

Voicing the generational disruption experienced by post-55-year-old and older women  
in contemporary Australian society through a creative narrative influenced by the  
literary genre of Magic Realism

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## **CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP AND ORIGINALITY OF THESIS**

The work contained in this thesis has not previously been submitted either in whole or in part for a degree at CQUniversity or any other tertiary institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the material presented in this thesis is original except where due reference is made in the text.

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Dated: 17 August 2018

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## **ABSTRACT**

This Masters thesis includes two interrelated components: a creative work and an exegesis. The creative component is a collection of theoretically informed short stories entitled ‘Myths, Moths, Mum and Me’. This fictional narrative follows the events in the life of a post-55-year-old woman in contemporary Australian society and, through this narrative, attempts to provide points of cultural identification that will lead to further discussion for, and about, this community of Australian women. This discontinuous narrative combines a realist style influenced by the genre of Magic Realism and was chosen in an attempt to provide a writerly, perceptive and honest presentation of the issues facing this generation of women. Written to accompany ‘Myths, Moths, Mum and Me’, the Masters-level exegetical dissertation investigates the culture of two generations of women – the contemporary post-55-year-old woman and her mother – and the reasons behind their differences, together with the current social situation experienced by many mature-aged women, including the contributing circumstances which have led to a lack of preparation for their mature age. This exegesis discusses the practice-led research methodology and resulting outcomes that inform and underpin the themes, narrative construction and literary devices chosen to develop and produce the accompanying collection of short stories. By extending the scholarship relating to the generation of contemporary post-55-year-old women in Australian society, it is hoped this exegesis will be useful for creators and consumers of, as well as commentators on, the cultural identity of the mature aged woman in Australian society as it contextualises and addresses current issues facing this demographic.



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EXAMINABLE MATERIAL.**

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## **PRESENTATION DURING CANDIDATURE**

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## **A NOTE ON READING THIS THESIS**

### **Sources used**

The rapid unpacking of mature-aged woman's' cultural identity warrants a constant updating of identifying factors through the immediacy of contemporary media. With this in mind, a combination of existing academic research and 'grey literature' (including non-published government, academic, business and industry materials) have been used to identify and define the behaviours and strategies currently exhibited by readers, writers, publishers and film makers that may be contributing to exposing the cultural markers of the post-55-year-old Australian women's demographic.

### **Spelling**

Australian/UK English spelling conventions are used throughout this thesis, however American spelling conventions are retained in direct quotations.

## **BACKGROUND**

Aged in my 50s, I heard many oft-repeated remarks from my female friends such as ‘My mother was retired at this age’, or, with a touch of bitterness, ‘My mother just told me to get married and everything would turn out’, or ‘This is not what I expected, I don’t know how to deal with this’. I felt empathy because I was in the much the same boat. This led me to question if we, myself and my contemporaries, had been brought up with realistic expectations of our future life. And if not, why not? How was the experience of one generation to another’s so different, that the previous generation’s experience could not (in most cases) be translated into practical maternal life advice, that would assist, rather than hinder, the next generation?

I began a small informal, personal survey on the subject by simply posing direct questions to friends and listening carefully to their answers. Even without formal data, I easily concluded that post-55-year-old women felt the maternal advice they had been brought up with, combined with observations of their mother’s lifestyle, had usually proven totally inadequate in preparing them for a comfortable, or at least dignified, mature age. By dignified, I mean a life led with basic physical, social and mental facilities: that is, adequate food, housing, clothing and social environment.

With this in mind, I reflected upon my own mother’s lifestyle at this age (55-years-old and after) and felt an estrangement between the social realities of my mother and myself. This was the second time this had happened. The first time I have since identified as the adolescent stage, when I, typical of this period, experienced a sharp sense of isolation from my biological family due to a lack of shared understandings.

In adulthood and onto middle life our shared experience of marriage, childbirth, children's upbringing and general family life recovered intimate connections. Yet, once again, and this time as a post-55-year-old woman, I was experiencing a sharp sense of disconnection. I was again navigating a world that I was not prepared for and, indeed, in terms of relevant social structures, not prepared for me. Perhaps I could be likened to a rudderless ship, but my general observations suggested I was sailing with a fleet of like-minded vessels.

Following this, another question arose: was this what every generation felt as they entered a new life stage? To gain additional informal information, I spoke to my daughter, who was in her late 30s, on the same subject. Particularly in terms of social media and its effects there were some predictable disconnections. However, overall, she said she sensed a multi-level understanding with me which included a consensus between us on marriage, divorce, women's education and spiritual, family and community values. This consensus between my daughter and myself was not reflected in the relationship with my own mother. As much as I loved and respected my mother, I recognised vast differences in our social values particularly concerning spirituality versus religion and women's place in the private and public spheres. The difference was great enough, I believe, to be coined a 'generational disruption'.

Following these personal observations, I began to seek further evidence to back up these thoughts. It was not hard to find women such as Australian social commentator and post 55-year-old woman Jane Caro who acknowledged exactly what I was sensing. In national broadcasts and print articles, Ms Caro pointed to post-55-year-old women who were brought up on the mantra that: 'A man was the plan'. This phrase

meant that a man, rather than employment, education or self-sufficiency, would be sufficient for life-long viability and sustainability. The rising number of homeless post-55-year-old women proves how wrong this was and credible reports show how this social problem is set to escalate (Older Women's Pathways Out of Homelessness in Australia Report 2014). So, what happened to make a mother's well-intentioned advice to her daughter prove to be so utterly inadequate for her future life? These questions continued to prick at me and I felt compelled to explore the eras of these different generations, and to juxtapose the experience of one generation to another. My ultimate aim was to come to an understanding about why there seemed so few guidelines to assist post-55-year-old women, not only through their adolescence, but also in their mature age. This prompted my undertaking of this Masters thesis.



## INTRODUCTION

Since I was a girl, I have always kept diaries and written short stories and poems, all expressing my life experiences. Ongoing through these writings, I observe a running narrative portraying these generational differences, not in sweeping dramatic scenes, but simply through illustrations of everyday life. In my mind, a picture began to emerge of these stories reconstructed on a strong researched foundation of what exactly constituted this 'generational disruption' between mother and daughters, a picture that would paint, I hoped, an enlightening and entertaining narrative.

Once I began this course of study, I considered such a reconstruction of my writings and pondered the genre most able to illustrate a demographic of women who had largely forsaken traditional religion for various streams of spiritualism and lived so much of their lives through the generous memory of the silicon chip. This is a generation who have seen leaps so significant in technological advances, they can seem like acts of pure magic. A generation who is blending cutting edge medical advances with ancient healing folklore in how they treat their bodies. A generation who have experienced divorce like no other and are the first generation to use oral contraception and are among the age-group, that within a few years, are destined to become the largest demographic on the planet. One idea led to another, and I began to wonder if the genre of Magic Realism would provide the literary language most suitable to express this great avalanche of social change.

My first encounter with the genre of Magic Realism came in the late 1980s, when I read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1968). I was riveted

by the book's form and language that incorporated supernatural spirits, psychological insights, historical truths and symbolic clashes between ancient and modern worlds. In particular, these elements seemed capable of containing, yet at the same time expanding upon, the clashes of thought and resulting behaviour that often characterised the post-modern life of a generation of independent older women. The world's leading Magic Realism exponent, Wendy B. Faris, in her paper, 'The Question of the Other: Cultural Critiques of Magical Realism', describes Magic Realism as:

a combination of realism and the fantastic in which the former predominates. This is not to say that they are not meaningful and illuminating distinctions to be made between different strains of magical realism, such as those that Jeanne Delbaere-Garabt examines under the rubric of psychic, mythic and grotesque realism. (2002, p. 102)

On further readings in this genre, including novels by Isabelle Allende and Aimee Bender, it struck me that the truest picture of life, as I see it, concurs with the description by Faris, of a combination of 'realism and the fantastic' (p. 102). Additionally, the acknowledgement by Faris of the 'different strains' (p. 102) of Magic Realism provided further confirmation of this genre's ability to illustrate the rich life of my potential characters, while retaining a grounded 'everyday' narrative. Thus, I came to formulate an idea of making a study of the 'generational disruption' between post-55-year-old women and their mothers and then expressing the findings through the production of everyday stories influenced by the genre of Magic Realism.



Further reading led me to the discovery of discontinuous narrative. This narrative can be described as a series of short stories linked by personality rather than orderly time sequels.

Considering how postmodern life, and indeed my own life, was proving to be a series of 'moments' rather than an ongoing story, I felt the combination of a discontinuous narrative together with elements of Magic Realism could prove to be the genre best able to express the life and times of the post-55-year-old Australian woman in contemporary society.

In many ways, I found the form of my Masters Study (Research) equivalent to the chief qualities of the Magic Realism genre – realism and magic. The research could be called the ultra-realist dimension of my Masters study, and the magic as the creative process. The discontinuous narrative contributed to both the magic and realist expression.

### **Research question**

Can elements and devices borrowed from the literary genre of Magic Realism be utilised to express some of the meaningful moments of a contemporary, mature-aged Australian woman's life in the form of a discontinuous narrative (linked short stories)?

## **Thesis form and scope**

This Masters Level project uses a creative practice-led approach and has resulted in a thesis of two parts: a creative work and exegesis. The creative work is in the form of a series of short stories in a linked discontinuous narrative format, approximately 17,000 words in length. While aimed at women readers, it does not exclusively target this market. The exegesis includes a report on the research conducted during this project, including identifying and exploring trends within contemporary Magic Realism as a type of literature in general and within the short story market, as well as identifying the distinguishing markers of bestselling women's stories.

Practice-led research has been used to conduct the study and to inform the creative work which uses elements of the Magic Realism style to express the concerns and interest of the mature-aged woman in contemporary Australian society. This research considers generational social changes and posits that their effect on the lifestyle of the post-55-year-old Australian woman and whether this re-established order of society requires a corresponding shift in conventional story-telling language to illustrate its perspective. In doing so, this project explores the potential of the Magic Realist genre to paint a literary portrait of the research demographic in deeper, truer colours than conventional realist language and realist representational literary devices.

The research takes in the second (1960s and 1970s) and third (1990s) waves of feminism and its resulting social cultural influences on the current generation of post-55-year-old women in Australia. The findings of the research are reported both in the creative work and the exegesis. The research component for the content of the short

stories is grounded in selective scholarly research into the everyday experience of post-millennial post-55-year-old Australian women in today's society, while the literary research focuses on research into Magic Realism and its features.

### **Significance and innovation of the research**

A study of the impact of these two waves of feminism, together with an acknowledgement of contemporary psychological discoveries and how the contemporary post-55-year-old Australian woman negotiates an environment sculpted by these conditions, has not yet, as far as my research reveals, been recorded in linked Australian short stories influenced by characteristics of the Magic Realism genre. The reimagining of this journey through fact-informed fiction seeks to express the daily external actions and corresponding inner life of this demographic and provide a lens through which to focus on current lifestyle issues. It has also been often remarked that despite notable exceptions, older women are not as well represented in fiction or other popular mass media. In 2013, a study presented to the British House of Commons, 'Representing older women in the media: The key issues', commented on the absence of images of older women, stating that when they were represented, these were often stereotyped. (Many of the television shows referred to in this study have been shown by, and popularised through, the Australian media). The study stated that:

While older women are statistically largely absent from a broad swathe of media they do appear in age and gender specific spaces, genres and social or cultural roles. For example, on television older women may appear in the role of the comic battle-axe (Nora Batty, Hilda Ogden, Hyacinth Bucket, Mrs

Brown – here the grotesque older women are a man in drag), as victims or potential victims of crime (newspapers, television news), and as ‘at risk’ through the health impacts of aging (health campaign, advertising), and in stereotypical roles primarily lined to the family and domesticity (the ubiquitous ‘nanna’ found in all too many media texts). (Dolan and Tincknell, 2013, n.p.)

My creative work is, therefore, designed to position a truer picture of older women within a creative category together with attempting a deeper understanding of their current circumstances. According to Reed (1992, p. 144), popular fiction underpinned by scholarly research has an innate ability to communicate with the wider world. Reed states that work by Janice Radway on romance novels offers an example of ‘literary intellectuals breaking out of professional confines’ in order to produce socially engaging and important works. My project follows this format as I seek to engage in creative dialogue regarding the subjects of aging, women and generational disruption, through the production of what I hope will be a publishable collection of short stories.

### **Project outcomes and outputs**

The outcomes of this research comprise the usual form of a Masters creative practice-led project in FoR 190402 (Creative Writing), in this case a short story collection (to be submitted for publication) and an accompanying reflective exegetical dissertation of Masters Level and scope, as the suggested length for the project as a whole is not to exceed 50,000 words.

The creative work takes the reader on a journey through everyday life stories (using elements of the Magic Realism genre in a discontinuous narrative format), to attempt to express various moments and aspects of the life of the post-55-year-old woman dealing with aging in contemporary, middle-class Australian society. The exegesis documents the underpinning research placing this demographic of women within a social and cultural context. It also considers the Magic Realism genre and its ability to illustrate the subconscious layers at work in the everyday life of the mature-aged woman.

Research to date suggests this is the first scholarly research in a creative practice-led mode about the post-55-year-old woman and her contemporary Australian lifestyle, and has resulted in the first Australian collection of research-informed short stories on the subject. The work aims to articulate contemporary everyday thoughts, philosophies and structures, yet to find a voice within an appropriate output.

## **CREATIVE WORK**

### **MYTHS, MOTHS, MUM AND ME**

## **Preface**

These short stories are based on my research into two generations of Australian women, one born in the mid to late 1920s and 1930s and the daughters they bore in the 1950s and 1960s. Through the juxtaposition of their everyday lives, the narrative seeks to portray the great gap, which I have coined a 'generational disruption', between the two demographics. The making of this gap began in the 1960s when disruptions such as the women's liberation movement, changes to government legislation, expanded education and spiritual upheaval, carved out a new cultural landscape which has resulted in the contemporary post-55-year-old woman navigating her mature life through unfamiliar territory.

In literary terms, I have been influenced by the genre of Magic Realism. The genre's very nature of imposing the extraordinary on the ordinary, and through this, destabilising dominant cultural codes, empowered me with a literary palette which could illustrate the world as I know it. In particular, it has allowed me to acknowledge the reality of women's intuition and in turn reflect the modern world's interest in alternative spirituality. My own life and that of my mother are definitely used as a basis for my storytelling, however any other reference to people known to me is not intended. Rather, it is intended that my description of situational circumstances may strike a note of recognition in the reader, and lead to an enhanced understanding of their own stories.

Finally, it is hoped that reflecting upon my own life as a post-55-year-old contemporary woman may assist my sister travellers to have lots of fun in in their own journey as we all move together through the passage to and of mature age.

Gail Forrer



## **Valerie and her friend Chassie**

In the afternoon, when they were home from school, changed into their play clothes and fed from their own kitchen, they would run into their front yards, stand straight, and stare directly into the neighbouring yard until they caught each other's sight.

Then, silently they would signal towards the chosen high stumped house they would find peace and shelter to dream and sigh and play away the last hours of the afternoon sun. If they decided on Valerie's place, Chassie's short bony legs would pound across the dirt road and onto the sharp grass of her front yard. Then he would slow down just long enough to slap her outstretched hand, clutch at it and pull her with him past the mandarin tree, where a halo of native bees poured a shower of citrus scent over their little bodies as they brushed past the deep green leaves. If sweet round fruit hung from the branches, they quickly gathered a few to stash in their pockets for a future juicy feast. Within seconds, they were down on their knees making their way through the widest gap in the wooden slates, then they straightened up and moved with stealth until the soles of their feet were soothed by the touch of the cold grey cement that stretched to the border of old red bricks which marked the separation between two levels of ground. Just there, they paused before clambering over the uneven barrier onto the soft black soil they so loved to pick up and let run through their splayed fingers. In their hands that soil felt as smooth as the last licks on a boiled lolly.

Most times, they just sat there and played in the soil, relaxing in the shade after a whole day of dodging the hot spit of a foxy sun that chased them from daylight to dawn. They would sit there, full of peace and quiet, and watch the long sunrays of dust grow and change in the light, and laugh when they swiped their hands through

and caught a bunch of nothingness. Under that house, their hands were busier than their legs. Sometimes, Chassie might reach into his pocket and bring out small notches of bleached white bones, throw them into the air and let them land on the the back of his palm or Valerie would retrieve her secret stash of marbles hidden in the orange rusted tin can. Then they would dig out a round area where they could roll and crash their coloured glass marbles with wild abandon. Later, as the sun was beginning to set and they felt the first rumble of their tummies, they would hear their names called, jump to attention and scrabble out to the light, thick with dust and tiredness to climb up their own timber stairs and into another family life. The next morning when Valerie woke to the first crow of the rooster, she fell from her bed onto her knees in front of a makeshift holy alter on her duchess and prayed to be a good girl so that she could play with her blonde-headed friend forever.

One day, a couple of years later when they about ten, they decided to stop playing with the dark, smooth grained soil, the marbles and knuckles and smoke cigarettes instead. They were walking to school holding hands when Chassie told Valerie that he wanted to try smoking and she said she did too. He organised the newspaper to roll up the tobacco he had nicked from his father's wallet and Valerie was to get the matches. On their first attempt they were too busy trying to roll up the tobacco and never actually got around to lighting it. A couple of days later they went back to their task and managed to create something smokeable, but Valerie had failed in her only job and forgotten to bring the matches. It didn't matter, it made them laugh even harder and they hid all the contraband under a pile of old horse shoes in a corner where the sun never reached. Each day they would recover it and go through the routine of rolling the tobacco and then holding it between their fingers, putting it into mouths

and pretending to blow out smoke. The days came and went and they kept rolling cigarettes until they became quite adept at it, they practised and practised holding, ashing and smoking unlit cigarettes. They even started to talk like the adults who smoked, saying bigger words with bigger meanings, like – and ‘How are you today Mr Smith’, then pausing while they dragged on the cigarette before saying something like, ‘I wish to buy the newspaper’, and then stopped again and looked down as they concentrated on the squashing out of their smoking cigarette butts. It was hard to do it all while shaking so hard with laughter the cigarettes would drop from their little hands. One day, they did light their homemade cigarettes, but they sensed danger in the flame and without consultation went back to playing marbles and telling other stories about the neighbourhood kids.

