sharon's sometime friend.

Diedre Taylor-Brown (1905 – 1960). A good sort who works tirelessly for charity.

Georgie (2011 – 2017). A little girl who likes to chat with old Billy.

Gladys White (1907 – 1969). Walter's wife and Victor's mum.

Janet Thomas (nee Marshall) (1949 –). Our protagonist, who is a care-survivor and woman of extraordinary courage, resilience and hope.

Kaz (1989 –). Amber's one-time boyfriend.

Mary Susan Marshall (1920 – 1954). Janet's mother.

Matron aka Margaret Goodman (1920 – 2015). A trained nurse and lover of classical music.

Reginald Thomas (1948 – 2012). A care-survivor and Janet's soulmate.

Robert (Bob) James Marshall (1920 – 1955). Janet's father.

Robert (1945 –). Wendy-Ann's husband.

Sharon (1945 – 2010). A kid at the same school as Janet and Billy.

Steve (1980 –) and **Alice** (1982 –). Georgie's mum and dad.

Susie Marshall (1951 – 1954). A care-statistic and ghost. Janet's younger sister.

Teddy Taylor-Brown (1905 – 1970). Diedre's marvellous husband.

Victor White (1925 – 2005). A timid man and paedophile.

Walter Thomas White (1904 – 1960). A returned WW I soldier, a fitter and turner and the father of Victor.

Wendy-Ann (1948 –). A care-survivor and bag-lady.

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“[There are] stories from a number of former residents over suspicious deaths and burials in unmarked graves.”

Forgotten Australians, 2004, p. 122

Prologue

There are lots of us little kids down here. Some of us have got straighter bones than others. The crooked ones are usually boys.

This is a world without angst – or pain – or fear. Once we've crossed over we are becalmed on a clear, horizon-less ocean. A vista that opens onto eternity. Even with dirt clogging our ears and our eyes, we hear and we see.

Everything.

My metamorphosis came about because I was sick. I was ignored. I cried. I was punished. I died. I was committed to the earth. Now here I am in an unmarked grave behind the laundry. I was only three years old but my sensibilities blossomed to full maturity before my dehydrated body had grown cold. This all-seeing, all-knowing capacity situates me as an omniscient narrator. I am able to pluck words from the past, present or future. The difficulty for those still living is finding words. Words from their past that those in the present can hear and those in the future will remember.

My name is Susie and when I was alive I came to live here with my sister Janet and my brother Billy. Janet was five. She was clever. My brother was eight. He wasn't so clever, but he was funny. They never told their stories to anyone. Even if they had who would have believed them?

That's why I would like to tell them. So you know what really happened. It would provide a sense of cohesion to otherwise dislocated tales. I even thought it might make a wonderful fairy story. I would unmask villains. Rescue victims. Create a unified plot with points of tension, moments of conflict and close with a satisfying resolution. A simple rendering full of hope and redemption.

But, lives broken into fragments refuse to be contained. The shards escape tidy telling. Voices, long silenced, begin to mutter, even shriek. No-one agrees on any one narrative. There are no neat endings. The muddled stories make you rage. And gasp. And cringe. And cry.

I will have to remain silent as corpses should and just listen with you. To the cacophony of voices attempting to say the unsayable.

"A number of Churches and religious Orders entered into settlements as a result of the commencement of legal action by victims."

Forgotten Australians, 2004, p. 200

A New Kitchen

‘Jesus, Kaz. This is a shitty part of town. Can’t we find something more up-market?’

‘Sure Babe. I’m cool with being a kept man. Neat apartment. Jacuzzi. Massive flat screen. Man-cave. Got a sugar-daddy hanging around to foot the bill?’

‘Ha-ha. Well I ‘spose we can fix it up. Wonder if the landlord would let us paint some life into the place. These beige walls do my head in.’

Amber and Kaz move in. Living on Austudy, the choices are limited. The landlord agrees to them painting and never comes back for house inspections. It’s an old house, block value only. He doesn’t care much as long as they pay the rent and don’t set up a some sort of drug lab. Life’s pretty sweet. Bit of part-time work, uni, summer on the beach, good friends to share a drink and some laughs.

They’ve been there nearly two years. They keep to themselves. The neighbours are kind of ordinary but okay. Mostly older couples. They wave hello. That’s enough. What does give Kaz the shits is the weekend morning routine. Bloody lawn mowers and leaf blowers first thing then the grandkids screaming and yelling out in the back yard. By noon when he staggers out onto the back veranda with a strong coffee, the air is full of righteous activity. Kaz is pretty laid-back but he hates this morning vibe. In his perfect world, he’s kicking back on the veranda of a beach shack, watching a great break and hearing nothing but an occasional magpie. The great Aussie outdoor dream.

Amber scoffs. He can be full of bullshit sometimes.

The couple next door is harmless enough. Early sixties maybe, but not in good shape. Both obese. Big guts and her with massive, swollen legs. She wears leggings. Huge fat sausages straining to burst out of their casings. How she could even think that it was a good look Amber can’t imagine.

The wife’s name is Bev and she’s asked Amber in for a cuppa on several occasions but Amber’s pretty busy. Not that Amber is a snob but she wouldn’t have a clue what they could talk about.

Bev and Dave have lived there since they were married.

‘Been here forty-three years all up. Housing Commission back then but we’ve finally paid it off. Dave said we might get a caravan soon so we can go up north. It’s the fishing he loves. He’s happy just sitting in a tinny with a line and some beers.’ Bev can share a lot in the short distance from her letter box to the front door.

Dave still works at the abattoir. He’s a supervisor now.

‘Thank God for that,’ says Bev. ‘All those years of stinking, blood-spattered overalls. Used to turn my stomach, especially when I was expecting.’

Amber commiserates although she has no experience of abattoirs, bloody overalls or pregnancy. And she certainly has never envisaged herself living in welfare housing.

Over the last couple of weeks there’s been activity next door. Tradies’ vans coming and going. A skip on the front kerb. Power tools screaming.

Amber sees Bev at the letter-box.

‘Getting a new kitchen fitted out. Waited all my life for a decent stove and we’re even getting a dishwasher. Tell you luv, I never saw myself having something so flash. Come and have a look when its finished.’

A week later, Bev is beaming as she shows Amber through the pokey hallway and into her dazzling new kitchen.

‘Could never have got it without the payout you know.’

‘Oh. What sort of payout?’ Amber is only half interested.

‘For the abuse. When I was a kid in a Home.’

Amber just stares. She breathes out slowly as she takes it all in. The gleaming stainless steel, the stone benchtop, the multifunction taps, the pristine white cabinet-work, the matte finished splashback, the timber clip flooring and the latest model stove with multiple burners and a double oven.

“For many people the traumas of a childhood in care did not appreciably resurface and have their fullest impact until mid-life ... Flashbacks and vivid recollections of events from childhood grow stronger with age.”

Forgotten Australians, 2004, p. 159

Never Talk to Strangers

‘What’s your name?’

‘Sue. I’m your daughter.’

She scowls into the daughter’s face, peering closer but finding nothing familiar. Confused, she flops back into the recliner.

‘I don’t remember any Sue,’ she mutters.

She holds the thought momentarily. ‘I don’t even like that name so why would I call you Sue?’

‘Well Mum, it’s Susan. You called me Susan Ann.’

‘That’s not the same thing then, is it? It’s not Sue.’

‘So you do remember me – Susan Ann?’

‘I didn’t say that. Get that kind lady to come back. I don’t know who you are. I want to talk to that other lady.’

Her eyes dart around the room searching for a way through this perpetual haze. Evidence that connects the disappearing dots is displayed on the dressing table. Aluminium-framed photos of Susan and her sister Patricia. Photos of her three grandchildren. And the centre-piece, an embossed silver-framed photo of her late husband. Her Reg. It’s five years now since he went.

Sue arranges the daffodils she’s brought in, pecks her mother’s resistant cheek and leaves.

The kind lady returns and tidies the dressing table. Janet’s mind seems to have briefly cleared and her face becomes beatific. She likes this carer. She always has time for a chat.

‘Is this a photo of your husband, Pet?’

‘Yes. That’s my Reg. He’s gone now.’

Debbie (that’s her name) sits on the visitor’s chair and Janet remembers.

‘It was cancer.’ As Janet breathes out, the sigh plumbs her very essence. ‘He was my soulmate you know.’

The jammed doors in Janet’s mind swing open and she wanders down the corridors of a more recent past. A past that still contains Reg.

She explains how she’d always seen them as one sturdy tree, gnarly around the trunk and able to withstand the storms of life. And there’d been a few. Like the accident Reg had at work. Fell off a roof and broke both his legs. Couldn’t work again for six months. Luckily she had the cleaning job and with the insurance they kept up the house payments.

‘Then there was our dear little Susan Ann. We nearly lost her you know.’ She describes how it had happened.

She’d been hit by a car when she got off the school bus. She was only eight and to see her little body connected to tubes and monitors week after week was the worst thing any parent could experience. She and Reg had sat by the bed, their hands soldered together channelling strength and hope. Susan was left with a slight limp but otherwise you’d never know how close to death she’d been. The girls were their pride and joy. Janet and Reg had worked out between them what a strong family might look like, how loving parents might behave. The blueprint they created had proved a success.

‘And standing up to that monster in court. I could never have done it without my Reg.’

Debbie pats Janet’s arm as the memories of that nightmarish day bring tears that splash into her tea cup.

‘You’re so lucky to have had such a good man, Janet. Always remember that,’ she says.

But it doesn’t console. Janet suddenly feels frightened and adrift in a world without Reg.

‘And to have your lovely daughters visit.’

Janet’s befuddled gaze wanders over the photos then back to the window. When her eyes return to Debbie there is no-one behind the blank stare. Despite the fond recollections of only a moment ago, her children are once again lost to her.

‘I don’t have any daughters. But my son visits me. He’s a lovely boy.’

Debbie smiles. Clears the morning-tea things and settles Janet into her recliner.

She patiently reminds Janet about her family.

‘You have two daughters, Janet. Their names are Sue and Pat. You haven’t got a son, but you do have three beautiful little grandchildren: Amber, Brett and Sally. These are their photos.’

The doors in the attic of Janet’s mind have swung firmly shut and she stares at the photos, looking for clues and connections.

‘When will Reg be back? His dinner will be cold if he’s not back soon,’ she wails.

Her fingers begin to pluck at the bed cover, at her clothing. Her body becomes rigid. Her eyes dart around a room that is now her only world.

Debbie leaves quietly. She can’t bear to remind Janet that Reg is dead. Again. The grief is too awful to witness. A keening soul, too terrible to hear.

‘I haven’t had my cup of tea yet.’

It’s the same every morning after breakfast as she is steered back to her room.

‘Yes, Janet. You’ve just finished your breakfast and you had your cup of tea.’

‘Are you sure? I don’t remember that.’ She is grumpy and not at all cooperative about changing her sodden pants.

‘I think it is time for the continence nurse to have another little chat, Janet.’

The voice is already weary despite the fact that it is only 8am.

It’s a struggle but eventually with clean, dry pants she is settled into her recliner with the TV remote in her hand.

‘You see what you can find to watch until morning-tea time. This is the volume button here dear. Just ring your bell if you need anything.’

She does ring the bell. Five times before morning-tea time. After the third time it is ignored.

Janet's days refuse to remain in the present. Time disintegrates, unravelling in multi-coloured threads as she returns to places and people from her childhood. Long ago, locked away memories bubble through the muddle of her mind.

She is back at a big house and a fat lady in a dark blue uniform is twisting her hand as she drags her along to a bed covered with a horrible grey blanket. The corners are tucked in tightly. Everywhere she looks there are more beds just the same. The fat lady orders her to stay where she is until the lunch bell. Janet's face is wet and sticky and her pants are soggy and cold. Dust motes are dancing and swirling colours are everywhere. There are warm blue egg shapes that she can pick up and nurse in her hands. Her mummy is calling and Janet can smell the special perfume she wears when she is going out. The rows and rows of beds fade as Janet moves through the dazzling light in the doorway. Her pants are soft and dry and her shoes don't even whisper as they cross the shiny wooden floor. Her mummy tells her that they will be home soon and Janet can have a Fanta.

'Good morning, Janet. Let's get you changed before you have lunch, shall we?' The carer's voice is soothing.

But, Janet resists and starts to scream. She is back in a big bathroom with white, white tiles. There are so many and they sparkle as if they might be a whole sky full of stars. Her mummy has disappeared.

'Take off your clothes,' commands a cross voice.

She is cold and shaky but the lady with the horrible voice grabs her clothes and yanks them off and says that she smells disgusting and her yellow hair ribbons are on the floor and a big pair of scissors chop off her plaits and stingy, smelly stuff is all over her head.

'Get in the bath.' The voice is shouting over her wailing.

Her legs feel like fire despite the cold water and the hairbrush smacks and smacks because she is a naughty girl who won't stop shivering and crying.

The carer battles to disengage Janet from her sodden slacks. Even her socks and sneakers need changing.

‘Come on Janet. Let’s get you into some dry clothes,’ says a gentle voice not at all like the one that is still playing in Janet’s head.

A hateful, nasty voice ordering her to stand in the corner with the wet sheet over her head. Her legs are still throbbing as she disappears from the shouts. She whispers to her shadowy mummy about the sunshine and the rosebush at home with the tiny, tiny, pink buds and Lily of the Valley perfume overpowers the stink of pee and she smiles but her cheeks are still wet from tears and snot that just run out of her eyes and nose like taps and she shakes and blubbers until she vomits and gets another belting for messing up the shiny floor.

The screaming is incessant and none of the staff can calm her.

‘We can’t have her disturbing the other clients. I’ll get the doctor to prescribe something,’ says the duty nurse.

The medication makes her dozy but she remains in the dormitory of her childhood. Her legs are burning and the wooden hairbrush is still beating against her calves and skinny thighs that stick out from under the wet bed sheet shrouding her head. Matron belts her again with a strap this time because she is a dirty, insolent girl who won’t stop wetting the bed.

It’s a larger dose and it finally pushes Janet out of the dormitory and into a deep dreamless sleep. The carer sighs as she tidies up the dishevelled bedclothes and lowers the blind.

A new morning and the daughter reads her mother's notes.

Behaviour becoming increasingly difficult. Family consultation recommended.

'Hello, Mum. Did you have a good night?'

'I don't think I know you. And Mummy says that I should never talk to strangers.'

'I'm not a stranger. I'm Susan Ann. You are *my* mummy.'

But Janet has departed. She is somewhere else. In another place and time and has no interest in sharing that with someone called Susan Ann.

The consultation is as expected. Awful. Both the daughters listen to the medical team explaining how their once strong, courageous mother continues to evaporate, leaving a frightened cowering child in her place. We are aware that Janet suffered childhood trauma they say. They also suggest that she may be reliving many of those experiences. The effects of trauma can be life-long they believe. Comfort and distraction are the best strategies. Medication gives some respite but they try to keep that to a minimum. They are doing their best. The daughters understand that.

Janet now spends more time in the new courtyard. She is calmer, the staff report. The sisters follow the paved walkway looking for their mother. They pass a woman treadling at an old sewing machine. There is no needle or thread but she is concentrating hard and humming to herself as she pushes a scrap of fabric under the foot. Another is turning the handle of an old wringer. She is busy doing what took her most of every Monday sixty years ago. She must keep going; there's the starching to be done yet. Behind a screen of lavender bushes, Janet is chatting conversationally as she rearranges the tea set on a tray. She lifts the cup and holds it to the rose-bud lips of a doll with yellow hair.

"I can't get some of the terrible things he did to me out of my head, they loom in the shadows of my life and haunt me. This man took my virginity, my innocence, my development, my potential."

Forgotten Australians, 2004, p. 103

Soulmates

1.

He'd never said anything before they were married. Maybe he couldn't find the words. In his experience, words could be as difficult to grasp as the eels he sometimes hooked off the jetty on Saturday afternoons.

But she remembers how jittery he was on their wedding night. His usual quiet and reassuring demeanour seemed askew. He'd disappeared in the bathroom and was gone for more than twenty minutes. And, when he'd finally joined her in the marital bed she sensed an agitation that was new. She had been anxiously waiting for him, propped up against the pillows in her trousseau nighty. It was apricot, layered with nylon frills. She'd smiled bravely as he slid back into bed. Her glasses were on the side-table so she couldn't see the angst behind Reg's equally brave smile.

After a tentative hug and peck, they had turned off the light and huddled under the blanket. Side by side, they gripped each other's hand and waited. Her shaking and sudden tears distressed him. He guessed the cause.

'We don't need to do anything,' he'd whispered into her hair. 'Lots of bad things happened to me too when I was a kid. I'm not even sure if I can do this. The awful memories keep coming back. I can't make them stop.'

That's when he'd told her.

What had happened moved him to another level of terror. The searing pain, the hissed threats, the dazed staggering back to a freezing bed. The shock of blood. Then the sleepless, foetal cowering anticipating what became repeated nightly visitations. The pall of shame, which never leaves him, he'd said. It was there still: haunting his marriage bed. As he'd groped for words, flashbacks returned Reg to that dark space of his childhood.

Sounds of snuffling, muffled sobbing and the creaking of iron beds fill his head. The kid next to him is Number 15 but his real name is David. He likes David. Sometimes they whisper to each before they fall asleep, huddled against the cold under a single grey blanket. The temptation to climb into the same bed for company and warmth is powerful but the thrashing that would await them at dawn prevents such an unwise decision. The doctor gives David a needle every night. Reg doesn't know why but David seems to be

getting sicker and sicker. One night his bed is empty. Then Number 12 comes to sleep there instead.

The throb of chilblains on fingers and toes delays Reg's longed-for escape into another consciousness. That opportunity to move from panicky wakefulness to a space away from the everyday: a place with soothing, soft edges. The deep, deep sleep of childhood. Yet, this peaceful repose is marred by the cold, wet sheets each morning indicating a deeper disquiet and triggering a new cycle of humiliation, beatings and deprivation.

But eventually even this special space is invaded as he is pulled from his bed to be taken to the toilets.

'Come on sonny. You won't wet the bed if you go now,' slurs the voice in the dark.

2.

His voice is barely a whisper. Janet doesn't question. She knows enough to fill the gaps and more words might become weapons. In the spacious bed, they are stones cast into a pond. Ripples surge into waves as she shivers in the dark until eventually her own terrors overwhelm. A sudden wave of nausea engulfs her as she stumbles into the bathroom. It is Mr White. He is still trapped inside her. His stinking breath and panting weight rushes back at her as she tries to breathe deeply and focus on the basin taps. The shuddering grows worse and she sobs as the vomit splashes up the sides of the porcelain bowl. The white tiles spin as she sits on the cold floor gulping air. It could be minutes or hours before she creeps back and slides under the blankets. Reg holds her tightly as her tears soak his shoulder and into the pillowslip.

Lurking memories dance around them, taunting and paralysing. But eventually they drift off to sleep. They greet a new day with faltering smiles, fortified by a gentle mantle of trust the night has delivered.

It was to be many more weeks before they found the courage to consummate their union. It wasn't wild passion. Just a gentle searching for a way to give each other a sense of fleeting pleasure and enduring safety.

3.

He had begun to count tiles. It filled the time now he spent so much of it seated on the new porcelain pedestal. He'd installed it himself and was proud of the professional finish he'd achieved. But Janet had noticed on a couple of occasions that he looked quite pale when he returned to his TV chair.

It's when Reg first mentioned the pain and bleeding that Janet formed her own opinion. It was because of the abuse, she concluded. However, after the preliminary medical examination, Janet's suspicions proved incorrect.

'So what did the doctor say?'

'Just some more tests. Nothing too serious I reckon. It'll take care of itself,' he said.

So new tests were arranged. The picture became much murkier. A large shadow indicated a mass of delinquent cells. More tests. These were more invasive – and conclusive. Stage four. Nonetheless, the oncologist was upbeat as he advised an aggressive approach. Cut, then poison.

'Don't worry Mr Thomas. We see plenty of these and there's a chance we can beat it. Surgery first, then chemo to mop up.'

There was never any chance. It only took eight months.

“A parent's death was pivotal to children's futures. Often the father could not cope with caring for the children after his wife's death, whereas if a father died, the mother often could not financially support her children ...

The attitudes of the day also worked against some families staying together as fathers were not seen as appropriate care givers ...”

Forgotten Australians, 2004, pp. 74 & 83

Arrangements

The late afternoon sunlight ricochets off the regulation cream and green. Patches of empty space dance with dust motes, although how they have escaped the disinfectant is a miracle. The polished linoleum floor demands a shuffling gait similar to navigating icy pavements in different climes. There is no ice or snow here. The heat in Perth is peaking at this time of the year. It reached 105 degrees Fahrenheit yesterday and today doesn't feel much cooler. As he settles on the chair by her bed the sweat gradually pools under his thighs and thin buttocks.

How are you today Love?

The same question. There is no answer really. She's dying. That's how she is.

And maybe she knows but keeps up the charade for his sake.

Not too bad. I had some jelly for tea tonight. Her voice is quite bright. He's encouraged.

That's a good sign isn't it? You'll come good with a bit more food in you.

Her arms are sticks and her collar bones are so sharp you could slice bread with them. Bob hasn't seen much of the rest of her for nearly two months now. She doesn't get out of bed any more. They bring the bedpan to her when she needs it.

And her colour is peculiar. A ghastly dark yellow. Like half brewed tea.

It's the jaundice, the ward nurse tells him. *It always happens once the liver starts playing up.*

Playing up? What does that mean? The euphemisms befuddle him. Skirting around the reality that she looks worse and worse every day. Even he can see that. It's bloody obvious and no-one has any decent answers.

Bob's head is pounding as he beats a well-worn track along the hospital corridors, through the heavy front door and down to the bus-stop. A gecko on the wall of the bus shelter works at becoming as green as Government Transport paint. The patterned eyes seem to stare in every direction before a long tongue lubricates first one then the other. The translucent creature mesmerises. Bob wishes he could be so motionless and that his guts would stop their incessant churning. The tiny reptile lifts one webbed foot, freezes,

then puts it down again. A fly settles on the peeling paint, oblivious to its camouflaged neighbour. A flash of pink tongue. Dinner. The bus arrives and Bob goes home for his.

Next day he is at the hospital as usual. It's only slightly cooler and she looks the same.

How are the kids? Is Gwen managing alright?

He's noticed that she's finding it hard to concentrate properly now the morphine is muddling her mind. She says it mostly keeps the pain at bay but that the last hour between the four-hourly injections is always the worst.

They're okay, Love. Nothing for you to worry yourself about.

Billy hasn't got that rash again has he? The heat sets it off. Tell Gwen to use calamine lotion if it flares up.

You just stop worrying about that. Gwen's doing a good job. You need to save your energy and get well.

I know, Bob. I'll just close my eyes for a while.

Her once pretty face looks like so many other dying faces. Time has been rubbed away and there is no clue to her age anymore. The sunken eyes are circled with smudged pigment, the discoloured skin stretched tightly over the cheekbones, the grimacing mouth struggling to hold back pain. She exhales slowly and closes her eyes.

The doctors haven't told Bob much and he's noticed that they seem to be avoiding him lately. As he stares at the tiny form curled around the relentless pain, he barely recognises the bag of bones that was once his softly shaped Mary.

Bob's mind wanders as he lifts one buttock, then the other, trying to relieve the pins and needles. He stands up and stretches as he tries to piece together his unravelling life. He remembers that at first it was just the nausea, but eventually cramping pain left her doubled up over the sink.

I am feeling off-colour, she'd admitted.

I reckon you look as yellow as a Chinaman, he'd joked. You'd better get off to the doctor and find out what's up. Probably just need a tonic or something.

The doctor was mystified but thought a short stay in hospital would give her a rest while some more tests were carried out. She had packed her best nighties, washed her chenille dressing gown and Bob was confident that the doctors would fix the problem quickly. For the first week or so, the pain had settled with the medication and she had relished the luxury of time to shower and rub on Ponds cold cream each morning. She'd even shampooed her hair a couple of times and her dark waves looked quite lively. She was only thirty-four and had kept her shapely figure after the three children.

What have you done to yourself? You look as good as you did on our wedding day, he enthused during that first week at the hospital.

You can't fool me Bob Marshall. I'm not looking that good but I had some time to do pin-curls after I washed my hair. It's got some bounce back. And I'm not feeling too bad at all. A few more days and I'll be right as rain.

The kids are missing you. Be good to get you back home.

Have you remembered Friday is castor oil day? And don't let them go without a singlet. I know the weather is warming up but I don't want them to come down with a chill.

Don't worry, Pet. We're managing alright. We just need to get you back on deck. I've brought you a few grapes. A couple of bunches are already ripe and I got them before those bloody parrots beat me.

Thanks Love. Put them on my side-table and I'll have some in the morning with breakfast.

During this first week in hospital Mary had enjoyed the attention and leisure-time. The grapes Bob brought tasted tangy on her tongue, a relief from the bland, overcooked hospital food. The meals probably seemed worse because she'd noticed that the medication had created a metallic taste in her mouth. It was as though she'd been licking pennies. Despite this slightly nauseating side effect, she was feeling stronger and was keen for some kind of distraction. She hadn't seen the latest *Women's Weekly* but one of the nurses told her that there was a lovely portrait of Princess Anne on the cover. Her own

little Susie was the same age and with the same blond curls as the Princess. Mary missed being in her own kitchen surrounded by her brood. She and Bob had made a good pair and created what most people would call a 'happy home'. Right from the beginning Bob had taken an interest in the children and hadn't believed in belting them the way a lot of other fathers did. He was in no way a violent man and had never laid a hand on Mary or the children. She's been lucky. So many other women she's known seemed to cop a backhand for the slightest thing. Not that they mentioned it. Just covered the bruises with more powder. Even when Billy was a toddler and such a handful Bob was always patient with him. His birth had been difficult and the doctors had told them that he might have slight brain damage

Can't really be sure, they said. Just have to wait and see whether he reaches his milestones at the right time.

Which he hadn't. He was late with everything: rolling, sitting, standing, walking, talking, potty training. And at school he got more and more behind. He had to stay down last year and he still isn't doing too well. The girls, on the other hand, are as bright as buttons. Bob and Mary have been lucky there.

The weeks drag on and the antibiotics and various other medications prove useless. The vomiting returns more violently than before and her bloated abdomen is growing so tight and painful that she can hardly roll over. Her pee has become a horrible brown colour. Her hair is now lank, without a skerrick of bounce. Her skin grows taut and more yellow. Her bones poke their way against her vanishing flesh. Looking down on her shrunken body, she doesn't resemble anyone she knows anymore. Poor Bob barely recognises her. She is a stranger trapped in an alien bag of loose skin. A 'patient' whose parts can be prodded and poked without any need to address the head that is attached. Blurring and fading like an old photo she is no longer a wife or mother. She is just an illness no-one can name. What the team of experts had finally mumbled was that they couldn't do any more.

Bob looks for the gecko each evening as he waits for the bus. He usually finds it somewhere in the shelter, patiently waiting for midges and flies. Its colour changes according to the surface it sits on. Adaptation; a remarkable phenomenon. Always able to blend into the world you find yourself inhabiting. Bob wonders how much longer he can manage without Mary. He's not so good at adapting.

He is dazed by it all and just keeps plugging away at work, sitting by her bed each evening and falling exhausted into an empty bed where silent tears soak his pillow. The kids are wearing him down with their questions and his sister is beginning to grate on his nerves. As the weeks drag by she begins to hint at the 'what if' scenarios.

Maybe you need to think about what will happen if Mary doesn't get better?

What she means by that he can't fathom. There is no other outcome as far as he is concerned. Mary will get better, come home and everything will be back to normal.

You're just going to have to face the facts. Gwen is raising her voice along with the stakes. *You'll have to make arrangements.*

For God's sake. Stop your harping woman!

Arrangements. What the hell is she talking about?

The doctors will figure something out soon. No need to go jumping to any conclusions, Gwen. Could you just let me eat my tea in peace?

Putting your head in the sand if you ask me, she mutters as she bangs down a plate of congealed stew.

His sister is not a hard woman, practical but not hard. She's very fond indeed of Mary and the kids.

I'm sure that you'd agree, Bob, a hotel is no place for children. So if the worst came to the worst, George and I would be in no position to take on the kiddies.

Bob acknowledges that it was very good of Gwen to come and stay. A Godsend if he's honest. Her husband George isn't a bad sort either. He'd encouraged her to help out when Bob's phone call had alerted them to Mary's illness.

Just for the time-being, George had reminded Gwen.

So, the timeline, not formally drawn up, was nearing its end one way or another. What was ‘too long’ when it came to dying? Heart and brain and tissue sucked in oxygen for as long as possible and even clever doctors couldn’t reliably predict when the whole system would collapse.

The gecko gives him solace. He can drift in another world for a little while as he watches it day after day. He starts to swipe at flies in an effort to feed the little fellow who is sometimes pale gold, sometimes green, and once a shade of pink as it clung to an abandoned and faded cerise cardigan. Its sticky splayed toes had balls of fluff attached. *Like slippers*, smiled Bob. He missed his bus once when he was stalking a fly around the back of the bus shelter.

The heatwave still hasn’t broken. Day after day the temperatures continue to soar and Bob’s chair remains sticky. She opens her eyes only briefly now.

Hello, Love. Have you had a good day? Her voice rasped as it worked at the air.

Not too bad. How’s the pain today?

A little better this afternoon.

Just rest and I’ll sit here for a while.

He wanted to tell her about the gecko but she couldn’t stay alert long enough for him to share the wonder of its colours and patterned eyes. Instead of talking, he’s got in the habit of bringing in the evening paper. Now he busies himself with the repetition of turning the pages. Sometimes he wishes he would never get to the end. Sometimes he starts from the beginning again just to maintain the soothing sound of paper moving through empty space. His eyes can see nothing on the pages. The curtain is drawn around her bed which provides something more tangible to focus his mind. Searching for the tiny tears and broken threads in the faded green fabric, he counted fifty-five last night. This must be a new curtain. He can only find thirty-one.

There have been no arrangements made and no matter how hard he concentrates he has no idea where to begin. At the bus stop that evening he can’t spot the gecko. He wanders a few feet away from the shelter, searching the footpath. On the concrete slabs behind the

shelter he comes across its smashed form. He sobs uncontrollably over the tiny extinguished body.

After he's gone home for his tea, Mary rouses to an aluminium sky dazzling through the tall windows. Outside, the heat bounces off the domed ceiling of this parochial city wedged between a desert and an ocean. It seeps through masonry and glass into the stifling hospital ward. Sister Betty has just completed her rounds and the patients are neatly arrayed with their counterpanes turned back four inches, corners tucked in and beds wrinkle free. As Mary sweats silently into the white starched sheets she hazily imagines waves splashing over her. She's always loved the sea and she and Bob have taken the children to the beach each year during the summer. They catch the bus loaded up with towels and sandwiches and spend the day swimming and skylarking. By nightfall the children collapse into bed exhausted, barely able to grin through faces that have turned into tight over-ripe tomatoes. Calamine is liberally applied and it takes another week before they can peel sheets of skin from each other's backs. A land of sun and sand and flies edged by an ocean of extraordinary power and beauty. A lucky place to be and a wonderful place to bring up children. Mary is certain of that. She longs for the cool of that ocean as she lies trapped in the clammy sheets.

A swim would be lovely, she mumbles to the empty chair.

Bob doesn't reply so she drifts off without him. The waves embrace her. Become her. Liquid diamonds bounce off her skin. Her aquamarine swimsuit clings to rounded breasts and hips. She is cool. She is beautiful. She is as pearlescent as a nautilus shell. Wind and salt and spray fill her sails and she floats and floats and floats. Shells and sand whisper and spiral.

There is no pain.

That night the duty nurse gently turns Mary's skinny body every four hours. The pressure marks are already showing on her bony buttocks, the scissor-sharp shoulder blades, the pathetic pointy elbows. Even her heels are beginning to inflame. The morphine dose is building up as she clings to life but eventually it will tip her over the edge.

Just tidying up the bed for you, she whispers as she rearranges the skeletal limbs. I'll bring something more for the pain.

It's the next dose that depresses Mary's breathing and slows her heartbeat to the point of no return. At dawn she takes a final breath.

Mrs Marshall has gone, the night-nurse reports at change-over. I'll finish things for her before I go off duty. I'd like to do that. I grew very fond of her.

She tests the water to make sure it's a comfortable temperature before she gently sponges the empty shell that had once been a pretty woman, a loving wife, a protective mother. And she opens the window to let Mary Marshall move freely away from earthly tribulations and the arrangements she will never have to make.

"Children were rarely given information about what was happening, where they were going, where their parents or siblings were and when they would next see them."

Forgotten Australians, 2004, p. 128

Witness

From the moment I arrived, visiting aunts and neighbours complimented my flawless complexion.

Just look at that beautiful face and those rose-bud lips, they gushed.

I was the centre of attention and I admit that I enjoyed it. Despite the fact that my senses remain trapped beneath a china veneer I can feel. Joy, excitement, pain – even grief. And my memory is quite remarkable. This may be of interest to those who believe the brain is the repository for all experiences, because my porcelain head is quite empty. Or you may be an animist and believe that despite my lack of a reasoning centre, I possess consciousness that allows me to move between the realms of the real and the imagined as I tell you about what happened all those years ago.

You may also believe that people are unable to remember events before the age of three or four years. Not constrained by notions of human development, it appears that I was created fully formed and time could not reshape me physically or mentally; although damage has been scribed onto my body. I have remained the same height and weight all my life and was assigned a consummate reservoir of knowledge. So, I can recall the first time my legs were broken when I wasn't even a year old.

I spent three months at the hospital and Janet told me she missed me. The wide, anxious eyes peering from similarly frail and damaged bodies were my only company during those long weeks. No-one visited. No-one comforted or cradled. It happened again sometime later. This time the protective arms became weapons as they flung me off the back veranda onto the concrete path. It was crazy paving that Dad had proudly sweated over the summer before. Crazy in a festive sort of way but concrete nonetheless. The damage was much worse although a clod of weeds between the crazes partially protected my face. The hospital stay was even longer and my head still contains fragmented images of tangled legs and arms jumbled together. Missing features and bald scalps. A ghastly landscape of brokenness. And silence. Always the silence. It shimmered around me and made me uneasy.

I first met Janet in 1952 under the family Christmas tree. No fir tree this: instead a banksia branch with golden candles poking through the tinsel. She loved me right away and named me Belinda. I was pleased with the name but immediately knew that it would

take time for Janet to learn how to care. She dragged me by one leg to the festive table and my pretty yellow dress was covered in custard before the celebrations were over. By nightfall I had been discarded and spent an uncomfortable night behind the couch. My inanimate state required that I wait patiently to be included in daily life. Janet's clumsiness and lack of attention led to the first accident. Her early apprenticeship in mothering proved inadequate and the unyielding linoleum of the bathroom floor did its worst. The dank surface could not absorb the force and my chubby white legs twisted at odd angles as the cold and damp seeped in. A tantrum was the cause of the second but after those early mishaps I never had to go back to the hospital. Janet became a dedicated and protective make-believe mother. She told me more of her secrets and we grew closer. She said that she still loved me even though my once perfect china face now bore the chips and cracks of experience and my crooked legs never really mended properly. But this was a time when it wasn't unusual to see children who dragged a leg or hobbled in leg braces and built up boots. Children who couldn't jump puddles anymore.

Janet sometimes took me shopping and I can still see the mothers dressed in their second best frocks and mended stockings adjusting their hats and smoothing their gloves as they sat side by side on the bus. Heaped on the grubby floor were string bags crammed with cabbages and potatoes and vegemite and Dettol. More often than not, a select piece of liver oozed its bloody fluids through the butchers' paper and onto the bus floor. They exchanged gossip behind gloved hands.

You must have heard about that Gordon Swan, you know the Swans on the corner of White and Rose Street. Well he's got the polio you know. I heard it from Mrs Sampson and she always knows what's what. She says he's in the hospital in the iron lung thingy, touch and go for a while but looks like he'll live, be a cripple though so Mrs Sampson says.

The mothers thanked their lucky stars that their Johnny or Beth hadn't caught the polio. They'd heard on the grapevine that there would be needles at the school soon that would stop the polio altogether. Well what about the diphtheria? Mrs Binks wanted to know. Did it stop that too? None of the mothers were too sure about that but the doctors knew best and they would tell us when they were ready. It didn't pay to ask too many questions.

We always did things together, Janet and I. She used to tell me secrets that even Suzie and Billy didn't know about. Like how she was going to be an air hostess when she grew

up. She decided that carrying cups of tea on a tray high up in the sky required skills similar to a tight-rope walker so spent a great deal of time balancing her tea-set on a plank of wood while walking along a skipping rope stretched across the backyard. She was also going to be a real mum one day. She was practising this when she smacked me and said:

Belinda. I've told you a dozen times not to dirty your clean dress. Just eat your biscuit properly or you won't get another one.

She was a good imaginary mother who knew what it took to mould a well-mannered and dutiful child.

We had a cubby between the passionfruit vine and the outside dunny and once we'd climbed inside no-one could see us. We had lots of afternoon teas with the rose tea-set; sometimes with real tea leaves floating in cold water. I loved all our adventures. Some were pretty scary, like the time the crocodile that lived behind the shed chased her three times around the Hills Hoist. Mum wasn't at all flustered when we ran inside to tell her.

It's just imaginitis. Crocodiles don't live behind sheds, she said. Maybe it was a goanna.

Janet and I were huffy about that. We both knew the difference between a crocodile and a goanna. We didn't bother telling Mum about Colin. He wasn't at all scary. His big furry face made us laugh when he hugged us in bed. Polar bears have got bad breath though and sometimes I wished that he would brush his teeth. If Janet was cross with me she would only talk to Colin. I listened anyway.

There was another small accident when Janet poked me in the eye with the new pencil that Mum had bought her for school. Janet was five now and ready for Bub's class. It was excitement about starting school that caused her to wave the newly sharpened pencil while conducting an imaginary orchestra. She was practising 'God Save the Queen' ready for her first assembly. I just happened to be too close as the final bars were belted out. Janet was sorry that my eye looked so wonky but we all got used to it after a while, even though I did see two of everything most of the time.

Her first school day finally arrived and I waited to be collected. With a new leather satchel on her back and virgin sandals squeaking she plodded into the bedroom.

Dolls aren't allowed, she said as she kissed me on the lips.

I was shocked. It had never occurred to me that Janet and I would spend whole days apart.

She usually left me sitting on a kitchen chair after breakfast; the kitchen was the hub of the household so I didn't miss much. Now I had days to myself I became a witness to family events. Susie was still too little to go to school so she was at home with me and Mum. Billy went to school but he had to stay down a year. The teacher said he couldn't be promoted to Standard Three because he didn't know his phonics or his two times table. Billy didn't care because he said school was dumb anyway. He only liked being an Indian stalking the cowboys hidden on the spare block next door to our house. He crawled through the wild oats with chook feathers stuck in his hair. He never found the cowboys but it kept him busy most days after school. He should have been practising his times tables but he usually managed to escape that ordeal. As soon as Mum put the chart on the table he squirmed and moaned.

Arr Mum, I've got a real bad tummy ache. I need to go to the dunny.

It's a lavatory not a dunny, Billy, she'd cluck.

Maybe Mum knew that Billy's life would go on whether he knew his times tables or not.

I got quite lonely at home because Susie didn't play with me. She was busy with her own tea set and her doll called Betsy. They mostly played under the kitchen table hidden behind a curtain of checked tablecloth. I could hear them whispering and laughing and felt very cross that I couldn't join in. I remained stranded on my hard kitchen chair until Janet got home. I daydreamed and made up stories to occupy myself when Mum and Susie went out shopping.

It was around this time I started to notice that Mum was bending over and taking deep breaths a lot. Her face would look crumpled and her eyes were scrunched shut.

Blessed cramps, she'd mutter. I'm just going to have a little lie down, she'd tell Susie.

I think Dad knew she wasn't quite right but he didn't say much when he got home because he was very tired from work and needed to read *The Daily News*.

Just give your father some peace, Mum used to say. He needs a rest after a hard day's work.

She never complained and we just had our tea and went to bed the same as usual. But from my kitchen chair I could see that Mum was leaning over the sink a lot more and her face was the same colour as the washing up water. Her smiley water melon mouth was upside down now.

Then one morning we got up and Mum wasn't even there. Our Aunty Gwen was making breakfast. Dad wasn't there either. The porridge was lumpy and we weren't allowed to have golden syrup on it.

A sprinkle of sugar is all you need. Golden syrup is a shocking waste. I'm not sure what your mother is thinking with such extravagances. She must know what a strain it is for your father to bring in enough for the whole family. Now I'm here I can get things back on the straight and narrow.

She was so bossy.

What would she know, Janet whispered. She's not even a real mum.

When Dad finally came home, it was teatime. We had lots of questions but got no answers.

Where's Mum? Can we see her? When's she coming home? We don't like Aunty Gwen's mashed potato. There's lumps and black spots in it. And we couldn't have golden syrup on our porridge.

Stop worrying your father. He's got enough on his plate without that. Of course you can't see your mother. Children aren't allowed. Now brush your teeth and get to bed before I lose my wits.

Bossy as usual.

Dad was late home for tea every night now because he went to the hospital to see Mum after work. When he did get home he would just say hello, nothing more. He never played the peek-a-boo game with us anymore, just ate his dried out chops and peas that had been sitting in the oven for ages. Didn't even read the newspaper and if you really looked you could see that his eyes just stared at something none of us could see.

Then one day Dad came home before tea. The front door slammed as his work boots travelled the unfamiliar surface of the carpet runner in the hallway. The shock of seeing the forbidden boots from our vantage point under the kitchen table brought our game to an abrupt halt while we waited for Auntie Gwen's fury. Instead she dropped the teapot. Tea leaves floated in brown rivers until miniature, black islands formed on the worn lino. We just stared as the floor took on its new landscape. Auntie Gwen's mouth seemed to have forgotten how to shape words. The kitchen froze into a world of silence. Thoughts and feelings were trapped in tiny jagged flakes filling the cramped room. Even the whining which had echoed around the back yard faded. Their squabbling suspended, Billy and Susie stood on the back doorstep, mouths open, staring at the kitchen tableau.

At last words came rushing back.

Shut that flywire door before the flies get in. Get out from under that table while I clean this mess up. Early tea tonight and off to bed without any complaints. Janet set the table. A boiled egg and toast soldiers is what we need.

Dad said nothing. His boots stayed under the kitchen table. The paint splashes made them look like confetti covering a giant's feet. He seemed to have forgotten how to move. He just sat like a splotchy statue in the gloom. The sun was still creeping its way around the blinds when we got into bed but the bedroom door was shut tight by our auntie whose mouth looked like a dog's bottom. We grizzled about how early it was and started playing the 'I spy' game. Billy had to sleep on the floor between our beds now that Auntie Gwen had the sleep-out. Much later we could hear an awful moaning noise but none of us knew what it was. Anyway, it stopped after a while so maybe it was just imaginitis as Mum would say.

We hardly ever saw our Uncle George, but here he was sitting at the kitchen table when we got up in the morning. Auntie Gwen plonked down grey porridge. The kitchen still seemed to be full of jagged pieces. Even Uncle George's voice was cracked.

We're going for a drive in the Holden with your father.

Auntie Gwen fussed about us all wearing our best clothes.

Where are we going? Is Mum coming? Can we have an icecream?

No-one answered.

Dad was already in front seat when we piled into Uncle George's car. His shoulders sagged inside the jacket of his best suit. We wondered in whispered voices whether we were going to the country. Mum and Dad had said that one day we would all go to the country for a holiday.

After what seemed forever, Uncle George stopped the car outside a kind of castle with a high wall and black gates. We all clattered out through the car door. Then we trailed behind Dad, through the gates and a huge wooden front door. Inside, standing on the shiniest floor I had ever seen, was a lady in white whose mouth pointed to our dad and formed the shape of a smile.

This is Mrs Goodman, Dad mumbled. Say hello.

Hello my dears. What lovely children. Tell me your names.

Billy kicked Janet to make her go first.

My name's Janet and that's my brother Billy. He's eight and that's Susie. She's three.

We all kept staring at the shiny floor as Mrs Goodman smiled and smiled.

And how old are you my dear?

I'm five already. And I'm in Bub's class.

Janet puffed out her chest.

And who is this? She pointed at me.

Belinda. She's got a wonky eye.

So she has but what a pretty name. Now come along with me all of you.

This was our new home, she told us through her ghastly smile.

You can call me Matron, she instructed.

The huge door banged and banged and banged, blocking the image of our dad shuffling away with his head bowed and arms hanging uselessly by his side.

Silence flooded into the enormous hallway with the shiny, shiny floor. Billy and Susie disappeared through a door. Janet and I waited and waited on a hard chair in another

room until a skinny lady in a blue uniform brought us a glass of milk and an Anzac biscuit. I remember how Janet poked some biscuit into my still perfect rose-bud lips while she squeezed me tightly. At last Matron came back. Her splotchy face grimaced from behind the huge pillars of teeth. That's when the sound began to bounce off the smooth white walls as Janet screamed and kicked. Once again, my chubby legs were twisted under my body as I fell onto the glassy wooden planks. My wayward eyes captured two sets of leering teeth.

Come along young lady. That's quite enough nonsense, Matron's not so friendly voice admonished through the shrill screams. Rough hands gathered me up. A large key worried at a lock in a vast wooden door. The cupboard door closed, switching day to night. My legs remained at odd angles and my wonky eye stared at nothing. The dark smothered and silence engulfed me.

There were no more whispered secrets and afternoon teas with the rose tea-set. A long time ago I saw Janet. Only once. She came into the playroom and smiled at me but a big girl pushed her away and picked me up. A girl with spiteful hands.

Many decades have passed and I'm old now. My chipped and cracked pate has lost its beauty and even my rose-bud lips have faded. My other eye is jammed shut and all the eyelashes have been picked out. Only a few strands of my yellow hair have survived. My legs have remained bent and my pretty voile outfit is quite shredded. No-one plays with me now and I no longer inhabit the dark cupboard in the place where Janet used to live. The air around me is putrid and the seagulls screech incessantly overhead. I've been here for years waiting for the sun and rain to reduce me to smaller fragments. But china endures just like my memory. My hollow head remembers still.

“Nobody pondered the process of growing up, thought about what went on in a child’s mind, or attempted to understand it.”

Baby boomers: Growing up in Australia in 1940s, 50s and 60s, 1988, p. 9

Not Suitable for Children

The shelter shed

Sharon and Diane sit together in the lunch shed. The content of their sandwiches informs the conversation.

‘What have you got in yours today?’

‘Jam.’

‘Raspberry or apricot?’

‘Raspberry. What’s in yours?’

‘Vegemite and cheese.’

‘Lucky duck. That’s my favourite.’

‘Mine too.’

‘Will you swap one for my jam?’

‘Nup.’

‘Denise Blower has vegemite and beetroot in her sandwiches.’

‘Erck. That’s awful.’

‘Yep. That’s what I reckon too.’

Each munches in silence whilst gazing out towards the adjoining bush reserve. Some screeching pink and grey galahs have distracted them.

‘Do know that kid Billy in Miss Robert’s class?’ asks Diane.

‘You mean the spastic one?’

‘He’s not spastic. He’s a slow-learner my mum said.’

‘Well I reckon he’s spastic because he can’t even do his two-times table.’

‘That’s not what spastic means. Spastic means you can’t walk properly. Billy’s just a slow-learner.’

‘Well I don’t care what your mum says. How come she knows everything anyway?’

‘She just does.’

‘Well anyway where is Billy? He hasn’t been at school for ages.’

‘I heard my mum tell my dad that he’s gone away because his mum has passed on.’

‘What does “passed on” mean?’

‘I dunno. Dead or something.’

Sharon doesn’t know quite what to do with this startling information.

‘I don’t care. He’s just a stupid boy. And I hate boys,’ she says as she stalks off to play with someone else.

Diane is just too big for her boots sometimes.

Not for children’s ears

Sharon’s mother has one of her heads coming on. She’s comforted by the captioned image on the packet of Bex powders. The reassuring smile of the white veiled nurse who asks:

“Stressful day? What you need is a cup of tea, a Bex and a good lie down.”

Sharon’s mum knows that’s precisely what she needs. Today it’s been one thing after another. Firstly the chooks getting out of the yard and up the lane. It took most of the morning to get them all back in and tie up the broken pickets. She’ll have to remind Tom about fixing the fence. Then the new lemon cake recipe had proved disastrous and she’d wasted four eggs and half a pound of butter. Finally, her most modern appliance had clogged up when something she couldn’t identify had got sucked up the hose. The outdated but more reliable carpet sweeper was summoned back into action. She certainly hoped that Tom could sort out the problem. The vacuum cleaner wasn’t even a year old.

She is steeling herself for the arrival of her rowdy and rather unladylike daughter. Who doesn’t disappoint as she crashes through the flywire door spattering news like vomit into the pristine kitchen.

‘Diane said that Billy’s mum passed on and that he’s gone to live somewhere else and that he won’t come back to our school anymore.’

Her mother exhales slowly as she places a plate of milk arrowroot biscuits and a glass of milk on the table. Sharon takes advantage of her mother’s momentary silence.

‘Anyway, why would he do that when he’s already got a house to live in? He’s got a little sister. She’s in Bubs with Miss Parkes. I don’t like Miss Parkes. She’s really strict. She smacks the Bubs kids on the legs with a ruler.’

The kettle whistles and her mother warms then fills the teapot, turning it three times in each direction before gently swaddling it in the tea-cosy. A brown tea-cosy with yellow daisies embroidered around the edge. An unexpected gift from her sister last Christmas. They had previously only exchanged cards. She must remember to send her something this coming festive season.

