

Part 1

Speaking Secrets

a manuscript

There is a psychological violence in the very process of breaking through silence. To see, to acknowledge, to speak – this is dangerous to political and ideological structures.¹

¹ Deirdre Lashgari, *Violence, Silence, and Anger: Women's Writing as Transgression*, Charlottesville UP of Virginia, 1995

LIZ MULLINAR



I know the general direction I am aiming for – Cessnock, north-west of Sydney. That isn't the problem. I have the address. And I have the map.

The real problem is that the map is a little old and the precise location is not quite anywhere to be found on it.

But I keep going – heading for Mayumarri, Coney Creek Lane, Quorrobolong.

I am late and I am lost. The rain doesn't help – torrential and relentless for the entire two hour trip from the Central Coast, just north of Sydney.

I pull in at a service station and step straight into a puddle, squelch into the service area and ask the woman there for directions.

“Quorrobolong – not a problem. Keep goin’ for another five kilometres, turn left at the crossroads and then keep goin’ for about another ten.

“Mayumarri - never heard of that one...” Shaking her head.

“Uh, thanks...”

So I do. Keep goin’. Once off the main road to Cessnock I travel deeper into the Hunter Valley. Into valleys and around hillsides. Attempting to ring Mayumarri on the mobile, but of course, there is no signal.

Finally stumbling across Coney Creek Lane just minutes before I am about to give up.

I follow it, pressing even deeper into these Hunter Valley recesses. And here it is, a sign. Mayumarri – Welcome. I feel wet, cold, disoriented – and late.

Opening the gate I drive on, along a dirt track. Further up and up a mountainous hill, wet and hazy. I get to the top of the hill and just sort of slide down the other side, the car simply rolling forward, nowhere else to go.

Slowly I spot it, rising ghost-like out of the wet mists – Mayumarri. It means peace.

It is idyllic really, even in a downpour. Awash with wet Australian greens and ochres, and light, pouring into the dam behind it. Mayumarri is a healing centre for survivors of abuse - physical, emotional or sexual. Here the hope is that people will move from being victims of abuse, to survivors.

There is nowhere else like it in Australia – and possibly the world.

Mayumarri is a nest of Western Red Cedar cabins and a rammed earth meeting centre, interconnected with paths through a carefully landscaped native garden. It is quiet and it is different. The quietness seems loaded, as if something is about to happen. Or is happening, somewhere within these walls, as I look on.

I feel a little out of place – and a lot intrusive.

Desperate because I hate being late, I am met by the caretaker who goes to get Liz Mullinar – world-renowned casting agent. Socialite. Mother. Wife. Christian.

Survivor.

“Hello,” she says. We shake hands and I bumble some form of apology for my lateness, attendant with excuses about rain and slippery roads and old road maps.

“Oh, don’t worry,” she waves her hand, a little flustered herself. “I totally forgot you were coming...”

It was then I look at her. Liz Mullinar is tiny in stature – she reminds me of a tiny bird full of tiny, little bird-bones. But the oneness of her is overwhelming. She is strong and fast and efficient.

Her dress sense this day would never have cut it in Double Bay let alone Hollywood or the West End of London – old, green cords; a reddish chequered shirt, too big for her; a blue polo neck underneath, which doesn’t go with anything else; and a pair of well-worn red shoes. Her hair is everywhere really, but she looks good. Not internationally chic but perfect for the moment.

Perfect for the woman who looks intensely at me, definitely warily, with her bird eyes, and gathers me out of the rain into the warmth of one of the wooden cabins, offering coffee as we enter.

We make our own, and sit awkwardly, sipping.

I set my tape recorder up, asking if she minds, not even knowing if she remembers why I have requested the interview. But there is nothing to worry about – her lapse of memory is momentary and perhaps intentional - I feel she doesn’t really want to be interviewed. Doesn’t really want to talk about her personal pain. Her personal secrets.

I suddenly feel I don't really want to hear. I don't really have any right to hear.

But Mullinar has agreed to this interview, I can tell, for a greater cause. For Advocates for Survivors of Child Abuse (ASCA) and for other survivors. The ones who have told. Perhaps more for the ones who have not yet told.

To help break the silence.

“Convention is silencing – the norm is silencing. Fear of not being normal. That's one of the reasons people keep secrets. That's one of the reasons people don't want to hear or know,” she says quietly.

In 1995, the *Melbourne Age* described Liz Mullinar as ‘one of the 10 most powerful people in Australian TV’. Not bad for a young woman who travelled to Australia in 1966 as a ten pound Pom.

For almost thirty years Liz Mullinar ran the most successful casting consultancy in Australia, discovering the likes of Judy Davis, Cate Blanchett, Geoffrey Rush, Colin Friels, Claudia Karvan and Jacqueline Mckenzie. Hers was a jet-set lifestyle, dashing around the world, working with leading producers and directors. Advising, consulting, fighting for what and whom she believed in.

And then suddenly, in 1993, she was struck down with what could only be termed, in the best possible Hollywood sense, a mysterious, life-threatening illness.

For eight weeks she dealt with a near total body shutdown, with no medical explanation. She was hospitalised, examined, tested, poked and prodded and about to go under the knife for exploratory surgery, when she and husband Rod Phillips decided enough was

enough. They went on a holiday to Noosa Heads on the New South Wales north coast instead of the scheduled surgery – Mullinar was taken onto the plane in a wheelchair. The holiday made no difference and despairingly, they returned. Mullinar was neither able to eat nor sleep, and was in constant pain. It was a friend of hers who suggested she should go and see a psychic healer, a woman called Alison Allward. Desperate for a recovery, Mullinar was prepared to try anything. But she told Allison Allward she was merely having trouble sleeping.

Allward handed Mullinar the usual forms to fill in. Mullinar left blank the question about any traumatic event in her life. When Allward questioned her on the empty space, Mullinar told her that she had been through no traumas – the worst possible thing that happened to her was breaking her arm when she was five and going into hospital for a week.

Allward looked at her and said: ‘I can’t help you with your sleeping problem because you were sexually abused as a child’. (Mullinar 1997, p.8). Mullinar calls this chapter in her book *A Bolt from the Blue*.

That was the beginning of a journey of discovery, pain and healing which has thoroughly transformed her and her family, and the direction of their lives.

Under hypnosis and EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing) throughout the next years of therapy, Mullinar unearthed memories of her systematic rape and torture at the hands of a doctor in the London hospital where she spent a week as a five year old, with a broken arm.

She didn’t want to remember. She couldn’t believe any of it was true. She didn’t know where the memories were coming from.

‘None of this was making any sense to me. I couldn’t understand that what I was going through was something akin to a battle between my mind and my body. My body was finally trying to release itself from a terrible burden and my mind was resisting it. After all, if it was some emotional trauma I had successfully suppressed for forty-three years, why would my mind be prepared to face it now?’ (Mullinar 1997, p.224).

‘For some people a traumatic memory remains constantly in the present. They are permanently locked into repeating, for instance, the living horror of the carnage of the battlefield. For other people, especially for children, the trauma is split off from everyday awareness and forgotten completely. The mind conveniently chooses not to deal with it. But this is like ignoring the fact that your house has no foundations: sooner or later, something has to give’ (Mullinar 1997, p.225).

When Mullinar came out of hospital, the fear and pain, and any memory of the fear and pain, were gone. The perpetrator had threatened to poison her if she spoke about what he was doing to her – and the child Elizabeth believed him.

“It was gone, completely. That’s what trauma is. Like in car accidents, people cannot remember what happened, it’s exactly like that; so therefore it didn’t exist as a question,” Mullinar explains to me. She is sitting in an old armchair, quite tense and on edge. There is still a wariness about her, sharing with a total stranger, but also a disarming honesty.

“But it did mean that I knew that the world wasn’t safe any more so it did give me the view not to trust anyone or let anyone caress me. It was affecting me in that way because no-one was going to get near to me, because even that inner me was being very tight, not taking in emotions.

“I certainly wouldn’t uncover it.”

And so the secret was underway, even from her.

There is a family photo in her book *The Liz Mullinar Story*, co-written with her brother Simon Hopkinson. The photo is taken in the summer of 1950, outside the Battersea Vicarage in London where her father was the vicar and the family lived. It is just a normal photo – Mum, Dad and the six children. The family used it as their Christmas card that year.

It was taken just a few months after Mullinar came out of hospital. Looking closely at the five-year-old Elizabeth – ribbons in her hair and English smocking on what must have been her best Sunday dress – she does not look any different really from her siblings. Except she is not looking at the camera. Her head is turned, looking off into the distance to her left. And her legs are tightly crossed. Not just crossed once but intertwined, with her right foot deftly hooked behind the left leg, clamping her legs shut.

Mullinar has attempted sleep like this every night since her abuse, legs crossed, tight and tense. During a session under hypnosis with her clinical psychologist Dr Susan Ballinger, after her memories came flooding back, Mullinar admitted in her five-year-old voice: ‘I won’t ever sleep again. That’s quite clear’ (Mullinar 1997, p.258).

Her years of insomnia, detachment from her emotions and super-efficiency were the only real signifiers the child Elizabeth carried with her into her adult years.

And an inordinate sense of injustice.

It was just before one of the final sessions Mullinar had with Ballinger where the pieces fell into place about her so highly developed sense of justice which had travelled with her – and dogged her – all her life.

In the dead of night, the doctor would come and remove the child Elizabeth from her bed, taking her hand and leading her down the ward to another room. There was an

examination table in the second room where he “gently” strapped her down, gagged her and proceeded to torture and rape her. After each abuse, he would let her up and she would wait patiently, facing a big green door which was her escape. She had to wait for him to get dressed and get the key before she could leave.

Mullinar believes it was the night before she was to be released from the hospital. And she waited, knowing it was nearly over. He had told her she could go back to the ward, but she knew she had to wait until he let her out.

She was suddenly grabbed from behind by him and sodomised. The pain was excruciating, deep ‘that shot right up inside me’. He whispered in her ear: ‘Don’t forget, you belong to me and I can hurt you this way, any time you don’t obey me’.

Mullinar writes: ‘What stands out so clearly in my mind is the sense of outrage at how unfair it was, because he had said it was all over and then he hurt me. He lied to me.

‘Now I understood why I had always had the most strenuous objection to anything that appeared to me as being unfair. Throughout the whole of my life, unfairness has been intolerable to me. And in a sense, I helped start ASCA because I thought society’s treatment of survivors was unfair’ (Mullinar 1997, p. 285).

Advocates for Survivors of Child Abuse is a national survivor-initiated association for men, women, teenagers and children. Equal emphasis is placed on emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Liz Mullinar founded it in 1995 and works constantly and consistently in its aims – to provide a voice for survivors and to take on the task of education, advocacy and support in and around survivors of abuse.

She set it up because there was no network of survivors or national support group for them. There was no place to realise others like her. There was nowhere for the voices of

survivors to be heard. Several years later Mullinar sold her Paddington family home and several valuable antiques to build Mayumarri.

Mullinar's own public disclosure came as a direct response – 'to express my personal outrage' (Mullinar 1997, p.255) – to an article written by journalist Richard Guilliat in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in November 1994 which piqued her highly developed sense of justice and changed her life forever. The main point of the article was a claim that recovered memory was nothing more than 'false memory', planted by therapists.

Liz Mullinar wrote a Letter to the Editor – and signed her name.

She wrote: 'As a woman who has discovered, through repressed memory, sexual abuse in my childhood – in my case not a member of my immediate or extended family – I would like to express how hard it is for women like myself who, embarking on a difficult journey of self-discovery, are continually discouraged by well meaning friends who read articles like 'Abused Memories' (Spectrum, November 5) and who now have reaffirmed the idea that discovery of childhood abuse is some sort of easy excuse for adult problems. It is no excuse for anything, but for women like myself, it helps explain our own behaviour and helps us to lead better and more fruitful lives. It is not an easy journey and it is much easier to leave it all repressed than suffer anew the agony by recalling memory, but it is the only action that is possible if we are to gain control of our lives. If we are to stop the insidiousness of sexual abuse continuing into the next generation, then it is essential that all men or women who have suffered speak out; please don't discourage us by associating us with a minute number of people who may have pretended to remember falsely.

'How they can do it, I – like, I suspect, other women who have been through it – cannot imagine. Memories are repressed because they are so awful our minds help us to survive by removing the memory. Recalling the memory is hell, as it involves recalling the pain

and fear and the awfulness of it all – these are not emotions which can be falsely felt. At the beginning of my adult life I was an actress, and if I had known how to express the emotions I recall, I believe I would have been a much more successful actress. Nobody wishes to recall horrors from their childhood, so please help those of us for whom it is necessary for personal survival to do so by believing us. It is not an excuse. It gives us a reason to become better and happier human beings’.

In an interview in the *Daily Telegraph* in Sydney several months later, Mullinar explained: ‘I don’t want to tell my story, I’m very happy to be private. All that happened was because of the false memory propaganda, I felt compelled to tell my story to the world.

‘The public have got a completely false impression of what goes on. I mean, people actually believe there are a lot of bad therapists running around putting memories into people and that people make up recovered memories. It’s nonsense’.

Succinctly in her book: ‘Recovering a memory doesn’t happen all at once. It is like peeling an onion. You start from the outside and work down towards the centre. You recall each layer as you are able to stomach it. The further down you go the worse it gets’ (Mullinar 1997, p.229).

But on this day, sitting in one of her cedar cabins in Mayumarri, Mullinar explains why she wrote her letter to the editor.

“Why? I suppose it’s because it was a perfectly dishonest article. I responded because it triggered into my own thing of total unfairness and knowing how much serious damage it was doing to people.

“I didn’t go through that thing of ‘shall I reveal my abuse, shall I speak out’ at all. I just knew I’d go for it. It wasn’t a massive decision at all.”

At the time, many people within the industry knew that Liz Mullinar had been very ill. But her discoveries from recovered memory were a totally private, family affair.

“I told everybody I’d been ill. So therefore a quarter of the film industry knew. But that was not me going public.

“I wrote with my name so that was public exposure. Masses of people wrote to me - masses. The public, lots of people, wrote thanks and I was stunned. I don’t know what I thought but it kind of wasn’t in my consciousness before. But that was definitely it. I think, after that, it was unbelievably validating because of course they all validated stuff with me because they all saw the journey I was on and they were all doing the same stuff, so that was fantastic for me.

“That’s when I decided to put *Breaking the Silence* together.

“I’m actually a very private person, so therefore I’ve spent my whole life putting on a front, so my front continues. Nobody knows the real me because it’s so important. It’s actually more important than anything else anyway.

“But now, if I do a television program or something, and get thousands of calls and masses of people get in touch, it isn’t something I can actually pull back from.

“It’s been given to me to pass it on.”

Breaking the Silence is a compilation of testimonials by more than one hundred members and supporters of ASCA, writing about their own, personal and past secret experiences at the hands of abusers. Liz Mullinar and Candida Hunt co-edited the book.

“What I wanted to do was to put together a book because these letters were helping me and I just knew I needed to put together a book. So then, when someone else like me starts on this, there’ll be a book which will say it happens to many other people, and thus would help them.”

Liz Mullinar has two sons, Ben and Nicholas, and three stepdaughters, Rodney Phillips' daughters by a first marriage, Kendall, Tristan and Adrian.

But it is when the conversation turns to the mothering of her sons that her raw pain fills the room. I can almost taste it, mingling in with the Western Red Cedar scent. It is nearly overwhelming.

She talks of relationships and how people who have been abused as children have very little trust in whatever remnant of emotion they have left – or anybody around them.

She speaks of a deep loss regarding her sons, both of whom have been supportive of her journey.

“Sadly I wasn’t a very emotionally connected mother and therefore we wouldn’t have as close a relationship as other mothers have with their children.

“I think we do now. I work on it now. But if you don’t when your child is small, you really can’t – you’ve lost it ... you know...”

Liz Mullinar cries. I think I hold my breath as she attempts to keep talking. “You can’t get that back,” she continues. “Any survivor of abuse who is honest will admit that they do not have a totally close relationship with their children. Because you can’t have – it’s got to have affected you. It must have affected you either emotionally or in some way so that you over-compensate, under-compensate or whatever you do, you do it. You don’t come from a functional base.

“I don’t think I was capable of giving my children everything they needed ... because I think my childhood with my parents was, not consciously, but you know ... you have a good relationship but you can’t emotionally give. They’re lovely, nobody’s saying anything else, but I’m saying because now I know how good a parent can be and that could be fantastic. One really appreciates the closeness of relationships.

“We very rarely talk on a really in-depth level to each other.”

I think to myself that Mullinar is possibly one of the most honest women I have ever met. I wonder how we can possibly go on. We sip our coffee, suspended in time for a few seconds. It seems like hours.

My next question...

One of Mullinar’s sisters was extremely supportive when she revealed her secret abuse. In fact, the revelation seemingly fitted like pieces of a jigsaw.

“The one sister I’m close to was very validating and was supportive because I used to move my mouth all through the night because I was gagged. It used to drive her nuts. So she was very good at first, yes.

“When I remembered that and told her she was really terrific and said ‘Oh, it makes so much sense. We could never get really close to you, it was always like - ‘that’s enough, don’t come any closer’ and stuff like that. So she was OK.

“But the others really tried to minimise it and didn’t want to know. My birth family had extreme difficulty with all of this.”

Mullinar’s father is elderly and cannot – or will not – accept what happened to his daughter.

“My mother is dead and my father couldn’t deal with it at all. He just ignored it really.”

Her brother now believes her, and her nieces and nephews totally support her.

“Other members of the next generation of my family were very, very good. My brother and sisters’ children were so supportive. I won’t go into it but yes – they were always great.”

I gaze out the window, thinking, and suddenly see a kangaroo, nonchalantly grazing in the field above the cabin. I get up and watch it. Mullinar joins me. She loosens up and smiles, as if she has organised this just for me.

I can tell she loves it at Mayumarri – she feels safe.

That is, until a journalist comes from the city and pins her to the wall like a butterfly specimen, dissecting not only her life but its content and meaning.

I want to finish and leave her in peace, a peace full of dysfunctional, hurting people on their individual journeys of healing in a place she has built for them. Her faith is strong and her aims sound. She is an expert in this field not because she has studied it, but because she has lived it.

We sit again.

“It is totally about power; all child abuse is about power. It’s about the power someone has over another. It’s about family secrets. I think it’s every bit about secrecy. What we work on here at ASCA is being honest with each other, telling each other how we’re feeling,” Mullinar says.

“But it’s the powerlessness that makes it so destructive; it’s knowing you have no rights for yourself. That’s why people are suicidal because they don’t count, they don’t matter. That’s the reason people don’t exist any more – because nobody cares, nobody’s noticed, nobody’s paying attention to their plight. So they feel they just have to kill themselves because they don’t care for themselves either.”

Mullinar herself has wanted to die, several times.

“Oh, yes, I have had terrible feelings of inadequacy or lack of self-value, yes. But what I did – I worked really hard because I wasn’t worthwhile. I was compensating.”

Most abuse survivors talk during their recovery of a voicelessness – of not being heard, even when they cried out for help. Mullinar sees her path as slightly different.

“Because of my sense of unfairness, I haven’t been silenced verbally. But because of my abuse, my emotions were silenced. That’s because emotions weren’t safe any more so I didn’t feel emotions throughout my life. So what was silenced were my emotions, not my voice.

“I became that when I was five.”

Mullinar gave up her casting consultancy not to set up ASCA but to seek ordination in the Anglican Church. This was a story the media simply could not leave behind. It had all the trappings of an ongoing and sensational story. But Mullinar is canny. She has worked surrounded by media for most of her career.

She laughs but I can tell she doesn’t think it is that funny.

“They only wrote about it because I’m one of your famous people. They only put me on *This is Your Life* because they could have Cate Blanchett and Jacqueline McKenzie and whatever – they wouldn’t have me otherwise.

“Let’s be realistic.

“But that’s all right. I may have been a successful casting consultant but but but but - nonetheless, ‘she discovered Judy Davis’ is a lot more interesting headline story, isn’t it? Me and my own life isn’t – if I’d been a successful businesswoman in any other area, it wouldn’t have been interesting to them either.

“We’ve really got to be realistic. It was only my connection with glamour and the film industry.

“As long as anyone cares about the person who makes a secret disclosure, it will get a run. Actually that’s not true because I tell my groups: ‘Whenever you want to get publicity, you ring up your local newspaper and one of you has to tell your story’. Then the newspaper will always run the story. Interestingly, the local newspapers here now have done so many stories about it that it’s actually come to the point where they’ve had enough survivor stories.

“We now have to have daughters of survivors or other angles of survival stories because they’ve done them and they’ve covered aspects so often on survival.”

She laughs again. She thinks it is a little bit funny. I feel a little bit ashamed.

“I find with journalists in fact that they are either amazingly sympathetic or so uppity that they don’t actually interview you because they don’t want to give you any mileage in any aspect,” she says.

Someone knocks gently on the wooden door. Popping her head through, a young woman smiles at us and directs her question to Mullinar: “Shall I set another place for lunch?”

There is an awkward silence. Mullinar somehow doesn’t answer. Not verbally anyway. I immediately say I can’t stay. Have to get back. Things to do. I can tell Mullinar does not want me in their space at lunch-time - would never invite the journalist into private time, when guards are down.

She is right and I respect her all the more for it. Not because I would have taken advantage. But because she doesn’t know that.

I just have a few more questions and then I can leave.

The main question, burning in the back of my throat for the past half-hour. I need to know where she has put her anger that must have steamed up like a vortex from the very

cells of her body? What would she say to him if he was here in this room now - the doctor who tortured and raped her as the five-year-old Elizabeth with the broken arm?

She answers, and simply takes my breath away.

“I would say I forgive you.”

No, I can't believe that.

She qualifies: “OK. My child self would still hate him and my adult self would be very forgiving. I would have to tell him of the effects of what he had done to me and doubtless countless other children, but also say I was able to forgive him.”

Would you ask him why?

“No, because I know why. I know why perpetrators do it so I wouldn't need to ask why.

“Why? Because they were made powerless in their lives, because they've been abused and because that's how they get power – it's just that power over somebody which makes them feel good about themselves so they then need to act like this in order to have power.”

We go outside. It is still raining, not quite as heavily.

It is time to go. She is standing in the door of the main house as the guests are eating their lunch together, guarding them from me. She does a great job. I feel repelled by her protective energy but still have an urge to hug her, and do.

I slip my way back up around the curves of the hills, manoeuvring the car carefully.

There is a wet gully on one side and a steep, sopping hill on the other. The road seems to have shrunk slightly since I drove down it this morning.

I feel Liz Mullinar hadn't really wanted to do this interview but did, for the sake of the cause. And Mayumarri. And breaking the silence.

I realise I hadn't wanted to do it either – as soon as I arrived, I had felt like an intruder.

But did, because she agreed to it.

And I am not quite sure if that is reason enough ...



Photos by Dee Geary

DAVID CUNNINGHAM



Someone once told David Cunningham he has great nipples.

He also has a great smile and beautiful hands, with long, elegant fingers. They look like a concert pianist's. He has an acute intelligence, quick wit and a wicked sense of humour.

And a healthy sex drive.

But Cunningham's legs are withered and his body slightly twisted. He also can see from just one eye.

David Cunningham has cerebral palsy.

The minute I enter his family's home in Doonside, in Sydney's western suburbs, I glean a little of his life. His father Michael opens the front door and lets me in. We shake hands.

"David won't be a minute," he tells me.

Then I hear Cunningham yell for his father. His father goes to him and then comes back out to me.

We talk of an impending war.

“Blair’s an idiot,” Michael Cunningham says. I nod. “And Bush – he’s just dangerous.”

I nod again.

“And as for John Howard – what a disgrace...” Again I agree with him.

The television is on, serving blow by blow accounts of a war looming in the Middle East. The kitchen is full of dishes, and clothes and books and papers are strewn everywhere. This is a seriously ‘lived-in’ family home.

Cunningham yells for his father again. Cunningham senior goes to him again.

He returns. “Won’t be long,” he tells me.

There is a huge portrait of Jesus Christ on a wall, and a crucifix on another.

Cunningham calls for his father again. This time he takes longer to go to tend him.

Cunningham calls again, slightly exasperated at the wait. I can hear it in his voice.

This is not a temporary illness or ailment – this has been their life, since Cunningham was born.

Finally, David Cunningham emerges from his room. I hear him before I see him – the wheelchair seems difficult to manoeuvre in the narrow corridor. He calls my name and offers his hand from around the wall. I shake his hand before I can even see his face.

On the phone a few days earlier, Cunningham warned me he only ever wears boxer shorts at home. And true to his word, here he is in boxers – green and gold satin boxers, to be precise. And not a stitch else. He asks me if I want to talk in the kitchen area, or in his bedroom.

He says: “I’d rather go in my room – that way I can be really honest. Tell you everything.” He looks towards the living room, where his father is watching war,

televised, with a half smile on his face.

“Your room will be perfect,” I tell him.

David Cunningham is twenty four years old. Three years ago, he stood as the Greens’ candidate for Chifley in the federal election. He got 1.57 percent of the vote.

“That means nine hundred and seventy-six people voted for me,” he says proudly. “All those people thought I could represent them...” He seems to almost not believe himself which is odd, because this man exudes an energy and self-assuredness rarely encountered. He is also a man with a mission.

Last year, David Cunningham went on national radio, on the ABC’s *Life Matters*, and told Australia he wants to have sex and believes he has every right to have sex, despite his disability and dependence. His mother was also on the programme and was asked how she would feel if her son wanted to use the sex industry for sex.

The only thing was, Cunningham had never mentioned or discussed this with either of his parents beforehand.

“I couldn’t – we just couldn’t talk about it. The first time I ever masturbated, my mother walked in and told me it was dirty and to never do it again,” he says, defensively. “Not a really good way to start puberty, eh?” he asks. Then adds, with a big grin: “It may have been dirty but it felt good, so of course, I kept doing it.” Cunningham’s right leg kicks forward in a spasm. He holds it down.

Cunningham was brought up a Catholic – his family’s faith is strong. But he no longer practises his Catholicism. “I’m half and half,” he says, with a dubious smile, seemingly not quite sure of himself, again. “I believe in God, I believe in Jesus, but I don’t believe in the Catholic Church with its corrupt and shocking and awful views of how they perceive the world. They are complete hypocrites at times which I just cannot stand. I mean, to me, in the Greens I’m being more Catholic than I am in the Catholic Church. I

actually am helping people in the Greens – that I like because it is being how God and Jesus wants us to be, to help people and make the world a better place, not just sit there and preach and pray about it and hope to God it happens.”

Sex was never spoken about to him in his home. I wonder out loud if it was because of his disability or because of religion.

He is adamant: “No, not my disability – it was the religion, for sure. You just don’t talk about it – I mean, look what happened when my mother caught me masturbating!”

Cunningham was completely isolated in terms of his burgeoning sexuality – at that time in his life, he mainly spent time with other disabled young people – all with little or no sexual experiences between them.

“It wasn’t until I got some walking friends when I was sixteen or seventeen when I could actually get some information,” he says. “And then, I not only wanted to know everything, I wanted everything, myself.

“My walking friends brought me more into the real world than my disabled friends could.

“I remember staying at a friend’s place one night and in the morning I went into his room, and there he was, lying next to his girlfriend.

“And it looked so good and natural and I thought to myself ‘I want that, too’.”

His leg kicks out again, out of his control but almost emphatically. He holds it down, once again, until the spasm passes.

Back to *Life Matters*. I confront him – tell him how unfair I thought it was to place his mother in the position of hearing for the first time when she had a microphone stuck in her face, that her son wished to go to sex workers for sex. I accuse him of copping out and manipulating the media.

He thinks about this. Then agrees. Then explains: “I had no choice...it was a safer way

of telling them.

“If you’ve got a high sex drive you’ve got to put it somewhere – I mean if I’m having blockages towards doing that, which are many I might add. I couldn’t get access to premises, to actual brothels as well as places, I mean it’s...when the interview came up I thought to myself, here is a prime opportunity to put that question to my mum, through her, which is a safer option for me, rather than say: ‘Hey Mum, you know, you know....can you drive me to a brothel, please’.

“Yeah, I mean, some may view it as me being a coward but for me it’s a question of safety. I mean, I class myself as being bisexual right. Now the thing is, if I’d told my mum I liked both sexes she’d drop dead. She’d think, Christ my son, first he loves the sex industry, secondly he has sex worker friends and thirdly, he’s interested in guys. She’d think to herself what the hell is he doing? Right, which is true, she probably would. So, I mean, the thing is I can’t say to my mum and dad, you know, this is me.

“Now, I’ve fought for more privacy and I’ve got more privacy now and that programme actually allowed me to get up and say to my own parents that I need my sex life and I need to have all these things and if you don’t like it, you know, that’s unfortunate.

“I am bisexual. Put that in your book – nobody knows that yet.”

He is proud and defiant and determined.

“No,” I say. “Tell them yourself.”

“I can’t,” he replies. “I just can’t. But I am what I am and I want them to know.” And he means it. And he seems desperate.

So I put it in the book.

We laugh and pretend flippancy but he is serious. There seems no frame for his voice, the voice which needs to speak about sex and sexuality and desires and needs. And no forum. So Cunningham actively uses the media – he makes it his forum.

“Well there’s both a broader issue and a personal one why I did that. I’ll tell you the broader issue first, and then the personal one.

“The broader issue – the fact is that at present this issue is covered up, it’s tucked up, no-one is to know about it. And what makes it worse is that the Government, the department that looks after us, don’t want to know about it either.

“The issue is giving people with disabilities the right to have their sex life. I actually believe that people with disabilities should be given money to fund their sex life.”

He looks at me, expecting some reaction. I say nothing.

“See, no-one would want to talk about that.”

I agree it is a difficult topic.

“Yeah but that is what I am after. I’m after tax-payers’ money to be given to us to go and get a root. Which is brutally being blunt.

“I did the programme because I want this issue put up on the public agenda. I want it close to the top, not buried in the middle or down the bottom. Because issues like sex and drugs and booze can’t be talked about, even though everyone else has a sex life. And they love it and they enjoy it and they have a good time with it, but we don’t get that.

“And actually, the thing is, I just want people to have the guts to get up and speak about things that matter.

“This is a release for me too. It lets me blurt everything out, the lot, and to say to Australia: ‘There, this is who we are’. And there is a lot more to life, it’s not just for me, it’s thousands of others.”

We have to stop the interview to allow Cunningham time to go to the toilet. He yells for his father once again, as I leave his room. Michael Cunningham can’t hear him – I poke my head into the living room where the television is still expounding war loudly, and

tell him David needs him. He gets up straight away and goes to him.

I wait outside, scanning the yard for good light and background for photos. When Cunningham is finished, his father wheels him outside, semi-naked still, and proud of it. It is difficult to keep him quiet long enough to get the right picture. I can tell he is enjoying the attention but there is an edge. A vulnerability he desperately tries to hide with bravado – and he is, mostly, successful. It is just the way he nervously readjusts his boxers every time his leg spasms and a wariness in his one good eye. Or perhaps it is a questioning – has he gone too far and where should he stop?

Once more inside the privacy of his bedroom, Cunningham needs to speak of his sexual exploits. It is almost a telling to validate what he is most passionate about at the moment – that disabled people need sex lives or rather, have a right to a sex life – too.

It took him several months after the *Life Matters* programme to get himself to a brothel. “The first time I actually went, I actually hunted around for the place to go to, right. I wanted a place where I could be spoilt rotten, treated as though, you know...like a prince.

“Sex for me now is more like being therapy – it’s not love sex. It’s therapy.

“I waited for a while ‘cause I wanted to make sure I...see, the thing is, right, I got a chance to gear myself up for it, prepare myself for what I was about to do. Which was interesting, the day I chose it was like going out – put on clean boxers and I even washed my bits as well, so they could say: ‘Gosh, his cleanliness is good!’ ” he laughs, nervously.

“And then I went out and I took the taxi there, OK. When I got there, I actually had to be carried up the steps, carried into the brothel.

“I went the front way, but that was OK, that was cool. I was the only wheel chair client there for a start, right. In brothels all the clients there all know why you’re there and it’s

funny because no-one talks to each other. There's no questions around, and the thing is nobody says: 'Hi, how are you?' which I found odd.

"But anyway, all the workers didn't want to approach me at all. Somehow, I was this bizarre strange thing on wheels that sat there and, so, I thought, gee, why is that? But then I thought to myself no, I'll let them come to me, I shouldn't have to put myself in front of them and say, here I am, I'm a wheelchair client, take me, my bod can be yours! For half price!

"But in the end I gave in. I went up and actually spoke to a couple of them and I actually found it, I mean the experience was fascinating, the whole idea of me going to them. I could actually sit there and work out what I wanted. I wasn't nervous until the horrible corridor walk to the room. I thought, geez, what am I doing now? What am I actually doing? Of course, the worker felt stupid. She's saying come with me and I thought, I am actually doing this. It is actually happening."

Sex with a disabled person, depending on the disability, needs to be negotiated, for so many and varied reasons – a notion most people would never ever have considered

"Why should they consider it?" Cunningham asks me. "That's the whole point – this is never spoken about – ever. That's why the media is the only real way to go."

And sex with a disabled virgin – even greater uncharted territory.

"With this," he looks towards his body, "there's more to it than just having a shag.

There's the whole issue of spasms, of transferring, of getting undressed and dressed, all the rest of that. You can't just say: 'Right, do me now'. Even though I'd love that to happen but I know I can't. So here I'm saying that sex has to be planned. It can't be spontaneous, can't say let's go now. Which I'd love to do. I have to negotiate with her. I said this is the first time, I said to her I could kick you in the head with a spasm and she said that's fine, that she wouldn't mind and I thought God, she would actually like that!!

“So after negotiating with her I said I would like to have a massage first and get comfy and then I could work out what to do next. And the thing is that even taking my clothes off can’t be sexy. Which is a real pity because it was tough to get turned on. And being turned on is the one thing that makes sex more interesting. The thing is though that after the massage she got the condom on – it was funny because I thought I would do that but she did it.

“The massage was pretty bad – I give better massages than that – but I didn’t want to hurt her feelings so I told her it was good.

“When she was actually going down I thought I’ve got to watch my legs or just enjoy this. The thing is that the whole session lasted about five hours. That’s not me boasting that’s the truth. But the funny thing is that I discovered, what I learnt from that session is that I am awfully sensitive and that sensitivity makes sex somewhat interesting, it makes it last longer and gives a more sexual experience.

“But my legs were a right pain in the arse. So, I learnt that my legs are a problem, not me.”

As if on cue, Cunningham’s left leg shoots forward and then backwards, whacking into the underside of his chair. It looks really painful but he doesn’t blink. Doesn’t actually stop talking, like nothing has just happened.

“But see the funny thing is, after the session, I came out of the room I was in and the workers said to me: ‘We heard you from out here’ and I thought God, and then they said: ‘You really went off’.

“I thought, God. Because the thing is with me is that I’m not a quiet person, I don’t mind saying that. The whole idea of sex is that you’re supposed to get into it and enjoy it and not pretend that you’re not doing it. So, for me, I get noisy, and the whole planet knows that. So I got looks from clients and workers and one said to me: ‘Can you come

and see me next?’ And I thought, maybe next time. I actually was at the door and I thought, it really wears you out.”

Cunningham rang one of his ‘walking’ friends from the brothel, to tell him. He then went to his friend’s house, to talk about his experience.

“I went and visited him afterwards right, and they said: ‘Welcome aboard’ to manhood, to the whole idea of what they had. Men had it for years, and I hadn’t until that time.

And they recognised the fact that I was capable of doing all that. I mean, it’s funny because, to me, being a man, there are a whole lot of things about being a man that are important. One of which is being able to love, properly, and to be capable of turning someone else on, and that’s an important part of being a man. And the whole thing is that once you’ve cracked into that, the rest of your blokey friends accept you as one of them...and the bizarre thing is that these friends said to me, how was it? And we discussed all that, you know, how it was and how big I am and how big they are, all the usual bits and pieces. And then they said to me: ‘wow, we’re impressed’ and I thought to myself, that’s good. Up until then, it was a whole area of experience I could never talk about or join them and talk about.

“I guess, it was a bit about acceptance and sameness, in some regard.”

Cunningham stops for a minute and thinks. It takes him a while to formulate what he wants to say.

“Basically, now I’m part of the pack and one of the normal people, per se. I actually don’t know what is normal any more because the word normal is so strange – to me, normal people don’t know what’s normal any more, they don’t. It’s ridiculous.

“It should be more about being equal even though we are actually all different.”

He confides his favourite drink is Bourbon and Coke.

“And actually it’s funny because I got that plastered one night I actually fell off my

chair and about six friends just sat there and laughed at me.” Cunningham laughs and I watch him. The story is another one about acceptance although for me, the image of a disabled person falling from his or her wheelchair is far from funny. And I wonder why, if he can cope with it, it makes me uncomfortable.

I say: “Hopefully, in your friends’ defence, they were all drunk too...”

“Completely.” He is still laughing and I manage a smile. Perhaps these are the rites of passage most young men and women journey through. Cunningham simply has a few extra pieces of paraphernalia to deal with, as he makes it.

He wants to tell me more.

“When you fall over drunk, that’s almost the most equal thing you can do with an able bodied person.” I look at him quizzically and say: “How about going to uni or getting a job or driving a car. Why falling over drunk?”

“Look,” he says, and I feel I am about to get a lesson in boy culture. “Getting drunk is an important part of growing up. It’s like you turn your back on what is good and safe, and lose your inhibitions...”

I interrupt him: “But David, you have got to be one of the least inhibited people I have ever met!!!”

We laugh, thinking back over the past hour, as he sat in his wheelchair in boxers, telling intimate details of his sex life and desires and needs. I wonder how much is performance – I wonder at the essence of this man, releasing himself as much as is humanly possible from the trap of his physical body, pushing it to its very limits.

Making it work as he wants it to, as much as he can. And I wonder in the future if he will regret his excesses in sharing this part of himself with me, to be published in a book forever.

And I wonder how right or wrong this is.

But we continue. He desperately wants to tell the whole story.

“When I fell at that point it was fascinating because I actually fell out down a ramp. My foot got caught on the wheel of my chair and I just toppled forward.

“And I didn’t feel a thing – I was far too drunk!”

He seems proud and almost liberated by his story. And I still feel challenged and made uncomfortable by it. And I don’t want to be.

“The fact is that in my life I’ve been sheltered all my life, massively sheltered all my life – I’ve been with my parents for yonks. It’s only in the past year or two that I’ve been out there getting drunk and doing all the things that, you know, young people do.”

And I guess I do, in a general way, know what young people do. I do remember, also. It just never occurred to me that a young disabled man would want to do the same things. And I don’t know why I think this. Basically, I think, because I have never thought about it – which is exactly Cunningham’s point.

Cunningham tells me ten percent of the world’s population is disabled. He tells me one million people have disabilities in NSW and there are three million disabled people in Australia.

“We equal ten percent of the Australian population. And yet we literally don’t have access or service for support. We should be in control of our own services, we should be governing and managing our own services. Self-empowerment. Self-governing. And dictating our own terms of what we want. It’s like me trying to say that I know what’s best for you. I don’t know what’s best for you, only you know what’s best for yourself. I know what’s best for me as well.” And I know he is talking about sex and accessing sex.

“But see, that’s the whole thing right, from my experience as being a disabled person, sex relaxes me, sex causes me to have no stress problems, no hassles, no need to get

angry. It is a therapy – there should be funding for this, if a disabled person needs support to access sex. There is such a lack of opportunity, lack of money, lack of transport.” He shakes his head.

“We just need to talk about it – get rid of the taboo.”

Very few countries supply their disabled population with funds to access sex.

Cunningham doesn’t pull any punches.

“There are so many of us throughout the world, yet we don’t have the same services, opportunities, chance, particularly in poor countries – some people still have to beg in some countries. It’s a sin, a curse.

“For me, at least I can talk about it, at least I can advocate, at least I can go out and speak to people like yourselves. They can’t though, they’re at that stage where, you know, they can’t even get a decent wheelchair. My point, people with disabilities in countries that are well off such as Australia and US and Britain, we should be saying that these things matter to us.” His one good eye flashes, angrily.

Cunningham belongs to two lobby groups – the Physical Disability Council of NSW and People with Disabilities NSW Incorporated.

“The thing is, I want people to have the guts to get up and speak about things that matter. And this so matters – a right to privacy and the right to a sex life, however hard or difficult that is to negotiate. It involves fighting, it involves speaking up, it involves lobbying and pushing and convincing the rest of society that we need something, which is a lot to do.

“It involves being heard.

“Now it’s becoming a crusade – this is why I actually want to become a politician because if I get there, I can do all that. I can get up and say, this is an issue, I can push it forward and say, make it happen. I can have people say to me, yeah, that’s right! Once

I'm there, all these issues will become public knowledge and I'll be able to say this is my experience, this is what happens, and I can say refer to Sue's book for more information." He laughs aloud, his leg kicking forward and whipping back under his chair, hard. Painfully. Again, he doesn't blink.

"This for me, it's a battle, like I'm fighting Goliath, 'cause when you take on the government you're taking on a whole system."

Cunningham is also challenging his own party to develop a sex policy. And according to him, the Greens are not that impressed.

"I'm actually trying to push for a Greens' sex industry policy which scares the pants off the Greens too 'cause they don't want to deal with the issue of sex either. I want to have every single brothel and nightclub and strip show, forced to become accessible, to have a ramp there, legally, through courts or council or whatever you want to do right.

"But straight back to the taboo thing, right. Some issues for the Greens are taboo to discuss, you don't discuss them, like it's suppressed debate.

"Bob Carr calls us a protest party – I don't mind that. For me, that's what we are. So we should, you know, protest, as loud as we can."

Cunningham suddenly becomes quiet and the smile leaves his good eye. For a minute, it seems he puts the performance aside.

"Do you know, I was normal. I looked normal in the womb, until the last moment of birth and Mum said that she believes that somehow I wanted to be different, I chose to be like this. Which is strange to say but I think it's true. Because if I walked, I'd be a lesser person than what I am now."

His leg spasms and this time he quickly holds it, gently but firmly.

"I mean now, when I get angry at something, I drive it home until I win. Because it's a question of, of changing something, if something is wrong,"

And I fully believe him. And I shake his hand and thank him for his time and leave his home. And I feel that he has confronted me and challenged me and made me think, hard, about issues which never even occurred to me.

And he has made me laugh.

Almost a year later, I visit Cunningham again. We are re-doing the photo shoot because his original photos and negatives are lost in a house fire.

This time, he is not wearing the prescribed boxers but longer board shorts. He is home alone and takes a while to get to the door. We go straight outside, into the sunshine, for the photos and he introduces us to Benji, the most gorgeous, big, bumbling dog.

He explains: "He belongs to my brother's girlfriend but she couldn't keep him any more. So we are minding him for a while." Benji runs between the three of us, barking and wagging his tail. Cunningham laughs, revelling in the chaos.

Photographer Hans Bool begins shooting, as Cunningham and I talk. He is bursting to tell me about a photo shoot he has done – in the nude.

"It was just great – even my mum thinks the photos are tasteful," he says. He has been busy this past year, basically hassling politicians.

"I found out there is a big file on me," he laughs. "I don't care – it is good – if these politicians groan when they hear I am coming, then I am getting somewhere, don't you think?"

"No doubt, David," I say. Then cut to the chase. "Have you managed to get back to a brothel since we last spoke?" There aren't many people I could be so blunt, so quickly with. But Cunningham almost demands it.

This time, though, there is despondency about his answer and his body trap is almost palpable, in the soothing autumn sun in this western suburbs Sydney home.

“It’s hard,” he says, and the laugh is gone. “You know, the transport and the money and my parents. It’s almost too hard....”

“What? You are giving up?” I ask him. And he seems to jump at my question and wake up out of a dark space I fear he might visit often. But suddenly, there it is again – the same old fight.

“Are you kidding? If I start something, I don’t give up. I am going to keep going, until I win!” Benji hears Cunningham’s voice rise and bounds over to him. Cunningham strokes him and holds him and loves him, clearly. The photos of this moment capture an essence which is not performance.

We leave, with the echo of Cunningham’s words and laughter ringing in our heads. On our way back from Doonside to the Central Coast, we wing past Kellyville and collect my eleven-year-old daughter, who has been playing soccer there, all day. Seven games of soccer, to be precise. And she is hot and dirty and tired, and totally excited because she scored a goal. And she falls asleep in the back of the car and I watch her. Her exceedingly young, able body, curled up on the back seat, breathing easily and deeply. And I think of David Cunningham, with wonder.



Photos by Hans Bool

JAN RUFF O'HERNE



As the taxi pulls into the drive of her Adelaide bungalow, Jan Ruff-O'Herne opens her front door. She has been waiting.

“Come in. Welcome! Here, give me a hug...” She envelops me in her arms and it feels completely natural. Warm and natural and welcoming. And comforting, in a way. And interestingly, the comfort is also welcome because although I have been looking forward to meeting and talking to this woman, her story – her secret – is steeped in pain and terror and grief.

Jan Ruff-O'Herne does not and will never accept the term ‘comfort woman’.

“We were Japanese war rape victims.” She is emphatic. The final four syllables are

spoken – no, spat, really, almost in staccato.