When you know who your best friend is so early in the piece, life gains a certainty that is filled with a gentle comfort. Even when big changes came like the end of school and jobs, the rockiness of these transitions are somehow cushioned by shared understandings. Even in 1939 when Britain declared war against Germany and Australia’s only role was to determine the extent of their military contribution, Chassie and Valerie talked about the momentous event with calm equanimity. Yes, Chassie would go to war to serve his country and then he would come back and they would get married.

But Chassie didn’t come back. One day the Postman with the red armband on his sleeve delivered to the news to Chassie’s mother. She screamed and ran across the road to find Valerie. She slammed past the mandarin tree and the native bees frightened by her urgency stung her in reprisal. She staggered up the front step, took a

step inside, reached out to Valerie and cried in unbearable agony. Amidst the howling, the caged budgie began to squawk and from the backyard the rooster returned with screeching crows of sympathy. The night went on and people came and went and no one was really sure if the world was still spinning. The priest came to their home and sat with them, drank tea and blessed them. The following day they decided to calm themselves with attendance at an early morning mass, but when they came down the stairs, the two women saw the ground beneath them covered with the shrunken shapes of fallen mandarins.

## **Valerie working at the Bank**

Beautiful, that's how she felt.

Powerful, that's how she tingled.

Confident and careful that was the way she sashayed down the main street of the big provincial town. Styled to perfection, she entered through the central arched doorway of the bank, marched past the decorative columns, positioned herself behind the heavy timber counter and marvelled at the austere elegance of her environment.

Here she was, a young woman in a place where no female had ever held status, had dared to imagine, until the advent of War and, in an instant, as men disappeared to the field of fires, women stormed into their jobs. They drove men's cars, buses and trucks, they worked their farms, they served at their counters and kept the ledgers at home, in businesses and in banks.

At the end of each day, in this new world, 18-year-old Valerie carefully rolled and pinned her hair to ensure her appearance reflected the precision of her position as a bank teller. She laundered the outfits made by her mother, checked her hat and gloves for the slightest blemish, wondered if the war would ever end and fell asleep dreaming of parties and flaming skies. When she sensed the first filter of yellow sunrays through the wooden blinds of her bedroom, she stirred enough to begin her daily prayers for the safe return of soldiers and the end of war. After the unrolling of her hair and seeing to her dressing, last of all she pinched her lips and cheeks until they blossomed into a heightened shade of pink, held her shoulders back and ventured fearlessly into the smoky world of an industrial township.

Inside the single storied bank, Valerie leaned into a kaleidoscope of sensory sensations. She tasted the sharp tang of fresh ink, paper and money, she saw herself mirrored in the deep gleam of the polished cedar floor boards. She beat in rhythm to the clink of coins, the shuffle of notes and the open and shut swish of giant ledger pages. Sometimes she felt an inner glow as bright as the vault's brass handles.

It was more than she could have ever wished. At 14-years-old, after leaving the convent school, Valerie attended Miss Fidgeon's commercial college to learn her tools of trade, typing and shorthand. But after starting work in professional offices, she realised her training hadn't included facing the fear of predatory professional men. The first time she was groped she burst out crying and it frightened both of them so much, she was immediately told she didn't suit the job and advised not to bother returning. When it happened at the next job, instead of crying she ran around the desk and he chased her and, this time, she told him she wouldn't be coming back. And so it went on, until the town's esteemed bank manager approached her equally esteemed father and through him, offered her a job in the bank, to be held during war time only. By then, she was 18 years old and ready to take on the world, come what may.

In those first few weeks, before the comfort of a routine had been established, the violent thump of her heart acted like an early morning alarm. She heard the long, high pitched moan of the backyard rooster even before she felt the light of day, but her early awakening gave her extra time to pray to add up the ledgers correctly, for all the miracles to occur that would ensure she had the right answer for every customer and especially for the manager. Her next prayer requested her guardian angel to help keep

her from smiling, laughing or letting her naturally gregarious nature emerge when she dealt with the frequent financial exchanges from young American servicemen.

Dressed to perfection and fortified with the armour of prayer, she set off down the timber stairs of her high stumped home taking care to push her face into the mandarin tree and deeply inhale its irrepressible fecundity.

In the summer of the first year at the bank, when the mandarin tree was heavy with loose skinned fruit and diligence had seen her nervousness replaced with a degree of confidence, a premature rumble ruptured the rhythm.

‘Can you please come into my office?’ the bank manager demanded of her.

She stepped in to see his small suited body nearly disappearing behind the big rosewood desk, but his voice was strong and urgent and he didn’t invite her to sit down.

‘You didn’t tell me your mother was working,’ he scowled at her.

Her cheeks didn’t need pinching to flare up, water filled her brown eyes and perspiration squeezed from every one of her powdered pores. She was nearly choking with embarrassment, but she breathed in and out and stood strong. After all, this was just another offence in the litany of requests and accusations that had been aimed at her since she began working. She just stood there and absorbed it. He continued in feigned disgust.

‘I didn’t think your father would allow your mother to work.’ He paused for dramatic affect and looked closely at Valerie. It appeared he was checking to ensure the gravity of his words were given due respect.

But at that moment, when she least expected it, Valerie’s heart starting beating again, and in turn, something rather odd happened. All that built-up inner confidence began to slowly unfold and she felt like laughing, laughing so boldly and loudly that the vibrations would cause the grand old bank building to tremor and bit by bit collapse into its own bones. Simultaneously, she felt the world was so upside down she could laugh at its antics forever and ever.

She defiantly tilted her head away from the floor and towards this small man. She opened her mouth and flared her nostrils, and then she felt the soft, sweet fall of mandarins into the palms of her sweaty hands and, just like she had imagined Donald Bradman doing, she bowled the rich juicy fruit into his sour face. She concentrated hard and made each shot a perfect bullseye. When she had successfully finished, she refocused on the voice of the bespectacled gentleman seated in front of her.

‘I wouldn’t have employed you if I had of known this,’ he continued. ‘Tell your father your mother must cease working, or you will lose your job.’

Full of emotion, Valerie bowed a headful of dark brown curls, walked back to her position behind the counter and wondered why this man wouldn’t go to the war and do some real work like other men.



When Valerie repeated the story to her father, with a deep, long sigh, he acknowledged that which was inevitable had come to pass. He faced down his wife with the news and she stopped cooking dinner to shout and scream and then, like him, bowed to that which was inevitable. She sold her share in Grace Salon, a high-quality dressmaking business she had started with her slightly crippled, spinster sister. At 36-years-old, she sacrificed her business for the men of the world and the dignity of her family and her only daughter and stayed at home, crazy busy sprouting great thorny branches of resentment, knitting socks for the men overseas, washing clothes in the boiler and making sure her white sheets were whiter and brighter than her neighbour's.

## **Valerie's Sunday dinner**

This was the routine. Every Sunday, six or more family members milled into the enclosed veranda, before they positioned themselves around the table proudly dressed up in a starched white damask table cloth. The men and children spent time speaking with Pete the green budgie or poking their heads out of timber framed windows and looking at nothing in particular.

The main thing was to keep out of the way of the women who darted in and out of the room setting tables with the best of silver and fine bone China dinnerware. The scent of roasting chicken, thick brown gravy, golden potatoes, soft green beans and just charred pumpkin travelled tenderly beside them. Somewhere, behind that first course, you could capture a waft of something sweet and lovely forming in the distance. Everyone's finer senses were a little on edge waiting for the taste of contentment, the momentary appeasement of family quarrels, problems and hardships settled just once a week around the dining room table.

There was even a certain grandeur in the atmosphere. The everyday had been replaced by Sunday, the day of rest, of worship to the lord, a day full of formality and thanksgivings for the precious gift of family and food that during the week was all but forgotten.

Preparations for Sunday began with dressing with care for church attendance, including hat and gloves. Then there was a rush around for money for the church collection plate. Inside the church, young Valerie met with the familiar faces of the

blue cloaked Madonna, the crucified Christ and stony faced angels. The atmosphere was fearsome and tiring, yet sometimes when Valerie concentrated and listened to the soaring sounds of the church choir, she did indeed feel a sense of the mystical. She treasured that feeling, but it was unreliable in its appearance and always fleeting. She certainly couldn't rely on it to keep her from utter and consistent boredom.

Nevertheless, it was astonishing, fascinating and a little tormenting to hear the stern loud Irish voice of the gold caped priest announce the huge amounts of money given by parishioners, and interesting to see what people were wearing, who was there, who dared sit in the front row and who slunk down the back. But after all of that, the first reward arrived when they walked out the door and Valerie knew that, at least, for the day, she could count on another life in heaven.

The second reward came with Sunday lunch, but not before the horror of watching her father put the chook's head on the chopping block. Sometimes, when things didn't quite go as planned she had seen a headless chook run around the backyard. The next step was to pluck each feather from its limp, soft pink body. Then headless, lifeless and naked it would be washed and put into the oven. Valerie often wished she didn't know those backyard chooks so well.

But she did wonder if death by chopping block was preferable to death by dog. The mad midnight crow of chooks and the desperate, furious barking of a dog sent icy chills running down her spine. In her mind, she saw the dog run off with one poor chook wedged between its jagged teeth, and the others, crazy with fright and fear, scatter through the hole in the wire the dog had dug, and ending up in the fruit orchard where their frantic pecking and wild tearing feet caused havoc. In the morning the

bedraggled creatures, all full of fear, could be found wandering helplessly under the custard apple trees or seeking solace around the pawpaw tree next to the outdoor dunny. Then she would be called to herd them back into their pen and it would be a few days before they laid eggs again and she stopped jumping at the slightest unexpected noise.

When the golden roasted chicken arrived at the Sunday table, her father, seated at the head of the table, would simply glance around the table with a certain look and demand attention. When silence ensued, he would bring his middle finger up to the centre of his forehead and begin: 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' For the children, this thanksgiving prayer seemed like a piece of long and unnecessary gibberish that kept the food from their mouths. The end of saying 'Grace' was met with a burst of rowdy voices. But it only lasted a moment before the next ceremony began. Her father straightened himself again, leaned towards the chicken and, holding the precious carving knife, was ready to complete the final part of the process. There was a nervous quiet as he ceremoniously lifted the huge knife and began for the last time to cut into its tender white flesh. When the meat was carved up and put on her plate, Valerie ladled a big spoonful of gravy over it, so she could enjoy the only dish with meat that would be served all week and also hide the creature she had once hand fed with grain.

The third gift of the day arrived when, after the trifle was eaten and the dishes washed and put away, the family would sit around the piano and listen to her mother play.

## **Valerie's TB**

The nurses didn't like you, the doctors didn't either.

She wondered, if they found people with diseases so repulsive, why they even worked in hospitals. They certainly weren't the Florence Nightingales she had imagined. But then again, the world had never been as she had imagined.

During the 1950s, tuberculosis had spread like wildfire throughout the country and her own family suffered terrible losses. Firstly, her uncle, a young married man in his mid-twenties, died, leaving behind a toddler and a wife, his childhood sweetheart. Then her aunty, the one only a couple of years older than herself, the smart union organiser, whose doctor fiancée had diagnosed her, had died painfully. Valerie had absolutely insisted on visiting her Aunty in hospital, but looking back now, perhaps that's where the infectious disease had taken hold.

The lunchtime medical appointment was prompted by a terrible tiredness enveloping her whole being, and the follow-up X-rays bore witness to the dreadful fact of her illness. After the diagnosis, she walked into the insurance office where she worked and told her boss. She can't quite recall her words, but the reply was etched in her mind.

'You must leave the building immediately,' he commanded, and she did.

Then she was in hospital, isolated with other sufferers, unclean and condemned. She made a friend of Connie, a beautiful artist who sketched the patients to fill the time of day and make memories. Rosie, too, became a friend and her wicker work was exquisite. The weekly visit from the Occupational Therapist was a highlight, the guidance in weaving the long strands of tan straw, art and wickerwork let them drift out of fevered dreams and back into a living world. Valerie was there when Connie coughed blood for the last time and the sound stayed with her for the rest of her life. Valerie lived long enough to gain a life, because she was one of the first patients to try the miracle drug cure *streptomycin*.

After more than six months in hospital and plenty of drugs, one day she was declared free of the disease and allowed to re-enter ordinary, everyday life. Her legs felt weak, her skin was pale and she was nervous, confused and interminably happy all at once. When she left the hospital with her parents, she donned a homemade straw hat. She had trimmed it with a rather cheeky pink rose and black lined brim, but a little further underneath she had embroidered the word 'eternity' with a warm red silk thread. On her re-entry into the world, she blinked her thick black eyelashes to protect against the dazzling light of a roofless day. She had never expected to feel the heat of Australian sun sear her skin again, to dress in new clothes, to dive into the local swimming pool and play with her two Pomerians, to have a future with a job, to grow old, to walk up the stairs of her home. But all of that she did, and before a week was over, her girlfriends had gathered on her enclosed veranda to welcome her home with an afternoon tea.

The half a dozen good friends sat there with tea and cakes and talked for as long as their friend's health could stand.

'Have a cigarette,' one offered.

'Oh no, I couldn't, I haven't smoked for months,' she replied.

But her friends urged her on.

'Come on', they said in chorus.

'You won't be really well until you can smoke again.'

She laughed, wondered if they were right, knew they were wrong and took the cigarette offered to her. The first time she inhaled, she gagged and nearly choked on the smoke. They patted her on the back and told her that, in time, she would be able to enjoy a cigarette again. Her head was dizzy and her mouth had such a foul taste in it, the smoke rose above her head, formed a heavy halo above her and made her say goodbye to her friends. When the chattering group left, she walked downstairs and vomited under the mandarin tree and staggered back with a drizzle of crème citrus buds scattered through her dark hair. But the next time she saw her friends, she tried again and puff by puff, she successfully resumed her former habit.

The medical profession recommended not having children, and definitely not to breastfeed, after TB, but smoking was a part of life that no one would condemn, no matter what your state.





## **Valerie Mirren transition**

Did she know me?

Do I know her?

What are the consequences of our relationships?

There are secrets between mothers and daughters. There are secrets they hold separately, big ones, little ones, and complex ones made to consolidate the convoluted illusions of our own selves. Just one huge herd of lazy lies and trying truths fenced in their own fancy corral.

When her body commenced its monthly bleed, when boys became known as the opposite sex, when she wanted to stay at home and play with her sisters, but couldn't resist the urge to cower in corners and smoke cigarettes. That was the time when she kept running out the door, when all she really wanted to do was to run hard into her mother's open arms and glue their two bodies back together again.

One day she was sitting in the family car with her mother waiting for a stop to open and she suddenly realised her mother was staring at her. She was so scared, so embarrassed, so full of longing to share words, that she shouted out her confusion:

'What are you looking at?' she screamed.

In unison, they looked away from each other.

Later on they walked into a milk bar and she asked Valerie if she could have a vanilla thick shake.

'You don't need that,' her mother replied.

Mirren stared back at her mother and because she didn't know what to say, she raised her unplucked eyebrows.

'Why?' she quietly questioned.

Her pudgy hand unconsciously wiped across her face and pushed back her wild brown hair. She bristled all over with strangeness, what was happening? Her mother always shouted her a vanilla thick shake when they were on their own together at the shops. What had happened to destroy this ritual? Her mind started jumping around in her pubescent body causing a mighty mayhem, and made her feel incredibly itchy. She tried to settle, tried hard not to scratch when she felt a cool breeze blow over her. It was so soft and soothing, she wasn't prepared for the joy of it nor the sight of a giant whirlwind spinning through the doorway, jumping onto the milk bar and into the lolly jars. One by one, the hissing, spitting serpentine demolished the sweet pink musk sticks followed by the long chewy snakes then dozens of pink gummed tender teeth and finally a myriad of coloured jellybeans. Up, up and away they flew into the ravenous, twisting corkscrew.

'Stop,' yelled Mirren.

There was a pause, a defiant hiccup and the vortex of wind blew open the fridge door and vacuumed up all the milk and ice-cream.

Satisfied and transformed with its fill of coloured lollies, sweet milk and cream, the rainbow coloured funnel elegantly spiralled out the door.

In the first few seconds after the event, the mother and daughter stood silently aghast at what they had witnessed together.

Milk dripped all over the linoleum floors, the left over shaving of lollies were scattered over every inch of counter and bench. The whole place was a mess.

‘Let’s get out of here, while we can,’ her mother said.

Without further words they hurried back to the Mini Minor and sped home.

## **Valerie and her daughters**

She told her six daughters that it wasn't that she was pretty, it was just that she knew how to make the best of what she had. None of them were sure what this meant. She kept telling each and everyone of them how attractive they were, but did she mean only with make-up on? It was hard to say.

In the backyard of their split-level light brick home, there were six fruiting trees. Each one planted to mark the birth of a daughter. They had started with a mandarin, followed up with an orange, a lemon, a pomegranate, an avocado and finally a custard apple. When they were small they would join with friends and feast on the fruit before it hit the ground. When they suffered measles, mumps and chickenpox their mother squeezed the juice from these trees, mixed it with honey and helped them sip it from a teaspoon. Some years later they juiced them through electric sieves and added a green powder to the mix and considered it a fabulous body cleansing power brew.

Valerie told the girls not to eat too much fruit, because it could cause breakouts. But, after dinner they were fed from big tins of cold white ice-cream and, contrary to the fruit, this cream enriched the texture of their olive skin.

She told her girls about the endless line of suitors the war years had provided, of the parties, the engagements, the dizzy fun of it all. The Americans, she told them, had plenty of money and bucket loads of good manners. She told them she had been engaged to a Flight Lieutenant, he had left her with an engagement ring and sent the money for her passage to New York. The night before her departure, she felt she

couldn't leave her family, her town, her life and called it off. That was that, on with the show.

Perhaps with the hope of creating their own line up of suitors or of not missing out on the hectic highs and lows of war as it was told to them, the eldest daughters kept their eyes on the Vietnam War, but all the voices they heard were thick with anger, protest and shame. Eventually, this war poked holes through the nostalgic stories their mother told them and they joined the anti-war protest marches with fear and pride.

One Sunday, with a few minutes to spare before evening mass, Valerie turned on the late news and there, right before her eyes, she saw one of her daughters in a crowd of women holding high a pro-abortion flag. Even though she seemed to have tried to disguise herself with a paisley babushka wrapped around her head and an oversized pair of round sunglasses, it was definitely her daughter. Her body started to react and she felt her legs start to give beneath her, she wondered if the neighbours had recognised her, then she lowered herself into the green velvet lounge chair and, before she knew it, she was thanking the Lord for giving her daughters who stood up for themselves. One thing led to another and she began in turn to say a prayer for each of her daughters, so by the time she arrived at mass, her lateness meant she had to slip quietly into the back row.

