

## **'no endings no endings no'**

This piece of creative non-fiction takes its title from the final sentence of Thea Astley's final novel, *Drylands* (1999). The essay was praised by poet and literary critic Dr Michael Brennan for its 'intelligence and openness, for its ability to see into the heart of what reading, of what literature, gives us, to express a kind of reading both of literature and life ... critical as much as it is creative' (*Southerly* 67 1-2 launch). It was described by an *Australian Book Review* reviewer, Ian Templeman, as a 'powerfully engaging stor[y]' (*ABR* November 2007: 58).

The essay is best described as a hybrid of memoir and literary criticism that blurs the boundaries between the genres and raises questions about the nature of reading in context. How reading is shaped, reformed or even deformed by the position of the reader is a topic raised in Astley's final novel in her depiction of an illiterate man who is taught to read by his librarian/writer partner. My essay, 'no endings no endings no', examines the way books are read in a family experiencing crisis, of a medical and emotional nature, and forms conclusions regarding the nature of the act of reading itself. It comprises part of my broader research topic regarding reading and readership, including reader reception, in the contemporary zone.

## DEBRA ADELAIDE

*no endings no endings no*

It was the cold late winter of 2004 and one particular day there was a look of wet cold rain in the distance, for yes, I was thinking of Didion, I was thinking of Chandler, I was thinking of them and more, for my head was filled with sentences from texts, beautifully patterned sentences that just to repeat brought calmness, while my heart was filled with that hopeful sort of misery that accompanies the first sudden discovery of bad news. For isn't that discovery always, instantly, accompanied by the offer, even promise, of hope? And by the human optimism that despite all the signs, everything will, in the end, be all right?

And on that cold wet morning just the name of the place we were going to inspired optimism, despite the unhappiness of the preceding weeks. My older son was to be assessed at an adolescent health service called Rivendell. Frustrated, insomniac, unhappy at school, hard going at home, he had spent days and weeks avoiding school, unable to face its inexplicable difficulties. But I was cheered by the fact that a place for troubled children was named for the haven of the elves in Tolkein's fantasy. And in the day or so before we visited even my son brightened up, not at the name so much but at the prospect that someone might be able to help his dark unnameable misery.

Under the low grey sky, the drive to Rivendell seemed to take forever, and the whole purpose of our visit would have been altogether depressing except that dreary day seemed the best day to be going to the Last Homely House, and I for one was full of hope. Some months before I had finished reading *The Hobbit* to my youngest son, and tried, then abandoned, reading the first book of *The Lord of the Rings*, which became increasingly difficult because, unlike with *The Hobbit*, my son by then had the film version of *The Fellowship of the Ring* running through his head. Our nightly reads were punctuated by so much

questioning and arguing on his part, frustration and impatience on mine, that I had given up, and demoted him to his school readers.

It was these I took with me the day we all drove to Rivendell. We went as a family, but I might have left my youngest son at school except that he had been complaining of a sore back, indeed it had kept him up during the night, and after the Rivendell visit I would be taking him to the doctor. Meanwhile the drive there seemed to take forever, the younger children whinging more than usual. Would we see any elves here? I wondered aloud on the way, but the boy at six was not half as naïve as I had been (even at fifteen I desperately hoped this story was somehow all true). Elves don't exist, he told us. Well, you never know, I suggested. Maybe we'll have to fight a few enemies on the way. But he was not amenable to jokes or imaginative ideas, for he was tired, miserable, and in pain.



*The words, she knew ... would be as heavy as bricks when what she wanted to build was some peopled landscape of mist and air (Astley: 12).*

But it was already a bad week. On the Monday an old friend rang to say she would be in town and could we meet. I arranged to see her on the Friday, but then the very next day she rang back to tell me something terrible and important. She had just heard that Thea Astley had died, earlier that morning.

What do people do when they encounter sudden and shocking news? I was at my desk at work. I couldn't think. I got up, walked around my office, went to my bookshelves to some of my collection of Thea Astley's novels. Felt an immediate urge to take the books down and start re-reading them. Felt straightaway that I had to do something, and what else but read her novels, perhaps the very last one. But why? What help could reading her books possibly be? And it's not like she was the sort of author you'd turn to for something comforting, or reassuring. She was the last author for that.