“Comfort means something warm and soft.” She shakes her head. “It was a Japanese name, from the Japanese we were called ‘comfort women’. And that name stuck with us, and we can’t change it because it’s only when they talk about comfort women that the people know who you are.

“We were really military sex slaves. But if you talk about military sex slaves, I mean it could be anywhere, but this puts us in that particular time of history, it comes from the Japanese name.”

She uses her hands a lot while talking. I detect a slight arthritis in her knuckles, but she disregards it, as she moves her hands almost constantly, for emphasis. There is still a strong accent – it is the hybrid Dutch-English-Indonesian combination, as she grew up in Java, speaking fluent Indonesian as well.

“It is, it’s hideous, because we were anything but comfort, you know.”

The euphemism is a translation of the Japanese *jugun ianfu* which means ‘military comfort women’. It refers to the more than two hundred thousand women – about one hundred were Dutch; the rest Asian women – taken by the Japanese military before and during World War 11 and forced into sexual enslavement at the hands of the military. Ruff-O’Herne explains: “Wherever the army went, and this goes back before WW11, when they fought in China, it was a part of the army, all organised, that they would have ‘comfort’ stations where the men could go to rape women.

These women, they were just young girls taken out of villages, just taken away from their parents, you know and just put in these comfort stations. They were called comfort women and they used to follow the troops wherever they went. And the South Korean women, they suffered the most – most of the comfort women were from there, at that time. Japan had colonised Korea and because Korea was a colony

of Japan, these South Korean women would go everywhere with the army and sometimes when the soldiers had to retreat they didn't know what to do with the women – they used to just shoot them and leave them behind. And they're dead, most of them were just killed. I've been told that they would shoot them through the vagina - that was their favourite way to kill them.”

She takes a deep breath.

“So they would shoot them through the vagina, killing them on the riverbank.

“That was a genocide too.

“They regarded us like their rations – just like their right to another packet of cigarettes,” she says.

It is Australia Day, and the sun is streaming through the windows and the Australian flag flies in the gentle summer breeze. Ruff-O'Herne is Australian and proud of it – that much is obvious. But her heritage is complex. Her mother was half Javanese and half Dutch; her father, half Dutch and half French. Walking through the long entrance hall in her home, its walls strewn with beautifully preserved photographs of her family, I see a glimpse of her history, right back to her great grandparents. She carries a striking resemblance to every one of her forebears, particularly the women. The photographs denote wealth and care-free times and dignity and family pride, all of which came crashing down around their feet when the war came to Java in 1942. Ruff-O'Herne's idyllic childhood came to an abrupt halt when the Japanese invaded the island. Interned for two years with her mother and two younger sisters, she was just twenty-one-years-old the day she was taken from the Ambarawa camp in Java, with nine other young women. Then, she and the nine other young women were

transported by truck to Semarang and led into a huge colonial home, with no explanation.

Slowly, the young women realised what was expected of them.

“They took our photos for a pin-board in the front foyer and gave each of us a flower name. To this day, I cannot receive flowers,” she says, shaking her head and looking away.

“I would never let anyone rape me. During the night, it was at least ten at night, sometimes in the daytime as well. So, umm, sometimes even more. I fought every one and my body, I was totally exhausted and I was beaten up because they didn’t like it, because of these fights you know. Really, there wasn’t an inch of my body that didn’t hurt in those days. I just hurt everywhere, and there were two women that said to me ‘look, it is better to go with it, it’s better for yourself, you know get yourself a boyfriend, somebody that isn’t that bad, play up to that person, so that he will be with you and probably spend a longer time with you during the night’.

“You know, I couldn’t do it, I could not play up to – I just couldn’t do it. To me, it just wasn’t right. To me, it would have been a mortal sin.

“So, I fought every one of them, yeah, but they always win of course, always win, but at least I fought a bit of a fight.”

Jan Ruff-O’Herne turned eighty the week before we meet. She has strong, mixed features – her Indonesian blood echoes gently around her eyes. Her skin is smooth, almost line-free – physically, she completely defies her age. Her hair is short and her eyes a fiery brown. She closes them often as she recounts her story of silence – fifty years of not speaking about her systematic rape by hundreds of Japanese soldiers, over a period of about four months towards the end of World War 11.

She buried her husband Tom in 1995, nursing him for twenty years beforehand after

he was irreparably brain damaged when hit by a car whilst crossing a road in Adelaide. But back in 1945, their story was a true war-time romance.

At the end of the war, the British were sent into Java to protect the Dutch from the Indonesian independence movement which wanted them out. Tom Ruff was one of those British soldiers and they fell deeply in love. But Jan Ruff-O'Herne had a terrible secret.

“When we fell in love and Tom said that he wanted to marry me, I felt I had to tell him. Because you have got to be totally honest. I couldn't keep that from him, you know, I could never tell anybody else but I felt I had to tell Tom.

“Oh, it was very hard, but being Tom the way he was I knew that it wouldn't make any difference. I knew that, I knew that.” She repeats the sentence, her own personal mantra from nearly sixty years ago. “No, I always knew to Tom it wouldn't make any difference.

“Although I knew that I would keep this secret for the rest of my life, but I knew I could tell Tom and he just sat there and listened, never said a word but just listened while I told the story. He never interrupted me. And that story was only ever told once, it was never referred to again, it was never spoken about again, it was too much for him to cope with it. It was just too much. Tom just blocked it out.

“We are living in a totally different era here, you know, going back, the era was 1945, a different era. I think it is because it was a different generation. In that generation you didn't talk about sex, you didn't talk about, mothers never even told their daughters about, never, you had to find out your own way. I was never told a damn thing, you know, nothing. My mother didn't tell me anything. I think it's just that generation you just didn't talk about those things, you know. So, if only we could have talked about it, it would have helped, but I couldn't, so I think this was

another great burden.”

Tom Ruff insisted that Ruff-O’Herne go straight to the British Embassy and report the crimes.

“Yes, we reported the crimes and to this day, I have heard nothing from them.”

It was only months before she had told her mother. The first night of reunion with her mother and sisters after the brothel, in yet another internment camp, this time near Jakarta, Ruff-O’Herne’s mother simply cradled her in her arms and rocked her to sleep.

“I had cut all my hair to make myself look ugly. We didn’t need to speak. But I will never forget that wonderful feeling of what a mother means. I lay down on the floor on a mattress that was totally worn out and dirty and smelly with sweat, and I just lay in the hole of her arm, I can see it now, with her arm around me and she just stroked my head and we just laid there and I felt this safety to be back in my mother’s arms. It was just such an amazing feeling. You know, we just lay there, we never spoke. She never asked any questions.”

Jan Ruff-O’Herne closes her eyes tightly and I hold my breath. She transports herself back to that night, to that moment, in her mother’s arms. She strokes the air, as her mother stroked her hair, and I can almost see it and smell it. The moment is tangible.

It was the next day Ruff-O’Herne spoke to her mother about the rapes.

“She couldn’t cope with it either. It was just talked about once, never mentioned again. It was too much, you know this was her daughter, you know, it was never talked about again.”

After the war, Ruff-O’Herne told her father.

“I thought he had to know. They’re my parents, they had to know. My father the

same, he listened, but nobody could cope with this story. It was too much for anybody to cope with. I had nobody I could ever talk about it again. We had no counselling, nothing. We had to go on with our lives as if nothing had happened and yet there is this burden you feel. You have this feeling that you're different, that you're soiled, you're dirty, that your youth had been taken away from you, that you would never be the same again, and you feel this shame. It's so great, you have no idea. Although you knew that you couldn't help it, what happened to me, but it's an enormous burden."

And that was it. Until 1992, Jan Ruff-O'Herne spoke to no-one else of her ordeal. The silencing was like a vacuum. "We were told by the Japanese that we weren't to tell anybody and that was why in the beginning, firstly we were reunited at one particular camp and then we were removed to a larger camp in Batavia - which is now called Jakarta - in a huge camp of women and children, but we were always kept separate from the others, we were a camp within a camp.

"We were kept separate from the other women and children and so the other women in the camp thought that, all these rumours spread that all these young women, that we had been with the Japanese, that we were doing it voluntarily. And this was terrible, because your own people calling you whores, and throwing bricks over the fence with little messages attached to it and all that sort of thing, and even when the war was finished and we could really mingle, you know, with all of the camp, we were called whores - we'd walk around and everyone thinks you're a whore. It was terrible, you just shut up, what can you say, what can you do, you know, we tried to explain but they just didn't believe you at the time. So, especially old people calling you whores, again the silence was again forced upon us. That silence started by the Japanese was forced upon us again and then again by the shame.

“It was like another weapon, the silence. They enforced it upon us, right from the start, threatening us that if we were to tell anybody, they would kill us and our families.”

And then, while watching television one night in 1992, her whole life changed. She knew the vacuum could be broken. Now was the right time.

She points to a chair in her lounge room, next to where I am sitting. “I sat there in that chair and I watched the television and I saw the first South Korean woman speaking like this. A little group of people – they had nothing to lose, no more shame because all their family was dead, now she was going to tell, and for compensation and an apology, especially an apology from the Japanese government.

And she had this small group of other women around her and I thought ‘God, I should join those women and speak for them, if they have the courage to speak up’.

“The amazing thing is, all the comfort women, and they’re mainly Asian, there was only about one hundred Dutch ones, they’re mainly Asian, all of us never talked about it for fifty years. It took fifty years – we had this bond of shame and fear, every one of us. None of us could talk about it, that’s how terrible the shame was.

“I felt strongly that their voices weren’t being heard because they were Asian women, so I thought as a European women if I speak out now I will help their cause.

And also in 1992 the war had broken out in Bosnia and again women were being raped on an organised scale in Bosnia. And I thought, what happened to me should never ever happen again. I didn’t want any woman to ever suffer like I did. So when it happened again in Bosnia, I thought it was time to speak out, you know.”

But there was one hitch – she had never, ever spoken of what happened to her to her two daughters, Carol and Eileen, now grown with their own children.

Apart from the deep psychological trauma and damage Ruff-O’Herne sustained at

the hands of the Japanese, physically she was a mess. She was unable to carry a pregnancy full term, suffering four miscarriages, before undergoing serious reconstructive internal surgery. She then was able to conceive and had their two daughters.

“I had to tell them first. I had to tell them - how can you tell your daughters this sort of thing?” She looks at me and I simply cannot begin to imagine.

She continues: “And by that time I had grandchildren – how can you tell your grandchildren? Their grandmother, their Oma – there was never the right time. And my daughters grew up, it was never the right time, when they were children, it was just...

“Still, all that time you still carry that shame and it was the hardest thing for me to do, to decide to speak up. Somehow I felt convinced I had to, now was the right time. There was never a right time, but this was really the right time.

“But at the same time I felt that I was going to do something with it, I wasn’t going to waste myself and once I speak out I’m going to use it and speak for the rest of the world to use it so that these things would never happen again, so that the campaign started in my head there and then that I was going to do something with it.

“But I had to tell my daughters, first.

“Well this was the hardest – I couldn’t tell them face-to-face. I couldn’t. So I wrote it all down in an exercise book, pages and pages and pages, I told the story. I gave the exercise book to Carol and I gave the exercise book to Eileen. Carol was on a plane to Alice Springs. As she went on the plane I said ‘read this while you’re in Alice Springs’.

“Of course she read it on the plane and she was just crying and crying all the way there, the air hostess had thought that something dreadful had happened in her life or

something.

“It had, she had lost her mother – they just gave her boxes and boxes of tissues. And they were totally devastated by it, you know.

“Well, Carol threw her arms around me, you know, and she said ‘Oh mum, thank you for telling me this, thank you for trusting me with this, because I would have found out after you had died. I would have thought that you’d never trusted me with your story. So thank you for telling me this’.

“We were always a very close-knit family, we were hideously close. But this brought us even closer, especially with my son-in-laws, you know. On both sides, they sort of, it brought us very close.”

Her daughter Eileen Mitton said on ABC TV’s *Australian Story* (30/08/01): “It was a perfectly kept secret.

“After I read the story, I drove over to my mother’s house and, I just put my arms around her, and cried and cried. I couldn’t speak, I didn’t...I just was total...I couldn’t say anything to her, nothing would have been enough. There was nothing – just putting my arms around her were words enough.”

Having told her daughters, Ruff-O’Herne felt free to do what she now felt she had to – speak of the rapes, publicly. She travelled to Tokyo that year, and appeared at an international public hearing on Japanese war crimes, held in the December in Tokyo. Her daughter Carol Ruff and her partner accompanied her. As Jan Ruff-O’Herne took the podium and spoke, her words flew around the world – she described her first night of rape at the hands of a Japanese high-ranking officer. Sitting in her Adelaide living room, she retells the story: “I felt like a hunted animal. I told him ‘I would rather die than give myself to you’. He got out his sword and I said ‘before you kill me, can I say a prayer’. He had paid a lot of money for that first

night, because we were virgins, and I knew when he began to undress as I prayed that he was not going to kill me – he never had the intention of killing me.

“This Japanese officer was in total control of the situation. I tried to fight him off but he was too strong.

“This was an inhuman and brutal rape, the first of hundreds...”

She also told the world of her inability ever to enjoy sex with her husband: “But worst of all I have felt this fear every time my husband was making love to me. I have never been able to enjoy intercourse as a consequence of what the Japanese did to me.” (*50 Years of Silence*, a film by Ned Lander, with Carol Ruff and James Bradley, 1994).

Back in her living room, Ruff-O’Herne says: “I mean, I loved Tom and he touched me like it was love but when it came to intercourse, all of a sudden because it’s all in the mind, sex is all in the mind, all of a sudden I was being raped again, that my first experience of sex was horrific rape, you know all night going on, so that is the first thing that came into my mind and when that comes in your mind it destroys everything else, you know.”

Ruff-O’Herne believed she could go to Tokyo, tell this story, and then resume her life back in South Australia, like it had been before. It was not to be.

“I was so naïve. This was an international public hearing and I didn’t even realise that it would be on television all over the world. I thought I could go to Tokyo and get back here and nobody would ever know. I never told anybody here and of course it was world news, the whole world out there was with microphones pointing in front of my face, you know. And the whole world was there, and the *7.30 Report* was there from Australia. Somebody from Australia. And when I was there in Tokyo I was surrounded by all these foreigners, all these Japanese people and it was

the hardest thing, is hearing the Japanese voices all around me, because after that time I couldn't stand hearing the Japanese voice. And to hear somebody from Australia it sort of, oh thank goodness, you know. And when I came back here, I thought, how are they going to receive me now? I was called a whore by my own people - what will they think, what will the parish think of me now? This was a fear I had, you know.

“And so when I did come back, I was just received the first time I went to mass - everybody embraced me, they put flowers on the seat where I always sat you know. And a little boy, I'll never forget it, he stepped up and said ‘Mrs O’Herne, I’ve seen you on television’ and I thought what a nice thing to be afraid of.” She laughs out loud at the memory.

Finally speaking of her ordeal at the hands of the Japanese was release. “It was amazing relief. Like a pressure cooker steaming, like the whole trip to Japan was the beginning of the healing process as I was so afraid to see or meet Japanese people before. Now I was surrounded by them and in Japan at the time there was a whole young, new generation of Japanese people that wanted to know the truth about the history of Japan and what Japan did. So, the healing process really started and I think the most amazing feeling was I met the other comfort women because they were also witnesses. Comfort women were there from North Korea, South Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, China and we met each other and it was amazing. We couldn't speak each others' language but we just embraced.

“I shall never forget this little Chinese woman and her body, she had the most, she shook when she talked – the scars she had on her body where she was cut and pinched – and I embraced this little woman and the others and the feeling when we embraced because nobody in the world understands what we suffered but only they

do. And that embrace was the greatest healing for me, greater than the embrace of my daughters or anybody else. They were the only ones that understood. And we all held up, and that, I think, that was to all of us an amazing feeling, the whole trip really was the start of the healing process.

“And then, meeting the other Japanese people afterwards, survivors of Hiroshima, men and women, they all came to me and they all showered me with gifts and embraced me and they said: ‘We thought we were the only people that suffered during the war and now we realise that you suffered too and the atrocities were terrible’. Because the Japanese never knew anything about their history and so we had a healing start again.”

Back in Tokyo, Ruff-O’Herne spoke of her deep spirituality, a faith which has driven her, her entire life. Her voice shakes slightly at this point of her testimony but she rallies, and continues: “They abused me and humiliated me, had ruined my young life; my self-esteem; my dignity; my possessions; my family. But there was one thing they could never take away from me – my faith and my love for God. This faith and this love for God was mine. This was my most precious possession and nobody, nobody could take that away from me.

“It was my deep faith in God that helped me survive all that I suffered at the brutal, savage hands of the Japanese.

“I have forgiven the Japanese for what they did to me but I will never forget.”

Ruff-O’Herne was brought up a Catholic, educated by nuns in Java and is today a Secular Franciscan. As a young woman in Java – just nineteen when she was interned with her family – she had a vocation to become a nun, a vocation she was cruelly advised not to follow after the war was over.

A priest came to the camp to give communion and Ruff-O’Herne went to talk to

him, telling him what she had been through. She also told him she wished to fulfil her vocation.

“He told me: ‘Under the circumstances, it would be better if you did not become a nun,’” Ruff-O’Herne remembers. “I couldn’t believe what I was hearing – but he meant it. He actually made me feel even dirtier than I already did. The shame – I can’t begin to explain the shame to you...”

Again, I don’t know how to reply but also knew she didn’t want or need an answer.

“You see, my body is the temple of God, our bodies are God’s temple, that comes straight from the scriptures. I’ve always honoured my body as being God’s temple, being something beautiful and good. And here, during the war, my body was made an occasion of sin, it was soiled, it was used by soldiers to commit sin, my body, you know. And that feeling, that this happened to your body, you know, this violation to your body and that is what creates that enormous shame, you know.

“From then on, I was just terrified all my life that anybody would ever find out, that so many hundreds of people, hundreds of soldiers used your body. It leaves you, you just feel totally dirty, soiled, different. So you just don’t want anybody to know.

People asked me what my nationality was. And I said Dutch, I never said I was born in Indonesia because they would have worked out that I was there during the war, questions, you know, I couldn’t afford that. With going with Tom, to England and Holland where the people that had known what had happened to me because they’d seen me taken out of the camp, yet all these people somehow in Holland, the two people that knew, they respected the secret – like my sisters never told anybody. My mother and father never told anybody, they respected that secret. I still felt, you know, going to England, nobody would know, then going to Australia which is even

further still, nobody would ever know. I felt safer, far away from this terrible thing, trying to keep a secret.”

Ruff-O’Herne truly believes her faith and her ability to forgive the Japanese saved her sanity throughout those five decades of maintaining her secret because she never really left the trauma or the war behind her.

“The war never ended for me – you live with it for the rest of your life. There is always something that triggers it off, you know even at night, I still have it now, when I look through the window and it’s getting dark – even now I sometimes still get the terrible fear running through my body, like electrical wires going through your body, this fear, because when it’s getting dark it means getting raped over and over and over again and the fear that worked up, you know, in the house, in the brothel, I could see it getting dark, it just totally overpowers your body. I can’t describe it, it’s just so terrible that you know it’s going to happen.

“And I think this is what the soldiers in the trenches in World War II, when they knew what was going to happen, they must have carried that fear. It’s because you know what is going to happen, if you don’t know, but if you know what’s going to happen this fear is even worse. It gets triggered off all the time. I’ve still got nightmares, you know.”

She remembers: “Even the doctor – I remember the doctor coming to the brothel and my thinking that at last, I can get some help. A doctor will surely help us.

“Anyway, every time that doctor came to examine us, to check we were not diseased or pregnant, he raped me as well...I can’t stand going to a doctor, I’ve always avoided going to a doctor since because of the experience of examinations by the doctors in the brothel, the humiliation that we had to go through. He used to always rape me first. So I’ve got this fear for doctors.

“It’s just little things – I’ve got terrible hands because I could never use rubber gloves for washing up because rubber gloves means doctors to me.

“Anything – so many things that trigger it off all the time.”

The minute Ruff-O’Herne decided to speak, her life transformed. The triggers are still there but she has been able to turn her pain and fear and shame into something positive.

“I made it an aim of my life that I would speak out for the rest of my life for the protection of women in war, just so these things would never happen again. The Red Cross, and the international Red Cross were very much into it, they always need speakers, especially speakers who were actually witnesses. It is very hard, you can read about these things in books, in newspapers and pamphlets and whatever, but it is hardly ever spoken by an actual witness. It is not until it is spoken by an actual witness that it has an impression.

“They were looking for a witness and in Bosnia they couldn’t get speakers from the Bosnian girls that had been raped because they would have to go back to their country. There they had for the first time a witness that, you know, was able to speak, and so they used me and I was glad to do this for them, to be a speaker of protection of women in war. And it took me all over the world, and by that time other organizations wanted me, it took me to Holland of course, to England, to Northern Ireland, to New Zealand, to Tokyo twice, to Jerusalem, you know, everywhere here in Australia and I felt at last something was being done for protection of women in war. And especially the Geneva Convention, a couple of years ago, we claimed that rape in war is considered a war crime and will be punished as such. And I think my speaking publicly has helped this to come.

“In 1998 for the first time in the International Criminal Court, four Bosnian Serbs were

sentenced to prison sentences for organised rape in Bosnia, and when I saw that on the television I cried with joy. I thought these women are protected now.

“You know, rape is always used as a weapon. It is a power game. They all need women, it’s a reward for the soldiers, we can do this because it is war, it’s a reward for the soldiers and it is used, it was used in Bosnia, in Rwanda, in Timor as a means of genocide. And that is the worst thing about rape in war, it becomes a weapon, it becomes a means to genocide. And when all this was happening I became more and more driven about sending this message.”

Jan Ruff-O’Herne has written a book about her life, *50 Years of Silence*. She says much of the book is the original story she wrote for her daughters to read, the first time she related her story to them. Her daughter Carol Ruff, with Ned Landers and James Bradley, then made her story into a documentary, running just under an hour. Also called *50 Years of Silence*, the documentary won Best Documentary, 1994 Australian Film Institute Awards and Most Outstanding Documentary, 1994 Australian Logies Awards.

Jan Ruff-O’Herne makes morning tea for me and serves it – on Delft china, of course. She produces delicious Dutch ginger cookies, and urges me to eat. She is refined and stylish and elegant and beautiful. I look at her closely – I truly believe she is at peace. “There are no secrets now, I have told it all,” Ruff-O’Herne audibly breathes out. “I think once you tell, you’ve got to tell all, you don’t keep any. If you keep a secret then you still have a burden that you keep for the rest of your life. Once you talk, once you tell, you have to tell all.”

I leave and look out the back of the cab at this Adelaide grandmother. She checks her letter-box and wanders gently around her garden, until the taxi turns a corner and I can

see her no longer. I worry for the memories I have dragged to the fore again, leaving her alone as they linger. But then the taxi drives past her church – I recognise it from the documentary – and I believe she will be just fine. I need to believe she will be just fine.



Photos by Dee Geary

JENNY MENDICK



There is nothing special about Jenny Mendick, by her own admission, but I beg to differ – at the very least, Jenny Mendick lives in a magnificently coloured house in the heart of suburban Canberra. That is one special thing – living in a house which is a stand-out in a city which pushes the definition of suburbia to its outer limits. And to live in one definitely makes someone special.

I arrive there mid-afternoon, and drive into Canberra, cloaked tidily in its Autumn colours. I am not sure how they manage to keep this city so clean and tidy – even the Fall leaves, fallen, seem to be gathered up quickly and spirited away here, which has always struck me as having very little spirit anyway. Or soul. Man-made lakes and carefully mapped out, insanely neat and tidy cityscapes have always never sat well with me. I am more comfortable in a more natural, chaotic growth and feel of places and spaces – which may say something more about me than the Canberra city planners.

But I arrive, vaguely when I had arranged with Mendick to arrive. And this time I do not get too lost – just have to ask for directions once, driving through the carefully manicured suburbs, and then I was only a street away. So when I finally find the Mendick home, I am delighted at its brashness. It is a steely grey blue colour, modern and full of strange shapes, and shouts from its perch on the very normal Canberra street: I am a special home, full of special people.

Despite her plea, Jenny Mendick will just have to accept, for the sake of this story and my humble observations, that she is, indeed, special, even above and beyond the home she lives in. I will not call her a survivor. And I won't call her brave. And I definitely am not allowed to call her courageous. She won't even cop the hackneyed media 'battling' tag. Which is all fair enough, when you hear her argument. But I think she is special – it may just be her furious honesty or her self-effacing sense of humour. Or just the way she talks about her husband and kids, and her dog. Or indeed, it could just be her exceedingly gorgeous home. Or maybe it is because she is just ordinary, still just doing her life with her family. I am not sure but she definitely enriched my day, and has never quite left me. And I call that special.

Jenny Mendick is the sister of a dear friend of mine on the Central Coast. My friend told me about a book *BodySpeak* published by The Real Women Project on the Coast in 2002 and an article her sister had written for it. I got my hands on a copy and read Mendick's story. It starts: 'Breast cancer is a way of life for me. I say that because for the past nineteen years I've woken up and thought about it sometime during the day. I haven't battled it, I haven't suffered it, I've lived it and so far, for some lucky reason, I'm still here. I find the long battle scenario offensive as it makes me different from healthy people who get to live their lives without battling, suffering, fighting or whatever other verb breast cancer patients are forced by the media to do. I therefore am

not a survivor or a victim or a sufferer. I was a breast cancer patient who may still have breast cancer within her body but in every other way, inside me I'm living my life like people who haven't had breast cancer. I just think about it at some time every day'.

Jenny Mendick has had a bilateral mastectomy.

She wanders outside to greet me and I brace myself – it suddenly strikes me how bad I am at cancer and surgery and life and death discussions. And it is all about fear. Mine. Or loss. Or grief. Or the unknown – again, I am not quite sure. But here I am shaking the hand of Jenny Mendick who lives with cancer, every day of her life. And so does her family. And I look into her face as I introduce myself and I let go – I relax. She doesn't seem special at all, yet. Just ordinary. And welcoming. And completely inviting.

I follow her inside and my mouth drops. Inside this steel grey blue home is the most extraordinary slanted wall, right there in the middle of everything. And it is spectacular and strange. The house is painted in deep shades of vibrant colour and I love it. There are modern paintings across the walls and sculptures popping out of the most unexpected places – but it works. And it is also a home – a perfect blend of chic good taste and gauche kitchen and kids' mess. People mess. Just lived in.

We retreat straight away to the back garden to try and catch the last of the setting light for the photos. It is the prettiest garden, full of camellia bushes and potted plants. The spaniel Teddy gets in the way of the photos, so we shoot some with him. I wander off and find a mirror, strategically built into a hidden wall, in a hidden part of this small garden which immediately multiplies its size – it is an optical illusion, made to make you see something that isn't there, although you are convinced it is. And it works. I can't take my eyes off it as it strikes me that is what our interview is about – optical illusions and society and media pressures perpetuating them. The irony is not lost.

When I first read the Mendick story in the *BodySpeak* booklet, I really felt I wanted to meet her, interview her and write about her here in this book. She, and her thoughts, simply interested me. And somehow, although not obvious at first, I knew she would fit in with the frame I was writing within. Her story is about a basic and very primal sexual body part – the breast – and a deep taboo surrounding gender specific body image. And how if you tend to be different from the norm, even when the norm is whipped away from you by a cancerous disease, society still tries to normalise you and failing that, shut you up.

For Jenny Mendick has refused both reconstructive surgery and prosthesis. Yet when she tries to talk about this as an option amongst the breast cancer community of women, she is just laughed off as ‘different’.

The first time was when she was at a fashion parade, held as a fund raiser for Breast Cancer by an organisation called Bosom Buddies.

“In the fashion parade, you could only go into it if you had both breasts. The whole audience were breast cancer ladies and their families and support people. All the women who were models had had breast cancer and that's stated in the program - you know, bilateral etc.

“At any rate, the compere said: ‘Tonight so and so is out the back and her whole job is to make sure all these ladies have their prostheses in properly and pointing in the right direction, so that they can look beautiful tonight’.

“In other words, if you don't wear a prosthesis, you can't look beautiful.

“I went over to another group of people. This is the Advocacy Unit of the International Conference and a lady whom I had met through the conferences was there. She said: ‘Isn't this a wonderful evening?’ and I said: ‘Well, actually, I've got a few issues here’.

“First of all, there were bra advertisements. When you walked in, on the table there were bra advertisements all over the place and there were these beautiful breasts in the bras - ordinary bras. And because they're being put out for women who've had breast cancer and I said I really thought that was terrible. Then I said I thought this woman's comments were terrible. I said we needed a woman to stand up there and walk up and down the catwalk with no breasts at all.

“And she said then: ‘Jenny, I think you're ahead of your times a bit. Your views are like how the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras would have been thought of ten years ago’. She agreed with me that one day, breast-less women on the catwalk should be accepted.

“To think that was radical, that it was too much for these people to cope with!”

Mendick suddenly remembers and laughs: “And guess what the lucky door prize was at that fashion parade.” I can’t guess – I dare not – so wait.

Her eyes are laughing when she says: “Cosmetic surgery!”

Jenny Mendick was just twenty-nine when first diagnosed with breast cancer.

“I had a lump and I felt it and I told my mum – like ‘Hey, mum, I think there's a lump here’ and she felt it and she said ‘Ahh, I think there's one on the other side; don't worry about it’.

“When you're twenty-nine, you'd think you were all right.”

That was just over twenty years ago. Six weeks later, on a routine visit to her doctor, she mentioned it.

“He had a look and felt it and said ‘There's only a two hundred to one chance that it's going to be malignant’,” she remembers.

“So I went and had it checked out - they did a biopsy, and it was malignant.”

She is slightly emotionless during the telling. But I know what is coming, and the context of her first bout with cancer, although a huge shock at the time, pales beside the rest of her story. Mendick underwent a lumpectomy at the time, keeping most of her breast.

“Yeah, they just took a bit out. And I had a scar about that long.” She holds her hands out, demonstrating the size of her scar. I don’t look.

“Then I had radiotherapy and then I had ten years where I had children – I breast-fed them on my other side because this side didn't work because of the radiotherapy.”

At the time of the lumpectomy, Mendick was not married. She had already met her husband Stephen but they had broken up and she was with another man. She and Stephen got back together again after the lumpectomy and married. They waited about four years before having children because of the treatments and then she fell pregnant with Sophie. Two years later, Elliot arrived.

She smiles, seemingly quietly to herself: “Yes, it was very romantic, getting back together with him like that. And then the kids...”

Every year after her cancer was diagnosed, religiously, Jenny Mendick had a breast check. And every year, for more than ten years, she received a clean bill of health. The family was living in Tumut at the time, in south-east New South Wales.

She laughs out loud: “I used to fly up to Sydney with my bags and my babies and whatever and have a day in Sydney at the doctor's – every year I'd have a check-up – and then I'd fly back to Tumut. It was really neat – you could go shopping all day.

“And then it was about, I don't know. I'm not very good with numbers. I think after ten years they shook me by the hand and everybody in the waiting room knew I was sort of happy that I was OK. So that was good; they shook me by the hand, said ‘God, you've been lucky – fantastic!’ you know?” she asks.

I shake my head and tell her I don't actually know. I can't actually imagine what it would be like to be given a clean bill of health from cancer. I can imagine it would feel like ten years of getting used to a suffocating stress – integrated into my life and every waking moment – and then having that lifted from my shoulders. I tell her I imagine it might be something like breathing again after holding my breath, on some level, for ten years.

She smiles calmly at me again, sitting there in her living room. And seems so ordinary in the middle of telling her story. And I realise that is her point – her cancer became such a normal part of her life – she chose not to be suffocated or labelled or categorised by it. It just became life – husband, wife, kids, dog, beautiful home, work – and cancer.

“There is no choice,” she replies.

Anyway, at this point, her story becomes one of those tales I rail against – the social injustice of inequitably spread pain and suffering. It just doesn't seem fair.

After ten years of annual breast checks, and being given the all clear, she didn't have one. Just for one year.

“And then a mobile unit came to Tumut and most of my friends were going and so I felt why not? I was fairly confident. I didn't expect anything – why would I, after all that time?” she asks.

Of course, I know what is coming but still am incredulous at the telling.

“Well, what happened – the mammogram in Tumut came back not clear enough and they wrote to me and told me to come to Wagga for more tests. So I did. But I sort of went into denial and just saw it as another opportunity to go shopping in a bigger place than Tumut!” She laughs again. “You have to take every opportunity when you live in a small town like Tumut!”

She was at the Wagga clinic all day. “They did ultra-sounds and God knows what else,” she remembers. “At five o’clock, they came out and told me they had found five tumours – cancer in both sides and that it was really bad.

“So I sort of went into overdrive and said I want copies of everything that's happened here today. I want copies of all the x-rays – I want the whole lot, in a package, because I don't want to go home without this and I want to be in Sydney tomorrow with all this data – and I need it now. They told me the photocopy room was closed for the day – I was furious and told them I didn’t care, just give me my stuff.

“The thing is, they had been so excellent all day – so caring and concerned, and then when the crisis hit, they went all bureaucratic on me.”

Mendick finally got all her documents the next day, faxed through to Sydney. What followed was a week of intensive tests – and confirmation.

“At one point, I had a Cat scan and the ladies were talking about chocolates and their boyfriends while this CT was happening and I was thinking ‘My life is on the line here and you're talking about chocolates!’ – that slipped through my head. Then the woman said: ‘Look, we've found something. The doctor's ready. And I said, hang on, my doctor is in the car park...’”

Her husband Stephen is a doctor and was with her in Sydney.

“Stephen came in and they told us. I sort of freaked at this stage.” She seems a little sheepish at the memory.

“I was very upset because, at this point, you think ‘Oh, shit!! I'm out of here’. You think, like, you're not going to make it.” Again, she laughs, but there is a haunted echo in her laughter. I ask about her children at the time.

“I was devastated – the kids were only tiny. My daughter was about six or seven – maybe eight – I’m not sure. But they were both tiny. How could I leave them.

“Anyway, then they decided whether they were going to take both breasts off or just one breast off and I said ‘Oh, just take them both’.

“Eventually they decided that it was better to take two. And I was glad because it had cancer in it anyway, so they would have to take all the lumps out anyway! I'd had my babies so I didn't really need them any more, so I said ‘Take them off’. I remember the doctor did say ‘you're a bit keen to get rid of them eh?’

“I just wanted them gone, and the cancer in them.”

She didn't really think beyond that decision, and just getting it done. It strikes me as a slow motion, long and drawn out type of fighting for your life – how can she ever feel free from this disease, considering her experience. But again, that is her point – she lives with cancer every day.

As to the ramification of having a double mastectomy – being breast-less – she didn't really think about it at the time.

“But then, after the op, this woman came and visited me. She said: ‘Oh, I've just got two lines and I don't wear anything’. She just passed it off. She had both breasts off and I think she was a very able support person.

“Now I've never had any contacts apart from that one chat and just speaking to her, I suppose that, in a way, gave me some information to think about, even though that isn't exactly why she came. If a woman with prosthesis had come, or reconstructive surgery, I still think I would have made this decision.

“It's about pain, really – why would I put myself through any more? Before I had two breasts, before the second time – I mean, the second one was a bit smaller – but I still wore a bra. But the second time I consciously thought ‘Why would I go through that extra pain’ because I wasn't sure I was going to make it at all – initially – and that was another reason why I wouldn't want to go through more pain.

“What did it matter – I was still here. Still alive. Still a woman and a wife and a mother and a sister and a friend. What does it matter.

“But now, well I never think about it, no.

“I guess also it is that Steve doesn't care – he is just glad I am here. Well, I think if it were a really, really big deal for him and if it were to affect the relationship – I mean, sure, I can reconstruct them but they never look the same anyway. Or feel the same.

There is no real point.

“As to the kids – Elliott has seen me where I might walk around with nothing on and says ‘That's my mum’ – that's fine. ‘That's my mum with the two lines’. And that's acceptable, you know, from him.

“And Sophie – she has a huge burden to carry. Women in the bloodline, even though genetic incidence of the disease is small, are hugely worried by my illness. But Sophie – I offered to go to her school and talk about breast cancer amongst her peers. She was absolutely thrilled by that.

“I don't know, that is important, the support of family and knowing that they love you for yourself. It must have an impact. It does, really,” she says quietly, almost to herself. She remembers something and continues: “I mean, there's a lady who died recently and she was a good friend, and a good lady. She used to love it when I talked to her about all this stuff. Do you know, she actually in one counselling session here mentioned that she's never let her own daughter see her scars?

“Isn't that amazing,” she asks. And I wonder, not out loud, how many women acquaintances and friends of hers have died from breast cancer. And what that must feel like. Living with cancer seems synonymous with living with death, as well. Not necessarily hers but from the world she now finds herself in. The world of breast cancer support groups and politics.

Mendick underwent months of radio and chemotherapy, and then just got on with it. With living. And still being here. She reached out to the usual support groups – and perhaps that is where she put her anger at what the universe had handed her. This inequitable dose of pain and disease. And fear.

And that is when we arrive at her passion – and where she wants to shout from the treetops. Mendick’s real distress derives from support groups which present just the two options – prosthesis or reconstruction. No mention of nothing. No mention of breast-less. The only way to recover from this disease and mastectomy is to normalise – make yourself look exactly the same way as before the op.

“What is that?” she asks, this time incredulity dripping from her voice. “I have had life-saving surgery, which entailed removing my breasts. That is who I am now – I do not have breasts. Thank goodness, because they were full of cancer. What I have are two lines – two scars – where my breasts used to be.

“But I am still here and my choice is not to go through any more painful surgery or wear false bits of apparatus on the front of my chest.

“I am not having a go at women who choose to do this – totally their decision, which is fine – but there must be room for women like me, too, and there should be support for women like me.

“I mean, at these fashion parades, there should be breast-less women strutting the catwalk, regarded as just as beautiful as other breast-less women who have chosen false breasts.”

She catches her breath for a moment: “For example, I resigned from Bosom Buddies because when I suggested they not have bra advertising and advertising for lingerie in the newsletter of Bosom Buddies, they said that there were women out there whom they wouldn't be able to help, who would be desperately looking for bras.

“You know, it's sort of like a chicken and an egg thing; because they put the bras in you're directing women that you must get your bra back on quickly - I think if you didn't have the bra there, then people might not be feeling that way. I think it's a sort of – you've had a mastectomy and then this is what you do next.

“One night I was at Bosom Buddies and there was a woman who was about seventy - she had to be seventy, a very elderly woman – who got up and said ‘I've decided to have a reconstruction after all these years’ and the other women cheered!’” She shakes her head.

“That damns everything! You know, like that is a success, that is good, like she has seen the light. I don't understand it. And at that point it's a bit hard to tread on that lady's toes by saying ‘Well, actually, do you think you need it?’ It's damn hard when a person who is that age has come to an important decision like that about her life, to step in and sound like I am criticising her. I'm not – I just wonder about the pressure.

“Having said that, that same night there was another person there who said that she really liked the fact that I was the only person there who had ever given her permission to go without breasts.

“Don't get me wrong – everyone should be able to make their own decisions but all the information should be out there – it is possible to lead a full and fulfilled life without prosthesis or reconstruction. And there are women who do but they seemed to have to hide a bit, and if they attend the support groups, are confronted and affronted about it, simply by advertising in brochures and on the walls and tables. And also by the culture – what is said and the cheers and the approving looks.”

Mendick doesn't totally subscribe to prostheses company conspiracies and cosmetic surgery propaganda and lingerie business profits – not completely.

“Some people say it is a prosthesis company conspiracy – doctors and business making millions out of these women,” she says. “It could be a bit of that but it is more a culture – a societal issue, driven by media and fashion and gender. The need to look ‘normal’, whatever that is,” says Mendick.

Mendick cites studies done, claiming the only way for women to normalise is to reconstruct or use prosthesis. “Basically, you know, how you get through breast cancer is to recreate the mounds in some way, either through cosmetic surgery or with prosthesis and every one out there in the industry direct you to it. I mean, the Breast Cancer people hand out what are called ‘Fluffy Ducks’ to give women the confidence to walk from their hospital bed to their car after surgery. You know, a fluffy duck is a fluffy thing that you put in to give you the confidence to get out there after having had a mastectomy – what is that about!

“There has got to be something wrong with that picture – you leave hospital after surgery and have to pretend it never happened and what is no longer there, is really! What does that say about us as women – that we are only breasts?!”

It seems the taboo about talking about being breast-less and beautiful in breast cancer circles functions the same way as social taboos do – if you don’t toe the prosthesis/reconstruction line, the line is taken away. Mendick has been banned as a representative from all breast cancer lobby groups, on both state and national levels, for these exact types of views. She is staggered by the treatment, and sees the gagging as an outrage.

“As a thinking person, the politics of breast cancer just generally makes me so frustrated, in that it’s not democratic that women have a say – like you vote someone to go up to the national level to talk about issues, where you don’t vote. I think we should

vote and I think those women should stand up and say what values and what issues they're going to make on our behalf.”

When a survey came out from the breast cancer research people in Melbourne, Mendick couldn't help herself: “I wrote all over it ‘I think it's a load of crap’. When I wrote back that I thought there should be a sort of democracy in the breast cancer area where women should be made to disclose what they wanted to discuss and how they would do it, I actually got a letter to say that they were very ‘disgusted’, I suppose is the way they saw it. They were very unhappy with my response to the survey and they would like me now to never be allowed to represent Australia at any national level or any State level. I've been banned from representing breast cancer in Australia. They were happy for me to continue locally but I'm not allowed to ever represent breast cancer at the national level.”

It was the Chief Executive of Breast Cancer National Australia (BCNA) Lyn Swinburne who wrote that Mendick could never be a representative for women with breast cancer in Australia.

“When I got the letter, I was so upset – furious, I was furious. So I rang this woman and said I thought it was the most disgusting thing that I'd ever had happen. I am a breast cancer person, I have had it recently and I want to have my view out there on the agenda, just like everyone else gets the opportunity to. And she ended up saying ... her line was ‘We are only human; we've had breast cancer. So - you can't expect more from us than that’ and she hung up on me. So I was so angry by then. I was really furious. Surely, at that political level, to use the ‘poor me’ scenario about themselves is a ridiculous way to argue a point – it might work when they are talking to people who have not had breast cancer but not to someone who has!

“It seems they were totally devastated when they got my survey back, where I'd written all over the pages. And they were not prepared to take any of that on board. That's what really upset me. You know, that there is someone out there who thinks differently and is then banned from speaking about breast cancer at the national level or the state level – has been banned by women. They are the top women who have all got legal instructors; it's the women at the top level who have banned me from speaking out because they could never trust what I would say.

“The thing is, I was twenty-nine when I first was diagnosed with breast cancer, so could represent young people; I have been a country woman with breast cancer; my cancer reoccurred; I have had a bilateral mastectomy; I have a brain; I have done advocacy training; and I have strong opinions.

“But I also believe I could represent everybody's opinion. I really could – my argument is I just want someone to talk about other options, not just the accepted culture. I could do both.”

BCNA didn't like it, and from then on, Mendick has been gagged. She has also sort of gagged herself in a way – disillusionment does that and often that is what the dominant culture depends on.

She tells another story, with a gleam in her eyes: “At a party, there was a woman who'd just had a mastectomy and she was there with a tee-shirt on and she was happily showing that she only had one breast. She was showing it off as her battle scar.

“Now, why shouldn't she – she had had major surgery and instead of hiding, ashamed, she didn't mind that people know.

“But these women, for some reason, fear that – that they won't be accepted back as women again unless they look completely normal. As long as they're dressed exactly right ... Like they reckon when they go back to work, people look directly at them and,

if they're not looking exactly right, it won't work for them - that's what they think. It's sad and it doesn't have to be that way – but somebody has to start talking about it.”

Mendick filled out another breast cancer survey – a New South Wales one – and tried to be more constrained in her responses.

“It was a whole heap of different things that we had to comment on that they thought were going to be important to women with breast cancer in future. I was posted this survey and most of them were really topics that I didn't understand, like ‘develop a centralised place where women can access information’ and I wrote all over this ‘This could be an interesting thing. Is it a real place because that would probably be the most promising point for women? Is it a concrete building and if it's to be centralised where do you plan to build it?’ ...And, ‘after all these considerations, I would then like to know all this before I prioritise this in a particular way’. And to each one of them – I went through it – and at the bottom I wrote ‘I'm sorry, due to lack of information on this, I will not now be able to prioritise but, when I get more information, I would like to redo it’.

“I was constrained enough to fill it in, in this manner, because I wanted it done properly and I felt that there were a lot of women out there who would just go one, two, three, four without really understanding the facts and then they'd have a result and not only that - that result would be fed back to me at the next conference, that ‘women in Australia believe dah dah is the most important thing’.

“Anyway, they at least had the guts to write back and say it sounded like I would make an excellent advocate and could I please phone. I did phone but it didn't go any further. There was never anyone there when I phoned.”

Perhaps Mendick's honesty is just too raw – perhaps her intelligence is just too incisive.

Perhaps she has used her intellect to override the fear and loss of breast cancer, which may be having a dumbing-down effect on other women living with cancer. Understandably.