## **Mirren and waves**

It is more than three decades since a huge white moon suddenly angered by the endless repetition of pushing and pulling in tides, overflowed with extreme emotion and dumped a flood of grievances on a small section of Australian coastline. In a flash of four days and nights, this big, sad moon opened its heart and let all its pent-up drama hail down onto an unsuspecting world.

Since it was Christmas time and a searing heat was burning the earth, some things such as the trees and wild animals were thankful for the downpour, but not so for the holiday makers who had made their annual pilgrimage to worship the sun, blue ocean and the soft white sand. These people, who had offered up their holidays to properly enjoy the sultry weather, felt cheated.

After four intense days of cyclonic conditions, the howling wind had turned to a whimpering wet breath, but its powerful energy had done its damage, buffer zones of trees meant to stabilise the sand had been ripped out and sent flying, lashing winds had whipped up huge waves that dumped their mighty weight on the soft sand, leaving the once smooth surface rough and rutted. The deafening storm has lessened but a low whirling growl beat remained in its place.

Inside damp holiday homes, people were becoming bored and irritable. They were full of desire for a touch of the weather that had randomly imprisoned them. Instead of watching the never-ending television pictures of wasted land and sea, they wished to see for themselves the brutal images of storm-ravaged beaches.

Mirren was sixteen, sharing the long days of her last year of school holidays with a school friend and her 14-year-old sister. During the cyclone, they had set up shop in her bedroom, listening to Bob Dylan records and rolling cigarettes from Drum tobacco and looking out the rain-lashed window. Now and then, she would venture out to the kitchen for some food, as she passed by the living room where her parents sat simultaneously playing scrabble and watching TV, she enquired about the latest update on the weather, but usually she continued her walk to the fridge before the update was completed.

Today, she didn't need to ask them, her last look out the window clearly showed the shift in the weather conditions. Besides that, the friends were just about out of tobacco.

'I'm completely stir crazy,' Mirren confessed.

'Let's get out of here.'

The girls whipped out to the phone and stood around it while Mirren called up friends and asked them to meet at her place. Within half an hour another four girls, the eldest at seventeen held a driver's licence and, courtesy of her parents, owned a car, had arrived in a mini-van and plans had been made to take a walk on one of the lonely beaches to the south of the town. Surprisingly, the little van was big enough to fit in all of the excitement packed up inside seven mini-skirted girls.

They drove the car into the sand-filled parking area overlooking the deserted beach.

The moment they piled out, rough winds pushed into their heads sending locks of hair

slapping across their salt stung eyes. With their sight partially blocked, they were unable to see far into the distance, but as views of the horizon diminished, the sensitivity of their bodies heightened and they instinctively began to feel for guidance from the natural elements. The wild weather stirred them and their walk to the ocean turned into a run.

‘I feel free,’ Mirren called out to no one and everyone as she made a dash towards the sea.

But her run was slowed as each step she made was bogged down in the soft, soggy sand. Nevertheless, after days of enforced enclosure, their stored energy was enough to pull their feet from the soaking sand and send them hurtling towards the tideline of bubbling froth.

As soon as the sea splashed on her body, Mirren bent down, cupped some of the dirty white bubbles in her hand, and thought of fairy floss and witches. Then she opened her palm and let the wind reclaim the stuff of its own making.

The atmosphere was damp and muggy, sometimes the clouds would part and burning lines of sunlight would pierce through the sky and stab their backs, it was so hot and heavy it felt good and bad at the same time. Blasts of ocean and gritty sand as hard as wet cement sprayed their lithe bodies, challenging them to navigate a sandy surface pockmarked with holes and slimy aquatic debris. Unconsciously, the girls formed a crooked line.



When one of the teenagers sighted a swaying jellyfish, a piece of driftwood or dead fish, they raised their voices above the din of the pounding ocean and hoped their friends would hear and heed their warning. Yet, with the sand scratching at their eyes and salty mist enveloping them, it was becoming increasingly hard to sense zones of personal safety. Still, Mirren had spotted something interesting, further along the shoreline, a big brown shape appeared to be embedded in an eroded sandbank. Intrigued, she squinted her eyes and made out its shape.

‘It’s a giant turtle,’ she shouted and waved her hands until she had everyone’s attention. The group gathered and made their way towards the turtle where they saw the back of a gleaming tanned shell wedged into the drenched wall of storm-stiffened sand, the small black flippers frozen in death. Balls of battered grey fruit from the Pandanus trees were scattered around the body as if ready to form a funeral mound. Shocked, they made a half circle around the ancient creature, then silently, each in turn laid their hand upon the hard brown shell and felt the pulsations of tides and ripples, corals and whales and all the glorious places this turtle had travelled.

As they moved out of the solitary moment and into awareness of the world around them, they realised that one of their own was missing. Mirren couldn’t see her younger sister and nor could anyone else. For a long while they ran up and down the beach, shouting out her name. Someone had seen her there and another here. She was behind them; she was in front of them. Now she was nowhere. They were frantic and they wanted to stay with her, wherever she was, but the light was fast leaving and dusk was on its way, there was no alternative but to leave her there. They were numb,

incredulous and frightened beyond anything they had ever known. The six of them, this time drained of any life-giving fluids, again filled the mini-van.

Over and over again, they told the story to parents and police. Search parties were launched but found no one. The girls trembled and cried at this incomprehensible horror. How do you lose a sister, a friend? They breathed the air in and wondered how you could disappear inside of this nothingness.

No one could bear to look in the mirror, a reflection was meaningless now, but sometimes Mirren would pinch herself until she felt pain and felt herself alive.

‘But am I really here,’ she would ask herself.

Later in the week, one night when she was asleep in her bed, her father came and woke her.

‘Love, they have found her,’ he said with a sheet of tears falling over his face.

‘She must have drowned.’

The newspaper reported a teenage girl’s body was found washed up between sand dunes. It did not report the extraordinary entanglement of jewel-like silver shells and green seed pods twisted through her long hair, nor the tattered lengths of Pandanus leaves strung around her wrists.

## **Mirren's boyfriends and girlfriends**

Mirren really wanted to share her plan, but that was the thing about sharing a house with couples, they went out together and you were left at home with no one to chat with, which left you sitting alone on the veranda watching the purple geraniums grow.

Even if it was Friday night.

Staring up at the gleaming half moon, neither planning nor thinking, but perhaps doing a little dreaming, Mirren felt a beam of inspiration illuminate her whole body. Yes, she could really do something a lot more meaningful and financial with her life plan. She could achieve much more than a fine local reputation in the visual arts.

These days, if she put her mind to it, she could value add to anything.

'I'm going to write a novel about myself,' she said to herself.

'I'll spill my guts about all the emotions, the pain, the ecstasy, the discipline, the love, the losses everything, absolutely everything.

'Damn it, in the way of an authentic story-teller, I will be totally courageous and bare my most outrageously private moments.

'I will hold nothing back, I will shock and horrify myself and mortify others, but it will be the authentic me.'

But truth somehow outs and she admitted.

'Really, what could I write about, who would want to listen. It's just me talking about myself, who cares.'

'Stop being such a narcissist,' she berated herself.

'You're not a narcissist, you are creative and authentic,' she answered back.

Mirren was surely on a roll now. 'I'll will write about these feelings.'

She was feeling more and more comfortable with the growing narrative and even began to experience a slight body palpitation, the stirrings, she sadly admitted, very much rooted in the alluring fire of fame.

'Oh my Goddess,' she howled to the thin curved moon.

'Sometimes I'm bloody brilliant.'

Mirren was determined and committed, all she had to do now was to share the vision with an understanding, supportive friend, but at this stage of her life, deep into her early twenties, many of friends had created their own lives with partners, committed to long working hours to climb the corporate ladder or were living overseas.

'I'm sort of lonely,' she thought.

The overload of adrenalin had left her flat and a few fat silver tears involuntarily slid down her cheeks.

'But,' she defiantly continued, 'I have my art gallery.'

And because of miracle-like circumstances, Mirren did indeed have a gallery.

Just twelve months ago, when she too was ready to take on Europe, she was contacted by the philanthropic friend of a friend of a friend from Art School, who had heard of her desire to start up an Art Gallery and offered her the cheapest of rent on a small house in a commercial area of a very up-and-coming part of the CBD for a period of five years. Mirren was one to recognise miracles not reject them, and with that knowledge she had thrown her complete self, mind and spirit into the serious business of art dealing in the front of the house and art making out the back. Complete with a visual arts degree, a love of gardening and no alternative, in the searing summer heat

she had tidied and cleared the yard, trimmed wild hedges, cut out unwieldy vines and planted sweet smelling shrubs. But finally, although it would have been a wise move, she couldn't bring herself to remove the gnarled old fruitless orchard of mandarins and custard apples. Instead of giving them a funeral, she breathed love into them, fertilised around the base of their thin grey trunks and sowed seeds of marigolds, nasturtiums, and violets. In return, the trees sprouted a few small white scented flowers, the precursor, maybe, to orange coloured fruit.

Mirren slowly lifted her head from the big cushions and hugged her knees to her chest, she needed to move, to do something strange and adventurous. She decided to do the thing that soothed her most, go to work in the gallery. She walked into her bedroom, checked out her wardrobe, decided against wearing her paint splashed overalls and, since it was Friday night, chose to dress up and impress herself. She opted for her wide black pants and Japanese tailored shirt, then, determined to go all out, teamed up the outfit with an extravagantly beaded, 1920s Tom O'Shanter wool-style beret. Gorgeous. She brushed her long brown hair, positioned the hat on a rather rakish angle, walked out to the garden, picked a sprig of purple geranium flower and used her antique hatpin to attach it to the beret. Well satisfied, she walked back inside and glanced into the mirror. She wasn't feeling so lonely now, her costume had successfully uplifted her spirits and, by the time she stepped into her pale green VW beetle, she could feel a familiar Friday night tingle. She started up the car, slipped on a Pink Floyd cassette, and just as she was about to wind around the corner to the gallery, she noticed a rather happy-looking, champagne-sipping crowd of people standing outside a recently created bookshop.

‘Right, this must be the opening,’ she rightly guessed.

Without too much thought, she pulled the VW around another corner and parked it in a spare space along the dark street. She turned off the engine, fumbled for her tote bag, decided her job as a fellow small business owner in the area secured her enough credibility to make her welcome, bravely exited the car and made her way towards the opening crowd.

‘For sure, I will know someone here,’ she told herself.

And, of course, she did know just one person there and without hesitation zoomed in on him.

However, when she gave this tall, dark and handsome man a big hello, he rudely feigned surprise and performed the where-do-I-know-you-from act.

Mirren, herself gifted with a certain predisposition for the dramatic, went along with it.

‘Of course, you mightn’t remember me,’ she purred, ‘but you were the last one to leave my art gallery opening a few months back.’

He stared at her and she could see the dawn of recognition rising in his already glassy eyes.

Mirren had, in fact, driven him home to his apartment after he was too intoxicated to even call a cab. She had got him up the stairs and left him trying to fit his keys into the door-lock. After that, she hadn’t really thought of him. The opening had been a success, she had sold two good pieces and he had been a minor nuisance. She hadn’t thought of him again, until now. ‘Of course,’ he said and they shared a slightly embarrassed but knowing laugh about the whole thing. Mirren was at her most

gracious. Here she was the woman who had saved him, and here he was the grateful recipient of her kindness. Perfect timing. What a wonderful connection. She mightn't have noticed him then, but she surely did now.

This man, going by the name of Ian, was one of those who clearly drank too much and whose main purpose for attending an opening was to enjoy a free flowing fountain of grog.

'Darling, thank you for saving my life,' he announced dramatically, nearly spilling his drink as he wrapped his arms around her.

Mirren drew him in with the warm comradery of an old friend and listened to his whispers.

'You know I really wanted to return and thank you.

'But I was sure an angel like you would never want to see a devil like me again.'

He winked at her and gave her bottom a mild, but meaningful pinch. Mirren couldn't believe how good things were going. Done up in her favourite outfit, sporting a purple geranium on a unique hat, she felt big love. She was zinged, unexpectedly struck by the proverbial bolt of lightening. He released one arm to take another sip of his drink, but fugitively kept the other one around her. Life was amazing. She had come here as a lonely single woman.

'And now look at me,' she thought.

She was now a couple and the two of them were attracting friends to their coupledom.

Between saying hello to this one and that, she relaxed into his arm and they nattered like old mates about her business, his life as a highly paid public servant and their fabulous inner city lifestyles.

Then the young male owner of the bookshop and the night's host made an appearance. His skinny tight jeans moulded his legs into a matching pair of long smooth snakes. His shirt was a very raw silk with minute dabs of black thread spitting free from the fabric. His brown hair was frost tipped white and spiked, while a dim dusty aphrodisiac scent lingered around his elegant throat.

When he began to speak, Mirren noted the sensitive tremor of his Adam's apple. But before he had got out more than a 'Good evening dear friend', Kevin unwrapped the one arm left around Mirren, interrupted the host, and pulled him closer to them. 'Kevin, meet Mirren,' he said with a tilt of his head that sent his long black bangs swinging to the side of his head.

'Mirren, meet Kevin.'

It was a moment. Mirren's love-intoxicated mind gave way to a sobering revelation. Clearly, Kevin and Ian knew each other well, very well. Ian gently melted into Kevin, in much the same way he had wound his arm around Mirren. Without her permission, silently and slowly, small purple flowers began to work their way free from Mirren's hat, struggling, then swirling, melding, fluttering quietly in the smoke-filled air, yet before they started their downward journey, there was a defiant change of plans. A sense of mischievous took over. Those wilful purple petals formed a carpet in the shape of a love heart for the two men to stand upon. There was no hiding now. It was



done. Mirren excused herself, walked straight through the purple heart to the bathroom to collect what was left of her shattered self. Fortunately, she was alone in there long enough to look deeply into the mirror and tell herself to pull herself together and appreciate the fact that she made new friends on a gay and happy Friday night!

And, indeed, she had. Kevin had been looking forward to meeting this divine creature wearing a fabulous antique hat, this neighbouring successful art gallery owner, who had been kind enough to drive home his hard-drinking lover, when he himself had left Ian alone to attend a family gathering. It was written in the stars. Mirren was to be their new best friend. It had all worked out beautifully – for them.

Mirren couldn't take her eyes away from the reflection of herself. She was single again, but that brief glorious moment of coupledness still lingered. Well, anyway, she had her work and a couple of new friends. Upon that realisation, she decided the VW would have a night out and she would have a couple more drinks and get a cab home. On her return to the party Ian had a drink waiting for her, he was a little prying but mainly solicitous, they were just interested in getting to know her. But the atmosphere had changed and Mirren, although accepting, did not feel as forthcoming. She quickly tried another drink to loosen up, finished it just as quickly and then, feeling a little shaky, decided it was time for another toilet break. This time there was a line up of women, but the drink had made her bold.

'Please, this is an emergency,' she told the woman in front of her.

'What do you mean,' she replied.

‘We’re all here because it’s an emergency.’

‘But I really can’t hold on any longer,’ Mirren pleaded.

She must have said it louder and with more emotion than she had anticipated, because suddenly the lady in front of her moved out of her way, the next two ladies did the same thing. She had obviously been given clearance to forge ahead.

When she emerged from the toilet relieved, empty and as an unpartnered woman, she had changed her mind and felt like she needed to get home as soon as possible.

As she washed her hands in the basin, the woman next to her looked over.

‘Are you ok?’ she said mildly.

‘No,’ said Mirren, ‘I have just come up with a headache.’

‘I’ve got some pain-killers here, would you like one?’

‘Thanks, I would love one.’

The curly black haired woman whipped a packet out of her bag, pressed out a couple of white pills and handed them to Mirren.

They walked out to the party together, took up positions beside each other and moved on with a barrage of small talk. There was no exhilarating moment, no floods of warm flushes, but there was the satisfying recognition of a like-minded person. It turned out Marianne was an art teacher and new to the city after fleeing her hometown at the finish of a soul-destroying relationship break-up.

‘I’m up for a new start,’ Marianne declared.

Mirren felt the soft weight of small geranium seeds sink into her velvet beret and begin to sow a new story. Marianne wore a wreath of red paper rosebuds in her hair, a matching 1950s vintage dress and high black platform shoes. She looked gorgeous and as Mirren checked her out, she was glad she had gone to some effort with her own dress.

Then, she thought again.

‘We match.’

Together, with their mutual blooms they made their way towards the makeshift bar. A rather handsome young waiter interrupted their journey with an offer of canapés and champagne. Thankyou. They stood still and accepted one of everything.

‘Are you feeling better now?’ Marianne asked her new companion.

‘Fine, just fine’, Mirren replied and followed up with a colourful story of her recent misguided affection.

Although they both understood the sub-text of, ‘Why me?’ and ‘How’s my luck?’, they also saw the funny side and nearly spilt their precious champagne as they released rolls of laughter.

‘Well, things are going to change,’ Marianne announced and then went onto elaborate on the dreadful situation that had led to her interstate move.

‘I was devastated, I thought I had found the one,’ she said.

‘I was completely deluded, turned out he was having affairs all over town. It was humiliating and heartbreaking and after three months of mourning, I woke up and told myself I was moving on.’

That very morning, Marianne gave a month's notice at the school where she taught, a month's notice of vacation on her unit and one month later she was in her car heading to Brisbane to stay with her cousin of a similar age.

'I was here two weeks and had a new job and found my own place. It was amazing, all meant to be.'

Mirren listened carefully to the story, she envied her new friend's liberated run-away.

She took a swift sip of champagne and looked into Marianne's eyes.

'You are amazing,' she said.

But she also thought she was amazing for making so many new friends on just one unexpected evening. Mirren could feel her head becoming blurry and her voice rising up an octave or two. When she noticed how often she was laughing at nothing, she made another trip to the bathroom. This time when she looked at her reflection, she said, 'I've got to get home.'

She made her way towards her third new friend of the night, leaned towards Marianne and told of her departure.

'I'm outta here,' she whispered.

Marianne slung her arm through Mirren's and they walked out into the night.

'I'll wait for a cab with you,' Marianne said.

The two of them stood on the black tarred footpath making small talk and laughing.

Each still clutched their champagne glass.