It was the middle of the day and I should have been doing many other things, preparing for classes probably the most important of

them. I returned to my desk and made some phone calls, to people I thought may not have heard the news. I spoke to a literary journalist, perhaps the last writer to have interviewed Astley, and discussed what she might write in an obituary. In fact she kindly suggested I would be interested in writing it, but I demurred. I just don't have the time, I said. Besides, you're the best person for that, I said, you've spoken with her recently. I hadn't had contact with her for years. I'd read everything by her but had never interviewed her and had anyway only met her a few times over the years. Our last contact was by telephone, the last before that by post.

She had died on Tuesday 17 August 2004, just eight days before her seventy-ninth birthday. Dates, increasingly fuzzy for me as I'd grown older, started to remain fixed again for a while. That Friday, 20 August, was the day of the lunch with my friend, the end, I thought, of a difficult and busy week in which emotions in my family had been exposed and were still unresolved. It was a time where the death of my favourite author seemed a malicious trick. As it turned out I was to be denied even the luxury of grieving for her, and prevented from doing what I wanted to do more than anything, which was just to immerse myself again in her novels. We resolved to stay in touch, my friend and I, agreed that I might manage to visit her place up north, even take the children. But when I saw her again it was two years later, and I had not even tried to contact her since this particular week. I last saw you on the twentieth of August two years ago, I reminded her when I met her in Brisbane in September 2006, and I'm sorry I haven't been in touch since then but that day after we had lunch, my life turned upside down.

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My youngest son's tendency to be slow in finishing his schoolwork was more pronounced in the middle of that year. Aside from that, there was not a single hint that his body was nurturing a deadly illness. Then, around the same time that Thea Astley was slipping into death, the child who had never had a day off school from sickness developed a strange pain in his back. Late on the Monday

evening when I came home from work his father told me he was complaining of a sore back. He was also tired and pale. The next morning he still complained. There was no bruise, he'd not fallen or been pushed or kicked, but he insisted it hurt. He stayed home from school that day, spending most of the time on the lounge, pale, listless, watching TV but with little interest. That night he woke with the pain. The following day it seemed worse, and he was so tired and grumpy I would have taken him to the doctor if there had not been the long-standing appointment with the elves—or maybe not—at Rivendell. All that time after he whinged and moaned, and I held and carried him for most of the day, a day so flooded with emotion anyway I was exhausted, but finally free in the afternoon I took him to the doctor.

It's so mysterious, I told her, he's never sick and when he gets hurt he's as tough as anything and never complains, so I know it's real. But there was no lump or swelling, no indication of an injury. She agreed there was no apparent reason for it, and we discussed the usual suspects: viral infections, referred pain, possibly from appendicitis. No way, I said half joking, my older son having had a sudden and dramatic case of that not so long back. No, it can't be appendicitis, I absolutely can't cope with another child with appendicitis. (How our words return to stab us in the heart, how I longed, in the months to come, that it had been his appendix after all.)

She suggested an abnormality in the spine, and referred him for an X-ray, then for a blood test. Deep inside my doctor had hoped desperately this wasn't what she suspected, the joint pain that is one of the first symptoms of a particularly acute form of childhood cancer.



Recently I took down from my top shelf the fattest of my Thea Astley folders. It contains newspaper cuttings, interviews, a few letters from her, drafts of articles and notes of mine, published articles, notices about awards, plus a document I had not looked at for over ten years, a rejected ARC application to undertake a major critical and biographical

study of Astley which I submitted in what would prove to be the dying days of my ambitions to be an academic. In the sour aftermath of that rejection, when I closed the books on that and other conventional academic work, and looked to other ways to write, and for all those years since I somehow had carried with me the idea that my application was not strong enough. Re-reading the documents now I am astonished to discover that all three assessors' reports on my proposal are outstanding, unequivocally positive. Yet this still did not mean it scored high enough for the postdoctoral grant I needed to fund my project, and I am still unclear why. Perhaps because even though by that stage she had won the Miles Franklin Award three times, readers and critics were ever confounded by their inability to pigeonhole her, to find her voice a representative one.