‘Diane said that Miss Roberts sends Billy to the headmaster’s office all the time because he can’t do spelling and sums. Her desk is near the door so she can see him going past our class. Mr King always gives the boys the cane when they go to his office. Then they have to sit on the veranda and eat their play lunch by themselves. Billy is always on the veranda poking his tongue out. Diane reckons he’s a slow-learner.’

Her mother’s head pounds despite the Bex. News of tragedy so close at hand is always very upsetting. Although, as Sharon’s mother realises, the source of this information is not entirely reliable. She must remember to ring Vera and ask her what she knows about it.

‘For Heaven’s sake, Sharon. My head is splitting. Will you just give me a moment’s peace?’

Sharon chomps through her milk arrowroots. Her mouth is too full to relay any more important news but her mother has some sound advice before she goes to have a lie down.

‘Let me remind you Sharon, there are some things that are not for children’s ears. Whether Billy comes back to school or not is of no concern to you. And, children certainly shouldn’t be discussing such morbid things as death. Now go and play outside until tea-time and keep out of your father’s way when he gets home. I’m sure he won’t want to listen to your incessant clatter.’

Sharon is tempted ask what morbid means and whether passed on really means dead. She's seen a dead budgie and it didn't 'pass' anywhere. It stayed where it was and looked like it was asleep. However, Sharon is cognisant of the fact that adults know what is best for children and that asking questions is usually pointless.

'And another thing Sharon. I was disappointed to notice that you have broken one of your father's tomato stakes. I don't think he will be very pleased to see that when he does the watering. Let's hope he has had a good day.'

Sharon had forgotten the tomato stake but now, reminded, she feels jittery. Her father has a terrible temper.

Scatters and overhand

It's knuckle-bone season. Sharon has finally got a full set of five.

'We had soup last night and Mum gave me the knucklebone. Do you wanna play?'

'Yep. Scatters or overhand?'

'Overhand. But don't forget no sweeping. That's the rules.'

Sharon and Diane rush through the routine of deciding who goes first.

Eeny, meeny, miney, mo,

Catch a nigger by the toe.

If he hollers let him go,

Eeny, meeny, miney, mo.

It's Sharon. They settle cross-legged on the wooden veranda. It's the best spot. Shady but near the rails so they can keep an eye on the playground. They can see Denise sitting in a circle on the asphalt with four other girls. She isn't playing knucklebones today. She is still glowing from being the first kid at school to have a plastic set. Her celebrity has allowed her *entre* to the favourite girls' gang. The game is Chinese Whispers and Denise's face is serene as she bends her head to receive a whisper.

'Did you see Denise's knuckle bones? They're coloured and not even made of bones.'

‘She always thinks she’s so smart. Where did she get them?’

‘At the Royal Show she reckons.’

‘Mum said that we can’t go to the Royal Show. She says it’s just a waste of money.’

‘Yeah my mum said that.’

‘Denise got three show bags. They must be rich or something.’

Their game lacks its usual competitive edge. They are both preoccupied with dreams about show bags and real plastic knucklebones. The bell goes and they shove their way into the class line. Sitting up straight with arms folded they wait for Miss Asher to hand out their social studies books.

‘Open at the next clean double page. No, Geoffrey. That is not a double page. Will you *please* listen to what I am saying.’

Miss Asher has a smudge of red chalk dust on the back of her dress, which sets off a wave of sniggering around the room.

‘Today we are copying the Union Jack onto the blank page and writing the words on the lined page. Remember the colouring must be your neatest. Do you understand Geoffrey?’

Geoffrey is nearly the dumbest kid in the class. Sharon saw his Half-Yearly Report when he dropped it on his way to the bike rack. She had a quick look before she gave it back.

Miss Asher’s comment was:

Geoffrey is a nuisance in class and needs to pay more attention. Improvement is required in all subjects.

His class position was 43rd. Sharon was twelfth. Denise, of course, was first.

Sharon opens her pencil tin as Miss Asher points to the blackboard, where her chalked illustration sets an exemplary standard. Rearranging the coloured pencils, Sharon can’t remember whether violet comes before indigo.

‘Stop fiddling with those pencils, Sharon. You only need blue and red.’

Miss Asher is now seated at her desk but can see as well as any bird of prey.

Sharon wishes the flags they drew had purple on them.

The public address system crackles and Mr King clears his voice.

Attention teachers, boys and girls. Congratulations to Miss Parkes' class for having the tidiest bags today. I am very sorry to report that two boys were caught throwing stones at recess time. I must stress that this type of behaviour is not acceptable. A reminder to all classes that tomorrow is folk dancing practice on the assembly area. We only have four more weeks before the end of year concert so I expect everyone to be doing their very best and anyone seen disrupting practice will be sent to my office immediately. Thank you for your attention. Teachers, you may proceed with your lessons.

At least it won't be Billy who mucks up the lines at folk dancing, thinks Sharon. Whether it's her concern or not, she has noticed that he still isn't at school.

Have you heard?

It's Carol here, Vera. How are you my dear? Yes. I am sorry I missed the meeting. I had one of my heads. No. The doctor doesn't seem to be much help. Maybe I just need a tonic. What about you? And how are the children? That is good news. Sharon is well thank you. She did tell me something rather upsetting though and I was wondering if you have heard anything about the Marshalls who live in Tate Street? At number 44. We don't really know them very well. I think he's a painter or something like that. Two of the children go to the primary school. Yes. That's right. Well, I'd heard that she was quite ill in hospital but there's a whisper that she might have passed on. Yes. It's dreadful news. Yes. Three kiddies. The oldest is a spastic boy. The others are girls. Tragic. I agree with you, Vera. A man couldn't manage three children on his own. Of course. You could never be sure that it would be a suitable environment for youngsters. Just a minute. I can hear Tom coming in from work. I must get his tea on the table so I'll hang up now, dear. Do let me know if you hear any news about Mrs Marshall. Bye-bye for now.

Steak and kidney pie

Sharon's mum pops down to the butcher shop before the heat builds up. The Fortes are neighbours of the Marshalls and may have some news about Mrs Marshall's situation. She finds it disturbing that someone as young as Mrs Marshall may have died. It makes

her think about her own mortality and she wonders about her headaches. Even three powders a day don't seem to be making a difference.

She puts on her bright face as she enters the butcher shop.

‘What warm weather we’re having, Mr Forte. Just a half a pound of that skirt steak today, thank you. Perhaps a few kidneys too if you have any. I’ll make a steak and kidney pie. It’s always a favourite.’

Mr Forte – Jim to those who know him better – weighs the steak and a few kidneys before he parcels it all up in a neatly cut square of white paper. Unlike many butchers, he is a man of few words, but this does not deter Sharon’s mum, who is quite skilled at keeping a conversation moving.

‘By the way, I was wondering if you have seen Mrs Marshall about recently? I heard on the grapevine that there’s some sort of problem in the family. And of course, I thought that if anyone would know it would be you and Betty being neighbours of the Marshalls.’

‘You’ll have to ask Betty,’ he says.

He has no opinion to offer. His wife specialises in opinions.

‘A good idea. I’ll drop in and see her. I need to return her cake plate from our School Mothers’ Committee meeting. Thank you Mr Forte. Have a pleasant day.’

Neighbourly concern

‘Come in Carol. How lovely to see you. I’d almost forgotten about that plate. Let me put the kettle on. I’ve just finished the polishing and I’m ready for a sit down.’ Betty hurriedly tidies her hair and removes her housecoat.

Carol follows her down the passage into the kitchen. Drifting at the window are bright café curtains, which are the latest thing. On the counter is a very smart red Mix-master.

‘What gay colours Betty. And laminex! It must be so easy to wipe down.’

Betty is proud of her modern kitchen. She and Jim like to keep up with the times without appearing ostentatious. She allows just a flicker of a smile to register in response to Carol’s enthusiastic appraisal.

‘That is kind of you to say, Carol. I chose the décor myself actually. I had the option of coral pink but the two-tone red marble was the latest so I took the plunge.’ Betty strokes the smooth surface dreamily.

‘I won’t stay long, Betty. But there was something that I was concerned about. Your neighbours the Marshalls. I’ve heard there were some problems there? Some suggestion of a bereavement in the household?’

‘I did hear a whisper but nothing official. To be honest, I’ve never seen much of Mrs Marshall. Just occasionally at the letterbox and he always goes off very early to work. The three kiddies play out in the backyard mostly. They’re quite rowdy sometimes, especially the spastic boy.’

Betty serves the tea with a slice of lemon cake before she continues.

‘I did know that she’s been in hospital because the aunt has been staying there for weeks. She said hello over the back fence and told me that she was looking after the children while her sister-in-law was in the hospital.’

The teapot is drained before Betty adds, ‘I have to admit that since Sunday I haven’t heard the children at all.’

Carol finishes her second cup.

‘It must be serious to be in hospital so long. More than women’s troubles, you would think, wouldn’t you?’ she says.

‘Oh, definitely something serious. I did wonder if it might be a growth. I’ve heard that these things can take off very quickly. Depends where they are of course but Gloria told me about a woman she knew who was gone in a few weeks. It was the liver I believe.’

Carol’s face clouds as her own unexplained headaches swim into her mind. She collects herself and smooths her frock.

‘Oh, I do hope it’s not that. What an awful thought. I’ll keep a look out in the newspaper. If something terrible has happened, I would think that the aunt would put in a notice. Thank you for the tea, Betty. Lovely lemon cake. I must get the recipe some time.’

Betty is still dredging her mind for clues.

‘Now that I think about it, there has been quite a lot of unusual coming and going the past day or so. The uncle has been there. I know because he’s got a green Holden that I’ve seen out the front. A very popular car according to Jim.’

Sewing, manual and monkey bars

‘I hate school.’

Sharon kicks the dirt on the school track that she and Diane are trudging along. The days go on and on and the summer holidays seem forever away.

‘Yeah. So do I,’ says Diane.

Billy hasn’t come back, but everything else is the same at school.

Boring old marching in pairs, saying tables, colouring-in stupid maps of England and the Empire.

‘And I really hate spelling and dictation,’ spits Sharon, who is sick of writing out her spelling mistakes twenty times each.

In fact, the main thing Sharon looks forward to is the compulsory quarter pint of milk at recess time. Even if the bottles have been sitting in a crate in the sun for hours. She doesn’t care about the slightly curdled texture or the collapsing paper straws.

‘What have we got today?’ she asks, hoping for a miracle.

She imagines that Denise could casually say, ‘Oh, today is playing outside until lunch-time. Then it’s sport all afternoon.’ Sharon loves sport. She’s a really fast runner.

However, today is actually Wednesday, so it’s Scripture before lunch and sewing and manual in the afternoon. She hates Scripture too because she’s a Methodist and gets sent to the lunch shed with all the Other Denominations. They have to do silent reading under a corrugated roof which broils and crackles in the heat.

As she remembers the real order of the day, she groans.

‘I wish I was Church of England or a Catholic like you Diane. It’s not fair. You get to have real ministers and proper colouring-in books with holy pictures.’

She'd seen Diane's book full of palm trees and stone archways. It was beautiful – always shaded in pastel colours. Although Diane did admit that she'd got into trouble early in the year. She had coloured a toga bright pink and added green polka dots.

'And you get to wear a bride's dress when you do that special church thing. I wish I could do that.' Sharon's voice is beginning to whine like a blocked vacuum cleaner.

'Anyway, I might be a nun when I grow up,' she declares.

She's seen a few nuns and is in awe of the black and white habit with the interesting nick-knacks hanging around the waist.

The morning drags into the afternoon, which stretches into eternity. The room is stifling and the blowflies that have bashed themselves to the edge of life are lined up on the window ledge. The listless silence in the classroom is interrupted by volleys of death buzzes.

Sharon sighs loudly as she tries to kick Geoffrey's legs under the desk in front of her. She can't quite reach so settles for an insult.

'Yuck. I can see nits in your hair, Geoffrey Tyler,' she whispers as she leans forward.

Geoffrey ignores her. He has stopped pulling the wings of stranded flies and picks his nose instead. He examines the snot in a desultory sort of way.

There has been no sea breeze this afternoon. Miss Asher's vase of peonies has collapsed into a sad starfish. It's a pity because they came fresh from Denise's mum's garden this morning. Denise is Miss Asher's pet.

'Sharon. Stop talking and get on with your silent reading.'

Miss Asher's voice is like sandpaper. It scratches and grates. On and on.

'Just pay attention everyone. Today at sewing and manual time all the girls are to go into Miss Robert's class. Boys you will go to Mr Hollings as usual. I will be assisting the visiting nurse. Girls, collect your baskets and remember, no talking during sewing time. Good afternoon everyone.' Her voice completes its chafing.

‘Good afternoon, Miss Asher.’ A weary sing-song response.

The afternoon recess bell clangs and a crush of sweaty bodies smelling of orange peel and piddle race to be first in the line. Sharon and Diane are first out the door. They usually are. They have learnt to use their elbows.

‘Quick Sharon! Bags the monkey bars before that Susan does. I can do an over-the-moon with no hands.’

‘That’s dumb Diane. You can’t do an over-the-moon with no hands. You’re just doing an apple-turn-over. Anyone can do those.’

‘Just shut-up Sharon. You think you’re so smart. I don’t even want to be your friend anymore.’

‘I don’t care. You’re just a skite.’

Recess time is short. It is supposed to be a lavatory break only. Only one trick has been performed on the monkey bars before the bell goes. The ex-friends do not agree on what it is called.

No talking

‘Come in girls. You will have to share a desk today. Are you all still working on the pot-holders? If you are ready come and get your piece of material for the backing. Line up at my desk and no talking in the line.’

There’s a scramble and the line already snakes as far as the door.

‘What on earth is this mess, Jackie? You will have to go and unpick it. Next person.’

Sharon and Diane are seated at the same desk despite being sworn enemies. Miss Roberts knows who needs to sit where.

‘Sharon. There is no need for that chatter. What are you talking about anyway?’

‘Nothing Miss.’

‘Well it can’t be nothing if it takes so many words to say it. Come out the front and tell us all what is so important that you have to disturb everyone while they are working. Well young lady? What was it that you are so keen on gossiping about?’

Sharon gets up from her seat.

‘I was just asking Diane about Billy Marshall, Miss. She says that he isn’t coming back to school because his mum died.’

The small black buttons that are Miss Robert’s eyes bore into Sharon who stares at her grubby toes poking out of the battered sandals. Miss Robert’s voice is as unbending as steel.

‘I’m sure that is none of your business Sharon. I don’t expect to hear any more about it. Go and sit at the back of the room with your sewing for the rest of the afternoon. We don’t need any more gossiping about things that have nothing to do with us.’

Mothers know best

‘How was school today love?’

Her mother is quite bright.

‘Okay I ‘spose. But, I hate Miss Roberts. We had to go to her room for sewing today and she made me sit up the back by myself for nothing.’

Sharon’s mum reminds herself that the maidenhair ferns will need attention after such a hot spell.

‘Sharon, I’ve told you before we should never use the word hate. I’m sure Miss Roberts must have had her reasons. I’m going to water the ferns on the side veranda so stay outside until your father gets home. And, wipe your feet properly before you come back in. The chooks are out for a pick.’

On an even brighter note she adds, ‘Shepherd’s pie tonight for tea. Your favourite.’

It’s not really Sharon’s favourite but her mother always knows best.

‘Has that Billy Marshall been back at school yet?’

‘Dunno.’

The flywire door bangs shut. Chooks flap like coloured bits of rag.

Official news

MARSHALL (Mary Susan) of 44 Tate Street, Leederville. Passed away on November 20, 1954, at Royal Perth Hospital. Beloved wife of Robert James, loved mother of William, Janet and Susan. Fond sister and sister-in-law of Mr and Mrs G.M. Smith of Guildford.

R.I.P.

“Access visits by parents ... were often denied due to apparently subjective decisions of departmental officers and as a form of punishment for a child's behaviour or parents falling behind in fee payments. Family visits to children were regarded as a privilege to be withdrawn rather than a right ... little effort was made to encourage or facilitate the maintenance of connection with parents or family.”

Forgotten Australians, 2004, p. 106

For the Good of the Kiddies

Bob stumbles from room to room looking for something. Anything to focus his mind and fill the gaping hole that gnaws at his guts. But as he crosses each lintel into a space once occupied by those he loved he is driven back by a force mocking his anguish.

There's no-one here, the one-eyed teddy bear shouts. *She's gone, she's gone, she's gone*, the clothes in the wardrobe hiss.

He slams the doors on the jeering voices and eventually finds a pocket of silence in the hallway where he drags some bedding and falls into a deep sleep. But the voices slide under the closed doors and invade his dreams with terrifying sounds and images. Howling mouths shriek and sob. He thrashes and cries and prays to a God he now doubts but can't entirely reject. His dreaming terrors finally retreat. His waking nightmares return. He creeps into the kitchen to make a cup of tea and eat Gwen's dried-out ham sandwiches.

Gwen and George made all the arrangements. And paid for the funeral.

'It's the least we can do,' George had said.

These were the only few words his brother-in-law had muttered, but his sister had many more to offer.

'A man can't raise children on his own, Bob. It's for the best and I'm sure the Home will provide all the right things that kiddies need. That's why all those good souls take in children from unfortunate situations. You can visit, and you never know, your circumstances might change one day.'

Bob had been unable to make sense of Gwen's incessant stream of noise. The words fluttered around him like falling leaves and lay at his feet in rotting piles. He could only scuff at them with his boots, pushing them away. And away. Words and words and words. They had battered him and left him with nothing to grasp. They made him feel as weightless as the film of dust that had settled on his best black shoes as he'd stood by Mary's grave.

A dishevelled stickman against a sky of relentless blue.

Head bowed, hat in hand, his only suit shabby and flapping like a tired tablecloth in the hot wind. Mute and motionless, he'd stood and stood with the sun beating down.

He had become the space a man once filled. Nothing more than the sum of essential elements: oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium and phosphorous. Still a living organism consisting mainly of water, and like water he had become if not transparent, at least translucent. Anyone would have seen straight through him if they met him on his way to the bus-stop. A shade, a spectre, a ghost.

It was over. His beloved Mary was a collection of decomposing cells beginning their transformation into dust. And his three beautiful children were in good hands. According to all those around him.

The kitchen is grey. His tears have washed away any colour. His tea tastes grey and the sandwiches are filled with something grey. Perhaps the world will always be grey, he thinks. Patches of brightness have been erased from his world.

It was Gwen who had organised the telegram to Mary's parents announcing her death. Their return telegram consisted of seven words.

Heart-broken. Not able to be with you.

Six weeks on a ship to see their daughter's gravestone would have been too much to bear. Even if they had the money.

At last, his well-meaning, noisy sister had left. The house continued to roar its emptiness.

Weeks slipped by in a blurry haze. There seemed no edges to his day and his nights remained fractured by unwelcome horrors. At work, Bob was a machine. He was a painter by trade and worked at the local race-course. There wasn't much focus required to paint white rails over and over again. His work hadn't always been rails. There were plenty of buildings and structures on the grounds that needed maintenance but his boss

kept sending him out to the rails. Waiting to see some sign of life returning to the shape called Bob.

The first visiting day at the Home was still a few weeks off. No visits were allowed for the first six weeks. He'd been told by the Matron that this was normal. It was to assist with the transition process.

'They need to become familiar with the routines of their new home. Too much outside interference is often quite disruptive,' she'd explained.

Bob's fogginess slowly receded. His edges took on more definition. His clogged mind was at last creating spaces filling with thoughts of the children. His beloved children. He missed their high pitched voices and laughter. He missed tripping over the tricycle as he came through the gate each evening. He missed their warm, soap-smelling essence each evening as they scrambled onto his lap for a bed-time hug. The ache was bottomless. His love, crushing. He wondered how he could even express his love across such a gulf of distance and time. How to reassure them about how precious they were. About how hard he was working so that one day they could come home. The only possible contact seemed to be via letters even though they were too young to read properly. If he enclosed some gifts with a letter that might help cheer them up. He presumed that the Home would have had a Christmas party with gifts from Santa. Even Billy still believed in a jolly, fat man coming down the chimney. But a present from their Dad would be special and maybe would help reassure them of his abiding love.

Bob struggled with the brown paper and string. It was usually Mary who had organised and wrapped up presents. At last, the corners stayed folded and he tied the string in a double knot. For Billy there was a cap gun and a roll of caps. Billy's chook feathered noggin' sticking up over the wild oats flashed back into Bob's mind and made the corners of his mouth slant towards a smile. Billy never caught the cowboys. He'll have to change sides now, Bob realised. The bow and arrow set was beyond his budget.

For Janet there was a beautiful tin of Lakeland coloured pencils. She loved colouring in and was getting really good at staying inside the lines. Bob felt certain that the Home would have paper for drawing and pictures for colouring-in.

And, for Susie there was the little knitted golliwog that Mary had bought at the school fete. It had been hidden at the back of Bob's sock drawer intended as a birthday present for Susie when she turned four. That was still some time off but it wouldn't hurt for her to have it early, he thought.

He posted the parcel off to the Home.

5th January, 1955.

Dear Matron

I am sending presents for Billy and Janet and Susie. I know that it is too late for Xmas but I lost track of the days. I'm sorry about that but I wasn't myself for quite a while. Inside the parcel there is a letter for them all. Could you let Billy read it to his sisters, please. He might need some help because he's a bit backward. I hope that they are all behaving properly. Please let them know that I am looking forward to my first visit, which isn't very far away.

Yours sincerely

Robert Marshall.

At the end of the six-week waiting period, Bob goes down to the phone-box and telephones the Home to organise his visit. The visiting hours are between 2.00pm and 4.00pm on the first Sunday of the month, he is informed. Bob has missed the January visit and would have to wait until February. Another three weeks away.

These slightly crackly words bounce off the glass of the telephone box.

‘Are you still there Mr Marshall?’

The constriction around his throat almost blocks the air completely. Words come at last. Shaky and faint.

‘But I've waited the six weeks. Surely this is a special situation and I can see them before then?’

The answer is no. There are no special situations. Rules are to be followed in order to maintain standards. Matron would send a letter reporting on the children's progress.

Bob replaces the ear-piece. His eyes remain fixed on the black Bakelite communication device. An urge to smash it out of existence engorges him. A ruddy-faced woman taps on the glass, at first discretely and then impatiently. He stumbles home.

Weeks pass. There is no letter. He stops hurrying to the letterbox as soon as he arrives home from work. The resident red-back spider in the little house on a post sometimes shares the space with a few bills, but nothing else. At times, his mind starts spinning again and in the kaleidoscopic jumble of sounds and images, Matron's stern words return.

‘As I’ve stated, our policy is that family wait the stipulated time before their first visit. It is not fair on the kiddies to upset them unduly. I’m sure you would agree with this, Mr Marshall.’

She is as imposing and as hard as the stone walls surrounding the Home.

‘We don’t like to encourage unnecessary contact with family members. The children need to understand that this is their new home. Policies must be followed by all staff and we can’t make exceptions. That’s what children need. Routine and discipline. We all know that it’s for their own good, don’t we Mr Marshall.’

For their own good? It didn’t make any sense to him then and it still doesn’t. How can such a shocking change to their whole world not be terrifying for young children? No-one seems to consider this likelihood. No, he doesn’t agree with Matron.

But he’d slunk away without a word. At the time, he could find none to express the flooding of grief, of confusion, of futility, of despair. Words had become useless as they danced around in his brain and could find no way out.

As he recalls this initial meeting with Matron, his sense of helplessness returns. Does he have no say in what happens to his children? This wasn’t how he’d expected to be treated. It’s as if he is some sort of undesirable drifter rather than a dedicated father.

Bob clings to his routines: rising at dawn, catching the bus to and from work, feeding the chooks, watering the yard and getting himself dinner. Mostly boiled eggs and potatoes followed by bread and jam with his cup of tea. He doesn’t know much about cooking and

he doesn't much care what he eats. He has Saturday afternoon and Sunday off and that's when he really struggles with the emptiness. He mows the bit of grass and washes his work clothes in the trough. He gives the kitchen floor and veranda a sweep. He knows that he should wash the sheets on his bed and the greying bath towel he uses each day but he can't summon up the energy required to chop kindling and light the copper. He mostly fills the empty hours sitting in a cane chair on the back veranda smoking his Capstans and staring at the wooden palings of the back fence. Then he goes to bed.

He continually fights to suppress his longing to see the children. Of course, he doesn't want to upset them more than necessary. But, more than two months have passed and he still hasn't been able to visit them. The Home is nearly twenty miles away and the logistics of how to get there by public transport on a Sunday have Bob baffled. There's no train or bus that takes him close to the property but a chap from work, who has a car, has offered to drive him up there. He's so grateful. He'd always thought Fred was a snob. He seemed to big-note himself and talked a lot about getting new things for his house. But Fred didn't have any kids and since his promotion to Supervisor he could afford more than Bob, that was for sure. Bob was paying the Home every month and with three children, it mounted up. Fred wasn't a bad sort after-all.

They are having smoko in the lunch shed the week before Bob's Sunday visit is due. Fred has changed his mind – or his wife has changed it for him.

'The wife says it's a waste of a Sunday afternoon to drive all that way. I feel sorry about your kids but I just can't help you out after all. Sorry mate.'

Bob is wordless.

But at last the all-important Sunday arrives and with a surge of determination, Bob sets off early on a trip consisting of a number of bus journeys that eventually get him what he estimates is four or five miles away from the Home. His rather muddled directions take him on a meandering route through bush tracks. It takes him two hours to walk the final distance but he arrives by 1.45 pm. He enters through those same massive doors that had swung so resoundingly closed on him that terrible day in November. There is a sign pointing to a waiting room. He sits on the hard chair and waits. A wall clock ticks its way

loudly to two o'clock. He stands up, retrieves the bag of sticky sweets from his pocket and takes a deep breath.

Matron meets him in the hallway.

‘Good afternoon, Mr Marshall. I understand that you are here to see the children but it appears that your payments have fallen into arrears. I’m sorry to inform you that until that is rectified, we are unable to arrange a visit.’

Bob has forgotten the monthly postal order.

‘It’s a matter of the rules, Mr Marshall. I *am* sorry you’ve travelled to no avail. But, I’m sure everything will be in place for next month’s visit. Good day, Mr Marshall.’

15th February, 1955.

Dear Matron,

I am sorry to bother you when I know how busy you must be but I was wondering how the children were managing. Did they like the presents I sent? Did Billy manage to read the letter okay? Maybe Janet helped him. She is quite a good little reader already even though she is only five. I have made up the late payment as we arranged. Please reassure the children that I will visit next month on the first Sunday. And please give all the children my love.

Yours sincerely,

Robert Marshall

Work, home, dinner, bed. And he still hadn’t had a visit. He finally lights the copper and boils the sheets and towels. By the time he’s rinsed them, put them through the wringer twice and hung them out to dry he feels buggered. A woman’s work isn’t so easy and memories of his pretty Mary who was always cheerful even on washing day swamp his empty, empty soul. Tears flood his washed out eyes and run in torrents down his scraggy face. He sits and sits and sits in the cane chair, staring at the palings, which unlike every other aspect of his life, never change.

22th February, 1955.

Dear Matron,

Even though I haven't heard from you I wonder whether it would be possible for you to send one or two of the children's drawings? It would give me great pleasure to have something from them and I know that they are not really old enough to send a letter. Well Billy might be but as I explained before he is behind with his reading and writing. I hope the payments are arriving on time. Please remind them that I will be there next visiting day.

Yours sincerely,

Robert Marshall.

The little gabled house on a post remains empty.

'Had a chance to visit your kiddies yet?' asks Fred from work.

'Not yet, Fred.'

He's briefly mentioned his abortive attempt, but couldn't go into the details. He knew that he'd break down if he tried.

'I was expecting a letter from Matron but I haven't heard a word. It just seems so hard to keep in touch with the poor little beggars. How would they be feeling about their Dad not seeing them? They'd think I didn't even care.'

'Let me talk to the wife again,' says Fred.

At smoko a few days later Fred makes another offer.

'The wife said she'd like to help out. But, just the once, she said. We can't be a taxi service, she said.'

Bob is tearful and thanks his lucky stars for a good bloke like Fred. And his missus.

He makes sure his suit is aired and brushed. He struggles with the iron but eventually manages to smooth the front of his only white shirt. He picks up his hat and the little bag of boiled sweets. He senses the nearness of something to hold onto.

The car ride is quiet. Fred's missus isn't a talker which suits him. They drop him at the gate.

'We'll go off for a little drive and meet you back here at four o'clock,' says Fred.

'Much obliged,' says Bob. 'See you then.'

He sits on the wooden bench outside Matron's office. He's ten minutes early and he's feeling nervous.

'Do come in Mr Marshall. I need to talk to you before you go to the visitor's room.'

Matron's voice is grave and her face is furrowed. The brusque manner that he has previously experienced seems tempered as she offers the chair.

'Please, sit down. I am most dreadfully sorry to have to break this news to you Mr Marshall. It's explained in the letter here. I was to post it off in the morning. It's about your daughter Susan. She has been very unwell recently. Diphtheria. Tragically we have been unable to save her despite the doctor's best efforts. It was just two days ago, I'm afraid.'

Bob's gaze is fastened to the desk lamp. It has a brass stand and green shade. If he just keeps staring, the world will vanish. There will only be a green desk lamp and nothing else. Forever. He won't need to take any more breaths because the world won't exist. There will be no more sounds, no more words. Words and words and words. Pouring out of the ghastly gash in Matron's face and smashing around him. And the air is too solid to go in and out of his lungs anymore. And his arms thrash like storm swept branches as he clutches at the edge of Matron's desk.

After minutes or maybe years, more words reach his ears.

'I am most terribly sorry Mr Marshall. You have my deepest sympathy. I realise that it must be a dreadful shock but you must be reassured we did everything possible. Little ones can go so suddenly with these illnesses. I will forward on any documents the doctor

might have left. We have taken care of everything for you already. There is nothing you need to do.'

There is no air to breath. No words to shape the pain that smothers him.

'Try to hold yourself together, Mr Marshall. Little Janet is waiting to see you.'

Matron ushers him out of her office and into the visitor's room where a little girl in a yellow dress stands, her double bouncing from the glassy floor. She calls him Daddy and asks him if they are going home now to see her Mummy. He reaches out and gently touches her head. There are still no words. Even though they scream and rush at him from around the room, there are none which can lodge in his throat. None that can be uttered. Thoughts flit in and out of his mind. Janet looks so beautiful. So perfect. Then he notices, with a sudden stab of rage, that her thick golden plaits are gone. His pain becomes an aching, silent roar that engulfs him as she reaches up. His arms remember the shape of an embrace. They cling, their bodies dissolving one into the other seeking the warmth and reassurance and enduring love they had both once shared.

The little girl in yellow holds tightly to this man whose body shudders, and whose tears soak into the yellow bow and drip through her hair. The harder she cleaves the less substance she feels. The bony frame dissolves. This man who is her Daddy doesn't speak. His arms become lead. He turns and shuffles away out of the door. This ghost person, who leaves no trace of himself behind.

Accompanying him to the door, Matron speaks soothingly as she informs Bob that Billy has been moved to another Home.

'A little bit further away, Mr Marshall. We feel that it's for his own good. He needs something more specialised than we can provide here.'

Fred and his wife drop him at his front gate. They are both concerned about his state of mind.

'Might just need a good night's sleep,' suggests Fred's wife.

“The attitudes of staff to children set the tone of the environment in which they lived ... the person in charge had the power of total disposition of inmates and the power to make their lives bearable or not.”

Forgotten Australians, 2004, p. 131

Tinkling Water

Stoney. That's how many of her work colleagues might have described her. Others may have said cold. Margaret is well into her forties now, grown stout with hair that has lost its coppery shine and rosewater perfume. It is cut short and is rather unbecoming. She trims it herself with the dress-making scissors. Her starched white uniform, veil and sensible lace-up shoes indicate the practical, emotionally distant woman she has become.

She shoulders heavy responsibilities. The care and protection of her charges; more than two hundred children without homes or families. Sweetness and sentimentality are not requisites for such a task. For years, she has kept a tight rein on all aspects of managing such an enterprise, particularly the budget constraints. The laundry, which is a commercial operation, brings in good income and she feels a degree of satisfaction about this achievement. She finds the children exhausting and mostly unruly. The routines and disciplinary measures she has in place do at least minimise the disruption but there are always individuals who test her beyond the limit of her patience.

If she had been a mother perhaps children would appeal to her more. Those maternal instincts she hears of may have guaranteed a smooth transition from maidenhood to motherhood and she would have probably have been surrounded by a brood by now. And her Tim would have been a marvellous father. He had such a sense of humour.

In the privacy of her room, there are occasional tears as she remembers a larrikin called Tim. His face is just shadows in her mind now and she needs to look at the black and white photo they had taken just before he signed up. They are both laughing their heads off at something silly but she can't remember what. The Tiffany lamp lights up the image. The lamp's brilliant colours are just as beautiful as on the very first day she brought it home. It remains bright and hopeful in a way she has not. A carved nubile figure balances the shade. Slightly risqué but her pride and joy all those years ago when she made the final payment to old Mr Green in the Hay Street antique shop.

'You've got a bargain there my dear,' he'd said. 'A lovely Art Nouveau piece.'

She's still got the letter, from so long ago, that captured her dreams for their future.

Monday 23 March, 1942.

My darling Tim

Once again, I am waiting patiently for your letters which seem to arrive at odd intervals and sometimes several at once. Please do not think I am complaining. Quite the opposite in fact. It is my habit to carry your latest letter with me and re-read it constantly until I receive a new one. That way I feel you are always close by.

I have some exciting news. Remember I told you that I'd seen a beautiful Tiffany lamp in an antique shop? Today I made the final payment. It is ours my dear and I feel sure you will love it as much as I do. The colours of the stained glass are quite stunning and I think it will complement whatever furnishings we choose for our future home.

This week has been very busy with an outbreak of influenza filling up the beds. We also get new polio patients most weeks. Very sad for some of the little children who will be cripples for life.

I must sign off now my love. The bathroom is finally free. Let's hope there is still some hot water for my bath. Always remember that I love you and I long for the day when we will be re-united.

Your loving fiancée

Maggie.

She'd been a good nurse.

The matron had complimented her efficient yet compassionate manner. Her pretty hair and shapely figure brought a smile to the faces of bed-bound patients. But after Tim, she'd turned inward. The warmth seeped out of her to be replaced by a coolness that eventually became glacial.

She made the change from hospital work to managing the Children's Home because it offered security, comfortable lodgings and no night duty. The once beautiful old home was positioned in extensive grounds and, although run-down, there was still evidence of a lovely garden. With strong stewardship, she believed she could return the garden to its former splendour.

On her first day, rows of silent children were arrayed. They were ordered according to size and age. Standing with her feet planted apart in front of what she thought was a motley looking bunch, Matron introduced herself. There was no whispering or shuffling. At least they seemed to be disciplined, she thought. Her preference was for silence during the day. Only at night did she enjoy the sound of beautiful and sometimes passionate music.

Passion might seem at odds with this terse, middle-aged woman. But once there had been a fervency in the letters she had continued to send to her far away fiancé. And those precious few letters she received in reply spoke of a reciprocal ardour. From the beginning, Tim's letters were full of optimism, discreet passion, even lyrical moments. She'd waved him off in Fremantle aboard the *Troopship Queen Mary*. His first letter had arrived about a month later.

February 7, 1941.

My dearest Maggie,

We have been sailing nearly two weeks now and are all feeling keen to get into the fray and on with job ahead of us. None of us knows quite where we are but must be around the equator as the heat and humidity are pretty intense. Plenty of fun on deck with tug of war competitions. I've been on the winning team each time. Then we have a good saltwater wash down afterwards to cool off. I've met a lot of good blokes and we have plenty of laughs. The food is quite good. I suppose everything will change when we disembark. Bully-beef and tea might be all we get. I'm not sure when I will next get a chance to send mail so I hope this finds you well, my darling.

I do miss you and often dream about the special touch of your hair. Its feathery tingling against my neck. Its gentle hint of rose water filling my senses. Here's hoping this wretched war will be over soon and I'll be back with you all.

Stay safe, my darling.

Your loving fiancé,

Tim.

But the letters became sporadic and sometimes contained so many blacked-out lines that it was difficult for Margaret to make much sense of them at all.

██████████ 1942

Dearest Maggie

*We are presently ██████████. The ██████████
██████████ keep our spirits up. I received the comfort parcel ██████████
██████████. The socks are very welcome.*

*I think of you daily and have your photo with me always. Some of the boys said
██████████ How wonderful that would be.*

Love forever, my darling,

Tim.

Over the next year, a few more censored fragments reached Margaret. Then all correspondence ceased. Eventually a letter-card declared that he was a prisoner of war: at Sandakan POW camp somewhere in Borneo. His mother's neatly made-up face crumpled as she read the scribbled twenty-four words allowed by his Japanese captors. As the red lips pleated and quivered, Margaret's heart lurched. Her future mother-in-law could utter no sounds as she passed the dog-eared card to Margaret. It was a Friday afternoon on one of those scorching summer days when the sea-breeze refused to materialise. They were having their weekly cuppa on the front porch hoping for a breath of cool air. Neither could articulate the rising dread that coursed in dark waves within them. They stared sightlessly over the box hedge stirring the tepid tea.

There were no more letters from Tim and although she wrote wistfully, her instincts eventually told her that they never reached him. As the years passed she steeled herself against the worst. There was no certainty that he was even alive. Eventually, the gruesome destruction came to an end. Armistice was declared and a telegram arrived. It was from Tim.

Dear family,

I am safe. Being processed on hospital ship. Fed, washed, new uniform, rotten teeth pulled out. Waiting for evacuation ship.

Soon be on home soil.

Tim.

His parents were overjoyed. Margaret's disbelief gradually faded. It was real. Her Tim was finally coming home.

'You just get yourself off to the dressmaker my girl,' his mother instructed. Not normally a woman to blaspheme, her language escaped propriety. 'To hell with the expense! Order whatever you fancy. This will be a very special wedding.'

The man she met at the Fremantle wharf bore no resemblance to the robust, sandy haired boy she had agreed to marry. The once thick mop of hair was reduced to a few lank strands, the strong tradesman's shoulders were withered and stooped. Muscle had atrophied and only bone had survived. The skin resembled an old suitcase.

But it was the eyes that belonged to someone else. Tim's eyes were blue. That kind of summer sky blue offset by a deep tan. Eyes that spoke of joie de vivre and daft jokes. This man's eyes were empty pools sealed below a faded blue-grey surface. A surface with no ripples, no reflections, no life. Empty, empty, spaces in a face Margaret no longer knew.

He went home to his parents to gain strength, to learn how to sleep, to become Tim. Even his mother's roast mutton and mint sauce couldn't tempt him. His body had lost its senses. Textures, aromas, flavours bounced off his leathery casing. Colour leached away, leaving him in a world of jagged, grey shapes and surfaces.

After several months he was sent to the country to stay with a distant cousin. The fresh air and farm life would hasten the healing. Banish the nightmares and sweats which recurred as he staggered through the jungle on that ghastly 'death march' again and again and again. He took the gun to get a few rabbits. There were thousands of the buggers in the wheat-belt.

Stan, the cousin, rang Margaret with the news. They'd found him up near the old dam. The top of his head, along with his hat, was gone.

The end of another long day. The quiet and seclusion of her room beckons, as does the contents of the bottle which dances in coloured lozenges under the lamp. Her room is situated at the far end of the second storey wing. The dormitories are at the other end of the long passageway. After her bath, she returns to the room where a tray of supper has been placed near the door. Cold mutton, cheese, pickles and bread. And plenty of custard and pudding which Cook makes for the staff every day. Matron savours these sweet offerings. The room is comfortable and there is a small electric ring in the corner so she can make herself a pot of tea when she pleases. But it's not tea she craves now. As she reaches for the bottle, her dressing gown falls open on pendulous breasts finally freed from a sensible and robust brassiere. Like Matron, the dressing gown has faded with the years. It was once a glorious fuschia reflecting a romantic young woman who purchased it in the lingerie department of Boans Department Store. She settles into the armchair and tunes into ABC radio. A recording of Chopin's *Fantaisie Impromptu, Opus 66* is being aired. The years of piano lessons flood back as she listens. A sense of melancholy pervades. She was a gifted pupil but earning any sort of income as a pianist was a ridiculous idea. Her mother had made that quite clear. Nursing had proven a practical and useful occupation.

Like water. That's how many had described Chopin's piano music. It travelled in tinkling cascades and sounded effortless although she knew otherwise. She had attempted some of his better-known works and had never mastered them completely. She is transported away from the imposing walls of the Children's Home. Beyond the impressive gates and back to a place of green ferns and dappled sunlight. A cool veranda where a wicker table is set for afternoon tea. She is sixteen and along with two other young ladies is a guest of her piano teacher Mme Boulant. Madame is a cultivated woman whose presence sent tongues wagging years earlier when she arrived in Perth wearing a long fur coat and milky pearls. A grand piano followed her and she began giving lessons immediately. Her private life remained a mystery but it was acknowledged that she was a talented pianist and wonderful teacher. Margaret worshipped her and as one of her best pupils was invited

to these intimate occasional gatherings. The music splashes over her as she pulls the dressing gown tighter, closes her eyes and recalls that naïve young girl.

‘Marguerette.’ Madame always pronounced her name in a European way. ‘I am so, so pleased with the way you are interpreting the Chopin. You have a very beautiful touch. Quite a gift young lady. Perhaps your mother will allow you to continue lessons for another year or so? Yes?’

‘I don’t think so Madame. She says I need to get out to work. Anyway, if I get into nursing I won’t have a piano to practice on.’

‘A pity, but we will see. Perhaps we can persuade her. Do have another éclair. I must watch my waistline.’

The fragile choux pastry crumbles into her mouth. It is the nearest thing to ecstasy she has ever experienced.

Madame pours more tea into the delicate bone china. The edge is rimmed in gold. Margaret’s family has functional cream dinnerware, a world away from Madame’s furs and pearls and grand piano. This other world is intoxicating yet out of reach, regardless of talent. Nursing is a sensible option and Margaret dutifully concedes to her mother’s wishes.

‘Matron! Are you there Matron?’ the door heaving under urgent hammering.

‘Sorry to disturb you Matron, but that Lyn Trigwell and Beth Winsom have run away again. They must have sneaked out the gates when the doctor left.’

It’s 11.00 pm by the time Margaret is in her uniform and back in the big hall. The police have been notified and the night staff are assembled. The empty beds had been discovered half an hour earlier.

‘Get them all out of bed and down here. At once.’ Matron’s face is as thunderous as her voice.

Rows of cowering, shivering girls ranging in ages from five to sixteen fill the hall by the time the police return the runaways. The rain has been heavy. The offenders are drenched

and trembling as they are shoved onto the dais in front of Matron. As instructed another staff member peels wet clothes from skinny bodies as Matron looms over them with her cane. The beating is ferocious and the welts create geometric designs as they ooze blood. The screaming bounces off the high ceilings and panelled walls. The sobbing and snivelling along the rows provides another layer of sound.

Matron's fury is finally spent and the two girls are shoved into the cupboard under the stairs. Their soaking clothes are tossed in with them.

'Back to the dormitories all of you,' she barks.

'And... let that be a lesson to any other girls who think that they can break the rules.'

The Chopin has finished and Wagner's *Valkerie* is playing. Passion, fury, violence and destruction crash through her room. She reaches for the bottle shimmering under the suggestive lampshade. The whiskey catches in her throat for an instant. Her eyes close as the magic roars through her veins. Her hand reaches for the tattered fragment of a letter in the pocket of her gown.

Life is not all tinkling water.

“Among all the vividly recalled bad memories of life in an institution, some also recalled happier occasions. Some ... institutions would provide an annual outing ...”

Forgotten Australians, 2004, p. 125

For a Good Cause

Never Too Much Trouble

She was a good sort and actively charitable. As president of the Dalkeith Ladies Society there was the looming Orphan's Christmas Party to arrange. It was always a big job and Mrs Taylor-Brown was not one to take short-cuts. The weather had been scorchingly hot, the kind of summer that Diedre (for that was Mrs Taylor-Brown's first given name) could do without, frankly. But this was Perth and for those too far from the coast to benefit from the cooling Fremantle doctor, the heat could remain most oppressive, even after sunset. Fortunately, Diedre was not one of those unfortunates, her home being only a few miles from the coast, with the added advantage of overlooking the expansive Swan River, one of the city's most magnificent features. And of course the most recent home improvement was the air-conditioning unit, which was a Godsend. One of Diedre's friends, Flora, had recently moved to the foothills, a dry, low escarpment many miles from the coast where for the past week the temperatures had hovered around the century. Diedre wondered at the sense of this move to a location where there was never a sea breeze, the flies were intolerable, and establishing a decent rose bed was almost impossible. It wasn't her cup of tea at all. Diedre often reminded herself of her comfortable, tasteful circumstances and was pleased to give her time generously to those less fortunate.

She had already run through her list today to check off the Christmas party tasks. Sir James Wigmore had agreed to officiate although she did find him a tremendous bore and she couldn't imagine why he had received a knighthood. Something to do with service in India she'd heard. The afternoon-tea committee would need reminding that Sir James would expect a tippie or two before the speeches. Also checked off her list were: hiring table cloths; organising volunteers for gift wrapping; purchasing balloons and string; borrowing trestle tables from the tennis club; ordering sandwiches, cakes, ice-cream and fruit cordial for the kiddies; plus of course the tea urn and crockery for afternoon tea. She was feeling a trifle overwhelmed with all these last minute details but was reassured that she possessed the character and grit to carry on, despite the fact that she had felt rather out of sorts lately. Last on her list was the phone call to Elsie Trumpet.

Dear Friends

It was always relief to let off steam with a special friend and Elsie Trumpet was a good listener. Diedre trusted Elsie and they telephoned one another most days just for a reassuring chat. This evening's call was to remark on the heat and to remind Elsie of her promise to attend the Christmas party although she wasn't a member of the Dalkeith Ladies Society. Elsie preferred the Canine Society and took great pleasure in presenting her furry children at the various shows. She was modest and rarely boasted about the trunk full of ribbons, mostly blue, that her precious boys had won. After exchanging platitudes and forecasting a cool change, the subject of the Christmas party was broached. Diedre was counting on her friend to attend as moral support more than anything else. As she disclosed discretely to Elsie, her irritation with the tedium of Sir James' monologues required a foil, and Elsie was that escape route. She would come to the rescue on an agreed cue. Diedre would catch her eye, wave and excuse herself graciously. Diedre expounded on some of the party details: the charming new doctor had agreed to be Father Christmas; the gift donations had been marvellously successful with over two hundred beautifully wrapped items; the newest ice-cream flavour had been ordered – neopolitan, three different flavoured layers – and, no, Elsie needn't be there until 2.00 pm when the children arrived on the buses. That would give her plenty of time beforehand to walk her pooches at the park. Elsie, as ever, was admiring of her friend's generous charity work. Diedre was a woman with a true Christian soul, she said, and Diedre felt uplifted by such approval. It made it all worthwhile. She glanced out of the bay window and quietly marvelled at the splendour of this year's roses. The full (voluptuous really) heads stood defiantly through the summer heat. They needed plenty of water, of course, and the fowl manure kept them vigorous. Her mind, as her eye, wandered a little before coming back to the subject of the party, specifically the location. She explained that the Melrose family were hosting the party this year, a perfect setting with their spacious lawn tennis court and leafy gardens. Farewells concluded, Diedre replaced the telephone earpiece in its cradle, smoothed the skirt of her lemon coloured sundress and wandered out onto the patio for drinks with her husband, Teddy.

Gin and tonic

Teddy was a good man and had remained a most suitable husband. She'd been lucky. He had never strayed, was always sociable, and held his drink admirably. As a successful

lawyer, he had provided wonderfully and was never mean with money. He still had a good head of hair, elegantly silvered, and a fine posture with little evidence of portliness. The boys had followed their father into law and shared his dark, good looks. They were both living nearby with quite pleasant wives and small children. Teddy had retired several years ago and spent quite a lot his time at the golf club, which Diedre stoically declared was very good for his health. He also enjoyed the garden and was very particular about the roses.

It was the glorious result of his meticulous manicuring which was now on display. The adjacent north-facing patio was paved with limestone blocks and furnished with a white wrought-iron table setting. The upholstered chair covers were patterned with deep magenta roses mirroring the real blooms nearby. Gin and tonics were already on the table and Teddy had gone back to the kitchen for a bowl of nuts. They had a woman who came in several times a week. She managed the cleaning and laundry and always prepared some of the evening meals. Diedre was rather a good cook, but was glad to escape the everyday routine. This evening there was a piece of baked haddock with lemon sauce warming in the oven with a crisp salad in Diedre's favourite crystal bowl cooling on the refrigerator shelf.

Diedre breathed in the intoxicating perfume and swooned slightly as she waited for Teddy and the nuts. She had showered and changed before making the phone call to Elsie and her yellow frock fell crisply just below the knees. Her legs were enclosed in the sheerest of stockings and her low-heeled court shoes were this season's tan and white. The weekly colour rinses had conserved the light chestnut of Diedre's hair and her skin showed minimal sun damage. She enjoyed tennis and at fifty-five remained trim and well preserved; not pretty exactly, but certainly still attractive.

'Busy day, Deedle-dum?'

'Exhausting, darling. And in this heat so much more trying. But at least, by this time next week it will all be over and I can rest up. Thank you for the drink Teddy-bear. A life-saver I'm sure.'

As the sun set and the squabbling parrots settled for the night, Teddy and Diedre enjoyed their icy gin and tonics generously flavoured with slices of lemon from the backyard tree. All things considered, Diedre thought life to be very satisfactory.