Who knows what happened then? Perhaps it was the flowery talk between the roses and geraniums. Perhaps, it was just because it was Friday night. Perhaps, it was the

curled up half of a moon staring down at them. But it happened. In the darkness, below the stars, next to the bookshop opening, a shared urge grew within them to celebrate.

Mirren didn't want to write novels, manage art galleries, sort out share-houses, travel or meditate. She just wanted to dance. She wanted to dance through the valley of this cement jungle and claim the night as her own. Mirren stretched her two hands towards Marianne, who wrapped her own around them.

'Dance?' Mirren asked.

'Would you like to dance with me?'

Ian and Frank smiled as they watched the two beautiful young women waltz their way home.

## **Mirren and moths**

Mirren held the cream-coloured phone receiver close to her ear and stared out of the window, upwards towards the wide, cloudless sky. In the vast space above, she noted a flash of white feathers, then watched as it formed into a line and dashed to the ground. The flock of dusty white cranes landed, bent their necks, touched the earth with their long curved black bills and began pecking for sustenance. Upon registering the intruders, five or six red billed water fowls peeked from their secret hiding place amongst the slender lengths of soft brown bulrushes, shook their shiny black feathers, then plunged into the dam seeking refuge amongst the blue water lilies. At the back of the dam, the young Olive trees looked forward to the time of their first fruiting, beyond that the giant Ghost Gums hosted the laughing kookaburras.

That summer was remembered long after for its fierce heat, and one day, in pure desperation, Mirren, fully clothed in a light summer dress, dived from the wooden deck off the dam and into the liquid glass. Transformed into a human cannon ball, she smashed through the mirrored surface and entered the realms of thin green water snakes, charcoal eels and merciless fanged fish. No matter how hot it was, never would she ever again invade their country.

On the phone she heard her friend explain his situation.

‘So I went to the solicitor last week,’ he said.

His voice began to gain heat and weight and speed.

‘She’s not getting this house, this is my house,’ he thumped through the phone.

‘I told the solicitor, and he said it looked ok, it was mine before she came here.

We didn't buy it together, so she can't claim it.'

There was silence and Mirren heard his breathing soften.

But they didn't talk about the fact he had conceived twins with this woman. They talked about the other children, his children, her children, their growing up adventures, lives traveling in and out like ocean tides.

Mirren listens to her friend as he bounds back to the initial topic.

'She says she wants to move to a house on the hill with a view.' She can hear his voice become more insistent.

'I'm not leaving this house.

'It's mine,' he repeats.

'I love this house – this is my home'.

This indeed is his house. He bought it with his first wife and first two children, paid her out and there, with all of his children, he intends to stay.

She bids farewell to her old friend. A last goodbye. Mirren hasn't talked much about herself. It's all about him. He's unhappy and so is she. History repeats itself. Linked up again with the wrong team members. There's an understanding. What is it with them?

Mirren is lost in thoughts about the present, past and future, she goes out to the kitchen and thinks about making dinner on a Saturday night. About picking up teenage children, about her friend going to a divorce lawyer. She mulls over separations, ex-wives, husbands, worried children. So many relationships strewn all over the shop, you could trip over and strangle yourself with them.

Teenaged children phone in and advise there's no need to pick them from their part-time jobs, because they have made other arrangements. Mirren breathes a sigh of relief, goes to the fridge, pours some wine and settles down on the cane couch on the veranda. When she looks up into the twisted tree trunk beside the veranda railing, she sees the translucent, patterned skin of a snake. It must be three metres long. Shedding skin and moving on.

In the aftermath of the phone call, she decides to make plans. It was about time. It was time. They could get together. The children could mix and meld. All doubt had shimmered into nothingness, it was inevitable, they would finally be where they belonged.

The high temperatures continued for another two weeks sucking the life out of flowers and fruit. Mirren sat in the relentless heat, completing the plan for her future. But before she could carry them out, a rain began that would change her world forever. Unexpectedly, suddenly, without a moment's warning, the weather changed, a full moon rose and pulled in the tides. Her friend was dead. That day she waded through the bull rushes, the dragon flies, the toads and into the dam. She swam around the circumference and before she dragged herself out of the murky waters, she called quietly to the waterfowls, budding fruits and tree angels. But none of them replied, none of them came to her. He had died without warning, one punch at a pub, violent and senseless.



From another paddock, the burning of sugar cane sent soft wafts of black ash into her house. The air filled with a sweet acrid odour and a giant, silent, brown moth came from nowhere and perched on her right hand shoulder. The teenagers came home; her husband returned. She cooked dinner. She shook and cried while a tempest roared through the home and the moth, undeterred, stayed exactly where it was.

It stayed and it stayed, then hours later lost in sorrow, in anger, in retribution, she pulled it from her shoulder and flushed it down the bathroom sink and thank God it was gone. The next afternoon at dusk, a small tawny owl arrived on the veranda rail. It stared at Mirren and she stared back. The bird stayed for seven days. Then flew away. Twelve months later, she did too. Her second marriage done.

## **Mirren and fruit tree songs**

One day, the grey clouds were so low, she simply jumped high, caught onto a woolly thread and let it drop her down where it would. Or that's what it felt like when circumstances had conspired to sweep her out of her own home and financial independence.

'Do you mind if I go out tonight, Mum?' the 55-year-old, former artist now a second career, registered nurse, asked.

'Oh well, I've been by myself all week, so what's another night,' the white-haired woman stoically replied.

Mirren bent low and looked straight into her mother's misty brown eyes and sighed.

'What the hell am I supposed to do?' she asked herself as she turned her back and walked towards her bedroom to change into a fresh dress.

She had been working nightshift all week, caught up on some sleep today and felt like getting out.

It was such a dilemma.

She didn't mind spending time with Valerie, but she enjoyed her girlfriends, her sisters, her two rambunctious adult sons and didn't mind her job.

She tended to think that simply living with her mother should be enough togetherness for the two of them. But no, it wasn't working out like that. She stretched her long, tanned arms above her head, linked and squeezed her fingers together, simultaneously in a soft strangled voice she let out a few choice swear words. It was times like these she retreated into the shady space of the shabby, uncared for backyard. In measured

steps, she made her way out to the back veranda, wandered down the stairs and made her way to the orchestra of fruit trees.

Even though some of them were too old to fruit anymore, their scent seemed richer and riper than ever, their limbs a dark dull grey and their ability to harmonise stronger than ever, perhaps not in tune, but certainly in meaning. As soon as they felt Mirren's presence, their voices, at first like church bells, began to tinkle: 'Oranges and Lemons, the bells of St Clements', the chorus of old fruit trees chimed.

You owe me five farthings,  
Say the bells of St. Martin's

Mirren spotted the custard apple tree and crawled under its low branches, crossed her legs and settled on a warm pile of leaf mulch to enjoy the choir.

When will you pay me?  
Say the bells of Old Bailey.

Even the skinny old peach tree, which usually kept quiet, started to sing.

When I grow rich,  
Say the bells of Shoreditch.

And that was it for Mirren, she joined in the next few lines with gusto:

When will that be?

Say the bells of Stepney.

I do not know,

Says the great bell of Bow.

By the time they had reached the last lines, you would have thought the Ten Tenors had taken over. Each piece of fruit, every living and dying leaf and branch and trunk sung out together in a great weight of tremulous tones.

Here comes a candle to light you to bed,  
And here comes a chopper to chop off your head!

At these final words, she pressed her hand deep into the rich, brown crackling mess of parasites, microbes and decay and from some bottomless pool of water she felt the location of the very earth she sprang from. For a moment it felt as if she was pregnant with the whole planet and about to explode with the pangs of birth.

She cried out from the very pit of her stomach, indeed the bowels of the earth, the place where she knew everything and nothing, the place where wells of anxiety filled, balls of pain bounced and the bells of her future rang loud. As quick as the sounds had come, the quietness arrived and, in that silence, she noticed there was one, just one lone custard apple hanging from an ageing branch.

When she regained her composure, she slid out from under the custard apple branches and followed an inner direction that pointed her towards the wilderness of lavender lantana bush, and just the same way as she did when a child, she picked the flowers, carefully threaded them together and gently put her wrist through the circle of purple lace.

Like countless other flowers and shrubs that thrived in Australian gardens, all at once this was a pretty flower and a noxious weed. Mirren threaded another flower bracelet, then made her way back up the steps and found her mother in the kitchen with a cup of tea.

It always made Valerie smile, when she offered her one of her delicate flower bracelets.

‘I don't know why you're killing yourself with that work,’ her mother would admonish her.

‘Why don't you stay home and make flower jewellery for me?’

Mirren had pondered that alternative, but attractive as not working was, the idea of her mother and she together all day, everyday, for the rest of their lives, however long that would be, was a daunting prospect.

Mirren laughed a little and cuddled her mother.

‘Oh yes, that would make me a fine living, dear mother,’ she pronounced.

And her mother did notice the tiny tone of irony in her voice.

‘Oh well if you can't keep a husband,’ Valerie said.

The ping pong match had begun and finished.

Mirren slipped out of the kitchen and into the bedroom to get dressed to go out. In a little more than thirty minutes, she had pushed her hair up into a messy bun, slicked on some very courageous ruby red lipstick and adorned her body in a fabulous Japanese designed maxi dress.

‘Hey Mum’, she called out.

‘I’ll be back in a couple of hours – don’t wait up for me.’

‘Oh, come on and give me a look at you,’ Valerie replied.

Mirren sashayed into the lounge room.

‘You look absolutely gorgeous,’ her mother clucked.

‘Go out and enjoy yourself.’

## **Mirren with Botox and India**

It was the year of India and Botox. A year disrupted by death, birth and divorce, distinguished by meditation, yoga, Himalayas Botox, dermal fillers, eyebrow lifts and fat lips and simply celebrated by making it to the finish line.

During the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, the general panacea for getting through the difficult decades was a cup of tea, administration of a white or pink headache powder full of quick-acting, calming, pain killing powders labelled Bex or Vincents (both were banned in 1977 due to their propensity to cause kidney cancer), and, following that, a good lie down. In the new millennium, Mirren and her friends lost touch with these powders and during their own difficult decades chose to knock on the doors of cosmetic enhancement studios. As far as she was concerned, these visits provided as much temporary relief as the coloured powders. Sure, one had to contend with the sting of needles into soft facial skin and, depending on the amount of smoothing, lifting or puffing up required, the result could be barely noticeable, at other times a thin red line defining the mouth morphed into a set of luscious lips as full as rose buds and you knew you had witnessed a personal miracle. Others who had the spare cash and had grown sick of piecemeal enhancements, would travel for a full facelift to an Asian country, and they too would return fresh faced and fancy free. In these times, many Hollywood celebrities seemed determined to avoid any ageing signs, and at seventy-years and older their physical appearances were nothing like people of a similar age in the previous generation. These faces showed neither lines of worry nor laughter, there was no evidence of a tippie or two or an extra hour sunbaking. They were the new portrait of a generation that chose the means to reverse physical ageing.

Thus, discussions of legitimate and illegitimate ageing signs in moral and ethical terms were as sneaky and illusional as a poker game.

‘It’s call the Dorian Gray effect,’ Mirren said, referencing both the 1890 publication of Oscar Wilde’s novel, *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* and the ageless Hollywood stars gracing the magazine pages in front of her.

‘So, what does that mean?’ her girlfriend Jan questioned.

‘The Dorian Gray story is about a young, handsome, dissolute man whose portrait is painted – however his wish that the portrait rather than himself, would acquire the signs of ageing, is granted.

‘And so he retains his beauty until his death, while the portrait manifests the tell-tale signs of age, disease and untruths. It is not until he dies that his body finally takes on the physical truth of the life he led and only then does the original portrait of the young man reappear.’

‘So, a complete denial of reality?’ Jan responded in a pained voice.

Mirren paused, sipped her coffee then gave clarification.

‘Well I don’t think the well-heeled Dorian Gray was competing in the modern job market in his sixties – and so he really had no excuse,’ she sniffed.

The two women finished their skinny flat white coffees, stood up, and for another tiny moment wondered what life was all about, or at least how much their face should reveal what their lives were about. Finally, with a self-induced, WTF attitude, they headed purposefully towards the small white, sterile cosmetic studio. An attractive young lady in white with perfect make-up and coiffed hair, affirmed the double booking, gave them a pleasant smile for arriving on time and led them into separate



rooms. The double booking attracted a discount and for regular treatment this could add up to a sizable sum. Eventually, a very fresh, exceedingly happy nurse walked in, introduced herself in a self-assured manner, then gifted them with an informal chat about the amazing rejuvenation powers within her hands.

‘I understand that you have booked in for Botox around the eyes and fillers for nose to mouth and lips,’ she said.

‘But I’d just like to add that because we appreciate your continued patronage, we are offering you an extra gram of filler for free. You can use it now, or on your next visit.’

‘Just put it straight into my lips,’ Mirren said without hesitation.

Jan had also been given the good news and she advises that a tad of filler above her eyebrows would be of great use in lifting her drooping eyelids. Thank you.

The procedure didn’t take long as they softly intoned the mantra of ‘no pain, no gain’ while needles invaded the inner sanctum of their ageing dermis. After a half an hour, they emerged with faint purple smudges around their eyes, red pinpricks on their lips, an adrenalin-charged surge of satisfaction and with the knowledge that, with a dab of specifically placed make-up, they were now perfectly presentable to the world.

Two weeks later, Mirren, now wrinkle-free and plump-lipped, stood in line at the airport holding out her passport, on the first stage of her flight to India. It seemed the ideal place to find solace from a dreadful end to a difficult relationship. In the painful wake of the divorce, her whole mind and body were aching. She wasn’t sleeping at night because she could hear the noise of blood as it travelled through her veins and the pumping of her heart felt like a hammer. She was sure she could feel an object

bruising her bones, and no matter what the time of day or night a dark recording of the break-up story played on and on inside her head.

It was the same year the weather bureau declared a drought. The relentless sunny days dried the green grass into a pale crunchy straw filled with snappy prickles. Thirsty trees couldn't feed their leaves causing them to turn brown and drop into a crunchy mulch on the ground. Wherever you went, people talked incessantly about the weather and flocked to shopping centres for the relief of the free air conditioning. It seemed no one could remember it ever being so hot. A couple of questions began to preface thousands of conversations.

'Is this climate change?' and 'Do you think it will ever rain again?'

Before Mirren left for India, she made her promised visit to say goodbye to her mother. Even knowing how the conversation would go, she looked forward to feeling the closeness of just sitting next to her and, sure enough, within minutes of sitting down in the kitchen and pouring the coffee, Mirren was explaining and justifying her reasons for choosing to hike solo through an impoverished third world country, rather than waltzing through the parks of Paris.

'Well, I've never wanted to go there,' her mother would say in a cranky sort of manner.

'If you are a looking for a religious experience, why not go to Rome?'

At that, Mirren's head dropped to her lap.

It was the 'I'm finished talking about this' sign.

'Because I prefer saris to cassocks,' Mirren retorted for the last time, simultaneously picking up her cup and placing it in the spotless chrome sink.

‘I think I’ll have a quick walk around the backyard before I go,’ she said, ‘to clear my head.’

‘Well, clear mine too, while you’re down there.’ At that, both women laughed out loud. Their shared language meant that all was generally forgiven, although misunderstood and mostly forgotten.

As soon as Mirren pushed open the back door to the veranda, she could smell the hot, organic scent of dried up earth worms and decaying snail shells. As she descended the stairs, she noticed the heat had made the cream paint curl up from the timber steps. Like everywhere else, the backyard was parched, the fruit orchard barren. Then spontaneously, as if out of the ceaselessly blue sky, a deep glassy sadness struck at the very depth of her whole being. Once her tears were released, her vision cleared and she saw all that was dying within her, above and below her. She was nothing and she was everything, she was all water and earth and bacteria and molecules. The air she was, the matter she was made of, collapsed under the fat-trunked Mulberry tree and began to ooze huge drops of purple tears. The wetness merged into long thin salty streams, then the streams widened into rivers and before she knew it, she was a whirling spitting hailstorm, sheets of violet lightning escaped from her and green balls of icy fury flew from her eyes. The tree, used to shades of deep lilac berries and green leaves, had no fear of this outrageous explosion, instead the mulberry trees saw only the good that came from this angry storm and, in response, issued forth a huge whoop of joy that sent her roots spiraling up to earth ready to lick from this unexpected oasis. In a spirit of reconciliation and celebration, the tree extended a limb and hugged her, staying there until her shaking had ceased and the leaves had gently wiped dry her eyes.

After this, Mirren felt ready for India, a swim in the headwaters of Mother Ganges and a new beginning with the birth of her first grandchild.

## **Mirren and food**

Diets are everything. Diets are nothing.

This is a personal mantra and it is Mirren's personal property. She subconsciously chants it hundreds, if not thousands of times a day. Diets demean her and exhilarate her. She imagines herself in 'before' and 'after' shots. Ten years ago, she saw herself as fat, now she looks back and releases a soft pigeon like coo at what she perceives as a shapely, perfectly weighted body. Sigh, she understands that sometimes the only way to go is to bury yourself in extra-large clothing (and cut off the size label). In the same mood she contemplates deleting every single photo of her ever taken and posted online and paying a small fortune for a series of false, but fabulous, glamour shots. The sort of shot that one could proudly paste on job applications, social media and dating sites. There would be no frills to frame this photo, the subject matter wouldn't need it. However, she acknowledges that it might be an idea to lose a few kilos before she poses for these shots, so she begins another in-depth investigation into fat-free options.

'Holy Hell,' Mirren shouts out loud to no one but herself.

'Am I seriously doing this at 60-years-old, isn't this the age of settling with yourself, your authentic self, the self that honours the whole mind and body accepting all the bad along with the good and loving it all, because it is beautiful in its own special way?' That's certainly the plan, but even with a few good feminist role models, it's hard to achieve such equanimity when you are twice divorced and need to earn a living in a youth-worshipping world.

Anyway, Mirren's train of thought jumps onto another line.

'My weight problem is not due to ignorance,' she announces.

'Throughout my life, I have absorbed an enormous amount of smart, ridiculous, dangerous and helpful information.

'I am well aware that pesticides are evil and they are the cause of tumours and birth defects. I endeavour to eat organic food whenever or wherever possible and I am very well aware that the alter ego of the mobile phone is a ray gun forever shooting lethal airwaves into my delicate little pink ear.