The folder also contains a notice I had fashioned in that sad week to place on my door at work as the only tribute I could manage. *VALE THEA 1925–2004* I had written, underneath an illustration of her I had printed off the web. Thea with her distinctive wry smile, wearing uncharacteristically tame hair, appeared under a quotation: "Trying to carve out a good sentence. There's little else to do. I might as well give myself up to that."

Just last week a book came in the mail, the first book ever published devoted to this author, featuring the same illustration on the cover (Sheridan & Genoni, 2006). Twenty years back I was appalled that the critical industry which embraced and promoted contemporary male writers like David Williamson and Peter Carey, David Malouf and Patrick White, Frank Moorhouse and Les Murray, could have ignored even then, someone like Thea Astley. Very mixed feelings accompanied my handling this book. Pleasure and satisfaction to see at last a publication on such an important writer, to be able to *read* such a book. A stab of regret for the research project I was unable to undertake, the book about her I never did write. Sadness that there will never be more books by her. Bitter memories of the week she died, the same week two of my children were diagnosed with illnesses, one of them emotionally crippling, the other potentially fatal.

The curious thing was, at Rivendell it actually seemed possible one might see elves. The place is part of the old Concord repatriation hospital, spread across vast grounds along the Parramatta River which have so far miraculously survived development. Rivendell is the last building on the road, reached by driving through the stone archway, and following the road around to the front. The last homely house in this complex stands peacefully facing the river, surrounded by green lawns dotted with trees.

Of dilapidated grandeur, it must have been beautiful once, if somewhat intimidating. A huge entrance hall, vast ceilings, enormous full-length windows. But it displays all the symptoms of a public utility—serviceable grey paint, pitted brown linoleum—under pressure and denied funds for maintenance. Beyond the entrance hall is a doorway leading to a room that was once a chapel, but one that over the years has developed a secular quality.

For hours that day I roamed the building and the grounds, holding my youngest son and trying to entertain and distract him. It was like he was a fractious and restless toddler all over again, and it was my job to stop him from bolting into the inadequate heaters, onto the road, into the river. I took him out to a courtyard that had a weed-infested lawn and a little fountain that was dry, but it was a peaceful place, like the cloister in a monastery. The entire place was almost empty, and rooms upon rooms seemed to be waiting for people to fill them up and make them useful. Back inside I finally pushed through the set of glass doors to the chapel and put the boy down to rest my aching arms. It was still and dark, and as cold as the rest of the place, but not cheerless. High above, six stained-glass windows depicted the virtues: Faith, Hope, Charity, Temperance, Justice and Prudence. Then around the walls up so high and written so large I had to hold my head up and revolve to read it, was this inscription: THIS HOSPITAL FOR CONVALESCENTS WAS FOUNDED BY THE LATE THOMAS WALKER OF YARALLA IN THE HOPE THAT MANY SUFFERERS WOULD BE RESTORED TO HEALTH WITHIN IT.

Exhausted and emotionally volatile that day, I read those words with tears forming. Perhaps there would be the chance of restoration to health, and this place, now renamed for a fantasy haven in a book

I still loved, would provide it. The sun broke through the clouds and light shafted through the windows as I picked my child up and left the chapel, feeling nourished and thinking that there was a small scrap of hope for my troubled adolescent, my suffering family.