Two more stories before I leave her. Mendick wears a T-shirt and only with a concentrated effort and foreknowledge can I see she is breast-less. And this is the illusion part – you don't miss what is meant to be there. But sometimes, just sometimes, someone notices something a little different.

“It's happened twice,” she laughs, almost uncomfortably. “Because I have a tummy – I could lose some weight, of course – but because I have a tummy and no breasts to hold my clothes out over it, twice someone has asked me if I was pregnant!”

She laughs again but I try to imagine that – it would at the very least, make me highly self-conscious. And this is what Mendick lives with, every day.

“I have promised myself if it happens again, I am just going to look the person in the eye and say: ‘Well, actually, I have had a bilateral mastectomy!’ I haven't said it yet because I think it would absolutely shatter the person...” she concedes.

And finally, one of the truly great things about having her breasts removed: “Do you know, when I hug someone, like really hug them, our hearts are just that much closer and I feel so much more connected than before.”

I leave the grey steel blue coloured home. By this stage, Stephen, Sophie and Elliot have all returned. They all say goodbye and Mendick comes outside to see me off, telling me the best place to have breakfast, down by the lake, for the next morning.

I drive there, just to check it out. Actually, I think it is more to try to disconnect from Mendick and her story – or stories. I sit by the lake and it is dusk by now and quite cold. I realise I am still really bad at cancer and life and death discussions. But on some level,

I actually truly enjoyed the afternoon. But the fact of the matter is, I simply really enjoyed her.

“That is one special woman,” I say out loud, to no one in particular.



Photos by Hans Bool

LYN AUSTIN



I stare at the photo, nearly forty years old. The ten year old, with the big brown eyes, stares right back. She smiles and I recognise it – the woman in front of me now still wears it. Sometimes.

In the photo, she holds a cup to her baby ‘sister’ Merryn. Her other ‘sister’, six year old Judy holds the baby, while ‘sister’ Susan looks on. They are dressed impeccably – they are clean, almost shiny.

But it was for the world to view, after all.

It was 1964 and Lyn Austin’s foster parents, Dorothy and Charles Shea, and their four biological children, Jennifer, Angus, Gilbert and Rosemary, were in the process of being lauded and feted by *The Australian Women’s Weekly*. Their story later appeared

in the November 11 edition that same year. Entitled *For Love of Aborigines* with a subtitle, *Farming family have quietly put a belief into practice – the Shea family paints a picture of gracious humanity, in the name of Christianity.*

In the article, Dorothy Shea is described as: ‘... a hardworking country woman who radiates kindness and calmness and a deep, understanding love for her children’.

Further in the article, Dorothy Shea explains: ‘Adopting Aboriginal children has brought great satisfaction into our lives, and what they give back to you – I count it as a privilege. There is no difference between them and say, our own children’.

I study closely another family photo from the magazine, this, a photocopy. It is the smiling face of a fourteen-year-old boy, standing next to his father. It is the Sheas’ second youngest biological child, Gilbert. He looks completely happy and untroubled, peering over the top of his mother’s head. A normal little boy, surrounded by his family. And I wonder why it is impossible to detect menace and danger in a look – how easy they are to disguise.

I read the words and examine the faces in the photographs. And I have never been so sure in my life that this type of journalism is pure performance. That what you see and read may never, ever be anywhere near what is really happening. And how dangerous it is to simply skim the surface of anyone’s story. And I wonder about anything and everything I have ever written as a journalist. How the journalist who covered the Shea story did not just miss it, but left four little girls endangered in a hell they have not, and will never, recover from.

Lyn Austin doesn’t smile often but when she does, a heaviness lifts from her face.

Nearly fifty, she welcomes me into her home in Reservoir, Melbourne. It’s a thrown together type of home – a white, cement rendered box, old and functional. A

government house, part of Women's Housing. It is unseasonably warm in Melbourne this particular October day. I am dressed for winter so need to peel off some layers.

Austin makes coffee for us and we begin.

Austin says: "He was just one of those lunatics that craved for sex. He was just, like he was sex crazy. And the mother actually, she actually said that he, she was taking him to the doctor to have injections in his back for his sex drive and all that because I think in time he was having sex with one of the bloody cows or the calves on the farm so you know, he was quite sick.

"And that was one thing we always said, you know, like the other adopted sisters and that: 'It's a wonder that none of us ever caught a disease from him, from having sex with each of us then going having sex with the bloody calf and that'."

She laughs uneasily, not because the memory is funny. There is wryness in her laugh, a sort of cynical acceptance. This is fact. This is truth. This is her truth and the truth of her three foster sisters.

She is talking about Gilbert, the youngest Shea son, who systematically raped Austin and her foster sisters until they were able to leave the family, as adults. He continued to seek Susan out, after she had her own two children, and sexually still abuse her.

Austin says: "He was, God, he was fourteen. Yeah, fourteen going on fifteen, he was. And he was on that farm for a long time. He was not only abusing me, he was abusing the other children as well, the other kids, the other younger girls.

"Yeah. He had an underground cubby house, it was a dug-out so he would take us there, lead us on down to the hay stack or the barn or lead the girls over to the shearing shed or down where the pine trees were and things like that."

Austin was ten when she first arrived at the property near Geelong in Victoria. She had been taken from her mother, Daphne Ruby, from their home in Dimboola, Victoria.

She remembers: “There was ten in the family, ten children. I’m the eldest of ten.

“We lived on the riverbanks, in little tin huts and there was a number of families living on the riverbanks at the time. There was no electricity, no hot water – Mum used to have to, they actually boiled an old copper to do their washing and old tins to do cooking on the outside and that. We had dirt and cement floors.

“Then, eventually in time we moved into townhouses where families were actually allocated houses and so we actually had, we were in a house, you know, with electricity, running hot water.

“Oh yeah, I can remember, I used to go to kinder, go to school, state school.

“Yeah, I was happy there. You know, there was also a lot of drinking and fighting amongst the different families and things. But I mean people, it was just like living, you know. So, I mean we grew up, that’s how we grew up.

“Yeah, I was always very close with me mother, very close.”

But then her mother took her aside one day and explained that she had to go away, to school. Austin remembers her mother telling her that she would be coming back.

“I can just sort of remember. I suppose because I was so young I didn’t understand what was happening,” Austin tries to explain.

“And, no, I don’t think my mother and a lot of people back then knew what was happening. They were put in positions because they didn’t have the education or the knowledge back then. I think a lot of people were barely able to sign their names.

“Yeah, so I don’t think Mum sort of knew fully. I don’t think, you know, I can never

understand. I don't think Mum could ever understand either, I think, you know, what was going on..."

Her voice dwindles out and she fiddles with the handle of her coffee cup. She is lost in some thoughts of her own for a few seconds – perhaps the recurring lack of understanding of how a mother would willingly give up a child. But when I ask her, she is defensive of her mother.

"I think maybe she was pressured as a lot of families were pressured back then to ah, you know..." Austin cannot finish the sentence.

The last Lyn Austin ever saw of her mother was as she was driven to the Shea family home, hundreds of miles away, that day back in 1964.

"It just happened so quickly, you know one minute Mum's telling me you're going and then that weekend I was gone. You know it was only like, she just sorta told me that couple of days, that day before, like: 'Oh you're off'.

"And then there was this lady – I don't know if she was from the education department or welfare or where she was from. She just said we're taking you to this farm where there is other Aboriginal children and, you know, it will be better for you to go there and, you know for your schooling, for your education and health and all that sort of thing. Because they sort of felt that my mother wasn't equipped with looking after us.

"We went in this old FJ Holden actually. I can remember that, the old black FJ Holden."

Again, she stops talking and there is a quiet silence, saturated with meaning. When Austin answers my questions, she rarely looks me in the eye. She always looks a little away. But this time, putting her coffee cup down, she does look at me. She looks hard at me.

"I can still hear my mother's voice – it was in her voice I could tell, you know, the

sadness. You know the anguish, and that. I guess probably because I was the first child see, I was very close to me mother.”

Again, she stops, looking away. She seems to gather herself and takes a deep breath. She remembers, but it is as if the memory is never far away. As if it has nestled there, just below the surface of her consciousness all these years.

“Yeah, yeah, they took me straight to the farm, and I always have that in me mind. I look back, I was looking out the window, like I was waving and you know Mum was crying and I always look back and I can see Mum standing on the roadside with her hands, you know, head in her hands crying.

“And I thought while she cried, I thought she’d be happy, you know, that I was going, but I didn’t understand why she was crying and so grief-stricken, then you know, cause like I said I was ten.

“I just – I don’t know, I never ever got back to ask Mum why, you know in the years as I remained with the family I never, because it was too late. She’d already gone. So, I was never able to go back and ask her why she let me go and that. So...”

Lyn Austin was planning a trip to see her mother but three weeks before she was due to go, she was given the news that her mother had died of a massive heart attack. Austin was only seventeen. Her mother was thirty-six.

“I was devastated, I was, you know, I thought oh, it was, it was devastating cause I thought, you know I wanted to go back and make up for all the lost years that I’d lost with her over the years and to go back and to be with her. You know, to try and make up for the years away from her.

“And, today I’m, you know I still, you know, think, you know, why, why, what happened, why didn’t we go back? So...”

At first, the Shea family seemed extraordinary to Austin.

“I thought oh she’s a lovely old lady, nice old woman, and he was a nice old fella, lovely family, you know, caring and loving and that at first. And then as time went on, oh it just turned into a nightmare.

“You were punished for little, minor things and getting into trouble and the punishments started when people weren’t there,” Austin says.

“Not a week went by without a flogging.”

It was Dorothy Shea, Austin’s foster mother who would mete out the punishments.

“She was like a lunatic, like a crazed person, her eyes would bulge and like she’d just, you know, one of those fruit loops that would flip. And she would use whatever she could lay her bloody hands on, you know it was a broom handle, rubber hose. She had a laundry with all these straps hanging up, army straps and things in the laundry she used to use to flog us with.

“And you wouldn’t see the welt marks on the lower part or your arms and that, it was always on your parts of your body that were covered. So, it was like mainly around your back area or whatever, and your upper legs and that.

“In between, she’d sort of butter you up, because she was, they were always having garden parties and all these church and Christian functions at the property, and Christian association dos, and all these barn dances and so there was always a lot of people going

to the farm and praising them and ‘oh what a wonderful person, what wonderful people, doing a good job with Aboriginal children’.”

Austin only ever told one person outside the family home – a young friend at school.

But it never went any further.

“Only about the physical abuse. It wasn’t about the sexual abuse. We couldn’t, you know, we never spoke about that,” she explains.

Both parents found out about their son’s sexual abuse of Austin. She remembers when they discovered it: “Yeah, she caught us actually. She actually walked into his bungalow and caught us. You know, I was trying to keep him away but he was always persistent, you know dragging us into the bungalow.

“Oh God, she just went crazy. She started screaming and yelling and the old fella came out and started flogging into the son, and she run me to the laundry and Christ, she gave me the worst flogging – I thought I’d die. I didn’t think I’d ever live through the beating.”

Dorothy Shea made Austin get down on her hands and knees and pray.

“She thought I wanted to – she didn’t know it had been going on for so long. She told me I was an evil person.”

After that night, Gilbert stopped the sexual abuse of Austin – but turned his hand to the younger foster sisters.

“They knew, the parents. Yeah, you had to tell her and show her your pad, that you were actually having, that you were actually menstruating each month. She was terrified, that you know, if you didn’t, if you forgot to tell her that you had your period, or show her, she would flog you because she was so fearful of it, you know, of one of us becoming pregnant.

“She was a very psychotic lady. And a very sadistic person, she was. I, you know, like I said, years and years went on and I still, after leaving that family and leaving her, years on I still wake up through the night dreaming that, you know, the abuse was happening and the batterings, and everything. Still.”

Austin left the Shea family and studied nursing. At the time, she wrote to her foster mother and told her she never wanted to see her again. Austin says Dorothy Shea wrote straight back to her: ‘...you’ll be like all the other black sluts, pregnant’.

Austin proceeded to put it all behind her. She had no contact with the Sheas or with her foster sisters Merryn, Susan, and Robyn. She began a series of broken relationships, drank heavily and had her own three children – Nicole, Eileen and Lindsay.

And then, twenty years after she left the Shea family home, her foster sisters came looking for her.

“And they wanted, they started asking questions, what had happened to them as children on the farm and talking about the abuse and that and then I thought oh God, why did you have to come now and you’re digging up the past. I was happy to just let it go, you know, just sort of forget about it,” Austin says.

But they wouldn’t – they couldn’t.

“I was really angry with them for looking for me to re-go through this all again. And I, you know, I was very bitter towards them actually.

“Well, they were starting to think about it, they started having nightmares and, and started remembering things and they started asking me to fill in the gaps, to tell them what had happened and things so, but oh, I just got so sick in the end. I, I did and you

know I tried not to sort of keep in touch with them and things because like I said, I was becoming quite ill out of it all.”

Austin had gone into deep denial about her childhood, like most child sexual and physical abuse survivors. She had only ever mentioned it briefly to one or two friends in her life. But when her sisters approached her, the memories and the injustices came pouring out.

“And then when they came and I thought that’s when it all had to be, you know, opened out. They were pressuring and wanting to go to the police about what had happened. And then I said, look, you know, you’ve come to me, you’ve come this far and we’ll have to go through with it now. I can’t turn back now.

“So, I actually went and made a police statement and they started following after, but I was the first one to go and do it.”

It took five years for the police to investigate their allegations – a paper trail that fills folder upon folder in her home. Gilbert Shea completely denies all allegations of any sexual abuse of his foster sisters.

“It caused an uproar with the family, the white family, and they denied everything and they still deny it and everything today actually, to this day, they’ve denied everything. They deny that anything ever happened.” Austin shakes her head.

But Austin has never quite recovered from the committal hearing.

“We all really copped a grilling from the defence. It was like we were the criminals and we were telling lies and inventing all these stories and, you know, this wonderful, good, Christian family, yeah, hadn’t done anything and you know, here we are making up and inventing all these happenings and events that had happened. So, it was quite horrific and I actually said, to tell a lot of people, don’t ever go to court unless you’ve got

enough evidence because it's not worth it. It's not. I mean we had nothing....

“Yeah so, it's only our word and our word wasn't good enough. There was no medical records, evidence, there was nothing there, ever recorded.

“These people were very well known and very high profile people. So, you know, who's going to believe a black kid, who was going to believe us anyway, even if we did talk about it years ago, no-one would have believed us back then.”

Austin remembers seeing Gilbert Shea at the committal proceedings: “He was very calm and collected and casual. I mean, he was about to get up on the stand and lie through his teeth, that we were lying and making all this up and nothing ever happened so, he was very cool and calm.”

The committal took three days and the magistrate, finally decided there was not enough evidence to continue to trial.

Despite not sending Gilbert Shea to trial, the magistrate who heard the case made an apology to Lyn Austin and her foster sisters.

“Oh, she just said, because there's lack of evidence,” Austin takes another deep breath, casting her mind back to 1999. “She's said she had no doubt that it did happen to us and she apologised to us for that...

“Yeah, and because of that there was nothing they could do. When I said to the girls, ‘look,’ I said, ‘there they are taking the files away’ – they were all being wheeled away on a big trolley - I said, to be closed and never to be reopened. The only time this will ever be reopened is if they admit to it. And they're not going to admit to it.

“I actually spoke to the old lady – I actually rang her and told her, I said, you know, that I was going to open it and take it to the media and everything.

“She said: ‘Oh, what rot, why are you doing this, I can't understand why you're doing all this now, telling all these lies and all this’. And she was just like living in her little

fantasy world.”

Meanwhile, Austin received a letter from the late Geoffrey Flatman, QC, the Director of Public Prosecution shortly after the decision was taken. He wrote: ‘You must not take the fact that the Magistrate did discharge the accused person to mean that you were not believed as a witness. Similarly, you should not view our decision to discontinue proceedings from the position of not being accepted as a witness of truth. This is far from the case. It is however necessary for the Crown to prove all elements of the case beyond reasonable doubt, something which we could not do in this particular case’.

Austin says: “Ours was the first group case to be investigated and to tell you the truth, I thought we had him nailed. It would have been a victory to us. Not only that, you know, for us but to many others that were taken in the community and around the nation.”

When the magistrate apologised to Austin and her sister, she also suggested the women apply to the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal.

And here, there was a sort of a victory, albeit financial – each of the women was awarded money.

Austin, in a flat, almost monotone voice says: “Seven and a half thousand dollars. Each. For the years of abuse.” She laughs again, that sardonic, wry laugh I have learnt quickly to recognise is not about amusement.

“Yeah, so we were compensated – for the trauma and you know, everything we went through, our suffering.

“They believed us.”

Austin’s solicitor then urged her and her sisters to take the case to a civil court – to sue Gilbert Shea in a court where the burden of proof is not beyond reasonable doubt.

“I said: ‘Oh I couldn’t be bothered, it is just too much, we’ve gone through too much’.
He said we would have won a civil law suit because it’s not such a strict proof – not beyond reasonable doubt. You know, like a couple of times people have said why didn’t you do it and I said we’ve been through too much. We’ve been through enough. We’ve been through the courts and we’ve done everything you know, it’s just knocked us about.

“So, that was it, I was sick of fighting – it was just like an uphill battle for us.

“But in the end, when it was all over, it was, you know, it was a big relief. It was like a big weight off me shoulders. That we had told.”

The day after the committal hearing ended was National Sorry Day in 1999. The symbolism was not lost on her.

The following year Lyn Austin and her cousin organised a huge massed rally for the Stolen Generation. More than four thousand people marched and gathered, bringing Central Melbourne to a standstill.

“We actually, we organised that white chrysanthemums be laid on the steps of Parliament... to acknowledge past and present mothers that had their children taken.

“So, it was beautiful to just, you know, see a sea of white flowers on the steps of Parliament.

“Then that afternoon, that evening, I flew up to Sydney, I went up to Corroboree 2000 that afternoon after the march, so I had to dash from there to home to grab me bag then out to the airport.”

By now, light has entered Austin’s eyes. Instead of thinking backwards, she looks forward. She travels to schools and rallies, sharing her story and teaching young white Australia – those who will listen – a little of a past history too few have any idea existed.

That is where I first met her. I invited Austin into a UTS remote postgraduate class I was teaching in Melbourne, the year before. Just before Sorry Day (Journey of Healing) 2000. All my students were deeply moved by her. All my students went on the march and rally.

She looks at me and quietly says: "I was silenced as a child, but it's time to speak out. It is justification for my mother, for her to rest in peace."

Austin had made a trip to Ballarat the year before this interview, to find her mother's grave. She carried a specially crafted wooden cross with her and when she finally found the grave, erected the cross above it. She tells me this in the front yard as we take her photo. She is self-conscious and finds the photo session almost more difficult than the interview.

We choose a cherry blossom tree, seemingly fooled by the strange Melbourne warm weather and trying to bloom, as backdrop. The lawn is unmown and rose garden overgrown. Snowdrops abound, perhaps the final vestiges of a winter which seems to have vanished far too soon.

I think of this woman with the grey tinged hair as the child being taken from her mother, no-one really explaining anything to her. I think of the little girl with the bluey-green eyes – the one in the photo – wondering where her mother went and why her mother let her go.

I can't think of the abuse – the sexual, physical and emotional abuse – she sustained throughout her years with the Sheas.

I imagine the seventeen year old Austin excitedly – no doubt nervously – planning her return home to her mother. What I can't imagine is the finality of being told, three weeks before she gets there, that her mother is dead. I can't imagine where she can possibly place her unasked questions. Her frustration. Her anger. Her unspent love.

Austin drives me to a tram stop, chatting casually about her children and her work. I watch her and wonder at her strength. Her courage. Her stubborn will to survive, against all odds.

I jump on a tram back to the centre of Melbourne. I grab a cab out to Tullamarine Airport and a plane back home to Sydney. I drive quickly to the Central Coast. It seems like a longer drive than usual.

I need to see my daughters. Just to hold them.



Photos by Dee Geary

RACHAEL WALLBANK



It's one of those beautiful, one storey, 1930s' homes in a leafy backstreet of Strathfield. The street curves gently around a central park, with huge trees strategically placed to break up the relentless sun of the summer months in inner Sydney. There is a smallish yacht tucked away on a trailer in the driveway, and a car parked in front of it.

At the moment, there is a definite Autumnal feel to the air. I have driven from my home, an hour north of Sydney. I stand in front of this house – the Wallbank family home. This is where Richard Wallbank grew up – riding bikes and scooters in the street, walking to school, climbing trees. A seemingly normal, suburban, average childhood. Except Richard knew, from a very early age, that she was female.

I was reading *The Sunday Age* (March 23, 2003) earlier that year in Melbourne when an

article caught my eye. For someone researching and writing about sexuality and secrets, it was a gift.

It told the story of Jennifer and Kevin (not their real names) and their battle to have their marriage ratified by law – for Kevin had been born Kimberly. And the Australian Attorney-General, at the time, Darryl Williams, was not pleased.

But it wasn't the couple who interested me so much – rather, their lawyer. The article said: 'Her credentials as a practitioner in family law impressed them. But Wallbank also had special reason to empathise with their case: at birth she was declared male'.

I set about finding her and requesting an interview. Finding her was easy – a simple telephone book search and a phone call. She actually answered the phone.

After I explain my project and request the interview, she says: "I will have to think about this – can you send me your thesis application so I can read what you are doing?"

"Yes, of course," I say, wondering where it is – hoping I still have an electronic copy.

Two computers later, I cannot put my hands on an electronic version of my thesis. I know it is on a disk somewhere but cannot find that, either. Typical. Anyway, the proposal has changed so much since I first began this project. It seems to have grown and taken on a life of its own, and I have simply gone along with it. So it would not really have informed her that much as to what I would expect from an interview.

What I finally sent Wallbank was two drafts of chapters I had already written – I thought I may as well put it out there. If she is going to trust me, she needs to know how I write and who I am writing about, and see herself as a part of the book's community – or not.

Wallbank rings me back a few weeks later. I hear her voice and am nervous because I really want to meet her and I really want this interview for my book – I have immersed

myself in her, and the Jennifer and Kevin case, reading as much as I could find.

Wallbank's struggle, no doubt similar to Kevin's struggle, is the secret stuff of rigid societies and prejudicial, ignorant fear. It sometimes amazes me that we can put men on the moon, nearly forty years ago, but as a society, cannot deal with human sexual diversity and difference. But many things amaze me in society – that which seem so simple and true to some, are anathema and hateful to others.

Unfortunately, it is the lawmakers of the land who usually get the last say. So, obversely and fortunately in this instance, when a legal advocate actually is living her legal argument, there is not a lot of room to move. Thank goodness. Or rather, thank God, as Wallbank would say.

But when Wallbank rings me, I am not prepared for what she says: "It would be an honour to be in the company of the sort of people you are writing about. Thankyou – I would love to do an interview."

I was so taken aback, I actually didn't know what to say – but was grinning, big-time.

So we meet. Wallbank opens her door, welcoming me into her home. She wears an elegant khaki-coloured pants suit. A single, gold cross around her neck. She is comfortable in her clothes; in her body; in her home. And why shouldn't she be.

There is a stark symbolism in Wallbank now living back in the family home. This is where she grew up as the little boy called Richard, struggling with what she knew in her heart was a false public perception. Inside, she was really a little girl, and she knew it.

And now the woman has returned.

"I think you can go back and redeem, and I think that's what I've done with my childhood here. My experience of being here is an experience of finding the little girl who was never able to be," Wallbank says, later in our interview.

The two of us make tea and coffee together and chat gently, in the kitchen looking out the back window to the garden. It is a simple garden – looks like most substantial Sydney suburban back gardens, not changed much from when Wallbank grew up, playing in it. I try to imagine the woman, Rachael, growing up here as a boy, Richard, keeping her secret closely in her heart. The pain. The lies. The confusion. The loneliness.

It feels a little like this home has ghosts and their stories are etched into the bricks and the ceilings and the corners of each room. The secret fears of people, growing up in a secret family together. And no-one talks about them. They are left unspoken, because they have to be – the family didn't know where to start. Or how. Society at the time was totally in the dark about transsexualism.

We then sit in the front room of Wallbank's home. I can imagine her meeting her clients and strategising legal argument; where she ends up counselling and helping the people who come to her for her family law expertise – mainly women.

She took on the Australian Attorney-General against the Commonwealth – and won.

And not just once – Daryl Williams appealed the original ruling to the Full Court of the Family Court of Australia – that because Kevin had experienced transsexualism and had undergone irreversible physical sex reassignment, he was indeed a man, and able to marry as one. Legal precedent, and history, were made.

Wallbank sits opposite me but I feel too far away, and move closer, placing the tape recorder between us. I drink my coffee; she drinks her tea. We begin.

It has been almost ten years since Wallbank began her public and physical sexual transition. She was then aged thirty-eight. She began hormone treatment in June 1994, transitioning her sex publicly the following month. She underwent several operative

procedures throughout 1995 and 1996, and then on July 17, 1997, had her legal sex reassigned with New South Wales Births, Deaths and Marriages.

“All I knew was that I had to be female or die. And I nearly killed myself on the path to staying male – for that little boy and his sisters.” Wallbank points to where her fourteen-year-old son James is working on his computer in his bedroom. “I wanted to be their father worse than anything.

“And in the end, I had to accept that if I was going to be around, I could only be around as a female.

“I knew I was female since five or six.”

Wallbank has three children – James, Kate and Rebecca.

“I remember thinking that I needed to be available for these kids and maybe I won’t end up being able to see them, but I’ll still be available and I’ll be alive, whereas I know I’m going to die if I don’t be true to who I am – that’s what it felt like,” Wallbank says. Her voice is husky, but not deep. Definitely not male – more assertive and gently strong, if that is possible.

“I’m fulfilling myself as a person and therefore I’m available to be something useful for them.”

I look at her hands – and can’t stop looking. Not until I say something: “Your hands – they are so, I don’t know – they are so – female,” I say, clumsily. And they are. Small and delicate – women’s hands.

She smiles but her eyes glitter. All she says is: “Thank you.”

Wallbank’s mother died in July 1994, before she transitioned.

“It was her presence I felt when I finally realised - I had this spiritual moment. In tears, I’d broken...a moment of complete breaking where you open – they say the broken heart is the one that’s open. And in that moment, I felt my mother’s presence and I felt

very clear – it came to me that God is very happy with me just the way I am,” Wallbank remembers.

“It was more important to be a whole Rachael to my children than it was a dead father image. That was the really powerful moment for me. That’s when I decided...and I decided to actually transition.”

And then both parents told the children. Kate was eleven at the time; Rebecca seven; and James was just five.

“We spoke to the children about what was happening and brought them in on it. We dealt with them honestly, dealt with them as honest human beings. By that time I was satisfied that they were on their journeys and I was on mine,” Wallbank says.

I wonder out loud how Wallbank’s wife coped. She looks at me and says: “There are just some things I will not go into in this interview.” Her voice is vice-like and her eyes adamant.

Me, I am almost grateful for her boundaries – of course, I had to ask the question.

That’s what journalists do – ask the obvious, and then not so obvious, questions – but I really do not need to know. Wallbank’s former wife isn’t there to talk to me, and Wallbank is not prepared to discuss her former partner’s emotional space around this decision of hers.

Needless to say, though, trying to hold the marriage together for fourteen years, while trying to be the best husband and father she could be, proved too much.

“By the end of that struggle I was at the point where, although my life still looked successful – the ‘Harvey Norman’ life – I wanted to end it. I was just too far from my truth.”

Regardless, she now smiles and says: “We had some funny times, the children and I,

though. I remember the day when I moved into my new home - that day was the first time all the children had seen me dressed as a female. It was just jeans and a blouse - by that time I was on the hormones and the breast development was beginning.

“The children and I had already decided that they would call me ‘Rachael’ in public. Not Mum. There is only one mum – I was there at each of the births and I know exactly who the mum is. We all were happy with ‘Rachael’. As soon as I heard it I thought, yes, that’s me.

“We went down to the local shop and on the way to get some ice-blocks the girls were saying to James, ‘When we get to the shop, it’s ‘Rachael’ not ‘dad’. The five year old James responds with ‘Sure, not a problem’.”

“So, as soon as we’re in the shop he says: ‘Dad, can we have this?’ And then I hear bang, bang and both girls are crash tackling James and are holding him down and laughing while they try to stop him yelling out ‘Dad!’ It was so funny. Poor James.” She laughs out loud, quietly, I imagine re-living that moment.

When Rachael Wallbank was growing up as Richard Wallbank, she went to St Patrick’s at Strathfield in Sydney. Which made it interesting when an invitation arrived for a school reunion, after her transition.

“James was about to begin at the same school and I knew that if he was going to front up there, I had to. Otherwise, how could I ask him not to be ashamed, if I wasn’t prepared to stand up?” she asks. It doesn’t seem too difficult to answer that question – just don’t go. Far too hard – all boys’ school; all boys’ reunion. But Rachael Wallbank sees the world differently – she is who she is, and having asked her children and family to take this journey with her, she can’t just go half way.

“One guy, Peter Harrington, had rung me up and said ‘please come’. That really

decided it for me. He knew I was transitioned, and he still wanted me to come,” she says.

“Look, I got an opportunity to be true to the little girl who I had to deny for so many years. If I’m not true to her then I’m in trouble. I’ve got to be consistent.”

She went to the reunion and was completely accepted for who she is. She leans over and smiles: “You’ll love this one – this year is the 30th reunion and the invitation is to ‘Gentleman (and Rachael)’!”

We laugh out loud – me a little more loudly than Wallbank. She just barely giggles but her smile is broad and her eyes are gleaming. She seems happy and contented and free to speak and be who she is – at last.

Fathers and their sons. Steeped in gender based expectation, at the very least; love, if they are lucky; probably conditional love, at best. I have no first-hand experience, but I watched it as I grew up, the only daughter amongst three sons. The gender-split unfairness of so many decisions.

The first challenge in this family came when Wallbank’s father found the little boy Richard dressing up in his sister’s clothes.

“I told Dad at five or six, somewhere around that time. I had to. I was caught dressing up in my sister’s clothes, because I had already developed that type of life. Just really looking at myself and picturing myself as a female, and Dad found me and asked what was going on. Thank God he didn’t rail at me. Because he loved me so much, thank goodness. I told him: ‘I’m really a girl’.

“And I look back and think: ‘Wow, how did I do that?’

“I was old enough to know it was big time, we were doing something big time. I wasn’t naïve about it and he didn’t say much but I always remember the look in his eyes – his devastation.

“He believed me. He was sad because he thought: ‘This little one I love so much has a huge problem’. That’s what he could see. And so we chooffed off to the child psychiatrist.” She shrugs her shoulders.

“It was ultimately a relief to speak. To tell my Dad, even then when I was so young. Ultimately the very fact that I could tell my father is probably a tribute to our relationship,” she says.

“I trusted him and I was right to trust him. Because his response was right.

“Now the psychiatrist, and I still remember, which is funny isn’t it? He just said – we were waiting for the wisdom to come down from this being – and he just said: ‘There’s nothing wrong, nothing wrong. This is just one precocious child, very intelligent. He’ll get over it’.

“We were this Irish Catholic family. We were there because we were desperate to find out what was wrong – why I thought I was a girl.” She smiles again.

“And we heard what we wanted – there is nothing wrong. And I go: ‘Thank goodness – I can keep going’, because it’s been scary because the spotlight has been on me.”

It is like Wallbank remembers so vividly, she is re-living the anxiety and confusion of her complex childhood. It is in the way she is delivering these memories – she is almost distracted, feeling the pain again and speaking in the present tense some of the time.

“So then we all get really busy forgetting it. And I go on with them because I know if I don’t, it is too hard. I hurt so much – how does a young psyche deal with this? I know what my father wants – I can remember developing a secret way of being from very, very young. And I can’t put a finger on it, but I knew that my inclination was to sit down with the girls next to me and do what they were doing – but I knew this was taboo.

“This is why I’m saying this is cultural abuse because my parents can’t know, they

aren't empowered by the culture to know anything about it, so the very people I should be able to go to, to say 'Help me' are the very people I can't go to. I'm little, and there's literally nowhere for me to go because I'm told not only am I doing something wrong, I'm told by everybody that who I am is something wrong. And it has to stop."

There is a silence in the room. The air is heavy with an almost palpable sorrow and I think back to the ghosts in this house and their stories. The little girl called Richard with nowhere to go and no-one to turn to, to get answers. Or explanations.

And then I think of the little boy James, told at five that his father is really a woman, and try and imagine what it would be like to have your Dad tell you that he is really a woman. I can't really begin to imagine. Calling it a challenge is a complete understatement.

When James Wallbank appeared on *ABC's Australian Story* (Marriage Matters, 31/3/2003) he said: "Rachael's, like, my dad...IS my dad. But just not in a male body, really.

"In my school, at St Patrick's, it was just trying to explain to other kids – it was hard. I say Rachael's my dad and, um...the first thing they usually say is: 'Does she have a penis?' But I say no, 'cause she had an operation. They're sort of a bit weird with that, but they get used to it."

James is very matter of fact about it. As are his sisters, apparently.

"Kate came to live with me shortly after I finished my surgery. It was a big brave move for her. She just said I had a peaceful home," Wallbank remembers. "I liked that very much. She was thirteen or fourteen at the time. Everyone said that if the other kids at their schools found out about me it would be a disaster for the children. But I read and read about this and decided they were wrong – what would damage my kids would be talking and living and acting from shame.

“So, I started turning up at things at school, if they asked me,” she says. “We worked it out, together.”

Again, there is a smile at the corner of her mouth. Her story is as much about the transcendence of true love as it is about the transcendence of sexual transition – the true love of a parent for her children, and children for a parent. And honesty.

“If this was to work and if I was to keep my children, there had to be total honesty and no shame. There was no other way,” Wallbank says.

“The transition was like a huge weight lifted off me – I’d agonised – I’m talking about just getting up to the stage of the ending of the marriage, leaving home, transition and doing the hormones. I’d cry myself to sleep about what was going to happen to the children. Night after night, for months and months and months.

“So I’d done this deal with myself, in my head – that if I ended up a sober waitress in Cairns who can see my kids on holidays, I’d be happy. I don’t care if I lose the practice. I need to be available for these kids and maybe I don’t end up seeing them but I’ll still be available and I’ll be alive, whereas I knew I was going to die if I didn’t do this.”

The case of the Commonwealth v Kevin and Jennifer began in 1998. Wallbank accepted the case on a pro bono basis but was later paid by the Commonwealth when it became a test case. The scientific aspect of the case was based on the concept of ‘brain sex’, first recorded in the journal *Nature* in 1995. The argument was made that some people are born with a brain recognising them as different to their public sex or the sex defined by their chromosomes and genitals.

Who better to argue the test case and make legal history than someone who had lived it?

In the past, transsexualism was regarded as a psychological condition or mental illness where the person with transsexualism made a choice, and then underwent the surgery

and hormone replacement therapies. Brain sex posits that transsexualism is biological and a natural part of human sexual diversity. It is not a choice.

And Wallbank proved it.

“All we’re saying is, this isn’t psychological, this is biological. And that’s proved to be the fact by people like me who get to thirty-eight years of life and against all the self-interest that I could find, and every psychological desire I could find, for my own survival’s sake I had to act against my desire, in order to survive. And that was to affirm myself as female,” Wallbank says.

“So the point is, there is sex – male or female – but there is gender as well. Gender is a cultural affectation, you see. We should all be able to express gender along the whole of the gender continuum. As males and females we express gender in lots of ways. You can have a male who wants to express aspects of femininity and you can have a female that wants to express aspects of masculinity.

“And once you are able to seize your language back, you are able to talk about these aspects of humanity with more clarity. Transsexualism is a natural variation in human sexual formation and is no more about cross dressing or trans-gender expression than it is about sexuality. The only medical treatment for the condition of transsexualism is to bring the body into sexual harmony with the mind through sex affirmation treatment; including genital reassignment surgery.

“I knew that someone’s sex or knowledge of themselves is determined between the ears – brain sex – and not between the legs. There is no other explanation why people like Kevin and myself exist. Why else would someone like me go through sexual reassignment surgery?” she asks, to no-one in particular.

I try and imagine sitting there in her living room, discussing this as a theory, instead of what it already is – legal precedent. I imagine I would be sitting there, totally believing

Wallbank, because she is totally believable, and just so wishing she was right, or had some rights around the claims.

The fact that she does – that she took on the Commonwealth and made legal history – shoved society in a direction it should not have been so hard to go in – is the stuff of Hollywood movies. Good ones, at that.

Professionally, it must have felt like standing on the top of the highest mountain and breathing in, deeply. Personally, it must have felt like flying from the summit.

“Really, it just felt like it was a really good reason to have decided to keep living,” she says, quietly.

Wallbank’s father died in June 1999. After Wallbank transitioned, her father refused to accept her for two years.

“This was hard for my Dad, really hard, but he knew. I had told him when I was little and he knew. He didn’t accept it. Not for a long while. But then, one day he gave me a gift – a beautiful gift. The gift of acceptance. The gift of his seeing me as a female - you’ve got to see this in the context of the resistance of the guy, and he said: ‘I just need to tell you that if your mother was alive she’d be as proud of you as I am, for the daughter you are and for the woman you’ve become. She’d be glad to see you so happy’.

“A while earlier I had given him a photograph of me looking as I do now, and he had thrown it back onto the ground. But this day, he had put it up amongst all the other family shots in the lounge room. And he said to me: ‘They can work it out for themselves’.

“So he put the picture of the little boy who grew up to be a woman on his living room wall and said to me: ‘All the pictures are up now’.

“And then he gave me my mother’s engagement ring.”

And Wallbank shows me her tiny, delicate hand, with the stunning setting sitting on it.

I ask her what seems like a thoughtless question really, but on purpose. “Do you miss Richard?”

There is a long silence, almost uncomfortable. But then she says: “Richard isn’t different from Rachael. I certainly don’t miss the pain that I went through with Richard. It was hell. The decision was hell. But I knew I would die if I didn’t do this.

“I had no choice, really. Do or die.

“And Richard is still here – always was, as Rachael always was.”

I revisit Wallbank about twelve months later with photographer Hans Bool, at her office – a two storey Victorian terrace in Burwood, the next suburb towards the CBD from her home. And she has been busy – really busy. She looks good and happy, but tired. And admits it. And she is nervous at first, with the camera. She can’t really relax. We assure her and continue, and gradually, she warms. Or gets distracted enough by her own thoughts.

“I’ve been dealing with the Victorian Government and its legislation around these issues,” she says. “And presenting an increasing number of papers to conferences. It’s become a balancing act really – how much do I do of my practice and how much do I do of re-educating, really.”

She is flying to the UK later in the year, presenting two papers to conferences over there. That is in September and James is travelling with her. She is presenting a paper to family lawyers at the College of Law, and then onto Queensland where she is presenting a paper to the Law Council of Australia’s biennial Family Law Conference on transsexualism.

“You’ll love the tentative title of that paper,” she says. “Degrees of Difference. That will also be the name of the book I write one day from all of this. *Degrees of Difference.*”

The title resounds around her office and sounds good. I do love it. It is perfect.

“You know, it is really about human rights, the whole argument around transsexualism. Transsexualism and humans rights in Australia – that’s what my book is going to be about.

“Until transsexualism is no longer regarded as a psychiatric disorder, people are being abused in this country.

“Gender confusion, or Gender Dysphoria as it is termed, is the opposite to transsexualism. If I could have shaken this off – if I was just simply confused – then I would have shaken it off. Don’t you think?”

If she had asked me that question twelve months ago, I really would not have known what she was talking about. It’s the language again, and Wallbank is so right. The language around issues of difference is paramount to the argument. And yes, if she could have shaken ‘it’ off, I truly believe she would have. But there was no choice. This is who she is. Simple.

The phone rings. Kate is at home, cooking a baked dinner.

“I can’t leave her waiting too long,” Wallbank says. So we wrap up – a few more photos outside, by the plaque fixed to the front of her offices. A bit more of a chat.

Wallbank talks about her love for her property just north of Sydney in the Hunter Valley – sixty-five acres with a little cabin, cattle yards and twenty-three steers she runs, and the remains of an old slab homestead. The property has been handed down through a long line of women since one of the earliest settlers of the area.

“I love that about the place,” she smiles. “I would eventually love to just live there, in the peace.”

I wonder out loud when that will be.

“Ah,” she smiles. “Not for a while yet. Using an old-fashioned term, this is a ‘calling’.

If you are uniquely able to change something or in a position to improve situations, then I don’t think you can avoid it.”

We leave Wallbank to lock up her office and head home for her baked dinner. We drive up the Coast, through the heavy Friday evening traffic. And we talk. I look at the photographs on the digicam. She is striking, in so many ways.

And she has taught me so much, this lawyer. This woman. About bravery and dignity and honesty. And hardship and pain. And hard work and parenting and love. And I am grateful.



Photos by Hans Bool

RUSSEL SYKES



When I ring Russel Sykes for an interview, he seems to want to chat. He is chopping up snow peas for his daughter Lauren's dinner. After introducing myself, I listen to him organise her in front of a video – Lion King 2. I hear him chopping as we continue to chat.

We talk for about an hour. About all sorts of things – our children, his work, my work. The time seems to sweep by. He is very quietly spoken and delivers his words slowly and methodically – he thinks about every one.

He seems a little lonely. Or maybe just alone.

He agrees to an interview and we set up the date and time – he invites me to his home in

Erskineville, an inner Sydney suburb, in a fortnight. But two days before the interview, he rings me: “I don’t feel happy about having a stranger in my house.”

“I can completely understand that – neither would I. How about meeting at the university?” I ask him. “Do you know the Tower at UTS?”

“Do you mean the really ugly one?”

“Yep, that’s the one. How about I meet you outside the glass doors at 11am? How will I recognise you?” I ask again.

“Do you know what my mother looks like?”

I immediately conjure up a vision of Dr Roberta Sykes, from the inside of her third book and the cover of the *Sydney Morning Herald’s Good Weekend*.

“Yes, I do, just from photos,” I say.

“Well, you’ll know me, then. Except I have a shaved head.”

So I wait outside the Tower at the University of Technology, Sydney. I sit under the winter sun, watching for Sykes. Cars pour through Broadway, up and down, clogging the streets. It is non-teaching period at the university, so very few students around. Just another day. Just another normal cacophony of inner city space. I don’t even realise when he arrives – if it wasn’t for the shaved head comment, I would never have guessed it was him.

Russel Sykes doesn’t look anything like his mother.

I say it to him as we walk towards my office. He carries a brief case and wears a woollen skullcap. He simply shrugs. But even my seemingly harmless observation is emotionally fraught – if he doesn’t look like his mother, does he resemble his father...?

Russel Sykes' father is a vicious rapist and would-be murderer. A racist. He could have been any of the eighteen to twenty white youth who raped, tortured and attempted to murder his mother, a race attack just weeks after her seventeenth birthday in Brisbane, Queensland.

Four of the main assailants in the attack were subsequently charged and brought to trial, and given sentences of five, seven, ten and fourteen years.

Roberta Sykes fell pregnant to one of her attackers – and kept her baby, Russel, who knew nothing about his conception for the first thirty years of his life.

It was his mother's secret. A lie she lived with and protected deeply. She writes of: 'keeping the dark secret of my son's conception and birth and carrying the pain and secrecy in my heart'.

It stayed a family secret until about a decade ago.

Russel Sykes is now more than forty years old and the father of two, Lauren and Mason. Sykes' marriage to his first wife broke up when Lauren was three. Sykes is a psychologist and we begin the interview with his asking me some questions about my job. He is interested because he has just been offered some lecturing work at the Aboriginal Medical Service in Redfern. I answer him, and then ask him about his.

He explains what he does and what he believes: "I counsel young people. I provide therapeutic intervention, you could say, to young Aboriginal people. I see my role as guiding people rather than helping. I assume ... I push people to sort out their own problems. But you can guide them. Some people obviously don't have a lot of skills and then they might need helping."

He has worked within Corrective Services at Mt Penang Juvenile Justice Centre on the Central Coast and Yasmar Juvenile Justice Centre in Sydney; Long Bay Jail; and privately. He has also been on the Social Security Appeals Tribunal since 1985. He has counselled young sex offenders but cannot – or refuses to – grasp the irony of this. Unknowingly, counselling young men imprisoned for similar sexual assault crimes perpetrated on his mother, all those years ago. Crimes eventuating in his own existence. Sykes and his mother – black activist, academic and author Dr Roberta Sykes – have never discussed her brutal rape – his conception. He learnt through a letter she wrote him, shortly after his sister Naomi’s twenty-first birthday.

Talking to him is difficult. No, talking to him is not difficult at all. Talking to him on this subject is. He sits in my office on the fifth floor of the university’s Bon Marche Building. He is tall and rangy and his legs seem to take up all the spare space. He has dark brown, almost liquid brown eyes and looks me square in the face when he speaks – except when we talk about what I have asked him here to talk about.

Sykes periodically zones off, staring out my window. Opposite are the chimneys from the old Carlton Brewery, and whenever a question gets too close, he just stares at them. There are many protracted silences and I ask him several times if he wishes to continue the interview. He does. And we do. Although I wonder why he has agreed to it, in the first place.