'On top of that, I know it is absolutely true that microwaved food is dead food and on top of that can have the effect of rendering my busy gooey red gut into a slow moving inefficient machine incapable of carrying out its job of absorbing nutrients.

'And let's face it, when a gut cannot do its job, then those useless nutrients morph into big blobs of fat.'

'Oh dear God, I am exhausted,' she thinks.

'But knowledge is power,' she continues to herself.

And then sadly and slowly she turns the whole statement inside out.

'But it is also despair.'

Not one to stay down, she decides to drop into a café and have a skinny flat white.

She is happy knowing the café, as part of its service, will present a full set of glossy magazines for customers and those magazine will be full of wellbeing stories including the amazing powers of Amazonian jungle reared superfoods.

Yes, there is good in the world she tells herself.

Sweet relief.

‘Alleluia,’ she sings out loud enough for the barista to turn her head in surprise.

‘There is always hope,’ she replies to the barista’s odd expression directed at her.

At the café, she notices that turmeric lattes are now available.

‘Oh, hell no,’ she thinks.

‘Another healthy choice needs to be made.’

She starts to think about her liver and the protein powder that has been assisting in her latest weight loss program. The news that this powder can play havoc with the human body, instead of contributing to a lean and healthy body, has sent a number of users to the liver transplant room.

‘Dreadful,’ she says and knows that she has probably consumed enough of the stuff to put her in the ‘need a new liver’ category.

She orders a double shot of black coffee to settle her nerves.

Food. Diet. Detox. Mirren hears news that her naturopathic, holistic healing friend is holding a two-week diet cleanse program. It sounds rather daunting, but suddenly Mirren remembers an inspirational quote she came across the other day.

She begins an inner chant, ‘Discipline is liberation’, while she calls her friend and confirms a booking for the initial detox workshop.

Her first meet-up with the detox group takes place on a fresh spring afternoon. The sticky scent of ripening mangoes seeps through the air, yellow-eyed honey eaters forage for nectar in the gold Grevillia flowers or hop up into the gum trees and peck for insects.

Five women turn up on time at the venue and their convivial host serves up an assortment of herbal teas. This gives a little time for idle chatter and bonding among detox group members before the formal start of the program. There's soothing Indian music playing and sandal wood incense burns in each corner of the house.

But the smooth-faced naturopath is not one to waste time, as soon as the tea ceremony is finished, with a wide sweep of her hands she signals that it is time to begin. The women carefully follow the directions of her arms and form into a circle in the host's living room. In the middle of their circle, tiny pottery bowls filled with shiny crystals or orange marigold petals together with notepads and pencils have been placed on the polished timber floor. After a short, initial shuffle into position, the program organiser begins to talk about the concept of 'intention'.

'Think of what you came here to achieve,' she says in a soft, persuasive voice.

'Take note of what you feel like right now.'

For some reason, a group twitch takes over in the same manner as a Mexican wave.

Our host notices the movement.

'Don't be distracted', she advises.

'Just be in this moment.

'Be aware of standing here, with friends, all with the same intention of taking care of our body,' she intones.

'This is a beautiful thing that you have chosen to do for yourself.

'Now let us all take the group energy present and use it to strengthen our intention to complete with integrity and love for ourselves and others, this detox program.'

Then she asks us to imagine a small, round green ball of health at our feet.

'Let it grow,' she urges.



‘Let it travel through your body and out to reach the stars.’

As she stands on her toes, her arms reach upwards and she asks us to retrieve the ball, slowly bring it back from the galaxy and gently place it down on the floor in the centre of the circle.

The group echoes the movements of their host, they reach out for their own green ball and place it down in the circle.

Mirren feels good.

‘This is a very cool thing to do,’ she thinks.

‘Now,’ the instructor continues, ‘the green ball is always there for you to access on your journey – you just have to ask for it and reach out and touch it when you need help during the next two weeks of your detox.’

The green ball did indeed come in handy. One night after about a week of the detox diet, Mirren started to suffer from one of the maladies she was told would signal her body was purging itself of poisons – her legs were wracked with painful cramps.

Without hesitation she called in the green ball. It arrived with a healthy bounce and Mirren hugged it tight until the pain began to diminish. Miracle.

After retrieving the ball, a play with the crystals and a closing prayer, it was time to talk diet food. It was all about green coloured food and green coloured drinks for two weeks. Everyone was grateful to receive assisting paperwork and settled back to ‘chew the fat’ so to speak. Freudian slip, there was certainly no fat to chew on this diet.

One rather attractive brunette aged in her late fifties is talking about an impending holiday to India, when the host interrupts.

‘I thought you were getting married,’ she says.

‘Well no, yes, sort of,’ the braided brunette replies.

Mirren could tell that this sort of muddled reply irked the Naturopath, who relished clarity.

‘Come on, why not, what’s really going on,’ she insists.

‘Do you really want to get married or are you sabotaging yourself.’

The brunette jingles her head a little and acts a jittery.

‘I don’t know, we pick a date then things just sort of pop up and interrupt,’ she manages to spit out.

The naturopath is not taking that for answer.

‘There’s something else going on here – we ought to talk about it sometime.’

The unmarried one keeps going.

‘Well it’s not just about us, there’s family, close friends, work commitments.’

But the inquisitor holds tight.

‘You diarise your whole life and you can’t finalise this one?’

A third party intervenes and provides a chance to close down the conversation.

‘Sometimes just making time for anything but your daily life is hard,’ she says.

Mirren and all four other ladies seemed to have heard this comment. Simultaneously they feel the monotonous weight of the most ordinary daily routines – waking, showering, dressing, parenting, working, schooling, eating, sleeping and then doing it all over again – yes, even without tragedy, the ordinary could drive you up the wall.

“Do this diet and you will have a clearer focus,” the good leader advises.

The group quietens down, drains their cups of tea and make a line to the door, where they pick up their sandals and put them on before heading down the footpath to the front gate.

Just as the woman at the front of the line begins to open the timber gate, a huge flock of big, black parrots begin a wild jostle in the white trunked gum tree. In seconds of the bird’s arrival, their haunting screech and crazy chatter scatters through a sky blackened by the fall of their glossy plumage. Amidst the cacophony of discordant sounds and floating feathers, an odour of decaying animal mixes with the pungent foreboding of heavy rain clouds as they gather and rise from the ground beneath them. The pulsating beat beckons in a golden lightening bolt of thunder. Then an unknown conductor calls in a soprano’s squeal of car brakes. A mechanical engine halts, stops, restarts, flees.

With feathers matted through their wet hair, the ladies dash toward the road, panting and somewhat dazed they see the fat body of a five metre carpet snake snuffed of its life during a simple street crossing. The dull patterned snake lies quietly while a whimpering wet black kitten crawls out of its mouth.

Diets are nothing. Diets are everything.

## **Mirren and moving home**

In a painting Mirren saw, a young woman wearing a faded orange-waisted frock was pushing along a gigantic snail. She was half the size of her snail, but there she was, back leg sloping forward, curved spine, bent front leg and outstretched arms, all ready to give maximum push power to help this slimy body glued to its home follow a sandy track that faded out of sight.

Another move has taken place.

This is the fifth time in three years. She tells herself she will not move again, but without a miracle (and she does believe in miracles), it will happen again. At sixty, on so many levels, moving from place to place is entirely inappropriate.

Each time she packs something is lost, a small earring, a card, an electrical item, or a flurry of giveaways to friends and op shops. The word 'pack' is used lightly, because she doesn't actually, really and truly pack, not in the tidy, simple, thoughtful manner she has seen others do. No, usually in the evenings, after a day's work, Mirren takes her time and stuffs, fills, tosses various sorts of items into boxes which she has deigned to be carted away by a removalist – always one with a zippy name such as, Moving On, Moving Up, or Moving Away. The men who run these businesses are quite remarkable, their physical strength is enviable, their forbearance on difficult driveways and the steepest of stairs saintly and their resolve to finish the job in the shortest of time could be labelled as inspirational.

Once delivered, another part of the packing process is complete, but whatever relief that brings is slightly overshadowed by the nagging thought of all the money she could have made from the online sale of this hodgepodge of mostly useless items. Mirren sighs. There is more, she realises her attachment to these items has imbued them with a faint breath and small personality and each thought of them brings her a little sadness.

Moving forward, she books some storage space to accommodate the left over but special things that will never fit into the increasingly smaller spaces she is living in, but she cannot bear to be altogether stripped of. She wishes these items, including old books, an ancient lampshade, a dark heavy bookcase, a display of sculpted angels and one ugly, broad brimmed, fluoro pink hat into a space where they could rest and rust back to nothing, but to ensure they meet again, their habitat must be without sun, wind, rain or any other attacking element.

Some people will ask if they can help you pack, but unless their credentials point to a ‘best ever’ friend, Mirren will not allow it. Packing is private business, it’s full of things close to your heart that will not stand the indignity of being commented upon, judged or even touched by unknown hands. This is your life – your personal, private and confidential life stuff. Inquisitors be gone!

Mirren feels that her belongings hold magical qualities that can comfort her. She senses its weight, but believes it is just enough to keep her feet on the ground. Unload, they say, de-clutter, they write, and you will feel clear-headed and organised. On the last night, before she leaves, she sleeps in the empty apartment and feels the pulse of

her sad heart pumping pink blood into a blue, willow patterned china bowl filled with floating red rose petals. Her body curls into a foetal position and she wraps her arms around herself, soon there is a warm gold thread issuing from her fingertips and softly, firmly it weaves a cocoon around her coiled torso. While her body is couched in gold, her head roams free and everything she thinks about is recycled out through her throat, letters and drawings of waxy wide floorboards, leather lounge suites, paintings of wet leaved forests, the scent of starched white stars on a black night, a friend's salty dog and a bleached tangle of driftwood are drawn all over her white linen pillow.

The charcoal coloured roads of her new address are strewn with purple blooms from the big, old Jacaranda trees. Once Spring is gone, the blooms will be replaced with the brilliant red of Poinciana flowers and the creamy white and yellow of Frangipani petals. Between the tiny mock orange blossoms of *Murraya* will leak a trail of sweet, musty perfume.

This year, at her home in Australia, 95-year-old Lady Mary Fairfax, of the Fairfax newspaper dynasty, departed her earthly home, with the gentle name of *Fairwater*, and went to what is always referred to as a better place. However, to some this was debatable, because to many, there there was no better place to reside than this elegant mansion located in a harbour front position in Port Piper, Sydney. Built in 1862, Lady Fairfax was the third owner and she lived there for five decades, long enough to take her last breath there. Although she never divorced *Fairwater*, she wasn't its constant companion. For a couple of those five decades, she enjoyed New York enough to purchase and renovate a magnificent apartment in Manhattan. In obituaries she was

called the *chatelaine* of the Sydney Harbour-side mansion. Months after her death, further stories harked back to her announcement made in 1996 stating that ownership of *Fairwater* would be transferred to a trust and could ‘never be sold’. Most people inferred this meant a public trust, but now the time has come, there seems there may have been other interpretations. Who knows what will happen to *Fairwater*.

Mirren doesn’t mind the exercise of meeting and greeting possible future habitats online and on her own. The invisibility of the virtual tour lets you make all sorts of judgments without offending or promising anything to anyone. On the other hand, the same sort of things you do virtually, when done in person are embarrassing and difficult, and often have nothing to do with the premises. It is about the ‘thing’ in between the inspections, the premises, the landlord, the mortgagee, the site manager, real estate agent, the curious neighbour – it’s about you. Who are you? Both they and you wonder at the same time. Do you suit? Can you pay? And most importantly, what are you doing here?

Mirren has moved in and arrived back from shopping. As she moves closer to her front door, she sees a pot plant, a card, a box, perched on the doorstep. She is incredulous. The plant is the most delicate of ferns, a Maiden Hair, a gloriously old-fashioned fern. it is healthy and strong in its pink plastic pot and next to that is an envelope and next to that a little box. She bends down and picks up the plant.

‘You are glorious,’ she whispers to the fern and thinks of all the times she has run into these ferns as they peek out from the dark spaces under wooden stairs, their slender black stems pushing its delicate leaves to the light between worn boards. The

envelope contains a welcoming note from her new neighbour. 'If you need anything,' she reads, 'here's my mobile number.' This gesture, this message, fills Mirren with joy. The little white square box easily opens to reveal four hand carved wooden drink mats.

The next day, Mirren knocks on the neighbour's door and thanks her profusely for the welcoming present. The neighbour says she works at the local bookshop.

'Oh yes,' Mirren bleats excitedly, 'I've already discovered that shop and ordered two books.'

Instead of responding, her neighbour's silence makes an uncomfortable lull in the conversation, before she continues.

'What is your surname?' she asks Mirren.

Mirren truthfully responds and as she does she watches a change in her neighbour's face.

'I was right, I knew it was you,' she said.

'Really?' Mirren says.

'Yes, I saw your order there and I knew your first name, because the site managers had mentioned it.

'I showed the order to my boss and said I bet that person is my new neighbour.'

But the boss was not to be taken in with such a slim line of connection; she said she was sure there was more than one person with the name of Mirren in this suburb.

'But, somehow I just knew it was you,' she said.

Mirren shivered a little, stopped pushing the snail, and felt that she was after all, despite the difficulties of moving, meant to be there.





## **The workings of Mirren and Valerie**

Mirren woke up just fine and dandy. Her navy blue linen suit was freshly dry cleaned, her smart new shoes were ready for receiving and after a rather late night reading through reports, she was on top of absolutely anything that could pop up in the monthly meeting. As she went through her routine ablutions, she rolled through the good things in her life: she knew her lovely daughter had her only grandchild enrolled in a very good childcare centre and although sad she couldn't personally take care of her 90-year-old widowed mother, she was accepting and relieved that she was well cared for in an excellent nursing home facility. Her son had eventually married well and, besides the occasional bump, her family life was going through a relatively smooth run.

'Life is pretty damn good,' she smiled to herself.

She hadn't ever thought about still working when she was over sixty years old, but she had never wanted to give up a corporate career that has been her joy, woe and mainstay for thirty years.

Unlike her daughter, she spent the first five years at home with her son and daughter, but to be honest, she couldn't wait to get out of the house. At home, with toddlers and housework, the day seemed to never end, but once back at work, even with household duties, she felt like the hours of her day had halved. But after a couple of years, to accommodate the needs of her growing children and full-time working husband, she changed to part-time work. There was a big drop in pay and, of course, superannuation payments practically stopped, but the adjustment seemed the right

thing to do for the family. Fortunately, her third and final career move to working in a bank had provided plenty of opportunities, a few women did become branch managers and a very few more, like herself, were able to, with effort, climb to the top. She felt well rewarded.

The phone rang and her mother's name popped up.

'Hi Mum,' she said in an upbeat tone. 'How are you?'

'Not too good today love,' her mother replied in a weak voice.

She sounded terrible.

'What's wrong Mum?'

'I don't know where I am,' she explained. 'I want to come home, can you come and take me home, I want my children with me.'

'Mum, I can't come right now, but I will be over soon.'

'Please. Come now,' her mother pleaded.

Then the phone went dead.

Mirren phoned the nursing director who said she would go and check on Valerie, then she looked at her watch and hurried out to her car.

She had just settled into the driver's seat, when her daughter phoned. 'Could you do the childcare pick-up this afternoon?' she asked.

'Why, what's happening?' Mirren asked.

'I'm working late and her dad's away on business.'

'Okay,' Mirren said, scheduling this into the list that included visiting her Mother, some food shopping and responding to certain workplace emails.

'You can pick her up from my place on the way home.'

Mirren phoned the office and said she would be about ten minutes late for the meeting. She swiped her card and walked through the open door, pattered down the hallways and remembered to switch off her phone before she entered the meeting room and settled in for a couple of hours of business. It was serious business; a senior executive had been accused of sexual misconduct. After investigations there was no doubt about his guilt, it was obvious to Mirren that due process had to be followed, right to the letter of the law. She was prepared to deal with the media, but she had ensured everyone else was also ready. Actions needed to be clear, decisive and meaningful.

‘So it is instant dismissal,’ Mirren, the only female board member, announced with finality.

As she said this, she watched the colour drain from the faces of the five other board members. She realised these men would conduct the usual meeting-after-the-meeting, as soon as she was out of the way. She wondered exactly what was on their minds to turn their faces so haggard.

She went back to her office, closed the door behind her and clicked on her phone. There was an urgent message from the nursing home. She thought she knew what it was about. Lately, she had received increasingly concerned calls from staff informing her that her once gentle mother had, on occasion, become loud and demanding. She didn’t listen to the voice message, instead she picked an apple out her bag, took a quick bite out of it and decided to head straight for the home. After her own appalling experiences, her mother would be pleased to hear that times had changed in the bank.

She turned off the 24-hour news station and played music instead in the car. Paul McCartney was coming to Australia, and they were preparing the public with a deluge of his songs.

‘Let it be, let it be,’ his sweet voice poured through the speakers.

She started to imagine the way she would tell her mother.

‘Mum,’ she would say, then pause for effect. ‘At last there’s some justice in the world.’

Then she would tell her the story, and her mum would reply.

‘Thank God for that, after all we went through. It’s about time those men were held to account. I’ll be able to rest in peace now.’

The phone rang again and she answered it through the Bluetooth connection. Her daughter’s voice sounded anxious. ‘Mum, come and see grandma now,’ she said.

‘I’m in the car, I’m on my way now.’

But it was minutes too late, her mother had suffered a stroke and died. Mirren went to her bedroom where she laid peacefully on her bed. There seemed to be a little smile on her lips.

She heard me, Mirren thought.

THE END



## **CHAPTER 1**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The primary methodological strategy I have used for this research project is creative practice-led research, that is, a form of qualitative research (Burns 1990, Creswell 2003). This model combines a research component using a reflective process, primarily the reflection on the textual analysis of novels, short stories, and other creative narratives by a number of authors, together with scholarly and other materials, and then the iterative, and reiterative, feeding of the results of this reflection into the development of my creative work. Brien (2006) states that through this process the creative writer is able to create the ‘stocks of knowledge’ that are required in terms of the new knowledge component of the research degree (p. 53). This was important for me, despite this being a Masters degree, which does not have the same requirements of knowledge production as the doctoral degree.