Nearby was another building, a hospital originally for children, inside it a series of lead-light panels containing inspirational quotations from edifying texts which I imagine some beneficent soul believed captured the late Victorian attitude towards childhood fortitude: *The noblest mind the best contentment has ... How sublime a thing it is to suffer and be strong ... Sweet flowers are springing no mortal can see ... Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal ... Poor and content is rich and rich enough...*

All vaguely familiar as quotations from poems or hymns, yet none exactly recognisable, the lines struck me as risible at best, cruel lies at worst, later even more so when I was to experience a kind of childhood suffering I'd not known existed. The words were stupid, smug and glib, offered by those pious and self-righteous people who seemed inevitably associated with child welfare, people who'd clearly forgotten what it was like to be young. How to expect a child to believe that pursed-lipped dictum, *How sublime it is to suffer and be strong?* I ached for the children who had been offered such flowery lies as comfort for their pain. They would have been better off in among Thomas Walker's honest unvarnished hopes that *many sufferers would be restored to health.*

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In the hours after learning of Thea Astley's death I had begun to understand its implications. I felt bereft because there would never be another Astley novel to look forward to. I thought very hard about all the writers whose work I admired, but knew that there was none like her. I realised also that there was now no other Australian author whose next novel I would unequivocally anticipate. She had never let me down. Even when she was difficult, she never disappointed me, never. I admired, even if at times I couldn't exactly like, every single one of her novels.



With no next book, I thought about the last one. *Drylands*, I remembered, was dedicated to the world's last reader. Already I had decided that was me. But it now occurred to me that *Drylands*, whose subtitle is *a book for the world's last reader*, was of course written by the world's last writer, my world's last writer, at least.

Because she was a no-nonsense genius, her fiction, like her personality, bearing the sharpest tongue and the most generous heart. I've often quoted her work methods to students as encouragement: "I wouldn't do more than a page or something like that. But if you do a page every day it's staggering how it counts up" (Ellison: 59). A page a day over just one year is likely to become a novel. And lately, for those procrastinating or complaining of the motivation required to write, I remind them of the story of Astley's appearance at the 2003 Byron Bay Writers' Festival: "Who here wants to write a book?" [hands flew up] "Well, piss off and go home and write one" (Wyndham: 79). When I returned to *Drylands*, the novel for the world's last reader, I saw it could show the students what the novel could do, if you just pissed off home and wrote it. It could be a set of stories independent and yet related. It could shift voice and point of view. It could even go over the same thematic ground (the dispossessed, the outcast, the misfit) and use the same settings (the rural fringes, the small town) and metaphors (drought, marriage) that the author had used in her novels previously, and yet still be fresh and challenging, even award-winning. For the few years I had been teaching creative writing I was always looking for ways to work Astley into my programs, and now re-reading *Drylands*, I decided it had to go on the reading list, and there it remains.

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*A hard sky across which clouds massed, hovered, then rolled away to the coast. The small spatterings of rain that dropped were as offensive as spit*  
(Astley: 287).

Did it really rain so much that week? Now I think not, but it seemed gloomy and wet the entire time. There was certainly rain when we went to Rivendell, but the type of mean drizzle that is just enough to

be inconvenient and not nearly enough to be useful. I had imagined that *Drylands* was about drought too, but when I re-read it I found this was not the case: ... *small dust-winds along the footpath ... the farm not quite making it ... fishing-holes vanished in the dry ... distraught by lack of water...* (Astley: 244–5). Drought is certainly there but in the background, the town itself is arid of moral, cultural and spiritual life, the metaphor more important than the literal lack of rain. And the novel, which is so full of suffering, despair and bitter disappointment, savagery, cruelty and passionate resentment, ends on a drought of words. The story peters out, the words evaporating before they land on the page, just like the small sputterings of rain Astley describes, that fall “offensive as spit”. *There were no endings no endings no*

Yet Janet Deakin, who finds her recently sold newsagency vandalised, on the verge of her final departure from Drylands, is somehow unable to be crushed by this destructiveness. Instead she laughs, at the pointlessness of it all, at the idea she would never discover whatever it is out there that she’s been striving for, at the sight of her novel now lying in a heap of loose pages out of sequence, at the message scrawled across a page, GET A LIFE! Contemplating the idiocy of her wasted years, she laughs even more (Astley: 294).