I think the answer is a simple one. I asked.

Russel Sykes has received no thorough counselling or therapy, and has spoken to virtually no-one about the rape of his mother and his subsequent conception. And not many people broach the subject with him.

“It’s not like I can ... it’s not like I can have a dinnertime chat or a chat with friends

about it. With some friends, I don't go there. Some friends probably know but they don't say anything," he says.

He knows he should seek professional help with it. He says formally, almost ritualistically: "It is an error not to. I know it.

"I once spoke to a colleague about it – he was just good and it was just OK. It seems a bit dark when I look at it sometimes. That's probably why I don't let my mind go there very much."

His isolation is palpable. This is an undeveloped side of who he is. He claims he hasn't thought it through thoroughly – he can't and doesn't want to – and has no slick, or even articulate answers to give, seemingly and erratically dissociating at any mention of the attack on his mother. I am left wondering what right I had even to have rung him up and asked him to talk to me in the first place.

He reminds me of someone in shock still – but only around the subject of his mother's rape. He is charming and smart and entertaining when talking about his work, or his own children. Or even mine. But I keep getting flashbacks to various death-knocks I have done in my job, where the person simply does not know what is going on – seemingly moving through the motions of their life on that particular day, making valiant attempts to function while processing their grief.

And it is a grief, here in my office with us. He didn't bring it with him. I conjure it up with my questions.

He eventually talks about it: "She wrote it in a letter – it was pretty bad. A lot of things fell in place. It explained a lot of things to me when I heard – our family, what sorts of things happened in it, and why I never knew my father. I knew because for some years...we weren't particularly close. It didn't feel like we were close for a long time... I

didn't feel nurtured by her. She was always busy, yeah. That's a very tough thing to say but it was true. I know she probably looks back and thinks I was a good kid and that but yes, it was probably as much about her having lived the traumas she's lived – a person to survive that would know how to detach from their emotions more than others perhaps.

“I was nurtured by my grandmother. So, if I didn't have that, I'd be a pretty detached human being in a lot of ways. You need that bonding process to happen and I guess it didn't really happen with my mother.”

There is a real sadness about this grown man. The little boy lost does not seem so many years ago. His sadness manifests as a sort of numbness – whether it is how almost inarticulate he is when talking about the issues around his mother and his conception; or the way he keeps avoiding talking about how he feels about the public disclosure. He is quite closed on the subject. It's not actually that he doesn't want to talk about it – I give him several opportunities to halt the interview – it is like he is unable to. The whole thing seems too shocking for him to fathom and he still, more than ten years later, has not found the words.

There is no doubt Sykes' relationship with his mother is, and has been, emotionally uneasy – how could it be any other way? Roberta Sykes was seventeen when she gave birth to her son – unmarried, Catholic, small town Queensland – and black. And it was at this early stage in her son's life she decided to keep his conception a secret from him. She writes at the end of the first book of her trilogy: ‘I saw no other option but to try, not merely to resurrect myself but to give Russel a healthy start in his own life. I was to assume the silence of the serpent as a cover for myself and my child, an umbrella to hold over both our heads for the next thirty years’.

But in the telling of her story, Dr Roberta Sykes tells her son's story, without consultation, publicly.

“Well, I looked at myself and thought: ‘This is a person – you read about these people in magazines and books and things like that’. But that’s me,” he says almost child-like, remembering how he felt after reading the letter. As if he doesn’t really believe what he is saying.

And he misses the irony of this statement, also. That he is one of “these people”, now in books and newspapers and magazines himself. The whole world can now read of his mother’s secret in three books – her three volume autobiography *Snake Dreaming* - and subsequent interviews.

But Sykes has never read them.

“I don’t go there. I don’t read those books. I don’t want to. The issue is not something ... it makes me very unhappy and I don’t know... maybe it would make me angrier or something. I don’t know.”

Again, in the telling of her/his story, there are discrepancies. One of the main reasons Roberta Sykes finally disclosed to her son – that he had to be a parent himself before she could tell him – is not true.

In an interview in Melbourne’s *The Age* (July 30, 2000) Dr Sykes explains at length: ‘He had to have his own child to understand the love you can have for a child. That, in the end, it doesn’t matter who the mother is or who the father is. I just wanted him to have the experience of having been bewitched by a child. And he is. Whenever she’s in the room, his eyes follow her.

‘My son had to be a man’.

But Sykes shakes his head. “No, I think that some of the ... she might be struggling with some of her memories, yes. That’s to put it politely. That’s why I don’t think the memory ...I was a man, yeah. I was a significant man by the time she told me but I wasn’t a father, no.”

Russel Sykes first became a parent at the age of thirty-three, three years after his mother told him of the attack which also became his conception.

He seems to realise how his story contradicts his mother’s, which is now in print and the public domain. He gently qualifies: “In her eyes, I was probably a father figure by then but she’s just looking back and thinking that was how it was. We didn’t have a discussion about it; there was no discussion about it.

“What happened is we had a number of words over the years about different things. Then just before that, my sister in the years coming up to me being thirty, my sister turned twenty-one and had a big party. She invited her father. No. That was what happened. My sister invited him, for good reason. Then he came down and he stayed at my house. Then mum wouldn’t come to the party, she was so angry about it, that I would have him in the house.

“That’s one of the pressures of being her son; she expects me to go with her – what she believes, what her views are. That’s a source of the problem between us, because I’ve got my own views on a lot of things. The disagreements seem to have a heavier consequence than they otherwise should. We should be able, with family, to disagree and then get on with things.

“Anyway, what happened is we hadn’t spoken for some time. So she wrote me a letter. She didn’t want that and I think she knew that I would be ready to understand things. I seemed to be looking very successful career-wise in that field. My work is recognised as

of a pretty good standard. I think she probably felt that I'd be able to handle it, that sort of information.

"I'm glad she did, actually. Knowing is better because it explains a lot about the family and myself. I could have gone off the rails, I guess, with that knowledge earlier. In some ways, I feel like it's thrown me a bit off the rails anyway, just ... it's made me stumble in some way. It did make me a bit angry with the world.

"I just saw the world in a different light."

In the same *Melbourne Age* interview, Dr Sykes says it was a bonus that her son was a psychologist: 'Because then he had a framework for understanding, not just my position that I'd taken all my life, but also his own position. He knew of the pain of disclosure'.

I ponder the letter his mother wrote him and wonder how much his psychology helped him when he read it. I wonder if he still has it, this letter that blew apart and at the same time, made some little sense of his life. He does – sort of.

"The letter? I probably read it once and I put that letter ... I hid it from myself. It was like I didn't need to read it again," Sykes says.

I look at him disbelievingly and ask him if he knows where the letter is now.

"Yeah. I think so. It's hidden."

His answer is so simplistic – again, almost childlike.

"I'm pretty sure that my grandmother intended for me to never know," he adds, out of the blue.

Regardless, Russel Sykes is glad his mother told him the truth about his conception, although he does believe there are secrets that should never be told.

"I don't know if that's one of them. I don't know." He stares out my window.

“Yeah, I think knowing did change my life for ever. I see things in a darker way now. Darker for want of a better expression. Maybe we’re socialised and programmed to believe that darker things are worse than lighter. But I mean, it just took a lot of positiveness away from me, I guess. I have to search a bit harder for it now. And it’s important, especially if I’m going to be a good parent, to be there for my children and, if I’m feeling darker, then I will avoid people. If I’m not feeling positive, how’s it to be hanging around? Who wants to be hanging around people like that? Who wants to be in the company of people who are not happy? So I put on a front.”

He has never spoken to his mother about the rape, his conception or that letter, but claims a deeper understanding of both his mother and his own upbringing. Although, by his own admission, he does not dwell on any of it for too long.

“Well, that’s kind of what I do nowadays I guess. I don’t put my mind to thinking about these issues too much. Sometimes my mind does get caught up but I just keep busy,” he says.

“Yeah, I mean, you know, I try and juggle things in my mind. But life is a gift and I’m lucky, in a way. I’m special in a way. Well, it’s easy in retrospect. You think ‘well, I was different’ and you now interpret things differently. Maybe everybody’s experiences are somewhat unique as an individual. Maybe that’s why I turned to psychology. I was searching in some ways for some meaning to my life as it was. I know I experienced a lot of racism as a kid, a lot of negativity just because of colour. Kids can be particularly cruel, they are anyway. Whatever they can do, whatever wound they can pick, they will. So I saw people treating other people in certain ways and I knew that race was big.

“Oh, yes, I ... yes, it’s like a world away but it’s ... yeah, it’s ... yeah, it’s affected me for sure. I see the world in another way, for sure since then.

“Once I knew, I thought ... I understood her to be a damaged person from all those experiences. There was no resolving or counselling in those days and I understood why she was an angry person as a young person. I saw her as quite angry – I’d just be extra kind to her after that. Understanding, tolerant – just changed.

“I just looked at her and thought ‘How did you do that? You lived through hell and you kept me’.”

Coming to terms with what happened to his mother – and I believe he hasn’t – is juxtaposed with coming to terms with a biological father who could rape and torture a woman, then leave her for dead.

“The only way I’d relate to them, is to get them. I would inflict serious harm.

“That would be a time to kill, wouldn’t it?” he asks.

The question hangs in the air between us, sharp and pointed. It has nowhere to go, this question. It is the sort easy to discuss hypothetically. In reality, it is impossible to answer. But he is not looking for an answer. Once again, he stares past me out my window. Before I can speak, he says: “Um, um, I always thought there was a balance of good and evil in the world but yeah, evil can be pretty evil.”

The interview is over and we decide to walk outside, to the fresh air, to take the photos. We wander slowly along the corridors of the university and head for the back of the Tower, where it is quieter and the light is more muted. Even though we walk slowly, I have to speed up every now and then to keep up – even at an amble, this man’s stride is long.

Despite it being non-teaching period, the Students’ Union is holding a BBQ behind the Tower on the hilly and awkward patch of grass UTS students laughingly call The Quadrangle. The music pumps and the smell of cooking sausages wafts across to us. We

get a few inquisitive stares but not many. Anything goes here, really.

But Sykes does seem to relax more. It has been an ordeal for him. I guess he believes the questions are over and for a while as we walk, I welcome the space, too. This has been a tough interview. But there is more I need to know, before we leave each other.

The photos, too, are tough. Not that we are searching for a carefree look – that certainly would not be indicative of the man or the interview – but he finds it hard, or unnatural, to relax in front of the camera. To let his guard down. He seems to have built such sturdy walls in the past ten years around the private, desolate space the ‘new’ knowledge about his mother engendered, that he now seems suspicious of a camera pointed at him. Perhaps he is fearful it might see right through him, and glimpse and record some of the reality that even he seems to have not yet faced.

And perhaps he is right to be suspicious, for the answers to my next questions explode around us in shock-waves.

“Yes. Forever, her life changed forever – and all of our lives, you know? All of us, the impact was immeasurable in all our lives,” he says, staring at the lens.

“It’s hard to balance it up with thinking that, if it didn’t happen, I wouldn’t be here.

“I prefer it didn’t happen and that I wasn’t here.”

Again, his words hang all around us, in the air. Heavily and thickly, this time. I can’t help myself and look quickly at the photographer to see if she also heard what I thought I just heard. She lowers the camera and just looks at him.

How can someone live with the thought of a pain so horrible and an experience so terrifying, inflicted on someone they love so much? To wipe out that pain would be to not exist.

I ask him: “Do you really mean you wish you didn’t exist?”

His answer is rapid: “Yeah, no-one should have that experience. I’d just rather my mum didn’t go through all that. I’d rather it didn’t ... it’s not something you can really think of in reality is it?”

Again, it is a question he doesn’t expect a response to. We finish taking the photos. He barely smiles in any of them, but that is fine. I tell him I think he should find someone professional to talk to. He readily agrees. I tell him I think he should then talk to his mother. He almost groans and says it is impossible.

We part. I can barely think clearly after this interview. Russel Sykes and his story stay with me for weeks and weeks afterwards. And the writing of this chapter takes months.

But some people’s stories have that sort of effect. Some people’s stories are just like that. There really aren’t the words to do them justice.



Photos by Dee Geary

DOROTHY McRAE-McMAHON



I first meet the Reverend Dr Dorothy McRae-McMahon in a newspaper clippings file.

There she is, splashed across centimetre column upon centimetre column of newspapers and magazines: female Uniting Church minister, mother, social justice fighter, grandmother – and lesbian.

The simple juxtaposition of these five labels tells just a bit of her story.

Scanning headlines in the major metropolitan papers and mainstream magazines around her coming out in 1997 is telling, if not unpredictable: Church split emerges over

lesbian leader (*SMH*, 14/7/97); Act of Faith, (*The Australian*, 26/7/97); A Challenge of Faith (*TIME*, 4/9/1997); Lesbian minister quits paid church post (*The Australian*, 2/9/97); Uniting Church leader resigns under pressure (*The Age*, 2/9/97); God made me this way, says lesbian cleric (*The Australian*, 7/11/97); and A Confession to Make (*The Weekend Australian*, 19/9/98).

But it seems, somehow, more gentle than would be expected.

I meet her again, shortly afterwards, throughout pages of her book *Everyday Passions: A Conversation on Living*. It is one of those books, hard to put down, where what a person actually thinks seems worth reading. A look into the heart and soul of a woman who has touched the hearts and souls of many, many people – on a religious front; on a family front; on a political front; on a female friend front.

I then meet her in person, in a busy coffee shop in the middle of Sydney.

For some reason, I am nervous. Perhaps it is what I have perceived, from reading about her, as her strong personality. Perhaps it's McRae-McMahon the politician who is keeping me on edge. Perhaps it is just having to ask seriously intrusive questions of a dignified, intelligent, older woman. About her sexuality.

And I really wonder what the hell I am doing here. Why I even need to know. And it crosses my mind to just leave. But of course, don't. I want to meet and talk with her.

The coffee shop is exceedingly noisy. I move tables three times before I am happy with my choice – as far away from the raucous sounds of the cappuccino machine as I can get. There is a potted palm brushing against my shoulder – I feel like I am hiding, waiting in fact to see her first.

When she arrives, I am overwhelmed by her gentleness. Her physical gentleness. She has softly greying hair, cut in an almost bob, and dark, yet bright eyes. We shake hands and as soon as I hear her voice, I relax. She just seems calm.

McRae-McMahon is a veteran when it comes to the media – I know this from my research. Most of her engagements with it have been controversial but I see this interview in purely personal terms. As much of the private woman she wants to give. McRae-McMahon's humanity involves a searing intellect, one I am aware of almost immediately.

We order coffee and chat idly until it comes. We then begin.

I ask McRae-McMahon when she was first aware of her own gayness. She said: "Well, I was fifty when I came out..." She misunderstands.

"No," I say. "When did you first really know?"

She looks at me, a little surprised: "Oh...in retrospect, I knew when I was a teenager. I did, but I had no name for it; my generation and the culture in which I moved. I've reached through my consciousness. I can't ever remember hearing the word said back then. I must, I suppose, have known people who had same sex relationships but I can't recall knowing it. As I said in my story, there were so many side issues about my person anyway, coming from an inhibited family sexually. People who didn't regard sex as dirty but they regarded it as so holy that it was almost unspeakable. You didn't talk about it in very clear terms because it was just so holy, and such a spiritual thing!"

She claims it is exactly her upbringing with the teachings of her intellectual and philosophical father which allowed her to come to terms with the truth about her sexuality.

“I didn’t have to work as hard as most people to come to terms with my sexuality because my father was a radical theologian. He was a philosopher and a theologian on a very fine line. He, in fact, always presented to us a much more open view of scripture and of God and he always asked us the question ‘Well, you know, if you take that stand, what are you saying about God? What God are you forming up here as you speak with your judgements? What are we talking about?’ He used to push and push us; he was a person that was very suspicious of absolute stands and easy dogma, especially if we judged other people.”

She stops suddenly, and looks down at her hands.

“Now I don’t know what he would have thought about me, had he been alive and I guess his generation would have had some problems, but he taught us to be very, very open-minded about thinking deeply and listening and watching and not just buying theories on things, particularly in relation to the bible.”

She sips her coffee and seems to be thinking – or rallying, I’m not sure which.

“In some ways people said: ‘Well, how did you work with self-hate?’” She laughs sardonically: “I had more self-hate as a person attempting to be a heterosexual and failing, than I ever had as a lesbian and succeeding. In other words, finding congress and integration and a sense of well-being and truth ... it’s very hard to describe, but it really is an integration of a person about understanding one’s identity and being able to live from it, even if that’s tough. I can live from it with fullness and freedom whereas attempting to be a heterosexual for so long – I was a very slow learner – was miserable and full of anxiety because I never could. I just could not do it!”

Dorothy McRae-McMahon was born in Tasmania in 1934, moving with her family three weeks later to Victoria. Born into a Methodist parsonage – her father was a minister – she describes her parents as totally engaged with the church their whole lives.

McRae-McMahon trained as a pre-school teacher before marrying an engineer named Barrie McMahon in her early twenties, and settled into a fairly conventional ‘50s’ married life.

Conventional, that was, until their first-born Christopher was about two.

By the time their second son Robert was born, Christopher had been irreparably brain damaged by a Salk vaccination, undiagnosed for two years.

McRae-McMahon claims this was the greatest test of her faith.

She writes in her book: ‘My own response to God was one of pleading. Please make our son well again. I know you can work miracles. I was only trying to care for him, surely you can stop his suffering.

‘Much later in my life, I felt free to be really angry with God who created a universe where such things could happen. Even had I then the view of life and God which I have now, I would still see a response of anger and protest at this tragedy as entirely appropriate’ (McRae-McMahon 1998, p. 37).

Christopher’s boundaries set the boundaries of McRae- McMahon’s family life for the next sixteen years, at which point she and her husband, with three more children after Christopher – Robert, fourteen, Lindy, eight, and Melissa, four – placed him in full-time residential care.

McRae-McMahon took over her first and only parish at the Pitt Street Uniting Church in Sydney in 1983. She was to be the parish minister there for the next decade.

It was a parish of social justice, attracting outcasts from other Christian parishes - including gay people. On January 15, 1987, Reverend Desmond Tutu visited the parish, took the pulpit and said: "Sisters and brothers - g'day!"

It made the TV news.

But the crusade for social justice came at a cost. For years, McRae-McMahon and her congregation were at the centre of a vicious hate campaign by National Action. It was mainly directed at McRae-McMahon's outspokenness on racism - both anti-Semitic and anti-Aboriginal - and homophobia. From the mid 1980s, the church was almost weekly vandalised with glue, ink and sump oil. McRae-McMahon received obscene phone calls - day and night. Even death threats. Bags of vomit and faeces were often left in her letterbox or thrown against her house. And one night, she returned home to the inner west to find a burning effigy in her front yard.

All incidents covered by the metropolitan press.

McRae-McMahon says: "I know that the media, particularly in Sydney, has the reputation of being fairly hostile to the church and I understand some of the reasons why that might be. But what I found, in my ten years at Pitt Street is that, when the church stands for something, when we actually live up to the hopes that the wider community has for us, that we will stand for justice and have some integrity and courage, then the media will in fact stand behind you.

"We had the reputation for standing on social justice issues over quite a long period and I think that there was some respect there, which surprised me."

So she already had a history with the press in her city, before she gave up her secret about her sexuality in public, more than ten years later. But there was more.

McRae-McMahon came very close to being outed by the neo-Nazi groups just as she was coming close to telling her family. She was still married – it was 1987 – to Barrie McMahon, and she recollects at the time he may have known of her sexuality conflict.

“It was around the same time. I remember it was before Barrie and I separated because they named him as my husband at that point. So it was just before – but he knew by that stage. But I hadn’t, at that point, told my children.

“Barrie did guess weeks before I made it clear; challenged me; but no, it was a shock to him. That was the hardest thing I ever have done in my life because he’s a man I respect and have a deep affection for and who put up with a lot over those years, I have to say.”

She looks at me as if I really know what she means – I can hardly begin to imagine what it must have been like, all those years, for both of them.

“The hardest coming out that I ever did was to my husband and children – especially my husband – because I didn’t want to hurt them. I mean, other people can make their judgements on things but I had the capacity to hurt them because Barrie wanted to stay married,” she says.

The possibility and threat of her secret spreading without her control or in her own time filled McRae-McMahon with fear. I can see it in her eyes as she remembers – a sort of haunting.

“It made you just go cold – cold with fear about what could happen, partly because the mode of doing it was so entirely out of my hands and that’s one of the things about people who tell your secrets that, if you want to tell secrets to anybody, you want to

have it in your hands in terms of the way you interpret what's happening for you and the mode in which you give that communication," she says.

The cappuccino machine screams from the other side of the coffee house. We both look over there, and wait until it stops.

"Of course, they (National Action) told it in an absolutely revolting, sick sort of way and, yes, that was a very frightening time on a number of fronts."

National Action spent two years sifting through her rubbish bin outside the church in Pitt Street, looking for information. Evidence to be used against McRae-McMahon and her church. It finally produced a pamphlet *Sodomy and Gonorrhoea in the Uniting Church*, including excerpts from letters and documentation found in the bin.

National Action sent the pamphlet to all major media houses.

McRae-McMahon isn't quite laughing but is fairly amused when she recalls the basis - and sum total of the rubbish search - for the pamphlet: "It was a letter to me from somebody I'd written to, a personal friend, who made some comment about a comment I'd made about exploring my sexuality, which could have meant anything. I mean, I knew I was secure in terms of, if I'd wanted to deny it.

"They also took loving letters that I'd drafted - not much but just a couple of things to women with whom I had no relationship apart from an ordinary friendly pastoral relationship, and implied that there was something more there.

"Actually, they were saying that I was having relationships all over the place with men and women - which was interesting! I had a fascinating sex life, according to them. But the church authorities were asking questions, and I never lied.

“They also had a mole in the congregation which at first I didn’t believe but later I realised they did – probably two at different times – people who were searching for ways of bringing down my ministry in particular but the congregation also.”

This seems to anger her almost more than the personal attacks.

“At the point where they searched, which was in 1986, and marched into the church with this leaflet which they put on the lectern of the church and distributed other little flyers, they also issued it to the media.

“I had letters from the media who picked up the racism issue.

“But I had letters from a couple of senior journalists who said ‘Dorothy, we have all this information about your sexuality. We just want you to know that we will not be using it’. And they didn’t.

“It went all over the country to all the major papers and they didn’t use it.

“So at that point, I could have been outed.”

Even now, all these years later, she still seems incredulous – but has thought long and hard about why.

“I think there were two things operating: one is, I realise now, that the media are fairly cautious about libel suits of course and they wouldn’t have known what they were dealing with at that point. But I really felt, also, that I was protected by the media at that point quite solidly.”

She and husband Barrie had already decided to tell their children, waiting until their youngest Melissa had finished her HSC. It was just weeks after this that McRae-McMahon moved out of the family home.

“Well, there was the second exposing of my secrets. That was in my home environment.”

National Action still waged a campaign of hate against McRae-McMahon and her congregation, painting, amongst other things, lesbian graffiti on her front gate.

“That meant my neighbours then looked on me with great interest,” she says.

“My Anglo Celtic neighbours pulled back from me; didn’t like being too near to anyone who was being attacked. It wasn’t so much my sexuality I don’t think, because they were quite progressive people, but they were afraid for their own property. Whereas my Italian-Australian neighbour, who had an adjoining property with me and was the very closest one, was just marvellous. Just came in and said: ‘If they come near you, Dorothy, we have a very big cousin called George, so just tell us and we’ll get George’.” She laughs at the memory.

“It was very warming, really warming. So that was a minor exposure just around me.

“By this time my family, of course, knew. So that was a secret that was put out there and it meant that I had to deal with it, whether I liked it or not.”

McRae-McMahon sees her coming out as a series of layers – unpeeling each separately. In her own time. Under her own control.

“The next layer out were friends and colleagues wider than my family, and I began to tell them. But it was interesting that I told many, many members of the parish – I don’t mean I made a point of telling them – but I just shared my life with them when it seemed appropriate, as my friends.

“The people I never ever told directly were the senior officers of the parish because I didn’t want them to be responsible for having my secret, because if anyone asked them

they would be either forced to lie for me or to out me, and I didn't want to put them in that position."

But Church authorities were beginning to ask questions.

"They were prepared to stand with me and take legal action against them (National Action). Then the lawyers had to ask me if there was any truth in any of this but I told them voluntarily anyway that much of it was highly untrue but that there was some truth at the centre of it.

"So the secret remained for some time, even though I never ever lied to anybody and I trusted a huge number of people. But the secret in some ways was not a secret; it was just not a public thing.

"It was a half secret." An interesting perspective.

"I think the thing is that, if you're a fairly public person in the sense of someone who the public recognises because of your role in the society and/or church or somewhere, there are layers and layers of coming out and different layers of secrets, if you like. I mean, the first one was a sort of exposure attempt. The second layer of secret would have been between myself and my closest family, and I had to then release the secret to them, which I did in 1987.

"So secrets are really complex when they are secrets that can threaten your employment and your standing. So I was, in a sense, forced to be secretive with the people I worked with most closely, in that parish.

"Now they knew, I'm sure – we both knew the truth. I mean, I'm sure they knew, couldn't help but know, and I knew they knew but officially it was still a secret.

Because I loved them and I did not want to put them in that position.

“So that was the complexity and I was relieved to be able to be completely honest with them much later but it was ten years between the first ending of the secret and the public ending.”

The public ending of the secret came in July 1997.

It was the Eighth National Assembly of the Uniting Church in July 1997, held in Perth, Western Australia. It was the last day of the Assembly and the debate was on church policy strategies regarding homosexuality. McRae-McMahon stood up in front of several hundred members of the church – and simply outed herself.

‘As we discuss the question of whether or not lesbian and gay people may be ordained, I want the Assembly to know that my own ordination is in question. As I do this, I ask myself, am I, by my very nature, a person who can never be the bearer of word and sacrament?’

‘Are those of us who are homosexual people perhaps those who the early disciples would have said are not following us but are casting out demons in the name of Jesus, those of whom Jesus said, If they are not against us, they are for us?’

‘Are we the true or false prophets?’

‘Jesus knew it would not be easy to answer that question, not as easy as quoting laws or texts, not as easy as identifying those who say Lord, Lord.’

‘By their fruits you will know them, he said.’

‘So all I can do is to ask you, my sisters and brothers, to make your judgement by looking at the fruits of ministry, of life and of faith. An elder in Terrigal (a little town in

NSW) prayed recently, Dear God, may we only find each other as Jesus has already found us. That is my prayer for all' (McRae-McMahon 1998, p. 100).

I have watched these moments over and over on a video of the forum. It seemed afterwards a noisy silence – one of those rustling, shuffling, mumbling silences. Finally, some in the auditorium rose to their feet and applauded her. Some had tears streaming down their faces. McRae-McMahon herself looked pale – almost transparently grey – as she resumed her seat. There was nothing triumphant in her walk - it looked like she was about to pass out – but there was a *fait accompli* air about her.

I ask her what she was thinking, walking back to her seat? What she was feeling?

“I remember, after I'd made the speech to the Assembly, here I am amongst two hundred and fifty people, even turning around to walk back to my seat I just knew that I had to look at every single person in that Assembly differently, except for the people who knew I was going to do it. But I had to look – had to keep going and sit down.

“Numb, really but also sort of light,” she finally answers.

In her book, McRae-McMahon speaks of ‘a sort of amazing lightness of being’. She writes: ‘I sat down and experienced the love of God, of my partner and my friends washing over me. I felt emptied of everything else, as though I had given my whole being into that moment and it had not yet returned to me’ (McRae-McMahon 1998, p.101).

But within six weeks, McRae-McMahon resigned as the National Director of Mission for the Uniting Church – the second highest ranking position in the Uniting Church.

She was not actually asked to resign but knew she had to, or damage the church extensively.

McRae-McMahon believes the media treated her with respect and calmness after her revelations.

“They were great, absolutely. Without exception they were very, very respectful and very faithful in what they actually wrote. I found it a remarkable thing because I’ve experienced the media before and, in the past, I’ve always felt ‘Well, I do want to talk to them. I know they’ll probably distort what I say, that’s a risk I have to take’ and so, when it came to this moment, I had decided actually when I went to Perth that I would speak to no media at all.

“Half way through it, the church media said to me: ‘Well, come on, you owe it to the church to give us your words for this’ so I said to myself: ‘Well, I’ll only speak to the church media’ but I then realised that, unless I spoke to the secular media, they would use their own words to describe what I had done. I was stupid and naive to think that I could get away with not addressing the media directly.

“So I went into it with some anxiety but they were immaculate, really immaculate, in their honest reporting of what I said and did. I was deeply grateful to each and every one of them.

“I actually think that a lot of them, from the way they related to me, did respect me but also cared quite deeply about the issue and feel it is a really primary injustice. I actually do believe that and that therefore, as responsible members of the media, I think they wanted to play their part in opening up the secret and reducing it to where it no longer becomes a painful secret.

“I actually believe that.”

McRae-McMahon alludes to an almost subconscious collective mind as well as individual editorial policy when analysing the relatively gentle media response to her coming out.

“Sub-conscious, I think, but some of it would be policy because the length of the articles that were let through – and I mean I was approached by the Deputy Editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* to write something myself and she paid me to do it. I mean, that’s really astounding stuff - most expensive bit of writing I’ve ever done! Most rewarding to me financially, I mean.”

McRae-McMahon believes there is a natural pace or time for everything - her coming out publicly was just a part of her journey – it was simply time. Everything was in place.

“I did it for several reasons. One is that we were, at this point, formally discussing the issue and, although I don’t buy the thought that gay and lesbian people are any more biased than heterosexual people on the subject...it’s funny how heterosexual people think they’re neutral on the subject and that these other people over here are biased whereas, in fact, they’re just as biased in their own direction. Everyone comes from their own life experiences and you can’t enter another person’s life experience. Even though I don’t buy that, I still felt, for the sake of my own integrity, I needed to say where I was coming from in the whole debate, so I was really free to debate it.

“The other main reason probably was that the church, at all times, talks about people as though they are ‘those people over there somewhere’ and I just felt that I needed to say to the church ‘No, we’re here; we love you. We’re here and you know us’.

“It was also to challenge the church and say ‘Come on, if you have received our gifts and recognised us over decades and have believed it was in the interests of the church to

do that, now face who I am and where those gifts are coming from. Don't be such hypocrites'. I mean, I feel quite strongly about that because everybody knows there have been gay priests in particular for centuries. I know a lot of them and I know who they are.”

McRae-McMahon has strong convictions on secrecy and confession, simply because she has lived them. It is not hard for words to fall from her mind, mouth, and heart - words that have a poignant resonance of personal experience.

“If you're a private person in the sense of you're not in any public type position - in other words, if that woman there wrote to the *Herald* and said 'Oh, by the way, I'm a lesbian', people wouldn't have the faintest idea what that would mean.

“But if you're a more public person, the layers of secrets are different and have a different impact when they're told because you set the stakes very high. My boss said that to me, when I told him I was about to come out at the Assembly. He said: 'Oh, Dorothy, you've set the stakes very, very high for us' because, had I been in a parish ministry, it would mean I would have had to hold the confidence of one group of people. Because I was in an international staff position and had a public persona whether I liked it or not – a sort of representative position – it had much greater consequences than it would have had.

“Because the other thing is ... the flip side of that is, if you are a person who has a certain level of status for whatever reason, the fact that you give the secret out is, of course, enormously powerful. Therefore the enemies of that secret have to really try to destroy you because you are so powerful.

“In other words, you have earned your standing and therefore, when you release the secret, it's got your standing in behind it and the respect of people would normally have

for you, which means that people who would normally ... well, that woman there says she's a lesbian – suspect she's not – I don't know her," she smiles at me, pointing discreetly, "it would not carry the weight and, apart from her intimate friends, no-one would think 'Oh, well if she is, I'd better think about this again'.

"Whereas if a person with some standing in the community and/or the church gives out the secret, there would be a whole section of people who normally would have held another viewpoint who would say 'Oh, oh, goodness, I'd better think!' "

Living a lie, or semi-lie, with her husband for more than thirty years took its obvious toll on their relationship. Although she claims not to have any real understanding of her dissatisfaction until so much later in life, on reflection she knows she was never attracted to men.

Her children and her work for social justice became her main focus. Until, through her work, she came into the company of gay women.

"I was very confident as soon as I decided about it. I had, as I said in the book, some theories that I might be bisexual although that was such a strange thought, if I really think about it, because I knew that I was not attracted to men."

Her ministry attracted many Christians from the gay world, unable to fit into conventional parishes.

"As soon as I set foot among lesbians, even without sexual activity, I knew who I was. It was just like finding you're a monkey instead of something else. It was really an extraordinary feeling and that's where people who are opposed to us don't understand the nature of the secret.

“They think it’s about secret sex acts. It isn’t. It’s about your very identity and being, about who you are and loving relationships, which is not just about sexual acts any more than their loving relationships are just about sexual acts. I think in some ways, when I look at parts of the church, it seems to me that the secret stuff cloaks an obsession actually. Now I don’t say that about everybody but I think I’m astounded on how much time our opponents spend thinking about sex! I’m just astounded! I don’t think about sex. Most of those ten years I just went about my business and almost forgot who I was except for feeling secure in it.

“I don’t think about it daily. I mean, I’m living whereas they seem to be constantly thinking about it.

“I would have to say I think that tells us more about them than it does about us.” I agree with her and the cappuccino machine starts up again but this time, she doesn’t wait for it to stop. She raises her voice slightly, so she can keep on her train of thought without interruption.

“For a start, you don’t know what I do in my private life and it’s interesting that, as soon as one says ‘I’m lesbian’ people think they know.

“If you tell me you’re heterosexual, I don’t know what you do in your private life. You have just told me that you are attracted to the opposite sex and I have told you that I’m attracted to the same sex. What we actually do, however, is still unknown to us and I find that very interesting because that has been said to me a few times.

“I understand why people say it because it’s because of the secret in a way. With people being attached to same-sex relationships, all sorts of speculations are seen. So in a way, if I tell you something about my private life which would not be of import to you at all

or of high significance to you, if we were all just accepting that some people are gay and some are straight.

“If we were just accepting of that, it would not be of great interest. People would not think ‘Ooh, I wonder what they do?’ if they have just told me something about their private life. Not that I think you’re thinking that but it’s a perception.

“I’m waiting for the day when you don’t have to make statements at all. It’s just a matter of, when I meet you at a party, I say ‘This is Aileen; she’s my partner. Who’s this friend of yours?’ sort of thing, which would be an introduction to you of the person that I love and the fact that it is of the same sex is of no import. But until we get to that day, it’s a startling thing because it has been held a secret.

“I just move around people who say ‘What’s the problem?’ and that’s very encouraging. It’s wonderful and that’s because the secret is beginning to be zeroed out.

“I get letters ‘How dare you engage in anal sex?’ ” I look up at her and smile. She laughs out loud, and I join in: “That is not one of my options, actually.

“I know, they are funny – bizarre actually – I mean, there’s a whole thing about that without facing that it’s the prime way of contraception to some cultures and it’s also quite common in heterosexual activity.

“What are we talking about, anyway? What is it that is so demonic about this activity? What is it?” she asks.

I can’t quite believe I am sitting in a Pitt Street café, discussing anal sex with a Uniting Church minister. Well, not exactly discussing – I was just really listening. The cappuccino machine bursts into life again, but is not quite distracting enough.

McRae-McMahon continues: “Well, you could say ‘unnatural’ maybe but there are lots of things that are not exactly straightforward in terms of those sorts of things but it’s not unnatural. It may be perfectly natural as another option. I mean, people do it!”

I nod, obediently.

“But the thing is, people are puzzled by lesbians. I started to say I read a history of lesbians, attitudes to lesbians over the centuries and very, very often it’s been ‘What are they doing? Nothing serious and how can you have serious sexual activity without a penis engaged for a start and therefore it’s really these women having a bit of a cuddle and probably because they can’t get a man because they’re too ugly and, I mean, there’s no harm in it anyway’.

“So you tap into the whole community attitude about women being basically a receptacle for sperm, if you like. That’s why you don’t get criminal action – it’s not a crime to engage in lesbian activity. Almost no culture has it as part of its criminal code, whereas lots of cultures have male sex activity, some sex activity, as criminal.”

Claiming to know many gay people, secreted within the church both nationally and internationally, McRae-McMahon says: “Once you move into the gay/lesbian scene, you enter all sorts of networks, and I know they are in every church – conservative churches, radical churches, Catholic church, Anglican church – we are there as their ordained ministers and priests and the church sort of knows this although it pretends it doesn’t.

“If the church is not wanting to explore this secret it’s because it’s not wanting to explore sexuality in general. It’s going right back to Augustine and possibly beyond. It has a huge duality in its sphere of human life with the flesh as being somehow of the devil and the soul as being of God, which I think is a nonsense and not at all consistent

with theology at its best. But because that's there, the church hardly needs to talk about sex at all.

“Now I'm not sure why it's coming forward now. It's partly because often things are of their time and I'd say it's the work of the Holy Spirit actually. But why does a women's movement arise? Why do the slaves suddenly decide they can be free? It's just hard to say. It's as though there's some build-up in the corporate human psyche which says 'OK folks, this is our moment. Let's begin to be brave and open up the secrets, tell the secrets'.

“I mean I could do it partly because I had so many people around me who loved me – all sorts of people, straight people, families and lesbian people, Christian people and non-Christian people and therefore had a sense of a certain cherishing even as I went towards that, even though I knew in the end you were alone when you exposed the secret. It still felt as though there'd be somebody there to pick me up and there were, more than I ever imagined were there.

“But people who keep the secret feverishly and fearfully are often people who have much at stake in terms of the possibility of relationships being taken from them if they expose themselves – or work or accommodation, all of those things regardless of any discrimination laws – and no-one around them to protect them. So I was in a privileged position at that time to wear the weight of it.

“Well, quite frankly, there have been ordained women around the world in churches for some decades now and I've moved around in an international position as well. If we all stood up, really the church would be staggered at how many of us leaders are gay or lesbian - and really senior leaders in the world church.

“It’s another secret. This is interesting and I actually think it’s a very big secret and it’s the sort of secret that many people experience in their own families if they’re gay or lesbian. They experience the sort of secret where people know but they don’t want it said, because if it’s said they will have to deal with it and they have no way to deal with it.

“I mean, in those sorts of circumstances, the idea is that because the church is used as a reference point whether we like it or not for what is supposed to be morality, until the church really works out how it can deal with all of this and release everybody to freedom and to acceptance and affirmation, people don’t know what to do. They really don’t know how to work with it at all because they have so deeply imbedded in them two things really.

“One thing is the biblical references that the church puts in there all the time and the other is probably, I suspect, some fairly primeval taboos which may well have been to do with the survival of tribes and stuff like that. There are all sorts of things like that going on there.”

She stops suddenly and changes gears. She looks at me, seriously, and says: “Nothing ever prepares you for the moment of actually coming out in a public sense and wearing the weight of that – perhaps most particularly because I think I had been a fairly widely respected person.

“I’ve been a radical person in the church and I knew not everybody agreed with me or liked me but I had a wide circle of people who related to me with respect. Once you do it, every group that I then entered afterwards, I didn’t know who was there, I didn’t know what they would have or how they would respond to me, so my life dramatically changed and I had to work really hard not to become quite paranoid about things. And I

did have to do some withdrawing after the first six months because it was so stressful and I scared everyone by having what they thought was a budding heart attack.

“But it wasn’t – my heart was one hundred per cent fit. It was just stress. It was just stress. It was spasms in my body which were stress and I had to take that seriously after six months when I’d gone through huge, huge trauma. I did hibernate and write my book for three months but it was just that sense that your whole has shifted, all of a sudden, in a most massive way.

“There has been pain in coming out - quite a degree of pain. Letters beginning with Dear Filth; pain of the threat to my ordination; leaving my job. But it has been worth it. I would never decide to do otherwise.”

The cappuccino machine splutters across the café again and I wait until it slows to thank her for her generosity, for her time and her honesty and her ideas. She has challenged and shocked and taught and delighted me.



Photos by Dee Geary

MICHELLE TESS



It was meant to be a lesson like any other lesson. At this time of the year – first semester – I always ask a guest in for a writing under pressure exercise for my students. I always seek out an indigenous person, mostly activists, generously willing to share their stories dealing with the legacy of the Stolen Generation.

No different this time, except I was teaching over an intensive weekend in Melbourne.

I run it like a press conference. The students research the subject, ask questions and then write a piece for publication just prior to Sorry Day, or the Journey of Healing (May 26).

This particular semester, Stolen Generation survivor Lyn Austin graciously came to my classroom. She told of the horror of being taken from her mother at the age of ten,

compounded by the horror of systematic physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her foster mother.

She also spoke of the horror of systematic rape by the son of her foster parents².

Everyone seemed to engage. The hard questions were difficult for my students – first time journalists – so I asked them and showed them how.

I remember noticing one student – a particularly brilliant young female lawyer, wanting to learn how to write – looking a little vague. She somehow seemed all of a sudden smaller. Definitely quieter than usual. I remember thinking it was odd because she was usually so focused.

I stopped her at the end of the session and asked if she was feeling all right. She eventually stumbled out that “something” had happened to her when she was eleven.

Suddenly realising how out of my depth I was, I grabbed something known – I suggested she write about it, imagining a sexual assault of some sort. I explained writing often provides a catharsis for pain and confusion. I said she never ever had to show anyone what she had written, that it could only be for her – just try and get the poison out.

This talk and the session set off a series of devastating consequences for this student. She ended up in a psychiatric unit for two weeks, depressed and suicidal.

I got a call from her asking if I could organise an extension for an assignment. She shared a little more of her story – the first time she had spoken to anyone about it since a particularly traumatic disclosure at the age of fifteen, her psychiatrist and a friend she had made in the psych unit.

I got off the phone feeling not so much guilty for introducing systematic rape as a topic

² See pages 71-85

into the course but fairly responsible for helping her manage to get through the rest of it.

Hers is a story of sexual, physical and emotional abuse framed by terror for five years, from the age of eleven to fifteen. It was her uncle, married to her father's sister.

He also abused - sexually, physically and emotionally – his own daughter, my student's cousin.

It was their secret.

The next intensive weekend of study we spent together, the student hovered after class. She handed me an envelope and asked me to read it. It was the beginning of a manuscript – the 30,000 word beginning of a manuscript – written throughout in the third person.

After lecturing all day, I was tired, very tired so crawled onto my hotel bed and began to read, expecting to stop, have a shower and venture out for food. Three hours later I lay the manuscript down on the bed, wiped my eyes and simply stared at the wall.

While reading, praying that it was a fiction. Willing it to be fiction. Praying that it could not possibly be true.

The “something” that happened to her when she was eleven was almost unspeakable - indeed, had been unspeakable for the better part of fifteen years by both herself and her family.

The book begins as she is about to kill herself, eleven years after the first attack on her small, not yet formed body. She is about to throw herself from a platform under a train. It quickly flashes back to this man, this uncle, smashing her tiny white pet rabbit against a garage door, because she would not stop crying, because she hurt so much, because he had raped her...

On the second page: ‘No-one will believe you, he would mock as he watched her pick up her discarded clothes and cover her body. People believe adults, not kids. You made me do this. If you tell, I will shoot your mother. I have a gun. I will shoot all your family and you will live with me. She recognised the contradiction and suspected these were lies, but the doubt was omnipresent and powerful enough to keep her silent. She remained mute as the fear and shame intensified’.

The following semester, I once more travelled to Melbourne to teach an intensive class, and this student was once more in my class. By this stage, she had virtually finished her manuscript and I had been editing it for her. We had become closer – we actually became friends. I don’t know when that really happened, the crossover between lecturer/student to friends. It didn’t feel compromising. It didn’t feel out of place. It felt like exactly the right place and exactly the right time.

I asked her if she would take part in an interview with me for this book – if she would talk to me about her desire to make her secrets public. She couldn’t believe I would be interested – she couldn’t believe I wanted to write about her.

But she agreed.

Michelle Tess³ is twenty-four years old. She is a junior lawyer in one of the biggest law firms in Australia.

I invite her to my home on the Central Coast, just north of Sydney, to do the interview.

I live by the water, next to a nature reserve where the light, filtering through the canopy of trees, is perfect for photos. We walk along the reserve. A flock of pelicans power their way through the sky, high above – a perfect arrow. If you stand silently it is possible to hear multiple wings flapping. We do. And hear.

³ name change at subject’s request

We watch them in flight and she laughs as I remember a three year old friend,

squeaking from my deck when he first saw one in flight: “Look – a flying dinosaur!”

Tess is nervous. She is self-conscious and uncomfortable. She giggles ominously and makes jokes about her body. I am so aware she hates being the centre of attention in this way – this must be hell for her.

She has a beautiful face – her Italian darkness frames an intense intelligence which darts from her eyes. She is going through what she terms a “fat” phase, but I don’t see fat. I see brave and smart and still here, a monumental feat.

She is skittish, and holds herself rigid. But the walk has done us some good – pelicans always lift spirits.

We decide to go to lunch together and do the interview by the sea.