Party Day

Diedre rose early and was fretful during the morning as she phoned various committee members, checking that all was under control. She had a touch of a head so she took some aspirin before leaving the house. Her relentless stewardship meant that by the time she arrived at the Melrose home soon after noon, everything looked in perfect order. The weather had been kind and a light sea-breeze drifted across the cool lawns. Diedre checked and double-checked each trestle table as she greeted the ladies manning the various stations around the garden. She looked most becoming in a fresh chiffon flower-print frock with a matching pill-box hat. She was wary of large brimmed hats at such occasions. Even a moderate breeze could unsettle such an accessory. Her gloves and shoes were a berry shade, complementing the same hue found in the print of her outfit.

She spotted Elsie, who had arrived earlier than anticipated. Diedre was quietly grateful for this slight change in arrangements. She embraced her friend warmly.

‘Elsie, my dear. So lovely to see you. Are the doggies well?’

The two women moved to the edge of the garden to take in the vista, although not before Diedre had remarked on Elsie’s striking hat. It had a broad, soft straw-like brim topped with two enormous silk roses.

‘I must say that hat is absolutely stunning. Where on earth did you find it?’

‘Bon Marche my dear. They were having a sale and I fell for it although I am a little apprehensive that it may be more suitable for a younger woman.’

Elsie twirled in a rather girlish fashion to show its various facets.

‘Don’t be silly Elsie. The colour of the roses is enchanting. So kind to your complexion.’

Diedre did have her doubts about its suitability for a woman of Elsie’s age. It was almost an overstatement. But that was neither here nor there at the moment. She must press on with overseeing the occasion. She rather wished that Teddy was at her side but he had a competition day and Diedre had insisted that he carry on as usual. She could manage perfectly well and would be home by five. She swallowed some more aspirin with a hurried cup of tea before moving to the front gate to greet Sir James. His face was already

flushed as he scrambled rather awkwardly from the car, but he took a moment to gather himself before grasping Diedre's extended berry-encased hand with great vigour.

'Delighted, Mrs Taylor-Brown. How charming you look today,' he gushed.

This was not their first meeting. They both did the rounds of the various functions in Perth. It was mostly the same crowd. There were seldom surprises.

'On behalf of the Dalkeith Ladies Society a warm welcome Sir James. It is most generous of you to make time to join us today. Of course it is one of our most important events and we do think that it is imperative to show support for the good souls caring for these orphans.' Diedre was at her finest.

Sir James began what she knew was to come. A waffling, self-important diatribe on topics plucked at random from his woolly head. His florid face and slightly mumbled enunciation indicated that he had topped up the tank before leaving home. He rocked on his heels, clasped his hands behind his back and thrust out his bulging belly. Diedre smiled bravely for as long as she could endure before waving Elsie over to join them.

'I'll just get you something to clear the throat before the speeches,' she offered and hurried to the tea station where the ladies had discreetly hidden a fine malt whiskey. She found a deck chair and settled Sir James under an umbrella near the little stage. He beamed benevolently about him as the potion worked its magic.

Diedre took a moment to catch her breath and surveyed the garden beds that were at their best for the occasion. The colours were superb and she felt a momentary flash of envy. The Melroses were very well heeled and employed a gardener almost full-time. Perhaps she and Teddy could afford one part-time. It would be rather fun to redesign some of the beds. She must ask Teddy about it when she got home.

But needs must and after her brief reverie, she was summoned to meet the buses that had just arrived. The children dutifully filed down the steps in silence and stood in neat lines on the lawn. They were tidily turned out. A credit to those in charge.

'How pleasant to see you again, Matron. It hardly seems that a whole year has passed since our last Orphans' Party. Do come and meet Sir James before we get the afternoon's proceedings under way.'

Matron appeared dour. Large and imposing in the crisp white uniform and veil, Diedre had forgotten her cheerless aura. However, Diedre was skilled in bright conversation, albeit one sided. Matron had little to contribute.

‘Let me congratulate you on how beautifully turned out the children are, Matron. Some of those little frocks on the girls are very fetching indeed. Rather quaint, but most suitable I’m sure. I suppose you must get some quite good things from jumble sales.’

Matron’s face worked to shape the tiniest of smiles. Diedre pressed on.

‘Do allow me show you around. Over here, we have the trestles with sandwiches and little cakes. Here is the fruit cup cordial. And, afterwards we have an ice-cream cone for each of them. Dr Whiteman is our Father Christmas this year. A wonderful Christian man if ever there was one. He will be distributing the beautiful collection of gifts which I am sure will bring joy to the poor little souls. And to finish the afternoon we have organised some lively games.’

The afternoon proceeded smoothly and by the time the bus carrying Matron and the children had disappeared down the drive, Diedre was exhausted but gratified. It had all gone exactly as she had planned. She collapsed into a deck chair with a cup of scalding tea and swallowed two aspirin to ward off the nagging head. Returning home to free her puffy feet from their soft leather bindings was an appealing thought.

Reflections

Feeling slightly refreshed after the tea and aspirin, Diedre noticed Elsie assisting with the afternoon tea things. She waved her over to an adjoining deck chair.

‘No need to do that, dear. The ladies have got it all in hand. Sit down and have a cup of tea.’

Elsie was still resplendent in her marvellous hat, although like Diedre, she had removed her gloves. She graciously accepted the tea cup offered by one of the auxiliary ladies.

‘I feel it all went very well and it was wonderful to see how delighted the children were with their gifts.’

‘A marvellous success,’ enthused Elsie.

‘Thank you, Elsie.’ Diedre smiled warmly at her friend before adding,

‘And the kiddies seemed well behaved. Rather quiet really. None of that high-pitched clatter that can be so wearying.’

This lack of childhood clamour suited Diedre, whose conversational talents did not stretch to conversing with children. She didn’t really see the necessity.

‘Of course, I’m not saying for one moment that such qualities are not admirable. One thing I cannot abide is a chattering child. A sign of bad manners I believe. I was just talking to Madge Fiddler. You know her don’t you dear? She’s a member of the Bridge Club. Anyway, Madge told me of a distressing experience she had recently when she attended a Red Cross luncheon where half a dozen boys and girls from the local high school had been invited. I can’t imagine the purpose but the point is they had no idea of common table etiquette. I sometimes wonder about the kind of upbringing those types of families provide.’

A Job Well Done

When Diedre arrived home Teddy’s car was already in the garage. He must have forgone drinks at the clubhouse. She let herself into the house and found him in the kitchen making himself a cup of tea.

‘Hello Old-thing. Like a cup of tea?’

‘No thank you dear. I had one just before I left the party. It went splendidly I’m pleased to say.’

Diedre sat herself at the kitchen table and eased her burning feet out of her shoes.

‘What a relief,’ she breathed, stretching her legs under the table.

‘Sir James expressed how impressed he was and just as he was leaving mentioned that we would be included on the guest list for the Governor’s Garden Party next month. Isn’t that a coup? It means that I will have to get straight over to the dressmaker. Just by chance, I saw a lovely lilac fabric in David Jones last week which might be very suitable.’

Diedre had noticed some most elegant new Vogue patterns and was keen to try one out.

‘Good for you, Deedles. Some recognition for your hard work.’

Diedre needed to debrief a little. Like Elsie, Teddy was a good listener.

‘The children were quite well behaved, which is a credit to those hard working people who give their life to care for them. The gifts were so prettily wrapped although some of the kiddies didn’t seem to realise that they could keep the gift. There was one little girl aged about nine or ten, quite a plain little thing with glasses, who seemed particularly pleased with her gift. It was a doll in a very sweet blue outfit that Mrs Roberts had donated. A pleasant woman actually although she doesn’t mix with our crowd very much. I think she must be involved in the Musical Society. She plays the piano rather well I’ve heard. Anyway, this child seemed fond of the doll right away and sat on the lawn talking to it all afternoon. Completely absorbed in her own world. I suppose you can’t be sure what goes on in these children’s heads. Not very savoury backgrounds, most of them it seems. Matron suggested, quite discretely I will say, that not many are orphans after all. I was most surprised at that and it does set you thinking about what sort of parents would abandon their own flesh and blood.’

Diedre’s head was beginning to nag again.

‘I’m just going to have a little lie down, Teddy. Wake me for drinks dear.’

A Soul at Rest

Teddy looked frightful. The shock had not only drained every vestige of colour from him, it seemed to have diminished him entirely. He shuffled like a man two decades older as he made his way to the front pew. There was a big crowd. Diedre had been a stalwart of the community and her sudden and unexpected passing had shocked them all to the core. As Elsie had explained as she bravely phoned one after another, Deidre Anne Taylor-Brown had suffered a massive stroke on the very day she had so magnificently hosted the Orphans’ Christmas Party. Poor, dear Teddy had poured the drinks and gone to rouse her after a nap. Nothing could be done. She was gone even before arriving at the hospital.

Charles, a close friend of the family, delivered the eulogy, reminding the weeping mourners of her extraordinary contribution to charitable works. His voice was oratorical.

“There was no surety that any child who passed through the gates of an institution would not suffer psychological, physical or sexual violence, because no-one was watching.”

Inside: Life in Children's Homes and Institutions, 2013

No-one Was Watching

A thud on the back of my neck as I walk through the yard. It's the shock that unbalances me and nearly sends me sprawling. I'm not as steady on my pins as I once was.

Bloody hell! What was that?

Just a little welcome gift, the screw says.

His sneer is as dark and hard as the bitumen leading to Block A. High supervision.

Nothing they hate more than a paedophile. They'll have plenty of names for you, mate.

Rock spider. Kiddy jumper. Yeah. That's why we'll keep an eye on you. Just till you settle in.

The warm oozes under the collar of my regulation shirt and trickles down my back. Thick like treacle. But I still don't get it. Until the stench smothers me and I gag. Turning in a circle like a bloody dog chasing its tail. Trying to get away from the stink and the slime.

Now I'm in here I've got all the time in the world to pick through the past and try to put together some sort of a story about what the hell this is all about. You know that I was never much of a talker. Always kept things to myself pretty much. I thought I might write it down for you to read – you know how we used to leave notes for each other? But longer, more like a letter. I'm pretty sure that where you are you might already be able to read my mind, but writing it down might help me make some sense of it. And just to get things straight, I'm not here at Her Majesty's pleasure. That's for the ones they reckon are insane and or at high risk as a repeat offender. My sentence is what the judge said was 'a reflection of the seriousness of my crime and the community's expectation that child molesters should be punished harshly.' Seven years is what he gave me. It could be worse I suppose. In some states it's life now. So my sentence can be measured and the days crossed off. I've got acres of time to study the smoothness of the walls in my 7.5 metre square box. No necks can be stretched in here unless it's another pair of hands doing the stretching. Which I'm beginning to realise isn't so unlikely. Functional, hygienic steel and concrete that can be hosed to remove unsightly stains. Bells signal routines to remind me of day and night. Sirens scream warnings of threatened mutiny and silent violence. I can tell you, Thelma, I'm getting a feel for the place pretty quickly. After the first few

weeks, the threats and abuse made it clear to me that I was clinging to the lowest rung of the prison ladder. My fellow inmates muttered at me that I was just a fuckin' rock spider who was always looking for little cracks to crawl into. A filthy prick they called me.

I'm not sure if that's what you thought. Maybe it was and that's why you stopped talking.

But, that's the way it is here. Worse than them they reckon. Which is a laugh if you're in the mood. Brutal criminals most of them. Wife-bashers, thugs, thieves, drug pushers, rapists, murderers. Animals and useless layabouts who've probably never done an honest day's work. Covered in disgusting tattoos. Bulging bellies, missing teeth, spitting and swearing as they stake out their territories. There's no way I'm one of them. I worked in a white collar job. Wore a suit and tie to work and had a first class ticket on the train. A responsible married man who always brought home an honest wage. You'd have to agree with that, Thelma, even though the drink was a slight problem at times.

I'm not one of those animals. Not even close.

I've been on high supervision since I've been inside. My exercise time is before the rest of them. Just to walk around the quadrangle and get a breath of fresh air. Listen to a few bird-calls which settles me. I can usually identify some species that I check in my bird book when I go back in.

But that's coming to an end. The guard informed me that I was going out with the rest of them tomorrow. He couldn't disguise the smirk in his voice as he told me that I'd have to take my chances. Which, he knows as well as me, are not too good.

Bastard.

'Inside' is a just another war zone when I think about it. Adrenaline keeps you on high alert. You start jumping at your own shadow and you never turn your back. The screws are mostly blind and deaf. The stink of piss and shit and blood and fear fills the air. The nightmares are already getting to me: night after night with sounds and smells and broken bodies. And this is just the beginning. Six years, nine months, four days to go. I might get out early for good behaviour and completing all the courses for 'crims' like me. What do you think my chances are, Thelma? Remember when I did that course for work? Safety-first stuff – load of bullshit really – but I topped the class. You know as well as anyone that I'm not stupid so I reckon I'll give all the programmes my best shot.

I'll admit that it was a bloody mistake but I thought it was over and done with. I feel like it was something that happened to some other bloke a million years ago. And I reckon it would have happened to plenty of other blokes back then. In those days you kept your business to yourself and just got on with life. Blokes made mistakes and urges overpowered common sense sometimes but people never used to make such a fuss about things like that. I put the whole episode to the back of my mind and the details are hazy and fragmented. How can I remember what the kid might have felt like? She was just a kid and kept her mouth shut just like any other kid. But it turns out that she never forgot and when they heard her story they tracked me down like a dog. Just one skinny kid who didn't kick up any fuss about it at the time. And it never happened again after she left.

When I saw her standing in the court room it shocked the blazes out of me. I wouldn't have recognised her but there was something about her voice that took me back all those years. She was usually pretty quiet but I remember once when she had baked a cake with you, Thelma, and she fairly trumpeted like an elephant as she took it out of the oven. It was that same voice in the court room as she pointed to me and boomed that I was Mr Victor White and that she'd been sent to live in our home when she was ten. She went on and on with her story, the details of which I had little recollection.

She'd always been so quiet. I would never have guessed that she'd have that in her.

I'll admit that I was glad you'd already gone, Thelma. I still believe that I was made a scapegoat but I know you wouldn't have coped too well with all the court business. And once the story came out I understand that you would never have been able to face your church group. I'm retired now, so the blokes at work probably don't know about it because I don't see them anymore. There's no-one really to point the finger which is some sort of a blessing I suppose. A man has to hang on to whatever dignity he can muster. Thank goodness we never had any kids. I'm not sure that I could have faced them after all this.

When I think back, I'm sorry that it affected you so much at the time. I remember you even threatened to leave but where would you have gone, Thelma? It wasn't adultery and I wasn't a wife-basher. You were always such a practical woman so I was relieved when you seemed to accept that what was done couldn't be undone. Maybe it would have

helped if we'd talked about it but you were pretty determined not to talk at all. I thought you were overly hard in that way Thelma and I recall telling you to let bygones be bygones.

I was in the hallway putting on my hat, ready to leave for work. But you just scowled at me before you turned around and marched back to the kitchen. Funny, I can see that as clear as day. But you stuck to your guns. Not a bloody word. That's when I worked out the notebook system that we used. Until you went actually. Seems strange – not a word in all those years.

Well I'm still writing and the further back I look the more I can see that you were always a pretty strong-willed woman. You used to nag and nag about having a kid but it was all too fast for my liking. We'd only been married a few months and it was on. I can still hear your voice as you sweet-talked me into early nights in bed. Then in the after-glow you talked more decidedly of baby prams, layettes and the colour of the nursery.

But I wasn't really up for it, Thelma. I was only just back from the war and had survived somehow in one piece. Better off than lots of blokes. Johnny Phillips with only one arm. Jack Winter with half a leg. Ted Jones with no nose and only one ear. That bloke Simon with a metal plate in his head and no-one understanding a word he said. And poor bloody Peter Shepherd with his balls blown away. I knew that I was pretty lucky. None of us blokes ever talked about the war even though there had been a few newspaper reports about the Australian troops in New Guinea. Mostly about major offensives like the Kokoda campaign. But so many of us were spread out all over the place fighting in remote jungle terrain battling the heat, biting insects, malaria and dysentery just as much as fighting the Japs. Even though I'd escaped that hell-hole, there were times when half-remembered moments crashed over me like waves that knocked the stuffing out of me. Trying to settle back into civvy life wasn't so easy. Bed at night was a battlefield as sleep came and went. Remember, there were times when you had to roll to the edge of the bed as I tried to kick a hand grenade out of the way. I wasn't too confident about having a kid so soon. I felt like I needed more time to settle back to normal. Back to the way things were before the war. And remember, getting married was your idea. I'd taken you to the pictures a couple of times and I thought you were a good sort. We had a kiss and cuddle when I dropped you home and suddenly you were full of wedding plans. I just went along

with it. I can't say I'd thought about it much. But, I was twenty four and I did have a trade. Lots of my mates were married already, so it seemed like the right thing to do. I know that you were pretty upset that the baby thing didn't work out. I don't know why the little buggers just kept slipping out. Did the doctor ever say why? Then when the last one was pretty far on you went to pieces. I was pretty sorry about it all too but that was just how it was. At the back of my mind I was almost relieved to be honest. My old man was such a nasty violent prick. I didn't have much of a clue about how a father should be. What if I'd turned out just as bad as he was? Luckily I didn't seem to have his temper and I never belted you the way he bashed Mum. Actually, I was glad when you joined the church group. You seemed to brighten up with all the activities and meetings: jumble sales and baby clothes for the orphans. That kind of thing. I didn't even mind too much when you talked me into helping set up the trestle tables. I know I grumbled but I was pleased that you'd stopped sitting at the kitchen table just staring into space. It went on for months and I remember saying to you that you needed to get out more often.

But you just drank tea and the dripping tears went on like a leaky cistern.

If you think about it Thelma, we were doing pretty well apart from the baby business. We had a war service house in Leederville and it wasn't too bad at all. Brick and tile with a few rose bushes in the front and plenty of room out the back for chooks and some veggies. And the geraniums you planted out the back brightened up the yard no end. Oh. I forgot. They weren't geraniums. You put me in my place about that, I remember. You were most insistent that they were pelargoniums.

I have to laugh when I recall you full of importance about the superior qualities of pelargoniums. Puffed up like one of those fat crested pigeons who strutted around the chook yard picking up odd wheat kernels. Not the same soft cooing though. More like a galah. I used to feel unsettled when you were in full squawk but I learnt to block out the sound, otherwise it might have tipped me over the edge. Like old Charlie Butler who belted his wife with a leg of lamb. He reckoned it was her voice. Got ten years for it, poor bugger.

The train station was only a ten minute walk so getting to work and home again was plain sailing and I was pretty happy with my work. The blokes out there were a good lot mostly

and didn't jibe me too much when I moved from a blue collar to a white collar job. Just like Dad I was a fitter and turner but I'd done extra night classes and got promoted to order-clerk. I was pleased as punch if you want to know and you seemed proud to see me off in the mornings in a suit and tie. I suppose that pelargoniums were more suited to our status.

It was about then that I'd sometimes stop off after work for a drink or two. The pub was handy – next door to the station. I'd down a few beers and have a chat with whoever was there. Mostly it was Simon and I'd have to remind him who I was but he always knew when it was his round so I guess his mind wasn't altogether gone. I'm not too sure what he was on about but it filled the time if there was no-one else to talk to.

By the time I got home tea was on the table. We never had much to say to each other except when you nagged about me having a quiet drink or two. I can remember that. You'd get all high and mighty about my drinking habits embarrassing you and how there were jobs waiting to be done in the yard and what Alice Croft had to say about men who drank at the pub.

I still claim that to have a yarn with the blokes over a few beers wasn't a crime. We always had money to pay for a roof over our head and food on the table. There was nothing to complain about and I reminded you that as head of the household it was my right to have a few drinks with my mates if I wanted to. I also think that the drink was a help for the nightmares. And it drowned out the ringing in my head. Some of the blokes called it shell shock. I don't know about that but it just went on and on. It still bothers me if you want to know.

The writing seems to settle me so I'll go on with the story, Thelma. I'm really stretching back into my memory now to figure out what happened next.

I recall you announcing that we should do something for the poor orphans from the Home that the church group talked about. I didn't see the point myself. They had plenty of good people to look after them where they were. But you were quite vocal about it and you hardly talked about anything else. Looking back, I think that was when things really changed in our lives. It kind of took over everything. You just kept at me about how these poor little kiddies needed a real home and we had one with a spare bedroom and you could do with company and you'd heard at church that you could foster these kiddies if

you were a good Christian family and of course we were because you went to church every week and it was pretty obvious that the house was clean and tidy because the vicar came for afternoon tea once a month and it was clear that I kept the front lawn in good order. And anyway it would be good to have a child who could help out around the house.

That's why Janet came to live with us. A bloody mistake if ever there was one.

It pains me now to think about all the fuss and bother we had to go to. We had to visit the Home to look over the kiddies, although I did agree it was a good idea to choose one that seemed suitable. You wouldn't want to end up with some little runt who couldn't do a decent day's work. The Home was in the hills so I borrowed my brother-in-law's car for the day to make a kind of an outing of it and you were pretty excited about it all: what with a picnic lunch and thermos flask. I remember that you made me wear my suit and you were dolled up in gloves and a hat. I thought it was too much but you kept saying that we had to make a good impression with the Matron, otherwise they might not let us take one of the children.

You'll remember Ron had the car waiting for us on the Saturday morning. A beautiful vehicle; a Singer Saloon that he'd bought second-hand but in tip-top order. Very roomy inside with a brown leather covered bench seat and pull-down arm rests. Real walnut dashboard as well. Even a heater and demister. I'd have to agree with you, Thelma, that the drive up to the hills was very pleasant. Quite relaxing and when we found a shady spot off the edge of the road we spread out the rug and had our egg sandwiches and thermos of tea. I can still taste that jam sponge you'd made. I'll have to say that you were a good cook. The muck we have in here reminds me of that every day.

When we got to the Home gates, I was amazed about how enormous they were. Great iron things that reminded me of a prison (and I should know all about that now). Matron was waiting for us on the front step and we followed her through the huge hallway into quite a grand reception room. I suppose you'd remember how stern Matron looked. Her stiff chest crackled as she walked and her shoes squeaked on the glassy polished floor. A real battleship sort. She greeted us and reminded us in a thunderous voice that the

children could only go to good Christian families and that she must be sure we were suitable.

Then another woman in a nurse's uniform brought in a tray with a pot of tea and plate of biscuits. Matron poured. The cups were those little flowery things that hardly hold more than a mouthful and threaten to smash in your hands. I know that you commented on how delicate they were and seemed to enjoy sipping away with your little finger pointing to nowhere in particular. Anyway, it was obvious to me that these orphan kiddies had the best of everything here so I hoped that if we took one of them they wouldn't expect to be treated like royalty.

After the tea, Matron took us up to the playroom to see the children. It was another big room with a glossy floor and about a dozen girls playing with a range of very good looking toys. They were aged from about six to eleven or twelve I would guess. Very neatly turned out all of them. Hair ribbons and polished shoes. You and Matron seemed to hit it off. They all looked the same to me so I just waited for you to choose someone. I wasn't really taking much notice but Matron wanted to drag me into it. Her voice wasn't quite so booming. She seemed to approve of us and was almost charming as she pointed out a child with yellow ribbons whom she considered might be suitable. The girl had been in the Home for five years and at ten years of age Matron thought that she might be helpful around the house. Apparently she was a ward of state so she was available for adoption if we so desired.

The whole thing was your idea Thelma and I don't believe that I had much say in the matter. But she seemed alright to me. Pretty quiet when she came back to Matron's office with us but that was good as far as I was concerned. I was finding noisy women's chatter more and more irritating. So we took her. Signed a few forms and that was that. Matron handed us a small case and we all drove off.

So, that was when it all began I suppose. The part in the story when things really started to go wrong although you couldn't have known that. Nor did I. You were so full of yourself back then.

You sounded like a bird crowing from the top of a tree as you prattled on about how we were a real family now.

Janet never said a word all the way home.

I didn't take much notice of her at first. Hardly heard a word out of her to be honest. She was always out in the backyard sweeping or cleaning out the chook house or collecting kindling for the stove in the mornings when I went off to work. After school there was always ironing and cooking to be done so she kept out of sight mostly. You seemed to think that things were working out alright and the ladies at church were quite impressed you said. You'd sometimes report to me about how much they commended your fine Christian spirit. About the generosity of such a gesture despite all sorts of warnings they had heard about how unsuitable many of these children could be. Not knowing what kind of background they came from was hazardous they suggested but despite all that you were doing a wonderful job.

I could see that you were feeling quietly pleased with yourself when they fussed and clucked.

I remember how you used to keep her home from school on Mondays because it was washing day. I can see now that must have been a big help what with lighting the copper and the wringer and the starching. And she wasn't a big eater so it seemed that all-in-all things were working out quite well. As I said I didn't see much of her but I had noticed that she was pretty skinny. Had long legs like a young filly. I must say I'd always liked the look of those long slim legs on a young girl. And once summer came you made her some shorts to wear around the house. They certainly suited her and I began to watch her more often. Then I noticed that she was wearing shorty pyjamas that you'd made for her. Pink and white they were. They were what young girls wore those days. Instead of long nighties. Much cooler and more comfortable you said. She used to put them on after her bath and sit in the kitchen to read before she went to bed.

So having Janet around the house wasn't causing any problems at that time.

I'm guessing that it must have been a few months later when my nightmares seemed to get worse. I would get up in the night and have another beer or two to settle myself. Janet would sometimes walk through the kitchen out to the toilet on the veranda while I was sitting at the table. She was always half asleep and never seemed to notice me there. It just happened from there really. I thought I'd just settle her back to bed. Those long legs

were so smooth as I tucked her in and the first time it happened without me thinking about it. I just wiped it up and she didn't say anything. Just lay still and quiet in her pink bed. Next time was the same. Never moved or made a sound. It just went on from there. I could hear her gasp and gulp at the air and her skinny body would go rigid but she didn't make any other noises. It was a distraction from the nightmares and I always slept well afterwards. She kept her mouth shut and sometimes I slipped a few lollies under her pillow. It was just between her and me. There was no harm intended. I would never have hurt her or anything. It was always over pretty quickly and she still had you fussing around her. Everything seemed to go on as usual.

Then that night you went off to bed early with a headache was when it all changed. My memory is fuzzy but I must have just stayed on in the kitchen having a few more drinks. Usually I only visited Janet's room if the nightmares had woken me but for some reason I slipped in there before going to bed. There was nothing different. She was as silent as always and I was just tidying myself up as I walked out of her room. And there you were standing in the hallway. I can't really remember what happened next. The shouting, doors banging, furniture crashing. It's all a blur of noise and movement. I just cleared out when you dragged her out of the bedroom with the stuff still running down her legs. I could hear you from the back porch: going berserk, belting the daylights out of her and screaming at her to pack her bags. Strangely, I remember feeling slight relief when I heard you telling her what a dirty, filthy creature she was. And I silently agreed with you about her going back to the Home. It reassured me a little that you were probably quite right. Janet had seemed rather slinky as she walked past me in the kitchen.

My memory is clearer about that day when I got home from work. Janet was gone. You'd moved my clothes to the spare wardrobe and Janet's bed was freshly made up. The pink bedspread was gone. In its place was a dark green cover. Our bedroom door was shut. My tea was in the oven. That was when you stopped talking and I worked out the notebook system. The messages were short but never nasty if I remember rightly. When to put the bins out, or mow the lawn or pay the milkman. To be truthful Thelma, I didn't mind it all that much and I began to listen for other sounds. We had plenty of visiting birds in the backyard and I enjoyed spending time with them. You might recall that I set up a feeding platform with seeds and water and built a wooden bench under the gum tree. Over those years I began to recognise quite a range of species. Although I do realise that you didn't care much for the birds and I noticed a couple of times you had tipped their seeds into the

bin. Even when you were sick we kept the notebook going. I've no idea what you were thinking at that time. Or what the doctor said. I suppose that I thought you would be alright but maybe you knew otherwise. Anyway when you'd gone I enjoyed the birds even more. Some of them screeched and squawked but oddly I never found their sounds unpleasant. Quite soothing in fact.

It's been nearly twenty years since you passed on and as I said before, I'm grateful that you haven't had to go through all this again. Now I have been thinking more about all this business I can see that there were some particular facts about my situation. I think I was the victim of circumstances. Maybe the drink might have muddled my mind too but I can see a kind of pattern now I've written it down. Events that were out of my control all conspiring against me in the end. Maybe if I hadn't met you, none of it would have occurred. Not that I'm blaming you, Thelma. Just wondering about it, that's all.

I've been writing all night Thelma. Once I got started it wasn't too hard. I'm pretty tired but today the weather's beautiful. That mild autumn sunshine we get in Perth always lifts my spirits and the early morning birdsong I can hear from my cell fills my head. It's as though I'm transported from the hum-drum of prison life with the chatter of willy-wag tails, shrieking parrots, twittering wrens and magpies' song; all exploding in fantastic colours inside my brain. Was today the day I'm going out with the rest of them? I don't seem to remember too clearly. Maybe it was next week. So when the screw comes to my cell I remind him that I usually go out before the others. He just grunts that he's had enough of watching over some pervert and he won't be giving up his smoko time to let me go out after the others any more. It's time for the big event he sneers.

Nasty prick.

I'll stop writing for now. You probably already know all this stuff but I think it's helped so I'll write again to let you know how I go with the counselling courses. I know it might sound silly but I still believe that the dead can just look down and see everything that's happening. Can you do that, Thelma?

The guard is leaning against the smoko shed on the other side of the fence. He inhales slowly as the nicotine works its soothing magic. Eyes screwed up against the brilliant sky, he glances over to the exercise yard half watching the kiddy jumper stumble into the yard. He sniggers and spits into the dirt as he observes. Plenty of time. Smoko doesn't finish for another fifteen minutes.

The spider is clinging to the wall but the shadows flicker around and somehow circle him. Spitting and hissing that he's a fucking filthy paedo. Needs to be taught a few lessons they jeer. Gobs of slime pelt down. Steaming piss splashing off his face as his hands rake at his eyes. Low chanting echoing off the corrugated smoko shed. Louder and louder, bouncing off the hot bitumen now. A sharp cracking sound breaking through the cacophony. Methodical thudding. Noises like tearing flesh and crunching bone.

“... the use of corporal punishment was widespread, socially accepted
and children were legally the chattels of their parents.”

*Historical Review of Sexual Offence & Child Abuse
Legislation in Australia:1788-2013, 2014. p.4*

Chip off the Old Block

1917, For King and country.

His mum is so proud.

‘I always knew you could do it even though your father had nothing good to say about it.’

She’s beaming at him as he leans gawkily against the kitchen door frame.

‘He took too much notice of that ridiculous report if you ask me,’ she adds. ‘Charlatan. That’s what I reckon about that Professor what-ever-his name was.’

She wrings her wet hands on her apron and hugs Walter before he can duck.

‘Thanks, Mum.’ Wal is embarrassed by her fussing but secretly proud as punch with having received his official papers.

A qualified fitter and turner. It’s not such a bad trade. In his dreams, he’d imagined that he would be a clerk in a cushy job filling in ledgers. Inside work, warm and cosy with office girls you could chat up. But there’s nothing wrong with honest manual work. Makes a man out you everyone reckons and Wal doesn’t disagree. Anyway, he’s not smart enough for all that figuring work, so no use wasting time worrying about it. In fact, that professor his mum mentioned, had written that he needed to improve his memory of figures. He’s never got around to it.

He’s been at the workshop since he was fourteen. Nearly five years and although he hasn’t told his mum yet, he’s pretty keen to join the boys overseas and see something of the world. Now that he’s finally completed his apprenticeship, he can enlist. He and a few mates have agreed to sign up after work. They are all as keen as mustard to be off on the adventure of a lifetime.

When he finally breaks the news his mum is heart-broken.

‘You’re just a lad. Let the men fight wars,’ she wails.

But, kitted out in their new uniforms, they are men. They laugh and skylark. Free at last from their mothers’ niggling and fretting. The train journey across the Nullabour to Victoria is one continuous caper. Changing trains, days and nights of travel, no-one getting much sleep but no-one caring. They are still buzzing with a mixture of fatigue and

exhilaration as they board *Troopship Aeneas*. It is October 30, 1917 as they sail out from Melbourne. A new world beckons.

Walter begins the letter home to his mother three days out of port. He adds to it every few days.

... After being three days out we passed the north corner of New Zealand and we have not seen land since for eight days. Directly we passed New Zealand we struck a very rough beam sea & you ought to have seen them sick, I don't suppose there was more than 200 that were not sick ...

He's delighted with what every day has to offer. Physical games most days with tug-of-war and potato race competitions fiercely fought. He came third in the potato race and his crib game is really improving, he reports to his mother.

... well Mother I have to play in a Crib Tournament tonight, I hope that I have better luck ...

The concerts are a laugh. Always some comedian dressed up as a girl who brings the house down and his unit won the bass, baritone and tenor solos in the singing competition. He is particularly proud to tell his mother that he has managed the challenge of washing his own clothes but adds,

... another washing day, I'll never be a bachelor after this lot it is too hard washing clothes ...

By the end of a month at sea, the seventeen-page letter captures the thrill of sighting land, awe of passing through the Panama Canal, astonishment at the speed of the American navy motor launches and general excitement in everything from fire drills to rock cakes for dinner. Signing off, *Your loving son Walter*, it contains no evidence of trepidation. There is no mention of looming battlefields or impending death.

The scales fall

That seventeen-page letter home to his mum captured Walter's innocent sense of wonder. It was the promise of freedom and adventure that had lured him away from the strictures of a safe and conservative community. Of course, he'd heard that many boys from home had made the final sacrifice. But the sense of mateship and patriotism wiped out the

shocking statistics along with the gruesome realities of war. The promise of escape from humdrum lives that offered little free time, an occasional few shillings to spare and no sex other than what you provided for yourself. The chance to get away from smothering mothers, domineering fathers, annoying brothers and sisters and never-ending work sounded a dream too good to be true. You got five shillings a day which wasn't at all bad. The Poms only got one shilling a day when they joined. His mates had even heard that there was plenty of sex in exotic places. What more could a young fellow want?

It was to be the only letter he sent home. The ghastly reality of the trenches clogged his lungs as it killed his mates and any further literary inclinations. In just under two years he was back home. The carnage was over and by some kind of miracle he was still alive. The four mates he'd enlisted with were gone. The gullible boy was a man with blood and guts and mud and stench and fear embedded in his being. Nightmares stalked him. And the coughing wore him out. The foul yellow gas had transformed him. He was a man much older than his years.

1922, A bun in the oven.

Once home again, the Railways sent him off to Northam, sixty miles out of Perth. He lived in a boarding house and it wasn't too bad. Mrs Little cooked a good roast on Sundays and her daughter Gladys was quite a looker. He started to hang around the house more when he got home from work. Helped out with chopping the wood and lighting the copper. Mr Little was an invalid and couldn't do much. There wasn't a lot happening in town but once a month or so there would be dance down at the hall. The CWA ladies would make a bang-up supper and there was a keg on tap. Mrs Frances from down near the station played the piano and old Mr West would play the fiddle. So, he asked Mrs Little (Mr Little was poorly again) if it would be alright for Gladys to come to the dance with him. Gladys was seventeen now and worked at the bakery. She seemed pretty keen so off they went, her balanced on the handlebars as he wobbled the bicycle two miles to the hall.

He had to admit she looked bit of alright and the other blokes gave some encouraging wolf-whistles as they arrived. Her frock was what she called apricot and seemed to consist of miles of net and lace. It frothed around her rather shapely figure very attractively if the truth be known. She had long gloves and he had bought her a corsage

which just about broke the bank. It was what the florist called delicate; white baby's breath with a white rose bud in the middle.

Anyway, the dance was just the beginning. Things moved on from there quicker than he planned and before you knew it she was in the family way, which of course meant they had to get married pretty smartly to cover their tracks. Victor was born six months later, rather premature the story went, but a whopping ten pounds none-the-less.

Bloody Vic. Been a bundle of misery ever since he was born. Always crying. Hardly slept. Ears that stuck out like jug handles. Good thing he was born so fat because he just didn't thrive at all that first year or so. Always vomiting all over the place.

1926, Married life.

'Bloody fool. You need to have your head read.'

She bashes her bottled fury into the pastry.

'Married life,' she spits.

He's just staggered in from the pub.

'What the hell did you say?' His lungs might be buggered but Wal's hearing is still pretty good.

Her response is methodical punching. The thudding sounds ricochet from the dark cavern of the kitchen.

'For God's sake, woman. Will you just leave off,' he slurs wearily. He shoves through the flywire door and thumps up the path to the thunderbox for a scrap of peace and quiet.

Now he's out of the house, the kitchen, which had expanded to bursting, settles as the kneading becomes more meditative. She remembers that he had once. Had his head read. They'd both had a laugh about it when he'd found The Mental Science College chart in his father's belongings. Five bob his father had forked out in 1910. Wal was eleven years old. The phrenologist was a Professor A. J. Abbot, M.R.P.S., who provided a full written report on the 43 different faculties of the aforementioned boy, Walter Thomas White. The father had obviously believed this new science would prove worthy of the investment.

Number 42.

Intuition: will judge character well.

His father was probably disappointed and aggrieved at wasting his five bob. The predictions deduced from his son's cranial bumps mostly proved inaccurate. Gladys had come to similar conclusions as her father-in-law. The above attribute was a case in point. He was always off to see a bloke who knew a bloke who could make a quick quid. She'd never witnessed any money-making miracles and the 'bloke' in question seemed to evaporate as quickly as he had appeared, usually with a pocket full of Wal's cash.

'Good judge of character my fat aunt,' she grumbled.

Number 3:

Bibativeness: not liable to inebriety.

'Now that is a joke,' she snorted.

Only ten minutes ago, Wal had reeled through the back door. The wage packet left on the kitchen table was lighter by half and Wal's wits were reduced by a similar fraction. He'd backed a sure thing.

Bloody kids and responsibilities

In the dunny, what with the heat and the flies, Wal can't get comfortable. His head pounds. His guts broil. Jesus. What was a man to do with responsibilities looming over him like a toppling mountain? Two bloody kids and another one on the way. He was smothering under it all. He finally settles his skinny arse on the wooden seat.

'It's a battle for a bloke just to have a fag and a quiet read of the racing pages,' he mourns.

But after his bad luck, even the nags don't capture his interest much today. He gloomily reflects on how he had arrived in such a predicament and recalls that he'd been warned before he got married. Your life's not your own any more, his already married mates had predicted. They were bloody right. And even though he had savoured the goods beforehand there had been a certain sense of abandon during the two-day honeymoon. But it wasn't long before the fleshy privileges had been restricted, eventually to tight

rations. Headaches, woman's troubles and exhaustion were the cited excuses. It became apparent that she'd pretty much shut up shop not long into the marital enterprise and what for him had been the main benefit of the contract had been tacitly withdrawn.

He'd come to realise that there was no option but to take what was his right whenever the urge came. A few drinks helped him along. She bore the incidents in silence. Presumably thinking of England while he pumped away at her. What infuriated him was that she fell pregnant just having him in the same bed. Four times in the four years they'd been married. One didn't make it but that still left two with one more around the corner.

He tears off a square of newspaper and swipes at his bum.

Steering clear of the house, he settles on the chopping block at the woodheap. The lemon tree provides a cooling umbrella as he lights up. He must have dozed off. The fag hanging in the corner of his mouth is all ash. Wal grinds the butt under his boot and sneaks past the kitchen. She must have popped next door to collect Vic and Ethel who've been having a play with the neighbour's kids. Wal can't work out why but he's just never taken to Victor at all. He's a skinny little whiner who needs a back hander every so often. After Vic came Ethel and she has a sweet nature. Then they lost one. Another boy. Still waiting for the next and Wal hopes it's another girl. They seem to be easier and keep out of the way most of the time.

He's taken the rest of the racing pages out onto the front veranda and tucks himself in the cane chair behind the potted plants. With luck he can stay out of sight until tea-time. He can't face Victor's bleak dial.

1930, A sorry sight.

The children were growing older. The girls were alright, but Victor continued to get under his skin. A runt of a kid really with those bloody big ears and snivelling nose. Wal had always given him a hiding when he had messed things up. Or moped about with that long face of his. Vic was at school now and Wal could see that he needed some more smartening up if he was ever going to amount to any sort of a man. It was high time he had some sense knocked into him. And the time came soon enough. Walter saw red one afternoon as he caught sight of Victor slinking down the back path towards the dunny.

‘What the hell are doing you lazy little bugger? I told you to get that kindling chopped so your mother can light the heater.’

Vic cringed as the tears welled.

‘I don’t care if you want to go to the lavatory. You can just hold on instead of always trying to get out of the jobs you’ve been given. And stop that pathetic snivelling before I give you a bloody hiding.’

The snivelling continued and the strap came out. It was a heavy leather belt that Walter no longer wore now he’d lost so much weight. It was handy on the back of the veranda door. The violent rage eventually subsided as Victor crawled sobbing and choking off the veranda. The crisscrossed welts oozed blood down his legs and puddled into his socks as he lay whimpering behind the wash-house.

‘Bloody sook. What sort of a son are you?’ Wal’s coughing had started up with all the exertion.

This was to be Victor’s lot from now on. He was thrashed mercilessly for anything and everything. Mostly for just being. He remained skinny into adolescence and his ears retained their jug-like appearance. Maybe it was this lack of physical vigour that so enraged his father whose own frailty increased as his lungs crackled and disintegrated. His son’s puny appearance made Wal wonder about how this useless streak of humanity was ever going to make any sort of a go at the whole sorry saga called life.

1938, A man in the making.

Wal kept coughing but stayed alive. They were better off than some. Wal always had work even when the Depression came and there were so many unemployed waiting in queues at the soup kitchens. There were no more children which was a blessing. He wasn’t too sure why that happened but was relieved all the same. The frequent coughing bouts wore him down and there’d already been a couple of bouts of pneumonia. He’d lost some work time but nothing too serious and the Railways looked after their lot pretty well.

Victor had started at the workshop now and Walter thanked his lucky stars that he had got the apprenticeship. Actually, he seemed to be quite good at numbers. He still didn’t have any bulk about him. Narrow little shoulders like a girl, Walter thought. But at least he

wasn't completely useless. They caught the same train to and from work but travelled in different carriages. Victor still snivelled constantly. Must have been something wrong with his passages. It drove Walter mad. He certainly couldn't have tolerated a twenty minute train journey listening to it. The pair were wary and kept out of each other's way as much as possible. The beatings had almost fizzled out. Wal just didn't have the stamina any more.

As Walter's lungs filled with muck more and more often the doctor had to be consulted regularly. This learned man even reckoned the smoking was making Wal's chest worse but that didn't seem to make any sense. One summer evening his old army mate Bill dropped by to collect the spare bike tube he'd lent Walter. They were sitting on the back step enjoying a fag as Victor slunk past his father on his way to the outhouse. Walter's big head, framed by two quite prominent ears, was silhouetted against the back door.

'Jeez. He's the spitting image of you, Walter. A real chip of the old block.'

'Can't see the likeness myself. He's nothing like me. Must take after his mother.'

They each drag on their smokes and squint through the haze to a future neither chooses to imagine. They are ordinary blokes not given much to reflection. No good pontificating about what might or might not happen tomorrow or the next day.

Although, there are odd occasions when Walter does brood briefly over Victor's future.

Christ knows what kind of a man he could ever amount to.

“A range of compulsive behaviours were described in evidence. Behaviours included compulsive cleaning, bed-making and general tidiness and obsessive hygiene including showering and bathing and water use.”

Forgotten Australians, 2004, p. 156

Ballerinas

She mostly stays indoors with a carer now. But, for a few hours each day, she is unsupervised. The first of these unfettered hours she spends scrubbing her hands until blood seeps out of the cracked, inflamed skin. This leakage puzzles her as she pulls on rubber gloves to obscure the troubling spectacle. Then she pushes the wicker pram out of the double garage and sets off for the park. When her husband returns from work, he leads her gently home. The neighbours worried at first and reported her to various authorities. But, eventually it was decided that she seemed safe enough.

No-one bothers her anymore as she searches through rubbish bins looking for... something.

As she trudges through the dappled shade and the haze of not-knowing, the wheels of the old pram wheeze slightly, returning her to a time when the wheels of another pram squeaked into her consciousness. It is a memory from long, long ago. A warm-smelling woman who is her mother holds her hand as they clamber onto a bus heading for the city to shop for weekly grocery supplies. By the time this exhausting mission is completed her mother is weighed down with string bags bulging with tea, floor wax, flour, sugar, split peas and custard powder.

And it's time for a cup of tea.

Ahern's Department Store serve tea in bone china and Wendy-Ann's mum is revived, even buoyed by the tea and the sophisticated surroundings. Her mum admires good manners and correct protocol and seems at peace as Wendy-Ann guzzles her strawberry milkshake from a tall, tin cup. Back at the bus-stop time dawdles and Wendy-Ann feels sleepy. Her eyes are drooping when she catches a glimpse of... a witch.

Pushing an old pram with a torn hood and rusty wheels. Her face dark and craggy with a nose like a parsnip. Warts with hairs poking out are dotted on her chin and piled on her head are many hats. Felt hats with feathers and flowers crushed out of shape. Underneath the hats is a mountain of knots and frays like the stuffing out of a mattress. The colour of drain water. Cardigans and coats form layers of grey, black and brown. Between the jagged hems and the battered slippers are legs encased in thick woollen stockings hanging like curtains around her ankles. She stops at the bin and rummages. A few crushed

packets are added to the pile of junk exploding from the pram. She walks past muttering to herself, staring into her pram.

Wendy-Ann hides behind her mum's skirt but is reassured at last that it's not really a witch. Just a lonely old lady who has lost her mind.

Wendy-Ann left the Home in 1967 and began work as a cleaner in a regional pub. If there was one thing she was sure about, it was cleaning. Scrubbing, polishing, sweeping, dusting, washing, starching, ironing: all were stamped into her and she found both comfort and pride in attention to detail. Bed-sheets and covers as smooth and white as a wedding cake were precisely aligned, mirrors dazzled, toilet porcelain sparkled, wooden floors reflected the legs of those passing over them. Behind this endowment she grew confident enough to peek at the world and when the manager complimented her work ethic she blushed and lowered the dark eyelashes framing rather beautiful eyes. He fell for it and they were married eighteen months later. Robert also worked hard and was financially astute. Hence, they were able to settle into a comfortable home as soon as they married. Rob was kind and generous. She was grateful and slightly amazed. Scared that it was all too good to be true and might just vanish like spirals of cigarette smoke. She became a bubbly young woman but underneath the grooming and sparkle she felt that she was play-acting. She felt guilty and ashamed that someone might discover her past, her pretence at normality. She was very particular about her appearance. Not necessarily in a vain way. It was more a compulsion. Keeping things, including herself, spotlessly clean and in order was paramount. It helped manage her world and was a measure of her worth. Robert appreciated his well-presented wife and neat home. He had moved into real estate after the hotel managing. He'd done well. There was a car and lots of attractive possessions.

Then she had fallen pregnant. A dream come true.

A dream that morphed into a nightmare.

'You'll get over it and if your milk comes in we'll take it for the premature babies,' said the briskly efficient mid-wife.

Her dead son had been bundled out of the delivery room wrapped in a way that looked just like a discarded packet of fish and chips. Dispatched to the incinerator along with other hospital waste. She never saw him. She never touched or smelled him. He was never named. There was no funeral. He just disappeared and nothing was ever mentioned. After a week she was sent home to 'get on with things'. She never talked about it and nor did anyone else, including her husband. There was a gaping abyss between them and neither knew how to bridge it. For so long she existed in a whirlpool of relentless grief. Her only child lost during that last hour. The beginning and end of a new life. Her body had not obliged and she had never conceived again. Rob buried his grief finally and became obsessed with making more money. It filled most of his hours and golf filled the rest. She filled her hours and her home with things. Lovely things that she would never have dreamed she could own all those years ago.

In those solitary hours allocated to the wife of a successful man, she cleaned, rearranged her beautiful things and swallowed the Valium tablets her doctor had prescribed for the perpetual sadness that clung to her. Through this fog of chemically dampened melancholy, she remained an exemplary housewife. But, the years and the Valium had worn her down and she didn't feel any closer to God despite her clean things. The nightmares which snatched her from the depths of sleep grew more frequent. Her mind overflowed with voices and cries. Not her baby's cries because his lungs had never filled. The cries seemed to come from a place further away. A glimpse of yellow net sometimes flashed into this far away world. Snapping sounds banished the sunny colour. A suitcase closing. A door banging and her mum's voice reminding her to be a good girl.

'It's just for a little while until Daddy gets better,' the voice reassured her.

She had never been told whether her daddy got better. Matron had quashed any enquiries about when her mum and dad were coming to get her.

'If your mother and father wanted you, they would have come to get you by now. Just be grateful that you have a roof over your head young lady.'

She had learnt much later in life that her father had in fact died. A gambler, he was always close to the big win which would have transformed him into a dazzling knight sweeping his little family away from the dingy boarding house to a new brick and tile three-by-one in the suburbs. Instead, his legacy was debt. Her mum had moved to a

country town where she could get work as a domestic for a well-to-do family. Distance and poverty were insurmountable obstacles. She never visited Wendy-Ann. There were letters. None of them were delivered. When Wendy-Ann left the Home she'd travelled by bus to the country town but her mum had moved on. No-one had an address.

Over the years, her world grew more fuzzy as she groped her way through each day. Shards of her childhood jangled within her. Blurred faces from dormitories, bathrooms, laundries, dining halls, classrooms peered into her eyes. Smells of urine, vomit and cabbage crept into her nostrils. Sounds of screaming and yelling and sobbing played on and on. She cringed if someone moved too suddenly when she was waiting at the supermarket check-out. Moments of panic stopped her dead in her tracks in the shopping mall.