In this research process, I have used a number of approaches interdependently, and complementarily, in the development of my creative work. The creation of my creative work and the accompanying research reflects the analysis of artmaking as research by Brien, when she discusses the process of making the creative work and refers to artist and theorist Paul Carter, who points out that ‘artists can productively reflect on the creative thinking – their working methodologies – that they use when making their own artwork, and the various and progressive iterations of that thinking’ (Brien in Kroll & Harper 2013, Chapter 2, p. 36). Moreover, Brien states that:

This is important, as Carter proposes, as artists who work in this way are integrating the craft ‘wisdom’ that goes into making an artwork with the conscious striving towards knowledge of a researcher. In such a process of creative arts practice-led research, the artist retrieves the ‘intellectual work that usually goes missing in translation’ during the process of making a work of art. (p. 36)

Gray captures two crucial aspects that make practice-led research applicable to creative practitioners of all kinds:

Firstly, research that initiated in practice, where questions, problems, challenges are identified and formed by the needs of practice and practitioners; and secondly, that the research strategy is carried out through practice, using predominately methodologies and specific methods familiar to us as practitioners. (Gray 1996, p. 3)

In my case, in this project, I identified the research question then investigated it through the practice-led research cycle until I obtained the necessary answers that I needed to develop my project. Finally, this method enabled me to reflect back the answers gained through the creative writing of my short stories into the reporting in this exegesis.

In this project, I have – in terms of process – also followed the six conditions which Haseman and Mafe 2009 have identified as the key characteristics of practice-led research. These are:



1. Resolving the ‘problem’ of the research problem, 2. Repurposing methods and languages of practice into the methods and language of research, 3. Identifying and deploying merging critical contexts which are networked out of his or her practice, 4. Identifying and engaging with the ‘professional’ frames within which practice is pursued, 5. Anticipating and deciding on possible forms of reporting, 6. Deliberating on the emerging aspirations, benefits and consequences which may flow from the demands and contingencies of practice. (pp. 213–6)

In terms of my work, the understanding of these characteristics revealed to me a process which has enabled me to drill deeply into the research question alongside the research I was conducting, and on receipt of the relevant information, and through its analysis, prioritise the meaningful learnings which inform this Masters level project.

### **Researching and writing non-fiction**

I have used an investigative approach to locating research surrounding the history of Magic Realism and its philosophical influences, cultural response, authors and their associated backgrounds. In the same vein, I have analysed the characteristics of Magic Realism and conducted a survey via a literature review of existing examples of Magic Realist fiction pertinent to my project. (This is discussed below). Insights and knowledge surrounding representation of the post-55-year-old post-millennium Australian woman within a fictional text have been teased out and imparted through using the iterative cycle of researching, writing, drafting and editing (Brien 2004,

2006; Stevens and Asmar 1999). Research into Magic Realism and feminist literature have been integrated into this cycle, assisting in the provision of materials for, and approach to, my creative writing.

In this way, I have used the practice-led methodology in an iterative cycle in drafting this thesis, using consideration of my own experience, mental reflection, note taking, and cycles of drafting and editing, in the creation of both the short stories and the exegetical text. I have also engaged in textural and critical analysis of research material and other content via reflective journaling and numerous drafts of the exegesis, as I drafted and redrafted the short stories that comprise my creative work. The cultural inquiry focus of this creative research project means that it has relied heavily on qualitative approaches, and the exploration and analysis of cultural and social material has played an important role in the development and understanding of cultural perspectives that are intrinsic to my creative work. Textural analysis has played a significant part in this project – especially in relation to Magic Realism, feminist and discontinuous narrative texts. My own experience has also informed the creative work, and adheres to the definition of autoethnography in a paper by Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011). The paper, ‘Autoethnography: An Overview’, states that:

Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to

write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both product and success. (n.p.)

Despite this, autoethnography has not provided a core methodology for my project, but instead has functioned as a ‘tool’ in the practice-led research tool kit. Similarly, quantitative research tools have been used in this research project to a minor degree in the form of the collection and compilation of published statistical data. This has included statistical data relating to the demographic of a contemporary post-55-year-old woman in terms of population, education, employment, spirituality, familial relationships, superannuation, housing, caregiving, divorce, marriage rates, retail trends and her reading. I have also obtained and analysed statistical data on book and short story publication and sales figures as relevant to the project. Analysis of book sales data collected from national and international databases (from both Magic Realism and Feminist short story categories) has provided useful information in relation to crafting a (hopefully) manuscript of short stories, however, such information is often as commercial-in-confidence, thus this aspect of the data collection has been minimal and conducted relative to opportunity.

### **Information gathering**

Due to the evolving nature of my subject matter of the mature-aged woman, I have maintained an information gathering process from both commercial and creative sources throughout this project. As the baby-boomer generation ages, an increasing amount of information has been developed to cater for their present (and future) needs. As the Group Editor of a well-respected publication for so-called seniors

(defined as readers over 55 years), I am an expert reader as well as author of such materials and this position has ensured the ongoing expansion of my knowledge regarding mature-aged, contemporary Australian woman. In my selection of media and online materials, I have chosen those both representative of the examined demographic and that provide up-to-date insights into the conversations of selected niche groups. I have also included various literary websites with a focus on short stories that align with my project. By assigning specific Google alerts, I have received daily updates on stories from around the world containing these words: ‘age-friendly’; ‘creative-ageing’, ‘longevity’; ‘changing ageing’; and ‘Magic Realism’. Mature-aged women fashion websites that I also peruse regularly include: *fabover50.com*; *AdvancedStyle.com*; *Thatsnotmyage.com* and *accidentalicon.com*. In terms of issues concerning ageing, I subscribe to *AgeingAgenda.com* and National Seniors Australia. To stay up-to-date with writing trends and new book releases I am also a newsletter subscriber of AWC (Australian Writers Centre) and Penguin Books. News websites, I have gathered information from include *The New Yorker*, *The Australian*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *Australian Financial Review* and *Yours: Magazine for women over 50*.

### **Literary theory and practical detail underpinning the creative work’s narrative**

The creative component of this project titled ‘Myths, Moths, Mum and Me’ takes the form of short stories influenced by the genre of Magic Realism and linked through the use of a discontinuous narrative format. The stories fit into the category of ‘Boomer Lit’, a term redescribing a classification of literature aiming to engage the post-55-year-old reader (Nougat 2013, n.p.) The short stories revolve around the life of one

central protagonist, a post-55-year-old woman living in contemporary Australia and features aspects of her everyday life together with her corresponding inner life. The narrative's tone is one of humour and honesty; the narrator is happy to share her public, personal, offbeat and quirky behaviour to provoke a wider conversation on issues intimately connected to the lives of post-55-year-old women.

In terms of my autoethnographical approach, I have been mindful of a statement from Geertz and Goodall:

When researchers do ethnography, they study a culture's relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences for helping insiders (cultural members) and outsiders (cultural strangers) better understand the culture (Maso: 2001). Ethnographers do this by becoming participant observers in the culture – that is, by taking field notes of cultural happenings as well as their part in and others' engagement with these happenings. (Geertz 1973; Goodall, 2001 cited in Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011, p.3)

Furthermore, Hunt notes in a UK conference paper autoethnography's ability to be used in the writerly construction of women's lives within the private sphere:

Autoethnography has been inspired by feminist autobiography to risk writing about the everyday, about lives that were once not accounted as important enough for the researchers to bother with. (Chapman 1999 cited in Hunt 2009)

Specific texts which have built the foundation for my research include Zelda D'Aprano's autobiography (1977), which overtly and courageously expresses her public and private life, something that is usually reserved for male history makers. From considering this text, I more fully realised the necessity of revealing both private and public sides of life, and also gained a further understanding of the potent role honesty plays in creating characters who can truly converse with the reader. In her book's foreword, this self-taught Australian woman and grassroots activist wrote:

Until women write truthfully of their personal experiences and involvement in the outside world, we will continue to be ignored and unrecorded, and generation and generation of young women deprived of this information will continue to make mistakes. (1995, p. xii)

A reading of Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* (2010) also contributed to my literary style. This was my first introduction to a text written in a discontinuous narrative style and I intuitively felt the narrative's chapter linkage through moments of time rather than chronological ordering, authentically reflected the post-modern life of the post-55-year-old Australian woman. The literary term discontinuous narrative has been defined as a style in which the narrative moves back and forth through time and traces one or a series of characters across individual texts and literature (Prendergast 2011). According to the definition, while my protagonist will provide a discrete narrative in each short story, the sense of time will be fluid and discontinuous, and her relationships and circumstances are referenced across stories in a non-linear manner. A review of *Olive Kitteridge* by Guaccero (2012) 'Standing in the Spaces with Olive Kitteridge, by Elizabeth Strout' published online, captures the essence of my creative

work stating that the ‘collection presents characters, events and time in a non-linear arrangement of shifting and discontinuous pieces that link together to arrange the whole’.

Similar to my reasons for choosing disconnected narrative, I also chose to utilise elements of the Magic Realism genre because of its ability to reflect certain post-modern characteristics apparent in the life of the contemporary post-55-year-old woman. In particular, the genre’s ability to describe and place the qualities of intuitive and supernatural understandings in everyday life are pertinent. Throughout history, these qualities have been associated with women and since my narrative concerns the contemporary mature-aged woman, who has often experienced the privileging of alternative cultures introduced through New Age thinking, it seemed a natural fit. Additionally, Magic Realism’s acceptance and incorporation of a character’s unconscious life in its narrative corresponds with pioneering psychological studies commenced by Dr Sigmund Freud in the late 1880s. These studies have led to ongoing, ground breaking discoveries in the field, and consequently changed the comprehension of human behaviour. The language of Magic Realism and its ability to give embodiment to the invisible inner life through metaphors, metaphoric figures, images and symbols enables the reader to engage with the subconscious dimension of life and provides another tool for the novelist to build a holistic character. (This is explained in more depth below).





## **Chapter 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter describes the reading choices I have made directly relating to my research undertaken into the history of legislation and relevant to the culture of two generations of women – the contemporary post-55-year-old Australian woman and her mother – which has informed the development of my short story collection. This diverse range of resources includes academic and ‘grey literature’, that is, traditional scholarly material such as theses, journal articles as well as other non-fiction and fictional works. These works were consulted alongside more informal sources such as popular periodicals, newspapers, websites and films. Both types of literature served in varying degrees to inform my writing of the creative work. Because my overarching topic is the lifestyle of contemporary mature-aged, Western women aged 55 years and over, I have surveyed a global selection of books that in some way express the outer/public and inner/private life of females, together with novels that illustrate generational differences. These texts, a selection from historical feminist legislation and the lived emotional, intellectual and family life of the white Australian woman from the time of European settlement to the present, provided a rich context for the positioning of my project. Since my creative work is placed in the ‘now’ a steady diet of newspapers and social media including blogs and websites have also contributed to a more inclusive view of the project’s key subject matter, the mature-aged Australian woman.

This Masters level selective review of the literature has been conducted in various categories utilising Brady’s ‘bowerbird’ approach (2000), which outlines how creative

writers selectively choose and take back to their research ‘nests’ the material needed to build their project. In terms of this approach, my literature review has been conducted in these categories: modern Australian female stories and novels specifically 20th and 21st century writings of everyday life; international female authors’ short stories and novels; popular (female-focused) childhood reading; Magic Realist literature; magazines, newspapers; Internet and blog sites. As my creative work drew on, and was heavily influenced by, this reading, this literature review – and my charting of its influence on work – provides a significant part of this thesis.

### **Modern Australian female authors**

My reading of modern Australian female authors for this project include alternative narratives to traditional hegemonic male histories presented in fiction and factual formats. In chronological order of subject matter, narratives from these Australian authors commence with a retracing of European woman’s first steps onto Australia, via Kate Grenville’s *Joan Makes History* (1988). This narrative introduces us to ‘Joan’, the everywoman who is present at all the significant moments of Australian European history, yet who is rarely seen worthy of entry into the history books. Grenville (1950–present) extends the traditional one-dimensional role of women in history when she describes ‘Joan’ as an explorer, prisoner of the crown, washerwoman, judge, mother and mayoress. She goes on to give ‘Joan’ a voice and she writes:

I, Joan, have been all these things. I am known to my unimaginative friends simply as Joan, born when this century was new, and now a wife, a mother,

and a grandmother: Joan who has cooked dinners, washed socks and swept floors while history happened elsewhere. What my friends do not know is that I am also every woman who has ever drawn breath: there has been a Joan cooking, washing and sweeping through every event of history, although she has not been mentioned in the books until now. (Grenville 1988, p. 5)

This book gained its first place in my chronological order, firstly, because it charts the beginning of the white Australian woman's story and, secondly, because it acknowledges the many roles played by women in private and public life. Additionally, Grenville has 'made history' by showing the exclusion of women from Australia's history-making moments. The combination of these points has largely contributed to the positioning of my narrative as that dealing with the holistic, Australian woman.

Following on from the first landing in Australia by a white woman, I forwarded to the experience of first European female settlers. In contrast to the Australian bush legend tropes such as mateship, bush heroism and man as the protector of white women, author Barbara Baynton (1857–1929) claims fame as the first Australian novelist to capture the truth of European female settler's bush experience in literary form. Baynton takes the 'everyday' life of such women and unites the physical and emotional realities of one-parent households, penury and predators that see women challenged to plumb the depths of their beings to find the fortitude necessary for their own and their children's survival. Although my creative work focuses on the *contemporary* post-55-year-old woman, Baynton's narrative contributes to my

understanding of the collective psyche of the Australian woman and, through this, provides rich source material for character construction in my creative work.

In 1995, the brave, complex and colourful female souls embodied in Grenville's and Baynton's female figures were somewhat reincarnated in Zelda D'Aprano's (1928-2018) autobiography, which details her life as a working-class woman with a lifetime involvement in shopfloor grassroots activism. Born in Melbourne to Jewish immigrant parents in the then slum area of Carlton, D'Aprano left school at 14, married at 16, and from the 1960s (and for several decades onwards) was at the forefront of the Womens Liberation Movement. D'Aprano's life story imparts a personal face to the history of the fight for women's rights in Australia and, in doing so, painted a clear and contrasting picture of 'then' and 'now', thus enriching my knowledge of the differences that constitute the 'generational disruption' I refer to in my project. Furthermore, it was her public writing about women's bodies that also empowered my own writing, in an area that I have always considered – for no real reason – private and perhaps, embarrassing. D'Aprano, for instance, describes a workplace response after admitting her absence was due to mensuration: 'Good heavens – anyone would have thought I had syphilis' (1995, p. 251). She goes on to note that, 'hernias, haemorrhoids, and bad hearts' were acceptable for male absenteeism, but a woman's natural bodily functions were not (p. 252). Such situations, she states, when referring to workplace conditions, is when the personal becomes political. In common with many women my age, my mother passed on very little reproductive information, let alone engaged in public discussion about such matters. In contemplating D'Aprano's text, I came to see how the unnecessary exclusion of these topics undermined the position of the Western woman by making

her body an issue of embarrassment, something that should be hidden rather than acknowledged and empowered. From this text, I gained a firm belief that if I was truly to write the 'everyday', then including the personal and the bodily in my writing was necessary.

However, the contemporary post-55-year-old Australian woman draws from a tangled variety of women's life history. While D'Aprano came from a working-class background and focused on the improving of workplace conditions, there were other women who championed equality in different fields and, in this case, I refer to Sunday Reed (1905–1981) whose story I read next. Sunday and her husband John came from privileged backgrounds and together used their money and status to finance, foster and promote the arts at a time when our island nation showed more pride in the physicality of nation building than in cultivating cultural empathies with Australia's artistic community. Harding and Morgan's 2015 biography of the Reeds, *Modern Love, The Lives of John & Sunday Reed*, also reveals the societal conventions of the day and their application to privileged women of the era. The 'Deb' Ball, the European trip, the expensive wedding, the children and the part they played in maintaining the established order, is contrasted against Sunday's own life experience of communal living, multiple love affairs (with her husband's approval) and their adoption of a child. However, while she lived an alternative lifestyle, it was the couple's ties to the establishment which provided the framework for both their lifestyle and the financial support they were able to give to artists and their projects. Through this text, I was brought into contact with another world of women. The recognition of this Australian woman's history contributed to raising my

understanding of the collective consciousness of the Australian woman, thus adding another hue to the palette from which I coloured my characters.

Moving on, my investigation into what constituted ‘generational disruption’, needed to be complemented with stories from contemporary women. I looked for stories about women who were born in the 1940s and 1950s, and who portrayed their journey as rites of passage – into what is now their mature age. In these texts, I sought to test and validate many of my own emotions, experiences and feelings as I have lived through during the same era. I also wished to be alerted to the differences and try to comprehend alternative reactions to the same societal conditions that produced the contemporary post-55-year-old generation of Australian women. One step I often took before deciding to include a book in my research reading included consulting the author’s website to find out what I could about them and what it was that prompted their storytelling. I followed this process, when investigating author Susan Johnson and her autobiographical novel *A Better Woman* (1999). In this work, Johnson (1956–present) presents an account of her journey through childbirth and her subsequent re-evaluation of her life as a woman, writer, mother and partner. On her website, Johnson expressed the reasons for writing this book:

It seemed to me when I started writing that I wanted to be a kind of witness. I couldn’t find any books which told me what it felt like to be a mother, and it seemed to me that no book has been written which documented the struggle between being a responsible mother and being a fully cognizant, breathing human being. How did anyone manage to be both a mother and a person?

Wasn't motherhood about selflessness and my life up until point about self-creation. (Johnston 1999)

One of the reasons prompting my project was my ability to locate stories where I could identify with people of my own age. While Johnson's book did not propel me into the area of autobiography, her intense and honest descriptions of everyday life did contribute to and confirm my project's overall aim to provide a self-identifying narrative for a post-55-year-old contemporary Australian woman. It also prompted me to think about a 'sense of belonging', how human beings long for this state, and if it was possible for a collection of stories narrated around the post-55-year-old woman to establish a sense of community where a sense of belonging could be felt.

Furthermore, I considered what a 'sense of belonging' meant from a psychological point of view. In relating to this, considering various texts assisted my development of another, deeper level of meaning in my work. In 2014, Karyn Hall wrote an essay, 'Creating a Sense of Belonging: finding ways to belong that can help ease the pain of loneliness', in which 'belonging' means acceptance as a member or part of a group – such a simple word for a complex concept. She explained:

A 'sense of belonging' is a human need, just like the need for food and shelter. Feeling that you belong is most important in finding value in life and in coping with intensely painful emotions. Some find belonging in a church, some with friends, some with family and some on Twitter or other social media. (Hall 2014)

From my own experience in this project, I believe that literature can provide another form of community space where a ‘sense of belonging’ can be established.