But though her novel will remain trashed, unpublished and therefore unread, she has not spent a wasted life, for amid the failures, half-realised ambitions and accommodating shifts in her life, Janet has done something perhaps more valuable than write a book: she has created a reader. There is little more touching in all of Astley’s novels than the tenderness of Janet’s late-life marriage to Ted, the illiterate farmer. Little more joyous and uplifting than Janet’s quiet triumph in overcoming his humiliation and shyness, and teaching him to read. She does it by a word, then a phrase, then a page at a time. The tormentors in the novel prevail, the drought remains unbroken, Janet prepares to leave Drylands, Ted is dead now some five years—but he died after transforming into a reader. He is Janet’s reader. Indeed, he is the one reader, in the end, for whom she is writing her book, and she does this not by publishing it or even by completing it, but by speaking it to him, in her thoughts and aloud, on the long lonely nights when sleep eludes her and when the racket from the Legless

Lizard fills her with despair. So *Drylands*, the book for the world's last reader, the story of individuals—all Astley's usual misfits—who are failures and victims in one way or another, the book that finds there are *no endings no endings no*, is a book dimly, but definitely, of hope.

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It might not have rained that much after all, but there were many tears that week. They had began to flow on the afternoon at Rivedell, when the family counselling session became a flood of crying on my part. I was so tired, already I was so, so tired. I could not sleep, so worried was I about my older son. In the session when he was calm and articulate and even cheerful and I was a sodden mess, unable to speak my concerns due to the choking sobs in my chest that just would not stop, when the psychiatrist patiently waited for me to control myself, when the entire family waited for me to be calm, to be in charge, to be the mother again, and when I could still only sob, I felt then that perhaps the only one with a problem was me. The quiet indifference, the calm reserve of the rest of the family, made me feel useless and inadequate. The realisation made me cry more. I felt acutely the burden of this family, and that made me cry more. The diagnosis of my son's problems, though not surprising, brought yet more tears. *We believe he is suffering from depression and anxiety*. My fatigue was like a great weight, as if the entire old building had fallen upon me, and that made me cry. And it was so cold in that place. Outside it continued to drizzle. The weather seemed determined to match my misery. All was completely irrational. I just cried. The sore and bitter feelings continued as we departed, when everyone was relieved, though all for different reasons, except me. I couldn't even enjoy the exhausted calm that follows a bout of crying, as there were other matters to attend to: taking the youngest to the doctor for a start.

Once a drought is broken, it seems to be broken with a vengeance. The tears resumed on the Friday when we returned to the doctor. *It looks like he has leukaemia*. My first response was to grasp his little hand and hold it, very tightly. My second was to control my face. I must not

cry, I must not cry, I must not let him see me upset. The tears were bursting behind my eyes, but they remained there, mostly. When I saw his father, facing him from the car window for the brief moment I'd allowed us to detour—for we were instructed to take him to the hospital, straightaway, that they would want to start tests and maybe even treatment instantly—and saw his face crumple, the tears form, I whispered fiercely to him, Don't cry, just don't cry, and nodded towards the back seat where our son sat utterly bewildered, where his sister was already sobbing inconsolably.

But it was hopeless. We cried all that afternoon, all that evening, and when by a small miracle I did actually sleep I woke with the feeling the tears had never left me. All except for the older boy. He who had been so sad, so miserable, so frustrated, so confused, he remained dry-eyed and in control. His forte was a crisis. His urgent optimism and insistence that it would be all right, his brother would get better, that he would beat this cancer, that we would all come through this ordeal, helped keep me going in all sorts of ways those first days and weeks. I would like to say that his anxiety and depression were also cured, and that the week that began with one sad story and ended with another sadder one had a positive moment. But that was not to be this story either. His problems were sidelined almost as soon as they'd been identified, and he was to have to cope with that for a long time afterwards. The story never does end up the way you first imagine. Besides, there are no endings, no endings, no