Yet, woven through these moments of terror were snatches of laughter and colour. Scenes of play with some other six-year old kids. Not real play, just making up games whenever they could. Rubbing rags in circles, all in a row on hands and knees moving across a big wooden floor. Round and round until spots jumped in front of their eyes. A brief reprieve when Matron went out of the room and they became ballerinas, with the rags tied to their feet. Before her mind left her forever, Wendy-Ann had wondered if the ballet was her idea. Flashes of fuzzy yellow returned as she recalled a girl dressed as a fluffy duck. The girl was her. Her mummy and daddy were clapping as she bowed with all the other fluffy ducks. The memory invited a tiny up-turning of her mouth until it was wiped away by the sounds of wailing as Matron returned and took the strap to them all.

Rob was concerned. He could see her drifting into a distant world. He cut back on golf.

‘Why don’t you come with me next week? I’m going over to Camden just out of Sydney to look at some property. It might be an enjoyable break for you,’ he suggested.

She had agreed but already felt as exhausted and dislocated as the landscape in the small country town she was presently visiting. The streets linking the few hundred shabby houses were potholed with head-high weeds on each side. The houses were a mishmash of weatherboard, corrugated iron and pink brick cladding. Wire fences closeted snarling dogs of no obvious pedigree and the back yards and adjoining paddocks wore an unkempt cloak. Those with a tidy mind like hers found it unpalatable, reminiscent of homeless

people in the city who wandered the streets clad in shreds of clothing and humanity. Rusty springs erupted from weeds telling of a past when beds were simple structures consisting of a horse-hair mattress slung over a saggy spring base. Relics from a more orderly past consisted of leaning fence-posts leering like ancient teeth half-heartedly containing a few bedraggled horses and goats that had lost interest in freedom. It all looked so sad that she wanted to be home within the ordered environment she had created. She disliked wide-open spaces, particularly those which offered no escape from wind, dirt, ravaging sun and disgusting insects. She wondered why she had agreed to come to this grubby backwater in the first place.

She swallowed more pills to counter the gnawing emptiness and continued walking. Amongst the debris she noticed something white. After scrambling through overgrown wild oats she realised it was a pram. An old fashioned wicker pram just like the one she'd bought in the antique shop all those years ago, lovingly restoring it to its original splendour. A half covered rose bush tore at her new navy tights. The pain barely registered as a bloody trail trickled into her ankle boot.

It was quite a different pain which overwhelmed. It undid her. She was found roaming, nude and chanting in a tongue no-one could decipher. Back home she was sedated and hospitalised. Many months later she went home but no-one, including her husband, had any recollection of this person. Nor she of them.

The unkempt woman with the pram lurches on. Her eyes stare ahead and she continues the muttered conversation she is having with herself. A jogger stops to inquire as to whether she needs assistance. The young woman's attempts are without success and when she smiles into the pram she is shocked by what she sees. No gurgling baby. Just piles of dirty rags, plastic bags, old shoes, empty boxes, rotting fruit, greasy paper plates. And a stench rising in shimmering waves.

The jogger remains motionless as she watches. This woman whose face is vacant. Whose gait is uneven. Whose gaze is fixed. This woman who keeps moving, neither seeing nor hearing. This woman with no edges. Searching... for something.

"The outcomes of serious abuse, assaults and deprivation suffered by care leavers has had a complex, serious and negative impact on their lives. At the most extreme, care leavers have lived a half-life tainted by alienation, isolation and degradation."

Forgotten Australians, 2004, p. 147

The Melting Tree

At times they share the melting branches with dozens of creaking cockatoos.

Today, however, Georgie, her sister and brother have it to themselves and are arranged at varying heights according to age. Her sister is the highest; Georgie feels quite brave two metres off the ground and their brother is hidden somewhere between the two.

This giant remnant from settler days holds its secrets as firmly as it holds the ground beneath its polished leather leaves. Its aerial roots have fallen from branches for nearly two centuries, buttressing the massive canopy. Hidden from view is a system of subterranean roots whose tangled web creeps silently into territory far from the trunk. A surreal sculpture, this living organism connects different realms; the real, the imagined and the spaces between.

From their elevated platform they hear Billy's back door bang shut. He must have finished watering his tomato plants. The kids scramble down, grab their bikes and head for home.

'Where have you been? It's nearly dinner time.' Their mother has had a long day. The thinness of her voice reminds them of this.

'Remember to put those bikes away properly. Well? Where have you been all this time?'

Her sister and brother barge past Georgie in their rush to get through the door first. Sometimes she wishes she were the oldest. But, she is only six and still pretty wobbly on her bike. Which is why she is always last home. She trips in her rush to dump the pink two-wheeler on the pile outside the back door. It's her sister who responds to their mother's fractious enquiries. Her voice is thick with the importance of information.

'Down near old Billy's place.'

'Who is Billy?'

'He lives down the next street. The house near the melting tree.'

'What on earth are you talking about? A melting tree?'

‘The branches are all melted down to the ground. Like it’s made of goo.’

Their mother scoffs at such an idea.

Georgie’s sister continues to inform. ‘Sometimes we sit on his veranda. He’s got a jar of lollies for kids.’

Their mother’s lips are a piece of string as she absorbs this news.

‘I don’t think you should be on his veranda. And, I certainly don’t think accepting lollies from a stranger is appropriate.’

‘Aw, Mum. That’s not fair. Billy’s not even a stranger. He just likes to talk to kids sometimes.’

The subject is closed as they are pointed towards the bathroom.

They trudge off whinging and shoving. A fight over who pushes the soap dispenser erupts before they finally troop back and settle on the bar stools. Their mother serves their meal.

‘I don’t like fat spaghetti,’ whines Georgie.

The Moreton Bay Fig was planted outside the first schoolhouse sometime in the 1830s. It has shaded kids for generations and served as a look-out for the community. You could spot a bush fire or peer into back yards from its grey-brown branches. Its trunk, smoothed by time, has invited adventurers and tempted the imaginative to dream. And for those less courageous it has provided a cool place of reflection. Underground, silent tendrils have connected different lives and this web now embraces the house where Georgie lives, the mysterious swamp where Georgie dreams, and Billy’s old weatherboard house where Georgie chats as she munches on forbidden lollies. There is a tangle of fibres creeping under Georgie’s back fence although Steve and Alice know nothing of the fig roots linking them to Billy and the swamp.

Once the children are settled for the night, Alice raises the subject which has been worrying her since dinner time.

‘Did I tell you that the kids were hanging around that old fellow Billy’s place today?’

‘Not that odd bloke who lives by himself in the old settler’s cottage?’

‘Yes. The house near the Moreton Bay Fig tree.’

‘Well, I suppose he seems harmless enough, but I’m not sure he’s quite right in the head.’

‘Harmless or not, he’s been giving them lollies, which I find quite disturbing. I’ve told them to keep away.’

Billy sips his cup of tea in the shade of the vast fig tree. Its branches extend over most of his yard sparing one sunny patch where he grows a few veggies. He loves the majestic tree and often shares his thoughts with this comforting living relic. He finds faces in the gnarly forms on the trunk and chats to them. No-one, except little Georgie, listens so patiently. The tree soaks up Billy’s secrets along with the moisture it stealthily garners from Billy’s veggie garden.

He exists quietly and simply enough by himself and enjoys chatting to passing children happily sharing his jar of lollies, even his favourite humbugs. Lollies are his only extravagance. The rest of his pension is carefully allocated for his living expenses by his sister Janet who visits once a month. He likes living in a house by himself much better than sharing with other needy people. The group-care houses he’s lived in before were busy all the time. The carers were always making him do things and sometimes he liked just doing nothing. When Janet had finally tracked him down he was already in his fifties. He couldn’t remember her very clearly. She was five and he was eight when they’d been sent to different Homes.

‘You like it here don’t you Billy? Do you talk to people sometimes?’

Janet speaks to his right side. He’s deaf in the left ear from the repeated bashings. How much other damage his already underwired brain had suffered would never be known.

‘Just the kids. Like Georgie. They play in the tree next door.’

‘Well, that’s good Billy. I’m glad.’

Georgie is his favourite visitor. She sits next to him on his old sofa and talks to him as though he were normal. She never laughs when he doesn’t know the answer to things

like, *Why don't silk worms eat lettuce leaves?* Or, *Why do cats have nine lives?* It doesn't matter to Georgie. She is happy to just wonder with Billy.

There are some kids who ride their bikes past his house and call him names.

'What are ya Billy? A spazzo or what?' as they skid their wheels in front of his yard and lob spit on his driveway.

They poke their tongues at him and are definitely not nice children. A few other little kids stop sometimes to get a lolly from his jar. He likes them but not the tongue pokers and spitters.

It's that time of the month and Janet has called in to check up on things.

'Has your little friend Georgie been to visit lately?'

'Nup. She must have forgot.'

Billy is used to his own company. He's used to watching from the edges.

A Moreton Bay Fig is also known as a strangler fig. It germinates in the top of another tree and as it enlarges it gradually strangles its host. It may grow to fifty metres with a canopy spread over the same distance. What is underground replicates the dimensions above. The roots of the melting tree crept into the swamp long ago. They tangle through and around the foundations of the paperbarks and into the sludgy water.

Since their mother's prohibitions, the three children have kept off Billy's veranda and are now engrossed in more exciting adventures around the stinking swamp. Once the overgrown track has been conquered, kids from all around are joining in the boggy explorations. High grass and water reeds create a dense jungle setting with unexpected stuff lurking in hidden places. Half buried in the murk they're discovering old bits of bikes and shopping trolleys. Each foray has revealed a new discovery. Some are seriously spooky. Like the skull of an animal with huge teeth grinning at them.

'It's a cow,' decides Jimmy, who is the oldest.

‘Tis not. Cows don’t have those kind of teeth,’ challenges Claire, who is going to be a vet.

‘Well what is it then, smarty pants?’

‘I reckon it’s a horse,’ she proclaims with some confidence. She goes horse riding once a week and is advanced enough to put the bridle on herself. The stubborn mouth which refused to open for her was barred by such teeth.

It’s finally agreed that it must be a horse when further muddy relics turn out to be a couple of horseshoes.

Georgie watches wide eyed during this episode. She loves horses and is amazed at the weird skull with its massive gaping eye sockets and those leering teeth. Where was the velvety muzzle she fondled when she fed carrots to the horse that grazed in the paddock near the school? And what about the beautiful soft eyes that gazed lovingly at her as she rummaged for the treats in her bag? This bony structure didn’t seem to have any relationship to that wondrous creature. Georgie dreams of having her own horse. It would be glossy and black and she would keep it in the backyard where she would ride it round and round. With her long hair billowing behind, she would gallop and gallop. Her fingers would twist in the black mane as they were transported to a world where she would ride horses and eat ice-cream all day. And she would be the oldest not the youngest in the family.

She returns from her reverie to the swamp, where the explorers have turned up an old television set with the screen smashed in and a microwave with the door hanging by one hinge. They start setting up their finds on a patch of raised ground. They name it The Spooky Castle. Off-cuts of four by two timber serves as a narrow and suitably precarious bridge across the murky moat.

The weeks march on and it is always a race to see who can get away from home first and resume residence at The Spooky Castle. The most senior members squabble for the position on the throne fashioned out of a battered shopping trolley with no wheels. But, if you are there first even a junior member can bask in the power of an elevated view of the swampy estate. Until your seat is usurped by the next older kid who turns up. Of the tribe of swamp dwellers Georgie is also the youngest.

Back at Georgie's house, Steve brings up the subject of Billy again.

'Are the kids keeping away from that old bloke? All these reports about paedophilia worry me.'

'They've been busy making cubbies down near the swamp, so they seem to have forgotten about him.'

Steve is thoughtful.

'I know how the media can drum up paranoia and it may well be that Billy is just a lonely old man. But you can never be sure about some people.'

Moreton Bay Figs can be destructive. Their roots can damage piping, invade sewerage systems, undermine foundations of buildings and vandalise the smooth surfaces of paving and roadways. Alternatively, these trees and their cousins can be a symbol of eternal life. The seemingly unending capacity for the roots to expand under the earth's surface gives rise to this mythology. And perhaps the roots also transmit secrets along their knotty fibres.

Something has alerted Georgie to a new possibility at The Spooky Castle on this Saturday morning. All the other kids are busy. Sporting events and shopping excursions have filled their timetables. Today she has no events and is at home by herself. Well, almost. Her mum is in the backyard mulching the vegetable garden and listening to relaxing music through her headphones. The idea of occupying the shopping trolley throne without any big kids is compelling and Georgie is drawn down the street and onto the hidden track. It's some time before her mum realises that she's not in the house. She dials Steve's number.

'Is Georgie with you?'

Steve reassures her. 'I'm sure she's not far away. I'll be home in ten minutes.'

They're not panicking yet as they ring friends and drive up and down the local streets.

‘She never goes off by herself,’ Alice keeps saying. ‘She knows not to do that.’

Georgie rubs her hand over the tree’s weird lumps and bulges as she passes on her way to the track. The branches creak and the cockatoos rasp. There is no sign of any other life as she crosses the drawbridge and clambers onto the rickety, regal structure. There aren’t too many rules in her household but Georgie knows that she isn’t to leave the yard without her older siblings. She won’t be too long and her mum probably won’t even miss her.

Or, she’ll really cop it when she gets home but it’s worth it. There’s no-one to boss her around. She surveys her realm with a sense of enormous satisfaction. Sunlight bounces off the water between the reeds, creating an illusion of transparency, which in reality doesn’t exist. On closer inspection, the oily, sluggish liquid bears little resemblance to water, yet in this light it becomes an ornamental lake on which white swans may settle at any moment. Framing her magic world are the twisted configurations of paperbarks, probably inhabited by elves and fairies, which she much prefers to the horrid banksia men she’s seen in Gran’s old picture book.

She confers with her doll Bette about how they might catch a swan and ride on its back.

‘We can make reins out of reeds, and it would be even better than riding a horse because we can fly in the sky,’ whispers Georgie.

In the recesses of her mind there is a growing suspicion that fairies and swans carrying children don’t really exist. However, she isn’t quite ready to dismiss them from her imaginary world.

The cockies continue to squeak and saw as the sun climbs higher. Georgie’s throne is still cool in the shadow of the vast, leafy umbrella. The birds have settled and tree remains silent and timeless. Time for Georgie also stands still. How long she has occupied this magic realm is unclear. When she hears sounds, alerting her to imposters, she casts around for a place to hide. The melting tree seems her only option but sneaking along the track to its base is hazardous. What if she meets the intruders on the track? She’ll be found out. She decides instead to wade through the swampy water. She can bypass most

of the track that way and the tall reeds will hide her from view. Then she can climb the tree and look down on whoever it is spoiling her glorious day.

She clutches Bette to her chest as she cautiously steps into the sludge. She is surprised by how cold it is. And how deep. The mushy bottom seems to go down and down. Tangles of weed and broken sticks grab at her.

It's the roots of the fig tree which finally hold her securely.

The police and volunteers search throughout the day. There is no sign of a little girl wearing a Dorothy Dinosaur T-shirt and orange shorts. Blond with blue eyes. Aged six. They visit the home of the old bloke Billy. Twice, just to be sure. He is quite teary because he really likes little Georgie. They search backyards, inside garden sheds, under culverts, the empty school-grounds, the surrounding scrub and around the Moreton Bay fig. They scan the area around the swamp but there is nothing to indicate that a little girl has been a queen on a throne. There is just an old shopping trolley and some abandoned junk. Water police are on their way. They will use divers to trawl through the water.

Just before dusk they find her. Slimy and lifeless, her small body is zipped into a bag.

While a family, which once numbered five but is now only four, packs up and wordlessly leaves town, Billy remains on the edges. No-one takes much notice of this strange and silent man. The lolly jar is no longer on the veranda and when he is not sharing life's mysteries with the faces on the Melting Tree, he spends time sitting on a log near The Spooky Castle. It's quiet now the kids have left. They've been forbidden by overwrought parents and their own bravado has evaporated. Even the Melting Tree is out of bounds, inhabited only by the roosting cockatoos settling like old floor joists into the night. Its roots continue their journey towards new places and new stories.

After a week or so, a doll floats to the surface of the turgid water. Old Billy finds it and sits it on his sideboard. The head lolls at an odd angle and the hair streaked with dried-out slime only partially covers the pink plastic scalp. The eyes no longer open and close. Although she stares without blinking, the doll listens patiently.

"Some are blessed with the experience of happy, fulfilling marriages due in large part to the fortune of finding loving, caring, patient and understanding partners."

Forgotten Australians, 2004, p. 159

An Ordinary Woman

A young lady

The face, reflected in the window of the trolley bus, is smudged with grubby finger marks. But even through these smears it is clear that it is a face in the process of collapse. Behind the functionally framed coke-bottle lenses, the eyes belonging to this face are awash and the pudgy, slightly spotty cheeks are sodden. The owner of this wretched visage is no longer Number 24. She is a 'young lady' with a real name. Janet Marshall. Knowledge of this transformation was delivered yesterday by Matron.

'Well, young lady. Your stay here is over. Here is a letter of introduction to the manager of the Leederville Laundry. You will be dropped off at the bus terminus at 8am in the morning. That will be all. Close the door after you.'

Bewildered by this abrupt alteration to the shape of her life, Janet had scrambled up the steps of the number 6 trolley bus clutching the battered cardboard case that contained both a relic from her past and the necessities for her future. A cotton brassiere and two pairs of cotton panties. Brown socks, green cotton pyjamas, one navy serge skirt, one white blouse, one navy woollen cardigan, a sanitary belt, two sanitary pads, a toothbrush, a comb and a tin of pristine Lakeland coloured pencils. The latter a gift from her father from so long ago. She's kept them tucked under her mattress for the intervening thirteen years. Just before leaving the Home that had been her home, she had slipped them into her suitcase. Now with the case jammed between her dimply knees, the shock of her expulsion into an unknown world overwhelms.

Eventually, the silent sobbing subsides. The envelope gripped in her clammy hands has come unstuck. She peeps inside afraid of admonishment. There is none. She is quite alone. There are no voices barking instructions or insults. No cruel hands delivering blows. Nothing. Just the whirr of the bus as it follows the overhead wires through the streets to her destination. Leederville Commercial Laundry, 16 Oxford Street, Leederville.

Another glimpse inside the envelope reveals the folded introductory letter, a two-dollar note and a creased slip of paper. Janet gingerly removes the slip and opens it out.

BIRTH IN THE STATE OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

CHILD	PARENTS	INFORMANT	WITNESS	REGISTRAR
10 th May 1949	Father Robert James Marshall 29 years Painter	Certified in writing by Robert James Marshall	Dr H. L .Cook	G.R. Hathway
Janet Elizabeth	Mother Mary Susan Brambles 29 years		A.M.Walsh	24 th May 1949
Female	Married 28 th September 1945	Residence 44 Tate Street, West Leederville.	S.Cummings	Perth

Time is frozen as Janet battles to decipher the writing. She's spent most of her childhood in the laundry so her reading skills are limited and she has never progressed to the nibs and inkwells required for mastering the flourishing script of this document. Yet eventually she recognises this scrap of paper as what must be the record of her birth. Proof of her very existence. Janet Elizabeth Marshall. She didn't even know she had a middle name. And proof of a real mother and father. Robert James and Mary Susan. Her birth date swims back into focus. There have been no birthdays all these years in the Home. No gifts, no cakes, no candles. She shakily returns the slip to the envelope and stares out through the grime into an alien universe.

Stranded on the concrete pathway, Janet also becomes rock. Her senses petrified. There are no sounds or smells or textures. She has found the wrought-iron gate with a number five painted on the curlicue frame. It matches the number scribbled on a scrap of paper by Mr Green, the manager of the laundry.

'The landlady is Mrs Kent,' he said. 'She runs a suitable boarding house for young ladies.'

Her glasses are coated with dried tears and greasy blotches so the world around her is a blurry fog as she stands and stands and stands willing the return of her imaginary world

and her sweet smelling Mummy. A special and secret place only she can enter. But through the haze Janet senses movement; at the end of the path the front door opens and a tiny woman in a mauve dress walks towards her. At least that's what Janet thinks she can see. It is when this silhouette speaks that Janet's vision begins to clear and she can hear again.

'Hello Janet. How lovely to meet you. I've been expecting you.'

The pastel shape, who is Mrs Kent, smiles, lifts up the suitcase, gently takes Janet's hand and leads her into her new home. With her own room. With a pink bed-cover. With a cake of lavender soap sitting on the pillow. With a chocolate wrapped in shiny paper as a little present. Because today is Janet's birthday.

'Mr Green telephoned me about a room and he noticed your birth date when he opened the envelope. Happy Birthday, Janet. I'll make a special sponge cake to celebrate at tea time.'

Soft arms embrace. Mrs Kent is a woman whose shape and smell is that of a mother despite never having had children of her own. The taut wires fastening Janet together begin to loosen.

This smiling woman doesn't have wings or a wand, but it is the beginning of something magic. From this moment, Mrs K (that's what she's affectionately called by her young ladies) believes in Janet until Janet begins to believe in herself. It is Mrs K who nurtures and loves, as Janet reconstructs broken bits of herself and goes bravely to work each morning at the Leederville Commercial Laundry.

Janet's bedroom door has a key. She locks her door and sits on her bed when she gets home from work. It's so quiet after the racket of the laundry. Mrs K is in the kitchen making tea and the other three boarders aren't home yet. She opens the secret door to her egg-shell blue world and talks to her mum. She tells her about work and about Mrs K. There are other things she tells her sometimes.

'Men aren't allowed in our boarding house, Mummy. I'm scared at night. I have nightmares. About Mr White. Grunting. The stink of sweat – and grog – and cigarettes. I wake up crying. I keep my eyes squeezed shut to block out his flabby guts and brown

teeth. I wish you were here, Mummy. Mrs White called me a dirty, filthy creature. They sent me back to the Home. I was so frightened . No-one said anything. Then the doctor pushed his long green gloves inside me and made me scream. I was only ten.'

Janet stares and stares at a spot on her bedroom wall and wonders what her mum and dad would look like now. She can hardly remember their faces. She was only five when she went to the Home. No-one had told her why she had to stay there. Or where Susie and Billy had gone.

'I didn't know that you never got better, Mummy. I can still remember the time when I had to go to Matron's office. She told me to sit down. Her voice was always crabby so when she started to talk in a soft voice, I knew something was wrong straight away. Then she said that Daddy was dead. He had been killed in an accident. She said she was sorry and that it was a tragedy. I remember that my mind and the vase of flowers on Matron's desk started to spin and make patterns in my head. Through the swirling colours my voice was very far away when I asked Matron where you were. She just told me not to be so silly. You were dead too. That's why I came to the Home. Then she told me to go back to my work and to shut the door behind me.'

Back in her bedroom the alarm clock ticks loudly. It's new – or nearly new. It's the first thing that Janet has ever bought. She found it in the Good Samaritan shop near her work. Before washing her face and hands for tea, Janet tells her mum about the young man at work who has been kind to her.

'His name is Reg. We sit on the lunch bench together. He's shy like me but he smiles at me which is more than anyone else ever does. They are all stuck-up and think Home kids are no good. He has jam sandwiches mainly but Mrs Kent makes me polony and tomato sauce most days. It's my favourite and Reg told me that it is his favourite as well. Yesterday we talked a bit more and I swapped my polony for his jam sandwich. I like Reg. He doesn't make me feel stupid. Or dirty. Or ugly.'

A friend

Reg and Janet are eating their sandwiches. Janet finds the familiarity of their brief and predictable communications comforting. There is a pattern to their daily exchange. Until one lunch-time when he bends towards her and whispers,

‘Someone told me that you are a Homie. Are you really?’

The wooden bench under Janet’s broad bottom turns to water and the world around her becomes soggy tissue-paper. The sounds and smells in the lunch-room vanish and her imaginary blue world comes hurtling back. The minutes bounce off the walls as Janet’s body remembers. She dashes to the bathroom and bits of polony and tomato sauce and white bread splash up the porcelain. Locked inside the toilet cubicle she whispers to her mum through the snot and tears.

‘I thought that Reg was a good person but maybe I can’t tell what kind people are really like. Some people said that Matron was a kind person but they didn’t see her belting the daylights out of those two girls who tried to run away. They didn’t hear the screams as she shoved them under the stairs and left them in the dark all night. And when they came back to the dormitory, they just kept crying ... and crying ... and crying. Even when their bruises faded and their cuts healed, they said that they were always scared and had broken bits banging inside their heads.’

The lunch siren goes and Janet splashes her face in the basin, rubs her glasses on the hem of her uniform and sneaks back to the ironing room. The afternoon unfolds around a girl who is nothing more than a terrified, dumb Home kid.

She tells Mrs K that she’s not well and doesn’t have any tea. Mrs K brings her a tray with a cup of tea and hot buttered toast. Janet sobs herself to sleep.

It takes all her courage to return to the laundry next morning urged on by the voice playing in her head. Her mother’s soothing voice telling her that she is really a good girl and that she loves her. A voice that reassures her that there are other nice people just like Mrs K and that she shouldn’t listen to the voices of nasty people from the past hissing that she is just a dirty little girl who smells of wee. Who tell her that her mother and father never loved her. That no-one would ever love her because she doesn’t deserve to be loved. Who hit her when she cries and can’t eat her cold porridge. Who shout as they hit her again and make her eat the vomit lumps sprayed all over the plate. Who snap and snarl as their eyes bore holes through her. Who twist her arms and ears to make her listen. Her mother’s comforting voice keeps telling her to forget about those people but Janet’s mind keeps remembering.

Reg is waiting on the lunch bench for her. She stares at the brown, lino floor so she doesn't have to look at him. Reg leans towards her and whispers, 'I'm a Homie too.'

Janet stops chewing and holds her breath. Eventually she darts a sideways glance at him. He is smiling at her. Not just with his mouth. His eyes look kind and they are smiling too.

So he tells her about the Home that he went to when he was four. He supposes that his mum and dad are dead and he doesn't know if he has any brothers or sisters. Janet keeps munching her sandwich while Reg remembers the beatings and the other awful stuff that he thought would kill him. He doesn't remember any kind people. But he didn't die so now he is going to make a go of things. He's saving up to buy a car.

The smiles exchanged between them become more regular.

A fiancée

It is more than a year since Janet started at the laundry. Reg is her friend but it is still a shock when he says,

'Why don't we go for a picnic at Kings Park on Sunday?'

The sky is streaked with fairy floss clouds as she waits for Reg at the bus stop. Her best dress mirrors the patches of blue above her and her seamless stockings slip smoothly into the white sling-back shoes. She looks lovely according to Mrs K. Reg is on time and he is wearing brown trousers and a checked shirt. He looks very smart. They smile hesitantly and board the bus.

They both have the jitters and don't have much to say as they find a spot near the pond and settle on the tartan rug that his land-lady has lent him. Mrs Kent has slipped two pieces of her jam sponge cake into a paper bag along with the sandwiches. Ham and gherkin. Something a bit special, Mrs K had said. Reg has a thermos of tea. They watch the ducks squabble over the sandwich crusts and laugh.

Going home, a face peers at Janet from the smeary bus window. It is the face of an ordinary young lady whose spots have subsided and whose eyes and mouth are smiling.

The picnic outings become a pattern. Perhaps once a month the two timid friends grow used to one another as they sit on a tartan rug overlooking a majestic river. There is laughter. A dog runs off with a man's hat. Ducks sneak scraps from the woollen rectangle that is their shared world. Unexpected showers of rain make them run for shelter shrieking like children. The always cordial and gentle partings as they leave each other at the bus-stop.

This routine is safe. There are no unexpected occurrences. The same bus-stop, the same destination, the same sandwiches, the same tartan rug.

Until Reg dares to suggest something different and Janet's chest stands still. In trepidation.

'Why don't we go to the Saturday afternoon pictures?' he ventures.

The bus-stop remains the same. And the destination proves a success as Janet and Reg grow accustomed to this new adventure. At interval the theatre becomes a circus as kids pelt each other with Jaffas. Reg buys two ice-creams in cardboard buckets each with a little wooden spoon. They sit in the same seats and have a good laugh at *Tom and Jerry* and scream along with all the kids as *Tarzan* swings from branches in the jungle. Their hands remain in their own laps.

Yet, they both seem to sense a tenuous love as fragile as eggshells. They are so careful with each other. They cradle this precious thing and never interrogate. They glance and smile often, each reassuring the other that this blossoming is real.

The faces reflected side by side in the bus window are at peace. Hands, resting on the seat, brush against each other as the bus lurches. Neither recoils. Over many journeys these hands, once sticky and sweaty, mould to one another becoming soft and warm. Touching becomes safe. Slowly, wounds of the spirit and soul are sealed. Reg and Janet are quiet people. They experiment with kindness. It suits them. They learn together about respect, about trust. They lock away the memories of neglect, of cruelty, of abuse. In each other they find a good person. They hold hands at the pictures like ordinary people.

Another year passes with outings to the park and the pictures. Added to the repertoire are Saturday night pictures where all-time favourites are screened. Sometimes they see the same film over and over. Tonight they are watching Janet's favourite, *My Fair Lady*, for the third time. She loves Audrey Hepburn and imagines learning to talk just like her. At the end they stand up with everyone to sing 'God Save the Queen'. The Queen, as always, looks beautiful astride her horse smiling out at her subjects.

Going home on the bus their hands are cemented together. Reg walks her to her gate and gives her a little peck on the cheek. Janet's glasses and their noses are obstacles and their lips don't touch. She feels embarrassed but goes off to bed with a warm fuzzy feeling.

The velvet seats and smoky darkness sooth. Janet and Reg love the intimate space and vicarious thrills. *West Side Story* dazzles with its music, dance and colour. The poignancy of its ending is not lost to either of them. They are both stunned when Tony is killed and he and Maria can never marry. It is their first viewing and Janet's face is streaming as the lights come up. Reg is swiping at his eyes with a handkerchief. On the way home in the bus they don't say much. Reg is holding Janet's hand tighter than usual. He squeezes it and whispers,

'Why don't we get married?'

Janet can't be sure of what she has heard.

'Us? Get married?'

Reg grips her hand and nods.

Janet's hand clutches hard. Her throat is parched but she finally finds the words.

'Yes. I would like that.'

Janet is a fiancée.

A bride

In the privacy of her pink bedroom, Janet continues her conversations with her mum. Tonight she pulls the suitcase from under her bed, carefully lifting out each item and arranging it on the chenille bedspread. She often shares this secret ritual with her mother.

Her glory-box. *Glory-box: a lady's storage box containing items for married life.* Janet has never imagined she would be the proud owner of such a receptacle. It reminds her that she is a real fiancée.

At first it was a shoebox but now everything is neatly packed into a suitcase, at the bottom of which is the box of Lakeland pencils, still with perfectly sharpened coloured points. The period of engagement has passed the twelve month mark and Janet has been adding to the collection with her modest savings. Lots of little things for the house like pillow-slips, tea-towels, tablecloths and doilies.

‘Do you like the lace edging on the doilies?’ she asks her mum.

Janet's fingers stray as usual to the sensuous satin fabric of her bridal underwear. All matching – a cream satin underwire brassiere, panties and full petticoat. And all edged with cream lace. The pure white of the patent shoes, satin gloves and frothy veil dazzle as they lay on the pink bed. And the apricot, nylon nightdress with shoe-string straps still evokes an intake of breath as Janet imagines herself gliding towards the marital bed.

‘Mrs K is making my wedding dress,’ she explains. ‘Here's the material. It's crepe. Mrs K said that it would drape really well. The style is the Empire line.’

Janet gazes at the photo on the Simplicity dress pattern. The glamour of being a bride. She is still astonished that it is Janet Elizabeth Marshall who will become such a vision of splendour.

‘I'm so lucky to have Mrs K to make my dress. And that isn't all. She said that she'll make a two tiered wedding cake as well. With Royal icing roses. And wedding figurines on the top. She is the kindest person I know. It's almost like having a real family. As though you and Daddy were here again.’

At present the figurines for the wedding cake are waiting patiently on the top of the fridge. Janet is transfixed by their miniature perfection. The handsome smiling face of the groom and the delicate beauty of the bride with her rose-bud lips. Lips that remind her of her doll Belinda. She still misses her childhood confidante and wonders if she is still in the playroom at the Home. A room Janet was allowed to visit once when she was about eight. A room for important visitors to inspect. Her bruises had faded enough to be one of the chosen and dressed in a pretty frock with shiny shoes and frilly socks she had spied

Belinda on a shelf too high to reach. Although the perfect rose-bud lips still smiled at her just like the tiny ceramic bride's do now.

'It's hard to imagine that Reg and I will be just like those little figures. Sometimes they make me wonder about what you and Daddy must have looked like on your wedding day.'

Janet has no remnants of her childhood. No photos, no mementos. She is luckier than most. She has a birth certificate.

The pelting rain and blustery wind has been replaced by a still breezy but warm Spring. Janet is standing in her cotton bra and half-slip with a podgy stomach bulging between the two. If she stops breathing, she can pull it in while Mrs K slips the partly completed dress over her head. Janet loves the pattern. A scooped neckline and flared elbow length sleeves. To her, the crepe folds look like a waterfall splashing down from the bust line. Mrs K tells her how much it suits her figure.

'You will look ravishing on the big day,' she says.

Ravishing. No-one has ever called her that before.

The dress is finished with only the hem to be pinned. Janet wobbles as she stands on the kitchen table looking into the big mirror propped against the cupboards. She barely recognises herself. She is transformed from a chubby, plain girl with glasses to a princess whose life stretches ahead promising happiness ever after.

Her wedding day. The girls in the household are excited and Mrs K is in a fluster. The morning is perfect. Not a cloud in the bluest of blue skies. The butterflies in Janet's stomach refuse to settle even after two cups of strong tea and two slices of toast and marmalade. The other girls use the bathroom early so that it is available for her to luxuriate in a bath perfumed with special bath salts. She washes her hair and Mrs Kent sets it with big rollers then bundles her into the back yard. Clad in her pink flannel dressing gown and with a pile of *Women's Weeklies* Janet plays at being a lady while her

hair dries in the mild Spring sunshine. For morning tea, Mrs Kent brings out a cup of Nescafe and a slice of her fabulous jam sponge.

‘Here we are my dear. Need to keep your strength up, don’t we?’

Mrs K also has her hair up in rollers and a net. And she is almost as excited as she had been on her own wedding day, she says.

‘Thanks Mrs K. You’re really spoiling me today!’

‘And so I should.’

Mrs K disappears through the fly-wire while Janet floats. Looking down, she can see a figure in pink as the centrepiece in a red square. Huge sausage shapes balance on the figure’s head flashing copper and gold under a white sky. Crimson balls beside her sway gently in a slight breeze and bright yellow and orange jewels dazzle as they move around on a grey carpet dotted with rocks of jade. An ordinary space transformed to a place over the rainbow. And the figure at its centre is her. It is the chickens’ squawking under the oleander bush that return her to the concrete square in a suburban yard with a bed of slightly wilted tomato plants beside her. Her happiness fills her to bursting.

Then fear nudges its way into her soul. What if she doesn’t deserve Reg and Mrs Kent and a white wedding? What if it all just disappears like her mum and dad and sister and brother? Flashes of doubt snap at the edges of her mind. Would Reg know that she isn’t a virgin? Would she have to return to that secret locked-away place deep inside her to explain the awfulness of Mr White? Her stomach churns as fragments of those memories disable her. She is frozen in the unravelling wicker chair. Smells and sounds and sensations from that little bedroom belonging to the kind couple who fostered her, render her eyes and ears useless to the real world. Shame bubbles from some deep part of her smothering her joy.

It takes Mrs Kent considerable effort to rouse Janet from this unexplained torpor, get her inside, splash her face with cold water and transform her into a radiant bride. Which she does, and Janet (without her glasses) looks more beautiful than she could ever have imagined. And Reg, resplendent in his hired penguin suit agrees as he holds his breath and looks up the aisle. Janet can’t actually see clearly who she is marrying but she is

certain of the cloak of security and commitment this special person throws over her troubled soul. She feels lucky. She feels loved. She feels safe.

The minutes and hours and years merge into decades. Janet glances at the hall mirror as she passes. She sees a smiling, resilient and extraordinary woman.

“This report is not just concerned with the past, it is very much about the present and it informs the future of our nation.”

Forgotten Australians, 2004, p. xvii

Australia Fair

At first, Amber experienced a sense of disbelief when she heard Bev's story. Later, she would recognise how these revelations changed her. But the sense that this dark history may replay itself with her as an actor was something she could never have predicted.

'I just don't get it! How could all that shit possibly have happened without someone doing something about it?'

Amber's face is puce with incredulity. It clashes terribly with her blue hair. The spikey bits are electric. So is the aura around her.

Kaz knows well enough not to challenge when she's in this mode. But he does show interest.

'Yeah, well. I guess maybe no-one knew too much in those days. There was no Facebook and stuff remember.'

It doesn't work.

'Jesus Kaz. I fucking totally understand that there was no social media. But this wasn't Dickens' fucking London I'm talking about. This was only about fifty years ago right here in Perth.'

'Well, I wasn't fucking there, was I? So how would I know about this shit?'

There's only so much he can take of her outrage. He's studying engineering. Facts and figures sooth him. There are neat calculations, which come to satisfactory conclusions. The Humanities leave him floundering. Everyone has an idea and no-one tells you which one is right.

'Anyway, I'm pissing off to the Olds' place. I'll hang out there for a while and chill out.'

He has piles of dirty clothes and his mum always cooks great meals when he goes home. Amber's a good chick but he just needs time out.

'Whatever.'

She loads the juicer and flicks the switch. Any further discussion is obliterated by the screaming gadget churning out beetroot, kale, chia seeds and spinach.

‘Catch ya soon, Babe.’

Kaz gives her a hopeful grin then he’s out the door with a green garbage bag full of his stuff. He might get a Macca’s on the way.

Amber takes her tumbler of wholesome goodness back to the computer where she dips into report after report about an issue that she’s just beginning to uncover: stories about ‘forgotten Australians’. First of all Bev next door, then by chance she’d come across a collection of stories about the same thing. Systematic and endemic child abuse in institutional care. Like a sniffer dog she is now hunting down historical sources. What she is finding takes her breath away. Disbelief, anger and overwhelming sadness surge through her whole being in alternating gushes. Like a river in flood, transporting flotsam and depositing debris along the banks, garbage gathers around her edges but her life goes on despite this unsettling new knowledge. Her shape is somehow altered and she is no longer able to unknow this disturbing past.

This weather is freezing her bum off. Her days and nights are filled with part-time work and uni assignments. Kaz hasn’t come back. She’s not sure whether that’s good or bad. She misses the sex and a warm body in bed but maybe that’s all. She’s not really in the mood for his smelly socks and sci-fi movies anymore. Kaz is kind of sweet but rather an empty vessel. He’s functional and non-aggressive. He can be funny and he’s good in bed. Good attributes, she recognises, but maybe she needs more. She’s moved on, with an increasingly cringing response to the me, me, me focus of her peer group. Maybe, she thinks somewhat tentatively, this is the blossoming of maturity. Or, is she just an uptight sex-starved bitch? She begins unfriending some of her Facebook contacts. The constant bullshit about nail technicians and eyelash extensions is beginning to bore her senseless. God. Maybe worse, she’s becoming a nerd. She can’t get her mind off the stuff about kids in welfare organisations. Her once simple world view is skewed. The grid of meaning established during her safe and comfortable childhood has been dismantled. She’s always known that kids in developing countries suffered abuse and neglect but she had been reared to believe that in ethical, wealthy countries like her own these practices, along with

slavery, had been abandoned centuries ago. So how come the bullshit stories about how wonderful and democratic and fair everything was in good old Australia have never been shot down? She's mightily pissed off to be honest. Like finding out there's no tooth fairy and that her tiny, pearly baby teeth have been chucked in the bin by her mum. Same kind of fairy story. Everyone believing that good, Christian souls looked after these kids when exactly the opposite was happening. They were beating the crap out of them.

'How twisted and vicious do you have to be to ignore sick kids and just let them die. Or beat the daylights out of them for spilling a drink. Or make them eat their own vomit. Or rape them over and over again,' she screams down the phone to her friend Storm.

Storm has never heard of the 'forgotten Australians'.

'Fuck! That's just what I'm trying to tell you. No-one seems to know about this stuff.'

'Fuck you too Amber. You're so preachy and full of shit. You need to chill out.'

But Amber is in no mood to chill out. Getting wasted has lost its appeal. And Storm is a fucking philistine. She's definitely going to unfriend her too. The more she searches the more she unearths the lying, the culture of silence, the justifications that children needed the innate wickedness beaten out of them. As Amber sniffs and searches, the facts pile up around her in untidy stacks. Hunched over her computer she recoils at the complacency, at the selective blindness, at the cauterised emotions of those hundreds or maybe thousands of complicit adults. She reads that more than half a million children were institutionalised during the mid-twentieth century. That required a lot of so-called 'carers'. She finds out that these institutions have gradually been closed down and she ponders, what happens now? What with all the drugs and domestic violence, the media is constantly reporting individual horror stories of child neglect or abuse. Amber usually ignores these stories. Probably just an odd incident that gets blown out of proportion, but now she wonders. Are there still cover-ups about these unsavoury aspects of a seemingly civilised society?

The newly shaped Amber is headed in a new direction. The abstract theories of art and literature are losing their intrigue and a more pragmatic young woman is emerging into a world not quite as bright and shiny as it once was. She wants to be part of a society that helps children develop into responsible, functioning adults. She wants to make a difference by becoming a teacher. After her Arts degree, that's what she'll do.

Her own childhood was pretty mundane although she has never been in doubt about being totally cherished and always safe. Her parents divorced and she did the back and forth between houses along with her younger brother. There were some benefits to be had and it didn't take Amber and her brother Troy long to work out how to get double birthday and Christmas presents. Especially from their dad who played the role of weekend 'good' parent.

'Awww, Dad. Mum won't let us have take-away. Can we have hot chips tonight?'

He always gave in. It was a cinch and she and Troy have a laugh about it now. Now Troy's a policeman and really loves the job stationed in a small country town. She did a few years of waitressing and travelling before starting uni. There've been a few longish relationships. She'd thought Kaz might last but it seems to have fizzled out. She's got plenty of time to make choices about partners and whether or not to have children. Or, maybe she could choose to have children on her own. Times have changed from the days when a single mother was branded morally contaminating and had her baby forcibly adopted.

'Morally fucking contaminating! What the hell is that supposed to mean? And, what a joke that is when you find out what really went on behind the locked gates of those children's homes.' Amber's voice is rising and she is scowling at the café patrons who seem to be less angry about life.

She's having a coffee with her girlfriend Zoe and after only five minutes she is proselytising again. Her friends are fed up. Where's the fun girl with crazy blue hair?

She charges on despite Zoe's blank face.

'Hardly any of those kids were even orphans. Just being illegitimate or having divorced parents was enough to be locked up. Jesus, Zoe. Half of us would have been in Homes in those days.'

'Yeah. Well I guess people thought they were doing the right thing.' Zoe is only half listening.

‘The ‘right’ thing! I so didn’t expect you to make excuses for the totally criminal stuff that happened to those kids.’

That’s it. She’s as bad as Storm. Amber is blocking her on Facebook.

Zoe needs to get to her nail appointment. She’s going to a hen’s party tomorrow night.

Amber has taken it for granted that she is a feminist. But what does that mean? Men don’t hold doors open for her, or walk on the outside of a pavement. She goes where she likes without a male chaperone. She’ll choose her own partner if and when she wishes. Marriage will not be her only pathway into an intimate relationship. She may choose to marry or not, she’s never given the issue much thought. Of course, she believes she is equal to any man. Does that make her a feminist or is she just reaping the benefits of those earlier bra-burning outraged women?

She’s aware of the way things once were for women. Sad. Terribly sad when she thinks about it more. She understands that gender roles assigned women to marriage and child bearing whether they liked it or not. That they just had to get married because there was obviously something wrong with them if they didn’t. That they certainly didn’t wait around until their thirties, by which time they were on the shelf – possibly damaged goods or not quite right in the head. She knows all that stuff but things have changed.

Thank God, because she can’t imagine herself so controlled by social mores. Like being a prisoner. How women stayed sane at all is a miracle. Although there were those who didn’t, she realised, women who gradually disintegrated as their lives shattered around them. No-one to rescue them from loveless, lonely or violent marriages. ‘Till death do us part’ was a life sentence and even the law could do little, as evidence for divorce was almost impossible for the average woman to substantiate. It makes Amber shudder to think about their powerlessness and the whole patriarchal control thing. She hadn’t really realised until she started researching about the kids in homes, that whatever men did behind the closed doors of the family home was sacrosanct. And, that professionals like doctors were happy to maintain the status quo by prescribing sedatives for the emotionally weak and sometimes over-excitable housewives. A woman could be black and blue but it wouldn’t be noticed. Banging into cupboards and brooms and doors was what women did. They were physically unbalanced as well as unsteady in the mind.

What she's also found out is that if families didn't fit the perfect model of a sober breadwinner as father, a smiling and well-groomed homemaker as mother accompanied by several, but not too many, well-disciplined, exceptionally clean children, they were deemed deficient. These families did not provide the right influences. An upright society demanded drastic intervention and an institution was the answer.

Amber's initial fury about past injustices has given way to a weary despondency. She begins to acknowledge the dogged determination and tenacity required by those early feminists. By comparison, she feels pathetically soft. It takes the sniff of summer to reinvigorate her. The sun and salty waves are her soul food. Between lectures she bolts to the beach. It's here that her mind shuffles all the information she's crammed in, as she lies drying in the sun.

Kaz wanders up the sand and plonks himself down on the edge of her towel.

'Hi Amber. Wanna coffee?'

'No thanks. Got uni.'

'Oh yeah. How's it going?'

'Okay. I'm doing a Dip Ed this year.'

Kaz gazes out at the waves. He's tanned, good looking, buffed and Amber feels a momentary sense of lust. Then loss. The moment doesn't last.

'Always thought you'd make a good teacher. You're pretty bossy.'

She stands up and drags the towel from under him.

'Gotta go. I've got assignments to finish. See you, Kaz.'

Amber feels renewed by the surf and the brightness of summer. She dyes her hair post-box red to match a gorgeous vintage sun-frock she found at a market. Red and white satin polka dots with a black satin trim. The full skirt shows off her tanned legs and makes her feel sexy again. She's working on an oral presentation for her next class. It's for her

History of Education unit. She looks back at some of her research on children's homes and finds an interesting link between institutionalised children and lack of education. She knows that education was mandatory from late in the nineteenth century and wants to find out how these children had been denied the same educational opportunities as others. As she trawls through reports and papers, she discovers the common factor: children were exploited as child labour. What kind of work did kids have to do, she wonders? She discovers that by the age of six or seven most children had to work part or sometimes the whole of every day. All domestic duties and the chores required to run Homes, which were often huge old mansions, were assigned to the children. Outside farm, garden, building and maintenance work was for boys and all inside work was for girls. Scrubbing and polishing floors, dusting, washing windows, lighting furnaces and coppers, collecting coke, setting tables, laundry work, cleaning toilets and bathrooms, kitchen work and caring for toddlers were just some of the endless indoor jobs for girls. Many Homes ran commercial laundries, which catered for hotels, hospitals, and schools. This unpaid labour force proved lucrative for many of the institutions. No wonder there was no time for schooling. Amber tries to remember what jobs she had to do when she was six. Make her bed, which meant pulling the doona up to the pillow, and feed the dog, which required scooping a cup of biscuits into his bowl. That was as tough as it got until she was a teenager and was expected to help her mum with the dishes and hanging out the washing. Some of her friends did absolutely nothing and still think cooking is heating up a takeaway in the microwave.

She got a great mark for the presentation.

Very well researched and competently delivered. Well done, Amber. You obviously feel passionate about your subject.

Amber had unearthed a quote by Aristotle that she had included in her presentation: *Give me the child until he is 7 and I will show you the man.* She had been astonished that long before the advent of modern psychology, he had recognised those early years as being critical in shaping an adult. She was equally astounded that two millennia later those in charge of children's welfare and protection seemed to have little interest in such ideas. Her classmates had gasped as she'd quoted a former NSW Deputy Premier and Minister for Education from 1956: *Deprived children, whether in their own home or out of them,*

are a source of social infection as real and serious as are carriers of diphtheria and typhoid.

These findings fuelled her determination to become a committed and compassionate teacher. Her first love was early childhood education. She'd always related easily to young children and loved their uncensored and quite unique view of the world. *Why have you got blue worms on your legs?* her four-year old cousin had enquired loudly of Amber's mum at a family picnic. The shorts never came out again after that.

The desire to become an excellent teacher who can make a difference to young children's lives drives her. She graduates with excellent results.

'Mum. I've been offered a pre-primary class in Busselton. I'm stoked. It's a new school. I'll be close to the beach. I can get a dog.'

'You deserve it, Amber. You've worked so hard and I know that you will be a fabulous teacher.' Her mum is congested with pride.

Busselton, the class, the school, the staff: they are all great. Her mum was right. Amber is a fabulous teacher and delights in sharing the wonder and excitement of new discoveries and experiences with her young charges. They literally soak up everything around them and think she is the fountain of all knowledge.

'Miss Young said that the moon is not made of cheese. It's dust,' Brayden informs his mum as she greets him at the door.

She is in awe of their trust and curiosity and knows she's playing an important part in making their world special. She believes she *is* making a difference even for these lucky kids with committed parents and beautiful surroundings. There is little want in this middle-class community. Amber hopes that for these children the main threat is over-indulgence. Which may result in some unpleasant traits but not life-long dysfunction.

Weekends are sometimes wild and always fun. The surf and the beach are as good as it gets. Her shoulder length hair is now honey blond. She settles down with a tradie called Jake and they plan a future together. They buy an old groupie house in Margaret River and start renovating. The jarrah floorboards are stunning once they are polished and Jake's workmanship is brilliant. They move in after only six months.