Driving to a restaurant at Avoca Beach, I point out my children’s school. I say, without really thinking: “At least I know they are safe there.” I don’t really know why I say this or what I mean – perhaps school ethos. Perhaps the teachers I have made a real point of getting to know. Perhaps the ammunition I hope I have given my daughters to deal with life. I don’t know. But I say it: “At least I know they are safe there.”

Tess agrees and nods and says, almost under her breath: “That is the most important thing.”

Keeping daughters safe. Keeping children safe. And there is real grief in her voice.

By now there are some daunting looking clouds flying around the sky and the sea swells onto the beach as we arrive. It is going to rain – I can smell it in the air.

Another wet interview.

We eat outside, but under cover. I am cold and I can't believe how hard this interview is. I have read her manuscript; I have discussed its contents with Tess; I have thought about my questions; and I have told her she doesn't have to do this.

She is now my friend and to ask her to talk about events which have damaged and scarred her spirit – her very essence – is hard. My enthusiasm is at an all-time low and I hope she cannot tell. I am really cold and it seems to well up inside, almost incapacitating. I wrap myself in a beach towel, and look ridiculous. Tess laughs at me. At my ridiculousness. It doesn't matter.

It is difficult to garner any semblance of professional detachment – I feel this isn't going to work.

But there is a dynamic here, generated by Tess. Although I am sure she does not wish to speak about this, she still wants to, for me. And I almost wish I hadn't asked her.

We begin.

Tess has never spoken of actual incidences – never uttered the words. She says she can't. In her manuscript, she writes of several shocking attacks by her uncle. But she has never spoken of what actually happened.

An intensely deep silencing. She calls it “the quiet”.

“I know in my head, in my visions – a feeling and a fear – but it's really hard to put into words. It's so hard to explain in words what it was like. I mean, how do you explain how scared – to say ‘I was scared’ well, you know, I see a moth and I'm scared. It's just a different kind of scared.

“Even now there's just not the words. I don't know, it was just terrifying – especially at

first; but then we got used to it. It was just a waiting game. We'd go there and until it happened – we already knew it was going to happen – but until it happened we couldn't relax. We'd just wish it would hurry up and happen and then we could just go and play and be safe. It was that whole waiting for something to happen, when we knew it inevitably would.”

Her uncle stalked her, even in other family members' homes. In her book, one incident is made the more despicable because she thought she was safe. It was Easter and a family gathering – a huge, Italian family gathering, at her grandmother's house. She went and played the piano in the room next door to the kitchen. She thought she was safe.

But her uncle came in, sat beside her on the piano stool, placed her on his lap and raped her. He then told her he would kill her if she said anything: ‘Tell anyone about that and I will kill you. I will kill your Mum and Dad. Believe me I will.

‘And she knew He would. By God, she knew He would’.

At the age of fifteen when a teacher finally extracted a small part of the truth from her; when her parents were rushed to the school and she was rushed from her classroom and the people from Community Services Victoria (CSV, now Department of Human Services) rushed to interview her, she still didn't say much.

“There were two people; one was a woman, one a man. I just looked at the woman. They asked what happened and I couldn't say it for five or ten minutes. I didn't know the words.

“So they said: ‘We'll make it easier for you’. They started at this end of the spectrum. They said: ‘Did he touch your chest’ and stuff like that. I just thought: ‘Oh, I bloody just wish’. They asked if he did anything else. I said yes and they ... you know ...”

I look at her and her brilliant mind – the one I know so well from the work she has produced for me; from the debates we have had in class; and the witty exchanges across email. And I wonder at her inability to articulate. I watch her struggle.

And I feel the long stretch of her uncle’s hand – how torturing the little girl is not enough. How raping the teenager is not enough. How the young woman is still grappling to escape his suffocating, life-threatening, terrorising hold.

How important her public disclosure is – this act of writing a book.

She remembers going home that night with her parents after the school disclosure and not sleeping. She remembers getting up the next morning – and going back to school.

And that was that.

“Nothing. All I remember is I didn’t sleep that night and I went to school the next day. Then everything was just back to normal. I didn’t have to go there ever again. I had to go to CSV again one more time and speak to them. A lot happened, without me knowing; Mum and Dad discussed going to people and all this kind of stuff but I didn’t have much more to do with it at all.”

Tess’s uncle also abused his own daughter – her cousin. They were the same age and easy to capture. When Tess finally told some of the truth at the age of fifteen, it was largely to try and save her cousin.

“Firstly, when I told them, they were more concerned immediately about her because they knew I wasn’t in any danger but they knew that she was still there. So apparently straight away that night the police – I think the police had to do it – went over there and spoke to him. I think they went to her school the next day or soon after that. So they were more concerned about her. But I only ever saw her one more time.

“I saw her at the bus stop because her school was next to mine – we didn’t go to the

same school. She came up to me and said: 'You wrecked my family. We had a deal and that deal was that we wouldn't tell anybody' and I remember thinking that the only reason I told ... It was because I kept thinking it's got to stop happening to her. Because I could go home after whereas she couldn't – she had to live there."

Tess was told that her cousin denied to the authorities that her father was abusing her. And Tess's parents, even though they were urged to press charges, didn't. She has only recently discovered the reason was because she had been so upset, her parents didn't want to upset her any more.

They also did not talk about what had happened to their daughter.

"No-one really said anything, not really. Dad didn't and Mum told me that she told Dad not to talk to me about it. I think she thought it was ... Dad just went really strange. He didn't hug me after that or touch me or ... stuff like that. And Mum told him not to talk to me about it because it would make me upset. So Mum occasionally would say something but pretty much we just never talked about it ever again.

"Because nothing was said, I filled the silence myself."

But things have changed since then. Psychiatric units, wanting to kill herself, lost job opportunities. Lies and silence.

"For me, telling is really scary. But so far the people that have known have not reacted anything like I imagined. People actually get mad at him and don't get mad at me - or they don't think I'm disgusting. Or people will even respond by saying something similar happened to them. Apparently it's common but I just thought I was the only one.

"You can know something rationally but not believe. Like I know, I know in my rational lawyer head that it wasn't my fault; it is always an adult's fault if they do that to

a child. A child does not have the capacity to want that or say no or get away. My intellectual head knows that but” She trails off.

I look at her plate and realise she is merely fiddling with her food. Moving it around the plate. And I know she is unable to swallow. I should have remembered this – she has explained to me that when she is made to talk of her uncle, her body relives copious oral rapes – and she cannot swallow.

I have a slight impression of trigger questions bombarding her brain with memories of her horror. Visual, bodily memories.

I push my plate aside. I should have remembered. I feel even colder and wrap my multi-coloured beach towel more firmly around my shoulders.

It isn't that cold.

“To get it published now would be like saying: ‘This is how it was’. There will be no more being quiet about it. This is what happened, this is how it was, this is what he did. I think I would finally feel like he didn't have any more power over me and the secret was gone, the quiet was gone. And, if people hated me because they read it, thought I was bad or disgusting or what ever else, well at least I would know that. I wouldn't live in fear of everybody hating me.

“I don't really believe that anybody will want to publish it and read it, deep down, even though I want to. It's like I'm so scared that everybody, if they found out, will hate me and never talk to me. Even last night I was thinking ‘Why would Sue want me around her children?’ because this happened to me, and dumb things like that.

“Everybody else hates him so much more. I want to hate him but I don't know how to hate him. The only one I can hate is myself for it happening. That is why I hurt myself, by not eating or over-eating or whatever else I did. The only way I could get mad was at

myself. So I'd get mad at myself for getting ninety per cent, not one hundred, or I'd get mad at myself for this and that. Because how do you get mad at someone you can't get back at?

“But setting it out in a book, it tells the crimes he committed, and then makes that public. And with that information out there, you're either going to touch more people who need to be warned, the parents who do really watch out for the signs and be careful of who their kids are with. Then there are the people who it is happening to.

“What you're actually doing is giving them a voice. Potentially you are giving a lot of silenced boys and girls, a voice.”

Dissociation has played an insidious and permeating role in Tess's life as a survivor. She is still reeling from the repercussions, nearly ten years later.

As a child, like nearly all survivors of childhood abuse, she learnt how to virtually leave her body as the abuse was meted out. She calls it “nicking off”. Although it may have saved her from losing her mind as a young girl, dealing with it within the world she is now trying to function in is fraught with danger.

I know now this is what she attempted to do in my classroom when Lyn Austin visited. But because of the nature of the class – a journalism press conference to be written up within an hour of the discussion – she had to make herself listen.

She remembers: “I thought I don't want to fail journalism so I'll have to listen to what she's saying but when she started talking about what her step-family had done to her, or the family that she was put into, and the stuff that happened to her – it wasn't so much what happened to her but hearing that stuff just set off a trigger ... I can't think of her

separately as her, and not personalise it. So all of a sudden, all of these memories started coming into my head, you know...

“I remember we had to write under pressure afterwards, an article. So I had to be there, I couldn't go away. In Criminal Law Class, I went to class and, if they talked about sexual offences, I'd disappear. I'd sit there and go ... but when we came back to theft or something nice in crime like that, I'd come back; and I just didn't do that question in the exam.

“I did really badly in criminal law.” It is, astonishingly, an admonishment.

It begins to rain, gently at first. And then harder. The beach is suddenly awash and I cannot tell where the water ends, as the waves surge into the rain and the rain becomes the waves.

The rain splatters on our table and we move it in, towards a wall.

We order coffee and I try to warm my fingers around the mug. I let the steam settle on my face – momentarily warming it. But it only makes me colder, as it cools. I watch the steam lift from Tess's mug. She lights perhaps the tenth cigarette of the interview. She talks to the waitress, flippantly, and I watch. They laugh together as if nothing heinous ever happened to her as a child. And I want to scream and throw things and hit out.

How can these things happen? Why do these things happen? How is she meant to continue functioning normally in such an abnormal world, where children can be systematically raped in silence?

And I know I am far too emotionally involved in her story to do either the interview or this chapter justice. She is too close a friend and my children echo in my head and I wonder where they are and in a way, I wish I knew nothing of this story.

But then I realise the gift she has brought to my life. I look at her and see the enormity of survival. What she has taught me in such a short space of time – a knowledge of exactly how fragile life really is and how careful we must be about who we trust, particular as the guardian of children. How never to take anything for granted. Ever.

Tess once told me that since she broke her silence, she thought about the terror her uncle imposed on her every ten minutes of every waking day – and in her dreams too.

“How many times a day do I think about it now?” she looks toward the sodden beach.

“It’s much better now – only about once an hour.”

It is a desolating moment of the interview.

“People have tried to talk to me about, um, moving on – I don’t know what ‘moving on’ means. I thought, by keeping myself busy and not thinking about it, that was getting over it. But it’s not. I think actually being able to think yes, this happened, but this isn’t me; it’s something that happened to me, it’s not me. If I can one hundred per cent believe that, then I’m over it, then I’ve moved on, if I can believe that it’s not me, it’s something that just happened.

“Yeah.”

We sip our coffee quietly together. I look at my watch and wonder about collecting my children from school. I want to collect them early, just to have them near me. But I wait. And we continue.

Tess talks of another dissociative episode, six months before I met her.

It was a work function – not her law firm but a part-time job as she finished her degree – and one of her colleagues offered to drive her home. She liked him but simply regarded him as a colleague. But he had had a little too much to drink – and tried to kiss her.

“I just left – I mean, I was still there but I wasn’t. I can’t remember anything about what happened in the car. And in the weeks which followed – I found myself in bizarre places, doing bizarre things.

“It was about a month - and that’s when I tried to kill myself and the police were involved and I ended up in the ‘nut’ house.”

There is record of a phone call to a helpline made at this time from Tess’s home by a little girl, about eleven-years-old, claiming her uncle is raping her. She was twenty-two at the time and has no recollection at all.

This dissociative episode is still impacting on her life. Tess went to court in March 2001 to face charges of making false report to the police and menacing phone calls. She was not convicted but placed on a bond for two years and ordered to pay \$4,000 for the waste of police time.

In April 2001 she went up for admission to practice as a lawyer before the Victorian Board of Examiners. Twenty-five articled clerks from her firm did – 24 were accepted.

Tess is turned down.

She rings me in tears. Heaving sobs from a place far further than the bottom of her heart.

“It’s because of the bond,” she weeps. “They said they couldn’t set a precedent - no-one on a bond has ever been admitted. They said I can try next year.

“What a loser – how come he did all those things to me and I am the one ending up in court? What a bastard...how long will this go on...I need it to stop...”

Her company could not believe she was not admitted. Questions were asked. Tess told

some of her story, to a select number of people. Her bosses listened – and then acted.

“I just don’t want people to feel sorry for me and I’m scared that people will feel sorry for me. I’m not scared; I just don’t want people to feel sorry for me – maybe sad or mad – but not sorry.

“I don’t want them to treat me like I’ll be a crap lawyer or like a fragile person they can’t be mean to. I just want to be normal and to be treated like a normal person.”

The week Tess hears she is not admitted by the Board of Examiners and rings me, I feel helpless and useless. It all seems so never-ending. Nothing I say means anything much, at this point. I decide to do something ‘happy’ for her – so I take her manuscript and ring a publisher and it takes three days of my pestering phone calls before she rings me back.

I tell her some of Tess’s story – and my involvement with her – and ask if she is interested in reading her manuscript. She listens. She agrees.

I ring Tess straight away and tell her the news. I explain it means nothing really except that a publisher didn’t say no straight away. I tell her to be ready for rejection – that apart from being a highly confrontational topic, no-one is published on a first phone call.

I hear her smile. I feel it beaming down the phone at me, all the way from Melbourne. It is powerful, like her.

“Oh, suej, just let me enjoy this. Let me enjoy this moment.”

She laughs and the phone echoes with freedom and happiness.

And her healing continues – slowly.

The Board finally admitted her when her two year bond was completed but then her admission was appealed by a member of the public – a man she made a false claim against whilst in the dissociative state for almost a month.

It takes many more months; a trip to the Victorian High Court; and hundreds of thousands of dollars until Tess is admitted by the Victorian Board of Examiners.

The press got hold of the story, and the *Herald Sun* – a Melbourne tabloid – went to town.

Tess rings one night at midnight, in the middle of her admission process, in tears again. I can hardly understand what she is sobbing down the phone. But when I hear what she is actually saying, I can barely believe it.

“The headline says *Sex Hoaxer, Liar may be allowed to Practise Law...*” she manages.

Time sort of stood still for me, as the words sunk in. This is tacky journalism, at its worst. This is imbalanced and inaccurate and false journalism. It is selective – the emphasis and the quotes – and selected for all the wrong reasons.

I hear my young friend on the other end of the phone, and I know, in an instant, this is dangerous journalism.

She endures weeks of bad headlines and scrutiny as salacious details only are published.

Then months more of waiting and legal wrangling – and extended holidays of Board members to Europe – before she is finally admitted at the end of 2003.

Within six months of her admission, she leaves the law firm. Tess became an editor and lawyer with a publishing house in Melbourne for a year. She has since returned to law, working for one of the nation’s major banks.

She still writes for Richard Ackland's law periodical and is still actively trying to get her manuscript published. Probably more so. She is getting used to rejections but says she will never give up.

And I truly believe her.



Photos by Hans Bool

JIM MALCOLM

I originally met Jim Malcolm within a week of the publication of my first book, *She's My Wife, He's Just Sex*. But I had heard of him for a long time before then, quite regularly, during the research for the book.

It was during my interviews with various members of GAMMA (Gay and Married Men's Association). Malcolm's name was mentioned often, as the one man with the most knowledge about what I was researching – the sexual duality of some men – but it was always tinged with a touch of caution or even, danger. He wasn't coping with his situation or he's too angry to approach or he was having a really hard time. Anyway, I seemed to be gathering the sort of information I needed from other members of GAMMA so stayed away from Jim Malcolm. Or rather, perhaps, was kept away from Jim Malcolm. I am still not sure.

Then I received a call from a *Midday Show* researcher, inviting me onto it for an interview about my book with Kerri-Anne Kennerley. Thinking of the national coverage and my publisher, I agreed. I was with a friend at the time and told her I had never, ever watched the show. She said it was on for another half hour that day, so I rushed home and switched on Channel 9.

My heart actually dropped – there was Kennerley in the tallest red stiletto heels I had ever seen, dancing, singing and shimmying around the stage, and I felt like calling it all off. It didn't seem to be the right forum for a discussion about sexual duality. Or a discussion about anything verging on serious! But it was too late – I was locked in.

The researcher had also asked me to bring “one of my men”. I rang GAMMA immediately, to invite one of the men who had been so helpful in my research, while the

research was merely print on a page. As soon as national broadcast exposure was threatened, they all took a collective step backwards.

But offered up Jim Malcolm, as the one who had the most media experience and would be best at it. So I rang him.

Malcolm agreed to come on the show with me but it was strange because I didn't even know him. He was not in my book and the first time I met him was in the make-up room at Channel 9. He looked as pale as I felt. Since my book was published, I was no longer the journalist but the sexuality expert – and was nervous, not used to being on the receiving end of some other interviewer, let alone one who shimmied on live television in red stilettos. And here I was, about to step up to the line and perform on national television, with just a tad more knowledge about the topic than most people watching. But what really happened on that programme was that Jim Malcolm was sacrificed. Unwittingly, I exposed him to a gruelling and vice-like onslaught from Kennerley about exactly what he had requested wasn't a part of the deal – specific and personal experience.

For Jim Malcolm is an academic and a clinical psychologist. He had just completed a PhD (*Sexual identity development in behaviourally bisexual married men*) on the precise topic I wrote my book on and thought he would be treated as such on the television.

He wasn't.

It was strange because we didn't even know each other, yet I was the reason he was there and ultimately, was given such a hard time on national television. We then parted as quickly and silently as we had met. We just walked away. I think I lamely thanked him for coming. He didn't seem pleased.

I never quite forgot him though. I had been left with an uneasy feeling about the whole

interaction. The way he was handled by his peers at GAMMA, for whatever reasons; the way he was handled during the interview – I could almost feel him want to disappear; and more personally, my part in bringing him to that space. So, when I began formulating this book, I pencilled his name in, hopefully, as one of my interviewees. Seemingly improbable, I know, but I just wondered. I felt we had unfinished – or not yet begun – business, and somehow thought he might agree.

Anyway, when I ring Jim Malcolm, who is now head of Clinical Psychology at the University of Western Sydney, I introduce myself in the usual way, adding: “Don’t know if you’ll remember me, but I dragged you onto national television a few years ago and...”

He interrupts me: “I remember you.”

There is a silence hanging in the air and I feel like hanging up. Or running away. But as I teach my students when dealing with a difficult situation, persevere.

“Hmmm, yes, that was a difficult interview for you. Why did you agree to do it?” I plunge on. I sort of wanted to remind him that he did agree to do it but I felt a little weak, pointing that out. Manipulative and defensive. More about my guilt than his complicity.

“Well, I had just finished my PhD on the topic and thought it would be a good opportunity to talk about it,” he says.

“We didn’t talk about it...” I offer, uselessly.

There is yet another silence. I fill it with the reason I am ringing him. And feel my voice and conviction that we somehow need to meet again, waiver. I tell him all about this book and what I am doing and what I want to do and – yep, he guessed it – will he let another journalist into his life, to pull it apart and comment on it?

Again, another quietness pervades the line. And I remember from the TV interview, he

struck me then as a quiet and gentle man. And I feel more of an imperative to meet him.

To make up for it.

“I’ll have to think about it. I’ll ring you. By the way, I had a huge problem with your first book,” he says.

“OK – in that case, we have to at least meet up and talk about that. I really want to know because that book just sort of appeared, without much planning...”

“I could tell that. I’ll ring you.” He hangs up.

I really want this interview but really don’t think I am going to get it. Weeks pass and no word. So I email him. No response, so I ring him.

This time, he is apologetic: “I have been looking at your email – it has been staring me in the face for the past week. I just don’t know. How about we meet and then I decide.”

“Ok,” I say. “But can I bring my tape recorder.” He laughs, genuinely, and I know I am at least going to get a chance to meet him again. It seems important.

I get lost, of course, again, finding my way to the Macarthur campus of UWS. I ring Jim Malcolm and tell him I am running late and why. He laughs again – sort of a chuckle – and says not to worry, he just arrived himself. He gives me directions and I arrive, about fifty minutes later. I was very lost.

Walking onto campus, I am struck by its stillness. There is no roaring city traffic as there is at UTS on Broadway in Sydney. There is no major carbon monoxide stench, or squeal of brakes or crowds of people to get through. There is just trees and buildings and some students wandering around. I think to myself that some people work in peaceful surroundings and file it away that I should try and do that for myself, one day. Find somewhere peaceful to work.

And then I see him, at the end of the footpath, leaning against the Psychology building,

smoking, watching me arriving late. We sort of size each other up and I apologise profusely and I feel awkward. It's almost like 'here we go again' – but this time, I actually want to give him a voice. I want to listen and get it out there, in the way he wants to tell it. So we begin.

The mandatory coffee, the mandatory permission sought to tape the interview (and it has transmogrified into an interview, somehow, rather than a decision whether to or not). The mandatory small talk about university politics.

And then his story.

Jim Malcolm married in his mid-twenties, even though for years he had been having sex with men. He regarded himself as bisexual, and that his bisexuality was a phase.

“There's not an homogenous population of gay men. I suppose there are three groups.

Those men who label themselves as heterosexual who would have sex with a man if given the opportunity – they are simply sexually focussed. A group of men often relate themselves as bisexuals and seek out men in very specific circumstances but may not form an emotional attachment. And the third group, they are homosexual men seeking men at an emotional level and that emotional contact. So they're mentally prepared and compelled to go through the trauma and leave their wife.

“There's certainly a subset of men, like me, who marry into a heterosexual relationship ... because they're confused and they are bisexual. I know this now but at the time, I thought bisexual was a phase.

“That's the confusion because you know what sex you are – that aspect of your identity is available to you when you look in the mirror.

“But your sexual orientation or sexual identity is something you get from within

yourself, it's not something you can be told – it's inside your head and for some of us, it is complex – it's not easily recognised. Some people they just know and other people for a whole variety of reasons to do with social pressure or family pressure or the church or simply their upbringing find it much more difficult..."

Jim Malcolm was brought up in a strict Irish Catholic family during the 1950s, the youngest of five children and only son. His father was a trades union man, and both he and Malcolm's mother were heavily involved in the church.

"I idolised my Dad," Malcolm says. "He was amazing." Both Malcolm's parents are now dead.

Going to school in the working class Wollongong where he grew up, it was impossible to express his sexuality publicly. But he did manage several homosexual – as well as heterosexual – liaisons.

"They actually tried to expel me from school for having sex with another boy," Malcolm says. "But I voluntarily left school... and went to work for an insurance company.

"I didn't function as a gay man – it just wasn't ok. And there was no way I could culturally get plugged in. I couldn't even begin to acknowledge or begin to think about the fact that I was bisexual."

So at the age of twenty-five, Jim Malcolm married.

"We were married in '78 but there were always a number of issues," he says. Sadly.

"Well I suppose that's what I kept on thinking – that that's what I needed to do to normalise... I suppose I just wanted to be normal. Because that's what I wanted to be. Getting married, having children, having a house – these are all proper things to do... what was the alternative?... I had no idea how to negotiate the social process, where to go, how to do it. And at that stage for me and for a lot of people in my age group it was

about sex and it wasn't about emotions and it wasn't about connections, even though I look back now and I can see how emotional it all really was.

"I had no concept of a psychological concept of a masculine gay man – that it was ok that I could have self worth and self value.

"And I suppose for some... there was an escape but I was in Wollongong then and it was all oppressive, very psychologically oppressive. Masculinity, or perceived masculinity, can be that."

Listening to him, I fully believe.

"... and so when I met my wife and I took her home to meet my folks and Dad in particular was very taken with her and liked her a lot and I think we were going out for a short while and I saw what was happening and I was afraid of what I could and couldn't do and actually broke the relationship off. I asked her out a couple of weeks later. We got very close very quickly and I got scared and backed off again.

"It was my sexuality... I was full of self-doubt – was it the right thing... could I do this?"

"I actually discussed it with her then that I had had sex with guys and I suppose we didn't really talk about it after that... we stuck it to the side. There were a whole lot of similarities between us and we got very close, very quickly."

Malcolm is convinced on a very deep level, his father knew he was gay – or at least, not completely into heterosexuality.

"At that point, Dad sort of put very subtle pressure on me – he very clearly thought that she would be good for me. I guess he thought if I married, that would be that and whatever else he detected in me would be shut down

"I wasn't effeminate but I certainly wasn't the macho bloke, you know. I was a little bit shy. I was different you know by that stage – I felt different to the rest of the family.

"He knew.

“The time I exited, my spouse knew. We’d struggled with it together for some time.”

The Malcolms have two children. Jim Malcolm was married for 11 years but finally couldn’t do it any more.

“My wife was prepared to accept my sexuality... she tried very hard to preserve the relationship on that basis... we both did... but it was my fault. When the relationship was not sustainable, there were social considerations and financial ... at the time I just had to leave.

“But I also didn’t want to leave and I was under enormous internal conflict wanting to preserve us – to act in the right way about the commitment I had made. It was an extraordinary conflict, psychologically messy. I did a whole range of stupid things that were really inexcusable – I can’t fathom what I did.”

He leaves me at this point, although he is still sitting there, in his chair in front of his desk in his office. His office is very like my office – a tiny space in a huge university, where you try to stamp a bit of yourself – posters on the walls, which mean something to you and probably nobody else; cards and notes from students; various timetables and cuttings strewn around on walls and pin-boards; bookshelves, full of books. And folders jammed with assignments yet to mark. It is just that sort of space. Functional with an attempt at some sort of personal.

I try to wait calmly, as he gathers his thoughts. Although I am anything but calm – once again, I have dived straight into someone’s personal pain frame, a place I really have no right to be. And I wonder, still, why I am sitting here and why he has agreed to this interview.

“...and I felt a lot of pain. So by the time I ended up leaving... it was such a struggle... I then went back for six weeks...so I walked out and moved to Sydney...” Again

Malcolm needs a moment. His pain is tangible. And his courage in the face of not only his pain but the pain he perceives he has inflicted, is immense.

“The question to ask yourself is how do I actually feel and this is what I feel and that is OK. Provided you can accept the consequences. And the consequences, especially if you have spent a good part of your life telling yourself you’re someone else... the consequences of finally acknowledging who you are, are huge. To overcome that, and still be a whole person ... if you pretend you’re somebody else and you get caught in the conflict of that, it is very, very hard.”

In 1993, Jim Malcolm finally settled in Sydney and the basic framework of his thesis was formulated. A few years later, in the preface to his thesis, he writes: ‘The genesis of this project lies in my somewhat peculiar and probably fairly unique combination of roles and social identities. I am a formerly married homosexual man, a clinical psychologist and a university academic.

‘I spent much of my late adolescence and early adulthood alternatively exploring and fleeing from homosexual desire. I began sexual contacts with other males very early in life and pursued these at every opportunity during adolescence and early adulthood.

However, I was also born in the early 1950s, a product of a traditional lower middle-class Roman Catholic family, the youngest of five children and the only male child.

‘These socialisation experiences contributed to my conception of my sexuality during adolescence as alternatively sin and pathology...’.

Sin and pathology. The words resound in my head and I wonder at the conflict – how it would feel. How you would begin to resolve it, with family, society, professional pressures. And the complexity of his life, and attempting to be honest within that complexity, crystallise around me. And striking at the core of that complexity, later on in the preface he writes: ‘This outcome, while it has allowed me to finally feel comfort

and self-acceptance, has been achieved at considerable cost to myself but more significantly to my children and former wife....’.

By this stage he had come out in his workplace, very slowly.

“At that stage I had a number of gay friends and in coming out I managed to keep it from my family – my ex-spouse’s parents didn’t know, either.”

And then Jim Malcolm’s first encounter with mainstream media exploded all around him. It was ABC’s *4 Corners* – a programme on the Gay Gene. Malcolm was approached as an academic and psychologist, who also happened to be gay. He had just published some initial research for his thesis.

“The research was just published and *4 Corners* did the filming and the interviews. I suppose I was doing a doctorate, started a doctorate, was an academic, wanted to talk as an academic – but what they were much more interested to talk about was the personal story type stuff and that’s what they kept getting me back to.

“So they filmed in the house I was living in with the two guys I was living with at the time. They filmed us up at gay bars and ... and got a number of clips of me entering in a gay setting.”

Jim Malcolm was not portrayed as the professional man he was but rather, a stereotypical gay man, who happened also to be a professional. That and his expertise were secondary. But the fact that he did the programme was far more personal, I think. He wanted to – needed to – tell his father of his sexuality. Needed to come out to his family and by engaging with mainstream media, he had no choice.

“The *4 Corners* program was coming up, they’d done the filming and I knew that it was only a week or two before the program was going to air. So I had to confront it – I had to ring each of my sisters and tell them. It was really hard but most of them were good.

“Then there was my Dad.

“We talked about it but it was extremely difficult – I was just choked – I felt like I was just letting him down but all I can really remember him saying is ‘I love you’...”

There are tears streaming down Malcolm’s face as he tries to speak. As he remembers. Jim Malcolm needs a cigarette, so we venture outside. I leave the tape recorder behind in his office and we just chat – about the weather, uni, smoking – anything that isn’t personal. It is raining lightly and the path smells steamy. There are just a few students nearby. It is mid-semester break, and all universities notch down a gear or two at these times – there simply seems to be more minutes in each hour.

We return, slowly, to his office.

Malcolm needs to talk more about his father and it occurs to me the power of a parent over a child, even a fifty year old child. Malcolm relates a story from the day of his father’s funeral, just months after the *4 Corners* programme was aired in 1994. A family friend – a priest – came to him after the funeral and told him he had gone to his father’s home shortly after the programme.

“He told me he had gone to see my Dad, just to check out whether he was OK with what had been on the programme. To see if he was OK with me. My father never watched that programme but the priest told me, the day I buried my father, that he was just fine with who I was.”

Malcolm cries again. And I wonder at the overwhelming emotions, nearly ten years after his father’s death. There is no doubt about his love for this man, but it is deeper than that, linked imperceptibly to his sexuality.

“I had an enormous amount of love and respect for him,” he says, almost in response to my unspoken questions. “It was clear to me that somehow, at some really deep level, I feared not being the person I should be in his eyes... and I was very emotionally

repressed and I think doing that programme was one way of just bringing everything out.

“I think at some point there was something in me that said it’s time you know, the gap’s there... I had began this... it was a very slow process...and I had to finish it. Tell my family. Be who I am.”

He wonders out loud at his tears – wonders why he can’t tell this story without them.

“I suppose it says something about me and ... the fact I told this story – I can’t get it out without bursting into tears...it’s just saying the words...”

We go and make more coffee. Take another minute. He collects himself. I collect myself. We continue.

Jim Malcolm has had an awareness of an attraction to the same sex since he was five.

“Stuff that happens at a particular time... certainly my sexual feelings or my pre-sexual feelings were same sex focussed. But certainly in my early adolescence, certainly by the time I’d gone through puberty I knew but still couldn’t see it as a lifestyle or choice.

Not in my family. Not in my neighbourhood,” he laughs, and I begin to relax back into the interview. He seems calmer now, after his tears. After talking about his Dad. But suddenly, we are talking about him again.

“I suppose I was expected to be ‘normal’. I was the only son and my father’s attitude towards me was very powerful – he almost tried to will me to be ‘normal’ ...I wonder what would have happened if I hadn’t given in to it...if I hadn’t believed the culture I was growing up in. I remember I had a real complex about dad but didn’t really know it.

“What I did know was that just deep down, he loved me.”

So, Jim Malcolm went on the national broadcaster as an impetus to confront his father and family about his sexuality. To finally tell everyone. A drastic, public step that had

huge repercussions with his ex-wife. But we can't talk about that. I am glad for the boundaries – we don't need to talk about it.

The irony is the way he talks about his sexuality now.

“It's important to me, and I don't tell people I'm gay, I just act,” he says, then corrects himself. “No, I don't act that way, it just occurs, because my sexuality impacts upon my life, you know, every facet of it and so, it's who I am and I don't need to broadcast it but I don't need to hide it either and if it occurs, it occurs so it's... natural.”

I look at him, this man who outed himself on a national television show, like he is a madman, and we laugh. And I know I like this man very much. He is warm and honest and self-effacing – and he has struggled to reach a place in his life where he has a comfort zone with who he is like no-one else I know. But I also know it has cost him – it is etched into his face.

But the media – why does he still engage the media? Why did he agree to come on national television, again, with me?

“Ah, I had just finished my PhD and I guess I wanted the publicity,” he shrugs. “It was a selfish thing... I wanted to begin to be identified as someone who had expertise in this area and secondly it was a defensive thing... there is this population of people that is broader and more complex than is necessarily outlined in your book. I wanted to drag it away from being a sensational type sexual thing... with all these sex crazed men out there running around the beats.”

But he didn't get the publicity he wanted. What he got instead was a very icy shoulder from Kerri-Anne Kennerley.

“She didn't like you,” I venture.

“No,” he corrects, “she didn't like what I did – leave my wife and family to become gay....” he says. And he is right. I remember Kennerley had a tenacious grip on that

interview and kept returning to Malcolm, digging for more and more personal and emotional detail. I remember Malcolm became very uncomfortable at the time.

“And I suppose I got very defensive about men like me – men like me don’t engender a great deal of social sympathy I suppose. It’s not seen to be this enormous internal psychic struggle...it’s seen to be this hideously selfish behaviour, this self serving sexually focussed stuff...I wasn’t angry, it’s just – I wanted to create an awareness that it wasn’t about sex.

“And I think that was the most important thing – that’s my message. It’s not about sex and that’s the assumption most people make. It’s about who you are as a person. And certainly sex comes into it and plays a critical part in it and people do all sorts of, you know act in ways sexually that aren’t good for them or for other people, but it’s a process.

“Don’t get me wrong – there are those men out there, like there are women out there, who just want and need to screw around. But they’re only a sub population of the total population and they’re not me. And although it would have been me at some particular stage... as people move through this process, at some point they would say about themselves, this is who I am I just want to have sex with men on the side and that’s all quite satisfactory and comfortable thanks very much but you talk about the same men ten years later and some have settled with a same sex partner, living happily ever after.

“But it’s differentiating. At that particular point in time you take that snap shot of people and it might not look like they are particularly responsible or even caring. But later, after whatever resolution, they could look entirely different.”

The world according to Jim Malcolm. He talks of his transition as a journey and is sorely aware of the people he has hurt along the way. But he had no choice – or rather, choices made when younger had to be undone when he started to get honest with

himself. But why continue exposing himself? Why this interview, for this book?

“Secrets. You know, secrets are heavy to contain and hold. And I need to have some sort of hope.” I smile and hope I can substantiate his ‘hope’ – maybe make up a little for that moment when we first met, years ago.

“And anyway,” he adds. “I haven’t given you permission to use this stuff yet, have I?”

His eyes are laughing there, in his pokey little office, as he looks at me. I laugh out loud and thank him and shake his hand and gather my tape recorder and pad and pen and bag, and say good-bye. But as I walk back to my car to drive home – hopefully without getting lost again -I know he means it. And I nervously hope he does, finally, give me permission to write his story. This story.

Malcolm did not contact me for five months. In the end, I contact him.

And he says no.

I can’t believe I can’t use this chapter in my book – it is so powerful. And at first, it feels like a real blow. But then his reasons are exactly what I have been questioning throughout the whole project – and everything sort of falls into place. Yes, I ring him and can hear myself begin to try to manipulate, to coerce, to talk him into it. I hear myself – and I hate it. So I stop. And listen to what he is saying.

And he is right. He doesn’t want the extra exposure. He has been through enough.

Reading about himself in my chapter has taught him much about himself and decisions he has made – and so he makes this final decision.

There is one concession, though. Malcolm agrees to allow me to use this chapter here, for my PhD submission – just not mainstreamed in book form for a publisher.

And this feels even more right.

Part 2

The Literary Journalist and Degrees of Detachment

An ethical investigation

Journalists do not live in isolation. Their values and techniques are part of their culture's larger fabric.
Thomas Goldstein⁴

Literary journalists aim to go beyond journalism's facts but stop short of fiction's creations.
Thomas Connery⁵

*As our minds become more deeply aware of their own subjectivism, we find a zest in objective method
which is not otherwise there.*
Walter Lippmann⁶

⁴ *The News At Any Cost*, 1985, p.256

⁵ *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*, 1990, p.18

⁶ *Public Opinion*, 1922

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation investigates the complexities of the relationship between the writer and the subject. It does so in the context of the literary journalism genre. It also examines the position and impact of the narrator in the telling of a subject's story.

Further, it will consider the various methods of maintaining differing degrees of detachment within the writer/subject relationship and against other factors such as ethical journalistic practice and the journalist's role in upholding the public's right to know.

Detachment operates on a spectrum. At one end, writing can be as subjective as first person narration. The middle ground is writing in the third person, while maintaining strong boundaries. And at the extreme end, detachment can be as duplicitous as creating a 'false friendship' with the subject in order to elicit information.

This dissertation will argue that striving for differing degrees of detachment cannot be considered in isolation from ethical practice. Further, ethical practice cannot operate in isolation from a developed moral practice. Such factors are dependent on the individual choices made by the writer and the circumstances of the story telling – and ultimately, impossible to codify, as most codes of ethics allow for dishonesty under the guise of the public's right to know.

The role of the journalist in this process is as fundamental to the telling of the subject's story as the subject is to the telling. Because of the very nature of disclosure, the journalist often treads an extremely fine line between a professional and 'personal' relationship. In order to extract the information from the subject, the journalist must create a relationship of trust. This is particularly required when dealing with traumatic or sensitive topics. The journalist's task then becomes difficult and fraught. He or she must transpose the trust from the relationship with the subject onto the page. It goes

without saying that this must be done with integrity and according to the writer's own ethical and moral convictions. This balancing act is invariably done by the journalist. As Mark Kramer writes: 'Every genre, whether daily or literary journalism, poetry or fiction, ultimately depends on the integrity of the writer' (Kramer 1995, p.27).

In the same way that the journalist's role is fundamental to the telling of the subject's story, the role and positioning of the narrator is fundamental to the writing. Ronald Weber argues: 'It's the deflection and refraction of the material in the filter of the self that gives a piece of writing its special edge...the distortion of the uniquely individual' (Weber 1974, p.17). But many journalists believe that writing in the first person singular is antithetical to journalism. Many go so far as to assert that it is egotistical and decimates any attempt at journalistic objectivity. But when considered from the reverse perspective, one must query whether the omission of 'I', particularly in the more complex literary journalism, is dishonest? In a news story, there is no room for the 'I'. As Ted Conover, known mostly for his first person, long form non-fiction, says: 'I'm glad the daily paper is written in the third person because I don't usually want to know about the writer in that context; I just want the information in the least obtrusive, most objective possible way' (Conover in Boynton 2005, p.27).

But where length and time is not a constraint, as in the long-form non-fiction, the 'I', particularly with sensitive and traumatic subjects, is as equally a part of the process as the subject. Each stage of the interview is an interaction with the journalist and each question and answer constitutes a dialogue.

Some literary journalists claim to always maintain a professional distance and detachment from their subjects while others concede to losing it all. The latter argue that this personal immersion in the subject's story operates to enrich their writing. In this regard, the story becomes as much about them as it does their subject.

But, as this dissertation will explore, the ethical danger zone for writers is the methods used to obtain the information from their subject and the subsequent portrayal of them.

The narrative process and the relationship between the story gatherer and the subject often conflict. Sometimes this is overt and sometimes it is covert. The subject makes choices including: how much to tell, what to omit and whether and what to embellish or emphasise. Similarly, the story gatherer makes choices. For example, what questions to ask and what not to ask; what to include in the final product and what to exclude.

This is not a transparent process as these choices are rarely discussed between subject and journalist.

Subjects, particularly unsolicited ones, are not necessarily ‘victims’ of a journalist. They are more accurately in a relationship – albeit an unusual one – with the journalist. It is widely believed that this relationship is clearly defined. But in reality, it is not. The journalist, when sitting in front of his or her computer, ultimately has the final say. American literary journalist Jon Krakauer warns: ‘I explain that if they decide to talk to me it will have to be for their own reasons, and they had better be good reasons, because what I write could turn their lives inside out’ (Krakauer in Boynton 2005, p.168).

The integrity – or lack of – is revealed in the writing process, and then in the final product. Janet Malcolm writes:

Journalistic subjects know all too well what awaits them when the days of wine and roses – the days of the interviews – are over. And still they say yes when a journalist calls, and still they are astonished when they see the flash of the knife (Malcolm 1990, p.145).

Chapter one will consider the history and evolution of the literary journalism genre. It will also investigate the application of ethics and objectivity/subjectivity – how indeed there are degrees of both underpinning journalism practice, particularly literary journalism. And how the writer’s relationship with his or her subject is even more

intense within this genre, allowing for even greater impact on the ethical and ‘objective’ imparting of stories, for public consumption and in the interest of the public.

In chapter two, this dissertation will explore the conflicts that exist in the practice of ethical journalism. In particular, tensions that exist between the oft-cited ‘public’s right to know’ and the integrity of the writer/subject relationship. For completeness, this dissertation will also review the academic debate surrounding the notion of ‘objectivity’ in journalism theory and detachment in writing.

In chapter three, the discussion will be furthered through the close analysis of three literary journalism case studies: *The Journalist and the Murderer*, by Janet Malcolm; *True Story: Murder, Memoir, Mea Culpa* by Michael Finkel; and *Joe Cinque’s Consolation: A True Story of Death, Grief and the Law* by Helen Garner. Each of these clearly demonstrates the differing degrees of both ethical and ‘objective’ (or detached) journalism practice and how it impacts on the relationship between the writer and the subject.

Finally, in chapter four, this dissertation will consider the themes and conflicts described above in the context of my own manuscript *Speaking Secrets* and how these conflicts were resolved. This will be an exegetical review of my own experience as a writer in: interacting with my subjects; gathering data from them; and managing the ethical component of the relationship. I will draw on Dan Wakefield’s book *Between the Lines* – a collation of several of his third person pieces of journalism, which he then revisited in the first person.⁷ Wakefield claims: ‘What we reporters... put in these stories is not always as interesting as what we leave out’ (Wakefield 1955, p.2). I had a similar experience in writing *Speaking Secrets*. I initially wrote in the ubiquitous third person, only to be convinced to revisit and rewrite in the first person. This dissertation will serve to show that, in certain instances, Wakefield is correct. This chapter will also

⁷ first published by Little Brown and Co, 1955

examine the positioning and voice of the narrator. This discussion will explore the views of several prominent literary journalists. It will argue that 'I' should be embraced and used more readily within the genre – a loosening of the stranglehold journalistic detachment has had on journalistic practice for so many decades.

Chapter 1

LITERARY JOURNALISM

A Brief History

The effort to draw literary effect from non-fiction materials, to render literature from reporting, art from fact.

Ronald Weber⁸

There is something intrinsically political – and strongly democratic – about literary journalism, something pluralistic, pro-individual, anti-cant, and anti-elite. That seems inherent in the common practices of the form. Informal style cuts through the obfuscating generalities of creed, countries, companies, bureaucracies, and experts. And narratives of the felt lives of everyday people test idealisations against actualities. Truth is in the details of real lives.

Mark Kramer⁹

Watch what's going on around you. Listen to people. You need to listen to people's voices, to how they tell their stories.

Francine Prose¹⁰

⁸ in Weber, 1974, p. 14

⁹ in Sims et al, 1995, p.34

¹⁰ in Gutkind, 2005, p.367

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Introduction

This chapter is a brief look at the history and evolution of literary journalism. I have chosen the tag ‘literary journalism’ because it is the name I believe describes the purpose of the genre, and its difference from other genres. Also, because there is great debate about what this form of writing should be called, and many different suggestions and justifications. It is often called creative non-fiction, documentary journalism or New Journalism, or more recently, the New New Journalism.

But it is journalism and one of the main reasons it stands out from daily journalism or feature writing, apart from length, is because of the greater degree of engagement with its subjects, purportedly lending a richer voice and greater reading experience. And because it engenders a more literary flavour, implementing literary techniques such as scene-setting and first person narrative, to name a few, found in fiction and drama writing.

Ever since Tom Wolfe wrote an extended thirteen page essay entitled *The birth of the new journalism, eyewitness report by Tom Wolfe* in 1972 for the *New York Magazine*, debate has been raging about what this New Journalism or literary journalism, is. Wolfe’s book entitled *The New Journalism (1973)*, which flowed on from this essay, is an anthology of twenty-three pieces by some of the most prodigious exponents of the genre at the time.¹¹

What was so startling about Wolfe’s stance at the time was his argument that fictional technique can be used to relay fact, and declared that this sort of writing would replace the novel as it was known. He wrote:

¹¹ Capote's *In Cold Blood*; Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*; Plimpton's *Paper Lion*; Thompson's *The Hell's Angels, A Strange and Terrible Saga*; McGinniss's *The Selling of the President*; Rex Reed's *Do you Sleep in the Nude?*; Michael Herr's *Khesanh*; Joan Didion *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*; Joe Eszterhas' *Charlie Simpson's Apocalypse*; and Terry Southern's *Red Dirt Marijuana and Other Tastes*, to name a few.