In another sense, Robyn Davidson’s seminal work *Tracks* (1980) gave young women of the 1970s and 1980s another corner of the world to call home. That is a home where high adventure is open to women as well as men. It is a world their mothers would more than likely not have trod but, Davidson suggested, was theirs for the asking. The spirit of this book informed the collective consciousness of the young women who have now become the post-55-year-old generation. This inspirational story followed Davidson’s 1700 mile journey through Central Australia to the Indian Ocean in 1977, undertaken with four camels and a dog. The audacity of Davidson’s undertaking is in some ways equal to her daring in writing the story of this groundbreaking journey. Along with bringing a bestseller to life, Davidson produced a new and challenging narrative for a generation of young women. However, there were some cultural hangovers from the previous generation that took another view of her adventure. Collis (1997), in her article, ‘Exploring Tracks: Writing and Living Desert Space’, reports that gender-based commentary still claimed a space in narratives around her journey and, in some areas, Davidson was not considered a ‘legitimate traveler’ (1997, p. 180). Collis also noted Davidson’s response to the dubbing of her as ‘the Camel Lady,’ quoting her as saying: ‘I (could not) imagine them coining the phrase “Camel Gentleman”’ (p. 238). This book and the commentary around it, point to the changing social conditions experienced by many contemporary mature-aged women. The text and associated commentary reveal both an environment that allowed and celebrated a woman’s solo adventure, but where some still felt compelled to



portray Davidson's successful quest as one of little consequence in the bigger picture of a male-dominated world.

In reading these texts, I delved into the representation of various social environments that fertilised and shaped the youthful years of the contemporary mature-aged woman. Through this increased awareness, now I find myself more fully able to understand and, hopefully, present the essence of what makes up the contemporary mature-aged woman. Since my representation of the contemporary post-55-year-old woman is co-dependent upon her adolescent learnings coming from a source unfamiliar with the range of social upheaval taking place during her formative years, I have also explored a series of texts focusing on mother/daughter relationships relevant to the post-55-year-old woman. In this Literature Review, I have chosen to discuss *The Lost Mother* (2009) authored by renowned Australian author, feminist, academic and editor Anne Summers (1945–present) as representative of many of these texts. As Summers narrates the story of her search for the artist who painted an intriguing and beautiful portrait of her mother as a child, she discovers and reveals the life her mother lived within the social mores of the day and its connection to her search. Simultaneously, Summers narrates events in her own life which present both within, and contrary to, the conventions of her mother's generation. However, Summer's sharp eye for gender inequity provides further insights into the conventions of her mother's day and thus added details to my conception of 'generational disruption.' Referring to her mother, Summers wrote:

Her new passport, issued in Melbourne on 13 December, to "Mr Eric Wyborn Stokes and wife," summed up her new status. Inside were individual

photographs of the couple, but whereas Eric was still a ‘manufacturer’ as he had been on his marriage certificate just four months earlier, Constance’s profession was no longer ‘artist’. Her occupation was now officially ‘home duties.’ (2009, p. 67)

On a similar theme, Kate Grenville (1950–present) examined her mother’s life in the biography *One Life, My Mother* (2015). While her mother undertook a career path before and after her marriage, she nevertheless had to navigate a life around the social pressures and prejudices of the time. In these texts, I have found support for my general observation of a vast gap between the lives of the contemporary mature-aged woman and her mother. Increasingly, I realised the difficulties of my mother’s generation, not through considering a long list of relevant legislation, but through the lives depicted within the memoirs and novels. Story by story, I began to see the underlying foundation I could use to construct my characters and their stories.

Finally, to explore alternative writing styles that may have relevance to my choice of appropriate genre, I looked towards author Finola Moorehead (1947–present).

Moorehead’s novel *Remember the Tarantella* (1988) utilizes a combination of realism and fantasy in a series of literary snapshots to create an early example of Australian postmodern narrative. (As a quirky adjunct to this information, I note that this novel was written after Moorehead’s contemporary, author Christina Stead, challenged her to write a novel without a single male character (1988, p. ix)). Moorehead was an active participant in the women’s liberation movement and later said that she wrote from her identity as a lesbian feminist. In 2015, she spoke about this in her acceptance speech for the Edna Ryan Award for the Creative Arts, stating: ‘In literature in the last thirty

years, not many women writers attempt fictions with no men in them, as I did as a Lesbian Feminist' (Moorehead 2015). In terms of my project, Moorehead provided another aspect to the demographic I am scrutinising; an example of a woman who produced a narrative on her own terms. Her award acceptance speech also revealed her mythical references:

My art is literature and half my lifetime ago I started a novel length fiction on the challenge of having no major male characters and that took me about a decade. It is *Remember The Tarantella*. The name came from a footnote in Mary Dalys' *Gyn/ecology* which was a myth probably witches made up before the Inquisition came to town. I think it was Naples. They said they had been bitten by the spider, the tarantula, then went into a crazy dance that took them into the sea to drown. Thereby robbing the Inquisitors of their trial. Quite a few million lost their lives in that war against women. (201)

This text prompted me to trace lines of mythical and other references that related to the community I had chosen to write about. From it, I also gained confidence to source material born from my own imagination and knowledge of female mythological stories alongside historical stories. Overall, however, while I admired Moorehead's gumption and her ability to narrate from the point of view of her personal identity, and, certainly, an identity that challenges Australian society norms, her style of juxtaposing reality and fantasy did not suit my literary aim of depicting the everyday world with its ordinary language (albeit juxtaposed with magical metaphors holding various layers of meaning) rather than using features and tropes.

## **International female authors**

The lifestyle of the contemporary post-55-year-old Western woman has been profoundly influenced by global communication and travel. This information has enabled her to access sources of knowledge, fertile with fresh thoughts and insights, that holds the potential to re-shape her life far beyond the realms of domestic or neighborhood origins and boundaries. My readings of international authors have, I believe, enhanced my capacity for ethnographical observation and considerably added to my confidence and sensitivity regarding the intuitive recognition of the rich and varied layers of this demographic's life and lifestyle. The international works considered in this context include fiction, non-fiction and autobiographical narratives.

The authors who have most strongly influenced my work in this context include Canadian short story writer Alice Munro (1931–present). In 2013, the Swedish Academy named Munro a Master of the contemporary short story and awarded her the Nobel Prize in Literature. The presentation speech by Peter Englund summed up what I am also endeavoring to describe, albeit focused on a different demographic in an alternative geography. Englund stated:

The tranquility of the outer world is always apparent in Alice Munro's works, which then opens the portal to an inner world where the opposite is true.

Munro writes about what are usually called ordinary people, but her intelligence, compassion and astonishing power of perception enable her to give their lives a remarkable dignity – indeed redemption – since she shows how much of the extraordinary can fit into that jam-packed emptiness called

The Ordinary. The trivial and trite are intertwined with the amazing and unfathomable – but never at the cost of contradiction. (2014)

I have also sought to see, feel and, indeed, in my own fashion, attempted to emulate her sensitive insights. However, my characters are exclusive to a time and demographic, with the explicit aim of my project that of attempting to give voice to the generational disruption, which I see as having been experienced by post-55-year-old women in contemporary Australian society.

In a similar vein, utilising a small-town atmosphere and a host of its inhabitants, American author Elizabeth Strout (1956–present), gathers and relays the secrets, emotions and activities of the everyday, and skillfully exposes layers of personality through her nuanced language and, at times, the complex metaphors that are infused into her character’s dialogue. In her Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Olive Kitteridge* (2008), the eponymous protagonist is drawn as a tough, straight-talking woman, her insensitive demeanour further emphasised by her large, strong body. However, during a chance meeting with a young woman suffering from anorexia, she reveals a deeper, more profound understanding of herself and life in general, as she empathises with the young woman. Their conversation is at once a surprise and a relief, as another dimension is subtly added to Olive’s personality. A *New York Times* book review by Louisa Thomas (2008) draws attention to the richness of Strout’s characters and, as an example, refers to this emotional scene when Olive, on meeting up with Nina the young anorexic, speaks to her:

Olive finished the doughnut, wiped the sugar from her fingers, sat back and said. “You’re starving.” The girl didn’t move, only said, “Uh-duh.” “I’m starving, too,” Olive said. The girl looked over at her “I am,” Olive said. “Why do you think I eat every doughnut in sight?” “You’re not starving,” Nina said with disgust. “Sure I am, we all are.” “Wow,” Nina said, quietly. “Heavy.”  
(Strout 2011, p. 95–96)

After this encounter, a town resident notices that Olive has dissolved into tears, noting: ‘If there was anyone in town Harmon thought he would never see cry, Olive was that person’ (96). In this odd conversation, Olive Kitteridge reveals herself as a person of insight who sees that no matter how over-or-underweight a person is, their very humanness points to the wider, universal hunger for understanding. Through this brief snippet of conversation, the reader has been given a glimpse of the extraordinary from this previously seemingly ordinary character.

Beyond Strout’s utilisation of everyday life and language as the material for her short stories, it was her use of discontinuous narrative in *Olive Kitteridge* that inspired me and seemed the most appropriate narrative style for my own short stories. Firstly, discontinuous narrative’s sequencing of time, which is linked by the protagonist rather than chronological events, corresponds to my own view of contemporary postmodern life, which due to the swiftness of communication, including the 24-hour news cycle, seems to be defined more by moments and events in time, rather than linked by the daily recording of time passing. Additionally, I was attracted to what I identified as a synergy between the characteristics of discontinuous narrative and elements of the

Magic Realism genre (discussed further in the next chapter), which revealed a shared characteristic of warping time.

In 2003, Azar Nafisi (1948–present) published her memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, in which the strength of a novel’s ability to provide a community and a place of belonging was revealed through a post-55-year-old woman’s story, this time that of an Iranian-born, American citizen. Nafisi travelled to America to study for her first degree, but upon hearing of the overthrow of the Shah, returned in jubilation to her country. However, her mood quickly turned to despair as she found the new government had created a police state where alternative political and academic voices were punished with imprisonment and torture. In this environment, she found her only source of freedom in the reading of literature. In a similar vein, I hope that my short stories may, through the reader’s recognition of shared environments, foster a feeling of like-minded community where divergent stories can be told, heard and supported. The subsequent literary scandal about this that labeled Nafisi guilty of using ‘her readings of some Western classics – Austen, James, Fitzgerald and Nabokov – to undermine Persian cultural autonomy’ (Lewis-Kraus 2006) did not affect its influence on me, although it provided a lesson in claiming a particular identity to bolster the potential ‘truth telling’ ability of a text.

### **Popular childhood books**

In this section, I briefly review the influence of novels popular with younger readers and their potential impact on the contemporary Australian post-55-year-old woman. I also note how many of the same childhood books, the classics such as *Little Women*

(1865), *Heidi* (1881), *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) and *What Katy Did* (1872), remained set reading for so many of the two generations of women examined in this project – that is both the contemporary post-55-year-old woman and her mother. Here, I have taken an autoethnographical approach to examine how readings of the same books by two different generations provoked alternative understandings. Carolyn Ellis, in her paper, ‘Autoethnography: An Overview’, described how these stories shaped the cultures of the time and thus contributed to my understanding of the factors underpinning the ‘generational disruption’:

they realized that stories were complex, constitutive, meaningful phenomena that taught morals and ethics, introduced unique ways of thinking and feeling, and helped people make sense of themselves and others. (Ellis 2011)

For my mother’s generation, the reading of childhood classics provided social messages that supported the romantic, domestic and educational positioning of their future lives. While *Heidi* was brought up in a single parent family and *Katy* coped with a disability, these narratives were contextualised within the familial and social norms of the time. In contrast to this understanding, these childhood classics held little information for a young woman navigating her adolescence through the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. For the contemporary post-55-year-old, *Puberty Blues* (Lette & Carey 1979), would be the better-late-than-never book that authentically exposed the dark side of liberation, which for some resulted in careless underage sex, abortion, miscarriage, and excessive drink and drug taking in a brutal male chauvinist surfing culture. So, despite women of both generations reading The Classics, the difference between *Little Women* and *Puberty Blues*, both novels about



teenage women, provides a startling portrait of two different generations. In my collection of short stories, 'Myths, Moths, Mum and Me', the cultural world of the contemporary post-55-year-old is coloured by the legislative victories of Women's Liberation, contraception, divorce, work outside the home into mature-age and influenced by modern communication and beauty technologies, such as facelifts and Botox, which have impacted on the way a woman relates to her own physical appearance. On the other hand, in my short stories the narratives of the mother speak of women who, other than experiencing a brief taste of life in the public sphere (workforce) during World War 2, spent most of their lives within the private sphere (mostly in homes) navigating a lifestyle within the boundaries of a hegemonic culture that had not yet been challenged by Women's Liberation or affected by a range of significant advancements in communications, health and education that so influenced their daughters' lives.

### **Magic Realism genre**

Inside the broad genre of Magic Realism, my readings included the recognition of the sub-genre of Feminist Magic Realism. In the paper, 'Revision/re-vision: A Feminist Writing Class' (1991), Susan Osborne utilises the thinking of linguists Julie Penelope and Susan J. Wolf to distinguish feminist writing, stating:

patriarchal expressive modes reflect an epistemology that perceives the world in terms of categories, dichotomies, roles, stasis and causation [while] females' expressive modes reflect an epistemology that perceives the world in

terms ambiguities, pluralities, processes, continuities and complex relationships. (p. 258)

Maryam Ebadi Asayesh (2017) states that Feminist Magic Realism is a relatively new term and was first used by Gabriel Garcia Ochoa (2010) in *The Hearing Trumpet: Lenora Carrington's Feminist Magical Realism*. Furthermore, in a 2011 article, 'Magical realism as a feminist discourse: Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* and Shahrnush Parsipur's *Touba and the Meaning of Night*', Farzad Kolahjoee states how feminist writing is easily incorporated into the genre of Magic Realism.

In its deconstruction of current ideology, magical realism becomes a quest to voice the other(s) of the world. Women, who, according to feminist theorists, have traditionally been under the reign of patriarchal society, gain their voice in magical realistic novels. The mode, when enfolding feminist elements, becomes a tool for emancipation and empowerment of the seemingly weaker sex. (2011)

However, Faris (2004) argues that:

Although we can discern certain common strategies between feminist issues and magical realist practices, magical realism is not a feminist genre, and while works by women authors such as Isabel Allende, Toni Morrison, Laura Esquivel, Ana Castillo and Marie Darrieussecq have used magical realism in novels that are centered on women's experience and women's problems, there is no single definable feminist ideology that joins them. (p. 172)

In Beverley Goldman's 1995 Masters thesis, 'Magic Realism and Isabel Allende: An investigation of the relationship between narrative techniques and gender politics', Goldman discusses the feminist aspect Allende has woven through her Magic Realist writing:

Out of the mainstream of male dominated Western Literature, Allende envisages merging the natural and the supernatural into a 'wholeness of existence which does not go together with binary thinking and rigidity of European orientated male culture'. (Branton 1990, p. 33)

In further references to Allende's narrative, Goldman states:

She recognizes the force of the matrilineal development of the American Indian culture while calling on fantasies associated with Catholicism and those indigenous to the Amerindian culture. There are strong elements of the fantastical in many of her landscapes: though her characters do not consciously focus on eliminating the patriarchal adversary they tend to work together to combat oppression in a peaceful rather than truculent matter. (p. 8)

Allende's narrative in *The House of Spirits* (1985) reflects the traditions of Magic Realism by following the earthly saga of four generations of a family. Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1968) also traces four generations of a family, however this is through the patriarchal line; in contrast, Allende follows the matriarchal lines. Allende moreover superimposes into her narrative a litany of strange and magical

events, which fit into Osborne's (2009) markers of feminist writing including 'ambiguities, pluralities, processes, continuities and complex relationships' (p. 258). The inventiveness of Allende's metaphors also pricked my imagination and further fueled my search to describe motivations and their repercussions that live beyond the ordinary actions of everyday life. For instance, the head of the protagonist, Nivea, is decapitated in a car accident and for many years cannot be found. However, it is eventually discovered by her daughter just as she is about to birth her first child. Its recovery allows the daughter to put her mother's head in the birthing room with her and later she gives it a home in a hatbox. In contrast to realist writings where characters and plots usually direct the reader to a singular understanding of the narrative, I see Magic Realism's colourful use of such metaphors, mysticism and history as a technique that is used to construct a multi-dimensional narrative, with the ultimate meaning left to the reader. In my own writings of postmodern mature lives, this technique has enabled me to attempt to reflect the enormous range of choices available to contemporary post-55-year-old Australian women while, at the same time, giving the reader the opportunity to discover and shape, through their own personal interpretation, the character's relevance, if any, to their own lives.

Faris (2004) has noted that a key characteristic of the Magic Realism genre is the privileging of many forms of women's spirituality. Since the contemporary post-55-year-old Australian woman inhabits a generational space where, for a majority of people, traditional religion has been explored, redefined, rejected, or abandoned for alternative spiritual practices (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011 Census) the recognition of this element of Magic Realism plays an important role in my writings,

as I attempt to mirror the changing role of spirituality in the life of the contemporary mature-aged woman. As, Faris (2004, p. 213) states:

The mystical union of body and soul is not a uniquely female issue, but the sense of recovering lost traditions that permeate much of Magical Realism allies it with recent feminist efforts aimed at recovering lost figures and traditions within which this kind of union can be envisioned as embodied in the female form, with the ‘ontological shift’ in feminist orientated theology that imagines divinity as female.

Throughout my short stories, I have included reflections on the everyday life of older women who, having left traditional male-dominated theologies, seek to find the female aspects of spirituality and, in this search, have discovered strong female antecedents in alternative histories and folklore. I found the characteristics of Magic Realism could accommodate and express this line of female spiritual inquiry.

To further my understanding of the shift in women’s spiritual practice, I have included in my readings works by Harvard Medical School trained cell biologist, psychologist and author Joan Borysenko, who has written a number of books on the multidimensional process of caring for body, mind and soul, and the feminist shift to a female God (1987, 1990, 1993, 1996, 1999, 2005, 2007). I understand her writing as re-affirming female energy in a contemporary spiritual philosophy and, as such, provides a strong theoretical background for my fictional writings.