'You must be the couple who have bought old Billy's house. Come over for a drink and meet a few neighbours,' says the young woman from a few doors down.

A gathering of young couples like them, some with small children. Amber feels an immediate sense of connection.

'Poor old Billy. He had a mental disability. He was in a Home as a kid and was abused I believe. Disgusting the kinds of things that went on. Thank God we don't have places like that anymore. Another chardonnay, Amber?'

Back in her classroom, she notes that Emily is missing. For more than two weeks. Must be hand-foot and mouth or something, concludes Amber. Yet when Emily returns there is no mention of what has kept her at home. Neither Emily nor her mum say anything. And later when Amber talks to her, Emily's face is a mask, her eyes blank. She mostly plays in the home corner. She wets her pants. She becomes rigid as Amber tries to change them. Amber mentions these changes to Emily's mum Stacey who is always in a hurry. An attractive woman who wears sunglasses and a cap most of the time.

'Things are kind of hectic at our place at the moment. Emily might be overtired,' is all she has to offer.

The school term rolls on. Emily is the same. Then she is absent for three weeks. It's her Grandmother who drops her off and asks to have a word with Amber in private.

'Emily is staying with me for the time being. There have been some family problems,' she says.

Emily has become attached to the doll in the dress-up corner and is fretful if another child is playing with it. Today, Amber observes Emily in the sandpit. She has brought the doll outside with her and is stuffing sand into its mouth.

‘You musn’t tell. It’s a secret,’ she admonishes.

Amber’s breath tears at her throat.

Her mind floats away from her body.

Part II: Stories Beyond the Gates

Chapter One: Once Upon a Time

In order to reflect on how and why these stories evolved, this chapter comprises two sections. It speaks firstly to the creative process and secondly to the creative product. The process section explores how literary influences, short story as genre and genre as social action inform the creative process. The product section reflects on how style, character, setting, theme, tone, point of view and voice have been employed in the artefact.

Process

The beginning

The stories which make up my collection *No-one Was Watching* originated from an earlier short story entitled *number 24* (2014). This was a tale about a protagonist named Janet, who as a five-year-old child was sent to live in a children's institution after the death of her mother. Like all the other children who entered this austere environment, she was 'processed'. Stripped of her clothes, scrubbed, deloused (which included shearing her plaits at the scalp) and vaginally inspected, a process Joanna Penglase names as 'state-sanctioned rape' (Penglase, 2007, p. 241), she was then dressed in a shapeless calico smock and marched to a dormitory containing fifty iron beds. Her doll Belinda was taken from her and she was assigned a number. She was no longer Janet: she was number 24.

Drawn from this original story are a range of characters who tell their own version of the events that surrounded the practice of institutionalised care for children whose families were deemed unable to provide a physically, socially, or morally appropriate environment. These stories reveal a social history little known to many Australians. Such history has been obscured from view creating the expression 'carpet kids' as another of the various terms describing the Australian born, mostly Anglo-Saxon children who were institutionalised during the mid-twentieth century. The testimonies of these men and women, also known as the 'forgotten Australians', reveal resilience and courage, but also revealed are the legacies of damage, marginalisation and silence still to be found under the layers of contemporary society. In this investigation, such legacies relate to a specific cohort of survivors of child welfare institutions, but these underlying themes continue to resonate for many other individuals deemed by society to be outsiders due to race, gender, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual identity and physical or mental illness. For many the

scars of life's deep wounds remain close to the surface as they subsist on the edges of a society they have grown to mistrust. Many of the individuals represented in this project continue to cling to the margins of a society that betrayed them as children.

Literary influences

Reflecting on how contemporary writers have re-imagined historical events as creative fiction has led me to research many works, particularly those that deal with the same underlying theme that is present in my works – that of trauma. I have been inspired by the works of a number of writers tackling topics such as the Holocaust, incest, and child abuse, who demonstrate that skilled authors are able to create evocative and powerful narratives which have the capacity to reveal more than journalistic realism. Irish writer John Boyne's *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas* (2006) demonstrates understated artistry as it relates a tale that continues to confront: that of the Holocaust. However, this story told by a nine-year-old boy does not preach and is hauntingly affecting whilst eschewing mawkishness and sensationalism. His more recent work *The History of Loneliness* (2014) speaks of the shameful revelations about systemic child abuse within the Irish Catholic Church. Spoken from the perspective of a dedicated and non-predatory priest, it eventually raises questions about this good man's complacent and ultimately complicit position. The complex relationships between victims, perpetrators, and witnesses are a constant motif within my stories and Boyne's closing sentence particularly resonates for me: "And the final irony was that it had taken a convicted paedophile to show me that in my silence, I was just as guilty as the rest of them" (Boyne, 2014, p. 380).

Much celebrated Australian author Kate Grenville remains one of my most valued creative writing models. Two of her novels, *Lillian's Story* and *Dark Places*, recount the same story from two different perspectives: that of the father and that of the daughter. Each novel tells of Lillian's rape by her father Albion. They are set in the nineteenth-century and although there are no historical figures or specific events re-imagined it is the brilliant treatment of a violation as heinous as incest which draws me to these works. *Lillian's Story* was first published in 1985. Told in the first person voice of Lillian it chronicles her life as a child, a young lady and a woman. The rape by her father signals a spiral into madness in which Lillian remains until the end of her life. Nearly ten years later Grenville wrote what she regarded as the other half of the story. It inhabits the dark inner world of Lillian's father, Albion Gidley Singer, a nineteenth century man "with a

splendid head and mouth that would never weaken ...[who] has always been a gentleman, and in addition he has been a son, a husband and a father” (Grenville, 2002, p. 1). Entitled *Dark Places* (2002), it unravels the complexity of the protagonist’s character who, as Grenville says, is “something more complex than evil: he is to some extent at least, a product of his world, and in many ways his world is our world too” (*Weekend Australian*, April 26-27, 2008, pp. 8-9). As a writer, I aspire to balance the lightness and darkness of my characters’ lives, and Grenville’s extraordinary capacity to capture not just a one-dimensional monster but the fully rounded character who was Albion Gidley Singer is writing at its finest. It demonstrates the nuance and balance required of a writer when exposing conflicting elements embedded in characters’ psyches.

Perhaps one of the most provocative Australian authors whose works continue to polarise opinion is Helen Garner. As reviewer Bernadette Brennan comments, many readers “rail against the ways in which she inserts herself into textual dramas of pain and loss. Where some readers applaud her candour, others see a kind of ruthless egotism” (*Weekend Australian Magazine*, March 25-26, 2017, p. 31). Garner tackles taboo topics and has always been a boundary-crosser with respect to what is considered fiction and nonfiction. Mostly her books recount actual events regardless of their classification, and interestingly her book, *This House of Grief* (2014), is declared both ‘nonfiction’ and a ‘story’. It traverses the territory of trauma at its most harrowing: the actual case of a father charged with three counts of murder for the drowning of his three young sons, a consequence of his marriage break-down. I am one of those who feel discomfort at her angry presence within many of her works. Her moral outrage and tendency to sermonise leave me little space to reflect and arrive at my own conclusions. Yet, after reading *This House of Grief*, I conclude that Garner treats this work differently and although present throughout the text she is cautious about expressing opinions around the complex nature of culpability, responsibility and motivation. Questions are posed rather than answers provided with respect to human behaviour, justice and redemption. Of particular relevance to my enquiry are her comments on the vagaries of memory: “memory is not a simple accessible file whose contents remain undisturbed from one inspection to the next. Memory is an endless, lifelong process, fluid, active and mysterious” (Garner, 2016, p. 106). She also alludes to the narrativity of recounting the past when she speaks of a witness account: her “story had become a recital, with the rhetorical figures and grace

notes of a tale polished by many tellings ... No narrative can remain pure” (Garner, 2016, p. 223).

Many other works continue to inform and inspire my creative writing including Australian author Zana Fraillon’s tale entitled *No Stars to Wish On* (2014). Although it could be viewed as a novel for young readers, its subject matter resonates powerfully for all age groups. Based on the same experiences of the ‘forgotten Australians’ as those which inform my creative stories, Fraillon cleverly crafts her story from the perspective of a young boy who is incarcerated in an institution and who clings doggedly to the belief that it is all a big mistake:

Here’s the real joke: I’m not who they think I am. They’ve brought me here because they think I’m Number 49, but I’m not. I’m not an Orphan or an Unwanted Child. And that’s who this place is for. It says so above the door when you first come in. (Fraillon, 2014, p. 3)

Fiction writing as meaning-making

My choice of fiction as a vehicle to re-imagine such a sombre history invites the question as to why nonfiction is not considered a valid or more powerful alternative. Why not let victims’ narratives such as auto/biography, memoir or the first person accounts of testimonials speak for themselves? Or, why not write a scholarly nonfiction account such as those by academics Joanna Penglase, *Orphans of the Living* (2007) and Nell Musgrove, *The Scars Remain* (2013)? Such accounts presume a strictly realist narrative grounded in empiricist epistemology. In other words, the view that human knowledge comes primarily from sensory experience and is thus based in empirical evidence rather than ideas. These nonfiction accounts are significant and compelling works, but my desire to engage with a form of fiction which challenges the dominant mode of realism mirrors the desires of Patrick White whose quest was to create “fresh forms [made] out of the rocks and sticks of words” (White, 1990, p. 16). This enterprise provides the opportunity to employ words in less literal ways and embrace language that may be more figurative and consequently less realistic at times. My research revealed little evidence of fictional accounts around these historical events and my commitment to fiction was driven by the desire to provide another conduit into these little known stories. This passion is fuelled by the same sentiments as researchers Barone and Eisner who claim that fiction has the capacity to challenge societal norms by engaging in other than a literal rendering of lived

experiences (2012, p. 101). The story collection consists of sixteen stories through which connecting themes and characters appear. As an epigraph to each story, I have inserted direct quotes, many from the *Forgotten Australians* report, and some from other nonfiction sources. These potent inclusions are often first person accounts from the testimonies of care leavers and are emblematic of the raw data that informs the creative stories.

Just how fiction may be subjected to the criterion of fact or invention continues to concern both philosophers and literary critics. A nuanced definition of fiction later in the thesis reveals an implicit agreement between reader and author, whereby the reader subscribes to a “willing suspension of disbelief” (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 129). A more detailed discussion around binaries such as fact/invention, truth/falsity, and real/imagined can be found in Chapter Three where insights into the hazy boundaries separating history and literature are explored. Whether truth and falsity are conceived as literal, moral or imaginative, it is the uncertainty that prevails around such conversations that motivates and, to some extent, validates my choice of fiction as a way of looking into the past. I consider this process as a purposeful recasting of experiences rather than a literal rendering of worldly phenomena.

Choosing to create a collection of short fiction rather than the continuous narrative evident in many novels with a linear structure was a conscious decision in order to allow space for many different voices to be heard through many different characters. The Bakhtinian notions of Carnival, where authority is subverted and the multiple voices of society create a polyphonic narrative questioning a unified truth, is an underlying motif throughout the thesis (Selden & Widdowson, 1993, p. 40). It is hoped that my stories are able to function in this way and can break through the prevailing and mostly monologic narratives which recounted the circumstances of children in care. Such authoritative narratives reminded respectable families that they must protect themselves against polluting influences. By removing children from contaminating families, the objective was to prevent further moral decline and an inevitable development into the feckless, weak and lazy adults their parents were perceived to be. The 1956 declaration by F.J. Heffron, NSW Deputy Premier and Minister for Education exemplifies this position: “[d]eprived children, whether in their own homes or out of them, are a source of social infection as real and serious as are carriers of diphtheria and typhoid” (Penglase, 2007, p. 219). Children were continually reminded of their own and their family’s inferiority and

their good fortune at having been saved from a life of crime and depravity. These official discourses are present in the creative work but in order to also hear unofficial versions of this history, disjointed short narratives presented in a non-linear fashion offer “a variety of voices appearing and disappearing, interrupting one another then falling silent” (Wilkshire, 2000, p. 891). A sense of dislocation is evoked, thus mimicking the fragmented lives of many of the characters as the stories overlap to create a dialogic rather than monologic narrative.

Accessing history

For many contemporary arts consumers, a view into the past can be via creative mediums such as literature, theatre, music, art and film. Literary works based on historical people or events are popular, as exemplified by Australian writer Thomas Keneally’s *Schindler’s Ark* (1982) and internationally acclaimed British writer Hilary Mantel’s trilogy *Wolf Hall* (2009), *Bring up the Bodies* (2012; with *The Mirror and the Light* due in 2019). As Jenny Stewart notes, there are essentially two types of fictional stories set in the past. The first follows the life of a real historical figure such as Keneally’s Oskar Schindler or Thomas Cromwell in Hilary Mantel’s celebrated works. The second type uses imagined characters but places them in credible historical settings. My story collection belongs to this category, as does Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* (2005) and it should be noted that Jenny Stewart raises an alarm regarding the pit-falls of this second type of fictional representation as she critiques Grenville’s work. She remarks that historians Inga Clendinnen and Mark McKenna were critical of what they pointed out was anachronistic use of detail, particularly regarding the massacre, which was a pivotal part of Grenville’s story (Stewart 2014, p. 2). In the view of these history scholars, Grenville had altered the meaning of the real historical events.

The stories that make up the collection for this thesis traverse similarly tricky territory although as author I believe that I have mitigated against such criticism by avoiding any identifying detail specific to institutions, events or persons. Instead, the details have been garnered from collective accounts rather than individual incidents. Notwithstanding, both of Stewart’s categories of fictional stories are open to debate with regard to the appropriation of past people and events: all works can only ever be a re-imagined historical account despite rigorous research. Stewart further unpicks the differences between historians and fictional writers when she comments, “writers of

history run the risk of ... writing about the past through the lens of the present ... historians try as far as possible to avoid doing this” (2014, p. 5). In contrast, she claims, writers of fiction need not be so constrained and observes that “characters in novels are always hybrids, partly based on real people, but often stitched-together attributes of a number of different originals” (2014, p. 5). My fiction is certainly constructed in such a way. The issue of seeing the past through a modern lens is an important consideration in my work. I have endeavoured to capture attitudes, understandings and values of a past time through the dialogue and actions of my characters and at times these ideological frames differ vastly from modern views. However, the work as a whole is refracted through, and speaks to, contemporary sensibilities.

Another element that shapes fictional work is the history of the writer, which in the opinion of David Huddle, is implicit. This autobiographical material infiltrates fictional work and he says that “characters, as far as I’m concerned, never take on lives that are wholly separate from the author ...” (Huddle, 1991, p. 17). Huddle believes stories often begin based on some kind of personal experience but as the work develops “memory of the truth of what happened [is] ... clouded by many alterations of it” (1991, p. 16). I admit to such infiltration where many of the settings, every-day regimes, vernacular of the period and character traits have been drawn from my own real life experiences.

Evolution of the short story

Short narrative has prevailed since ancient times in such forms as myth, legend, fable, parable, exemplum, allegory and folktale. Earliest cultures relied on these stories to explain how the world began and how the gods and humans occupied that world. Over the centuries, these narratives provided answers and the certainty of belief. As the forces of science, industry, capitalism and democracy swept away feudal order, “centuries-old beliefs were challenged, institutions radically altered or destroyed and the ... [stories] that supported the old order lost much of their power to explain and comfort” (Stone, Packer & Hoopes, 1983, p. 2). Short narrative remains a popular way of telling stories but modern fiction no longer provides certainty: instead, it has become a medium for enquiry. The genre of short fiction as a vehicle for challenging social and cultural discourse has been a powerful tool for writers, particularly in modern times, and my creative project aims to continue this tradition. Philosophical, cultural and personal issues continue to

drive the need to explore with words and contemporary writers engage with many of the same dilemmas concerning the human condition as writers from the past.

Recently published short works have provided inspiration as well as indicating that the short story as genre may be experiencing a renaissance. Australian authors such as Tim Winton (*The Turning*, 2004), Richard Rossiter (*Arrhythmia*, 2009), Amanda Curtin (*Inherited*, 2011), Robert Drewe (*The Rip*, 2008), Christos Tsiolkas (*Merciless Gods*, 2014) and Susan Midalia (*A History of the Beanbag*, 2007; *An Unknown Sky*, 2012; *Feet to the Stars*, 2015) have all enjoyed recent publishing success in the short story genre. Both Winton's *The Turning* and Rossiter's *Arrhythmia* are of particular interest as they consist of stories linked by theme and character in much the same way as my collection. International engagement with the short story genre is exemplified by Canadian writer, Alice Munro, whose body of work consists only of short fiction, and who was awarded the 2013 Nobel Prize for Literature. Also acclaimed for short fiction is American Elizabeth Strout, who received the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for a collection of character-linked short stories.

Defining the genre of short story is problematic. Most commentators agree that it is a unique literary form and not just a truncated version of the novel. Edgar Allan Poe (1809 - 1849), who defined this form as 'the prose tale', "is sometimes called the originator of the short story as an established *genre*, [and] was at any rate its first critical theorist" (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 365). The modern short story seeks to present rather than preach and it depends on impressions that deliver their meaning without waste. As a brief work of prose fiction, the short story can be differentiated from the anecdote which relates to a single incident but does not "organise the action, thought and dialogue of its characters into the artful pattern of a plot [that is] directed towards a particular effect on the audience" (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 365). This notion of plot as an essential aspect of the short story form is explored later in the chapter where it is suggested that characters or themes may fulfil this function instead. As most readers would agree, the short story form must be succinct without being shallow, which means settings and background are often implied rather than drawn in detail. Characters are often revealed rather than developed and the reader must infer rather than be provided with resolution and closure. Short stories may also employ the device of epiphany, where the story comes to a climax and a deeper significance reveals itself to the protagonist and/or reader. Thus by creating a single effect rather than a merely transitory one, such

stories often reveal little but suggest more. Such an effect is seen when the young school teacher experiences an epiphany at the end of the story 'Australia Fair'. As Amber observes Emily stuffing sand into a doll's mouth, she overhears the child's imaginary conversation:

You musn't tell. It's a secret, she admonishes.

Amber's breath tears at her throat.

Her mind floats away from her body. (Australia Fair, 2018, p. 152)

Both Amber and the reader recognise a deeper significance but the story reveals no more.

Devices such as epiphany as well as the economy of the short story form proved an ideal match with the new format of magazines. Beginning in the 1880s and 1890s, it was these magazines which provided profitable outlets for short story writers and such publications invited literary experimentation, advancing many of the features associated with modernism. Magazines became an active force in refashioning the genre of short story and a marriage between modernism and experimental short fiction seemed evident, although the genre of short story has never been assigned any definite role in accounts of modernism. American author and Pulitzer Prize winner Eudora Welty, whose earliest work appeared in the 1930s, believed that "a short-story writer can write anything ... Variety is, has been, and no doubt will remain endless in possibilities" (cited in Shaw, 1983, p. 1). Welty's sentiment is very much aligned to the modernist tradition that invites freedoms from the conventions of narrative style and which often "shock the sensibilities of the conventional reader [by] challenging the societal norms and pieties of dominant bourgeois culture" (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 227). Disruption of narrative structures via juxtapositions of words and ideas, as well as transgressions of accepted punctuation, grammar and syntax were part of the early twentieth century modernist manifesto calling for a rejection of popular culture, a critique of bourgeois ideology and an abandonment of inherited models of plot and character "in favour of a style marked by indirection, indeterminacy, suggestion, subtlety and ambiguity which were considered more suitable for rendering the subjective inner experiences and external conflicts of individual characters" (Sacido, 2012, p. 3). As Victoria Glendinning says of short story writer Elizabeth Bowen, she "suggests – and suggests only, never describes - the fantasies, fears

and manipulations that underlie social behaviour” (Glendinning, 1977, p. 2). Bowen also declared the short story exempt from the what she called the novel’s conclusiveness, and Jorge Sacido references her comment when he says that “by forsaking the novel’s ‘too often forced and false closure’ the short story comes nearer to ‘aesthetic and moral truth’” (Sacido, 2012, p. 2).

Postmodernism, a term applied to much literature and art after World War II, may involve a continuation of many of the counter-traditional modernist experiments, sometimes carried to extremes. However, it may also seeks to break away from many modernist forms and challenges the elitism of modernist ‘high art’, perceiving instead ‘mass culture’ as art. Despite the diversity of postmodernists’ positions, fundamentally they emphasise a critique of traditional conceptions of meaning, knowledge, truth, value and the ‘self’ or subject. Thus a postmodernist world view acknowledges and values multiple perspectives of reality and truth. Such a view enunciates the problems associated with theories that attempt to master and codify structures as complex as language. As Culler explains, “they recognised the impossibility of describing a complete or coherent signifying system ... [as] systems of signification do not exist independently of the subject, as objects of knowledge, but are structures for subjects, who are entangled with forces that produce them” (Culler, 2011, p. 139). This is a position that advances the notion of language as an active agent in the construction of meaning and knowledge where “every mode of discourse ‘constructs’ or constitutes, the very facts or truths of knowledge that it claims to discover” (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 309).

My project engages with ideas of both modernism and postmodernism as it grapples with perceptions of truth, reality, knowledge, good and evil via the arguably less-than-objective vehicle of language. The work revisits prevailing values of mid-twentieth century Australia that tended to lean towards claims of absolute truth and moral goodness although there may have been some for whom moral relativism seemed more modern and democratic; in other words for something to be morally right it must be approved by society. The research process, however, is refracted through a twenty-first century lens and thus more aligned to the deconstruction of conventional modes of thought and language. Therefore, like many postmodernists, this project sets out to reveal the manifestations of dominant ideologies as well as the constructions and relationships of power within societies. From this perspective, texts can no longer be assumed to be transparent: they do not necessarily say what the writer intended to say, or they may

disguise what cannot be said overtly. Sacido cites Dominic Head when he describes the postmodern short story saying that it problematizes representation “by placing greater emphasis on literary artifice (metafiction in particular). While modernism has the ‘capacity to *re-present* the social world’ by exploiting artifice up to a certain limit, postmodernism crosses this limit and ‘may be seen to have precluded judgement [on the social world] altogether’” (Sacido, 2012, p. 19).

This postmodern concern with representation emphasises the link between postmodernism and poststructuralism. In fact these terms are often used interchangeably and it is evident that the postmodern developments in art and literature often reflect poststructural theories. A claim shared by diverse types of poststructural thought is that due to the “absence of an absolute and atemporal standard or foundation or centre, all asserted truths and values and cultural norms are relevant to the predominant culture at a given time and place” (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 313). This reflects a moral relativism although more uncompromising poststructuralists may position themselves as moral anti-realists claiming no moral values exist at all. As researcher, I tend towards a more individualist subjectivism believing that there are as many scales of truth, good and evil as there are individuals in the world. Whether arguing postmodernism as a continuation of or a radical breaking away from modernism, it remains that the short story is hospitable to literary innovation. Modernist elements such as inference, epiphany, symbolism, lack of resolution, fractured syntax and lack of plot can still be found in much contemporary short fiction. Now postmodernist traits of genre blurring, anti-mimesis, metafiction, intertextuality and fabulation (fusions of the everyday, the fantastic, the mythical or the nightmarish) have also become part of the mix. Elusiveness and ambiguity remain elements of the short story genre and these features contribute to a subversive function whether philosophical, political or cultural.

Many of the characteristics, attributed to both modernism and postmodernism, inform my writing practice. Qualities of ambiguity and open-endedness are employed in an attempt to create texts, that are non-didactic and invite questions, rather than provide answers. The stories engage with a mix of modernist and postmodernist elements, as this fusion of everyday realism and the fantastic illustrates:

Janet floats ... huge sausage shapes balance ... Crimson balls beside her
sway gently in a slight breeze and bright yellow and orange jewels dazzle

as they move around on a grey carpet dotted with rocks of jade. An ordinary space transformed to a place over the rainbow ... It was the chickens' squawking under the oleander bush that return her to the concrete square in a suburban yard with a bed of slightly wilted tomato plants beside her. (An Ordinary Woman, 2018, p. 140)

At times there are transgressions of conventional syntax and grammar. Interior monologues are used to provide fragments of thought as in this example in the form of an epistolary narrative:

You just kept at me about how these poor little kiddies needed a real home and we had one with a spare bedroom and you could do with company and you'd heard at church that you could foster these kiddies if you were a good Christian family and of course we were because you went to church every week and it was pretty obvious that the house was clean and tidy because the vicar came for afternoon tea once a month and it was clear that I kept the front lawn in good order...That's why Janet came to live with us. A bloody mistake if ever there was one. (No-one Was Watching, 2018, p. 99)

Symbolism is a literary characteristic of modernism, and it is evidenced throughout the collection with the recurring symbol of the doll. There is further discussion about the function of symbolism later in this chapter but in this example there is an obvious disruption to the conventional meanings a doll may signify. As well as innocence, beauty, fragility and loyalty, a doll can also represent the silence and powerlessness of children. However, in the story 'Witness' the doll is assigned agency as she becomes an omniscient narrator:

... my memory is quite remarkable. This may be of interest to those who believe the brain is the repository for all experiences, because my porcelain head is quite empty. Or you may be an animist and believe that despite my lack of a reasoning centre, I possess consciousness that allows me to move between the realms of the real and the imagined as I tell you about what happened all those years ago. (Witness, 2018, p. 41)

As suggested, the postmodern practice of resisting generic classification provides the opportunity to blend literary genres, often resulting in texts that combine elements of

biography, autobiography, memoir and fiction. Freeing writers from the constricting templates of traditional or established forms is now a more common practice and the artefact for this project may evoke uncertainty around genre classification. Opportunities to engage with the magic of language often push against realism itself. The opening prologue, narrated by a dead child, exemplifies this freeing from conventional form:

Now here I am in an unmarked grave behind the laundry. I was only three years old but my sensibilities blossomed to full maturity before my dehydrated body had grown cold. This all-seeing, all-knowing capacity situates me as an omniscient narrator. I am able to pluck words from the past, present and future. The difficulty for those still living is finding words. Words from their past that those in the present can hear and those in the future will remember. (Prologue, 2018, p. 16)

Genre: Intention and effect

My story collection belongs to the broad category of literary fiction but such a classification suggests an implicit author/reader contract. The urge to classify appears to be fundamental and allocating certain discourses to distinctive classes or genres exemplifies such an imperative. Conventional forms such as report, eulogy, article, essay, poem, novel, short story, memoir, history, autobiography, biography are just some of the many forms. All of these genres seek to connect with an audience, doing so in differing ways. As Carolyn Miller explains, conventional forms have evolved because they arise in situations with similar structures and elements. She argues that comparable conditions occur, prompting comparable responses and that speakers and writers learn from precedent what genre is appropriate and what effects their actions are likely to have on people. This nexus can be viewed as rhetorical where there exists a “point of connection between intention and effect, [and thus becomes] an aspect of social action” (Miller, 1984, p. 153).

Debate about what constitutes genre continues to provide a profusion of claims. Notions of genre have been evident since the writings of Plato and Aristotle, with the three major classifications of poetry, prose and drama prevailing into modern times. Although there have been periods when various critics have sought to subordinate the role of genre, its importance has been more recently revived. As Abrams and Harpham note, genre can be conceived as a “set of constitutive conventions and codes, altering from age to age, but shared by a kind of implicit contract between the writer and reader” (2012, p.

149). Thus a set of expectations is generated which function to make the work intelligible “by relating it to the world as defined and ordered by codes in the prevailing culture” (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 150). Abrams and Harpham also remind us that modern publication practices exemplify what seems to be indispensable in literary discourse, generic distinctions announced with titles of works. This practice would seem to flag ‘intention and effect’ by alerting readers to a writer/reader contract before they engage with the work. With respect to fictional works based on history, there may also be disclaimers making statements such as: ‘although based on real events this is a work of fiction and any resemblance to actual persons is entirely coincidental’. Sophie Cunningham (2004) challenges this trend, as she discusses the dangers of setting out to prove what is fact and what is fiction when embarking on any writing from life. She warns that, “if a writer becomes defensive and tries to map the intricacies of how her fiction works, she is accepting simplistic distinctions between fiction and nonfiction that undermine the way her ... [stories] will be read” (Cunningham, 2004, p. 45).

Many subgenres have been created in an effort to describe fiction that is based on biographical, historical or contemporary facts. Names like fictional biography, historical novel, nonfiction novel, fictional history, and documentary fiction abound. Another, known as literary docu-memoir, has recently been added to this list: a form employed by Jo Parnell (2014) in her PhD dissertation about the ‘forgotten Australians’. It is a subgenre that appears to be defined more in relation to methodology as it involves the creative nonfiction writer interviewing and recording individuals’ life experiences, thus providing the material for literary production. It claims to “bring out a deeper level of meaning in the speech and the reflections of ordinary people” (Parnell, 2014, p. 87). This reliance on recorded interviews resonates with ethnographic rather than arts-based methodological approach. As my own creative work does not draw on such ethnographic methodology it does not fit this classification or perhaps any of the others suggested above. A postmodern genre of the historical novel was christened “historiographic metafiction” by Linda Hutcheon (1988) and it is this term that comes closest in describing what my stories are attempting. It is a genre that is “deeply involved in telling and rewriting history ... [as it] often challenges hegemonic discourses by re-contextualising them and offering alternative versions” (Nunning, 2004, p. 360). Such a term captures the kaleidoscopic qualities of recollecting the past as the many layers are revealed and variously interpreted through a contemporary lens. In Hutcheon’s words, “historiographic

metafiction espouses a postmodern ideology of plurality and recognition of difference...there is no sense of cultural universality” (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 114).

Returning to Carolyn Miller’s discussion of genre where she argues that “a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centred not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish” (1984, p. 151), Hutcheon’s form of metafiction appears capable of enacting such a promise by providing alternative versions of history. Although Miller’s discussion is positioned in rhetorical theory, it is of literary significance when considering the argument this thesis pursues: that fiction may function as an agent for social change. She postulates that, “a genre becomes a complex of formal and substantive features that create a particular effect in a given situation” (Miller, 1984, p. 153). In this way she believes genre becomes more than a formal entity; it becomes pragmatic, fully rhetorical and thus able to prompt social action (1984, p. 153). Whether my creative text is identified as fact or fiction, short story or even fragmented novel, it is the intention and effect that is of ultimate importance. In the spaces created by my imaginative writing new understandings may be glimpsed, changes in ways of thinking may be considered and changes in social behaviours may be enacted.

Multiple versions of history

An interesting phenomenon known as the Rashomon Effect is discussed by Robert Anderson with particular reference to his own field, communication studies. Originating from a 1950s Japanese film, he describes how it has provided an explanatory paradigm for complexity that has moved to a number of other intellectual fields such as psychology, anthropology, sociology and history. In its simplest interpretation, it is about the differences in perspective found in multiple accounts of a single event (Anderson, 2016, p. 250). Both the artefact and the exegesis of this research thesis investigate this same notion as they explore the intersection between history and fiction, arriving at a similar conclusion that there are many versions of past events. The film *Rashomon* employs three voices to relate the story based around a central event, the murder of a samurai. Each of these interpretations of the same event is coherent and plausible. What Anderson finds of interest is the inability to disqualify any particular version of the truth. In this project, the many voices audible in recent witness testimonials disrupt past official versions of daily life in child welfare institutions across Australia during the mid-twentieth century, yet the circumstances of those times made the official accounts

credible. Capturing the perspective of that era are the words of F.H. Hawkins, NSW Minister for Child Welfare in 1956:

[T]housands of excellent citizens, in many varied organisations, are doing outstanding work without thought of payment for the benefit of the community ... in the knowledge that everything that they do to make better citizens of the less fortunate of our children is a valuable contribution towards the improvement of our society and our democratic and Christian way of life. (cited in Penglase, 2007, p. 155)

This rescue narrative of children cherished and cared for by exemplary Christian souls was a plausible version of events received by the public. There was little reason to doubt the words of distinguished figures like Mr F.H. Hawkins, and what also reinforced this narrative was what Joanna Penglase believes was the widespread credibility of eugenics – “the equation of ‘poor stock’ with social ‘inadequacy’ and intellectual weakness” (Penglase, 2007, p. 105).

Welfare policy was predicated on an ideology of benevolent charity yet “there was a stark contrast between stated policy and how children were actually treated” (Murray & Rock, 2005, p. 1). That disconnect was re-enacted over and over again regardless of the common belief that these institutions were staffed by selfless, benevolent people and that children were fortunate and should not complain (Murray & Rock, 2005, p. 11). These children were positioned as a threat to the social order, therefore their status was low. Their voices as well as those of their contaminating families went unheard. The mounting body of testimony from surviving care leavers undermines this hegemony, and the multiple perspectives provided by many voices within the story collection demonstrate this disruption as they challenge the plausibility of such official accounts. Various versions of events are provided by a range of characters as they reveal the complex and diverse ways of experiencing, knowing and remembering which shape individuals as well as societies. Although this polyphony of voices does not set out to provide a single, congruent account, each voice tells his/her own truth and combines to create a larger jigsaw of the many pieces. It is this assemblage of fragments that reveals the central thread: the long-term consequences of childhood trauma.

In their book *Is History Fiction?* (2010), historians Ann Curthoys and John Docker also allude to the Rashomon Effect. As they point out, in contemporary times the

media and the public in general expect historians to know the truth about the past. When these experts seem to disagree about the many versions of history, lay audiences are dismayed and confused. Which versions are true or are they all plausible? Questions are raised about how history should be written and whether historians can tell the truth about the past: are their interpretations closer to fiction than fact? Poststructuralism and postmodernism have radically questioned Western historical discourse and come close to denying the value of history altogether. Despite such critique, the past continues to be described as history, although one important question remains: “are histories shaped by narrative conventions, so that their meaning derives from their form rather than the past itself?” (Curthoys & Docker, 2010, p. 11).

Narratologists maintain the conversations around the ubiquity of narrative and its function as a basic vehicle for human knowledge. Increasingly these discussions include the notion that narrative itself is an active force in the construction of reality, both past and present. In other words, it is posited that the narrative form may not be a neutral framework. Such an assertion is conceded by history scholars Curthoys and Docker who declare that “the search for historical truth brings with it not a rejection but rather a greater awareness of the cultural specificity ... a self-conscious recognition of the fictive elements in historical writing ... strengthens, not weakens, the search for truth” (2010, p. 16). This position echoes that of Portelli whose work on oral history is discussed later in this thesis. He also saw invention and elaboration embedded in stories relating to past events as not only unavoidable but desirable. In his view they revealed different and often important meanings or truths. The recollections of childhood experiences of care leavers by care leavers reveal many truths excluded from the official documents of the day. The purpose of this project is to employ both the real and the imagined to create something new that is ethically and emotionally ‘truthful’ knowledge.

Product

Setting

“Nothing”, says Elizabeth Bowen, “can happen nowhere” (cited in Stone et al., 1983, p. 18), but the brevity and compression of the short story requires the setting be rendered “swiftly, sparsely or impressionistically” (Stone et al., 1983, p. 18). Although care leavers’ experiences of institutional care took place throughout urban and regional Australia, my collective re-presentation is set in and around Perth. The imagined Home

that Janet inhabited is not an exact description of any particular institution but it places Janet *somewhere*. It depicts an imposing structure situated on the edge of the city, a common practice when establishing residential orphanages or homes for ‘unwanted’ children. Keeping the prying eyes of the public out was a strategy that aided and abetted the lack of accountability evident throughout the child welfare system at this time. As described in *The Forgotten Australians* report, “one particular feature of institutions was their isolation. They were isolated in the community as buildings and grounds were either hidden behind high fences and gates or placed at a distance from towns and other dwellings” (2004, p. 130). Establishing distance from families both emotionally and physically was a regular practice that seriously limited visiting opportunities. Most parents had too few resources to negotiate the long journeys required for visits, and even when accomplished, they could be refused the right to see their child because of some reported misdemeanour: “Access visits by parents or grandparents were often denied due to apparently subjective decisions of department officers and as a form of punishment for a child’s behaviour or their parents falling behind in fee payments” (McLucas, 2004, p. 105). This practice of isolation is captured in the story ‘For the Good of the Kiddies’, which tells of Janet’s father, helplessly separated from his children.

One story is set as early as the 1920s, most occur in the 1940s, `50s and `60s, and a few take place in the twenty-first century. The mid-twentieth century settings of a working class family-home, a hospital, a school, a charity Christmas party, and a boarding house are all scenes from my own childhood memories. Family memorabilia in the form of photos, letters and documents provide details of typical furnishings, clothing and possessions as well as the activities and mores belonging to this period. The physical spaces occupied by a typical 1950s family remain vivid in my own memory, as do the climate, the daily activities and colloquial speech of the time. Everyday life for many families was mundane and routine: social life and leisure activities were very limited. Children were seldom enlightened with respect to the mysteries of the adult world, emotions were kept under control and accordingly, speech was peppered with clichés and euphemisms. Such censorship was, of course, ‘for the good of the kiddies’. Moving as far back in time as the 1920s, I have drawn on elements of my grandfather’s life, including his letters home as a WW1 soldier and the phrenology report measuring his character and predicting his future career pathway. Stories set in contemporary times, several in the south-western town of Margaret River, also draw from my own experiences as a teacher and regional resident. Crafting connections between the real and the imagined continue to

challenge writers of fiction and it is hoped that my stories have accomplished the task of creating a world of verisimilitude in which the characters reside.

Plot

The plots of traditional forms of fiction use discernible exposition, complication, rising action, climax, falling action and denouement. Seeking an answer to the question “how is this story going to turn out?” propels such stories forward. The chief character in this type of plot is the protagonist, and his/her passage through life often replicates that of the archetypal hero journey. In this paradigm, the hero/heroine passes through three main stages: separation/departure, initiation and eventual return, although there may be many steps within each stage. In its simplest form these stages follow the lineal progression of the beginning, middle and end of a story (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 293-297). Such simple rendering may prove satisfying for some and in the opening ‘Prologue’, Susie alludes to such neatly contained telling:

It would provide a sense of cohesion to otherwise dislocated tales. I even thought it might make a wonderful fairy story. I would unmask villains. Rescue victims. Create a unified plot with points of tension, moments of conflict and close with a satisfying resolution. A simple rendering full of hope and redemption. (Prologue, 2018, p. 16)

However, just as the character Susie concludes, plot is not life and not all stories adhere to plot conventions. Many writers of prose fiction “have deliberately designed their works to frustrate the expectations of chronological order, coherence, reliable narration, and resolution” by eschewing traditional plot structures entirely (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 297). This creative project is about people who have experienced lives full of unpredictable, uncontrollable and often catastrophic circumstances and events. Their lives and the narratives they have constructed in an effort to chronicle their pasts consist of fragmented moments and pieces. Such lives lurch in every direction and cannot be captured by the classical plot structure espoused by Aristotle who saw plot as unity of action, where the writer’s arrangement of events creates a complete and ordered structure of actions directed towards an intended effect (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 295). Thus my stories are character rather than plot driven, employing impressions, images, sketches and snapshots in an endeavour to capture troubling and sometimes unutterable experiences. Yet, one plot element that might be recognised over the whole collection is

Janet's hero journey; beginning with separation from family and security, an initiation comprising what appear to be insurmountable obstacles, and finally a return to hope and a new life with Reg. It may also be evident that this character shapes her own narrative within these traditional conventions, seeing Mrs K as her magic helper and Reg as her saviour.

Theme

As Stone, Packer and Hoopes explain, once a reader has experienced the pleasure, pain, excitement or perplexity of a story, they are "left with a residue, a distillation that we call a *theme*" (Stone et al., 1983, p. 22). Northrop Frye points out that when a reader asks, "what is the point of this story?" they are questioning the idea or theme of the work (Frye, 1990, p. 52). Themes often emerge in the act of writing and I, like many other writers, have experienced this phenomenon. However, as an opening to each story there is a quotation from a relevant factual report which does identify a major theme developed within the story. There is also an over-arching theme which connects the stories: that of the enduring and often generational legacy of trauma. The term legacy can be defined as a gift by will or bequest; anything handed down by an ancestor or predecessor; or a consequence. It is the last of these meanings that mostly resonates within the stories: the creative project is largely a response to the *consequences* of disempowering and inhumane treatment of children separated from family members, often for their entire childhood. It is particularly about the legacy of psychological and physical damage we now understand as trauma.

In the story 'Australia Fair', Amber quotes Aristotle, who long before the advent of psychology recognised that a young child's experiences shaped the ensuing adult. This understanding has been reinforced by contemporary psychological theory and is largely accepted today as irrefutable. And yet, even in contemporary times, damage continues to be inflicted on the most vulnerable of society's members, resulting in damaged adults. Care leaver Ryszard Szablicki emphasises that a child should never have to defend itself and cites Nelson Mandela when commenting on society's responsibilities towards children: "a civilised society is judged by how it treats its children" (Szablicki, 2010, p. 77). Permanent psychological damage was the outcome for many of those institutionalised as children and despite variations in the types of care provided, "the overwhelming response as to treatment ... even among those that made positive comments, was the lack of love, affection and nurturing ... [provided for] young children at critical times during their development" (McLucas, 2004, p. xv).

Each of the characters in the collection bear some form of legacy which directly or indirectly touches the lives of others. The stories speak from many positions and are not only victims' accounts. The recurring character of Mr Victor White is represented as a battered son, as a damaged returned WW II soldier and as an older imprisoned paedophile. The legacy of his past has moulded this man just as his father before him carried the legacy of WW I trauma. Matron is shaped by a legacy of loss and grief which embitters her to the point of cruelty. Each of the characters deals with shadows from the past in different ways exposing facets of the human condition that may lie dormant in any one of us. These blemished individuals struggle to create a narrative that is their life, continually editing this life-story in an effort to find some kind of redemption.

A number of sub-themes may also be traced throughout the work. They include feelings of loss, fear, shame, isolation, guilt, and grief. For many care leavers on-going brutality as well as the absence of security and affection resulted in such life-long consequences. For children who lived in care, experiences of adult behaviour seldom demonstrated examples of how to love, care, protect, or nurture. Thus, a cycle of dysfunction was programmed to be repeated. Forming trusting and intimate relationships has proved impossible for many care survivors and escape via substance abuse has been common, mental illness endemic, inability to function within society, commonplace. As Murray and Rock remind us, "although some good stories have emerged, the sheer scale of damaged people is staggering" (Murray & Rock, 2005, p. 12). Of these many sub-themes woven throughout the stories, perhaps the most poignant is that of loss. At so many levels it is a sense of loss that is revealed over and over again: loss of childhood, of innocence, of parents, of siblings, of a spouse, of children, of precious belongings, of home, of identity, of trust, of hope and of life itself.

The issues of oppression, inequality and injustice revealed in the text speak to yet another theme – that of power. Considered as "something that is unevenly distributed and accessed to the benefit of some groups and individuals at the expense and cost to others" (Hodgson & Watts, 2017, p. 51), power within a society provides or withholds privilege according to such things as class, gender, race, religion and sexuality. The stories reveal conservative, patriarchal and Christian values, and power was afforded the male-dominated institutions which controlled education, politics, religion, social welfare, and the judiciary. There are few male characters depicted in the collection belonging to this ruling class although their influence is implicit. In fact, the only two characters who

possess such cultural capital are Teddy Taylor-Brown and Sir James Wigmore. Both are gently parodied as men of means but little substance, yet the ultimate decision-making about public and family affairs rested with such men. Men without such cultural clout had little status or power outside the family home as is evidenced by the character of Bob who demonstrates utter helplessness within a society that deems men inappropriate as parents and struggling families deficient. But within the privacy of their own homes all men were expected to control their wives and children by whatever means they chose. Many of my male characters belong to the working classes and for each of them the only place where they could exercise power was as head of the household. Some abused this power, others did not.

Women of means, such as the character Deidre Taylor-Brown, possess a degree of power within society, although just as women of lower classes, she and others from her position of privilege are beholden to men behind closed doors. Stories set in the early and mid-twentieth century are inhabited by women characters who are all constrained by the conventional gender roles assigned them at this time. Their place was in the home, producing children and attending to the needs of their husbands. This was the norm and few women occupied different positions or adopted different roles. If a woman remained unmarried and childless, she was often pitied rather than admired. Matron represents such a woman yet her single, independent status is not celebrated. The only female character who disrupts these traditional gender roles is Amber who as a twenty-first century woman exhibits agency of her own. At the base of this pyramid of power were children. No child, regardless of background, was expected to challenge the ultimate authority of adults. And if they dared, they were immediately admonished, their claims mostly ignored and often punished severely.

Symbolism

Defining the term symbol differentiates it from the notion of theme. In literature it is a word or phrase that signifies an object which in turn signifies something beyond itself (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 394). As pointed out earlier in the chapter, a recurring symbol throughout my story collection is that of the doll. Since earliest times societies of all kinds have created and used dolls for a range of purposes. This miniature human has often fulfilled the function of a child's toy but it has also been employed by adults for more magical and at times sinister purposes. A doll can be adored, abandoned or abused

and it will always keep its secrets, remaining a loyal confidante. In fact a doll may often signify a child by representing the innocence, beauty and fragility associated with childhood. Relevant to the sexual violations captured in these stories, anatomical dolls may be used as aids when interviewing sexually abused children. The doll becomes the abused child (Thierry & Lamb, 2005, p. 1125).

A symbol, then, can be said to be a sign or a thing standing for a meaning (Stone et al., 1983, p. 21). Not only standing for a child, a doll may also signify a range of human attributes such as devotion, discretion, selflessness and attachment. The dolls that recur in the stories are literally and symbolically voiceless. This allusion to the silent or silenced child reappears through the stories, although disrupting this convention is the doll attributed the role of omniscient narrator in the story 'Witness'. There are various appearances of a doll throughout the collection, the most important being Janet's doll Belinda. Primarily she is Janet's best friend and she is the holder of many of Janet's dreams and secrets; she is the subject of Janet's mothering attempts; she is the recipient of Janet's anger. She is also a silent witness, initially within the ordinary but content family household and again later when she accompanies Janet to the Home. As she is snatched from Janet's arms she symbolises the destruction of a trusting friendship, of childhood, and of a whole family. From her dark place in the cupboard she hears and, when occasionally taken out, she sees all that plays out within the high walls.

The miniature dolls destined for Janet's wedding cake are slightly different to dolls as toys but they function in the same symbolic way by standing for something else – in this case the perfect union of a man and woman in marriage. As the story 'An Ordinary Woman' progresses they also come to represent Janet's lost mum and dad, idealised in Janet's mind as a perfect married couple. 'The Melting Tree' presents a bedraggled doll salvaged from murky swamp water that represents the little girl drowned there; and the damaged relic on the mantelpiece signifies the destruction of the fragile relationship between Billy and the child. In 'Australia Fair' another little girl is damaged and it is a doll that is used as an aid for her to act out her trauma. 'Never Speak to Strangers' includes a doll reminiscent of Belinda with whom a demented Janet can converse and relive her childhood tea parties. Janet's inability to recognise loved ones means the doll can become whoever she imagines it to be as well as the trusted companion from a past that Janet now occupies most of the time. But, perhaps the most powerful of all is the image of Belinda as a broken and abandoned object on a pile of rubbish at the close of the

story 'Witness'. The figure of a broken doll is often captured in film and photography and, without words, speaks of broken or abandoned children: a motif that reverberates throughout this story collection.

Character

T. S. Eliot was noted as saying, "A 'living character' is not necessarily 'true to life'" (cited in Stone et al., 1983, p. 19). However, he goes on to qualify this observation by explaining that a writer must have an exceptional awareness of people in order to capture a realistic character on the page. I would agree that writers must be expert observers of detail in order to convey how a character looks, moves, dresses, speaks and thinks, often by showing rather than telling. Creative choices such as point of view and tone contribute to this mysterious process. Elizabeth Bowen believed that "characters must *materialise* – that is, must have a palpable physical reality. They must be not only see-able ... they must be able to be felt ..." (cited in Stone et al., 1983, p. 20). Characters may be considered as flat or round. Flat characters do not change or develop whereas round characters are more complex and at each appearance the writer must provide some deeper understanding of them. Thus, a rounded character becomes a whole person rather than a type or caricature.

My stories are narrated by both male and female characters; some were survivors of the care system, some were perpetrators of abuse, some were witnesses of events. Janet is the central rounded character around whom other characters, some of whom remain flat, revolve. The connection to Janet may be direct and contemporary or may be indirect and beyond the scope of her life. The story collection opens with a cast list of characters that positions each in time and in relation to Janet or to each other. Janet's character develops over different periods of her life and eventually a whole woman emerges. The characters of Mrs K and Janet's husband Reg show less development. They function as temporal markers in Janet's progress through life but more importantly they are types who represent the trusting and loyal relationships which allowed Janet to flourish. A character who was both witness and perpetrator of inhumane institutional practices was Mrs Goodman, the matron of Janet's Home. Her character does develop as we are introduced to an embittered and cruel mature woman whom we discover has been transformed from a young optimistic fiancée. The other significant witness to the events in Janet's early life was the doll Belinda who functions archetypically as both innocent and magician. In the

first role she is a trusting, forgiving companion for Janet, always pure and beautiful despite worldly mishaps. As magician she holds secrets and can move through various worlds and dimensions acting as a bridge between the imaginary and the real for both Janet and the reader. She remains a flat, unchanged character in spite of the ravages of time.

The character of Mr White is complex and develops from a young, vulnerable boy to a young man who experiences war and eventually a mature man who rapes a child. Characters like Mrs Taylor-Brown, Sharon and Georgie are employed as flat types. They signify a particular world-view and provide different ways of seeing people or events. Reg, Billy and Wendy-Ann are all care survivors and each represents a different legacy of the welfare system. Their inclusion is to this purpose and their development as characters is accordingly somewhat limited. Janet's father, Bob, is also limited in character development. He represents the lack of agency experienced by so many families of children committed into care. As he shares his despair and helplessness about the loss of his wife and family, he remains powerless as so many parents did. It is Amber, the character who both opens and closes the collection, who develops significantly, moving from an idealistic young student to a more mature adult faced with history repeating itself. Whether Amber remains silent, and thus complicit in what she realises is the violation of a child, the reader is left to conjecture.