What interested me was not simply the discovery that it was possible to write accurate non-fiction with techniques usually associated with novels and short stories. It was that – plus. It was the discovery that it was possible in non-fiction, in journalism, to use any literary device, from the dialogisms of the essay to stream-of-consciousness, and to use many different kinds simultaneously, or within a relatively short space (Wolfe 1973, p.5).

His epiphany offended as many as it inspired but his analysis was clear and his aim stated: ‘...to excite the reader both intellectually and emotionally’ (Wolfe 1973, p.28).

But Tom Wolfe never claimed that New Journalism was actually new. He certainly didn’t name it that himself. What he referred to in the opening lines of his article was the beginning of ‘the first new direction in American literature in half a century’ (Wolfe 1973, p.3). He called it a new notion – that it was possible for journalism to read like a novel.

He writes that American author and editor Seymour Krim first heard the name in 1965 when a request came through for an article called ‘The New Journalism’ – slated to be an article written about Jimmy Breslin and Gay Talese.¹² Wolfe claims it was in late 1966 that people started talking about New Journalism (Wolfe 1973, p.23).

Wolfe defers to the problems of anything being called new, writing that to do so is ‘just begging for trouble’ (ibid). It was more really a fresh attempt at a certain form of journalism which took on a life of its own in the 1960s and 1970s, more because of the controversy surrounding certain assumptions about its celebrity, and the celebrity of its proponents, than anything else.

The certainty is that it definitely was not ‘new’ although it shook up the industry and created vociferous discourse. Flowing on from that discourse has been invaluable debate and discussion which has inspired not just more aspirations to richer writing, but has informed critique and analysis of it. Effectively, the result has been a keen and more incisive regard of what literary journalists do, and how they do it.

¹² while Krim was editor of *Nugget*, 1961-5

The Old New Journalism

Gloria Steinem suggests that indeed, the New Journalism of the 1960s and '70s is merely really old journalism, the sort of journalism that existed before the arrival of the telegraph machine when all news was written in some sort of literary form – essay or short story form (Weber 1974, p.77).¹³

And William L. Rivers¹⁴ also believes there is not a lot new about this writing. He says: 'The new non-fiction is the only part of the New Journalism that actually *is* new. One can find all the other aspects here or there in practices that are centuries old' (Rivers in Weber 1974, p.240).

In a way, the English satirists of the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries were early proponents of this type of impassioned journalism, and it was more to do with a formula to attack the establishment and spark questioning debate without being jailed or executed, than anything else. Jonathan Swift wrote a series of essays condemning British foreign policy.¹⁵ One, *A Modest Proposal*, advocated dealing with Irish poverty by eating Irish children.¹⁶ Charles Dickens assumed the pseudonym Boz to produce the original five essays he entitled *Street Sketches*.¹⁷ They depicted life on the streets of London, with all its misery and poverty and colour, and were so popular that he went on to write forty-eight more (Weingarten 2006, p.11).

Charles Dana's *New York Sun* throughout the 1880s lent itself to well-crafted and colourful news stories, focussing on everyday lives. And when Joseph Pulitzer bought

¹³ *Gloria Steinem: An Interview*, appeared in *The Bulletin* of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, February 1971, later reproduced in *The Reporter as Artist*, edited by Ronald Weber

¹⁴ *The New Confusion* by William L. Rivers, first published in *The Progressive*, December 1971

¹⁵ in 1710, became editor of the *Examiner*

¹⁶ 1729 essay

¹⁷ 1836, for the *Morning Chronicle*

the *New York World* in 1883, he attempted to poach some of Dana's staff, precisely because of the style of writing they were producing (Boynton 2005, p.xxiv).

But it was throughout the 1880s that the idea of New Journalism first appeared, and was executed. In a manifesto published in 1883 in the very first edition of his *New York World*, Joseph Pulitzer inferred it:

There is room in this great and growing city for a journal that is not only cheap but bright, not only bright but large, not only large but truly democratic – devoted more to the news of the New than the Old World – that will expose all fraud and sham, fight all public evils and abuses (ibid).¹⁸

He was calling for a young America to stamp its own identity on its newspapers, away from the imperialism and trappings of Britain – a fresh start.

And in 1887, the term was first coined in Britain by Victorian poet and critic Matthew Arnold in describing William T. Stead's *Pall Mall Gazette* as 'brash, vivid, personal, reform-minded and occasionally feather-brained' (Kerrane et al 1998, p.17).

Back across the Atlantic, it was not just the *New York World* but also the *Journal*, which contemporaries believed was delivering the 'new journalism'. Begun in 1882 by Pulitzer's brother Albert, ironically, a little more than a decade later, he sold it to Joseph Pulitzer's biggest rival. William Randolph Hearst bought the paper in 1895 (Schudson 1978, p.88) and the two became the most widely read in the city by the turn of the nineteenth century.

Three of the leading American proponents of this form of writing at the end of the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries were: Stephen Crane in his *New York Sketches*;¹⁹ Lincoln Steffens and his work as editor on the *New York Commercial*

¹⁸ quoted in Douglas, *The Golden Age of the Newspaper*, p.103

¹⁹ most were published in the *New York Press*, 1894

Advertiser;²⁰ and Hutchins Hapgood in his accounts of immigrant life *The Spirit of the Ghetto* published in the *Commercial Advertiser*.²¹

Stephen Crane painted true-life pictures of New York City in his series called *The New York City Sketches*, published mostly throughout 1894. He took everyday happenings on the street, and using specific literary techniques to bring them to life in the paper such as dialogue, contrast, description, scene setting, clear imagery and irony. His view of what he was writing was totally subjective – he himself said that he wrote in order ‘to give readers a slice out of life’ with no other purpose ‘than to show people as they seem to me’ (Connery in Sims 1990, p.8).

Lincoln Steffens, largely known as one of the greatest proponents of American muckraking at the time, wrote about what he was attempting at the *Advertiser*: ‘...to make a new kind of daily journalism, personal, literary and immediate’.²² He wanted people to: ‘...see, not merely read of it, as it was: rich and poor, wicked and good, ugly and beautiful, growing, great’. He claimed to hire men and women ‘picked for their unusual literary prose’ and let it be known to the universities of Harvard, Yale, Princeton and Columbia that his paper wanted ‘not newspaper men, but writers’ (Connery in Sims 1990, p.10).

Steffens said: ‘It is scientifically and artistically the true ideal for an artist and for a newspaper – to get the news so completely and to report it so humanely that the reader will see himself in the other fellow’s place’ (Boynton 2005, p.xxiv).

Accordingly, when Hutchins Hapgood was looking for work, he chose the *Advertiser* because he believed he would fit in well with other staff Steffens had employed who all seemed to believe in ‘Steffen’s idea of literary journalism’ (Connery in Sims 1990, p.11).

²⁰ from 1897

²¹ published in 1902; reprinted in 1967

²² best known for his muckraking work at *McClure’s* magazine at the beginning of the Twentieth Century

Strong debate clearly existed back at the turn of the Twentieth Century, as it still does about this unformulated form of writing. Although there is no doubt that these days, the genre is regarded as a form of literature, H.W. Boynton asserted forcefully in the *Atlantic Monthly*:

Journalism has, strictly, no literary aspect; it has certain contacts with literature, and that is all...The real business of journalism is to record or to comment, not to create or to interpret. In its exercise of the recording function it is a useful trade, and in its commenting office it takes rank as a profession; but it is never an art. As a trade it may apply rules, as a profession it may enforce conventions; it cannot embody principles of universal truth and beauty as art embodies them. It is essentially impersonal, in spirit and in method. (Boynton 1904, p.846).

He did however concede in the same article that from time to time a reporter ceases 'to be a machine or a mouthpiece' and, if rarely, 'develops extra-journalistic skill in the portrayal of experience or character'. He cites Rudyard Kipling as an example where the result 'asserts its right to be considered not as journalism, but as literature' (Boynton 1904, p.848).

Perhaps in response to Boynton, Hutchins Hapgood described his own contributions to the *Advertiser* not as story-telling but as '...a short article which is a mixture of news and personal reaction put together in a loose literary form'. Later, again possibly as a part of the burgeoning debate, Hapgood actually called for a style of writing combining journalism and literature in a 1905 *Bookman* article (Connery in Sims 1990, p.15).²³

Around this time, Hapgood's call for a more literary form of journalism went virtually unheard, as the 'highly fashionable muckrakers' were attracting most of the attention (Connery in Sims 1990, p.17). And because of this, the two prose forms – that of fiction and journalism – continued as two separate styles. But the essence of the amalgam style by the likes of Crane, Steffens and Hapgood did evolve slowly, just not as mainstream writing. Thomas B. Connery argues this slowly-evolving amalgam style actually became a third prose form: 'Such writing attempted to go beyond journalism's facts but

²³ *A New Form of Literature*, *Bookman*, 21:424, 1905

stopped short of fiction's creations and sought a fusion of the role of observer and maker into a literary journalism that presented a third way to depict reality' (Connery in Sims 1990, p.18).

It is clear that the New Journalism of the 1960s onwards was not 'new'. Connery identified a form of writing which was a distinct forerunner of the genre at the turn of the last century although he concedes this form was not highly influential on the 1960s' New Journalism movement, simply 'precursors' to it (ibid).

Jack London sought deep and personal perspective when he wrote *The People of the Abyss*.²⁴ Inspired by the writings of Dickens's in his *Street Sketches*, sixty-six years later the American journalist set out to see and feel what Dickens had seen and felt. He wrote in the preface of his book: 'I went down into the underworld of London to see with an attitude of mind which I may best liken to that of an explorer' (London 1903).

As London was inspired by Dickens, so Eric Blair, later to call himself George Orwell, was inspired by Jack London's *The People of the Abyss*. Orwell spent three years immersing himself with the poor and impoverished of London and Paris, compared to Jack London's twelve months. And unlike London who had a room not far away booked for time-out, Orwell did not afford himself such luxury. His musings came together in his book *Down and Out in London and Paris*.²⁵

John Hersey launched his career travelling through Europe, China and Japan during World War 11, writing for *Time*, *Life* and *The New Yorker*. Interviewed for *The Paris Review* in 1986, Hersey said of the time:

I guess I'd been thinking from the beginning, and had been experimenting a little bit with pieces I did for *Life*, the notion that journalism could be enlivened by using devices of fiction. My principal reading all along had been fiction, even though I was working for *Time* on fact pieces (Weingarten 2006, p.19).

²⁴ first published by MacMillan in 1903

²⁵ published in England in 1931; French edition in 1935

But it is his post-war piece *Hiroshima*, in *The New Yorker*, which clearly places him as masterful literary journalist, and mainly through the technique of relaying what his subjects were thinking, when the atomic bomb exploded over their city on August 6, 1945. Humanising the ‘enemy’ as his six Japanese subjects described the moment the bomb was dropped – published in 1946, a year since the end of the war – was brave. And in 1999, Hersey’s *Hiroshima* was voted by the New York University’s journalism department as the most important news story of the twentieth century (Weingarten 2006, p.24).

The Criticism

Tom Wolfe pays tribute to the people who were ‘doing’ the New Journalism all around him in the mid-1960s. He names feature writers Thomas B.Morgan, Brock Brower, Terry Southern and Gay Talese at *Esquire*. Also novelists Norman Mailer and James Baldwin who were also writing for *Esquire*. He writes of his colleagues at the Sunday supplement of *New York* – Jimmy Breslin, Gail Sheehy and Tom Gallagher. He claims they were all just writing; that there was an ‘air of excitement’ all around about what they were writing but that at the time, he never ‘had the slightest idea that any of it might have an impact on the literary world or...any sphere outside the small world of feature journalism’ (Wolfe 1973, p.23).

When the criticism started flowing, Wolfe saw it as ‘bitterness, envy and resentment’ (Wolfe 1973, p.24) from both sides of the fence: the literati, and those who believed in a purer form of reportage journalism. Ronald Weber writes: ‘To the degree that journalism pushes toward literature it opens itself to attack both as second-rate literature and second-rate journalism’ (Weber 1974, p.23). This seems to be what occurred.

Weber's argument is that New Journalism was neither exactly literature nor exactly journalism but a blending of the both, making itself vulnerable on both sides. This is what he sees as the heart of the harsh criticism of the genre at the time (ibid).

Wolfe himself found no mystery in why journalists criticised the sudden explosion of a seemingly new genre, with a journalism tag. He writes that newspaper people: '...were better than railroad men at resisting anything labelled new'. He assumes a universal knowledge that railway men are intransigent, and journalists just the same – they resist change. But he harks back to an Eighteenth Century class model to explain the literati disquiet – he claims novelists, and the occasional playwright or poet, were the upper class; the middle class were the men of letters or essayists; and the lower classes were the journalists. He writes: '...the sudden arrival of this new style of journalism, from out of nowhere, had caused a status panic in the literary community'. The upper class: 'were regarded as the only creative writers, the only literary artists. They had exclusive entry to the soul of man, the profound emotions, the eternal mysteries'. What journalists were doing taking these skills and weaving them throughout their reportage was seen as a challenge to this elitist status quo (Wolfe 1973, p.25).

Dan Wakefield simplifies the matter.²⁶ He claims that the criticism was derivative of an old prejudice that good writing solely by definition must be fictional. He lays the art component of this type of reporting down to simple technique. He claims the author does not distort the facts, neither are they made up. He has:

...presented them in a full instead of naked manner, brought out the sights, sounds and feel surrounding those facts, and connected them by comparison with other facts of history, society, and literature in an artistic manner that does not diminish but gives greater depth and dimension to the facts (Wakefield in Weber 1974, p.41).

Wakefield specifically cites Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, querying its journalistic merit. He believes Capote 'did as honest and skilful a job as possible in his re-creation'

²⁶ *The Personal Voice and the Impersonal Eye* by Dan Wakefield, first published in *Atlantic*, June 1966

(Wakefield in Weber 1974, p.47) of the 1959 murder of the Clutter family in Holcomb, Kansas, but is sceptical to say the least about the recall of the many dozens of people Capote quoted (ibid). But Capote himself never called his book journalism – on the contrary, he claimed it as the new art form of the ‘non-fiction novel’.²⁷ Nevertheless, he still claimed it as a non-fiction (Plimpton in Weber 1974, p.190).

William L. Rivers believes the original non-fiction novelist was actually Lillian Ross with her 1952 *New Yorker* series on the filming of *The Red Badge of Courage*.²⁸ He writes: ‘She used the central technique of what is now the new non-fiction: recreating scenery and atmosphere scene after scene’ (Rivers in Weber 1974, p.241).

Wakefield also queries that Capote was the ‘Columbus of the non-fiction novel’, not because it had not been thought of before but because those who did think of it rejected it, firstly as journalism, and secondly, as an art form (Wakefield in Weber 1974, p.46). Basically, how could a novel be non-fiction and how could non-fiction, by definition, be deemed a novel.

Interestingly, Capote had much to say about the so-called New Journalists. He told George Plimpton they ‘had nothing to do with creative journalism’ because they didn’t have ‘the proper fictional technical equipment... It’s useless for a writer whose talent is essentially journalistic to attempt creative reportage because it simply won’t work...to be a good creative reporter, you have to be a very good fiction writer’ (Plimpton in Weber 1974, p.191).

One of the most revered American writers, Gay Talese, was actually credited with ‘starting’ the New Journalism movement by Tom Wolfe in his book the *New Journalism*, a nomenclature he has never wanted and does not accept. He writes:

²⁷ *Truman Capote: An Interview* by George Plimpton, first published in the *New York Times Book Review*, January 16, 1966

²⁸ Later published as the book *Picture*

I'm often given credit for 'starting' the New Journalism...while I was kind of flattered that people were, for the first time, starting to take notice of what I was doing, I have always kind of thought of myself as rather traditional in my approach and not so 'new'. I never wanted to do something 'new'; I wanted to do something that would hold up over time, something that could get old and still have the same resonance (Hirschman, 2004).

Jack Newfield is credited with the simplified definition of New Journalism as 'good writers being turned loose by wise editors on real subjects' (Weber 1974, p.14). What Newfield actually wrote in an attack on the Wolfian New Journalism discourse is: 'I suspect it is nothing more profound than a lot of good writers coming along at the same time, and a few wise editors...giving these writers a lot of space and freedom to express a point of view. I wouldn't refine the generality much more than that' (Newfield in Weber 1974, p.300).²⁹

And Barbara Lounsberry, in a preface written to a book she co-edited with Gay Talese, believes in the promise of this new genre when in the hands of 'writers of literary distinction'. She echoes Tom Wolfe when she writes: '...this form can be as artful and dramatic and significant as the best efforts of our most revered dramatists, poets and authors of fiction' (Lounsberry 1996, p.vii).

A Terrible Name

Australian journalist and academic Matthew Ricketson also claims there is no satisfactory, authoritative definition of literary journalism (Ricketson 1997, p.82). Although he concedes there is not a huge company of Australian historically placed literary journalists, he is well versed in the history of the more global evolution (Ricketson 2004, p.233). He argues that the reason Australia has not been rich in this particular burgeoning genre is because of the enormity of the continent and the

²⁹ piece appeared in *Columbia Journalism Review*, July/August 1972. It is an adaptation of another article *Of Honest Men and Good Writers*, first appearing in the *Village Voice*, New York

relatively small size of its population, unable to sustain a large and more diverse publication tradition. He cites magazines such as *Australian Society* and *The Independent Monthly*, as well as *Nation Review* and *The National Times* as forums for some literary journalism within Australia. None are still in print (Ricketson 2004, p.234). He also cites two Australian journalists who won Walkley Awards for pieces of literary journalism – the *Truth*'s Evan Whitton in 1967 and Craig McGregor of *The National Times* in 1977 (Ricketson 1997, p.83). He also mentions some Australian writers who have produced books of literary journalism – John Bryson; Anna Funder; and Helen Garner.³⁰

But primarily, he believes Australian newspapers use narrative to flesh out news stories for their audiences rather than spending the time and money on allowing journalists to undertake pieces of literary journalism. This practice is largely enabled by publications similar to the *New Yorker* and *Esquire* (US) and *Granta* (UK) (ibid). He notes exceptional overseas contemporary literary journalists like John McPhee; Tracy Kidder; Mark Kramer; Janet Malcolm; Susan Orlean; James Fenton; Ryszard Kapuscinski; and Ian Jack (ibid).

Ricketson is in good company searching for a suitable title for the literary journalism genre – Barbara Lounsberry dedicates pages in an introduction she wrote on non-fiction analysis to just that. She compares the floundering to find a name for this form of writing in the past forty years to Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding trying to entitle their own literary contributions. She writes:

In the first half of the eighteenth century, they were struggling to name their own new narrative prose form – a form we have no difficulty today calling the novel. In desperation Fielding finally called *Tom Jones* a ‘comic epic-poem in prose’!

³⁰ *Evil Angels*, by John Bryson, Penguin, 1986; *Stasiland*, by Anna Funder, Text Publishing, 2003; *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, by Helen Garner, Picador, 2004

Historical perspective in fact is what has been missing in many of the ‘new journalism’, fact/fiction debates of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. In some respects we are seeing the turn of the wheel back to the time, only 200 years ago, when serious writers chose non-fiction over fiction for expressing their views and crafting their art (Lounsberry 1990, p. xiii).

She is thinking of the likes of essayists Joseph Addison, Sir Richard Steele, William Hazlitt, and James Boswell. Authors like Robert Louis Stevenson. Journalists and writers like John Hersey, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Ernest Hemingway.

She also decides that there is no correct ‘term for this discourse’ but that should not preclude studying and critiquing it. She leans towards the terms literary or artistic non-fiction, positing it as an identifiable discourse ‘recognisable in its solid central particulars, though blurring (as all genres do) at the edges’ (ibid).

Barbara Lounsberry sums it up:

We come down finally to the odd declaration that in our time literary non-fiction is a form of writing with a distinguished history, untold possibilities, and a terrible name. Literary non-fiction is certainly *not fiction* – although some works read like novels. Artful non-fiction is more than fiction, offering the satisfying truths of fact and the ‘universal truths’ of art (Talese et al 1996, p.30).

Ronald Weber also claims there is no dispute – indeed he claims it is the only thing beyond dispute – that the New Journalism is ‘badly named’ (Weber 1974, p.13).

Gay Talese opts for the term ‘Literature of Reality’ emphasising his insistence on bringing ordinary people to life without changing names or falsifying facts (Talese et al, 1996, p.6).

Harold Hayes cites *The Wall Street Journal* definition that the New Journalism is merely ‘a technique of compressing facts in order to distil reality’, and the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism’s definition: ‘subjective reality – the attempt to report events with the technique of fiction’ (Hayes in Weber 1974, p.260).³¹

³¹ his comments on the New Journalism appeared in the Editor’s Notes column of *Esquire*, January 1972

But Hayes also had no delusions to the newness of this form of journalism. He creates a formidable linked list back in time, comparing Gay Talese's work to Lillian Ross, to Joseph Mitchell before her; Alva Johnston before Mitchell and so on. He claims Tom Wolfe in *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* bore heavy similarities to the voice of Holden Caulfield in J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* – much of which was edited out because of the similarities. He cites Edmund Wilson and his 1930 *Frank Kenney's Coal Diggers*; James Agee in 1941 with his *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*; and George Orwell in his *Homage to Catalonia*, a personal account of the Spanish Civil War. Harold Hayes writes scathingly: 'The wealth to be found from mining magazine journalism somewhat prior to the day before yesterday is embarrassing – or should be to historians of the New Journalism and others who persist with the term' (Hayes in Weber 1974, p.261).

Hayes prefers another term for this writing – literary journalism. He says Dwight MacDonald coined the term when asked to describe how he regarded himself and his work. Hayes writes: 'Literary journalism allows, indeed encourages, conceptual writing and there is nothing new about conceptual writing except when there occurs the ever-new miracle of a single writer's originality – that of a Mailer, a Talese, a Wolfe' (Hayes in Weber 1974, p.262).

More recently, Mark Kramer writes:

Literary journalism is a duller (than New Journalism) term. Its virtue may be its innocuousness. As a practitioner, I find the 'literary' part self-congratulating and the 'journalism' part masking the form's inventiveness. But 'literary journalism' is roughly accurate. The paired words cancel each other's vices and describe the sort of non-fiction in which arts of style and narrative construction long associated with fiction help pierce to the quick of what's happening – the essence of journalism (Sims et al 1995, p.21).

And as Ben Yagoda asserts: '...literary journalism exists and is not an oxymoron' (Kerrane et al 1997, p.16). He describes the literary side of the equation in five words:

‘thoughtfully, artfully and valuably innovative’. The journalism aspect involves facts, research and currency (Kerrane et al 1997, p.14).

There is no doubt this type of writing is an emerging, controversial and ever-developing field. Looking back over the history, it is clear its emergence has been in waves but it has always been there, in some form or other. Perhaps the 1960s onslaught was in response to the times – rock and roll, the Vietnam War, the peace movement, the Women’s Movement, sexual liberation, drug use. Regular he said/she said type of reporting just did not seem to be able to do this culturally explosive time any type of justice. Some thirty years later, American literary journalist Norman Sims writes of its further development:

In the 1970s Tom Wolfe suggested that the New Journalism required scene-by-scene construction, saturation reporting, third-person point of view, and a detailing of the status of lives of the subjects. In 1984 the Literary Journalists broadened the set of characteristics to include immersion reporting, accuracy, voice, structure, responsibility, and symbolic representation. Writers I have spoken with more recently have wanted to add to the list a personal involvement with their materials, and an artistic creativity not often associated with non fiction. An innovative genre that is still developing, literary journalism resists narrow definitions (Sims 1995, p.9).

Robert Boynton has identified this other group of writers, the successors of the New Journalism of the 1960s onwards, calling them the New New Journalists. He lists them as: Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, Michael Lewis, Lawrence Weschler, Eric Schlosser, Richard Preston, Alex Kotlowitz, Jon Krakauer, William Langewiesche, Lawrence Wright, William Finnegan, Ted Conover, Jonathan Harr and Susan Orleans, to name a few. He argues these writers in particular have positioned themselves ‘at the very centre of contemporary American literature’ (Boynton 2005, p. xi).

He writes:

The New New Journalists bring a distinct set of cultural and social concerns to their work. Neither frustrated novelists nor wayward newspaper reporters, they

tend to be magazine and books writers who have benefited enormously from the legitimacy Wolfe's legacy has brought to literary non-fiction (ibid).

Boynton goes on to claim that the new generation of writers experiments more with the way they get the story, than the language used or how a story is written. He writes:

The days in which non-fiction writers test the limits of language and form have largely passed. The New Journalism was a truly avant-garde movement that expanded journalism's rhetorical and literary scope by placing the author at the centre of the story, channelling a character's thoughts, using non-standard punctuation, and exploding traditional narrative forms (Boynton 2005, p. xii).

Regardless of the emerging field, thirty five years later, Tom Wolfe's prediction has not been realised – the novel is still well and truly not replaced – but literary journalism has grown into a broadly, if badly-defined and well debated, genre of its own, embedded within the professional practice of journalism. Although interestingly, it is taught more in creative writing courses than journalism courses throughout the academy, despite its hybrid make up.

There is no denying that some of the most successful pieces of writing toward the end of the Twentieth Century were exactly what Wolfe did predict: true life informed by fictional technique. These are the stories Hollywood then picks up and catapults even further into people's lives – the stories of ordinary people, made extraordinary by what happens to them or how they conduct themselves or what they discover or where they are, at a particular point in time.

Or as Walt Harrington writes:

The stories of everyday life – about the behaviour, motives, feelings, faiths, attitudes, grievances, hopes, fears and accomplishments of people as they seek meaning and purpose in their lives, stories that are windows on our universal human struggle – should be at the soul of every good newspaper...everyday life is the only real laboratory we have for understanding ourselves and our society, our values and our behaviour. Even when examining the aberrant, it is what has become routine within those aberrant worlds that is often most revealing of human nature (Harrington 1997, p.xv).

Chapter 2

AN ETHICAL MINEFIELD IN THE NAME OF

THE PUBLIC'S RIGHT TO KNOW

The central purpose of journalism is to tell the truth so that people will have the information that they need to be sovereign.
Jack Fuller³²

The writer is a confidence man. The journalist never has any intention of telling the story your subject wants told. Your job is to tell the story as you see it. Once a subject has talked to you, he has surrendered all control.
Jon Krakauer³³

Our fine sense of ethics diminishes in proportion to the importance of the story.
Thomas Goldstein³⁴

³² in Kovach et al 2001, p.19

³³ in Boynton 2005, p. 167

³⁴ 1985, p.132

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Introduction

This chapter explores the complexity of the relationship between subject and writer within the journalism profession. It focuses particularly on the genre of literary journalism and explores how journalists can ethically maintain and represent that relationship.

It is an area fraught with conflicts: is it ethical to act in a particular way in order to encourage the subject to divulge more only to represent him or her in a completely opposite light in the final piece of writing? Is it acceptable to masquerade as a friend in order to obtain the story? Should a journalist's interaction with their subject differ depending on whether he or she is a convicted perpetrator of a crime, or a suspected perpetrator of a crime, or a known victim of a crime? How far does the writer push his or her subject to answer questions when the material is sensitive or traumatic to the subject? Is it legitimate to continue to question a subject in order to provoke an emotional response? How far, if at all, should the journalist get involved with his or her subject during the interview and when writing?

This chapter will explore these issues and argue that, while constructive, the perennial academic debate concerning 'objectivity' in journalism will never be resolved. It will be argued that there will always be degrees of journalistic objectivity which encompass notions of fairness, balance and accuracy, all to be aspired to.

This chapter argues in favour of a loosening of the strict definitional concept of journalistic objectivity and detachment. It is time to acknowledge and embrace the spectrum of engagement (or detachment) between the journalist and the subject. Such an acknowledgment can only enhance the public's image of journalists and its trust in the profession.

For means of this chapter, I will define journalistic objectivity as an attempt at fairness and accuracy and balance; journalistic detachment as a lack of engaging or permission to care about an issue or a subject. And I will argue that degrees of the first are attainable, and that the second should be deconstructed and reassessed.

It will be concluded that different subjects and subject matter require different approaches. And while codes of ethics and codes of practice are necessary, most contain out-clauses which sanction dubious ethical behaviour, in the name of the public's interest. Because of this, it is self-evident why there is such little public trust in journalists and journalism practice. The craft of journalism comprises a moral imperative that can never be codified in a charter or code of ethics, as it is entirely the domain of the individual journalist's choices.

Australian journalist Matthew Ricketson writes: 'The more that journalism...does not play fair with the audience (or its subjects), the more debased is the currency of trust by which journalism seeks to act on the public's behalf' (Ricketson 1997, p.94).

But how is journalism not playing fair with its audiences? I believe the answer is found in examining notions of detachment, and loosening their interpretation. Why shouldn't journalists care about what they are writing? Why shouldn't it matter to them? Implementing the long-held arguments against objectivity in journalism, surely it is dishonest to claim otherwise, as journalists are just people, too?

It will be concluded that empathetic or less detached journalism should never be regarded as antithetical to good journalism but rather, notions to embrace and incorporate more of, in the name of honest reporting and writing. And that it is only with a more self-effacing discussion and debate of the possibilities surrounding relaxing the notions of journalism objectivity and detachment which will engender greater public

trust. Aspiring to the greatest degree of objectivity possible and moving away from total detachment can only enhance this trust in both journalists and their practice.

Polls and Codes

Polls carried out in the UK in the early Nineties found that real estate agents were rated at the bottom of British public esteem – journalists were just above them. And in a 2000 MORI survey, seventy-eight percent of British people believe journalists do not tell the truth. Sixteen occupational groups were polled – doctors topped the findings while journalists came in sixteenth, or last.³⁵ According to a Harris Poll in the US, only 43 percent of people in America trust journalists to tell the truth³⁶ (Sanders 2003, p.1). In Australia also, the majority of people do not trust journalists – sixty-three per cent do not trust journalists to tell the truth, according to a recent Morgan Poll.³⁷

Long-time White House correspondent Robert Sherrill says:

Trying to decide in the abstract how far a reporter should go is about as futile as parents trying to decide how far their daughter should go...when the passions are up and the story is tempting, any reporter...is likely to do whatever the moment seems to call for. No good reporter is honest all the time and it's silly to pretend otherwise (Goldstein 1985, p.116).

Programme Director of postgraduate journalism at the University of South Australia in Adelaide Associate Professor Dr Ian Richards argues that every decision a journalist makes in his or her professional capacity has the potential for a lack of ethics. He writes: 'What many journalists seem not to understand is that all of their professional decisions have an ethical dimension'. He argues that every step within the process of gathering information and disseminating it comprises ethical components:

³⁵ MORI poll in February 2000 on behalf of the British Medical Association; face to face poll of 2072 people, aged 15 and over

³⁶ 1998 Harris Poll

³⁷ carried out in November 2005; phone poll of 653 people, aged 14 and above.

...there is an ethical dimension at all stages in the journalistic process, from initial decisions regarding what to report, through decisions about gathering and processing of whatever information is acquired, to decisions as to how the information will be presented and to whom (Richards 2002, p.10).

If journalists were to reflect on each and every decision in depth, it could potentially render those with conscience unemployable. Richards cites the well-known adage within the industry: 'doctors bury their mistakes, lawyers jail them and journalists publish their mistakes for all the world to see' (ibid). Yet ethical decisions are at the core of what journalism is and what journalists do on a daily basis.

But are journalists any more or less ethical than other professions? Former Dean of the Graduate School of Journalism, Columbia in New York (from 1997-2002) Thomas Goldstein says no. He claims that as individuals, journalists are 'no more or less ethical' than other professionals like doctors, lawyers, politicians and businessmen and women (Goldstein, 1985, p.19). But he acknowledges that on a day-to-day basis, journalists 'confront a formidable array of ethical quandaries' (Goldstein 1985, p.17). Perhaps this is why Kovach and Rosenstiel insist on the necessity of journalists to develop – and use – 'a moral compass' (Kovach et al 2002, p.181).

In the wake of a poor result in a 2004 US Gallup Poll measuring public trust in the professions, Renita Coleman of Louisiana State University and Lee Wilkins of the University of Missouri recently tested the moral development of a group of journalists. Consistent with previous studies' findings, the poll found that the public does not trust journalists. Specifically, less than twenty-five per cent of those polled rated journalists' ethics as high or very high.

Two hundred and forty-nine print and broadcast journalists in the US were surveyed and evaluated using the Kohlberg Moral Development Scale. It uses three scenarios to assess subjects.³⁸ On the whole, journalists ranked fourth amongst ranked groups,

³⁸ Moral development psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg

behind seminarians, physicians, and medical students. Dental students, nurses, graduate students, undergraduate college students, veterinary students and the average adult ranked as less 'moral'.

The study also found:

- No significant differences between male and female journalists;
- No significant difference between the journalistic medium (eg broadcast or print);
- No significant difference between journalists on the basis of seniority (eg managers versus non-managers);
- The more autonomy a journalist reported, the higher the score;
- The more highly journalists rated the importance of laws and rules, the lower their scores;
- Investigative journalists displayed higher levels of moral reasoning;
- Journalists who said civic journalism was part of their work had higher scores; and
- Journalists were particularly adept at thinking through the ethical dimensions of journalism problems.

This discounts the theory that journalists can apply moral thinking to others but not to themselves (Coleman et al 2004, p.511).

Bill Kovach, the former curator of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University and currently, chairman of the Committee of Concerned Journalists, and Tom Rosenstiel, a former media critic for *Los Angeles Times* and correspondent for *Newsweek*, currently director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, claim that journalism is simply an 'act of individual character'. They write: 'Every journalist –

from the newsroom to the boardroom – must have a personal sense of ethics and responsibility – a moral compass’ (Kovach et al 2001, p.181).

Kovach and Rosenstiel state:

Since there are no laws of journalism, no regulations, no licensing, and no formal self-policing, and since journalism by its nature can be exploitative, a heavy burden rests on the ethics and judgement of the individual journalist...this would be a difficult challenge for any profession. But for journalism there is the added tension between the public service role of the journalist – the aspect of the work that justifies its intrusiveness – and the business function that finances the work (Kovach et al 2001, p.180).

Associate Professor Dr Ian Richards says that journalism is a quasi profession (Richards 2002, p.10; 2005, p.4). On this point, Goldstein agrees. He claims that by any of the usual definitions, journalists are not ‘professionals’ (Goldstein 1985, p.18). He attributes this to the lack of evidence in journalism, which is at the centre of other professions such as law and the sciences.

But that does not stop many journalists from regarding themselves as professionals, and their craft as an emerging profession. Researcher Michael Singletary found that most journalists not only see themselves as professional, they think of themselves, their organisations and their practices as being professionally oriented (Johnson-Cartee 2005, p.72).

Some media theorists conveniently ignore this grey area around the professional status of journalism in developing their arguments. By identifying journalism as a profession, they then substantiate the claim by the mere existence of ethical codes, implying its professional status:

Journalism’s claim to the professionalism resides in meriting public trust. The basis for public trust is located in journalists’ position of ethical managers of truth. Hence trust is based on journalists’ privileged access to truth and expert power to disseminate their version of it (Crowley-Cyr et al 2004, p.54).

But it is clear from statistics cited above that there has always been a lack of public trust in the practice of journalism.

Codes of ethics and codes of conduct or practice have evolved over the years, to encourage high ethical standards and accountability, and to attempt to professionalise journalism practice sociologically. Of course, the mere existence of a code does not guarantee that journalists will behave ethically. In fact, almost every code includes an ‘out-clause’ which allows journalists scope to deviate from the code (and in effect, excuses ethically dubious behaviour) where it is necessary to do so in the public interest.

For example the American Society of Professional Journalists’ code of ethics provides:³⁹ Journalists should avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information except when traditional open methods will not yield information vital to the public.⁴⁰

Similarly, the United Kingdom Code of Conduct for Journalists (authored by the National Union of Journalists) says:⁴¹ A journalist shall obtain information, photographs and illustrations only by straight-forward means. The use of other means can be justified only by over-riding considerations of the public interest.⁴²

And the German Press Code provides:⁴³ Dishonest methods must not be employed to acquire news, information or picture. BUT covert research can be justified in individual cases if it brings to light information of special public interest which could not be obtained by other means.⁴⁴

³⁹ adopted in 1996

⁴⁰ www.spj.org

⁴¹ adopted on June 29, 1994

⁴² www.uta.fi/ethicnet/uk

⁴³ adopted on December 12, 1973

⁴⁴ www.uta.fi/ethicnet/germany

Australia also has such a qualification. The Australian Journalist Code of Ethics states:⁴⁵

Basic values often need interpretation, and sometimes come into conflict. Ethical journalism requires conscientious decision-making in context. Only substantial advancement of the public interest or risk of substantial harm to people allows any standard to be overridden.⁴⁶

And in 1997 the Poynter Institute for Media Studies set out some criteria for ascertaining when it is appropriate for a journalist to ‘deceive’ in order to procure a story. The criteria permits such behaviour where:

- The information sought is of profound social importance
- All other alternatives have been exhausted
- The journalist discloses and justifies his or her deception
- The apparent benefits of the story outweigh any harm caused by the act of deception
- The journalists have decided that their deception is warranted having considered the consequences of the deception on those being deceived, the impact on journalistic credibility, and any legal implications of their actions (Fakazis 2003, p.53).

Interestingly, the only time the phrase ‘public interest’ is mentioned in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Journalists’ Code of Ethics is: The ASEAN journalist shall refrain from writing reports which have the effect of destroying the honour or reputation of a private person, unless public interest justifies it.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ revised February 1999

⁴⁶ www.alliance.org.au

⁴⁷ www.ijnnet.org

This dissertation argues that ethical decision-making is complex and varied. In most cases, it is fully dependent on the individual, and the particular circumstances. Associate Professor Dr Ian Richards writes:

In common with many other human behaviours, ethical behaviour appears to be the outcome of a complex amalgam of social and other forces, and journalists' decisions are influenced by more than the content of professional codes and an individual's ability to engage in moral reasoning...their final decisions appear to be the product of the interaction of a range of factors of which the content of ethics codes is only one (Richards 2002, p.12).

However, this reliance on individual behaviour and decision making is problematic. Because of the quasi nature of the profession, the individual's behaviour is unaccountable to no person or authority, and effectively, ethically fraught. Louis Day argues that an ethics system lacking any form of liability allows for a certain sense of autonomy, without responsibility, and so lacks 'moral authority' (Richards 2005, p.48). Similarly, Crowley-Cyr et al see ethical obligations as the responsibility of the individual. They write: 'The important point of departure between the classic professions and journalism is that journalists' ethics are voluntary whereas in the classic professions ethics is mandatory' (Crowley-Cyr et al 2004, p.55).

While some journalism practice is ethically dubious, it is not illegal. A sub-set of journalists assume a moral high ground and will go to any lengths to obtain a story. Some will even break the law and defend their actions with the public's right to know. However, very few journalists are ever prosecuted. Thomas Goldstein says that this places journalists above the law. He argues that the standard justification used by journalists (namely that the ends justify the means) generally does not withstand close scrutiny (Goldstein 1985, p.115).

Goldstein also argues that journalists engage in deception on a daily basis and in many cases do not even realise they are being deceptive. He writes: 'Many of the most

questioning techniques used by journalists in their quest to be eyewitnesses rely on stealth, secrecy and deceit' (Goldstein 1985, p.120). He identifies a number of journalism techniques that can be considered dubious. However many of these are regarded as common practice in the industry. For example: the ambush interview; faking taking notes or avoiding taking notes so that the subject 'forgets' they are being interviewed; nodding heads, or smiling to indicate agreement or to encourage the subject to provide more information; telling subjects they are interested in something when their interests lies in something altogether different; allowing subjects to believe erroneously that the journalist knows nothing about what they are talking about, when in fact they do; using material obtained via overheard conversations; reading documents not intended for them (Goldstein 1985, p.113).

American journalist Bob Greene of *Newsday* in New York admits that he has lied to get a story. Talking about his part in a 1974 Pulitzer Prize winning, thirty-two part series on heroin trafficking from Turkey to France to New York called the *Heroin Trail*, where he impersonated a lawyer, Greene claims that he had to weigh the magnitude and importance of the story against the means used to get it. Ten years later he said:⁴⁸ 'I lied, I cheated. I damn near stole. The result obviously was good. I'd do it again. Our fine sense of ethics diminishes in proportion to the importance of the story' (Goldstein 1985, p.132).

Award winning 1970s' journalist and lawyer Geraldo Rivera went a step further. He broke the law in a television series he did on a mental facility in Staten Island, New York. Accompanied by a camera crew, he broke into the facility and filmed patients in shocking conditions. It was broadcast to two and a half million people and was one of the highest rating local news stories ever at the time. Years later at a panel discussion called *Eyeball to Eyeball: Dilemma in the Newsroom*, at Columbia University in New

⁴⁸ at a Miami meeting of Investigative Reporters and Editors on June 10, 1984

York, he said:⁴⁹ ‘Yes, I violated the law. It was a question of balance. I stood ready, willing and able to suffer the consequences. I stood ready to be prosecuted.

‘Our position commanded the moral high ground’ (Goldstein 1985, p.116).

But he knew he would not be prosecuted and indeed, became a public hero and cemented his career.

Both Greene and Rivera made choices about the means required to get a story. Some of these choices were ethically dubious and even illegal. But to them, the story and the public’s right to know was more important than the suspect or illegal practices they employed.

The Public’s Right To Know

The public right to know has become a catch phrase in the journalism industry. It is a phrase that has been around since before World War 11, and is mostly attributed to Kent Cooper, an executive of the American Associated Press (AP), writing in an editorial for the *New York Times*.⁵⁰ Cooper worked for Associated Press for 41 years and wrote the book *The Right to Know: An Exposition of the Evils of News Suppression and Propaganda*.⁵¹ He died in 1965.

Harold Cross, lawyer for the *New York Herald Tribune* and later legal counsel for American Society of Newspaper Editors, used the phrase in a title of a book he wrote for the Society (Goodwin 1983, p.9) – *The People’s Right to Know: Legal Access to Public Records and Proceedings*.⁵² Cross’s central tenet is that the public has a legal right to know what its government is doing, and how it is doing it. He argues that in this regard the media is the public’s representative in investigating and reporting on this.

⁴⁹ January 1982

⁵⁰ January 23, 1945

⁵¹ published by Farrar, Straus and Cudahy in 1956

⁵² published by Columbia University Press in 1953

However using the public's right to know as a justification for breaching rules or codes or laws is potentially dangerous. It effectively elevates the journalist to a position where he or she is above the law, sanctioned by the ethical out-clauses. Eugene Goodwin writes: 'Journalists too have tried to turn the doctrine to their own ends, invoking it, for example, as justification for questionable conduct; stealing or lying to get a story is often explained away by claiming that the public's right to know had to be served' (Goodwin 1983, p.10). Greene and Rivera, cited above, make similar comments.

Tanner et al claim the meaning of both phrases public right to know and in the public's interest has diminished throughout the years because of the manner in which they have been used as a defence when journalists have overstepped boundaries. They argue: 'To some extent these worthy principles that form the bedrock of responsible journalism have been devalued by being used as feeble defences of intrusive and damaging reporting' (Tanner et al 2005, p.77). They also argue the difference of meaning between the two phrases, differentiating the public's right to know attendant to press freedom and freedom of speech. They cite public interest together with codes of ethics and conduct, attendant to other disciplines like 'philosophy, politics and law' (Tanner et al 2005, p.78). But they do state it is a definitional grey area, with most agreeing to a formula relating to disclosure, qualified by ethical consideration and other values (Tanner et al 2005, p.79).

Investigative reporters for *Detroit Free Press* David Anderson and Peter Benjaminson argue in favour of dishonest practice in journalism where the means justifies the ends in the name of public interest. In their book *Investigative Reporting* they claim that deception and misrepresentation is acceptable practice but only if the public will be harmed if the information gathered is not disseminated.

They elaborate:

Most reporters use deceptive methods to gather information – on the theory that in a democracy the public’s right to information outweighs a public official’s right to expect candour from journalists...the underlying assumption is that society has more to gain from an accurate, thorough reportage of events than it has to lose from the discomfort of the corrupt. Most professional journalists would prefer not to find themselves in a position of withholding important information from their readers simply to avoid worrying about their own personal ethics. Their overriding goal is to inform the public (Anderson et al 1976, p.6).

The public’s right to know is the embodiment of journalism practice regarded as the Fourth Estate of society. Some nominate journalists as the guardians of democracy and the defenders of the public interest. British politician Edmund Burke (1729-1797) is identified as the orator of the phrase Fourth Estate during comments he made in the British Parliament. He identified an original three estates – the Royalty, the House of Lords and the House of Commons – then referred to the fourth. According to Thomas Carlyle:⁵³ ‘Burke said that there were three Estates in Parliament, but in the Reporters Gallery yonder, there sat a fourth Estate more important far than they all’.

Informing citizens is widely conceived as being the most fundamental element in a healthy pluralistic democracy. As Kovach et al claim the primary purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing. They write:

The news media help us define our communities, and help us create a common language and common knowledge rooted in reality. Journalism also helps identify a community’s goals, heroes and villains...the news media serve as a watchdog, push people beyond complacency, and offer a voice to the forgotten (Kovach et al 2001, p.17).