To date, North American author Aimee Bender has written five books with Magic Realism themes. Tamara Kaye Sellman describes the author's writing style as drifting between 'realism, magical realism and surrealism to deliver witty interpretations on age-old subjects: hate, sex, death' (2004). Bender's novel, *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* (2010), incorporates a number of elements of the Magic Realism genre, especially in its family's inheritance of psychic abilities. At nine-years-old, the protagonist, Rose Edelstein, comes to realise she can taste people's emotional state in the food they prepare. This is a terrible imposition on her desire to lead an everyday life and she rails against the knowledge. But as she gradually comes to accept her ability as a 'food psychic', and begins to use this to her advantage, her sensitive and highly intelligent older brother seems to reject his gift of intellect and little by little, loses himself inside a chair. This is a prime example of Magic Realism where the extraordinary, in this case the older brother morphing into a chair, is superimposed on the ordinary – the real, everyday life of this brother. Such a situation can have many meanings, but since it cannot be taken literally, meaning must be sourced from psychological viewpoints and thus the reader is forced to drill deeper into the character's spirit, to assign reasonable causes of thought, feelings and action. Since I see the postmodern mature-aged woman as possessing a wide range of learnings and a rich perception of her own possibilities, her life choices result from many such layers of thought and feeling, and it is the genre of Magic Realism and particularly through its utilisation of the magical metaphor, that has provided me with the way to attempt to express these qualities in my short stories. In an interview with Saye Teiser (2014), Bender states her preference for Magic Realism similarly comes down to its ability to provide a pathway into her character's inner motivations. Bender states:

I think the emotional life is the core and seed of the story – that’s where the story lives and breathes. So the magic is a way to access that, and I will happily use whatever way I can to get to the emotional stuff. For me, for whatever reason, I like to go to indirectly, and via metaphor, but hopefully not metaphor that’s too easily unpacked. (2014)

Zamora and Faris (1995) delve deeper to note how Magic Realism can capture a sense of the inner person: ‘Magical realism turns out to be part of a twentieth century preoccupation with how our ways of being in the world resist capture by the traditional logic of the waking mind’s reason’ (372). They state, furthermore, that:

The magical realists’ project to reveal the intimate interdependence between reality and fantasy is shared by modernists, but magical realism and modernists proceed by different means. Magic realism wills a transformation of the object of representation, rather than the means of representation. Magical realism, like the uncanny projects a mesmerizing uncertainty suggesting that ordinary life may also be the scene of the extraordinary. (p. 372)

These insights from Zamora and Faris led me to determine my own reasons for choosing Magic Realism rather than a modernist literary form to express the interdependence between reality and fantasy, and suggested to me that this genre would best suit a literary illustration of the post-55-year-old woman in contemporary Australian society. Upon reflection, my readings of Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung, and particularly his books, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*

(1961) and *Man and his Symbols* (1964), were also influential in my genre choice. In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Jung weaves the narrative of his own life and patients' dream experiences in order to provide scientific evidence to back up his psychological insights. In *Man and his Symbols*, Jung's lens is directly focused on metaphor and symbolism, explaining its significance in terms of both the conscious and unconscious mind. According to Jung, the revelation of correct dream interpretation could, and did, lead to mental healing. Jung's writings convinced me of the interdependence between reality and fantasy, and how fantasy is both a real and yet unseen component of human existence. To explain the world with magic symbolism, following Jung, is, I believe, to tap into both the visible and invisible. This further confirmed for me that the genre of Magic Realism was the vehicle best able to carry the weight of both worlds.

## **Conclusion**

As a result of this investigation outlined and discussed in this literature review, I have gained an understanding of the genre of Magic Realism, situations and circumstances that led to, and then supported, the evolution of Feminism and the various social factors underpinning the cultural make-up of contemporary post-55-year-old women and their mothers. These learnings have underpinned the foundation of my project's creative work 'Myths, Moths, Mum and Me'. Additionally, my readings in the genre of Magic Realism, particularly in the use of metaphor and parable in this genre, has spiked my imagination and pointed me in the direction of future studies surrounding Biblical use of these literary techniques and the idea of symbiology as a transcendent language. In this case, I refer to writings by American Jesuit priest Father Richard



Rohr, who, in his weekly newsletter of meditations, stated: 'It takes inner experience of the Holy, and your own attempts to describe it, to finally move you toward a necessary reliance upon symbolic language' (2018). Therefore, my research question would be along the lines of questioning if postmodern Magic Realism authors are developing a sacred language in order to describe spiritual experiences exclusive to the new millennium.

## **Chapter 3**

### **MAGIC REALISM and WRITING ‘MYTHS, MOTHS, MUM AND ME’**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter explores the foundation of Magic Realism and its history and the influences that have fuelled the evolution of this genre. It examines Magic Realism’s characteristics which have gifted the genre with attributes that have enabled it to translate the growth of new thinking, lifestyles and consciousness into words, thus assuring its position as a living literary language and a natural choice as the language to narrate my stories about post-55-year-old women in contemporary Australia. It also explores one of the most recent trends within the genre of Magic Realism. This is an extension of Post-Colonialist Feminist writing, spawning what is termed Magicorealism.

#### **History of Magic Realism**

Austrian art historian Franz Roh first coined the term ‘Magic Realism’ in a 1925 article describing a new style of post-expressionist art (Faris & Zamora 1995, p. 33). More than 90 years after its birth, the term Magic Realism has largely transferred to a literary genre, which has spawned a multitude of connected meanings. According to Faris and Zamora (1995), Roh states why the original literary meaning of Magic Realism was based on the choice of the word ‘magic’ rather ‘mystical’ as this usage is ‘to indicate that mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it’ (p. 35). The Spanish translation of Roh’s work became

available in 1927 and, from that point, this information was adopted by various Latin American authors (Guest 2003, p. 20). According to Faris and Zamora (1995, p. 7), Cuban author Alejo Carpentier ‘posits a particular affinity between the real and imaginary in Latin America’. In his 1975 essay, ‘On the Marvellous Real in America’, Carpentier argued and defined differences between Surrealism, the genre founded by Andre Breton, and Magic Realism, asserting that, ‘The magical, mystical and imaginary is not being discovered by transcending reality (as the surrealist claim), but that the marvellous is inherent in the natural and human realities of time and place’ (cited in Bowman 2015).

Faris (1995) lists five points that distinguish the genre of Magic Realism from other types of writing. They are: ‘The text contains an “Irreducible element” of magic. Something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as know them (irreductable magic often means the disruption of the ordinary logic of cause and effect)’ (167). Faris (2004) backgrounds this point by noting that Magic Realism can be: ‘a manifestation of a cultural need, for a sense of contact with cosmic forces that extend beyond the material reality and the individual and for discourse that accommodate that contact’ (75). As a writer and mature-aged member of Australian society, I also seek corresponding words and thus genres, to reflect the magic, mystical and miracles of society one experiences living in the new millennium. *In Enchantment*, Tacey (2000) states:

There is always a religious dimension to any living culture, because culture has to grapple with the big questions which are invariably theological: what is

the purpose of life? What is my place in the scheme of things? What is the point of human community? (p. 40)

My understanding is that the ‘religious dimension’ referred to by Tacey, has been realised in the construction of ‘New Age’ philosophies. In *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion* (2013), Steven J Sutcliff and Ingvild Saelid Gilhus note the meaning of New Age Spirituality as:

The ontological commitments range from weak transcendence to strong immanence: that is, from “A blend of pagan religions, Eastern philosophies and occult-psychic phenomena” (York 1995: 34) to a “highly optimistic, celebratory, utopian and spiritual form of humanism” (Heelas 1996: 28). (Sutcliff & Gilhus 2013, introduction)

As it can be posited that New Age Spiritualism thus corresponds with Faris’s first element of the characteristics of Magic Realism: ‘Something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them’ (1995, p. 167), I have found in this genre a language capable of reflecting the contemporary culture of postmodern times.

Faris’s second point is that:

Descriptions detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world. Realist descriptions create a fictional world that resembles the one we live in, it superimposed by the projection of images that tend to reveal their motivations,

psychological, social, emotional, and political – after some scrutiny. Use of objects that often may take on lives of their own, and become magical in that way. (p. 169)

Due to modern psychological discoveries and expanded information sharing in tandem with a renewed respect for folklore, the contemporary mature-aged woman has an increased knowledge of both her inner and outer worlds. Accordingly, the Magic Realism characteristic described above enables a layered portrait of the post-55-year-old woman, including the impetus underpinning her motivations.

Faris's third characteristic of Magic Realism is that: 'The reader may hesitate (at one point or another) between two contradictory understanding of events – and hence experience some unsettling doubts' (1995, p. 171). This speaks to me. Surprise. A pause. A moment of reflection. Awe and wonder. In an age of increased education and leisure time, a once familiar state of certainty can be confronted with questions raised through a perception of a multitude of choices or meaning. In this way, I believe Magic Realism's ability to recognise this moment enhances the depiction of a post-modern lifestyle and all its uncertainty.

Faris's fourth characteristic of Magic Realism is described as how, through it: 'We experience the closeness of near-merging of two realms, two worlds. The Magic Realist vision exists at the intersection of two worlds, at an imaginary point inside a double-sided mirror that reflects both directions' (1995, p. 172). The post-55-year-old woman living in contemporary society has had no choice but to experience the effect of living at this 'intersection of two worlds'. She was raised by a mother with

traditional views usually more suitable to a past world, her childhood was played out in a pre-silicone chip backyard, however her maturation came about as the conservative world's thinking intersected with a pantheon of new ideas and actions – including women's liberation, divorce, career, contraception, artificial intelligence.

Faris's fifth element is that Magic Realist fictions 'question received ideas about time, space and identity' (1995, p. 173). Judy Wajcman (2008) refers to modern life as the 'Accelerated Society', and notes that Castells et al (2007, p. 17) state that: 'The diffusion of mobile communication technology greatly contributes to the spread of the space of flows and timeless time as the structures of our everyday life'. As I accept this statement as a depiction of our postmodern lifestyle, then Magic Realism's inherent ability (as described by Faris) to challenge ordinary ideas of 'time, space and identity' provides another tool in the writer's toolkit.

Ultimately, I hope that by using elements and literary devices of the Magic Realism genre together with the realistic content of my short stories, a narrative has emerged that is capable of illustrating the many layers of concerns and complexities of the contemporary age.

### **Recent trends within the Magic Realism genre: Magiccorealism**

In 2009, Aldama coined the term 'Magiccorealism', which he stated was founded on his opposition to what he perceived as commercially-motivated and therefore diluted Magic Realism. Instead, he stated that Magiccorealism 'collapses distinctions between

the real and unreal in the storyworld to reverse the gaze that traditionally objectifies the Other' (p. 39).

My reading of this definition interprets women as the culturally different other in a hegemonic society. Aldama, for example, suggests that Marina Warner's novel *Indigo* (1992) falls into the Magicorealism genre. Warner traces the history of three generations of Caribbean colonialism through the English Everard family from the time of the first colonial contact with the British in the early 17th century. The narrative is interwoven with strands from *The Tempest*, Shakespeare's 16th century play depicting an imaginary island where Ariel, Caliban and Sycorax once lived. In Warner's novel the 17th century Sycorax and the 20th century Seraphine are interlinked counterparts; both are wise old women who possess universal knowledge and act as conduits to educate further generations. Thomas Bonnici (2003) explains how Warner privileges homemaking, community creation and healing rather than the dominant social order of kingdom making and institutionalised medicine.

The building of houses, towers and castles is classically attributed to the male. Sycorax does not appropriate this strategy either to dominate or to found an empire. She builds a house on a tree so that it could easily be perceived as 'no man's land', or rather, as a feminine refuge and to dedicate herself to the building of a community. Counselling and curing people who seek her is neither a domination nor a hegemonic task, but a construction of a community. (p. 5)

While writing an 'everyday' story demands a realist core of fact, Magicorealism is a sharp reminder for me to stay aware of my own personal social constructs, and to mindfully attempt to maintain an unbiased and sensitive eye, as I endeavour to honestly reconstruct the 'everyday' life of the post-55-year-old-woman in my short stories.



## CONCLUSION

The outcome of this research project comprises the usual form of a creative practice-led project in FoR 190402 (Creative Writing) – a creative work, in this case a collection of short stories, and an accompanying reflective exegesis of Masters Level and scope.

The creative component of this project, ‘Myths, Moths, Mum and Me’, fits into the category of ‘Boomer Lit’ a term describing a classification of literature aiming to engage the mature-aged reader. The online article ‘The Genesis of Boomer Literature: A Brief History’ stated that the new boomer lit genre could be: ‘defined as addressing “coming of old age” Boomers, who in their young years were rebellious and keen to change the world of their parents, still see themselves as an active, dynamic lot’ (n.p.). It went on to state:

Books, to stay relevant, need to accompany these changes in their lives, meeting the new demands, putting forth characters Boomers can identify with, characters who face those existential questions. Hence the term Boomer literature or Baby Boomer novels (BB novels), a term that eschews the negative connotations of “aged” and “ageing.”

My stories are constructed to attempt to take the reader on a journey through scenes of ‘everyday’ life stories and attempt to express the life of the post-55-year-old woman dealing with ageing in contemporary Australian society.

This exegesis has documented and discussed the underpinning research undertaken in the creation of the creative work. In terms of the location and utilisation of an appropriate literary style to reflect the creative work, my research included a focus on the Magic Realism genre and its ability to illustrate the subconscious layers at work in the everyday life of the mature-aged woman. In seeking to further locate a narrative to fully accommodate my short stories, I have adopted a discontinuous narrative format which I believe is able to echo elements of the postmodern lifestyle of a post-55-year-old Australian woman.

To support my contention of a generational disruption experienced by the post-55-year-old Australian woman, I have researched the social conditions surrounding women in the 1940s and 1950s and how these conditions influenced the upbringing of their daughters. Furthermore, I have sought to identify the cultural changes initiated as a result of the struggle for women's liberation during the 1960s and 1970s. The recognition of these two, very different, social climates has created a base of theoretical knowledge which informed my creative portraiture of the post-55-year-old woman in contemporary Australian society in my short stories.

This research and creative work has been completed in tandem with my full-time position as the Group Editor of Seniors Newspaper Network (News Ltd). The three strands of my work, engagement with research, writing of the creative work and editorship of a demographically related publication, have contributed to my gaining a certain depth and focus of vision that has supported my aim of writing a creative work that, if read, will assist in promoting an understanding of this generation via the provision of an entertaining, factually informed, narrative.

My research bears witness to how mature-aged women are caught between two worlds in Australian society – an early life that, overall, did not provide the cultural tools to build her independence, and a later life that has often insisted on her independence. As a result, many of this ‘new’ older demographic – post-55-year-old Australian women – are suffering from, among other things, the ramifications of the sexual revolution, divorce with children, gender pay disparity and a lack of education and superannuation.

Elizabeth Ettorre (2016) specifically looked to autoethnography as a research genre that could display the multiple layers of feminine consciousness and connect the personal to the cultural. In my case, I have tried to capture the moments of dealing with wrinkles in an anti-ageing society, dating in older age, dealing with unexpected physical trauma, the experience of being caught between caring for both mothers and children, contemporary dress codes and ageist workplace discrimination. These topics contrast with mass media stereotypes of older women which I have outlined in my exegesis including fictional characters such as Hyacinth Bucket and Mrs Brown. In the last few years of this decade, the voices of celebrity ‘new’ international older women such as Helen Mirren, Jane Fonda and Judi Dench have been projected into the same mass-media arena as Hyacinth Bucket. These voices now play a role in shaping or reshaping the past, present and future life of the post-55-year-old woman. The everyday ‘new’ older woman is a phenomenon birthed in the socially conservative years of the 1940s and 1950s, while her maturation into an older woman has occurred in the post-feminist society of the new millennium.

Essentially, I see the post-55-year-old contemporary Australian woman as akin to the image of the enduring family home. The foundations were built with the conservative political materials of the 1940s and 1950s. Across the decades, changes induced by cultural revolutions in the form of women's liberation, improved education, new technology and medicines have battered and challenged the home's longevity, but an innate survival instinct, possibly fed by a certain respect for the past, has emerged and powered a creative search for tools and materials shaped with an inventiveness and flexibility better able to strengthen its foundation and fortify its structure, to ensure this generation of mature-aged women and their offspring have a comfortable place to live now and into the future. By exposing, in literary form, the life of the post-55-year-old woman and the social and cultural areas she inhabits, renovates, relaxes or parties in, I hope my creative work can, in some way, support her efforts to define and meet the challenges she now faces, along with identifying the ones she has already overcome, in order to keep her house in fine working order.

My investigation into answering my research question, 'Can elements and devices borrowed from the literary genre of Magic Realism be utilised to express the meaningful moments of a contemporary, mature-aged Australian woman's life in the form of a discontinuous narrative (linked short stories)' has discussed elements and qualities of Magic Realism and discontinuous narrative that I have identified as having the ability to create a narrative that can illustrate the life of the post-55-year-old woman in Australian society. It has often been remarked that despite notable exceptions, older women are not well represented in fiction of any kind or other popular mass media. My creative work is, therefore, designed to attempt to position a truer picture of the older woman within a creative category, as well as promoting a

deeper understanding of her current circumstances. As far as I can ascertain from my research, this is the first time the story of this demographic of Australian women, negotiating an environment sculpted by the conditions identified in my research, has been recorded in linked short stories influenced by characteristics of the Magic Realism genre.

The practice-led research methodology enabled the production of a credible work of fiction underpinned by a solid body of theoretical understanding undertaken in the exegesis. While this enabled a direct and in-depth focus on the demographic of two generations, the scope of this Masters study definitely limited research to the White Australian Western women. This meant that impact of the generational disruption on the corresponding demographic of males, or other cultural groups, were not examined, meaning this is an area for further exploration. Following on from this thesis study, the understanding of the generational disruption between women could also be widened and deepened through further research into the current generation of mothers and their daughters.

Perhaps, in creatively revealing the contrasting social conditions experienced by the contemporary mature-aged Australian woman, it will become more palatable for society to see not only the mature-aged woman's struggles, but also her value.

Perhaps too, it will lead to a more sensitive understanding of how deep social change can both accelerate and deconstruct a lifestyle. However, to achieve an ongoing and deep understanding of the unique circumstances faced by the post-55-year-old woman, further research into, and documentation of, the changing social response to the contemporary older woman and how this response affects her lifestyle is

necessary. This would assist in such women (including myself) obtaining a secure and respected identity and, indeed, make her wholly visible in today's society.

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