Voice and perspective

Sophie Cunningham cautions about the responsibilities inherent in constructing voice as she explains her own “wrestle with ethics (and aesthetics) of writing fiction based on real women's lives” (2004, p. 41). As a creative writer, I too have wrestled with this dilemma as the narratorial utterances I invent establish a particular tone in each story. The voice of the narrator reveals, sometimes subtly, values and attitudes about the things he/she is talking about and about assumptions with respect to the reader. Tone can be critical or approving, formal or intimate, solemn or playful, arrogant or humble, serious or ironic, condescending or obsequious; the possibilities are countless. The themes and issues informing the work have been described as tragic: the tales reveal shocking truths and merciless human behaviours. To introduce aspects of light within this dark subject matter is challenging. Irony, humour or playfulness may be seen to undermine the integrity of

the work as well as my commitment to respectful use of source material. Yet to eschew these elements entirely risks plunging the reader into a morass too deep and despairing to negotiate. Thus the voices telling these stories do sometimes demonstrate aspects of humour, irony, and playfulness, with the intent that the collection allows the reader breathing space as well as providing an opening for hope with respect to the human capacity for grace, humility and resilience.

By using fiction as a means of viewing the past, my goal is the realisation of a text that is powerful and evocative. Utilising many voices creates multiple windows through which to observe differing schemas, all contributing to a more expansive world-view. To this end, the power and function of voice is crucial. Delving into the imagination often involves seeking out a voice or voices as a writer manipulates the shape and structure of an emerging story. The voice of Janet was the first of the many I brought to life as I grappled with what and how I wanted to tell my stories. I recognised that the voices telling these stories must be persuasive in an Aristotlean sense: discourse whose chief aim is to effect emotionally and intellectually (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 342). The term voice is a recently evolved usage but it is equivalent to Aristotle's 'ethos' which in a speech of persuasive rhetoric was concerned with the influence of the physical voice in oration. This aural awareness can be conceived as an "overall sense of a convincing authorial voice and presence, whose values, beliefs and moral vision serve implicitly as controlling forces throughout a work [and] helps to sway the reader to yield the imaginative consent without which a poem or a novel would remain an elaborate verbal game" (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 288). This imaginative consent on the part of the reader permits the narrator's voice to place a story temporally, by either recounting the immediate or remembering the past. For some, voice may be understood as a writer's attitude to the subject matter, and the nuances of tone set an atmosphere through the sounds, tempo and rhythms of words. To many readers, it is the voices of the characters that are the most recognisable and plausible. Varying ideas about voice remind us that a clear-cut definition which suggests only monologic and unified narratives fails to encompass all the possibilities. As Claire Wilkshire observes, narrative voice often functions in various and complex ways involving author, implied author, narrator and characters (Wilkshire, 1997, p. 2). Every story has at least one storyteller and whose voice does the telling signifies the perspective; in other words establishes the relationship between the storyteller, the story and the reader. There are several considerations here,

some highlighted by Stone and others when they pose questions like: “What vantage point has the writer selected from which to relate his story? Does the story come directly as a happening to the reader, or is it filtered through another mind or personality? Through what window is the reader permitted to see the characters and actions?” (Stone et al., 1983, p. 11). Thus a narrator may be visible or not, unobtrusive or participating.

The most commonly employed points of view are third-person and first-person narratives and the story collection utilises both of these positions. Of these the mode providing the widest angled lens is third-person omniscient. This narrator has unlimited knowledge of all characters and actions and the opportunity to be in many places, many minds and share many perspectives. Providing backstory to Janet’s early childhood is such an all-seeing third person narrator who tells of the illness and death of Janet’s mother in ‘Arrangements’. The story closes as a nurse prepares Janet’s body for the undertakers:

She tests the water to make sure it’s a comfortable temperature before she gently sponges the empty shell that had once been a pretty woman, a loving wife, a protective mother. Then she opens the window to let Mary Marshall move freely away from earthly tribulations and the arrangements she will never have to make. (Arrangements, 2018, p. 39)

More of this early history is revealed through a similarly wide lens that captures the overwhelming loss and despair experienced by her broken father in ‘For the Good of the Kiddies’:

He had become just the space a man once filled. Nothing more than the sum of essential elements: oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium and phosphorous. Still a living organism consisting mainly of water and like water he had become if not transparent, at least translucent. Anyone would have seen straight through him if they met him on his way to the bus-stop. A shade, a spectre, a ghost. (For the Good of the Kiddies, 2018, p. 65)

Although such an omniscient point of view can report on any character’s speech, doings or state of mind, it is a position which reduces intimate or intense identification with the characters. A more intimate mode is that of limited third-person narration where the narrator tells the story from the confines of what is perceived, thought, felt or

remembered by a single character. This provides a double vision, as the reader both observes the main character and has intimate access to that character's thoughts and feelings (Stone et al., 1983, p. 14). This position requires managing the tensions between what the storyteller and reader understand and what the character knows and understands. It is from this point of view a narrator tells Wendy-Ann's story, 'Ballerinas', revealing the protagonist's inability to maintain an intimate, trusting and functional relationship. Such is the legacy experienced by many care leavers and, as the story conveys, Wendy-Ann's initial contentment in marriage disintegrates as she becomes a mentally deranged bag lady haunted by flashbacks:

Over the years, her world grew more fuzzy as she groped her way through each day. Shards of her childhood jangled within her. Blurred faces from dormitories, bathrooms, laundries, dining halls, classrooms peered into her eyes. Smells of urine, vomit and cabbage crept into her nostrils. Sounds of screaming and yelling and sobbing played on and on. She cringed if someone moved too suddenly when she was waiting at the supermarket check-out. Moments of panic stopped her dead in her tracks in the shopping mall. (Ballerinas, 2018, p. 118)

Some writers further developed this technique into stream-of-consciousness narration where the reader is presented with "outer perceptions only as they impinge on the continuous current thought, memory, feelings and associations which constitute a particular observer's total awareness" (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 303). For example:

Men aren't allowed in our boarding house, Mummy. I get scared at night. Nightmares. About Mr White. Grunting. The stink of sweat – and grog – and cigarettes. I wake up crying. I keep my eyes squeezed shut to block out his flabby guts and brown teeth. I wish you were here, Mummy. Mrs White called me a dirty, filthy creature. They sent me back to the Home. I was so frightened. No-one said anything. Then the doctor pushed his long green gloves inside me and made me scream. I was only ten. (An Ordinary Woman, 2018, p. 133)

Different again and much more clinical than the third-person limited view is that of third-person direct observer. No more than a fly on the wall, this type of narrator has "no memory of the past, no understanding of the present This kind of story approaches pure drama: all action, dialogue, setting, stage direction" (Stone et al., 1983, p. 13). The opening of 'Not Suitable for Children' exemplifies such a point of view.

Sharon and Diane sit together in the lunch shed. The content of their sandwiches informs the conversation.

‘What have you got in yours today?’

‘Jam.’

...

‘Do know that kid Billy in Miss Robert’s class?’ asks Diane.

‘You mean the spastic one?’

‘He’s not spastic. He’s a slow-learner my mum said.’

‘Well I reckon he’s spastic because he can’t even do his two-times table.’

(Not Suitable for Children, 2018, p. 50)

First-person narratives speaking as ‘I’ provide a much narrower lens as what is known, experienced or inferred must be channelled through one person’s eyes and mind. This person may be a central character, a witness, or a peripheral participant. The storyteller can only tell the reader what he/she knows and cannot relate unwitnessed scenes or speak from the minds of others. However, the intimacy and authenticity of this point of view is powerful and when well realised, readers feel in touch with a real person. ‘Prologue’ opens the collection and it is here that Janet is first introduced in the first-person voice of her dead sister, Susie:

My name is Susie and when I was alive I came to live here with my sister Janet and my brother Billy. Janet was five. She was clever. My brother was eight. He wasn’t so clever, but he was funny. They never told their stories to anyone. Even if they had who would have believed them? (Prologue, 2018, p. 16)

To provide more backstory to Janet’s early childhood, an ordinary family life is recounted in the first-person voice of a doll in the story ‘Witness’. This narrator, like that of the ghost Susie, is inanimate and possesses attributes that are beyond the realms of reality. Both these narrators could be identified as unreliable, as they are not living human-beings, and as such push the boundaries of credibility. Yet they are imbued with agency and are free to comment in ways that would not have been possible if the real Janet was recalling these early years in her own voice. A very different first-person voice is that of

Mr Victor White, the man who raped Janet when as a ten year old she was sent to live in his home as a foster child. Limiting the story entirely to Mr White's point of view has been achieved by the use of an epistolary technique:

You know that I was never much of a talker. Always kept things to myself pretty much. I thought I might write it down for you to read – you know how we used to leave notes for each other? ... And just to get things straight, I'm not here at Her Majesty's pleasure. That's for the ones they reckon are insane and or at high risk as a repeat offender. My sentence is what the judge said was 'a reflection of the seriousness of my crime and the community's expectation that child molesters should be punished harshly'. Seven years is what he gave me. (No-one Was Watching, 2018, p. 93)

As some of the above examples evidence, a mode employed on several occasions throughout the collection is that of an unreliable narrator who breaks with the established convention that positions a narrator as authoritative and trustworthy. Instead this type of storyteller exhibits an obviously skewed point of view which may be the result of his/her false or delusionary claims, mental instability, exaggeration, immaturity, dishonesty or even a state of inanimacy. Such narrators further challenge boundaries regarding the literal rendering of reality.

The assorted voices of men, women and children can be heard as they provide a number of impressions, sometimes of character and sometimes of event. The collection in its entirety embraces these varying voices in order to represent characters from different social positions. Matron, Aunty Gwen, Mrs Taylor-Brown, and the teacher at Billy's school all represent an official version of the rescue narrative and their voices compete against unofficial versions of this orphan story as told by Janet, Bob, Reg, Wendy-Ann, Billy and Susie. A different version again is provided by Victor White and a contemporary viewpoint is offered by Amber.

Contemporary attitudes and values about the care and protection of children are predicated on fair and humane treatment as well as well-regulated policies and programmes. However, some of my narrators may not reflect these values at all. Even near the end of his life in the twenty-first century, Victor White does not perceive his violation of a child as a crime. He denies responsibility, intimating the child herself was the guilty party, and that his wife was the facilitator of his deviant behaviour:

I can see a kind of pattern now I've written it down. Events that were out of my control all conspiring against me in the end. Maybe if I hadn't met you, none of it would have occurred. Not that I'm blaming you, Thelma. Just wondering about it, that's all. (No-one Was Watching, 2018, p. 103)

Victor's father, Mr Walter White, shows no remorse or misgivings about his brutal treatment of his son and wife. He is comfortable in the belief that such behaviour is his right as husband and father:

The snivelling continued and the strap came out ... The violent rage eventually subsided as Victor crawled sobbing and choking off the veranda. The crisscrossed welts oozed blood down his legs and puddled into his socks as he lay whimpering behind the wash-house... 'Bloody sook. What kind of a son are you?' (Chip off the Old Block, 2018, p. 112)

The Matron's vicious beating of the two runaway girls does not trouble her conscience although it interrupts her radio broadcast and her assignation with the whiskey bottle. She is beyond censure and her behaviour is sanctioned by a system and ideology that expected the sins be bashed out of children's bodies:

The beating is ferocious and the welts create geometric designs ... The screaming bounces off the high ceilings and panelled walls. The sobbing and snivelling along the rows provides another layer of sound. (Tinkling Water, 2018, p. 82)

The Dalkeith Ladies Committee provide yet another set of values. These are respectable and moral members of society who would not consciously condone violence towards children yet their complacency and self-interest is revealed in their superficial good works. They have no real understanding or empathy for the children who are exhibited like objects once a year at the Christmas party. As long as they are clean and don't pick their noses their plight is an inconvenient reality to be forgotten once the party is over:

I suppose you can't be sure what goes on in these kiddies' heads. Not very savoury backgrounds most of them it seems. Matron suggested, quite discretely I will say, that not that many are orphans after all. I was most surprised at that and it does set you thinking about what sort of parents would abandon their own flesh and blood. (For a Good Cause, 2018, p. 91)

Most of the stories take place over Janet's life span and each voice contributes a part to the reconstructed picture that is Janet. To this end, the pivotal character remains Janet, who although not overtly present in each story, is implicitly present as the unravelling stories suggest connections to, and influences on, her life. Although each story may be read in isolation, it is the way that each story informs other stories that contributes to a more powerful whole. The order of the stories in the collection is not linear. Temporal leaps, both forwards and backwards, exist with thematic connections becoming clearer as more fragments are assembled. This deliberate dislocation replicates the nightmares and flashbacks that can return survivors to the traumatic incidents and experiences of their past. Thus the collection's many voices, perspectives and points of view recount different moments and scenarios relating to the lives of children in institutions. Some of the voices express understandings, attitudes and values of a past era, others may be closer to contemporary beliefs. It is hoped these voices are convincing enough to transport the reader into an imaginary yet believable realm.

Conclusion

This chapter considers both the creative process and the creative product as it sums up how the artefact contributes to the research project. Literary influences that address trauma are examined in an attempt to identify how accomplished writers manage such contentious subject matter. As in the case of Kate Grenville's novel *Dark Places* (2002), it is obvious this is no simple undertaking. Examples of successfully published works of both short fiction and fictional accounts of historical people or events establish currency for the genre chosen for this project. In particular, it is Australian authors whose works are cited. The influences of both modernism and postmodernism are revealed as the artefact suggests a variety of styles and structures that collectively result in a lack of resolution with questions posed rather than answers provided.

The varied classifications of fiction based on biographical, historical or contemporary facts are reviewed, with the strange term historiographic metafiction devised by Linda Hutcheon, most closely resembling the type of narratives in my collection. And once again some of the discussion returns to the vexed notion of fictional 'truth' where it becomes apparent that sometimes explicit (such as publishing practices declaring generic distinctions) and at other times implicit contracts between writer and reader are established which flag intention and effect and invite the 'willing suspension of

disbelief'. The many versions of truth, the intertwining of history and literature and the suggestion that histories may be shaped by narrative conventions ultimately all support the argument that fiction has the capacity to represent varying historical truths.

The origins of the characters and the narratorial voices are explained, as is the undertaking to represent victims, perpetrators and witnesses affected by the events surrounding the childhoods of 'forgotten Australians'. By creating stories from such varying perspectives, the polyphonic nature of the resulting creative work is evidenced. Questions around justice and redemption are provoked as a balance of light and dark is negotiated within the narratives. Main characters are rounded rather than stereotyped, and their flaws and vulnerabilities are exposed, restoring even those guilty of heinous acts to the human condition. It is the person behind such acts that is explored and, although not pardoned, is often found to have once been cast in the role of victim. It is this legacy of damage that links the stories and speaks to a complex and troubling phenomenon of generational dysfunction. There is an examination of how setting, plot, character, theme and symbol contribute to the over-all text but it is the power and function of voice and point of view that returns us to a main tenet of this thesis: versions of the past are many and varied, but each speaks its own truth.

Chapter Two: Places and Spaces

This chapter locates the research within cultural and historical spaces, but closely related to this contextualising of time, place, event and milieu are concepts that inform the subject in an epistemological space. To this purpose, I include the investigation of oral history, testimony, archive, memory and trauma as significant markers to a comprehensive view of the historical and cultural context of this project. How fundamental notions of fact and fiction influence the research process is also briefly outlined, although a more detailed examination of narrative and narratology can be found in Chapter Three.

An ugly era

On 16 November 2009, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologised to the Forgotten Australians and child migrants. The apology began:

We come together today to deal with an ugly chapter in our nation's history. And we come together today to offer our nation's apology. To say to you, the Forgotten Australians, and those who were sent to our shores as children without your consent, that we are sorry. (Hil & Barnigan, 2010, p.123)

This national apology came after another long awaited apology was delivered to the Stolen Generation, the term describing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who were forcibly removed from their families (delivered by Kevin Rudd on 13 February 2008). Official, public apologies which acknowledge wrong doing, accept responsibility for those wrongs and express sincere remorse were recommended by various reports which asked why children were separated from their families and why welfare systems had delivered such poor outcomes for so many of these children. The first of these reports addressing the Stolen Generation was entitled *Bringing Them Home* (1997) and in the late 1990s public commentary regarding the testimonies of the Stolen Generation tended to be framed around race and colonialism (Musgrove, 2013, p. xii). However, it soon became apparent that there were other groups who had also grown up in institutional care and who had experienced similar traumas. The eventual outcome was the establishment of two more major enquiries, making a total of three landmark reports. The second dealt with child migrants from Britain and Malta and was called *Lost Innocents* (2001) and the

third in this trilogy was *Forgotten Australians* (2004). This final report addressed the institutionalised care experiences of Australian-born non-Indigenous children from 1920s onwards. It is this final report that is central to my research project.

As Rudd acknowledged, this was indeed an ugly chapter from Australia's past and one which has only recently been exposed. The 'chapter' stretches back into the nineteenth century but the most brutal and systematically harmful policies and practices regarding the care and protection of children were carried out through the early and mid-twentieth century. By the second half of the century changes in the child welfare system were beginning to be implemented, particularly with respect to housing children. The inappropriateness of institutionalised care was increasingly recognised, large institutions were closed and alternative living arrangements became policy. As Nell Musgrove finds, "the trend away from institutional 'care' began in the 1970s ... [L]arge institutions which were styled on nineteenth-century models of orphanages and industrial schools have given way to much smaller facilities" in an effort to provide a more 'home-like' environment (Musgrove, 2013, p. 161). Issues of staff suitability and training were flagged as needing urgent attention and the 1999 Forde Inquiry stated that:

The lack of specialist training in child care and adequate resources, as reflected in low staffing levels, mitigated against providing a loving and caring environment for individual children within the orphanage system. (Forde, 1999, p. 92)

The need for improved monitoring of policies and practices within the welfare system was identified as crucial due to the finding that "inspections by welfare officers were often superficial and more concerned with the physical structure of the buildings than the children's welfare" (McLucas, 2004, p. 177). However, the extent of the ugliness, which was endemic within the child welfare system, was not truly exposed until decades later. Musgrove notes that "the voices of the hundreds of thousands of children who grew up in institutional 'care' have become more familiar to the Australian public since the 1990s ... [when] grass-roots activism ... led to a series of national inquiries ... " (Musgrove, 2013, p. x).

The 'forgotten Australians' were mostly children of the mid-twentieth century so most of them experienced life in institutions many decades ago. In the current era few would assume that historical wrongs could be addressed and then forgotten and in the past twenty-five years attempts to redress past wrongs have prevailed as "leaders all over the

world have been forced to come to terms with the gross injustices of their nations past” (Neumann & Thompson, 2015, p. 6). As Neumann and Thompson note, various governments around the world have apologised, offered compensation, promised adherence to the terms of old treaties, erected memorials, compiled exhibitions, revised historical accounts and redesigned educational programmes in response to such claims (2015, p. 6). Australia’s past also contains a sorry trail of historical injustices with acts of oppression and violence evident throughout the short history of European settlement. In twenty-first century Australia moral assumptions about what justice requires has led to a number of government actions with respect to past policies concerning children, including the already mentioned *National Apology to Forgotten Australians and former Child Migrants*. When addressing views about the need for a formal apology, the *Forgotten Australians* report found that for many care leavers this was an important step towards “an acknowledgment of their past treatment and recognition of their ‘existence’” (McLucas, 2004, p. 193). However, for some, the promise of such an apology provided no solace: “I cannot forget, will not forgive and no apologies accepted” (Submission 330, McLucas, 2004, p. 194).

These words are a reminder that reawakening memories of past injustice does not always lead to reconciliation or healing. However, the rise of human rights as moral and legal touchstones implies that violations against humanity become everyone’s concern. Neumann and Thompson point out that identifying an action as an injustice demands an appropriate response and how a society deals with injustice often requires a ‘legalist paradigm’. As they say, “memory plays a crucial role in this paradigm because legal processes depend on the memory of victims and other witnesses and because remembering the mistakes of the past is supposed to be an important factor in preventing future injustice” (Neumann & Thompson, 2015, p. 10). We are also reminded of the complexities of redressing these past wrongs when often “they were made possible by the laws and practices of a society: they were endorsed by the attitudes and prejudices of many citizens ... often passed for common sense at the time when the injustices were committed” (Neumann & Thompson, 2015, p. 11). This is the case with respect to the cohort under examination; the wrongs they endured were not acknowledged at the time they were being enacted. Not only was no-one watching, no-one was listening to what were perceived as ungracious and seldom believed grievances. In bringing these once hidden histories into the light, the voices of victims, witnesses, victims’ families and at

times whole communities have had to be strident and strong in order to gain recognition and acknowledgement of unjust, inhumane and often criminal treatment. In their introduction to *Surviving care: Achieving justice and healing for the Forgotten Australians*, editors Richard Hil and Elizabeth Branigan remind us:

The fact that the population in question was referred to as ‘forgotten’ is in itself a searing indictment of the politicians, bureaucrats, religious leaders and charity heads who knew about what went on under their watch, but chose to do nothing, or worse, actively obstructed processes of justice. (Hil & Branigan, 2012, p. 40)

A desire to right past wrongs has fuelled the determination to remember such events and the testimonials informing the many reports and enquiries divulge previously unheard stories that allow a glimpse behind the gates once incarcerating innocent children. They are stories about high walls and imposing buildings that rendered children invisible. They are about silenced voices and unspeakable cruelty. They are also about resilience and survival. The man largely responsible for the long overdue 2004 senate investigation into the plight of children in care was Senator Andrew Murray (himself a child migrant) whose poignant comment reverberates, reminding us of the long-term effects of harming children.

Children who experienced life in an orphanage, children’s home or other form of out-of-home care last century [bear] ... the enduring legacy of institutionalised care [that] can only be described as tragic. (Murray & Rock, 2005, p. 1)

The legacy for many of the adults who endured this trauma as children *is* tragic; it has meant a life of desperate struggle and deep mistrust. Victims have articulated the consequences of their experiences, pronouncing how their lives have been permanently shaped by what happened to them as children. Dysfunctional relationships, limited parenting skills, drug and alcohol addiction, homelessness, unemployment, anti-social behaviours and criminal activity are among the outcomes for many, and “anecdotal evidence of an abnormally large percentage of suicides among care leavers” (Murray & Rock, 2005, p.12) is also abundant. Social and political denial prevailed for much of the twentieth century thus stifling the voices of those whose childhood was deemed of little value. In general the “official and community view was that children in care were not of

much significance or interest ... [an] attitude... reinforced by care leavers, many of whom were ashamed of having been in care and kept their childhood to themselves” (Hil & Branigan, 2010, p. xxvi). The bleak irony underlying the practices of ‘child welfare’ organisations has been pointed out by many of the care leavers who were taken away from their families because they were deemed neglected, exploited or abused only to suffer these same violations within a system purporting to provide care and protection. A long trail of reports exposing endemic abuse whereby harm was done to children in the context of welfare policies and programmes has been revealed in this research. Some of these reports date back to the mid-nineteenth century, an example being the 1874 New South Wales Royal Commission into Public Charities. In the *Forgotten Australians* report it is noted that “for over a century, many inquiries have condemned children’s institutions in Australia” (McLucas, 2004, p. 14). In 2013 the *Royal Commission into Institutionalised Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* was announced, a commission tasked with investigating the sexual exploitation and abuse of children within institutional settings. However, it was not just sexual abuse that was endemic within the child welfare system. As academic and past care leaver Joanna Penglase points out, “children were violated in every sense in an institution and being used sexually was just one of those violations” (Penglase, 2007, p. 145).

The mid-twentieth century was an era when protecting and nurturing children was a societal expectation, although historically such protection had not always prevailed. Prior to the nineteenth century children were often valued merely as chattels, and from a young age they required strict, often brutal discipline to rid them of their “innate immorality” (Boxall et al., 2014, p. 4). The dawn of the nineteenth century brought with it changes in how children were perceived; infancy and childhood were seen as stages of innocence and vulnerability although there was little done to enforce any form of protection and the prevailing religious perception was still of innate sinfulness. Abuses of all kinds were perpetrated and it was not until 1924 that the League of Nations introduced *The Declaration of the Rights of the Child*, which for the first time connected child welfare principles with child rights. Despite this breakthrough in understandings about their vulnerability, children continued to be abused and “most commentators agree that it was between the 1940s and 1960s that child abuse was ‘re-discovered’ and that western democracies recognised child maltreatment as a societal-level concern rather than cases that occurred in isolation” (Boxall et al., 2014, p. 8). Contemporary values and attitudes

reflect abhorrence regarding the disturbing stories about ‘forgotten Australians’, yet an often cited response has been that standards were different ‘back then’. Such comment fails to recognise the “severity of the documented behaviours and provide any feasible explanation for when ... the ‘standards of time’ change[d] that condoned the perpetration of neglect, cruelty, psychological abuse, sadism, rape and sodomy” (McLucas, 2004, p. 141).

Attitudes and understandings of children’s developmental needs have indeed changed over time. With the development of psychoanalytic theory in the mid-nineteenth century, beginning with Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and further developed by Erik Erikson (1902-1994), new understandings evolved regarding the developmental stages of human maturation. Children were no longer viewed as miniature adults and the specific needs of childhood were increasingly recognised. During this same period learning theories expounded by Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936) and later B.F. Skinner (1904-1990) emphasized the importance of environmental factors in a child’s life, and the theories of Jean Piaget (1896-1980) formulated stages of cognitive development, thus establishing understandings that children think in different ways to adults (Berger, 2017). These ideas all combined to construct developmental stage theories that are still pertinent today. Many of these ideas were already informing western societies by the mid-twentieth century and in the modern, democratic Australia of this era laws *were* in place which were designed to protect children from exploitation and abuse. However, the evidence suggests that these regulations were seldom enforced behind the closed doors of child welfare institutions and that cruel, draconian methods of child management such as beatings, isolation, humiliation, deprivation of food, clothing, education and healthcare were common.

Although the findings of the *Forgotten Australian* report did not furnish direct answers to the two-part question posed in the Introduction of this thesis, they did reveal two factors contributing to these abusive practices: firstly, that endemic abuse was an institutional ‘culture’ across all organisations whether state, church or private; and secondly, that repeated reports about such abuse were systematically ignored. The report found that “abuse and assault was widespread across institutions, across States and across the government, religious and other care providers” (McLucas, 2004, p. xv). Such abuse seemed to be “able to thrive and survive in institutions over such a long period due to a combination of reasons that centred around a culture of silence, of power and personal control” (McLucas, 2004, p. 128). For much of the twentieth century the common

responses “when victims reported sexual [and other] abuse ... [were] disbelief, blame and minimisation” (Clancey, 2009, p. 86). The prevailing policies and rules operated on fear and control that normalised inhumane treatment. The report found that such “emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, and often criminal physical and sexual assault” (McLucas, 2004, p. xv) were customary and that a common response by institution staff was that children “were better off, lucky to be there and should not complain” (McLucas, 2004, p. 140).

This was an era when prevailing beliefs were that white, Christian, modest-sized family units lived harmoniously in neat suburban houses. The parameters were narrow, and to be positioned outside these confines meant deficiency and marginalisation. Any families who failed to fit this model were “pathologised as contaminating because they did not provide the ‘right’ influences for children” (Penglase, 2007, p. 73). Murray and Rock report that:

Impressionable children were constantly told they were worthless, were good for nothing, that they came from the gutter and would end up back there, that their mothers didn’t want them, that they were scum, sluts and whores. (Murray & Rock, 2013, p. 6)

This was a time when “mothers and fathers came appropriately paired ... Social security didn’t look after single-parent families. Married women were barred from many jobs ... and adultery and cruelty were the [only] grounds for divorce” (Townsend, 1988, p. 9). Unmarried mothers were deemed ‘immoral’, ostracised from society and, often from their own families. Mental illness was dealt with by locking patients in what were known as lunatic asylums. A monoculture existed, with the *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901, later known as the ‘White Australia’ policy, continuing to restrict entry (until 1958) of non-white immigrants. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were subjected to what indigenous novelist Kim Scott perceives as “something akin to an apartheid regime” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, August 25, 2017). This discriminatory and punitive milieu meant that reasons for children going into care were seldom because a child was orphaned. Poverty, illness of one parent, death of one parent, illegitimate birth, divorce, family breakdown due to abandonment, violence, alcoholism or mental illness, and exposure to ‘moral danger’ were reasons for being committed to an institution (McLucas,

2004, p. 65). The voices of the families were rarely acknowledged and the voices of the children went unheard.

Publications of care leavers' auto-biographies, biographies and memoirs provide some of the data informing this thesis. Often, these are self-published works that reflect one of the lasting legacies of institutionalised care: little, or in some cases, no education. Many of the children were exploited as “‘slave labour’ – a term used in many submissions” to gain economic advantage for the institution (McLucas, 2004. p. 113). This included “work in commercial laundries, on farm plots ... clearing land and the erection of buildings” (Murray & Rock, 2005, p. 12). Such labour, as well as cleaning, food preparation, gardening and other domestic duties, left ill-nourished children exhausted and even those who received some schooling benefitted little. However, a significant number of care leavers' stories are now officially archived transcripts recording their mostly oral testimonies. The opportunity to tell rather than write their stories has provided a conduit for many care leavers whose literacy skills are limited due to the educational neglect they bore as children. It is this data, usually embedded in reports, enquiries and investigations, which is the major source informing my own and other academic documents addressing the topic of the ‘Forgotten Australians’. Several of the academic works most pertinent to my project are *Orphans of the Living* (2007) by Joanna Penglase, *The Scars Remain* (2013) by Nell Musgrove and *Surviving Care* (2010) edited by Richard Hil and Elizabeth Branigan.

As researcher, my personal circumstances provide gravitas to the choice of this particular cohort. I was an Anglo-Saxon child in this era of deeply conservative, patriarchal and insular values when, as one British visitor noted, post-war Australia was a country “in many ways , still essentially a Victorian society with a mid-twentieth century economy and culture”(MacKenzie, cited in Penglase, 2007, p. 72). During this time, my own rather precarious nuclear family was in danger of collapsing. If it had, I may well have found myself as one of these institutionalised children. Although unaware of the repercussions of a broken marriage when a child, I can now reflect on the dire consequences that I may have faced if my parents had divorced. Thus, elements of the personal and of the vicarious have been combined to create something new, resulting in an artefact that is many-layered. The polemical tone evident in the creative artefact reflects an engagement with evocative and at times emotive language and echoes what the *Forgotten Australian* report found:

The highly evocative and emotive language ... such as ‘my sentence’, ‘concentration camp’, ‘prison’, ‘hell-hole’ ‘felt like a convict’, ‘entombed in institutions’, ‘inmates’, ‘incarcerated’, ‘internship’, ‘tortured’, ‘nightmare’, ‘release’, ‘outside world’, ‘victims’, ‘survivors’ ... is testimony to the nature of the treatment of children over many decades. (McLucas, 2004, p. 85)

The report claimed that the inclusion of such subjective language resulted from the “need to produce an authoritative and compelling report which respected the life experiences of the care leavers” (McLucas, 2004, p. 3). I make no excuses for my passionate engagement with the subject. The choice of arts-based research methodology reflects this desire and it is with the same sense of honouring the enormity of care leavers’ stories that prevents me sanitising and diminishing the emotive power of such history by using distancing, impersonal language.

Such a re-imagined history is, however, tempered by the acknowledgement that there is no single history nor can there be a simple narrative of institutional life for the children known as ‘forgotten Australians’. The settings and the quality of care varied considerably from one institution to another and there have been some care leavers who have triumphed over adversity, just as there were some sincere and humane carers. Yet, the overwhelming evidence remains that “there was no surety that any child who passed through the gates of an institution would not suffer psychological, physical or sexual violence, because no-one was watching” (*Inside: Life in Children’s Homes and Institutions*, 2013).

Bearing witness

As Nell Musgrove notes, “the testimonies of people who grew up in institutional ‘care’ powerfully convey the many ways in which their lives are marked by their childhoods” (Musgrove, 2013, p.162). Finally surfacing in the many testimonials are fragments of care leavers’ past lives which my stories strive to reassemble. The goal of these creative stories is not so much to “portray the facts of what happened ... but instead to convey the meanings” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 751). The term testimony may be defined as “a speaker engaged in the speech act of testifying to the truth of some proposition” (Coady, 1992, p. 38). Coady explains further that every-day witnessing of events can be viewed as testimony, for example the utterances “‘I testify that...’or ‘I give witness that ...’or in less explicit ways simply saying what we have seen” (Coady, 1992, p. 26). He calls this

‘natural testimony’ and differentiates it from ‘formal testimony’ which he says is defined as a kind of evidence brought before a court of law or a commission of enquiry by persons referred to as ‘witnesses’. As he suggests, we are invited to accept something as true because someone says it is, “where the someone in question is supposed to be in a position to speak authoritatively on the matter” (Coady, 1992, p. 27). Coady emphasises the orality of testimony thus positioning it as a type of oral history. The age-old tradition of oral history often crossed genre boundaries: it was a space where “historical, poetic, and legendary narratives [could be] inextricably mixed up ... [and where] personal ‘truth’ may coincide with shared ‘imagination’” (Portelli, 1991, p. 49). Alessandro Portelli’s seminal research around the stories relating to the death of a factory worker identified how over time recollections of this event were elaborated, changed and interpreted, resulting in many different versions of the occurrence. Portelli’s conclusion was that oral sources are not always reliable but “rather than being a weakness, this [was] their strength: errors, inventions, and myths lead us through and beyond facts to their meaning ... the way people remember is as important as what they remember” (Portelli, 1991, p. 2). Survivors who experienced abuse as children in various child welfare facilities have provided such evidence and this material has been recorded and archived, acknowledging these previously unheard voices with the hope that by addressing the human rights abuses of the past, a safe and nurturing environment can be provided for children in the future.

Survivors’ testimonies may contain the errors and elaborations alluded to by Portelli, but in archiving these life stories it could be assumed that there would be no place for further invention. However, research by Antjie Krog and Nosisi Mpolweni provides valuable insights into the process of archiving by examining the refiguring of witness testimonials presented to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a process of truth and amnesty initiated in 1996 after the abolition of apartheid in South Africa. This research reveals that the very process of archiving is ‘figured’: in other words, the material is gathered within a particular context and for a particular purpose. It warns that an archive can only be a small trace of a whole and that when retrieving archives we must pay attention to “how the record has been altered over time; the gaps, omissions and excisions from the record” (Krog & Mpolweni, 2009, p. 358). This figuring process is often shaped by power relations, and decisions about what and how to archive remind us that archives are not simply sources, they are sites of contested knowledge, often official declarations of what is supposed to be true. The findings of

Krog and Mpolweni uncover many refigurings: in translation, in transcription, who is telling, and how the narrating of an event leaves the central moments un-uttered. They find that even the testifiers themselves refigured the archives of their own memories in ways which enabled their need for answers, for peace or for reconciliation. Despite these slippages, Alan Wieder also refers to the lessons from the public hearings of the TRC as he argues that “testimony as oral history is important as a public forum for people who have been historically invisible” (Wieder, 2004, p. 23).

Defining oral history, tracing its development over time and recognising the many gaps and silences which exist within this genre provide insights into how historical record is “a discursive entity made up of signs [which] means it offers a *re-presented*, thoroughly selective account of what actually happened” (Chamberlain, 2008, p. 386). Investigating the process of archiving also reveals omissions and excisions, sometimes accidental but often shaped by power relationships which results in another layer of re-presentation of actual events. Portelli sees this mixing of personal ‘truth’ with shared ‘imagination’ as intrinsic to oral history where the boundaries between historical, poetic and legendary narratives are often blurred. Elaboration, error and invention contribute to the recollected stories of past events. From Portelli’s perspective these stories provide a pathway “through and beyond facts to their meaning” (Portelli, 1991, p. 2). The meaning behind these care leavers’ stories is abundantly clear regardless of the gaps, omissions, elaborations and errors: for many survivors, life-long damage was the consequence of violations experienced whilst in institutionalised care.

From these findings, it is extrapolated that the sources which inform the creative work are already ‘figured’. That is, errors and inventions are already present and that gaps, omissions and un-uttered moments leave spaces throughout these archived testimonies. It must be emphasised that these stories as remembered childhood histories have been acknowledged and validated yet what ‘actually happened’ has been variously told and recorded according to interpretation and the conditions of telling. It appears that despite the historical and ethical significance of witness testimony, the boundary between fact and invention remains hazy. My project also acknowledges the validity of these first person accounts but challenges the notion that only nonfiction, usually perceived as objective and absolute, can tell ‘truthful’ stories. The meanings beyond the facts are that many children were isolated, neglected, violated and forgotten for many decades. My stories are committed to these truths.

Fractured memories

Care leavers' stories which have eventually found their way into the public domain rely on memories, both individual and collective, about what happened in their past. Many recount a range of abuses and most reflect on the absence of humanity: kindness, affection, respect, and empathy. The field of memory studies ranges across many disciplines including history, psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, neurology and literature. As an exhaustive treatment of these varying understandings about memory is beyond the scope of this thesis discussion is limited to the confines of psychology, history and literature. Memory is a many-layered process and psychologists generally distinguish between semantic, procedural and episodic memory stores. As Boyer and Wertsch explain:

Having semantic memory, in the usual sense of stable, declarative, and accessible knowledge of the environment, allows us to extract relevant information about current situations from past state of affairs. Whatever is stable across time is in our semantic memory. In the same way, various forms of procedural memory (skills, expectations ...) have a straightforward biological function. They provide fast, appropriate responses modelled by past encounters ... In this scheme of things, it is more difficult to explain why any organisms should have episodic memories, or what we most commonly refer to as simply "memories" – information about unique, specific situations that they encountered in the past. (Boyer & Wertsch, 2009, p. 4)

Historians Alice and Howard Hoffman also speak of episodic and semantic memory, where they define episodic as relating to remembering personal events over time and semantic as recalling learned material about the world. Social memory is thus semantic because it depends on shared learned material in order to communicate meaning to others. This shared information is embedded in the culture of the subject and when combined with episodic memory contributes to the remembered account of historical event. As Hoffman and Hoffman point out:

No oral history document is likely to be simply a reflection of a purely personal memory or a social memory. It will contain both, in that it will draw both episodic, purely personal descriptions of a unique perception of past experience and will also contain [semantic] information that is grounded in the social,

conversational, and cultural styles of the informants' background. (Hoffman & Hoffman, 2008, p. 292)

It is this subjective process which reveals the speaker's relationship to their history and reminds us that "memories are rarely 'raw' but shaped in and by social and historical narrative" (Hoffman & Hoffman, 2008, p. 292). Although the investigation of memory has occupied the attention of scientists for more than a century, often with a focus on its failures and distortions, the study of memory "has grown by leaps and bounds in the last twenty years, providing us with new tools and models from the neural foundations of recollection to the creation and maintenance of autobiographical and historical memories" (Boyer & Wertsch, 2009, p. 1). The workings of memory are subject to many individual and cultural variables and can be disrupted, embellished or distorted by such things as the passage of time, absentmindedness, failure to recall the source of the recollection, suggestibility and bias (Schacter, 2001, p. 4). However, the presence of persistent, intrusive recollections of negative emotions can also interfere with how the memory functions. This phenomenon (now commonly known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) is of particular relevance when considering the testimonies of adults who endured abuse as children. As psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk points out, "although art and literature have always been preoccupied with how people cope with the inevitable tragedies of life, the large-scale scientific study of the effects of trauma on body and mind has had to wait till the latter part of ... [the twentieth] century" (2014, p. 3). As a prominent researcher into traumatic stress, he has found a dramatic difference between the ways people experience traumatic memories and the ways they experience other personal events. He concludes that:

When people receive sensory input, they generally automatically synthesize this incoming information into their large store of pre-existing information. If an event is personally significant, they will generally transcribe these sensations into a narrative, without conscious awareness of the processes by which they translate sensory impressions into a personal story. Our research shows that in contrast with the way people seem to process ordinary information, traumatic experiences are initially imprinted as sensations or feeling states, and are not collated and transcribed into personal narratives. Our interviews with traumatized people, as well as our brain imaging studies of them,

seem to confirm that traumatic memories come back as emotional and sensory states with little verbal representation. (Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 296)

This lack of language means that for many care leavers, the process of creating meaning from the past is dislocated due to the complex effects that the psychological wounding of trauma has on the mind. These survivors face a lifelong battle struggling to make sense of who they are and where they fit in the world as the capacity to translate past traumatic memories into cohesive personal narratives continues to elude them.

The word trauma, which can be traced back to the Greek word *trauma* or ‘wound’, originally referred to an injury inflicted on the body, although later usage has come to mean a wound inflicted upon the mind. As earlier trauma scholar Cathy Caruth sought to illuminate the mysteries of this phenomenon, she explained it simply as “a breach in the mind’s experience of time, self and the world” (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). Historian and philosopher, Michael Roth expands this definition when he says that contemporary mental health professionals agree a traumatic event is “an event that overwhelms one’s perceptual-cognitive faculties, creating a situation in which the individual does not really experience the event as it happens” (Roth, 2012, p. 91). This means that the normal memory process is interrupted and this lack of reliable memory may be felt as a gaping absence, flashbacks, terrifying nightmares or severe anxiety attacks that recur in a struggle to re-present the past. The disconnection between traumatic experience and language is emphasised by Roth as he explains, “the traumatic event is too terrible for words, too horrifying to be integrated into our schemes for making sense of the world” (Roth, 2012, p. 91).

For children exposed to ongoing psychological and physical abuse, feelings of intense fear, horror, helplessness and confusion were with them on a daily basis. Long-lasting harm was caused as a result of “unnaturally high levels of neurobiological arousal ... so extreme that it becomes toxic ... leading to long-term emotional, behavioural, and cognitive dysfunction ... [resulting in] changes in psychological arousal, emotion, cognition and memory” (Clancey, 2009, p. 9). These are the complex and varied outcomes reported by many of the survivors of institutionalised care when they describe how their lives have been permanently damaged by what happened to them as children. Initially this manifested as the horror of merely being one of these vulnerable children who were “charged with neglect, no visible means of support, being uncontrollable or

exposed to moral danger” and committed to an institution (McLucas, 2004, p. 85). This quickly turned to confusion, mistrust and fear bought on by the separation and isolation from family members as these children were ‘processed’ into a depersonalised “institutional setting quite different and inappropriate for normal social interaction in the outside world” (McLucas, 2004, p. 145). Once ‘inside’ the many and sometimes daily traumatic events such as beatings, humiliation, withdrawal of food, neglect, intimidation, isolation and sexual violence added layer after layer of damage. So, there appear to be two levels of trauma experienced by these children: firstly in being wrenched from ordinary life and committed to care; and secondly the physical and psychological abusive events which became part of daily life within many care facilities.

Not-knowing knowledge

In writing about trauma, Roth introduces an ethical dimension with respect to both historical and literary consciousness as he ponders the problem of how traumatic events can be represented. As he notes, “the traumatic event draws one to it even as it demands acknowledgement that one can never comprehend what happened at that time in that place” (Roth, 2012, p. 82). Any representation of traumatic historical events will always be problematic; paradoxically, if a traumatic event cannot be forgotten it is precisely because it cannot be reliably remembered and therefore cannot be integrated with existing mental schemes and transformed into narrative language (Roth, 2012, p. 83). This notion is reinforced by Amos Goldberg when he describes how a traumatic encounter may lead to the eradication of the entire grid of meaning. At such a point he contests, “the victim cannot speak or his/her speech has absolutely no meaning; the victim has been silenced” (Goldberg, 2006, p. 134).

The specific point at which knowing and not knowing meets is the juncture where literature may intervene. Literary critic Geoffrey Hartman suggests that “a theory emerges focusing on the relationship of words and trauma, and help[s] us ‘read the wound’ with the aid of literature” (Hartman, 1995, p. 537). The contradictory elements of traumatic knowledge are both the inability to forget and the inability to remember the actual event/s. Literary practice can respond to this dichotomy literally or figuratively. A literal response may be to the registration of a traumatic event; a figurative response is more about the memory of experiencing that event. It is figurative language, then, that largely explores and expresses the disjunction between experiencing and understanding. Thus,

the literary construction of memory is not a literal retrieval. Language which seeks to capture the absent moments of traumatic experience opens a new space where the focus is on disclosing an unconscious or not-knowing knowledge (Hartman's term). Trauma theory "throws a light on figurative or poetic language ... as something other than an enhanced imaging or vicarious repetition of a prior (non) experience": rather, the role of literature is as an act of both witness and representation that transmits knowledge in forms that are not totally realistic, scientific or analytical (Hartman, 1995, p. 552).

Importantly, the potency of a traumatic past to remain an open wound creates a tension that writers as well as artists and historians must negotiate in their attempts to retell the past. This inability to fully retrieve past traumatic events, and the distortions which result in the effort to communicate what has happened in the past, reinforces the notion that knowledge which is 'certain' or 'true' is, and has always been, elusive. In a recent study examining trauma experienced by survivors of childhood sexual abuse Susan Clancey reports that "memories are subject to decay and distortion over time ... [and] research shows that people have a tendency to let current psychological states bias their memories of the past" (Clancey, 2009, p. 88). In the retelling of past events "oral sources [may] tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing and what they now think they did" (Portelli, 1991, p. 50). The archival sources recount a litany of abuses, yet a reflection common to most care leavers concerned the lack of love, nurturing and sense of security; conditions now understood to be essential for healthy emotional and social development in young children. This backward gaze speaks of a gap or an absence, a longing for something lost which in fact was never gained. It also demonstrates how memory is refracted through a prism of contemporary values and attitudes.

Forms of writing which respond to traumatic events have raised vigorous debate among critics. Literary scholar Greg Forter reflects on the growth of trauma studies which stresses the power of texts seeking to transmit *directly* to the reader the experience of traumatic disruption rather than seeking to *represent* traumatising events (Forter, 2007, p. 260). A conflation of textually-induced disequilibrium with actual historical trauma is something Cathy Caruth views as trauma's capacity to be represented by those who haven't directly experienced it: "the best kind of text is one that actually induces trauma in its readers" (Forter, 2007, p. 262). Recognising the psychological dislocation and fracturing which occurs as a result of trauma reveals the discrepancies between the

repetitive and belated temporal structure of trauma versus the linear temporal structure of narrative. In seeking to capture the intrusive fragments of an unknown past, writing which is itself fractured in style may provide a sense of traumatic experience better than a lineal and literal description of this complex phenomenon. In this attempt to understand the “bewildering experience of trauma in our century ... we recognise the possibility of a history no longer based on simple models of straightforward experience and reference” (Caruth, 1996, p. 11).

This idea supports my premise that fictional stories may be considered important cultural texts, as a simplistic view of remembered history is challenged. Traumatic events involve such a breach in the mind that it is not fully assimilated and the paradox of knowing yet not knowing resists simple comprehension. As Caruth suggests, this lack of direct, experiential reference poses questions as to how representation of traumatic events can be transmitted when such crises simultaneously demand *and* defy our witness. She argues that such representation must be “spoken in a language that is somehow always literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (Caruth, 1996, p. 5). Saying the unsayable is a quest many writers undertake and Australian Nobel Laureate Patrick White (1912-1980) declared that he sought to write other than dun-coloured journalism by mimicking the process of abstract painting capturing “the fragmentation by which I convey reality” (White cited in Marr, 1992, p. 150). Similarly, I seek a writing style that at times escapes realism by pursuing a non-linear, disjointed narrative employing impressions, images, sketches, and imaginings in an endeavour to capture the troubling and sometimes unutterable experiences of my characters. Ultimately, my stories provide *a* version rather than *the* version of past events. The collection contains many voices thus disrupting any single narrative. The stories seek to evoke many feelings including grief, fear, confusion, unworthiness, isolation, guilt and shame as they speak to the ever present question driving the many enquiries: how could these atrocities have happened in a modern and so called ‘civilised’ society and how could that society turn a blind eye to such happenings?

The real and the imagined

An exploration of narrative, its presence and function as vehicle for knowledge, follows in Chapter Three. However, a brief reference to this significant mode of communication is included here as it draws connections between the mini-narratives of individual

testimony and the grand narratives of cultural ideology. Between these two types of narrative are liminal spaces that reflect both the real and the imagined: fact and fiction overlapping as the narratives reveal myriad meanings.

As qualitative researchers Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln suggest, “telling the stories of marginalised people can help create a public space requiring others to hear what they don’t want to hear” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 415). They believe this process allows for the previously silenced to be heard and they declare that qualitative research can be used as a “tool to create social change and advance social justice initiatives” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 249). Narrative enquiry, another research framework that complements arts-based methodology, also advocates the power of storytelling. The empirical materials researchers may study include life history, life story, personal narrative, oral history and testimonials; human experiences are at the core of this type of enquiry. Although critics of this approach focus on its incapacity to capture facts, proponents of this framework remind us that narrative enquiry:

... signals a move away from traditional ways of knowing and telling ... towards multiple ways of knowing and telling, away from traditional quests for objectivity towards a celebrated acceptance of subjectivity, away from grand narratives towards local narratives and away from facts and towards meanings. (Thomas, 2012, p. 211)

Opening the story collection is ‘Prologue’. This short narrative clearly belongs to an imaginary realm. Dead children cannot speak and there is dubious evidence of omniscient ghosts. However, it is anticipated that the text would do more than entertain: that it might instead raise questions about the circumstances surrounding this young child’s death – and of the others buried with her. Rather than seeking a literal truth, the purpose of narrative as a vehicle for enquiry “is not to ‘prove’ or ‘disprove’ anything, but rather question the notion of truth and, in doing so, expand notions of possibility” (Thomas, 2012, p. 208). By entering and feeling part of a story, readers may experience a realm that seeks verisimilitude: a world that is lifelike, believable and possible. Even stories which are not strictly realistic have this potential. Narratives seek to make our present, imagined future and remembered past cohere. Creating stories as ways of explaining ourselves, our world and our relationship to that world has prevailed since earliest times and these narratives are what historiographer Hayden White perceives as a

meta-code, “a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of shared reality can be transmitted” (White, 1990, p. 1). The words of literary theorist Barbara Hardy capture the scope of how narratives inform us: “we dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative” (Hardy, 1968, p. 5). And as literary critic Roland Barthes notes we recognise the ubiquity of narrative as present in every age, place and society (Barthes, 1987, p. 79). Cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner believed that “we seem to have no other way of describing ‘lived time’ save in the form of narrative” (Bruner, 2004, p. 692).