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Or the endings are simply indistinguishable from beginnings. That week properly ended on the Sunday afternoon, in Ward C2 West of the Sydney Children's Hospital in Randwick. There, a young and unsmiling resident on duty that day, who continually pushed his glasses back up his nose and seemed incapable of looking a parent in the eye, came around with the results of the biopsy. Yes, it was confirmed that our son had the type of childhood cancer of the bone marrow called Acute Lymphoblastic Leukaemia. Treatment would commence immediately and would last for two years. It would begin

with a steroid, involve the surgical implantation in his chest of a permanent catheter, continue with many different types of cytotoxic drugs known by the term chemotherapy, administered in several different ways. On this day and over the next few we were also told, though at the time it did not properly register, that the treatment would suppress the white cell count of his immune system so dramatically that he would become neutropaenic and be susceptible to all sorts of infections; that his hair would fall out; that his weight would first inflate with steroids, and then reduce with chemotherapy; that his growth while in treatment would be retarded; that the first sign of infection would be a high temperature and that we should at once buy a good-quality digital thermometer; that it would be difficult, confusing, unpredictable, and terribly distressing, but that his chances of survival were very good.



I don't know how you cope. People would say this constantly over the months that followed. What with the other children, your work...

There was no mystery. I told people I coped because I had to, as any other parent would in the circumstances. I coped because there was no question of not coping, there was quite simply no alternative. Children have needs that are palpably there—they require cooking for, driving around, help with homework, their washing done—and such practical demands, exhausting as they are, mean you cannot dissolve into abject uselessness. But there was another reason I could cope, which was one I could never articulate, seeing as it sounded so simple-minded and at times even callous.

I coped because I read. My diary of that first year or so of the treatment is also a diary of my reading, haphazard and arbitrary and sometimes ironic. I read books like *The Da Vinci Code*, because it was simply available, not to mention the perfect book to escape from emotional exhaustion; A. S. Byatt's *Possession*, because I never had; several Mills and Boon titles, all forgettable, but because I found myself in hospital with nothing to read one long night, and that was all on offer in the parents' room; Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*,

coincidentally set for a subject I was teaching and which proved not to be as confronting as I was fearing.

And Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, which I resumed reading to my son during his first stay in hospital. This became for me an education in how to read a written text when a visual one is already implanted in a child's imagination, but once I understood the importance of skipping the bits that Peter Jackson had, it became a reading experience that we both treasured. All through the two years of his treatment we read the three books in Tolkien's trilogy and then, both feeling rather bereft, we progressed to the *Harry Potter* books, and finally, though I felt my capacity for fantasy shrinking, Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*. Quite coincidentally we finished the Narnia stories exactly two years and two days after his diagnosis. It was the very last day of his treatment, the last day of chemotherapy, the last lumbar puncture, the last bone marrow aspirate. And we were reading the last chapter of the last book, *The Last Battle*. There was no special significance in any of this, just a very beautiful symmetry, a comforting pattern.

I had always felt that my last child had missed out on the special attention I was able to give to his brother and sister, and that especially I had neglected his reading. At the time he was diagnosed he was learning to read slowly and perfectly capably for any six-year-old, but with nothing like the speed or proficiency his siblings had shown at the same age. During his many months off school I never pressured him to do any school work, and left to learn at his own pace, his reading skills accelerated remarkably, but of course I was also reading to him with more intimacy and dedication than ever before. I nurtured this reader. Maybe he has been the only reader I helped create.

And when he was too sick to be read to, I read to myself. When he had the highest temperature ever, when it went over forty degrees, when he was still and silent in a hospital bed with his skin burning and his eyes glazed, when he couldn't even be given medication to reduce his temperature because certain tests had to be done first, I sat calmly by his side re-reading *Lolita*. Perhaps it did not make sense to read this of all books, perhaps it did not make sense to read any book at all. But reading is not logical. Vladimir Nabokov in his *Lectures on Literature* insists that the wise reader reads a book not with the heart, not with

the brain, but with the spine. It is there, he says, that occurs the *telltale tingle* or the *artistic quiver* that shows us we are reading a book of quality (Nabokov: 6). My jaw might have been clenched tighter than normal, my neck and shoulder muscles locked in a permanent spasm, but I kept reading, slowly and determinedly, even attentively, conscious despite the suffering of my son beside me, suffering that always ate my heart alive yet never destroyed it, that I was reading with the spine, one glorious and painful page at a time.

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