But Janet Malcolm, author of *The Journalist and the Murderer*, says that in the context of journalistic practice, this view is ‘pompous’ and constitutes one of the many ways in which journalists justify their ‘treachery’ (Malcolm 1990, p.3).

⁵³ in his book *Heroes and Hero Worship*, published 1841

Goodwin concurs: 'There has been an ethical dimension to the public's right to know movement. It has stimulated journalists, somewhat arrogantly in some cases admittedly, to see themselves as representatives of the people' (Goodwin 1983, p.9).

However, this begs the question: what other means can be employed to inform? Is there a better way of communicating government and agency decision making processes and policy? How does corruption, illegal dealings, disaster and community warnings get disseminated? In many ways this is the greatest criticism of journalism practice. In claiming to critique and analyse government decision-making processes, journalists find themselves positioned between 'the people' and the often smooth speaking, spin-doctoring of highly organised and invested institutions (for example, governments, churches, businesses etc). Maintaining wary journalistic scepticism helps arm the public with facts and information to make its own decisions. There is some irony though in that the media (in most developed and democratic countries) are highly organised and market-driven corporations themselves.

Ultimately, it is still the actions of individual journalists in any given situation but it also must be remembered that they are generally members of one of these large media organisations. At this point, the individual journalist is invested with his or her own moral codes of practice and decision making processes. It still all comes down to the individual on the day. So if the journalist believes it is in the public's interest to bend the rules, break them or even break the law, ethical code out-clauses seem to justify and effectively, protect. The imperative for impartial reporting of facts is high when dubious behaviour is accorded the legitimacy of being somehow sanctioned by codes of ethics. It is clear why there has been so much debate about objectivity in journalism.

Award winning journalist and author Robert Scheer concedes: 'Some of the most important stories of recent years have involved theft, burglary, seduction and conning

people'. But he qualifies his statement by saying that this sort of behaviour is only acceptable practice if the story is 'vital to the public interest' (Goodwin 1983, p.173).

At an A.J. Liebling Convention, Scheer was asked how to deal with politicians who are suspected of hiding things from the public.⁵⁴ His answer was: 'The journalist's job is to get the story by breaking into their offices, by bribing, by seducing people, by lying, by anything else to break through the palace guard'(ibid).

He has since recanted his sentiment, and is reported to have regretted ever saying it.

But his original statement is a reflection of a culture, and a culture that despite – or perhaps, because of – the numerous ethical codes, still exists. The late James Thomson, curator of the Nieman Foundation from 1972 to 1984 at Harvard, interviewed hundreds of young journalism students at Harvard. He noted that in their minds 'the clean and beautiful' ends of journalism 'can justify virtually any means' (Goodwin 1983, p.173).

His inference is – sometimes, at any cost. But the point is, it is still up to the individual.

On the day, on the spot, at that moment, the entire exercise of gathering information is the responsibility of the journalist, and how he or she is interacting with their subjects.

Eugene Roberts, the executive editor of the *Philadelphia Inquiry* at the time of his interview with Goodwin in 1981, said: 'We have to have high standards but we can't get so finicky about ethics that we use them as excuses for not doing our jobs...There's no ethics in being docile and the pawn of whoever wants to prevent you from getting the story' (Goodwin 1983, p.175).

In Search of 'Objectivity'

How much a journalist becomes involved with his or her subject should, and does, vary.

It depends on the particular circumstances of the story, the reliability of the story and the time frame in which the story must be obtained. It also depends on factors

⁵⁴ in 1977

motivating the subject to talk to the journalist. The degree of objectivity also fluctuates, depending on the type of story. These days, most journalists avoid the word 'objective'. But denying the word does not relinquish its imperative – an aspiration to concepts such as balance and accuracy and fairness, at the basis of most thinking journalists' own personal credo.

The word 'objectivity' seems to have lost its original meaning – it is the journalism, not the journalist, which must seek to be 'objective', although to attain this, the journalist must behave impartially – an issue when discussing degrees of detachment exercised by the journalist to his or her subject. Associate Professor Dr Ian Richards crystallises the dangers inherent in this – that the journalist is merely delivering the news, therefore has no ethical responsibility for its content. A sort of 'don't shoot the messenger' code language, abrogating all personal and individual responsibility (Richards 2005, p.39).

The notion of 'objectivity' has become misunderstood and highly maligned within the industry, and this must impact on the ethical dilemma of writer involvement and degrees of detachment with his or her subject. Often within the industry, detachment and objectivity are used interchangeably – but this is inaccurate. There is a clear difference between the two words.

Michael Schudson clearly explains a succinct notion of objectivity: 'The belief of objectivity is a faith in 'facts', a distrust of 'values', and a commitment to their segregation' (Schudson 1978, p.6). He cites facts as: 'assertions about the world open to independent validation. They stand beyond the distorting influences of any individual's personal preferences'. Values he claims are: '...an individual's conscious or unconscious preferences for what the world should be; they are seen as ultimately subjective and so without legitimate claim on other people' (Schudson 1978, p.5).

But Schudson clearly queries the debate around journalism objectivity, questioning why it has not simply been given up. He claims that in journalism there is nothing existing to guarantee objectivity, like there is in the sciences or medicine or law (Schudson 1978, p.9).

Jack Fuller, a Pulitzer prize-winner (1986), claims that no one has ever achieved objective journalism and no one ever can.⁵⁵ He says: ‘The bias of the observer always enters the picture, if not colouring the details at least guiding the choice of them’ (Conley et al 2006, p.403).

While total journalistic objectivity is an impossible attainment, aspiring to degrees of objectivity, or rather, using the tools of objective journalistic research is possible. Aiming at fairness, accuracy and balance should not replace the word but rather recognition should be given to the basis of their meaning – a breakdown of the means of representing as objectively as possible, a subject and their story.

Australian journalist and academic Susie Eisenhuth also points out:

There is a well known mantra for journalists going about their business – and while the simplicity of its terminology might be contested, it is still the baseline in journalism education: accuracy, clarity, completeness, fairness and balance. It is a useful checklist, a working guide. And it makes more sense for a journalist than trying to adhere to some unrealistic notion of objectivity... (Eisenhuth 2004, p. 4).

But why be so black and white about replacing one word with five others – objectivity for ‘accuracy, clarity, completeness, fairness and balance’? These words simply are a part of an aspiration to be as objective as possible – a part of the whole.

Perhaps it is these ongoing debates that gives journalism practice its unique and daily controversial role within society – making it work harder for its Fourth Estate significance. Ironically, perhaps also these debates are one of the reasons why public trust of the media is so low. Loosening the stranglehold on the meaning of journalistic

⁵⁵ *Chicago Tribune* journalist

objectivity and then shifting the notion of total detachment seems the only way out of the debacle.

American academic Elizabeth Fakazis writes:

The discourse of objectivity proved particularly powerful because it has long been used to ground journalism's authority and, even though it has been theoretically crippled in recent years, it remains a discourse that influences the understanding that many professional journalists and media consumers have of what journalism should be (Fakazis 2006, p.14).

The debate about the quandary of the word and meaning of objectivity has become so skewed that some media analysts believe the concept 'is usually used to describe the very problem it was conceived to correct' (Kovach et al 2001, p.13). The term began to appear in the early Twentieth Century, particularly in the 1920s, replacing 'realism' – what journalists had used up until then to describe their work (Carey, 1997; Schudson, 1978).

Realism was a method of collecting 'facts' with the belief that merely laying them out in an orderly fashion would reveal the truth. But with the rise of propaganda and press agencies at the beginning of last century, some journalists began to realise the naivety around this notion of realism and the notion of objectivity in journalism began to evolve.

But the word was never meant to describe a specific person – an objective reporter – but rather the method he or she used to get a story (Kovach et al 2001, p.41). And this method was devised for the specific reason that journalists are full of bias, just by being human. So in order to rectify this bias within stories, methods were devised to verify copy – fact checking or verification.

In a seminal treatise on the media and the public, two-time Pulitzer Prize winner (1958; 1962) Walter Lippmann reflected he was looking for a way through for journalists 'to remain clear and free of his irrational, his unexamined, his unacknowledged

prejudgements in observing, understanding and presenting the news' (Lippmann 1931, p.170).

Lippmann was searching for a scientific approach, a methodology for journalists to employ and even the hope of the professionalising of journalism practice. The whole point of a scientific approach is that it can be replicated – a scientific experiment proves its objectivity when it is repeated with the same results. Applying the notion to journalism – explaining how journalists know what they know and what method they used to gain the knowledge – is all about what Kovach et al call transparency in reporting (Kovach et al 2001, p.82).

But they claim that journalism somehow fell between these aspirations of a scientific approach of observation and deduction, dreamt of by Lippmann, and a comparison to other professions with standards of evidence, like the law. That what eventuated was an understood practise of verification or fact-checking (Kovach et al 2001, p.75).

This still leaves the journalist untended within their own subjectivity, and everything written, up to their own interpretation. But as Managing Editor of the *Columbia Journalism Review* Brent Cunningham points out, a stringent adherence to a 'simple principle of objectivity makes us passive recipients of the news, rather than aggressive analysers and explainers of it' (Cunningham 2003, p.2).

The 'us' he is referring to is journalists. And what he is really arguing for is more engagement with subjects – a move away from total detachment. The idea that maintaining detachment produces what Eugene Goodwin calls 'bland, even ignorant, kind of news reporting that gives all the facts and all views equal weight to the point of distortion' (Goodwin 1983, p.13). He notes that some critics are calling for journalists to educate themselves in their subjects in order to interpret with a point of view, so the

public can then make sense of complex issues. He really is arguing for breaking down the strict guidelines around detachment.

Associate Professor Dr David McKnight carries on a discussion begun by James Carey, describing journalism as a ‘vernacular literature’. Carey says journalism is a ‘vernacular form of literature, an imaginative practice that emerged at a given historical moment (roughly the Seventeenth Century) in relationship to the growth of literacy and above all, the social movement of republican democracy’ (Carey in McKnight 2000, p.18).

Associate Professor Dr McKnight claims that if indeed journalism is a ‘vernacular literature’ then ‘objective journalism’ is a ‘style of doing journalism – a literary tradition’ (McKnight 2001, p. 50).

He compares the style of objective journalism to interpretive journalism – clearly distinguishing between objective and less detached journalism practice. Objective can be recognised by its spare, taut and plain writing style; its anonymous voice, its claim to authority; its liberal use of others’ words by quotes. Interpretive uses the writer’s own voice; the writer’s moral judgement; has emphasis on narrative style; has a love of rhythms and sound of language; and uses adjectives and adverbs liberally (ibid).

By recognising the creative element of journalism Associate Professor Dr McKnight claims creates a ‘humanist framework’ for journalism (McKnight 2001, p. 51).

Despite the battering the notion of objectivity has been given for decades and the abandonment by many journalists who have replaced it with fairness and accuracy, the term itself carries ethical imperatives and implications which still persist.

ABC journalist Chris Masters once called himself ‘an innocent bystander’ rather than a veteran journalist. In an interview with the *ABC*’s Julia Baird, he redefined what he meant:

...maybe I’m not an innocent bystander, maybe that’s a naïve self perception but I don’t believe I go into a story with an agenda and I do believe that objectivity

can be practised. I think it's a pity that it's just been presumed over the last couple of decades that there's no such thing. I know that when I approach a story I do look for alternative points of view and when I construct my contact list I make sure that it is across the spectrum of a story and I still don't understand why people think that is so difficult. I think to some degree it comes down to craft. If you're a good storyteller you're not frightened of the complications...⁵⁶

Pulitzer prize-winner (1993) Stephen Berry claims that in this era of spin doctoring and war-time propaganda, criticising objectivity could not come at a worse time, particularly for the public (Berry 2005, p.15).

Brent Cunningham and other analysts are taken to task by Stephen Berry. He cites Geneva Overholser, from the Missouri School of Journalism calling for 'a forthright jettisoning of the objectivity credo' and denouncing objectivity as worse than useless, even dangerous.

Berry does concede that Cunningham, unlike many other critics of the notion of objectivity who agree with Overholser, does not suggest eliminating the concept just yet. What Cunningham does conclude is a way through the debate:

Journalists (and journalism) must acknowledge, humbly and publicly, that what we do is far more subjective and far less detached than the aura of objectivity implies – and the public wants to believe. If we stop claiming to be mere objective observers, it will not end the charges of bias but will allow us to defend what we do from a more realistic, less hypocritical position (Cunningham 2003, p.13).

Cunningham is calling for more rigid questioning and verification, and not just the simple he said/she said reporting which he claims creates the potential and danger of superficiality, and is at the basis for the modern-day debate around objectivity.

What Berry claims is that both Overholser and Cunningham are right about the failure of the press but wrong to blame objectivity for that failure. Potentially, employing methods of verification works up to a point – again it comes down to choices made by the journalist and their degree of detachment.

⁵⁶ *Sunday Profile*, ABC, July 9, 2006

Berry writes: ‘The ultimate purpose of this method is to help the journalist see the facts as accurately as human frailty allows’ (Berry 2005, p.16). He cites Curtis D. MacDougall, tagging him the ‘father of interpretive reporting’, from his seminal text of the same name, *Interpretive Reporting*:

As is true of no other profession, his (a reporter’s) entire training is devoted to overcoming or sidestepping his prejudices. He is encouraged to be as open-minded and as objective as is humanly possible to be, and to be aware of any emotional obstacles that he may have to overcome (Berry 2005, p.16).⁵⁷

Berry is echoing the *New York Times* former managing editor A.M. Rosenthal.⁵⁸ Rosenthal wrote to his staff: ‘Our business is facts. Although total objectivity may be impossible because every story is written by a human being, the duty of every reporter and editor is to strive for as much objectivity as humanly possible’ (Miraldi 1990, p.159).

Berry argues finally that it is objectivity that separates journalists from their audiences. He writes: ‘We should claim it, use it and reveal how we pursue it’ (Berry 2005, p.16).

Current co-chairman of the SPJ Ethics Committee and Denver columnist Fred Brown is clear-cut in his views – there is no definitive line:

In serving as the public’s representative, asking the tough questions, reporters should be impartial. But asking those questions also makes them a part of the story. Involvement is unavoidable and it is not taking sides to ask the questions that need to be answered. Getting involved, like most ethical questions, is a matter of degree (Brown 2005, p.17).

As Robert Miraldi writes: ‘A blending of purposeful objectivity and careful but outright subjectivity should not only be allowed for reporters, but encouraged’ (Miraldi 1990, p. 160). He urges an attempt at a form of objectivity, or degrees of it, together with a breakdown of age-old dictates of detachment. This represents a far more honest approach to the decades-old argument around some basic tenets of journalism practice,

⁵⁷ first edition of *Interpretive Reporting*, 1938; seventh edition, 1977. This citation from seventh edition

⁵⁸ 1969-1977 Managing Editor; 1977-1988 Executive Editor

and would create a less overtly hypocritical aura and therefore engender a greater public trust.

To be empathetic or not to be empathetic – doing away with detachment

It is impossible to codify notions of detachment, juxtaposed with empathy and compassion within the context of journalism practice. Detached reporting points to a certain spectator rather than participant component – ‘the discipline of objective reporting... requires a dispassionate approach to the gathering and presentation of facts’ (Goodwin, 1983, p.240). Goodwin goes on to sum it up succinctly: ‘Reporters are not supposed to get involved in their stories; they are not supposed to become part of the story; they are supposed to be neutral observers’ (ibid).

But journalist and author Robert Scheer is emphatic. He says:⁵⁹

It’s stupid and dishonest for journalists to continue to insist that they are without gut feelings values, politics et cetera. And if they are, I want to know why and how did they get to be without those things and where have they been....to me the more important question is not whether you can be neutral but how you do your job in a fair and honest way (Goodwin 1983, p.13).

And Elizabeth Fakazis claims that the notion, the critical and the practical value of the notion of empathy, or less detachment, has been seriously underestimated in journalism and claims it is a failure of journalism education that empathy is not taught (Fakazis 2003, p.57). Empathy is antithetical to the image of the objective reporter who ‘remains emotionally detached even in the face of the most heart-wrenching tragedy’ (Fakazis 2003, p.47). She defines empathy as a:

...deep understanding of a subject’s emotional and psychological perspective...empathy comes from listening carefully and becoming emotionally and intellectually engaged with a subject. It comes from trying to see the world through the subject’s eyes, to get under the subject’s skin, to walk a mile in the subject’s shoes (Fakazis 2003, p.46).

⁵⁹ interview with Goodwin, November 25, 1980

Davis Merritt, editor of the *Wichita Eagle* in Kansas, has developed a paradigm for moving away from detachment as a journalistic practice. He specifies there is a clear difference between journalistic objectivity and journalistic detachment. He regards journalistic objectivity as a good thing and something all journalists should strive for, defining it as ‘fairness and balance and accuracy and a clear, cool-headed look at the facts’. In an interview with Jack Breslin, he says:⁶⁰

Journalistic objectivity is an important thing and we must maintain it, but detachment, this sort of ‘we’re not part of anything notion, uh, doesn’t work well for us’. It separates us from our sources, it separates us from our audiences, it separates us from the whole rest of the world. It’s mandatory that journalists care about the implications of their work, and so often when we’re doing stories, the way the frames we choose to do stories are frames that say ‘you’re not involved here’. Well, whether we like it or not, or whether we’re comfortable with it or not, the way we do journalism affects the way public life goes. That is inescapable. What we choose to put in the story, what we choose to leave out, how we choose to emphasize things within a story, all of those things affect what happens. And so, we are kidding ourselves if we say, ‘Oh, no, we’re just good observers, sitting off here on a mountain and neither responsible nor accountable for the outcome of what we do’. That’s an unethical and immoral position (Breslin, 1997).

His six point argument is:

...detachment is not the fount of journalistic credibility; there is too much truth out there; an announced bias is just as good as no bias at all; detachment presents impossible human and moral dilemmas; self-interest and public interest require moving away from detachment; and Walter Lippmann doesn't work here any more (ibid).

He argues that moving away from detachment is not to become attached – that it is a continuum. On the one end is total detachment, where journalists just observe, attempting to get the facts, as presented, correct. On the other end is total attachment, where journalists almost become the news they are reporting themselves. Merritt argues for movement within these two positions.⁶¹

⁶⁰ in 1997

⁶¹ *Disconnecting from Detachment: Six Arguments for an Ethic of Journalistic Purposefulness*, lecture by Davis (Buzz) Merritt for the Silha Center for the Study of Media Ethics and Law, University of Minnesota, November 1997

His argument is the obvious realisation that journalists are human – no more and no less. Pretending otherwise – that they shouldn't care or have any feelings about what they are reporting – is dishonest and obviously, impossible.

The various codes say that developing a relationship (or what has been termed a 'false friendship') with a subject in order to get a story is unethical except where the public's interest outweighs the duplicity. Many journalists have formed such relationships in order to obtain some of the most well-known and exceptional pieces of journalism work published. In their defence, they have argued that there was a need to become involved in a situation in order to truly understand and report on it.

Likewise, Mark Kramer claims that authentic writing can only be achieved at a 'felt life level'. He says the relationships necessary to strike up with subjects if the literary journalism is to be effective must be akin to the most personal of relationship types – of wife, husband, lover, best friend. He writes of the conflicts which arise from such relationships:

...literary journalists will seek from subjects the sustained candour usually accorded only spouses, business partners and dear friends. Strong social and legal structures bind husbands, wives, partners, and pals to only the most tactful public disclosure of private knowledge. Literary journalists' own honourable purposes, on the other hand, require as much public disclosure as possible...the ticklish questions the writer comes up against are these: Does the subject see himself revealing information to a friend, at the same moment the writer sees himself hearing information from a source? And, how responsible is the writer for the consequences of such perceptions? (Kramer in Sims et al 1995, p. 26).

This is the age-old question – the spectre of the false friendship relationship at the heart of many of the ethical debates concerning journalism practice.

Using a specific example, Truman Capote was severely criticised by reviewer Kenneth Tynan over his relationship with convicted murderers Perry Smith and Dick Hickock.⁶² Tynan accused Capote of gaining the confidence of the men on death row in order to

⁶² in the London *Sunday Observer* March 1966

write his best selling non-fiction novel *In Cold Blood*.⁶³ He claims he could have – and should have – done much more to help save the men through better psychiatric evaluation.

Kenneth Tynan wrote:

For the first time an influential writer of the front rank has been placed in a position of privileged intimacy with criminals about to die, and – in my view – done less than he might have to save them. The focus narrows sharply down on priorities: does the work come first, or does life? Where lives are threatened, observers and recorders who shrink from participation may be said to betray their species; no piece of prose, however deathless, is worth a human life (Goldstein 1985, p.28).

Capote reacted strongly and labelled Tynan's attack as 'McCarthy-like' (ibid).

Becoming a friend, as opposed to a false friend or misrepresenting yourself, with a source also has its inherent problems. Mike Feinsilber, a Washington AP reporter, says:⁶⁴

My rule is I try not to become friends with my sources. It's asking too much of human nature to separate the reporting function from your social function. This is hard because many of my sources are about my age and are fine people I'd like to have as friends (Goodwin 1983, p.115).

Goodwin says 'the conflicts of interest that arise' when friendship between reporters and sources develop 'are obvious evils. Reporters have to be wary of falling into cosy relationships with sources that inhibit their ability to be truthful in what they report and about such sources' (Goodwin 1983, p.132).

He is really talking about compromising a supposedly impartial position – the reporter's.

Pulitzer prize-winner (1995) Leon Dash attempts hard and fast rules about his boundaries with subjects, but feels sometimes it is a very difficult line to hold.⁶⁵ He writes: '...the basic rule is to keep a professional distance. I'm very strict about not

⁶³ published 1966

⁶⁴ interview with Goodwin September 23, 1981

⁶⁵ Journalism professor at Illinois University and former *Washington Post* correspondent

crossing ethical lines while the project is ongoing'. He speaks about when he was researching for *When Children Want Children*, and some of the young people he interviewed gave him Christmas presents.⁶⁶ He didn't accept the gifts. He said:

I didn't want them to see me as their friend. I'm a reporter...it is a very fine line between my maintaining my role as a reporter and developing the kind of humane relationship that eventually occurs between two people who spend a lot of time together (Boynton 2005, p. 64).

But American business writing specialist Joe Nocera, says:

In any kind of literary journalism you have to build a bond of trust. You have to get people to let their hair down when you're around, to be willing to forget about you as a reporter, and to say things. They may end up hating you afterwards (Sims et al 1995, p. 6).

Empathy and compassion is the opposite of detachment and duplicity, or even posing or masquerading that some journalists practise. Fakazis cites American literary journalist Ted Conover and his book *Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing*.⁶⁷ Conover is sometimes referred to as an immersion journalist because of his method of becoming part of the scenery or environment whilst researching and gathering his information.

He says: 'That personal reaction is as powerful a storyteller as the best ethnographic research' (Sims et al 1995, p.12).

For *Newjack*, Conover applied for the job of a prison guard at Sing Sing Prison in New York, and worked there for one year, after seven weeks training at the Albany Training Academy. His story is one of his own personal experience and witnessing. He says: 'There's no substitute for understanding a life like living it yourself'.⁶⁸

Ted Conover did indeed pose undercover, and although he did the requisite training, he still misrepresented himself in order to get the story – an unethical practice, according to some in the industry. But not others. Conover is quite clear in his book that he was more

⁶⁶ published by University of Illinois Press, May 2003

⁶⁷ published by Vintage June 12, 2001

⁶⁸ www.tedconover.com/afterword.html

than aware of the ethical problems associated with his kind of reporting. Fakazis claims he was troubled by his deceptions – writing about people who did not know he was a reporter when they were talking to him and working side by side, day by day. Conover claims he was denied access to a behind the scene story on the American prison system and its guards, so decided to immerse himself in the culture. To become his subject. But he never told any of his colleagues, once behind the prison walls, that he would be writing about them. Dubious professional behaviour, at the very least.

Undercover reporting was a staple of investigative journalism for decades, falling into disrepute in the past decade. Fakazis lays the blame for this disrepute not so much at the feet of an angry and distrusting public but rather, the duped subject – and the litigiousness of the practice.

Kovach et al have come up with a three point test to determine if masquerading or undercover work is acceptable. They claim:

- The information must be sufficiently vital to the public interest to justify deception
- Journalists should not engage in masquerade unless there is no other way to get the story
- Journalists should reveal to their audiences whenever they mislead sources to get information, and explain their reasons for doing so, including why the story justifies the deception and why this was the only way to get the facts

They then claim that using this method, the audience can decide for itself if the dishonesty was justified (Kovach et al 2001, p.83).

In terms of viewing life through the eyes of the subjects, this kind of reporting, together with this sort of formula, is invaluable. Fakazis writes:

Empathy can help journalists deepen their understanding, allowing them to not only observe what their subjects do but also why they do it. This kind of

understanding can foster compassion and respect for others, more sophisticated understanding of a situation, and more appropriate and productive attitudes and responses (Fakazis 2003, p.46).

But there is discord at loosening detachment and including empathy and compassion in journalism. Diane Benison, managing editor of the Worcester, Massachusetts *Evening Gazette*, says:⁶⁹ ‘One of the curses of this business is that you’re expected to have your pores open, to be able to feel, to be able to empathise with people, and yet to eviscerate yourself to do your job, just as if you were a machine’ (Goodwin 1983, p.242).

Opposing that view is Joseph Shoquist, managing editor of the *Milwaukee Journal* at the time.⁷⁰ He says: ‘Compassion is basic to good ethics and good journalism.’ He feels journalists should have ‘a regard for people as human beings, not be so hard-nosed about everything, and understand where people are coming from and why they do the things they do’ (Goodwin 1983, p.245).

As does literary journalist Alex Kotlowitz. He actually describes his work as ‘the journalism of empathy’. He claims empathy works on two planes – firstly, by putting himself into the shoes of his subjects; and secondly, to get his readers to a place where they too are in the shoes of his subjects. He writes: ‘I have to set aside my preconceptions. I have to open myself up’ (Boynton 2005, p.131).

Goodwin concedes that compassion and empathy cannot be codified and is ignored within dominant debates around journalism practice but suggests it should be encouraged in a bid to improve the public’s trust of the media. He suggests:

Although compassion cannot be turned on and off like a faucet, encouraging more of it in news work and presentation might improve the public’s perception of the entire enterprise. It also might improve the perception of news work by journalists themselves, many of whom seem to get cynical...Perhaps it is time in news work to start honouring compassion more and cynicism less (Goodwin 1983, p.261).

⁶⁹ interview with Goodwin, October 19, 1981

⁷⁰ interview with Goodwin, October 19, 1981

Fakazis is a strong advocate for empathy and less detachment within journalism, and actually teaching it through journalism education – teaching that it is all right to attempt subjective understanding by becoming involved, both emotionally and psychologically with the subject, and yet still question and critique. She also believes employing empathy is a means to improve journalism ethics and the public's attitude to journalists, and journalism:

Journalists have been criticised for being callous, for exploiting people to get a good story, and for writing stories that are high on sensationalism but low on respect for human dignity. Empathy is not possible without such respect – without the belief that the subject matters, that the subject's motivations, experiences and worldview are worth taking the time to understand (Fakazis 2003, p.46).

Eugene Goodwin writes: 'The great journalists are people who excel at getting the news out but who also never forget their humanity. Being humble and compassionate in dealing with other human beings involved in the news should be seen as virtues in a news professional' (Goodwin 1983, p.303).

This chapter is not about the philosophical debate surrounding journalistic objectivity. It is about a less esoteric look at journalism practice, but a look which nonetheless cannot ignore the burgeoning debate around notions of detachment, particularly in the field of literary journalism. This chapter then becomes a discussion of the degrees of objectivity and detachment writers practise while at their work, and how differing degrees of involvement with the subject still results in the individual journalist's interpretation of the subject and subject matter. And how this then can become an ethical minefield when negotiating with subjects for access to, and use of, their stories because as demonstrated, ethical out-clauses within most codes of ethics actually sanction dubious or unethical behaviour, in the name of the public's right to know and public interest. Maintaining a neutral voice whilst collecting data from certain sources and interviewing certain other sources, is all up to the journalist's choice on the day.

Embellishing that voice to construct a relationship of trust that is false, just to get the story, is seen by most analysts – and many journalists themselves – as dubious and unethical journalism practice. Some analysts talk about passive deception (Goldstein 1985, p.130), a practice used far more widely than actual impersonation or posing by journalists. It draws a very fine line between misrepresentation and subtle misleading by omission.

No matter how hard theorists attempt to redraw the semantics around journalism ethical practice, there is always an exception – in the interest of the public or the public's right to know. There seems no doubt that without the rigour of evidence or legal redress demanded by the classic professions, journalism is indeed a quasi profession. There is no uniform, enforceable standard. And the ethics accorded it an act of voluntary conscience. But rather than detracting from authenticating journalism professional practice, this rather sets it up as a unique practice, with unique and highly public responsibilities. And in many ways lends itself to a self-effacing and ongoing debate about improving journalism education, and indeed, perhaps introducing the concept of empathy and compassion, not as a notion to be avoided at all costs, but as an intrinsic notion to help position the journalist and allow him or her to make those voluntary ethical decisions about their subjects in a less detached fashion.

There are enough analysts in the industry advocating a greater embracing of empathy and loosening the stranglehold on the decades-old tenets of detachment for it to eventually make a difference. This is what the literary journalists are doing.

Literary journalism lends itself far more to the incorporation of empathy and compassion, and breaking the strangleholds of journalistic detachment, mainly because there is more time and more space. But the danger here is, as will be demonstrated later in this paper, that with deeper research and time comes the opportunity for even greater

unethical deception – there are more opportunities. Associate Professor Dr Ian Richards declares that a journalist's influence or viewpoint becomes more apparent as the complexity of the journalism increases (Richards 2005, p.44). Tanner et al suggest that journalists should always strive for objectivity, should be as objective as possible, and be aware of their own practice at all times in order to assess when it becomes 'ethically untenable to remain detached or to resist making a moral judgement' (Tanner et al 2005, p.71). At this point, they suggest, changing the mode of journalism, to longer pieces of writing in order to incorporate the switch. They claim: 'This way the departure from more objective reporting standards is made clear. It lets the audience in on it' (Tanner et al 2005, p.72).

But Kovach et al claim that form can never determine substance – technique should never alter the facts (Kovach et al 2001, p.161).

Founder and editor of the American online journal *Creative Non Fiction*, Lee Gutkind says:

The creative non-fiction writer must rely on his or her own conscience and sensitivity to others and display a higher morality and a healthy respect for fairness and justice...as writers we intend to make a difference, to affect someone's life over and above our own. To say something that matters – this is why we write, after all. That's the bottom line: to have an impact on society, to put a personal stamp on history, to plant the seed of change. (Gutkind, 2005, p. xxxvii)

Matthew Ricketson brings in another dimension to the notion of empathy in interviewing – he differentiates between the roles of the journalist as interviewer or reporter, and the journalist as writer. He claims the writer's first duty is always to his or her reader. And that even ethical journalists will experience some sort of conflict, on some level, with interactions with their interviewees. But he simplifies it:

Even the most ethical journalists struggle with the shift in role from being a sympathetic, charming listener in an interview to a dispassionate, tough-minded writer, sitting at the keyboard. You can feel as if you are 'seducing' then 'betraying' the subject, particularly in profiles where you get closer to the

person. It is probably more important to be aware of this shift in attitude than to actually change it, because part of the dilemma is inherent in the job (Ricketson 2004, p.116).

Ricketson manages to step around the idea of being a part of any sort of duplicity, justifying it with a change in roles played. But in so doing, he presents just another out-clause for journalists in his own words to ‘present themselves as the subject’s best friend, then shaft them in print’ (ibid) – not a practice he advocates. His solution though is to urge journalists simply to be honest with their interviewees. And more importantly, gain their trust. He claims most people will always respond well to an appeal to their sense of fairness and accuracy.

But Jon Krakauer is even blunter – he is precise about his relationships with his subjects. They have nothing to do with the process nor the final outcome, and more times than not, will not like what he writes. Krakauer claims:

The writer is a confidence man. The journalist never has any intention of telling the story your subject wants told. Your job is to tell the story as you see it. Once a subject has talked to you, he has surrendered all control (Boynton 2005, p. 167).

Krakauer represents a major tension within journalism practice. Yes, there is some truth in what he writes – what he writes is possible. But it is my position that this is the tension the journalist must struggle with every day, with every story and in every way when researching and interviewing. The ‘story the subject wants told’ was paramount to the manuscript *Speaking Secrets*. It was the imperative behind the project – giving a voice to the previously voiceless. And although the stories were filtered through me, to get to the page, they are still as close to my subjects’ stories as I could humanly get them, to borrow from the ‘father of interpretive reporting’ Curtis D. MacDougall.

Summing up, as stated before, journalism ethics is a complex notion deeply embedded within the individual’s choice and decisions, sometimes made in haste, on the day. Sometimes dubious ethical decisions are premeditated and justified in the name of

public interest and the public's right to know. The problem is not the lack of philosophical underpinnings of ethical codes of conduct, but the fact that they are unenforceable and too easy to side-step, and most codes even facilitate this side-stepping with out-clauses based on this right to know and public interest. The question is when these out-clauses are invoked. Who is deciding when it is in the public interest to employ dubious means to gather a story? Who draws the line? Are the same skills to be brought to bear on a local shop keeper, overcharging for his services, as a politician, suspected of domestic violence? Who decides the relativity of the public's right to know? Both could be argued as valid – so local people can take their goods elsewhere to be repaired; so members of the public won't vote in a state or federal election for the alleged wife beater. Kovach et al have come closest to dealing with the degrees or relativity within this decision making process with their three-point test.

As discussed endlessly by media theorists, these words are easier said than done. It is like going around in circles – yes, there are codes of ethics and conduct but they are unenforceable uniformly, and as discussed, qualify themselves so really, anything goes. They are left up to interpretation by the individual, an individual already steeped in their own subjective cultural baggage. So what is their point?

Edmund Lambeth is clear on this. He writes:

Ethical theories are not like black boxes, gimmicks that can be called upon to accept ethical questions and spit forth answers with mechanical regularity and precision. Rather, such theories are like windows onto the world of moral reasoning...Moral reasoning is an art and not science. It can be carefully cultivated by careful and persistent reflection and diligent application...there is craftsmanship in ethical reasoning as well as in gathering the news (Lambeth 1986, p. 25).

Finally, an excerpt from a 1984 address by Ray Cave, managing editor of *Time Magazine* to students and staff at the University of Oregon, School of Journalism. It is

very basic and seems more suited to a family's dinner room table than a sophisticated tool of ethical journalism. It is really just sound advice:

If you are a reporter, or an editor, how do you know when what you are doing is proper, or whether it has transgressed propriety and is infringing on the rights and privacy of others?...My father once told me that in attempting to decide if a given action is right or wrong, you may think you do not know – you may even pretend you do not know – but you know. Follow that kind of guidance and you may lose a story now and then for being over-cautious. But you will never lose faith in yourself as a journalist, in the true sense of the word journalist (Cave in Lambeth 1984, p.175).

Chapter 3

THE TEXTS

Three Case Studies

How do you distinguish between issues that are considered to be in the public interest, as opposed to those that are merely interesting to the public? This is one of the fundamental questions that journalists need to consider, not just when dealing with privacy, but all matters relating to journalism.

Stephen Tanner, Gail Phillips, Chris Smyth, Suellen Tapsall⁷¹

⁷¹ 2005, p.155

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Introduction

The relationship between the subject and the journalist is crucial to any reflection on the craft of journalism. I have used three texts of literary journalism to explore differing perspectives of this notion – *The Journalist and the Murderer*, by Janet Malcolm; *True Story: Murder, Memoir, Mea Culpa* by Michael Finkel; and *Joe Cinque's Consolation: A True Story of Death, Grief and the Law* by Helen Garner.

Interestingly, each text deals with the story-telling of murderous moments, attendant with the trauma, shock and horror the events elicited, and the evolving relationships emanating from these events. Murder attests to humanity at its starkest, sickest, perhaps in some cases, most evil state – a definitive glimpse at violent death and its ramifications, and how a journalist could possibly fit into people's moments of private pain; how some are eagerly invited in. This access and use – or abuse – of it, as a method of journalism practice, is essential to the ethical reading of each text. And it is within the scrutiny of this ethical reading of each text light is shed further on the reality of the relationships journalists form with their subjects.

Many journalists glibly believe that their ends justify their means, in the name of the public's right to know. As demonstrated in a previous chapter, ethical out-clauses are codified around the world, in the name, or perceived name of the public's right to know. It is these differing degrees of the notion of the subject/writer relationship, and how the manuscript *Speaking Secrets* is positioned within this notion, that is going to be examined later in this dissertation. And to what degree is this serving the public's interest, if at all. Is advocacy journalism a valid reason for stepping into some of the most painful moments of people's lives, and have them relive them because it makes a good story?

Malcolm's book critiques the practice of well known American literary journalist Joe McGinniss after he was sued by a convicted murderer; Finkel's book critiques himself and his own practice throughout a bizarre one year relationship with a man charged with murder, awaiting trial, who impersonated him while on the run in Mexico from the FBI; and Garner examines her own journey as she covered the murder of a young man by his girlfriend, and Garner's ensuing relationship with his parents, as well as the parents of the young woman charged with his murder, following on the heels of her controversial *The First Stone*. Her story does not concern the perpetrator of the crime but rather the family of the victim.

Each text spans the spectrum of writer/subject relations, from duplicity and deceit, in order to get the story; to dual manipulation and exploitation; to an allegedly genuine, completely subjective relationship. As such, the three texts demonstrably highlight the differing degrees of detachment attainable throughout literary journalistic practice.

The Journalist and the Murderer

Writer Janet Malcolm takes one case history in her seminal text *The Journalist and the Murderer*, published in 1990, and does more to damage the already quite challenged name, reputation and profession of journalism and journalists than any text has done in the past. The opening lines of the book position her immediately: 'Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible' (Malcolm 1990, p.3).

But as an example of the extreme of writer/subject duplicity, Malcolm's dissection of literary journalist Joe McGinniss's journalism practice surrounding his coverage of the Jeffery MacDonald case is damning.

Philip Weiss in *Newsday* wrote at the time: ‘If Janet Malcolm had blown up an ink factory, forcing the presses to shut down for a week, she couldn’t have sparked greater outrage in the media kingdom’ (Weiss 1990, p.24).

If Malcolm is guilty of one thing, it is hyperbole in those first few lines of her book. Perhaps it was intentional because it has certainly kept her in the forefront of mainstream journalism analysis and education, frequently cited in discussions surrounding journalistic ethics and practice, for the past 18 years. But most striking is what she eventually concludes – this is a relationship, and both parties have something to do with its dynamic and reality. Malcolm places heaviest responsibility on the journalist but also concedes subjects play a part in the dance, albeit a mostly compromised part: ‘The subject’s side of the equation is not without its moral problems, either’ (Malcolm 1990, p.143).

Malcolm’s story *Reflections: The Journalist and the Murderer*, in the form of extended essay, first appeared as a two-part article of *The New Yorker*.⁷² This was at the conclusion of a six week jury trial brought against writer Joe McGinniss.⁷³ Convicted of triple murder ten years earlier and serving three consecutive life sentences, Jeffrey MacDonald brought a lawsuit in 1984 against McGinniss for fraud and breach of contract pertaining to his book of MacDonald’s crimes, *Fatal Vision*, which finally went to trial in 1987. The jury was hung over just one question – the first of thirty-seven – five to six, and a mistrial declared. There was then an out of court settlement of US\$325,000 paid to MacDonald’s side, although he didn’t see much of it.

Malcolm alleges that five of the jurors believed that a man convicted for the homicide of his pregnant wife and two young daughters, deserved greater sympathy than a man

⁷² in the March 13 and 20, 1989 issues

⁷³ *The Selling of the President*, 1968; *The Dream Team*, 1972; *Heroes*, 1976; *Going to Extremes*, 1980; *Fatal Vision*, 1983; *Blind Faith*, 1989; *Cruel Doubt*, 1991; *The Last Brother*, 1993; *The Miracle of Castel di Sangro*, 1999; *The Big Horse*, 2004

who wrote about it (Malcolm 1990, p.6). But as McGinniss points out, the jury never got beyond that first question, which was more to do with MacDonald's conduct and signed declarations, waiving McGinniss's liability, than anything else, the mistrial called and the settlement made (McGinniss 1989, p. 680).

But Malcolm's point is, Joe McGinniss acted like he thought MacDonald was innocent, in order to get the story – a 'morally indefensible' stand. From the way McGinniss behaved, responded and wrote to him, MacDonald was led to believe by McGinniss that McGinniss was his friend. He was also led to believe that McGinniss believed him to be innocent of the crimes.

McGinniss met MacDonald in California in June 1979. He was there at the time as a guest columnist for the Los Angeles *Herald Examiner*. He noticed an article in the local paper about a doctor about to be tried for the triple murder of his family. Jeffrey MacDonald's twenty-six year old wife Colette MacDonald, who was pregnant, five year old Kimberly and two year old Kristen had been stabbed and beaten to death in their Fort Bragg apartment, nine years earlier on February 17, 1970 (Malcolm 1990, p.15). MacDonald, who was a doctor for the Green Beret stationed at Fort Bragg Army base in North Carolina, was charged and then acquitted of the murders by a seven month long army tribunal.

A year later, his wife's step-father Alfred Kassab, urged the Justice Department to reopen the case, which it did, indicting him in 1975 and finally re-trying him in 1979. He was found guilty.

After one meeting with McGinniss prior to the retrial, MacDonald invited him into the defence team arena in order to write a book – he had full access to MacDonald, his lawyers, all strategies and all game plans running up to the trial and during the trial in Raleigh, North Carolina. And then after his conviction on August 29, 1979, four more

years exclusively with MacDonald via tape recordings MacDonald made, letters between them, and in person on prison visits.

As part of the deal, McGinniss received complete exclusivity and release from liability, and MacDonald would receive twenty-six and a half percent of the advance and thirty-three percent of royalties, in order to pay legal fees, which were many (Malcolm 1990, p.19). MacDonald's lawyer at the time, Bernard Segal, qualified the agreement on liability. He added to the contract before it was signed '...provided that the essential integrity of my life story is maintained' (Malcolm 1990, p.21) - and that was the entire basis of MacDonald's lawsuit against McGinniss.

There is no doubt Jeffrey MacDonald was looking towards Joe McGinniss and his book as a form of exoneration of the crimes he was convicted of. And here is where the 'false friend' comes into play. Indeed, MacDonald's counsel used the analogy in his opening statement at the fraud trial of McGinniss: 'It is a case about a false friend' (Malcolm 1990, p.45). MacDonald trusted him and at no time was given any idea that McGinniss did not believe him. Malcolm writes: 'In common with many other subjects and writers, they clothed their complicated business together in a mantle of friendship' (Malcolm 1990, p.23).

Instead of the exoneration MacDonald was expecting, Joe McGinniss' *Fatal Vision* depicted him as a cold-blooded and psychotic killer, who had taken too many diet pills and went berserk on the night, slaughtering his young family. To make matters worse, MacDonald only discovered the duplicity when he appeared on *CBS News, 60 Minutes* (US) from prison in 1983 when he happily agreed to some pre-publication publicity for the book. Mike Wallace read out loud some passages from an advanced copy of *Fatal Vision* – the first time MacDonald realised McGinniss thought he had committed the

crimes and had been stringing him along for years. Malcolm writes: ‘...the camera recorded his look of shock and utter discomposure’ (Malcolm 1990, p.31).

Joe McGinniss told Malcolm after the lawsuit against him:

MacDonald was clearly trying to manipulate me, and I was aware of it from the beginning. But did I have an obligation to say, ‘Wait a minute. I think you are manipulating me, and I have to call your attention to the fact that I’m aware of this, just so you’ll understand you are not succeeding?’ Do little bells have to go at a certain point? This has never been the case before. This could inhibit any but the most superficial reporting... (Malcolm 1990, p.17).

Further, McGinniss’s personal credo, echoing Matthew Ricketson cited earlier: ‘When you sit down at the typewriter, it is between you and the typewriter. You have to be true to what you believe’ (Boynton 2005, p.119). The issue here was that McGinniss claims he believed at the beginning of MacDonald’s trial that he was innocent of the charges – by the end of his trial, he had changed his mind. He just failed to tell MacDonald – dubious ethical practise in the least.

But McGinniss explains:

I am perfectly capable of suspending judgement while gathering information, or even of suppressing troublesome feelings in order to more fully report – as I think any good journalist has to be – but I cannot fake what I feel...I liked MacDonald when I was with him during the murder trial. I felt sorry for him for months afterward and wrote him letters genuinely expressing that sorrow, even after I formed my opinion as to his guilt. Those letters – far from being my attempt to con him – represent the degree to which he’s succeeded in conning me (McGinniss 1989, p. 669).

Despite these protestations, journalists around the world continued to critique Malcolm’s book and seemingly take it at face value.