Earliest narratives, whether verse or prose, were represented by forms that often mingled historical and imaginary detail. In modern narratives, what is ‘true’ and what appears to be true may still become entangled. Thus, differentiating between modes of fiction and nonfiction remains problematic. In the broadest sense, narrative can be divided by these two genres: one is factual and the other is imaginative. It could be said that fiction is any narrative which is invented rather than an account of events that actually happened. Abrams and Harpham provide a more nuanced explanation:

fictive sentences are meaningful according to the rules of ordinary, nonfictional discourse, but in accordance with assertions implicitly shared by the author and reader of a work of fiction, they are not put forward as assertions of fact, and therefore are not subject to the criterion of truth or falsity that applies to sentences in nonfictional discourse. (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 128)

What is of interest here is the ‘implicit’ agreement made between author and reader, a point that literary critic Northrop Frye reinforces: “genre is determined by the conditions established between the poet and his public” (Frye, 2000, p. 247).

Australian author Amanda Curtin debates this issue at length in her doctoral dissertation as she unpicks what is ‘real’ and what is not in her own novel, which was later published in 2008 as *The Sinkings* (Curtin, 2006). She cautions against accepting simple binary distinctions between fiction and nonfiction as she points out the resemblance between historians and novelists. Historian David Lowenthal supports this view when he observes that “each genre has encroached on the domain once exclusive to the other; history has grown more like fiction, fiction like history” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 227). In their book *Is History Fiction?* Ann Curthoy and John Docker do not reject the

discrete discipline of history, but ponder long-standing questions about how historians tell the truth about the past. Included is the question as to whether histories shaped by narrative convention derive their meanings from their form rather than the past itself (Curthoys & Docker, 2010, p. 3). Ultimately, simplistic distinctions between fiction and nonfiction, which explain the categories as mutually exclusive, clear and unambiguous, are of no use. Ambiguity does exist and notions of ‘fact’ and ‘invention’ remain blurred.

As this arts-based thesis is committed to a move away from more traditional quantitative ways of knowing and telling by engaging with both local and grand narratives, it challenges readers to hear what they might not wish to hear. In doing so, it also seeks to expand notions of possibility by inviting debate around a core theme concerning the human condition: how and why those in power oppress and violate those without agency.

Conclusion

I have argued that the investigation of oral history, testimony, archive, memory and trauma are significant to a comprehensive view of the contextual elements of this thesis. Including a brief account of narrative omnipresence has also been an attempt to position the project in an epistemological space. Addressing these rather diverse topics has been essential to locating such complex subject matter. Place, time, events, beliefs, attitudes and discourses all inform where, why and how this history has been played out. Thus, in exploring the contextual influences informing this thesis, a range of disciplines are implicated as the complexities of re-imaging historical events are unravelled. Blurred boundaries are revealed which challenge the binary opposition of fiction and nonfiction as well as contesting the borders between many disciplines such as literature, history, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy. Storytelling, which is an ancient and continuing human endeavour, serves to make sense of the world by bridging the past and present yet it is revealed that this enduring form of narrative contains inventions and imaginings which blend history, myth and poetry. Even perceived factual accounts such as testimony and oral history are found to be coloured by the imagination and the processes of memory. Both official and unofficial (not previously heard) narratives are distorted over time and are subject to ‘refiguring’. The legacy of trauma is recognised as a disjunction between experiencing and understanding, exemplifying the paradox which

prevents victims truly comprehending what happened at a particular time, in a particular place.

My re-imaging of these past events through a contemporary lens is yet another blurring, a refraction of the original events, and as a researcher adopting a subjective, interpretive approach and what Denzin and Lincoln call “a more avant-garde activist view of method” I too “want to change the world by creating texts that move persons to action” (2011, p. 682). Like any research, my creative enquiry involves the complex politics of representation: past events and experiences can never be captured directly. Seeking to understand these lived experiences can only be via vicarious experiences and the representation of the other will always involve politics and ideology.

To draw together some of the many threads weaving through this chapter I reiterate what has been already stated: that the context of this thesis is not just about events that happened in a particular time and place. It is also informed by understandings and beliefs both from the past and into the present. My creative response to the data provided by testimonial accounts is shaped by so much more than the simple mission of retelling stories from the past. A culture of abuse and denial has been exposed within a child welfare system that was intended to protect and nurture children. For many thousands of children in care, the barbaric practices which were taking place behind high walls resulted in legacies of fear, shame, a sense of isolation and unworthiness. Stigma, secrecy and silence compounded these consequences. In the creative re-imaging of this history, a long silence has been broken. By providing different ways of viewing a world that was inhabited by these once forgotten children, it is hoped that via this journey into an imaginary realm the collection of stories may function as a significant cultural text.

The findings of this chapter suggest that there is no single, objective narrative of history: instead, a Bakhtinian view is posited. Such a view challenges the idea of single-voiced discourse and embraces the idea of a medley of voices bubbling to the surface engaged in multiple conversations, each struggling for cultural space thus resulting in multiple layers of ‘truth’ (Selden & Widdowson, 1993, p. 39). The many voices liberated in the fictional stories disrupt past official versions of what went on beyond the gates of child welfare institutions. By engaging in other than a literal rendering of lived experiences, it is argued that fiction can indeed disrupt and disturb the familiar and

commonplace; it can invite the search for multiple solutions by remaining open to the unexpected through unusual expressions, metaphors and imaginings.

Chapter Three: Telling stories

This chapter considers the theoretical underpinnings of the research project. The field of narratology is examined, tracing its beginnings from structuralism and its transition into poststructuralism. This examination reveals more about how narrative continues to function as a vehicle for human knowledge and how the disciplines of history and literature overlap. The chapter has been divided into two sections, beginning with the exploration of narrative structure in both fictional and nonfictional texts, and secondly investigating the complexities and functions of voice within narratives.

Theoretical perspectives

When considering the notion of theory, Jonathan Culler reminds us that the main effect of theoretical engagement is the disruption of common-sense views about writing, literature, experience and meaning. It is an exercise in thinking about thinking, a desire to understand what one is doing and the implications of that enterprise. This desire for understanding has resulted in “writings from outside the field of literary studies ...[being] taken up by people in literary studies because their analyses of language, or mind, or history, or culture, offer new and persuasive accounts of textual and cultural matters” (Culler, 2011, p. 3). Broadly termed *theory*, this body of works crosses many disciplines including anthropology, arts, history, gender studies, linguistics, literature, philosophy, psychology and sociology. The works Culler alludes to as theory “are those which have the power to make strange the familiar and to make readers conceive of their own thinking, behaviour, and institutions in new ways” (Culler, 1975, p. 8). This expansive definition supports the claim put forward by this thesis that certain kinds of knowledge can be created through the arts, in this case creative writing, which also have the power to make the strange familiar: that indeed such new and persuasive realisations of experience and meaning might themselves function as ‘theory’. This thesis does not set out to advance a new theoretical paradigm, instead addressing already recognised theories. Although this project is informed by writings from outside the field of literary studies, at its core it remains the production and exploration of narrative. It therefore draws largely on literary theory sources particularly the influences of Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin, the German school of Critical Theory and the corpus of theory known as narratology.

The theory of narrative

What is narrative?

The ever-presence of narrative, as Mieke Bal suggests, can be applied to virtually every cultural object: “practically everything in culture has a narrative aspect to it or at the very least, can be perceived and interpreted as narrative” (1997, p. 220). Beginning with the structuralist notion of ‘classical’ narratology, this discussion leads on to a poststructuralist view of ‘postclassical’ narratology. Such a move from textual formalism to historical contextualism reflects other post-discourses such as postmodernism, postcolonialism and feminist theory. The purpose of revisiting early structuralist attempts to understand, analyse and evaluate narratives is to reveal that the tool-box of concepts, including story, plot, discourse, text, work, voice and point of view compiled by these theorists, remains significant and still provides the foundations for investigating the narrative form (Nunning, 2004, p. 358).

From earliest times, stories have provided a way of understanding the world and have linked the past to the present. Stories are as old as campfires, but whereas early myths “record[ed] a completed vision of something true ... [contemporary] fiction often represents, for writer and for reader, a crisis of belief and a groping for certainties” (Stone et al., 1983, p. 20). This aura of uncertainty around literary narratives can also be perceived in narratives that inform other disciplines including history. As this thesis involves a creative narration of historical events, the discussion seeks to examine the ubiquitous nature of the story form in both fiction and nonfiction with particular reference to its locus in history. The investigation ponders questions about how narrative informs history, what fictive elements are embedded in historical narratives and whether fictional narratives about historical events can be perceived as justifiable realisations of ‘truth’. The groping for certainties suggested above is a postmodern angst which challenges acceptance of simplistic views about meaning and truth: the postmodern experience stems from “... a loss of fixed points of reference ... neither the world nor the self any longer possesses unity, coherence, meaning” (Selden & Widdowson, 1993, p. 178). The thesis argues a possibility for many truths being revealed in the palimpsest of stories told by multiple voices. To this end, the collection of stories operates in a dialogic form where there is no attempt “to orchestrate or unify the various points of view expressed by the

various characters” (Selden & Widdowson, 1993, p. 40). Thus, the creative stories for the project aim to engage with this crisis of belief, unsettling the reader, by *not* providing solutions, but instead setting in motion a desire to question the ideologically shaped, often inconsistent and at times fabricated official narratives about past events concerning child welfare organisations in Australia during the mid-twentieth century.

The concept of narrative can be viewed in several ways: as a cognitive structure or way of making sense of experience; as a type of text or utterance; and, as a tool for interactive communication (Herman, 2009, p. 7). It is the first of these interpretations that mostly informs this discussion, as the purpose of the thesis is to create narratives which strive to make sense of past events. However, on closer examination it is clear that each of the three views has some relevance to the discussion. The thesis *explores* narratives of each variety: historical documents which seek to ‘make sense of experience’; testimonials, memoirs, biographies, nonfiction and fiction each of which represent ‘types of text or utterance’, whilst together provide a multiplicity of perspectives acting as ‘tools for interactive communication’. The thesis also sets out to *produce* narratives of each variety: the story collection as ‘a type of text or utterance’; the critical component as a ‘cognitive structure’; and the combination of the creative and critical segments as ‘a tool for interactive communication’. So, in the context of this research project, it becomes apparent that each perspective overlaps and informs the other. David Herman captures this inter-relationships when he says, “narratives result from the complex transactions that involve producers of texts ... the texts themselves, and interpretations of these narrative productions working to make sense of them in accordance with cultural, institutional [and] genre-based ... protocols” (Herman, 2009, p. 8).

Narratologist Donald Polkinghorne returns the focus to the idea of narrative as a cognitive structure by claiming that it “gives meaning to temporal events by identifying them as parts of a plot” (1991, p. 136). This configuration takes place through the process of emplotment, in which a list or sequence of disconnected events is transformed into a unified story with a point or theme. As Frank Kermode suggests, in making sense of our lives we must position our stories in time; that we “have a need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and an end” (Kermode, 2000, p. 4). This temporal element of narrative is taken up by literary theorist Brian Richardson as he outlines four basic approaches for defining narrative: temporal, causal, minimal and transitional. He explains:

The first posits the representation of events in a time sequence as the defining feature of narrative; the second insists that some causal connection, however oblique, between the events is essential; the third and most capacious, Genette's, suggests that any statement of an action or event is *ispo facto* a narrative, since it implies a transformation or transition from an earlier to a later state; the fourth posits that narrative is simply a way of reading a text, rather than a feature or essence found in a text. (Richardson, 2000, p. 169)

The first two of these four approaches are the most commonly employed stances. A widely cited temporal definition is that of Gerald Prince; narrative is "the representation of at least two real or fictive events in a time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other" and a fairly consensual causal definition by Dorrit Cohn conceives of narrative as "a series of statements that deal with a causally related sequence of events that concern human (or human-like) beings" (cited in Richardson, 2000, p. 2). Each of these two definitions could be employed to explain survivors' narratives but it is the third of the four narrative approaches, implying a transition from a former to a later state, which invites a way of considering the 'figuring' aspects of testimony which is discussed earlier. Survivors of institutionalised care, just as any storytellers, bend and shape their narratives searching for understandings as they reflect on this transitional aspect of themselves, but instead of the more expected transition from dependent children to independent adults, their transition is often from helpless children to damaged adults.

As troubling as these survivors' accounts may be, the expression of life in the shape of stories seems as fundamental as breathing. Life as story has remained a recognisable form over millennia as human experiences and journeys, both physical and psychological, have been mapped and explored. Despite varying interpretations around the concept of narrative, an underpinning belief that narrative frameworks inform our view of the world and our place within it remains an important connecting thread throughout the project. The 'forgotten Australian' narratives provide another layer of story seeking to understand the vagaries, inconsistencies and flaws of the human condition. The idea that mankind is evolving as more civilised, informed and empathic is challenged by the collection of stories. Resolution and redemption are not offered to the reader. Instead the stories seek to provide pathways for reflection, debate and multiple ways of viewing the world.

Ultimately, no matter how the term narrative is defined, it appears that it has long served as a successful device for recreating the past. The notion that narratives are an embedded part of how we function continues to be claimed, as indicated by theorist and narratologist Monica Fludernik, who states that “research is showing increasingly clearly [that] the human brain is constructed in such a way that it captures many complex relationships in the form of narrative structures” (Fludernik, 2009, p. 1). Storytelling as a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process and change is pervasive, a belief that is reinforced by Roland Barthes: “narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society... All classes, all human groups have their narratives ... narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself” (Barthes, 1987, p. 79). Barthes saw narrative as present everywhere and available through a variety of genres including myth, legend, fable, history, tale and novel. Catherine Riessman asserts that memoir, biography, autobiography, diary, archival document, official record, folk ballad and photograph should be added to this list of genres (Riessman, 2008, p. 5).

Narrative as a way of explaining life was also central to the work of cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner who explored the idea in his 1987 publication *Life as Narrative*. His central premise is that ‘world making’ is the principal function of the mind, and that since the Enlightenment this has mostly been explained in terms of logical-scientific reality. He argues an alternative explanation: that our world may be constructed in the form of stories, that “we organise our experiences and our memory of human happening mainly in the form of narrative – stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing” (Bruner, 1991, p. 4). David Herman concurs with this position when he says, “an essential part of our mental lives, narratively organised systems of signs are also socially constituted and propagated, being embedded in social groups and constructed in social encounters which are themselves represented after the fact by way of narratives” (Herman, 2009, p. 9). This research project builds on past narratives, and by creating stories upon stories it aims to contribute new understandings about how we might view ourselves and the society we inhabit. It is the task of these new stories to alert us to complacent notions of an evolving civilised, inclusive society and shock us into realisations that such ideas may be illusionary.

History and narrative

The use of stories to describe human activity and past events has long engaged scholars in debate about the distinction between historical and literary narratives. For many this boundary is blurred. Oral historian, Mary Chamberlain, reinforces this view by saying, “the writing of history ... [bears] close affinity with other forms of imaginative writing and engage[s] with similar narrative devices” (Chamberlain, 2008, p. 387). The way narrative shapes history continues to blur the historical/literary boundaries and an examination of the way the past is *re-presented* through narrative is significant to both the creative and critical aspects of this research project. Whether invited or not, the past invades our present in the form of relics, artefacts, histories and memories, and it is usually narrative which acts as the bridge between the past and present. Historian David Lowenthal reminds us this when he paraphrases Mendilow: “we are at any moment the sum of all our moments, the product of all our experiences” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 185). Lives thus become stories built on what has happened in our past. Lowenthal suggests that although the past may resonate differently according to culture, era and individual, many of us “are so enlivened (or oppressed) by remembered or imagined pasts that all present experiences resonate with memories of them” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 186).

The domain of historians has long been the representation and interpretation of the past and the earliest vehicle was the narrative form (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 17). However, since the Enlightenment, debate has prevailed as to whether history should adopt the more formal methods of science in order to defend itself as a valid form of knowledge. During this period of intellectual development, the notion that human reason could free humanity from past superstition, prejudice, authority and unexamined tradition prevailed. The idea that ‘reason’ was arrived at by the inductive procedures of science became a dominant model (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 106). Such a model demanded that history adopt formal scientific methods in order to maintain credibility. Positivism rather than interpretivism was deemed superior in its claim to objective and valid knowledge. As the discipline of history had a long tradition prior to the advent of formal science, an early response was for historians to argue for a variety of legitimate epistemological schemes including the narrative tradition. Polkinghorne, intrigued by the links between history and

narrative, traces the development of history as a discipline and he points out that the human versus formal science debate began in 1868 when Johann Droysen claimed that the narrative scheme *was* a legitimate knowledge form. Droysen explained that “there are three possible scientific methods: the speculative (philosophy and theology), the mathematical or physical, and the historical. Their respective essences are to know, to explain and to understand” (cited in Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 38). As historiographer Hayden White observes, this differentiation between explanation and understanding prompted Droysen to argue that history must be:

considered an autonomous field of study and a discipline with its own particular aims, methods, and subject matter, and hence must be distinguished from Positivistic science, Idealistic philosophy and Romantic art. (White, 1993, p. 271)

Droysen went on to emphasize that the mimesis of actual events should not be regarded as a photographic reproduction of the events: that it is not “objectivity which is the historian’s best glory. His justness consists in seeking to understand” (Droysen cited in White, 1993, p. 272).

Distinctions between physical explanation and historical understanding were seen as distinguishing between the natural and human sciences and Wilhelm Dilthey, writing in 1883, continued this argument by working to clarify and refine the notion of ‘understanding’ as developed in hermeneutics, which can be understood to be “an approach to the analysis of texts that stresses how prior understandings and prejudices shape the interpretive process” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 16). He perceived that hermeneutics could have broader application and be used as a general method for comprehending all of human expression. Dilthey’s attempts to establish history and the human sciences as autonomous and distinct from the physical sciences fuelled on-going debate and controversy regarding the concepts of explanation and understanding in history. His approach advocated “that the purpose of enquiry in the human sciences was understanding (*verstehen*) rather than proof or prediction” (Erickson, 2011, p. 44).

From that time, there have been a range of responses to the engagement of history with formal science. The neo-Kantians moved towards logical positivism’s pure logic of science embracing the Kantian notion that “all true knowledge, whether of the natural world or of human expression, should be objectively valid” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 40). Defending a ‘different and autonomous’ method for history the neo-Kantians claimed the

objective validity of their method of understanding by arguing “that it did not produce an arbitrary and subjective knowledge solely determined by the historical standpoint of the knower” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 40). Underpinning this claim was the notion that there existed true, ideal values independent of people’s beliefs or circumstances. By the early twentieth century an increasingly dominant view was that formal science was the only way of gaining legitimate knowledge, and questions around whether criteria for historical objectivity and truth even existed were revisited. By this time a division within the discipline of history was apparent: those who favoured the traditional narrative vehicle for history and those who sought approximations to a scientific standpoint. Numerous attempts to limit history to a single, deductive-nomological mode of explanation proved inconclusive and despite further and extensive enquiry into causal analysis it was agreed that although historians may arrive at their explanations through judgment and the logic of practical choice, this could not be construed as scientific deduction (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 48).

It was Hayden White’s seminal work *Metahistory* (1973) that shifted the focus from the objective/subjective debate arguing that literary devices *were* employed in historical writing. The result was a major rupture in the presumed boundary between history and literature where previously both historians and literary critics sought a clear distinction: that history dealt with a representation of the ‘real’ and that literature created compositions of the imagination. White spoke of the linguistic protocols that have long underpinned historians’ works as they “fashion a ‘story’ out of the ‘chronicle’ of events in the historical record” (White, 1993, p. 426), and he “assigned the procedures of literary emplotment to the narrative structure of history ... propos[ing] that history and fiction belong[ed] to the same mode of comprehension” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 53). According to White, a narrative organisational hierarchy is apparent: firstly, the listing of events in chronological order (chronicle); secondly, the story line where the themes and motifs are grouped together; and thirdly, emplotment (plot) where the story line is ordered according to traditional cultural modes like romance, tragedy, comedy and satire or any combination of these. He believed that “the historian is forced to emplot the whole set of stories making up his narrative in one comprehensive or *archetypal* story form” (White, 1993, p. 8), and that historical narrative is a construction of a story about reality rather than a direct representation of it. From White’s point of view, the writing of history remained “prey to the creation of mutually exclusive, though equally legitimate, interpretations of

the same set of historical events” (White, 1993, p. 428). This debate about the legitimacy of narrative discourse as a mode for explaining the past occupied White and other scholars like Louis Mink (1965), who remained sceptical about the representational value of historical narrative. These theorists observed that life has no beginnings, middles and ends, that “original experiences are heterogeneous, unstructured and confused, composed of scrambled messages that can hardly be spoken of at all” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 68).

Narratologist Monica Fludernik also explores narrative as an historical vehicle but cautions against equating historical and novelistic texts. She views history as an area of study “which interprets, orders, analyses and attempts to *explain* human experience but it does not set out to *represent* such experience” (Fludernik, 2009, p. 41, her italics). In this respect she echoes the words of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur who stated that “a gap remains between narrative explanation and historical explanation, a gap that is inquiry as such. This gap prevents us from taking history ... as a species of the genus ‘story’” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 179). Although Fludernik differentiates between narrative structuring of experience and narrative structuring of history she concedes that history is a constructed discourse and that most historical ‘events’ are already in story form, having been reconstructed from oral or written witness reports which usually display a high degree of narrativity (Fludernik, 2009, p. 41).

Ricoeur agreed that there was a connection between history and narrative although he believed there existed “an epistemological break between historical knowledge and our ability to follow a story” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 175). He argued that “conceptualisation, the search for objectivity, and critical re-examination ... marked the three steps in making explanation in history autonomous [thus differentiating it from] the ‘self-explanatory’ character of narrative” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 177). Yet, despite this perceived break between history and narrative Ricoeur insisted that history “cannot ... sever every connection with narrative without losing its historical character” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 177). From this philosophical stand-point, Ricoeur shifted the earlier discussion from the representational value of historical narrative to a reflection on how life and narrative overlapped. He concluded that there *was* some overlap between narrative and the lives humans enact, that there was an underlying template that allows experience to be configured as narrative. Polkinghorne agreed with this view, stating that “narrative is the fundamental scheme for linking individual human actions and events into interrelated aspects of an understandable composite” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 13). He deduced that historians do not work with

fragments of past actions, “rather for the most part, they work with materials that are already in story form. Actions have already been lived as stories ... the historian does not narrate past facts but retells past stories from a current perspective” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 69).

Late in the twentieth century history scholars continued to grapple with concepts of inference, judgement, explanation, comprehension and knowledge, and despite a few critics who continued to challenge the legitimacy of the narrative model, attention returned to a narrativist rather than causal interpretation of history. Into the twenty-first century, this trend continues as the field of narratology expands to inform many disciplines including history.

Recalling the past

History may be described as the branch of knowledge dealing with past events, events that are expressed orally or recorded in written form. The act of remembering these past events requires engagement with the imagination, a slippery concept that was much considered in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s (1772-1834) theories of both poetry and general mental processes. Abrams and Harpham explain Coleridge’s perception of imagination as being “able to ‘create’ rather than merely reassemble, by dissolving ... the mental pictures, or images received from the senses – and unifying them into a new whole” (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 120). Numerous variations around the concept of imagination have been argued since Coleridge’s time, but it seems a view prevails that remembering past events involves a process of invention. Nor is this a new perception, for as far back as Aristotle’s *Poetics* (335 BCE), the idea that history and fiction often coalesced was evident. In Aristotle’s era, style and language rather than fidelity to facts was a focus and texts which strived for mimesis (the imitation of human actions) were formalised with specific genres attributed to the kind of actions re-presented. Drama, epic, tragedy and comedy were the major vehicles for narrative and following the normative forms and styles of the Greek masters was a major influence until the eighteenth century. Debate about the mimetic relationship between stories and life have prevailed over the centuries and texts have ranged from strict realism represented by prose, to remote idealism found in poetry (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 172). The foundation for psychoanalytic theory, which began with Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and was followed up by theorists such as Carl Jung (1875-1961) and Erik Erikson (1902-

1994), consolidated the notion of the unconscious mind and implicated in this idea of the unconscious are the workings of memory and the imagination (Berger, 2017, p. 37). Exploration into these complex mental processes continues, with neuroscience currently taking up the challenge. Morris Moscovitch reports that recent neurobiological studies suggest that “we cannot think of memory as an immutable, free-standing entity waiting to be discovered and retrieved, but as a representation that is *created* from the interaction of the retrieval cues and processes with stored knowledge” (Moscovitch, 2008, p. 77, my italics).

Just how narratives reflect social reality continues to be pondered with many theoretical frames available as tools for such analyses. My creative artefact is situated in twenty-first century poststructuralism which critiques empiricism by decentring and disrupting unified world-views. Nevertheless, the work also speaks to a Marxist unity whilst simultaneously being coloured by feminist and postcolonial thought. Thus, it exists in a place of creative tension, a liminal theoretical space where something new is born in the endeavour to represent human actions within a social reality via the narrative form. My study could be considered through a Critical Theory frame which is defined as “a wide-ranging form of social analysis grounded in Hegelian Marxism and including Freudian [psychoanalytic] elements” (Selden & Widdowson, 1993, p. 81). Such a window captures the underlying reality of class struggle and a leading figure of Critical Theory, Theodore Adorno strongly advanced the notion that art and literature functioned as theatres of resistance to social reality. It was his view that “art cannot simply reflect the social system, but acts within that reality as an irritant which produces an indirect sort of knowledge” (Selden & Widdowson, 1993, p. 82).

Often, it is through these various theoretical frames that scholars are alerted to ideological concerns regarding any recounting of past historical events. Culler notes that these theoretical approaches to literature are “from the point of view of hermeneutics, dispositions to give particular kinds of answers to the question of what a work is ultimately ‘about’” (Culler, 2011, p. 65). The issue of class is certainly part of what my creative work is ‘about’. The reality of mid-twentieth century Australia meant that if families were positioned in a lower social/economic class, this greatly increased the likelihood of the children being institutionalised. As the *Forgotten Australians* report found, “a parent’s lack of finances often underlies the reasons for children being admitted to residential care” (McLucas, 2004, p. 72). Most care survivors came from families who

were often marginalised and discriminated against due to a lack of economic and cultural capital, although ‘othering’ was also gender and race determined. The embedded patriarchy of that era labelled women as the weaker sex who, without a male head of the family, would be unlikely to possess the rigour (or financial support) required to rear children, whilst the overtones of colonial rule still dominated a society where policies and mores reflected the belief in the superiority of white, Christian, upper-middle class members of society.

The mimetic relationship between art and life remains contested as contemporary narrative works cross borders of form (genre) and disrupt styles of conventional language in an attempt to capture what it is to be human within a social reality. These non-traditional narrative practices peaked with modernism and continue into the postmodern era. Such counter-traditional experiments began as a deliberate and radical break from Western culture in general. Thinkers questioned “the certainties that had supported traditional modes of social organisation, religion ... morality ... and traditional ways of conceiving the human self” (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 225). Narratives which assumed a “relatively stable and coherent social order” no longer reflected a social reality (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 226). These challenges to traditional beliefs as well as to style and form also impact historical accounts transported via narrative structures. The ancient blurring of boundaries between history and fiction remains despite myriad attempts to prise fact from fabulation. As eminent historiographer Hayden White notes, “the historian ... had to cleave the truth, insofar as humanly possible, avoiding the ‘fabulous’ at all costs, inventing nothing not justified by the facts, and suppressing his own prejudices and party interests lest he throw himself open to the charge of slander” (White, 1993, p. 49).

Fidelity to facts may still be an historian’s goal, yet an awareness that the reconstruction of past events is highly subjective and figured by omissions and inventions informs scholarly attempts from a range of disciplines, including history and literature. As Lowenthal says, “the truth in history is not the only truth about the past; every story is true in countless ways, ways that are more specific in history and more general in fiction” (1985, p. 229). It is also his opinion that many people discover the past through a variety of fictional texts rather than through any formal history scholarship (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 224). My project supports his view as it renders history via fiction. Fundamental is the role narrative plays in this process, firstly as survivors recount the stories of their

particular pasts (narratives to make sense of their experiences) and at a second level when these stories are re-imagined as creative fiction (narratives as a type of text as well as a tool for interactive communication).

The study of narrative

Like the historians, literary theorists have no unified theory regarding the study of narrative but have moved towards a “general concern with the kind of comprehension and truth communicated by narrative expression” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 72). Although varied approaches represent the broad school of thought known as narratology, this body of theories has evolved in an attempt to both understand the components of narrative and to analyse how particular narratives achieve their effects. The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines narratology as “a term used since 1969 to denote the branch of literary study devoted to the analysis of narratives, and more specifically of forms of narrative and varieties of narrator” (Baldick, 2015, p. 166). The term is often associated with structuralism notes Baldick, but he writes “older studies of narrative forms and devices, as far back as Aristotle’s *Poetics* (4th century BCE) can also be regarded as narratological works” (Baldick, 2015, p. 166). Baldick dates modern narratology from Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), and narratology as a theory of narrative became a focus around the 1960s when structuralists such as Gerard Genette, Roland Barthes, and Tzvetan Todorov sought “not to interpret literature but to investigate its structures and devices” (Genette, 1981, p. 8). According to Abrams and Harpham, these structuralist narratologists did “not treat a narrative in the traditional way, as a fictional representation of life and the world, but as a systematic and purely formal construction” (2012, p. 234). Their aim was to determine codes of composition and formulate a “grammar” of narrative. Although these systematic and formal notions of narratology have morphed into many varied theoretical positions since the mid- twentieth century, these structuralist foundations require further discussion in order to make connections with more recent poststructuralist theories of narratology.

Narrative theory developed from a linguistic model where Todorov and others like Propp perceived “syntax (the rules of sentence construction) as the basic model of narrative rules” (Selden & Widdowson, 1993, p. 109). This idea of a ‘narrative syntax’, where the subject of a sentence was compared with typical characters and the predicate with typical actions set the scene for later more complex arrangements of this

fundamental idea: “all the syntactic rules of language are restated in their narrative guise – rules of agency, predication, adjectival and verbal functions, mood and aspect, and so on” (Selden & Widdowson, 1993, p. 112). French structuralist critic Gerard Genette took a slightly different path as he divided narrative into three levels: story, discourse and narration which are related to three qualities of the verb: tense, mood and voice. Concepts such as text, story, plot, event, focalisation, order, duration, frequency, mood and voice were unravelled in his “influential analyses of the complex interrelationships between a story and the types of discourse in which the story is narrated” (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 234). Genette’s interest in the workings of narrative discourse (narrative as text or utterance) “constantly implie[d] a study of relationships: on the one hand the relationship between a discourse and the events that it recounts ... and on the other hand the relationship between the same discourse and the act [of speaking/writing] that produce[d] it” (Genette, 1981, p. 27). His distinction between ‘mood’ and ‘voice’ clarifies some of the complexities around what he termed ‘focalisation’, what is now usually known as ‘point of view’, where we may fail to differentiate between the voice of the narrator and the viewpoint (mood) of a character.

Structuralist studies aimed to define the general principles of literary structure rather than provide interpretations of individual texts. The main concerns for this ‘classical’ narratology were text rather than context and form as opposed to content. It was a mode of study that was perceived as a neutral tool in its description and analysis of texts. Instead of saying that “an author’s language reflects reality, the structuralists argue that the structure of language produces ‘reality’”(Selden & Widdowson, 1993, p. 121). Gerald Prince comments that the traditional narratologist “pays little or no attention to the story as such, the narrated, the what that is represented, and concentrates instead on the discourse, the narrating, the way in which the ‘what’ is represented” (cited in Punday, 2000, p. 227). In Angsar Nunning’s view “when narratology was invented in the late 1960s, three of the things that were lost were context, cultural history and interpretation” (Nunning, 2004, p. 354). Yet, Julianne van Loon reminds us that the work of these early structuralists remains highly relevant to writers and critics of narrative fiction in explaining how narratives come to mean what they mean: “what the structuralist did ... was to disassemble the machine of language and narrative and provide some useful insights into its component parts” (2009, p. 19).

Structuralist literary critics such as Roland Barthes, Gerard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov argued that reading is a structured activity that requires the study of processes by which meaning is produced. This rule-governed process was envisaged as a kind of literary competence which would enlighten readers providing a type of logic by which acceptable meanings are produced. Such a position was in opposition to:

mimetic criticism (the view that literature is primarily a reflection of reality), to *expressive criticism* (the view that literature primarily expresses the feelings or temperament or creative imagination of the author), and to any form of view that literature is a mode of communication between author and readers. (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 382)

As this structuralist quasi-scientific view fell out of favour via a range of poststructuralist theories, it was increasingly considered that texts could be read in many ways. Culler takes up this claim as he argues that “each text contains within itself the possibility of an infinite set of structures, and to privilege some by setting up a system of rules ... is a blatantly prescriptive and ideological move” (Culler, 1975, p. 242). Yet, critic Brian Richardson cautions that although postmodern ideologically and politically engaged schools of critical thought may have “swept away the mania for structure, spurious objectivity, pretentious system building, false claims of organicism, and scientific excess” there remains a field of indeterminacies (Richardson, 2000, p. 170). It is Richardson’s belief that despite the upheavals in the field of narratology there persists a significant presence of older schools including Marxist, Freudian and structuralist traditions and like van Loon he is not prepared to throw the structuralist baby out with the formalist bathwater.

A plethora of evolving poststructuralist theories challenge the orthodoxy of structuralism, and are all concerned with the central argument that structuralist narratology ignored context, cultural history and interpretation. One of the new narratological approaches to have emerged is termed ‘cultural narratology’ by Ansgar Nunning, a leading theorist in the field. He argues that classical narratology and context-sensitive analyses of narrative need not be viewed as incompatible, that the gap between ‘neutral’ description and ‘ideological’ evaluation can be closed by an applied cultural narratology. Attention has been shifted to consider how narrative forms contribute to our understandings of such phenomena as gender, history and subjectivity and “the ways in

which narrative forms function as an active cognitive force in the actual generation of attitudes, discourses, ideologies, values, and ways of thinking ... [in other words] how literary production is engaged in the ongoing process of cultural construction” (Nunning, 2004, p. 356). Nunning cites Bender as an example of narrative’s active role in shaping mentalities:

I consider literature and the visual arts as advanced forms of knowledge, as cognitive instruments that anticipate and contribute to institutional formation. Novels ... are primary historical and ideological documents: the vehicles, not the reflections of social change. (Bender cited in Nunning, 2004, p. 358)

Narrative has long been perceived as an imitation or representation of human endeavour (mimesis), although this concept may be realised in diverse forms ranging from the real to the abstract. Cultural narratology questions this mimetic tradition by suggesting it is more rewarding to conceptualise narrative as an active cognitive force in its own right which has “the power [in] narrative fictions to ‘represent a medley of voices engaged in a conversation and/or struggle for cultural space’” (Scholes cited in Nunning, 2004, p. 358). This view incorporates Russian Formalist Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism and his interpretation of the carnivalesque, both of which have been embraced by many in the field of cultural narratology. Selden and Widdowson paraphrase Bakhtin’s idea of carnival when they explain that he stressed, “not the way texts reflect society or class interests, but rather the way language is made to disrupt authority and liberate alternative voices” (Selden & Widdowson, 1993, p. 39). Bakhtin himself says that:

... carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions ... [It was] the feast of becoming, change, and renewal (Bakhtin, 1994, p. 199)

Bakhtin described monologic discourse in contrast to dialogic discourse, as a type of discourse where a unified, authoritative voice subordinates all other character voices. The primary component of literary work in Bakhtin’s view is dialogic discourse that can be summarised as “a medley of voices, social attitudes, and values that are not only opposed, but irreconcilable, with the result that the work remains unresolved and open-ended” (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 86). It was in his influential book *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1929, trans., 1984) that Bakhtin described this dialogic interaction:

[Dostoevsky] heard both the loud, recognised, reigning voices of the epoch, that is, the reigning, dominant ideas (official and unofficial), as well as voices still weak, ideas not yet fully emerged, latent ideas heard as yet by no-one but himself, ideas that were just beginning to ripen, embryos of future worldviews. (Bahktin, 1994, p. 100)

This notion of emerging ideas as embryos of future worldviews dovetails neatly with the claim this thesis proposes: that my story collection possesses voices that have similar capabilities.

Returning to cultural narratology thus informed by Bakhtin's theories, the suggestion is that rather than merely imitating human action, narrative constructs its own reality. Gabriele Helms Riessman contributes to this conversation by asking 'what does narrative do?' Her view is also that narrative does more than imitate, that it generates its own social and political agency. In summary, she notes:

Narratives often serve different purposes for individuals than they do for groups ... Individuals use the narrative form to remember, argue, justify, persuade, engage, entertain, and even mislead ... Groups use stories to mobilise others, and to foster a sense of belonging. Narratives do political work. The social role of stories ... is an important facet of narrative theory. (Riessman, 2008, p. 8)

These notions about the active forces that may be contained in narratives, particularly fictional narrative, reinforce the claim of this thesis that fictional narratives may be catalysts for social change. Indeed arts-based research methodologies often undertake political work with artefacts functioning as significant cultural texts. Critics and theorists continue to grapple with the idea that narrative frameworks may not be neutral: that narrative itself is an active force in the construction of reality, both past and present. The view that narrative techniques are not neutral is also expressed by Culler when he asks "is narrative a fundamental form of knowledge (giving knowledge of the world through its sense-making) or is it a rhetorical structure that distorts as much as it reveals? Is narrative a source of knowledge or of illusion?" (Culler, 2011, p. 93). He offers no definitive answer instead suggesting that "we must move back and forth between awareness of narrative as a rhetorical structure that produces the illusion of perspicacity and a study of narrative as the principal sense-making at our disposal" (Culler, 2011, p. 74). In some respect this mirrors the structuralist versus poststructuralist

debate which prevails as the study of narrative continues to employ both formal (classical) methods of analysis as well as a range of context-sensitive (postclassical) methods for interpretation. What Nunning finds is that context and form, content and narrative technique are closely intertwined rather than mutually exclusive as early structuralists would have us believe. He believes that cultural narratology takes into account “both thematic and formal features of texts and the ways in which epistemological, ethical and social problems are articulated in the forms of narrative representation” (Nunning, 2004, p. 359).

Summing up, it is apparent there is a renaissance in the field of narratology as it informs many disciplines, thus reinforcing the commonly held view that narrative functions as a basic vehicle for human knowledge. Acting as an underlying structure it informs genres of both fiction and nonfiction across a range of disciplines including history, anthropology, psychology, philosophy and literature. A question explored here is whether narrative is a rhetorical structure that distorts as much as it reveals and it is the ambiguity of such a claim that continues to challenge a simplistic perspective of this pervasive story form.

The voices in stories

Who speaks?

One of the elements dissected from the whole of a narrative text is the concept of ‘voice’. It may be argued that rather than being the utterances from one dominant narrative persona, ‘voice’ may in fact consist of a polyphony of varied voices. The dialogic theory of Bakhtin explores the possibility of competing voices engaged in a conversation all competing to be heard. Such as perspective contends that narrative fiction is a cognitive force which influences and challenges unspoken “mental assumptions and cultural issues of a given period” (Nunning, 2004, p. 358). Bakhtin’s insistence on the competing voices of marginalised groups provides a link to Critical Theory whose purpose is the emancipatory struggles for greater justice within societies: the seeking to “liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Horkheimer cited in Barani & Yahya, 2012, p. 143). Polyphonic voices are a key to the subversive capability of narrative thus providing a means to disrupt complacent attitudes and hegemonic discourses.

What this term ‘voice’ means and how it functions within narrative has captured the attention of theorists and critics since earliest literary production. One popular idea

conceives of a voice beyond the fictional voices that speak in a work, suggesting that we have a sense of “a pervasive authorial presence ... who has invented, ordered and rendered all these literary characters and materials in just this way” (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 287). A similar definition is provided by T.S. Eliot who described voice as the author “‘talking to himself’ addressing an audience, or creating a character or persona who speaks” (cited in Wyke, 1996, p. 133). These explanations tend to simplify the concept and suggest the possibility of only unified and monologic narratives. However, Genette’s definition points to the more complex and discursive aspects of voice where possible layers of voice could be attributed to the different figures of author, narrator and characters. In his analysis, voice is “the mode of action of the verb considered for its relations to the subject – the subject here being not only the person who carries out or submits to the action, but also the person ... who reports it, and ... all those people who participate, even though passively in this narrating activity” (Genette, 1981, p. 213). Genette’s voice concept remains – that is the existence of a narrator’s voice whether attributed to author, narrator or characters – and this view continues to be shared by narrative scholars despite objections to this position from critics like Ann Banfield (1982) and Andrew Gibson (2001). Their opposition to the more commonly held views of narrative voice and their claim that there is no such thing has been largely ignored. A more well received critic who further develops Genette’s ideas about voice is Monica Fludernik (1996) who speaks of a linguistically generated *illusion* of a voice that the reader rather than the narrator creates (Hansen, 2011, p. 3).

Critics continue to address the age-old question of “who speaks?” and as Hansen and others observe “the term voice thus would seem to combine the stabilizing function of an always-necessary narrator with the seductive mimetic intuitivity of someone talking (to us)” (Hansen, 2011, p. 2). The key elements are that a narrative somebody – the narrator – is speaking to someone – the narratee. The term voice continues to stimulate debate in the field of narratology and as Richard Walsh (2007) remarks, although the idea of voice may appear “‘commonsensical at first sight’ [it is] ‘unexpectedly elusive on closer inspection’” (cited in Hansen, 2011, p. 4). Claire Wilkshire, whose doctoral dissertation analysed voice in contemporary short fiction, also reminds us of the difficulties in providing a clear-cut definition of voice because it would fail to encompass all the possibilities. She explains that “while the term ‘voice’ is at times used to designate one dominant narrative persona or stance” her study ... “explore[s] the voices of

characters as well as narrators, and ... demonstrate[s] that the narrator's voice is often not one voice but many" (Wilkshire, 1997, p. 19). As she explains, voice functions in a variety of ways and the complex relations among figures such as author, implied author, narrator, and characters often overlap, creating what she calls "the broad range of languages which combine to form that strange and variegated thing which is called narrative voice" (Wilkshire, 1997, p. 2).

There are scholars, such as Brian Richardson and Silvie Patron, who choose to explore different paths that separate them from what arguably may be considered dominant views of the connection between voice and narrative. They and Nordic critics such as Hansen and Nielson (2011) take a special interest either in strange voices *in* the literary text or in the strangeness of the voice *of* the literary text and they do so by questioning the widespread notion that literary narratives always abide by the same rules as real life narratives. They are a reminder that literary narratives excel in the construction of and playing with the strangeness of the written, narrating voice (Hansen, 2011, p. 4). Readers may well pursue this avenue when considering the many and varied voices contained in the artefact of this thesis, particularly when confronted with the voices of a doll and a dead child. For many readers the more commonly held concept of 'voice' remains a potent element of a narrative text. Often the most recognisable are the voices of characters: a character is male or female, young or old, belonging to a particular race or ethnic group, identifiable by particular physical, emotional and psychological attributes and speaks with a certain tone. Although uncommon, a character may be real or unreal, dead or alive.

Less obvious are the voices behind these voices: those of author (implied or real) and narrator or narrators. 'Who' is speaking in a narrative discourse is of prime importance to the reader and within the field of narratology much attention has been given to a particular manifestation of voice (which also implicates the idea of point of view), that of the unreliable narrator. In 1961, Wayne C. Booth first proposed his well-known definition where he states that "I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms) *unreliable* when he does not" (cited in Nunning, 2008, p. 89). Following Booth, almost identical definitions have prevailed in standard narratological works. Ansgar Nunning argues the need to reconceptualise this term as he points out the elusiveness of this definition. More recent attempts at defining this concept have followed two paths.

The first explores the question of moral distance between the norms of the implied or real author and those articulated by a narrator. The second examines the veracity of the account a narrator gives (Nunning, 2008, p. 93). The first of these paths remains the most debated and the use of terminology such as ‘basic common sense’, ‘human decency’ and ‘normal moral standards’ provide little guidance in a pluralistic and postmodernist age, yet they still abound in narratological discussions. What Nunning suggests is a move towards synthesising the two approaches regarding the concept of unreliable narrator: the rhetorical (recursive relationships between implied author, text and reader) and the cognitive (emphasis on reader response and cultural framework) in an effort to explain what he says is the intricate problem of how readers and critics intuitively consider narrators to be reliable or otherwise (Nunning, 2008, p. 105).

Culler’s hypothesis about literary effects is rather less didactic as he argues that “most literary effects, particularly in narrative prose, depend on the fact that readers will try to relate what the texts tells them to a level of ordinary human concerns, to the actions and reactions of characters constructed in accordance with integrity and coherence” (cited in Nunning, 2008. p. 95). This interaction between text and reader is a move away from the idea of a narrator’s character traits to a more interpretive strategy on the part of the reader. As readers we do usually expect what the narrator tells us to be authoritative yet writers of fiction (an example being Henry James) have long employed the device of unreliable or fallible narrator. A narrator’s excessive innocence, over-sophistication or moral obtuseness are just some of the ways authority may be decentred.

Another view of unreliability is put forward by critic Tzvetan Todorov who argues the device of unreliable narration as deliberately designed by the author to leave the reader in a state of uncertainty as to how to interpret a text. His term was ‘fantastic literature’ and he suggests readers may step outside the reference points of reality to another realm of the supernatural as explanations of unreliability. Magic realism is an example of this enterprise crafted by weaving sharply etched realism with dreamlike and fantastic elements. Creating a sense of discombobulation for readers is common to much modern fiction and the fallibility of a narrator is just one of the methods employed where more than a superficial level of interpretation is demanded. The story collection for this thesis invites such uncertainty as it utilises both strange and unreliable voices in the works. There are voices like those of the doll and the dead child, which take the reader out of the empirically verifiable world, and there are other voices such as the morally

questionable paedophile Victor, brain-damaged Billy and demented Janet, which may also be considered unreliable.

As previously discussed, contributing to this sense of ambiguity around the subject of voice is the argument for polyphony put forward by Mikhail Bakhtin who perceives voice as always multiple and concludes that narratives can never be totally monologic; they must be dialogic. He states that “authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters can enter the novel: [and] each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships...” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 263). Abrams and Harpham interpret this perspective by explaining that “a person’s speech does not express an autonomous individuality; instead his or her character emerges in the course of the dialogue and is composed of languages from diverse social contexts ... [and that] the multiple voices which constitute the text of any novel disrupt the author’s single voice” (2012, p. 86). Here it is important to differentiate between Bakhtin’s ideas of polyphony (multiple voices but not necessarily in conflict) and heteroglossia (conflicting voices coming from both ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ discourses). Alluded to earlier is the notion of the carnivalesque which argues the oppositional tension between official and non-official discourse. The unofficial traditions of folk culture enacted at festivals, carnivals, marketplace spectacles and seasonal rituals were an opportunity to undermine official hegemony (Morris, 1994, p. 21). This flouting of authority and temporary inversion of social hierarchies is reflected in literary texts by the mingling of voices from diverse social levels resulting in subversive discourse which has the capacity to challenge the prevailing ideology.

Recognition that voices from other than a hegemonic social group exist is essential to the investigation of how ‘voice’ may be interpreted within my story collection. The many stories told by survivors of childhood trauma are the ‘unofficial’ voices not heard in the past by ‘official’ authorities. The voices of various figures within the collection such as author, narrator/s and characters mingle, resulting in a text that is dialogic with the many voices demonstrating Bakhtin’s notions of both polyphony and heteroglossia. Peebles and Depoe believe that “voices do not emanate merely from persons, but also from within and between texts” (2014, p. 4) and these authors agree with Bakhtin’s notion that multiple voices are present or at work within texts creating both unified and conflicting meanings. In this way understandings of voice broadens from

originating in a person to existing as meaning which could be perceived as “an interactive flow of texts and voices unfolding across time and place” (Peeples & Depoe, 2014, p. 4). With careful listening, multiple voices, including those from the margins, can be identified. As Eric Watts claims “voices emanate from the openings that cannot be fully closed; from the ruptures in sign systems, from the breaks in our imaginaries, from the cracks in history” (Watts, 2014, p. 259). He also cautions that these voices are not always be welcome or pleasing: that ‘voice’ tends to upset the status quo.

Michael Roth steers us back to another aspect of ‘voicing’: that associated with traumatic memory. As he observes, “in voicing one’s own traumas, one assumes a moral authority vis-à-vis the past that trumps questions both of factual truthfulness and practical efficacy. Speaking becomes its own truth” (Roth, 2012, p. 97). Such voices may be difficult to ascribe to any specific figure (narrator, author, character), instead being perceived as ‘unfolding across time and place’. Trauma, Roth claims, commands our attention whether as sufferers or as witnesses and although there is an urge to avert our gaze, we see things we would prefer not to see. These visions are mostly metaphorical as it is often the written word (the transcribed testimonials) which tell us of horrendous things and which upset the status quo. But behind these words are the ever-present ‘voice/s’.

Layers of voice

In real life, there may be voices which create a sense of discomfort. People on the margins of society often voice unexpected, unpalatable and unwelcome opinions, observations, values, or experiences. These utterances are often ignored although at times they break through the barriers of indifference. Also dismissed but often more poignant are the voices of children who question and comment loudly on subjects and situations which are censored in adulthood. This naïve disinhibition is characteristic not only of early childhood social/cognitive development but also of the diminishing cognitive and social powers characteristic of dementia. The fictional child characters as well as the demented character of Janet possess distinct voices which have the capacity to jolt the reader out of their comfort zone. It is our cultural concern for children’s innocence and vulnerability that is aroused and is particularly challenged if these voices suggest the violations of these elements of childhood. Mary Jane Hurst’s enquiry into the voice of the child in literature suggests that the tendency for adult authors to compose children’s

utterances reflects this societal concern (1990, p. 3). By vicariously revisiting the space of childhood the reader is sometimes compelled to face emotional, social, ethical or moral issues which through the backward gaze of an adult gain potency.

Despite the technical difficulties of creating credible children's voices in fiction, this strategy remains a powerful device when mastered. Hurst notes that most of these children's narratives are funnelled through an adult point of view as "on the whole, children's direct discourse narratives are relatively rare ... narratives told by children can be loose, rambling, and inefficient, while prose fiction requires dialogue that is tight, focussed, and efficient. Psychological difficulties must be considered as well for emotionally and experientially, children think and behave differently at various ages" (1990, p. 11). The purpose for using the child's voice within fiction requires consideration. An author may wish to recreate a child's perspective on life or conversely elaborate an adult point of view by contrasting it with a child's (Hurst, 1990, p. 108). Narrative voices reverberate against each other working in harmony or in contrast and the voice of the child character is one of many jostling to be heard. In many societies, a child's voice has little or no agency: it is deemed inconsequential. This was certainly the case in mid-twentieth century Australia. Similarly, the voices of oppressed, marginalised or traumatised adults may appear 'loose and rambling' due to language differences, lack of social capital or mental illness. In this way, these voices have been reduced to the same status as children.

The story collection presented in this thesis employs this deliberate device of child-like voices (whether utterances from child characters or broken adult characters) and draws attention to voices otherwise silenced. The purpose *is* to jolt readers out of their comfort zones by making audible the frightened confusion of children's voices or the no longer suppressed grief and outrage of damaged adult's voices. In the collection, it is this conflation of child/adult voices which capture a sense of bewilderment, fear and extreme loneliness that many survivors remember experiencing as children overlaid by adult voices which speak of shame, guilt, and betrayal. Incarceration in an institution meant complete dislocation from parents, siblings, extended family and the place once called home, resulting in the inmates shrivelling as their sense of identity and worth disintegrated. Their voices were reduced to whimpers and often when they attempted to articulate their thoughts or needs they were silenced brutally.

Some of the children's voices heard within the collection are mediated, as for example the story narrated by a doll. Used as a symbolic device, the doll represents the child as it speaks from this perspective. The reality of institutional settings prevents dialogue from or between children, hence the 'unreal' doll is given agency to take up the story. Children whose voices are heard more directly are those who were not trapped inside the welfare system such as the voices which come from the school children who comment on the disappearance of Billy from their classroom. They are audible but heavily censored by the adults in their world, a norm of the mid-twentieth century. More contemporary child voices belong to those who befriend a lonely and marginalised older Billy, less censored but sometimes still ignored. A completely uncensored omniscient child's voice is that of the ghost, Susie, unreliable due its departure from reality as well as its adult-like word-view. The subject of the child, its innocence and vulnerability underpins the story collection. Damaged children become damaged adults and part of that legacy is the inability to function maturely emotionally, socially and to some extent cognitively: to remain a child in an adult body. Thus, many of the voices are childlike.

This discussion indicates just some of the many spaces voice can occupy but included in the contemplation of fictional voice must also be the phenomenon of silence. What is not on the page often speaks powerfully and as Trussler says Ernest Hemingway's 'iceberg aesthetic' (seven eighths of a narrative may take place beneath the surface of the text) often strengthens a story (Trussler, 1994, p. 2). Silenced voices are a major theme of this thesis and realising how to write silence is a challenging dimension of the creative process. Each of the stories in my collection contains silence and the juxtaposition of one against the other allows us to "read the silences and silencings of another ... where each story helps to say ... what another could not" (Tagore, 2009, p. 23). Tagore alludes to Gloria Anzaldúa's description of such a methodology as a process of 'interfacing' and quotes her when she explains that interfacing involves a certain "piecing together of a 'fragmented and interrupted dialogue which is said to be a discontinued and incomplete discourse' ... This process is crucial to bearing witness to ... the fragmented records and testimonies – told, untold, yet to be told" (Tagore, 2009, p. 23). This process is indeed central to my primary goal of many stories told by many voices. Each reveals something another cannot. Ultimately, it is the multiple voices of survivors, as children and as adults, which reveal the previously untold or in some cases, unheard narratives which disrupt the official voices of governments, institutions and

media. These official voices were powerful yet finally, from the cracks in history, the voices of ‘forgotten Australians’ are being heard.

Conclusion

This chapter explores a range of theoretical influences that inform the thesis beginning with Culler’s broadly termed *theory*, which he explains as ‘thinking about thinking’. The discussion points out theoretical influences from an array of disciplines including literature, history, philosophy, psychology and sociology before it establishes narratology as the core corpus of theories to be investigated. Teasing out meanings around the concept of narrative reveals commonalities: that narrative is a way of viewing the world and our place within that world; that narrative is structural tool for linking the past to the present; and, that narrative is an omnipresent phenomenon across time and place.

Of particular significance is the relationship between history and literature; a recurring concern as this research argues the boundary between these two disciplines to be blurred: that each contain inventions, omissions, and gaps. Tracking the development of the discipline of history from the mid-nineteenth century reveals a long debate about history as a legitimate form of knowledge with various thinkers pondering the authenticity of a narrativist rather than causal interpretation of historical events. Narrative’s capacity to capture social reality is much considered within Critical Theory that suggests art may act in resistance to social reality, thus producing what Adorno called an indirect form of knowledge. Adorno claimed that “art is the negative knowledge of the actual world” which he believed can be achieved by writing difficult or experimental texts rather than directly polemical or critical works (Selden & Widdowson, 1993, p. 82). Such a view reinforces my key claim that an imaginative view of historical events may serve to distance reality enough for the reader to recognise flaws inherent in any social system.

Moving to a more detailed exploration of the varied approaches of a broad school of thought known as narratology, the structuralist foundations of this narrative theory model are explained. Investigation of the structures and devices of narrative underpinned this approach as a system of formal ‘grammar’ was envisaged. Attempts at interpretation were deemed irrelevant by structuralist theorists as narratives were not considered representative of life. Such a quasi-scientific model lost favour as critics and theorists argued that texts should be read in many ways and that context and cultural history were

essential components of such an interpretive method. Nunning, a leading figure in this poststructuralist period, argues a 'cultural' narratology which considers narrative as an active cognitive force particularly with respect to phenomena such as class, gender, history and subjectivity. Such a perspective views narrative as able to generate a medley of voices struggling for cultural space, an opinion that incorporates Bakhtin's notion of dialogism and the manifestation of carnival. Culler suggests narrative as a rhetorical structure that distorts as much as it reveals, further challenging any simple or stable view of what initially may appear simple: the act of story-telling.

The complex phenomenon of voice is then unpicked, and found to be 'unexpectedly elusive'. Wilkshire finds that rather than one voice manifesting as that of an author, implied author, narrator or character, these voices overlap creating what she calls a 'variegated thing' known as narrative voice. Voices may be strange or unreliable but in Bakhtin's view are never monologic: narratives contain multiple voices which work to disrupt dominant discourses and challenge ideologies. The creative artefact of this thesis seeks such a function by employing multiple voices which create layers of story.

To close, the chapter returns to the main purpose of this thesis, which is to tell the stories of individuals who experienced trauma as children. Many of the voices within the story collection originate from the testimonies of these traumatised individuals, yet as Roth proposes such voices may be outside any one narrator, author or character. He claims voices of trauma unfold across time and space: they are universal voices, which urge us not to look away.

Chapter Four: Finding out

This chapter argues for the choice of methodology and the methods employed in collecting and interpreting the data. Positioned in the human sciences and addressing matters of equity and social justice, the project engages with qualitative rather than quantitative research. By using multiple voices, different textual formations and narrative styles the thesis weaves a text about child abuse and the influences of class and power. In committing to arts-based methodology, creative writing as research is foregrounded. Triangulation reflects the attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the issues and is achieved by the use of archival and autoethnographic methods.

Qualitative research

In the simplest sense, a research thesis sets out to formulate new knowledge which can be shared and validated. What is considered research knowledge, particularly in field of the arts, continues to be debated globally. It was as late as the 1970s when conventionally accepted notions of what counted as research evidence, and thus what kind of knowledge claims could be validated, began to be challenged. The idea that “evidence such as personal descriptions of life experiences, can serve to issue knowledge about neglected but significant areas of the human realm” gained currency and the belief that evidence was only about facts and numbers was no longer accepted as the only way of generating new knowledge (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 471). Despite the diversity of qualitative research approaches, a broad and shared perspective evolved. Altheide and Johnson sum this up when they state: “all theories, concepts, and findings are grounded in values and perspectives; all knowledge is contextual and partial; and other conceptual schemas and perspectives are always possible” (Altheide & Johnson, 2011, p. 581). Into the twenty-first century scholars and researchers in the fields of qualitative research continue to grapple with issues such as truth, validity, verisimilitude, credibility and trustworthiness. Out of this, a view of ‘evidence-as-process’ has been advanced and is termed ‘evidentiary narrative’ (Altheide & Johnson, 2011, p. 586). This views all kinds of enquiry as “a *process* of acquiring information, organising it as data, then analysing and interpreting those data with the help of refractive (conceptual, theoretical, political) lenses” and calls for qualitative researchers to be as transparent as possible: “to substantiate their interpretations and findings with a reflexive account of themselves and the processes of

their research” by providing guidance about the relatedness of the observations, findings, claims or conclusions (Altheide & Johnson, 2011, p. 587). Nelson cites Haseman and Mafe as he points out, reflexivity defines the position of this kind of researcher; “reflexivity ... concerns not only reflecting on what is being achieved and how the specific work is taking shape but also being aware of where you stand (‘where you are coming from’) in respect of knowledge traditions” (Nelson, 2013, p. 44). Reflexivity requires profound critical reflection, which includes a dislocation of habitual ways of seeing.

My thesis engages in such a process of deep reflection and the dislocation of customary view-points as it disrupts a habitual mid-twentieth century perception of a ‘benevolent’ and ‘charitable’ Australian society. By challenging the ‘knowledge tradition’, I question past perceptions about this land of opportunity where life in the perennial sunshine was deemed democratic, tolerant and just. My own childhood was played out within this milieu and as a child I never questioned such an idealistic view of my world: nor was I encouraged to. Children were ‘seen and not heard’ in a very literal sense during this era. Parents, Sunday-school teachers and school-teachers belonged to the world of adults and what they said was not to be questioned: yet as a researcher reflecting back through political, conceptual and theoretical lenses, what they said was parochial, patriarchal, patronising and monologic. Life for an Australian child was singing ‘God Save the Queen’ and tracing maps of the Empire at school; colouring in pictures of a pink, blond-haired Jesus at Sunday School; playing knuckle-bones and climbing trees with sunburnt, freckle-faced Anglo-Saxon kids who were either Catholic or Protestant; running barefoot through the back flyscreen door (the front door was only for visitors) to a house-bound mum who put milk-arrowroot biscuits and a glass of milk on the kitchen table for afternoon tea; and sitting quietly, bathed and in clean pyjamas when the head of the household returned to eat a home cooked dinner and relax with the newspaper.

It was the life of white, middle class, Christian family units living in orderly, clean suburban households with large backyards where children played in the fresh air and sunshine. There were no variations to this ‘knowledge tradition’. This was my knowledge base until well into my adult life and it required time, education, travel and experience to begin to question this mythical Australia. Feminist, postcolonial and Marxist discourses gave shape to a new and different perception of a society continually described as

tolerant, just and democratic but nothing prepared me for the extraordinary findings uncovered in this research with respect to the welfare policies and practices taking place under my nose during my childhood and early adult years. The care leavers' testimonials which inform the project come from recollections of lived childhood experiences reminiscent of Dicken's nineteenth-century London. There appears to be no correlation to the modern Australian democracy within which these lives were located. As a child and young woman of this period, I was informed and influenced by the prevailing attitudes and values and intertwined throughout each story are my own memories and experiences of places, people and events situated in the same era. Now, as an older adult the scales have been removed from my eyes and as researcher I see a very different mid-twentieth Australian society. Thus, elements of the personal, social and political have been combined to create something new, resulting in a many layered artefact.

The concept of reflexivity also pertains to the data selected and interpreted. It is important to note that only a fraction of the research findings appear on the page, but the 'unseen' body of knowledge is vital in the ways it informs and directs the creative work. The empirical data for my creative project has been selected (a subjective process) from stories recalling childhoods lived in institutions. Such choice has been affected by the self as researcher but it is hoped that it maintains academic rigour by avoiding the pitfalls of sentimentality and bias. As Morwenna Griffiths cautions, "avoiding bias is best understood in ethical terms as academic virtue" (Griffiths, 2011, p. 183). She references David Bridges when she explains that this requires careful attention to argument and evidence; thoroughness; honesty; humility with regard to one's own knowledge; and respectfulness with regard to the knowledge claims of others.

Within the raw data, dominant issues and themes became apparent and I have *reflected* over time about the multiple injustices revealed. Griffiths explains this reflective practice as a means of engaging with personal understandings, attitudes and reactions and that it is a means of tracking the changing self. She writes "... elements of time and space are crucial ... as reflections in one place connect with thinking in another, over time, with all the changes in the self ... acknowledged" (Griffith, 2011, p. 184). The changes over time for my 'self' have already been flagged: from an unquestioning child and young adult witnessing multiple injustices with respect to age, gender and class, to an educated, mature middle-class white woman with a sense of commitment to political enquiry.

However, in creating my own stories around these issues I have also engaged in *reflexivity* which has involved a distancing so that I am both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ myself simultaneously (Hunt & Sampson, 2006, p. 4). Experiencing ‘self as other’ whilst maintaining a familiar sense of self is the essence of reflexivity: a process of accessing and objectifying personal material is required in order to develop a reflexive writing practice. Griffiths perceives reflexive practice as a more self-conscious awareness and acknowledgement of one’s own social, political, value position and positionality. As she notes, this may be:

[by signposting] theoretical positions, especially those which indicate political value systems (e.g. feminist, socialist, Marxist, anti-racist, post-colonial, and queer research), and it may indicate positionality which refers ... to the social and political landscape inhabited by a researcher (e.g. gender, nationality, race, religion, sexuality, [dis]abilities, social class and social status). (Griffiths, 2011, p. 184)

By accounting as clearly as possible for the self (myself as researcher) in both the past and present contributes to what David Altheide and John Johnson refer to as ‘transparency’ although the inevitable incompleteness of such an attempt at self-consciousness is acknowledged (Altheide & Johnson, 2011, p. 588).

The project

What does this research project actually set out to do, why is it deemed important and how does it undertake the enquiry process? The claim that qualitative research can be used as a “tool to create social change and advance social justice initiatives” is put forward by Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, (2011, p. 249). I share their belief that this process allows for the previously silenced to be heard and creates opportunities for them to speak for themselves as agents for social change. Qualitative research crosscuts disciplines, fields and subject matter rendering a simple definition difficult. Complex concepts and assumptions surround the term which may mean different things according to the historical moment but the generic definition offered by the aforementioned authors serves to position my own research:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world ... It consists of a set of interpretative, material practices that make the world visible

... It involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study, personal experience, introspection, life story, interview, artefacts and cultural texts ... along with observational, historical, interactional and visual texts – that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, pp. 3-4)

In making visible the childhood world inhabited by care leavers, this research has committed to producing a creative and a critical text which combine to speak to these three research questions:

- how can a short story collection function as a way of telling many versions of historical ‘truth’ by employing multiple voices?
- how are contemporary values reflected in this process of creative re-imaging?
- how can fictional stories re-imagined from recent historical events function as significant cultural texts?

Addressing such questions challenges a monologic version of the past, introduces readers to little known social history, and encourages the critique of hegemonic discourses which continue to prevail in contemporary times.

For some critics, the claim that qualitative research serves as a tool for social justice may seem both idealistic and simplistic. Yet, this goal continues to be pursued by many, and in an effort to gain a more thorough engagement with this purpose, qualitative researchers often use more than one interpretative practice within a study. This strategy adds rigour, complexity, breadth and depth to any enquiry and contributes to a process known as triangulation, although Laura Ellingson disputes this term’s inference of only three sides. She endorses instead a postmodern multiple lensed image: crystallisation (Ellingson, 2011, p. 605). Either metaphor works to display multiple, refracted realities simultaneously. The researcher “tells the same tale from different points of view ... offering partial, situated and open-ended conclusions” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 5). Another way of viewing the many methodological practices available to the qualitative researcher is as bricolage, a term used by Denzin and Lincoln and attributed to Claude Levi-Strauss (1968). The French word *bricoleur* describes a handyman or handywoman

who makes use of the tools available to complete a task. Sometimes compared to quilt making, montage film or jazz music, the notion of improvisation is evoked as images and understandings are blended together to form something new. Hence, the qualitative-researcher-as-bricoleur uses the aesthetic and material tools at hand, resulting in a process which “creates and brings psychological and emotional unity to an interpretive experience” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 5).

This sense of montage in qualitative research may mean the employment of different voices, different perspectives, points of view, different angles of vision and the use of dialogical texts. Bricolage also implies imaginative elements of research and if new tools or techniques need to be pieced together, the researcher will do this by crossing disciplinary, methodological and critical borders as required. In fact, bricolage “exists out of respect for the complexity of the lived world and the complications of power” (Kincheloe et al., 2011, p. 168). Such an eclectic enterprise abandons the quest for a simple representation of social realism creating instead spaces for give and take between reader and writer. This type of research presumes to do more than “turn the other into the object of the social science gaze” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 5). The blending together of different images, impressions and perceptions has been employed in the creation of the fictional stories in the thesis collection: thus many of the same praxes of the researcher-as-bricoleur are to be found in the researcher-as-creative writer.

Although my thesis belongs to the domain of literature, the project reflects this notion of bricolage as it also draws from history, psychology and philosophy, piecing together something new. Nonetheless, first and foremost it is a literary production, which does not claim to be a history of the policies or laws which governed Australian institutions for children during the mid-twentieth century. Nor is it a therapeutic tool, and although it provides ethical challenges, it is not a morality tale; moral principles usually reflect class interests, historical circumstances and cultural tradition whereas ethical principles require an openness to other possibilities. Again, referring to researcher-as-bricoleur, this primarily arts-based project also borrows from other research approaches: namely archival and autoethnographic frameworks. This mixing and matching of approaches is driven by the belief that there is no unified or objective method of capturing the complexities of the human condition. By combining varied yet complementary research methods my endeavour is to provide more breadth and depth to the enquiry.

It is subjective research, which is informed by many of the postdiscourses such as postmodernism, critical feminism, postcolonialism, poststructuralism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 163). This positions me alongside many contemporary researchers who believe that individuals' view of themselves and the world are influenced by social and historical forces: "thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are socially and historically constituted" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 164). I eschew a positivist attempt to legislate one version of truth over another that can result in "mainstream research practices [which] are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of system of class, race, and gender oppression" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 164). My project is one of countless versions of any historical event and just as any other version, it wears a cloak of context. It is a view from the twenty-first century and the data derived from the many sources has been selected through my subjective lens with a particular purpose in mind. Just as other sources, it is figured and can only ever be a small trace of a whole. Nonetheless, it invites an openness to other possibilities.

Arts-based research

Various approaches and considerations to the research process all contribute to the project but the over-arching methodology remains arts-based research. Art in its many forms has prevailed throughout human history and has long been considered a powerful vehicle for expressing and communicating human emotion but seldom as a vehicle for human knowledge which was (and in some cases still is) viewed as "an accumulation of true propositions or statements about how things are and how they work which can be verified by past, present or future experience" (Johnson, 2010, p. 144). While the idea of art as research within this definition of knowledge appears misconceived, Robin Nelson reminds us that the "desire to address a problem, find things out, [and] establish new insights" drives all academic research (2013, p. 3). Practising artists (including creative writers) also explore issues or ideas in order to achieve new insights. Arts-based research, also known as practice-led research, practice as research (Nelson's term), performance as research, studio research, and performative research is a methodology which asserts primacy of 'practice' as a key method of enquiry. Common to all is that the researcher creates an original artefact as part of the enquiry process.

Whatever the nomenclature, as an academic thesis it means: "a research project in which practice is a key method of inquiry and where, in respect of the arts, a practice is

submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry” (Nelson, 2013, p. 8). Academia has long purported to meet “the metaphysical desire to make things safe and secure” by validating the truthfulness of knowledge (Caputo cited in Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 15). It would seem that arts-based research seeks instead to promote disequilibrium, but in doing so may persuade percipients of the work to revisit the world from a new direction and challenge a single-minded quest for absolute certainty. Primacy of creative practice as a key method for enquiry remains the focus for arts-based research but virtually all doctoral programmes require that the creative artefact be accompanied by an exegesis. This component creates the difference between art as art and art as research and the importance of this element is reinforced by Candy and Edmonds who argue that an artwork alone cannot be seen as a research outcome: a “commentary is needed which frames the context in which the artwork is to be understood” (Candy & Edmonds, 2010, p. 125). An artefact standing alone can of course represent new knowledge but Biggs (2003) agrees with Candy and Edmonds that without physical, social or cultural context as well as theoretical framing the work cannot be described as research (2010, p. 125). Nelson adds to these expositional requirements by proposing that a practice-led research submission should include a creative product (the artefact), complementary writing (the exegesis) as well as documentation of process (eg. diary, sketchbook, photos). Tara Brabazon minimizes the enterprise by describing the exegesis as a ‘bonsai’ dissertation which should result in “perfectly formed engagements with theory, method and scholarship, but in miniature” (cited in Webb & Melrose, 2014, p. 135).

Tensions and strains continue to prevail between the two established research methodologies: qualitative and quantitative. The more recently evolved practice-led or arts-based research is generally located under the umbrella of qualitative research but Brad Haseman perceives arts-based enquiry as a third methodological category describing it as “intrinsically experiential ... com[ing] to the fore when the researcher creates new artistic forms” (Haseman, 2006, p.102). Haseman perceives the principle distinction as being the way arts-based research chooses to express its findings as symbolic forms rather than the words of a discursive text. These may take the form of dance, visual art, performance, music or creative writing. There remains no one universally accepted methodological approach to research within the arts but it is characterised by the use of practice, artistic action, creation and performance. Stephen Scrivener recognizes three principal relations between art and the conditions of research:

The first, *research into*, identifies art as the *subject* of inquiry treating it as an object in the world to be examined, understood and explained. *Research through* art treats art as a *method* for understanding the world, which might be art itself. *Research for art*, like research into art, treats art as the *subject* of inquiry, but with the *goal* of producing art that transforms art. (Scrivener, 2011, p. 144)

It is the second of these, *research through* art that is the primary strategy employed in my arts-based enquiry: the creation of a collection of short fiction which generates new knowledge about the ‘forgotten Australians’ and is a response to the research purpose. Practice-led responses to research questions claim that certain kinds of knowledge can be created only through practice and Lelia Green writes specifically of creative writing when she explains “that it is through the practice of creative writing that new knowledge about the art of creative writing is developed, and knowledge about the contribution of creative writing to contemporary society” (2006, p. 177). It is *research into* art to which Green alludes when she speaks of creating new knowledge about the performance of creative writing. However, she also refers to *research through* the art of creative writing when she speaks of the contribution of creative writing to contemporary society. Performance of writing creates new knowledge about the art form particularly for the writer, analysis provides new knowledge about the text. She reminds us that what is important is that this new knowledge is communicable to others (Green, 2006, p. 177). Within the academy it is expected that the art is carried out as part of an exploration of a research question: that it is not ‘art for art’s sake’. As a function of recognised research practice, my creative project undertakes to conform to Haseman’s (2006) broad protocols of all research as already outlined in the introduction.

It is fictional writing which comprises the artefact for my arts-based research project and the idea that imaginative forms of writing are primarily for pleasure or entertainment may challenge the credibility of fiction as a research tool. Factual writing is understood as a literal rendering of worldly phenomena whereas fiction can be defined as a purposeful recasting or re-imaging of experiences often distanced from the mundane realm of everyday life. However, Iser (1993) highlights a particular aspect in the creation of fiction when arguing arts-based research. Of prime importance, he suggests, is the

process of *selection* which he defines as the collection of empirical ‘data’ from the “given world [of] social, historical, cultural and literary systems” in the manner of a qualitative social researcher (cited in Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 104). For my thesis these methods of collection have included observation of human interactions, archival reading and analysis, reflection on previous experiences and, of course, listening to stories. In creating new stories this ‘data’ becomes character, dialogue, setting and action. It is the minutiae of human activity which has been selected and reimagined through the artistic process. Reflecting on her own practice-led doctoral thesis, Gaylene Perry speaks of her finished artefact (a novel) as being one site of what she has created, but not the only site; “the rest of what I have created seems to lie just beyond or beside the novel ...” (Perry cited in Barrett & Bolt, 2010, p. 33). What she learned during the process was about the instability between the singular experience and collective, the personal and the political. Similarly, my creative project tells the stories of individuals but it contains voices from the collective. Personal narratives are re-imagined yet political messages bubble beneath the surface. Like Perry, I perceive spaces where new knowledge may dwell outside and in between the texts of each story.

Archival investigation

My research journey began with internet searches for archival material related to the ‘forgotten Australians’. According to *The Macquarie Dictionary*, an archive can be defined as: the noncurrent documents or records relating to the activities, rights, claims, treaties, constitutions of a family, corporation, community or nation; a place where public records or other historical documents are kept; and the agency or organisation responsible for collecting and storing such documents (“Archive”, 2017).

This repository of knowledge has traditionally been viewed as static, yet contemporary archival researchers view archives as “primary sources for creating knowledge rather than merely storehouses for finding what is already known” (Gaillet, 2012, p. 39). Finding what is already known begins my enquiry but as flagged earlier in this exegesis, decisions about what and how to archive remind us that archives are not simply sources, they are sites of contested knowledge. Thus, what is selected for archiving by the agency or organisation responsible as well as what is left out provides space for researchers to discover new knowledge. What ‘counts’ as evidence remains contentious: using archival materials in ways that may not have been the original

intention expands the notion of who and what matters. Research and special projects librarian Judith Panitch reminds us that “archives, as ‘sites of memory’ are very much products of their time, invested with meaning that may have changed ... by changing beliefs and values” (cited in Gaillet, 2012, p. 40). Nevertheless, at the heart of archival investigation, the tradition has been to examine a wide range of materials and texts. These could include letters, pictures, newspapers, government documents, manuscripts, reports, recordings, diaries as well as artefacts and relics like clothing, tools, personal objects, coins, and household items. In this way, opportunities to look beyond the ‘official’ writings of the powerful are afforded and the “size, shape and smell of archives” can be experienced (Gaillet, 2008, p. 49). Disappearing into the vaults of silent libraries and museums, white-gloved archival researchers once spent hours sorting through box after box of data. This traditional form of archival storage occupied a physical space and contained physical items. Lori Ostergard speaks of serendipity when searching in this type of physical space: chance encounters which may lead to unexpected outcomes (cited in Gaillet, p. 49).

In the past, this process of accessing, selecting, studying and interpreting information about these items was an arduous process. Once collated, some material was discarded, some retained. Eventually, choosing from a wide range of materials (thus triangulating data), the researcher sorted out what he/she counted as evidence. Preconceived values, experiences and perspectives on the part of the researcher colour this process although adopting a reflexive position may mitigate some of these biases. Despite these challenges researchers continue to mine the archives and some still prefer the traditional mode of investigating in a physical space. However, for many others access to the internet has provided instantly accessible archival material via digital technology. The ‘size, shape and smell’ has been replaced by convenience and speed. This massive technological change has opened the doors on the dusty spaces of traditional information management, which were once places seldom accessible to an outsider. Now anyone can become an archival researcher although what counts as ‘evidence’ in archival research continues to be a vexed question. Corroboration of data is still deemed critical; “archival documents need to be triangulated with general documents ... in order to avoid making major history blunders” (Gaillet, 2012, p. 50).

This new technology provides what Gitelman calls “the largest document ever written; stored in a digital archive” (cited in Gaillet, p. 38). Today we are becoming an information management society as photographs, sound files, documents and videos are ‘archived’ and shared continuously in various storage modes. This convenience has served me well as a resident of regional Western Australia and much of my source material has been drawn from this new storage system. For the historical context of this project, access to digitally stored government reports, enquiries and curated exhibition material has provided a pathway, which I have often navigated backwards by following reference links provided in the documents. These searches had the capacity to be endless because as media theorist Wolfgang Ernst suggests “ultimate knowledge (the old encyclopaedia model) gives way to the principle of permanent re-writing or addition (Wikipedia model)” (Ernst, 2013, p. 85). Bombarded with so much easily accessible information, I eventually decided that my choices about which data to include and exclude would be defined by what had initially begun my investigation into this topic: the compelling findings of 2004 Federal Senate report *Forgotten Australians*.

Thus my enquiry, although informed by broader readings from both digital and traditional sources, kept returning to this seminal document and my creative artefact as well as the critical discussion is ultimately a response to the *Forgotten Australians* report. This document quoted extensively from the submissions they received in a “deliberate attempt to give as many care leavers as possible a direct voice in the report by using their actual words ... [but acknowledged] that the use and choice of quotes is necessarily selective and highly subjective and at best can only give a snapshot or a sense of events, experiences and emotions” (McLucas, 2004, p. 7). Once again, the notion of bricolage is evoked in the strategies adopted by the senate report committee. The endeavour to capture the direct voices of care leavers demonstrates a turning away from the practice of creating the other as an object for social gaze.

Triangulating (or crystallising) this archival data are published books, a curated exhibition entitled *Inside: Life in Children’s Homes and Institutions* (2013) as well as documents and materials disseminated by support services. The above exhibition was curated by the National Museum of Australia and proved an excellent repository for documents, relics and artefacts. Another source of particular significance was *Orphans of the Living* (2007), a nonfiction account of the ‘forgotten Australians’ (and PhD dissertation) by Joanna Penglase, herself a care leaver. Other nonfiction accounts

(auto/biography and memoir) were authored by individuals who were members of the ‘forgotten Australian’ cohort. Support groups such as Care Leavers of Australia Network (CLAN) and Find and Connect have accessible websites as well as print materials providing both collective and individual stories. The evidence from these combined sources reinforced validity and mitigated against ‘major history blunders’.

Complementing the sources discussed above is a seemingly insignificant archival repository in the form of an old suitcase filled with memorabilia from my own family. This consists of concrete objects which have size, shape and smell and it is here I have experienced some ‘chance encounters’ resulting in fresh ideas for shaping my stories. This suitcase contains family documents such as letters, certificates, photos, newspaper cuttings and recordings which stretch as far back as the late nineteenth century. By the mid-twentieth century my birth is recorded. Thus, I become part of this archive from which I have drawn to reimagine the settings, voices, attitudes and values for many of my stories.

Although my research journey has not ventured into this territory, an increasingly accessible archival source available to current researchers is digital storytelling, a practice which has proliferated in recent times. Bryan Alexander defines digital storytelling in its simplest terms as “telling stories with digital technologies. Digital stories are narratives built from the stuff of cyber-culture” (Alexander, 2011, p. 3). Every era and culture has told stories but as Alexander suggests “no sooner do we invent a medium that do we try to tell stories with it” (2011, p. 5). He reminds us that digital stories are now “created using nearly every digital device in an ever-growing toolbox” and can include a vast array of examples, some of these being remixed archival photographs telling a short story about a particular subject, a podcast about a topic presented in instalments, a blog novel, an account of a fictional event delivered through multiple tweet accounts, a video-clip capturing a personal life-story over time, a novel read from a mobile phone, or a trauma victim’s life recounted on Facebook (2011, p. 3). These stories can be created by professionals or amateurs, may be fiction or nonfiction, personal or political, brief or epic and although this move into cyberspace may be seen by some as a total rupture from the traditional mediums of oral or analogue (books and film) forms of storytelling, it is apparent there are already multiple opportunities available for tellers and readers of stories in the digital space.

The term mediatisation relates to “how changes occur when communication patterns are transformed due to new communication tools and technologies, or in short: the ‘media’” (Lundby, 2008, p. 3). Although this concerns scholars of media and communication, it also impacts the humanities and social sciences particularly with respect to “daily interactions that are transformed through the expanding role of ‘social media’” (Lundby, 2008, p. 3). Pertinent to this project is the proliferation of social networking which invites endless opportunity for self-representational digital stories creating what have been termed ‘mediatised stories’: stories which allow the passive spectator to become an interactive participant. Some of the individuals who experienced institutionalised care as children have found a voice through social network sites: some personal such as Facebook and some organisational such as CLAN (Care Leavers of Australia Network). In this new interactive narrative environment, mediatised stories abound. For this project, some source material has been accessed through organisational websites such as CLAN where these self-representational stories may appear in the public domain, but the research does not include my engagement in any social media. I am not a participant ethnographer.

As new technologies develop, humans have adapted story-telling techniques accordingly. The tools for narratives may change but “the way we express ourselves, through whatever medium is available, [remains] ... one of the key elements in how human beings have evolved...” (Erstad & Wertsch in Lundby, 2008, p. 21). Erstad and Wertsch observe two basic narrative levels in this new digital environment: ‘specific narratives’, which deal with specific characters, places and events; and ‘schematic narrative templates,’ which are generalised, abstract and without specific actors, times and places. The latter may appear transparent “in the sense that like a clear window it is something through which one views the world without realising it is there” (Erstad & Wertsch, 2008, p. 30), but we need to remain alert to this naturalising trick by acknowledging the ideological window frame which supports the glass. It would seem that even the newest technology, which allows any individual connected to the internet an immediate voice, is still shaped by social and historical context. Underlying power structures may still prevail despite the illusion of egalitarianism and this newest data source certainly defies any claim that stored knowledge remains static.

Auto-ethnography

Earlier, I revealed my own positioning within the context of the stories I have created. Although I do not appear directly as a character, my lived experiences find their way into many of the stories. This autobiographical dimension can be attributed to many authors of fiction: ‘write what you know’ is often the advice given in creative writing courses. Once again there appears an overlap between the social sciences and literature as this linking of the personal whilst making connections to broader society and culture can also be ascribed to the research genre of autoethnography which “foregrounds the emotions and experiences of the researcher as a way to acknowledge the inevitable subjective nature of knowledge” (Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1662). This methodology moves towards breaking down the distinction between researcher and subject, reflexively recognising the place of the researcher-self in the production of new knowledge.

We all engage in some sort of identity work, a presentation of self to others and to oneself: consolidating a concept of “who one knows one is” (De Nora cited in Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1660). Butz and Besio paraphrase Reed-Danahay when they speak of autoethnography as being understood as “the practice of doing this identity work self-consciously, or deliberately, in order to understand or represent some worldly phenomenon that exceeds the self; it is ‘a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context’” (Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1660). Using this approach researchers scrutinize, publicize, and reflexively rework their own self-understandings as a way to shape understandings of and in the wider world (Butz & Besio, 2009).

Some researchers now argue that “we can only study our own experiences: that the researcher becomes the research subject” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 417). But as Tami Spry warns, articulating personal feelings or experiences does not automatically equate to autoethnography. As she says, autoethnography demands that the focus is not on the self, rather it is the “intentional and critical reflexive connection of ... [personal] narrative to larger social issues, to the politics, pleasure and pain of other people that distinguishes performative autoethnography as a methodology grounded in forging knowledge with others...” (Spry, 2011, p. 498). The inclusion of the term ‘performative’ here relates to Stacy Homan Jones’s description of autoethnography as “a performance that asks how our personal accounts count” (cited in Spry, 2011, p. 498). Carolyn Ellis explains that autoethnographers gaze back and forth, first through “a wide-angle lens focussing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they

look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). In this way, researchers include themselves as an important aspect of what they are investigating by zooming backward and forwards and eventually creating a blurring between the personal and the cultural. However, the “researchers’ own lives, emotions and experiences are not their primary objects of study ... it is a reflexive effort ... to analyse how they are situated in relation to the people and worlds they are studying” (Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1666).

Such zooming in and out between the cultural and the personal well describes the juncture between my own research and creative practices. My own life and experiences are not the focus in any of the fictional stories yet this personal connection contributes to grounding the imagined characters in reality. Details from my own life abound; childhood experiences of school, teachers, parents, adult rules, games, toys, clothes, food, and figures of speech are just some of the many aspects of my life that appear throughout the work. Even the doll named Belinda comes from my childhood. The geographical settings, modes of transport, buildings, work experiences and social strata are all part of my past. Obliquely, these experiences of the personal are juxtaposed against the very different experiences of institutionalised children during the same epoch. There appears to be two parallel universes which the act of looking back has revealed. Ultimately, autoethnography invites readers to “become participants, engaging the storyline morally, emotionally, aesthetically and intellectually” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.733). This echoes Barone and Eisner’s claim regarding arts-based research when they remind us that the arts teach us to see, to feel and to participate empathetically in events otherwise beyond our reach (2012, p. 8). My own research purpose is the same: to invite readers into the re-imagined world of the various characters and to re-live some of their experiences in such a way as to transform understandings about the ‘forgotten Australians’.

Conclusion

Concurring with esteemed researchers Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2011), I have argued for the role of qualitative research as a tool capable of triggering social change and advancing social justice. To this end, arts-based methodology is employed as the over-arching research framework and the significance of an artefact as research evidence is highlighted. This discussion explores the power of the arts in general and creative writing explicitly, as vehicles for reflection, debate and new ways of viewing the

world. In this project it is the world of the ‘forgotten Australians’ which is evoked via the collection of short fiction.

Tackling such a challenging enterprise has required multiple research approaches and although it remains essentially an arts-based project, archival and autoethnographic methods have been employed in an effort to provide more rigour to the enquiry. A reflexive account of my ‘self’ as researcher has been explored in an effort to provide transparency and to mitigate bias. The notion of bricolage is embraced as different voices, points of view and perspectives are engaged across varying disciplines, methods and critical borders. It is in these borderline spaces that the research project aims to do more than “turn the other into the object of social gaze” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 5).

In the endeavour to capture a glimpse into past child welfare practices in Australia, this creative project anticipates a range of different readers. The academy is the expected audience for the critical component of the research and it is hoped that the exegesis may be received favourably enough to encourage those delivering undergraduate courses to consider inclusion of this recently revealed social history. The published article “Beyond the Gates: An arts-based investigation into the ‘forgotten Australians’” (2016), which is extracted from this thesis, also engages scholarly readers. However, the artefact speaks to a broader audience: both the academy and mainstream readers of literary fiction.

When works of fiction are constructed from historical sources, there is always the risk of creating a text which is too close to the historical documents. Such works often lack emotional engagement and become instead a chronicle of events. Mastering the facts is a balancing act, which aims for a work that is both evocative and respectful to the sources. Such a focus on the emotive power of social science and humanities research is evident in what Leon Anderson explains as “the turn towards blurred genres of writing, a heightened self-reflexivity ... an increased focus on emotion ... and the postmodern scepticism regarding generalisation of knowledge claims” (Anderson, 2006, p. 373).

By-passing nonfiction accounts of history and instead engaging in evocative works of historical re-imaginings has proved a popular entrée into the historical past for many readers. Works based on historical people or events are popular as exemplified by Australian writer Thomas Keneally’s *Schindler’s Ark* (1982), a Booker Prize winner and later enormously successful film *Schindler’s List* (1993), which recounts the life of the

real Oskar Schindler. In Hilary Mantel's celebrated trilogy it is the historical figure of Thomas Cromwell which is brought to life. Amanda Curtin's *The Sinkings* (2008) recounts the murder and mystery of a real convict, and Hannah Kent's novel *Burial Rites* (2013) fictionally re-imagines the life of a woman who is the last person to be executed in Iceland. All have been critically acclaimed and it could be expected that such enthusiastic public engagement with these works have sparked conversations and reflection around the ethical and moral issues each raised. By reaching out to such an audience, it is anticipated that the creative artefact from this thesis can trigger similar conversations and debate, particularly with respect to social welfare policies pertaining to children's care and protection.

Chapter Five: Denouement

This concluding chapter is brief, and avoids reintroducing material already interrogated in the thesis. Instead it circles back to the three research questions reflecting on how they are considered from both creative and critical perspectives. It does not close with a list of recommendations or suggested solutions. Rather it strives to give “voice to the oppressed, critiques neoconservative discourse and brings passion to its performance, moving persons to positive social action” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 416).

So what?

So what does this research mean and how is it significant? The thesis responds to the call that “social sciences and the humanities become sites for critical conversations about democracy, race, gender, class, nation-states, globalisation, freedom, and community” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). The work illustrates how the most vulnerable members of society – children – need to be valued and protected in order to ensure they develop into functional, responsible adults in the future. Conversations about how this may be realised involves examining understandings about democracy, class, gender, family and community. A dialectic exists between the critical and creative elements of the thesis, repeatedly circling the three research questions, each iteration garnering and synthesising evidence along the way. This dialogue also speaks to the underlying two part question posed by the *Forgotten Australians* report: how could children within a mid-twentieth century Australian welfare system suffer endemic abuse for decades and how was such a culture of abuse possible without official intervention and broader community awareness? As a response to this over-arching question the findings of the three research questions are revisited.

How does a short story collection function as a way of telling many versions of historical ‘truth’ by using multiple voices?

A novel often maintains one or only a small number of characters and voices, but by choosing to create a short story collection, the artefact includes the voices and points of view of many different characters. The various narrators occupy diverse positions and periods. Employed are storytellers who may or may not be reliable, may be young or old, male or female, real or illusory, comic or tragic, omniscient or unwitting.

The thesis examines the complex and elusive notion of historical ‘truth’ advancing that a single, unified narrative of past events is an illusion rather than a reality. The creative *and* ethical imperative has been to craft a text which delivers a polyphonic rather than monologic narrative concerning the topic of past child welfare policies and practices. Therefore, rather than reporting facts, the work seeks instead to capture meanings by speaking to the complexity of the social, cultural and personal conditions that facilitated a culture of violence against children. How such history can be portrayed and disseminated has led to a scholarly text exploring many areas of ambiguity with regard to understandings about fiction, memory, narrative, and knowing. It concludes that there can be no single version of history; that every story tells its own ‘truth’. And as every story requires a storyteller, every voice tells its own type of ‘truth’.

Although the many voices in the sixteen stories tell many ‘truths’, as author I have remained committed to the task of creating ethically and emotionally ‘truthful’ knowledge about the historical events under investigation. By creating stories that challenge a hegemonic view of history, the artefact can be seen to operate as cultural discourse where “every word that is launched into a social space implies a dialogue and therefore a contested interpretation” (Selden & Widdowson, 1993, p. 127). Such discourse suggests multiple voices and many points of view. This undertaking is reflected by the collection which offers many voices representing multiple ways of seeing the historical conditions and events that surrounded the experiences of institutionalised children.

How are contemporary values reflected in the process of creative re-imaging?

The collection represents different eras and settings as it seeks out varying voices that all contribute the parts to an overall whole. The main theme cementing the parts together is the enduring legacy of trauma: trauma that may impact on individuals at any time in life’s journey, but perhaps the most damaging of all, trauma experienced during childhood. By shining a light on this theme, the stories reflect contemporary values concerning the welfare of children and understandings about trauma. Such views were not shared by past societies and some of the stories reflect these quite different values and understandings.

Tracing the earliest manifestations of narrative, the thesis reveals that this structure has long functioned as a vehicle for human knowledge and that this function endures, shaping both fiction and nonfiction. The research reveals that memory and identity are also informed by narrative and although lived lives may not conform to neat plots, the reshuffling of the recollected parts into a more ordered whole is common as individuals endeavour to make sense of who they are and how they fit into the world. It is a process that is subject to gaps and omissions and the assembled narrative may also contain elements of invention. What this project also evidences is how this process may be further disrupted due to ongoing cognitive, emotional and social damage caused by trauma. Such constant editing and re-visioning of life stories refract versions through more current frames of belief and the care survivors who are now in late middle age recognise through contemporary sensibilities just how brutal were the injustices inflicted on them as children. Thus from the outset, survivors' testimonials that make up the raw data informing the re-imagined stories about this past history have already undergone refractions which in some measure reflect contemporary values.

As a re-imagined version of historical events, the creative work continually moves between the now and then. This can be observed in the temporal span of the stories, the most distant being early in the twentieth century and most recent being set in the current twenty-first century. This looking backwards and forwards demands a creative awareness that avoids positioning the past in the same ideological frames as the present. As a subjective researcher, my scholarly interpretations are unavoidably coloured by my own experiences and embedded belief systems, yet, in creating the stories from past eras, I have consciously sought to recreate the prevailing understandings, beliefs and biases that informed the society in which my characters are situated.

As a collection, a temporal progression can be discerned moving from a distant past to the present although the arrangement of the stories does not initially suggest this transition from then to now. The deliberate fracturing of a lineal narrative structure has been employed in an attempt to mirror the fragmented nature of memory and the particularly dislocated nature of traumatic memory. However, it is the cumulative effect of all the stories that is deemed more powerful than any individual story. Ultimately, the reader can reassemble all the parts and be returned to a reflective space informed by contemporary values and understandings. Consequently, the creative artefact does reflect contemporary values even as it re-imagines values from the past.

How can fictional stories re-imagined from recent historical events function as significant cultural texts?

This project speaks to the claim put forward by Denzin and Lincoln that qualitative research can be a vehicle for social change and the advancement of social justice. Arts-based enquiry requires an artefact that, it is argued, is itself legitimate research. It is a type of enquiry that generates new knowledge through creative practice and like any research sets out to address a problem, find things out and establish new insights. The thesis reveals that for many individuals, history is often accessed via a range of creative media including fictional writing. As these individuals make up the citizens of a society, awareness of historical events contributes to better informed participation in the present and improved understandings about how to create a more just future.

The artefact of this thesis contributes to the interpretative enquiry addressing issues and themes emerging from the 2004 *Forgotten Australians* report. Creating contextual, theoretical and methodological links between the artefact and the exegesis serves to strengthen the research findings and the discussion around the vexed notions of fact and fiction reveals that the less than exact discipline of history contains fictive elements. The gap between the disciplines of literature and history is found to be blurred and the notion of modern fiction as a questing rather than a didactic tool is evoked.

It is in this spirit of questing that my creative stories evolve. The stories do not claim to provide solutions to the myriad issues concerning child welfare programmes and policies. They instead aim to challenge the presumptions, understandings and beliefs of citizens in contemporary society with the hope that such reflection may lead to individual shifts in world-view and ultimately translate into community action. Creative writer Elizabeth Bowen made the observation that short fiction had the capacity to suggest rather than describe the fantasies, fears and manipulations that underlie social behaviour (Bowen cited in Glendinning, 1977, p. 2). I believe the stories in my collection describe these phenomena and in doing so function as significant cultural texts by alerting readers to the presence of underlying ideologies in society, encouraging them to question whether inclusivity and justice are served by these hegemonic discourses. Readers are urged to reflect on the rights and responsibilities of all members of society and challenged to examine their own position within that community. This may entail a shift from a comfortable space where complacency resides. It may also be the catalyst for change particularly in respect to how a society values and protects its children.

To close

This complex journey set out with fragments of information about a little known history and concludes with an accumulation of new knowledge. The thesis provides both creative and critical evidence of having interrogated the three research questions rigorously. The intent of this work has been to affect individuals and to awaken social awareness. However, a potent issue not addressed, as it falls beyond the scope of this investigation, concerns current child welfare practices and policies in Australia. What happens to children who need protection and care in contemporary times? The many pages of recommendations made in the *Final Report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* (2017) provide a raft of guidelines with respect to current and future care of children. It also calls on the Australian Government to issue a formal response to the *Final Report* and to report on the implementation of recommendations within six months of being tabled. Just as my research project calls on readers to examine their own moral and ethical position with respect to children's safety and welfare, the Royal Commission counsels:

Protecting children and promoting their safety is everyone's business. It is a national priority that requires a national response. Everyone – the Australian Government and state and territory governments, sectors and institutions, communities, families and individuals ... has a role to play. (2017, p. 7)

Unexpected outcomes are the territory of research investigations, and as in many other research projects, the artefact threw up such a finding. It is the transporting effect of the entire collection as it moves the reader from an initial sense of not-knowing to a type of new knowing that cannot be ignored: from a kind of silenced civility to an awakened emotional resonance that may manifest as shock, anger, shame, pity or grief. The reader is left with new knowledge regarding inhumane attitudes and behaviours from the past, but this comprehension trickles into the mind through a contemporary lens. This act of witnessing illuminates many other acts of oppression and violence enacted daily and, it is hoped, triggers a resolve to act as advocates not only for children, but for other silenced members of society, both now and into the future.

This project has been propelled by a belief in the power of stories. Others, including the former Governor General, Her Excellency the Honourable Quentin Bryce AC CVO, also speak of the power of storytelling. In her series of Boyer Lectures 2013 entitled *Back to Grassroots* she expresses her belief that stories provide “our best hope of building a more inclusive and more responsible citizenship ... [and can] dramatically shift attitudes and conventions” (Bryce, 2013, p. 37). It is anticipated that this thesis and the stories it tells may contribute to this process.

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