The New Statesman’s Linda Christmas wrote that perhaps Malcolm chose a very bad example – what she regards as the worst possible deception of a subject – to hold the craft of journalism, and the ethics and integrity of journalists up against (Christmas 1991, p.35). But the essence is there. MacDonald’s case was damning of McGinniss –

MacDonald's people produced letters written to him in prison by McGinniss, repeatedly emphasising his solidarity with the convicted man and desire that he be free again.

On September 11, 1979, twelve days after MacDonald wrote a letter to McGinniss which 'brought tears to my eyes' (Malcolm 1990, p.33), McGinniss wrote to him:

...Total strangers can recognise within five minutes that you did not receive a fair trial...it's a hell of a thing – spend the summer making a new friend and then the bastards come along and lock him up. But not for long, Jeffrey – not for long (Malcolm 1990, p.34).

More than forty letters were written throughout the next four years. What makes it worse, also, is that within the letters, McGinniss makes it very clear that MacDonald should not speak to any other writers in case it jeopardised his own book and this appears purely as monetary concern – competition on the bookstands. At the time, there were actually two other writers researching the story – Bob Keeler from *Newsday* and Colette MacDonald's stepfather, Freddy Kassab.

Janet Malcolm was first approached by Daniel Kornstein when the lawsuit against McGinniss was over. Kornstein had represented Joe McGinniss in the trial and wrote to Malcolm about the 'grave threat to established journalistic freedoms' (Malcolm 1990, p.7). He went on: 'Now, for the first time, a journalist's demeanour and point of view throughout the entire creative process have become an issue to be resolved by jury trial' (ibid).

A 'journalist's demeanour and point of view' – it is an enticing phrase, and Malcolm was hooked. But it wasn't until she read the trial transcript and the letters McGinniss had written to Jeffrey MacDonald in gaol that she realised what had transpired – a fake seduction of a subject, in order to 'get the story'.

Two of the defence team's witnesses – well known writers William F. Buckley Jr from the *National Review Magazine* and Joseph Wambaugh⁷⁴ - were cross-examined by MacDonald's lawyer Gary Bostwick and produced what was later deemed the pivotal moment of the trial. When Buckley was asked by Bostwick if he would 'tell him something you don't really believe in order to get more information' (Malcolm 1990, p.53) he replied 'Yes. That is right, understood in context' (ibid).

And when Wambaugh explained his difference between a lie and an untruth: '...a lie is something that's told with ill will or in bad faith that is not true' while an untruth is 'part of a device wherein one can get at the actual truth' (Malcolm 1990, p.54), Bostwick had all he needed for his closing address to the jury.

He told the jury the defence's argument, told by experts, was to do 'whatever is necessary' to get the story – even lie to the subject. This notion of deception is at the heart of the public's mistrust of journalists and journalistic practice.

As the crux of the story, Malcolm takes this and tarnishes all journalists and the business of journalism. Her assumption is that the art of journalism, or the craft or the profession just by its nature, 'lies' to subjects in order to get their stories. But she also places some of this responsibility on the subject. Malcolm writes:

Unlike other relationships that have a purpose beyond themselves and are clearly delineated as such (dentist-patient, lawyer-client, teacher-student), the writer-subject relationship seems to depend for its life on a kind of fuzziness and murkiness, if not utter covertness, of purpose. If everybody put his cards on the table, the game would be over. The journalist must do his work in a kind of deliberately induced state of moral anarchy. This is what Buckley and Wambaugh were trying to say in court...if they had put it as a baffling and unfortunate occupational hazard rather than a virtual necessity, they might not have antagonised the jury as they did (Malcolm 1990, p.143).

⁷⁴ *The New Centurions* (1971); *The Blue Knight* (1972); *The Onion Field* (1973); *The Choirboys* (1975); *The Black Marble* (1977); *The Delta Star* (1983); *The Glitter Dome* (1984); *Lines and Shadows* (1984); *The Secrets of Harry Bright* (1985); *Echoes in the Darkness* (1987); *The Blooding* (1989); *The Golden Orange* (1990); *Fugitive Nights* (1992); *Finnegan's Week* (1993) *Floater* (1996); *Fire Lover* (2002)

Public reaction to her text was immediate – validation of long held criticism. But perhaps it is the hyperbolic nature of her initial statement which sent self-righteous shudders throughout the industry. After all, Joan Didion basically posited the same thing, if less eloquently, twenty-two years earlier when she wrote in the forward of her acclaimed modern classic *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*: ‘Writers are always selling somebody out’ (Didion 1968, xvi).

Nat Hentoff writes in *Editor and Publisher* (Hentoff 2001, p.26) that criticism is ‘endemic’ to the profession. Malcolm’s seemed to ratify public perception that journalists are no more to be trusted than second hand used car salesmen and creates a standard with no expectation of attainment. But her text is much more than just this, although this is the popular grab most often taken from it.

Book reviews at the time of publication varied. *The Wall Street Journal*’s Andrew Ferguson wrote: ‘...Ms Malcolm considers this relationship paradigmatic, when in fact it is far slimier than anything that normally obtains between journalist and subject’ (Ferguson 1990, p.A22). Across the Atlantic, Linda Christmas from *The New Statesman* explains that Malcolm set out to write about the relationship between subject and journalist or author. She wrote: ‘If that was her aim, she should not have restricted herself to one example. And a *bad* example at that’ (Christmas 1991, p.35).

Anthony Lukas from *The Washington Monthly* makes a more personal attack, labelling the book ‘a work of inspired quackery’ (Lukas 1990, p.44). He claims that when she wrote her book, she had never worked for any other publication than *The New Yorker* as a staff writer and so was really writing from an outsider’s perspective: ‘She never went through the apprenticeship – general assignments off a city desk – that has shaped the work habits of so many American reporters’ (Lukas 1990, p.45).

But Catharine Stimpson reviewed with a seemingly greater insight. She writes of the book: ‘It offers little consolation to writers of some integrity...such writers do what they must, but some blood will fleck the keyboards of even the wisest among them’ (Stimpson 1990, p.902). What she means is that even the most ethical of journalists are compromised at times.

And this is the thrust of Malcolm’s text often overlooked by knee-jerk reaction to her opening lines – ignored both by the public and industry. There is a relationship – both writer and subject are after something, will be getting something from the coupling. It may be celebrity, financial, revenge, altruism, a semblance of justice, or just some way of being heard, but the subject of every solicited story gains something, or else they would not be there in the first place. It is the balance of methods used, the depth of honesty imposed and believed, from both sides, which tips the balance. The integrity of both writer and subject is on show to be judged. Janet Malcolm’s text is a key case raising questions and themes which must be constantly discussed, to maintain a semblance of honesty about what is the exact nature of journalism.

Janet Malcolm writes of interviewing Lucille Dillon, the juror who could not agree to find McGinniss guilty of fraud and breach of contract in the MacDonald/McGinniss lawsuit. Malcolm writes:

People tell journalists their stories as characters in dreams deliver their elliptical messages: without warning, without context, without concern for how odd they will sound when the dreamer awakens and repeats them. Here I sat, eating my Thanksgiving dinner with this stranger dressed in white, who I would never see again, and whose existence for me henceforth would be on paper, as a sort of emblematic figure of the perils of the jury system (Malcolm 1983, p.115).

But perhaps at this point, Joe McGinniss should be allowed a word:

If you are going to be a non-fiction writer you must be willing to go where the story leads you, even if it isn’t where you want to be. And, as the occasion demands, you must be willing to publish unpleasant truths – rather than pleasant untruths – about your subject (McGinniss 1989, p.684).

True Story: Murder, Memoir, Mea Culpa

One of the major premises underpinning Michael Finkel's narration of his relationship with Christian Longo, convicted of murdering his young family, echoes Malcolm's *The Journalist and The Murderer*. He devotes centimetre after centimetre of copy labouring the point of honesty within their relationship, while at every step qualifying and analysing the potential for dishonesty. And he systematically dissects his bizarre relationship with Longo, and the constant confrontation he had with the material.

He also takes Janet Malcolm's most infamous statement from *The Journalist and The Murderer* – 'every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible. He is a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse'⁷⁵ – to task. Finkel claims: 'I think it is a brilliant line that I disagree with. My rebuttal is that you can be truly honest and still get the story' (Thompson 2005, p.CO1).

Longo himself writes to Finkel, echoing Malcolm's words with an accusation: 'You are a typical journalist out to get a story by whatever seedy means possible'⁷⁶ (Finkel 2005, p.62). Later, he spoke again to Finkel: 'I hear stories about journalists taking people under their wings,' Longo said...it's a common tactic he pointed out, for a reporter to insincerely befriend the people he's interviewing, only to 'thrash them in a story, which was his whole point to start with' (Finkel 2005, p.111).

But Finkel writes:

My chief source of information – Longo himself – had promised me, over the phone and in person, that every word he spoke or wrote to me was the truth. 'I will be completely honest with you,' Longo had said, 'if you're completely honest with me.' I swore the same. Yet soon after we made this pledge, Longo also admitted, in his letter, that he was an habitual liar (Finkel 2005, p.76).

⁷⁵ page 3

⁷⁶ Letter from Christian Longo to Michael Finkel

The deep irony here is that Finkel also has been publicly exposed as a liar.

Finkel, writing for *The New York Times Magazine*, was caught out when he blended fact and fiction, attributing quotes and experiences to a composite character he created – a young Malian boy called Youssouf Malé – in a major piece more than five thousand words long on child labour on West Africa’s Ivory Coast cocoa plantations.⁷⁷ Malé did actually exist. Finkel writes: ‘The decision to use Malé’s name was more or less arbitrary; I think I just liked the way it sounded, and the surname was the most common one I’d encountered’ (Finkel 2005, p.87). Finkel also supplied a photo of a young boy he claimed was Youssouf Malé. It was not.

It was not the fact checkers at *The New York Times Magazine* who discovered the deceit but rather an agency – Save the Children, Canada – unhappy at Finkel’s portrayal of its work in West Africa and knowing the boy Finkel pinned his story on, Youssouf Malé, was not the boy in the photo.

Cynically, or possibly more likely desperately, when the agency first contacted him, Finkel tried to continue the deceit. He writes: ‘In my West Africa story, none of the boys I’d melded into one had access to a telephone and I had accurately quoted all the people who were reachable’ (Finkel 2005, p.89).

Finally, Save the Children accepted his written apology but demanded *The New York Times Magazine* publish a correction of the falsely named photo. At this point Finkel’s editor Adam Moss investigated further, and demanded his notebooks. Finkel now came clean with his bosses – and was sacked.

The New York Times Magazine published a six paragraph piece headlined Editor’s Note, making Finkel’s dismissal and why he was dismissed, public.⁷⁸

Bob Thompson wrote: ‘...he committed a journalistic felony’ (Thompson 2005,

⁷⁷ Is Yousouf Malé A Slave? *New York Times Magazine*, November 18, 2001

⁷⁸ February 21, 2002

p.CO1). Dennis Lim described him as a ‘defrocked journalist’. Lim describes Finkel’s relationship with Longo:

...a pact of mutual exploitation, a hall-of-mirrors power game in which two proven liars (and admitted egotists) attempt a relationship premised on candour, or at least they say they do...the familiar quandary of the journalist and the murderer gains an unnerving intimacy – and even transparency (Lim, 2005).

Finkel writes:

My career, twelve years of intensely focused labour, promptly imploded. I was about to be pilloried on page A-3 of the *New York Times*. The rest of the journalism world would soon weigh in. I’d be shown, publicly, to be a liar – a stink you can never fully wash off. I planned to go into hibernation. And then my phone rang (Finkel 2005, p.36).

This phone call was to rivet Finkel. It was the night before the public outing of Finkel as a liar, when a journalist from the Portland *Oregonian* rang him for a comment – not about his shaming dismissal, as Finkel thought at the time, but about a bizarre story emanating from Mexico.

The journalist told Finkel that a man named Christian Longo, who had been placed on the FBI’s *Ten Most Wanted Fugitives* list on January 11, 2002, suspected for murdering his entire family, had been arrested three days later on January 14 in Mexico where he had been impersonating a journalist – Michael Finkel.

At this point, no doubt the lowest of his professional career – ‘I had lost my career due to stupidity and hubris: I had caused my own downfall’ (Finkel 2005, p.41) - Finkel saw a shred of hope. He thought if he could get Longo’s story, he could resurrect his axed journalism career. A career which saw him condemned, as he predicted, by his peers: ‘One writer described my actions as sleazy, arrogant, offensive, and pernicious, and then concluded that people like me should burn in Journalism Hell’ (Finkel 2005, p.4).

Christian Longo married MaryJane Baker on March 13, 1993. Longo was nineteen and MaryJane seven years older. Both were devout Jehovah's Witnesses. Their first son, Zachery Michael was born on February 28, 1997. Just over one year later on April 30, their second child, Sadie Ann was born; and then on October 19, 1999 their third child Madison Jeanne was born.

MaryJane had stayed at home and mothered their three infants, while Longo worked at a variety of jobs, making a variety of very poor decisions. Longo managed to hide his bad business decisions towards the end from his wife by moving his young family from rental accommodation to a tent for a fortnight to an old warehouse to hotel lodgings and finally, to a condominium in Newport. MaryJane never seemed to complain and neither did the children but it seems what was driving him – to get away from his bad decisions and continue to support his family – is what finally pushed him over the edge to murder his family.

On December 19, 2001, four year old Zachery was pulled – found shoved in a pillow case weighted down and drowned – from Lint Slough in Newport, Oregon. Two days later, his three year old sister Sadie Ann was found, still weighted down at the bottom of the bay. She too had drowned. Prosecutors claimed the autopsy showed evidence of strangulation. The defence said this was inconclusive. Longo himself, finally admitted to Michael Finkel that both children were alive when he threw them from the Lint Slough Bridge (Finkel 2005, p.300), to drown to death.

MaryJane and baby Madison were both strangled, shoved into two separate suitcases, and thrown into Yaquina Bay outside their condominium. Longo claims MaryJane had attempted to strangle Madison but he finished her off. He admits strangling his wife, also.

It was April 7, 2003 and Christian Longo was found guilty of all four murders. It took only four hours for the jury to come to a unanimous decision. He was sentenced to death for each murder and is currently on death row at Oregon State Penitentiary. There are twenty-six death row prisoners ahead of him.

Christian Longo, now an inmate at the Lincoln County Jail in Oregon was refusing, on the advice of his solicitors, to speak to any media when Michael Finkel saw an opportunity. He still thought it worth a try and wrote to the accused, just two weeks after the Editor's Note appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* (Finkel 2005, p.42).

Finkel told Longo he had heard that Longo had used his name to impersonate a journalist whilst in Cancun, Mexico. He told Longo:

...I find it both interesting and, in a way, it makes me feel somewhat honoured. I understand that you are facing an upcoming trial, and that there is probably much that you are unable to talk about, but I was hoping that you would agree to meet with me in person (Finkel 2005, p.43).

He even wrote to Longo that he would be 'grateful and honoured' if Longo decided to speak to him. There is no doubt from this that Finkel was desperate to interview this man, going so far as to ingratiate himself with talk of gratitude and honour – highly manipulative and dubious ethical journalistic practice, to say the least.

He admits: 'Longo's story – one that combined murder, identity theft, and a bizarre personal connection – was the journalistic equivalent of a winning lottery ticket' (Finkel 2005, p.56).

Bob Thompson from the *Washington Post* writes, tongue in cheek: 'Janet Malcolm, call your office. *True Story* is another grotesquely magnified version of a journalistic encounter, complete with...a developing 'friendship' between writer and subject' (Thompson 2005, p.C01). But Thompson goes on to differentiate between Joe McGinniss' *Fatal Vision* and Michael Finkel's *True Story*: '...Finkel acknowledges the writer-subject dance from the beginning and tries to record its steps as he goes along'.

Darren Everson writes in the *San Francisco Chronicle*:

Longo refused repeated requests to speak to other media, but with Finkel he forged a bond...obviously, it was one of convenience to both parties. Finkel wisely acknowledges this...but Longo isn't the only one being used here. He has his own purposes for carrying on contact with Finkel (Everson 2005, p.B-2).

Everson claims Longo's reason was merely to have a connection to the outside world because not even members of his family maintained contact after his conviction. He also claims it was to get his story out.

But by the end of the book, Finkel arrives at a far grimmer conclusion: 'What I'd unwittingly been doing...was helping Longo get away with murder' (Finkel 2005, p.199). He writes:

A disturbing feeling swept over me, an angry shock, like the moment you realise your wallet's been lifted. If the story of his family life passed my scrutiny, Longo was perhaps thinking, then surely it would pass muster with a jury. I was his dress rehearsal. A one-man focus group (ibid).

The Guardian's Blake Morrison sees it as far less unevenly weighted:

Of course, he realised Longo was using him – that the account he gave of what had really happened was a dress rehearsal for what he'd tell the jury when the case came to court. But Finkel didn't mind being used since he in turn was using Longo – at the end he would get a book out of it and (perhaps) be reprieved from a life in journalistic exile (Morrison 2005).

Michael Finkel spent a year on what he fawningly called the 'Chris and Mike Project'. By the end of Longo's trial, Finkel claims to have examined more than five thousand pages of legal material, transcribed conversations and media clippings (Finkel 2005, p.309).

Longo had chosen Finkel to impersonate because he enjoyed his writing, and as Finkel admits: '...there is nothing more dangerous to a writer's common sense than encountering an enthusiastic reader, even if he is calling collect from county jail' (Finkel 2005, p.53).

After an initial visit to Lincoln County Jail, Longo and Finkel began corresponding. Longo's first letter was seventy-eight, perfect pages long – there were no crossings out or erasure marks. Finkel held off asking about the murders until almost the end of his first visit to the prison – then he asked him outright. Longo told him he wasn't prepared to answer the question at that moment but winked at Finkel and told him: 'But I think you know' (Finkel 2005, p.107).

Finkel muses that he did, indeed, know. He says himself that he had read everything on Longo that had been written – police reports, warrants, media, court transcripts. He had spoken to him in person, and on the phone. Finkel writes: 'I knew. He was guilty. The evidence against him was overwhelming' (Finkel 2005, p.108). And this before the year he spent corresponding with and visiting the man.

Finkel claims because of this knowledge, he felt torn. He writes: 'I felt tugged in opposing directions' (ibid). His conflict was that he thought Longo was guilty of a heinous crime – the premeditated murder of not only his wife, but their three tiny children – yet still had a compulsion to immerse himself in his life, to get the story. Or, as he admits: '...quite possibly, help me restart my life' (ibid). In order to do this, he told Longo that he had felt 'comfortable maintaining the legal assumption of innocence' (Finkel 2005, p.110).

He also admits in the book to an openness and frankness with Longo – telling him personal things about his own life and feelings. One in particular, he confided with Longo about his girlfriend, a woman called Jill, and when he began falling in love with her. He actually told Longo of his feelings before he told his girlfriend.

Finkel makes an incredible – and insightful – admission at this point. He claims he shared his own personal feelings with Longo – definitively crossing the professional line – because:

Longo was the only person in my life I felt morally superior to...with Longo I could talk freely and candidly. Compared to the crimes he was accused of, my transgressions seemed so petty that I found myself gabbing away, poking at the roots of my behaviour without hesitation or embarrassment (Finkel 2005, p.138).

Michael Finkel sets out to redeem his journalistic integrity and his journalistic career with *True Story*. He is self-effacingly honest about this from the beginning but dresses up the subsequent relationship with Longo as more of a clearly and cleanly professional one. It isn't – it is clearly dually exploitative and dually manipulative. His shock when he realises that Christian Longo is exploiting him, as well, as his one man practise run for when he is in front of the jury, is feigned and so naïve as to not be believable. Finkel's desperation to re-establish his destroyed career blinded him to this obvious fact and is yet another example of his poor and already proven unethical decision making in pursuit of his journalism practice.

Joe Cinque's Consolation: A True Story of Death, Grief and the Law

In July 2004, author Helen Garner told the ABC's *The 7.30 Report's* Kerry O'Brien that she hoped her book, published that same year, would 'restore some dignity to Joe Cinque'.⁷⁹ She spoke to Anabel Pandiella at the Sydney Writer's Festival ten months later and admitted: '...it sounds a bit like I'm falling in love with him and I suppose I have in a way. But he was a decent young man'. Pandiella postured that her book, *Joe Cinque's Consolation: A True Story of Death, Grief and the Law*, was Garner's 'attempt to bring Cinque out of the shadows of his fate' (Pandiella 2005, p. 4).

Joe Cinque was a young civil engineer, murdered on Sunday, October 26 in 1977 by his Australian National University law student girlfriend Anu Singh. Singh doped him with massive doses of the date-rape drug Rohypnol in his coffee during a bizarre send-off dinner party with friends in the home they shared in the Canberra suburb of Downer.

⁷⁹ July 29, 2004, *The 7.30 Report*, ABC

She then injected him, not once but three times, with heroin. She waited with him while he took thirty-six hours to die, panicking at the last minute with an hysterical and dramatic 000 call.

Anu Singh and her friend Madhavi Rao were both charged with Cinque's murder. Rao was acquitted but Singh was found guilty of manslaughter due to diminished responsibility based on her mental state at the time. She was sentenced to ten years, backdated to the day of her arrest – the day Joe Cinque died, 26 October, 1977 – with a non-parole period of four years. Anu Singh walked free from jail in October, 2001, after four years. Within that time, she completed a Masters in Criminology at Sydney University, and began consulting with film-maker James Ricketson, on a documentary of her story, due for release when her parole is ended in October 2007.

Garner claims she came to the writing of this book reluctantly. It was March 1999 when she first heard of the case and by this time she had missed the entire Crown case against Singh. She decided she could do nothing - until she read a newspaper clipping with the 000 call transcript. She writes:

It was the shrill blast of this dialogue that broke through my indifference and galvanised me: the killer's voice pleading, dodging, feinting; the dispatcher's desperate striving for command; and the jolting visual flashes of Joe Cinque's death throes – the close presence behind the screaming, of a young man's body *in extremis* – his limbs, his mouth, his teeth, his heart (Garner 2004, p.21).

Garner is regarded as one of Australia's foremost literary journalists. Suzanne Eggins calls her 'arguably one of our best exponents of creative non-fiction' (Eggins 2005). And there is no doubt that *Joe Cinque's Consolation* is as much about the process of writing the book, as the story itself. Garner positions herself well and truly in the middle of the story as she attempts to unwind it around herself. From very early on in her text, Garner tells of yet another broken marriage – her third; of her humiliation; and her

anger. She describes herself as ‘a woman at the end of my tether’ (Garner 2004, p.13), living alone in a rented Sydney flat, jobless and depressed. Garner becomes a subject of interest immediately and a player in her own narrative. She even writes of a termination she had as a young woman at university, wondering if her own parents had had any idea what was bothering her when she went home one day in 1964 (Garner 2004, p.33).

She writes about the writer, as a third party: ‘A story lies in wait for a writer. It flashes out silent signals...without knowing she is doing it, the writer receives the message, drops everything, and turns to follow’ (Garner 2004, p.25).

She is self-effacing when she finally describes why she decided to follow this story:

I wanted to look at women who were accused of murder. I wanted to gaze at them and hear their voices, to see the shapes of their bodies and how they moved and gestured, to watch the expressions on their faces. I needed to find out if anything made them different from me, whether I could trust myself to keep the lid on the vengeful, punitive force that was in me, as it is in everyone – the wildness that one keeps in its cage, releasing it only in dreams and fantasy (Garner, 2005, p.25).

As Morag Fraser writes: ‘Helen Garner does much scouring of her soul throughout *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*...her own state of mind is stark’ (Fraser 2004).

Fraser refers to Garner’s overt role in the narrative of *Joe Cinque*: ‘It’s the writer Helen Garner who intuits and dramatises the moral dimensions of the story. And it is the writer who uses Garner, the woman at the end of her tether, as the fallible register of impressions – a chorus of one, but a chorus with a timbre of responsibility’ (ibid).

Michele Hewitson claims:

Garner remains poised on the rim of her story – often tempted to jump. She thinks about the attraction of fiction. She writes about herself. She wants to give up...despite some magic writing, Garner fails to tell anything other than the story of the frustration of telling stories (Hewitson 2006).

And perhaps this is how the process of the writing becomes as tangible as the story itself.

Garner was stung badly by criticism, mainly from her peers, several years earlier with the publication of her first non-fiction book *The First Stone*, because she developed seven fictitious characters from the one person – a female academic mentoring the student victims of the sexual abuse she was trying to uncover. Neither the academic nor the students would agree to a meeting and interviews with her. Clearly thwarted, she committed the ultimate crime in calling *The First Stone* a non-fiction when she clearly – but much later – admitted to the fact of fabricating several characters, albeit derivative of the one. She survived the barrage of criticism levelled at her by adding a foreword to later editions.

But she fell straight into the same sort of dilemma with *Joe Cinque's Consolation*. To begin with, Joe Cinque was dead – a refrain she repeats continuously throughout the text. But she did manage to develop a strong relationship with his parents, Maria and Nino Cinque, particularly with Maria.

Garner approached Anu Singh's father, Paddy Singh, who at first said he would be more than happy to talk to her and so would his daughter. But that never eventuated – Anu Singh declined to talk to Garner, as did Madhavi Rao.

So Garner was again faced with only having half a story to tell. This time, there was no question of creating or compositing characters and everything told her to drop it, to back off, that without a balanced story, there was no story. But she had not factored in Maria Cinque.

She wrote to the Cinques, explaining her situation and that she felt she could not go forward with the book. Garner, in conversation with Hilary McPhee and Martha Nussbaum at the Melbourne Writers' Festival⁸⁰ selected an excerpt from the text to read aloud to the audience: 'I must have actually imagined that they had not come to depend

⁸⁰ August 27, 2005

on me; that they would accept my mealy-mouthed abandonment of them without protest' (Garner 2005, p.269).

But Maria Cinque was desperate and almost inconsolable. Garner kept reading:

'You were in the court,' she said, 'you know what happened. My son was murdered. For no reason. No motive. Without mercy. My family is destroyed and I have to be silent.' There was nothing on the line but the sound of her weeping. I was dumb with shame. How could I have thought that when I couldn't bend the story to my will I could just lay it down, apologise for any inconvenience caused, and walk away? Her son's murder was not an opportunity for me to speculate on images of disharmony and integration. It was not a convenient screen onto which I could project sorrows of my own that I was too numb to feel. It was not even 'a story'. It was *real*. It was the brutal hand that fate had dealt her. It was the unendurable that she had to endure. Never in my life had I felt so weak, so vain, so stupid (Garner 2005, p.279).

Garner describes to McPhee, Nussbaum and the audience, how she felt:

I was blocked solid with the book. I had done all the research, or as much as I was able to do, and I just couldn't go on. Maria Cinque was...it's not as if she was on the phone pestering me for it, but she was waiting for the book and I didn't know how to start. Two years passed and I was paralysed...Of course, this book is a particular case in that when I got to that point of paralysis that I was trying to describe, I was really seriously and badly stuck, morally stuck at that point because Maria Cinque and Nino Cinque desperately wanted this story to be told because they felt that they had been victims of an injustice and that I was their only channel to the world, in a sense. The courts were finished with their story, no one was interested anymore, except me, and I was kind of carrying, holding this story for them. You can't just give it back, especially if you've asked them. It's not as if they approached me; I approached them and asked them to tell me the story, and so they gave me this story. I then was holding this hot, burning thing and I had to shape it and do something with it because they weren't going to take it back. They said, 'No way. I'm not taking this back,' she said to me. So my main thought was that I did not want to do anything which would cause them any further pain because they'd suffered so horribly and unimaginably in that their son had been murdered.⁸¹

Garner first met Maria Cinque in the ACT Supreme Court's women's toilets. Maria smiled at her and said: 'I see you writing in court...are you a journalist?' Garner

⁸¹ *The Humanities Writing Project, Sydney University, 2005*

admitted to Maria Cinque that she was a freelance writer when what she really wanted to say was, that at that moment, she was still only ‘perving’ (Garner 2004, p.39). Garner then asked her that, if she did write something, would Maria be willing to speak to her. Maria said yes.

On *Radio National’s* Book Talk Helen Garner spoke candidly to Clare Foster about her relationship with Maria Cinque, evolving from that very first meeting:

I greatly admire and respect and love her. Actually, I’ve come to be close to her. I’m not making any secret of that and obviously it would be absurd to pretend that I had any objectivity about this story but...I couldn’t say she forced me to do it. I felt there was a moral obligation to tell the story because I’d asked her to tell the story...I’d asked her for the story and she’d given it to me in good faith. So I had to find a way to tell the story without access to the other side (Foster 2004).

Effectively, Garner mythologises Maria Cinque, many would claim appropriately under the circumstances, as ‘mother’.

Peter Rose writes in the *Australian Book Review*:

Books such as *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* often dignify the parents’ agony and indignation. In Maria Cinque we have one of the great stalwarts in this literature of loss. She is always there in court listening, occasionally hissing and weeping, raging when she must. They were keeping vigil (Rose, 2004).

Maria Cinque is the tragic heroine of Garner’s narrative – the archetypal mother whose child has been ripped from her in the ugliest of manners. She trusts in the legal system to mete out justice, only to have no voice in court, and then be delivered the ultimate insult – a verdict of manslaughter, not murder, of her son. And she comes to regard Helen Garner as a vehicle to be heard. She told Garner: ‘...all I want, *all I want* is my son to be acknowledged’ (Garner 2005, p.269).

Throughout the trial, seen tortuously through Garner’s eyes, she weaves the Maria Cinque narrative masterfully throughout the facts.

In response to harrowing evidence retold in the text, Garner describes what she saw:

Mrs Cinque lurched forward and clutched her arms to her belly, as if she had been stabbed...she went pale, a bad yellow colour. She unfolded a tissue and held it to her mouth. She struggled to compose herself. I wanted to cry out with horror, and pity (Garner 2005, p.50).

Peter Rose writes:

In the book, as in court, attention is drawn to Mrs Cinque, who looms like a kind of moral rock in the company of these legal wizards and temporisers — not to mention the psychologists and psychiatrists for the defence...Mrs Cinque makes you ashamed of the vapidness of modern society, with its endless indulgences and extenuations — its flaky moral relativism (Rose, 2004).

On hearing the verdict delivered by Justice Ken Crispin, Garner writes: ‘Mrs Cinque uttered a choked cry...the dead man’s mother burst into wild sobs...Mrs Cinque covered her face and wept (Garner 2005, p.68).

It is Garner’s unfettered affection for the Cinques and in particular Maria which comes through clearly. She is entirely upfront about her relationship with the parents – she admires them and is highly empathetic towards them. She told the Melbourne Writers’ Festival self-effacingly: ‘I can be aware now of how much affected I was by the Cinques’ emotions, how much of that rubbed off on me, if you like, and how my desire not to hurt them any further perhaps constrained me in the breadth of imagining that I was allowing myself’.⁸²

Garner seems to be reflecting publicly on her efforts to interview Anu Singh. Singh herself has also publicly remonstrated that she wished Garner had tried harder to talk to her. She told Phillip Adams on radio:

I think it's unfortunate that there wasn't a greater attempt to speak to me, and she brings up a lot of questions in the book, and I think more questions than

⁸² *The Humanities Writing Project*, Sydney University, 2005

answers; because there was no contact when she decided to go ahead with the book to speak to me...'⁸³

Adams asks Singh if she recognises herself in Garner's descriptions. She replies:

I think it's very exaggerated. Some aspects of it I can agree with, but I think that it is exaggerated because she hasn't spoken to me and she decided on what I was like by a photo. Apparently I raised her 'girl hackles'. I don't necessarily know what that implies, but I think that yes, the description of me is unfortunate because she didn't actually get a chance to speak to me and maybe she would have described me in a different way.⁸⁴

Even Anu Singh is quite aware that Helen Garner became a virtual advocate for the Cinques and seemingly, she believes this to be a good thing. She told Phillip Adams in the same interview:

... I think that she was particularly concerned to give the Cinques a voice and I think that's really admirable and a noble thing to do, given that they aren't represented in court, and unfortunately victims of crime don't have the ability to be able to speak about what they're going through. So I think that yes, the sense that I get is that she was compelled in that sense to go ahead with it.⁸⁵

Helen Garner at no time hides or camouflages her subjectivity. She writes in the first person from page one of her book, and hauntingly the reader can almost feel her struggle at the horror of the crime – its ramifications in terms of pain and suffering – throughout the text. She herself becomes furious with the law and its seemingly unfair treatment of the Cinques – and Joe himself. None of this is disguised and most of it fleshes out the text, in and around the harrowing story.

But she again effectively only got half the story. She knows this but admits it was never her intention to just complete half a story and claims this is an unresolved issue for her. She told Hilary McPhee and Martha Nussbaum at the Melbourne Writers' Festival:

⁸³ *Late Night Live*, Joe Cinque is Dead, 23 September 2004

⁸⁴ *ibid*

⁸⁵ *ibid*

In the book somewhere I say that what I hoped to do was to enlarge my imagination far enough so that it could encompass both the Cinques and their suffering, and Anu Singh and her family and what this killing had meant for them. It was a very deep hope that I had that I might find that largeness in myself but, as it turned out, because I didn't get the access to the Singh family that I'd hoped and that had been offered to me early on, there was no...I had no access to that side of the story. I do feel that part of the story that you put your finger on there is unresolved for me.⁸⁶

Garner now claims to have a normal, friendly relationship with the Cinques. She regards them as friends, and believes that simply by the book coming out, telling their story, 'something in them has relaxed'.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Melbourne Writers' Festival, August 27, 2005

⁸⁷ *ibid*

Chapter 4

SPEAKING SECRETS

Conclusion

Literary journalism couples cold fact and personal event, in the author's humane company. And that broadens readers' scans, allows them to behold others' lives, often set within far clearer contexts than we can bring to our own. The process moves readers, and writers, toward realisation, compassion, and in the best of cases, wisdom.

Mark Kramer⁸⁸

Standard reporting hides the voice of the writer but literary journalism gives that voice an opportunity to enter the story, sometimes with dramatic irony.

Norman Sims⁸⁹

The defining mark of literary journalism is the personality of the writer, the individual and intimate voice of a whole, candid person not representing, defending, or speaking on behalf of any institution, not a newspaper, corporation, government, ideology, field of study, chamber of commerce, or travel destination. It is the voice of someone naked, without bureaucratic shelter, speaking simply in his or her own right, someone who has illuminated experience with private reflection, but who has not transcended crankiness, wryness, doubtfulness, and who doesn't blank out emotional realities of sadness, glee, excitement, fury, love.

Mark Kramer⁹⁰

⁸⁸ in Sims et al 1995, p.34

⁸⁹ in Sims et al 1995, p.3

⁹⁰ in Sims et al 1995, p.30

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Introduction

This chapter discusses the various ethical dilemmas encountered while researching and writing *Speaking Secrets*, and how they were dealt with. This chapter will also consider more broadly the position of the narrator in how literary journalism stories are told. In particular, it will examine the use of the pronoun 'I' and will conclude that journalists should more readily use and accept the use of the first person in the profession where appropriate, particularly in pieces of literary journalism.

The manuscript *Speaking Secrets* revolves around people who have undergone differing levels of trauma and hardship in relation to their sexuality or sex. The three case studies explored in the previous chapter were selected because of their common theme: trauma and violence surrounding murder. One of the main reasons in selecting these three themed case studies is because of how they differ in relation to the degree of detachment exhibited by the relevant journalists who researched and wrote them. *Speaking Secrets* will be compared and discussed in relation to these case studies.

Media analysts and journalists around the world agree – sex sells. And secrets about sex sell even more. It is a 'news value' in some shape or form present in almost every edition of almost every mainstream newspaper or magazine publication. It can be – and often is – salacious, and as a news value, is a sought after commodity in most news rooms, in some shape or form. Media commentator Associate Professor Dr David McKnight believes both producers and consumers of news expect it, and expect it as a sensational and dramatic component of their media consumption:

You see that this is where journalism bumps up against fiction. Journalists say they just write the facts. But the more you look at it, you see how journalism adopts dramatic forms from Shakespeare or detective novels or film, and that in the media's coverage of anything to do with sex both the audience and the producers of the news are drawing in this unspoken way from those fictions that have been around for hundreds of years (Mordue 2007).

It is far more to do with what is known in media theory as what interests the public, as opposed to what is in the public's interest.

This research broadened this news value to encompass the notion of secrecy. While researching the themes of sex and secrecy, other dominant themes emerged including: the notion of suffering; social justice; and making other people aware, comprising the Fourth Estate concept of journalism. Sociologist Michel Foucault claimed:

Truth, lodged in our most secret nature, demands only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can only finally be articulated at the price of a kind of liberation (Foucault 1976, p.60).

What Foucault has identified is a human need to confess, even when societal norms may discourage it. Perhaps this innate tendency to confess answers the age-old question of why people talk to journalists and divulge, sometimes, their deepest, darkest thoughts, moments and memories for public consumption.

Over the decades, the media has slowly dismantled many social taboos. As a result, new discourses have emerged and many people – previously unheard – have finally been heard.

Many of the interviewees in the manuscript *Speaking Secrets* are such people.

Speaking Secrets contains ten interviews with people ranging from the well-known, to the publicly unknown. All interviewees were silenced or unable to tell their secret stories for various and varied reasons. But finally, each of them sought out the media to disclose their secrets. Their reasons are as diverse as they are personal. Sociologist Catherine Kohler Riessman writes:

...some experiences are extremely difficult to speak about. Political conditions constrain particular events from being narrated. The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from awareness. Survivors of political torture, war

and sexual crimes silence themselves and are silenced because it is too difficult to tell and to listen (Kohler Riessman 1993, p.3).

These subjects were not solicited. The subjects put themselves out from behind their personally constructed walls of secrecy – or were put out, as in the case of Sykes – into the public domain. The manuscript delves into people's lives and asks questions about their most haunting and secret sexual traumas and memories, and how and when they finally spoke about them. The research sought to give each subject a voice again – allowing them to speak and tell their stories in their own words.

Each subject was approached in the first instance by phone or email. During this contact, the method and nature of the research was explained. Namely, that they would be interviewed and photographed for inclusion in a manuscript with the possibility of publication. All but one person – and that particular circumstance will be expanded upon later in this chapter – in the manuscript *Speaking Secrets* agreed to this, each for varying reasons. I viewed this process as the sort of contract I always strike with my subjects – I am after their story, the way in which they tell it and then the way in which I hear it – and they can either agree or disagree, for whatever reasons. This then flows onto the reader as a hybrid rendition.

Ted Conover calls himself a 'nuts and bolts' writer when it comes to journalism, and talks also of a contract he strikes, not so much with his subjects but with his readers. He writes: 'Either something happened or it didn't. I have a contract with my readers according to which they can expect my material to be true, and I honour that. I believe in the literal truth of non-fiction' (Boynton 2005, p28).

This 'literal truth of non-fiction' is an imperative of literary journalism, one I have adhered to rigidly in *Speaking Secrets*, and have attempted in all my journalism. But one of the main aims of the manuscript was to give a voice to those who did not have

one – literal truth then becomes the subjects’ truth or more simply, their own story, in their own words.

Most of the stories within *Speaking Secrets* are about personal trauma and hardship. Given the confronting nature of the interview, when interviewees appeared distressed, they were offered the opportunity to terminate the interview. Various theorists argue about the appropriateness of this – indeed some proffer that it is preferable just to be silent and wait for a sign from the subject. However this thesis argues that it is incumbent on the interviewer to monitor the verbal and non-verbal cues of the subject and – where a subject is distressed – to remind them that they have a choice in the process of being interviewed. None of the subjects in *Speaking Secrets* elected to terminate the interview, despite probing questioning.

The research for *Speaking Secrets* sets out to establish an overt relationship with each of its subjects and to create for the reader an evocative and believable space for their stories to be told and voices to be heard. Each story has been supported by rigorous research and fact checking to allow a freer momentum for their voices. The question that must be asked after the interview is: What is left behind? Is it an empowered subject feeling they have achieved what they set out to achieve? Or is it a damaged person – re-traumatised – and wondering whether they have said too much and how it will be used and retold by this person who seemed so genuine and ‘friendly’ at the time? Trusting that the integrity of what has passed between them will be maintained but really, having no idea until it is seen or heard, after reproduction.

Raymond Schroth writes in the *Columbia Journalism Review*: ‘...that is the journalist’s moral tension: one person’s pain is another’s stimulation, his living. Suffering sells. Yet the journalist, insofar as he or she is a human being, must strive to alleviate suffering’ (Schroth 1995, p.45). Schroth is arguing for the integrity of the story as told to be

reproduced, not a version that makes for better reading. He is really calling for the highest integrity of the reporter.

Matthew Ricketson also argues that the rigour of literary journalism carries with it an even greater responsibility ‘to keep faith with the reader’ (Ricketson in Mead 1997, p.86).

Pulitzer Prize winning columnist Jim Dwyer claims only one true justification for intruding on a victim’s life – that the journalist will help:

The journalist knows that...his moral obligation is to help that foundry worker find the language, to be his scream, a scream that takes flesh in bold headlines, pictures, text, and layout that make the story jump off the page into the reader’s heart (Schroth 1995, p.45).

And Norman Sims writes:

Literary journalists share a goal of bearing witness, and a certainty that there is more to common life than just politics...because personal experience illuminates political issues, literary journalists are likely to write about politics by letting individuals represent larger groups (Sims et al 1995, p.13).

Each interviewee in *Speaking Secrets* represents such a group – or rather, they are emblematic. Each represents or has experienced a different societal taboo, be it rape, race, gender, homosexuality, disability, disease, child abuse, sexual reassignment. And in each instance – each was silenced or repressed in some way by entrenched institutional norms.

Perhaps together within the community of the manuscript *Speaking Secrets*, they represent the perils of ignorance and obversely, the potential for learning and understanding – the essence of journalism advocacy and the Fourth Estate at work.

Speaking Secrets – ethically speaking

As has been explained in earlier chapters, an immediate relationship is formed when a journalist and subject come face-to-face; even before, in negotiating agreement, time

and place for an interview. Janet Malcolm claims that while the onus is on the journalist to conduct the interview ethically, she also argues that the subject has a decisive part to play as well. This role is often overlooked by critics of journalism practice. But journalists must make continuous judgements about the capacity of their subjects, particularly subjects talking about deeply personal, traumatic, and/or sensitive topics. This thesis argues that the mere fact the interviewee agrees to the interview is insufficient consent to an interview. Journalists must continuously question themselves and monitor the cues of the interview. They must adjust their 'moral compass' (Kovach et al 2002, p.181) continuously and reassess the ethical ramifications of continuing with the interview if there is clear distress.

Juxtaposed against this is the notion that if a victim or survivor has elected to speak to a journalist, respect must be given to how the subject tells their story. The journalist must not be deterred by a highly emotional subject. Some victims and survivors may even find it patronising if a journalist attempts to stop an interview because the subject becomes emotional, or the journalist themselves is upset. Psychiatrist Frank Ochberg suggests the journalist should come prepared, with tissues, like a psychologist (Cote et al 2006, p.108). He goes on to say:

When survivors cry during interviews, they are not necessarily reluctant to continue. They may have difficulty communicating, but they often want to tell their stories. Interrupting them may be experienced as patronising and denying an opportunity to testify (ibid).

Ochberg asserts that asking the survivor or victim if they wish to terminate the interview may itself constitute a re-victimisation of the subject. My research does not support this position. Instead it argues that any re-victimisation or re-traumatising will present itself in the recalling of memories in answering a journalist's questions, not a suggestion to have a break or halt the process.

During her interview for *Speaking Secrets*, Liz Mullinar became highly emotional and cried about the lack of bonding she formed with her two sons as a result of her childhood sexual abuse. Similarly, Russel Sykes appeared to dissociate several times whenever the topic of his mother's rape, and his very existence, came up. Jan Ruff-O'Herne was clearly shaken by my questions, and like Sykes, dissociated after she related her memory of returning to her mother's side in the Javanese internment camp, after being forced into a brothel for the Japanese military for three months; as did Lyn Austin when recounting her horrific sexual and physical abuse at the hands of a foster brother. Michelle Tess clearly became so distressed throughout her interview, she could not even begin to eat the meal in front of her. And psychologist and academic Jim Malcolm also cried throughout his interview when trying to talk about his father, and telling his own family of his sexual orientations.

All six insisted they wanted to continue, despite offers of terminating the interview. This partially confirms Frank Ochberg's assertion, however unlike Ochberg, I believe it is the right thing to continue to give the subject the choice – to always ask the question if they want to stop, or not, or have a break.

However, there is still a perception of false friendship about the interview process. It is immaterial that each interviewee agreed to talk about deeply personal memories even where the interviews caused them distress. The question still arises as to what right the interviewer has to be there in the first place. Somehow, the more upset or re-traumatized the subject became, the more evocative the telling became – clearly, a 'morally indefensible' stance. There is a fleeting intimacy established between story-teller and story gatherer – the false friend. It generates a feeling of mutual opportunistic potential at the time of interviewing which typically ends when the journalist leaves having obtained what they came for, namely: the story.

Of all the subjects interviewed, the biggest ethical dilemma arose in relation to my interview with academic and clinical psychologist Jim Malcolm, and it eventuated not during the interview but well after.

My research for this dissertation followed on from my first book *She's my Wife; He's just Sex* (1997) which explored a certain type of sexual duality amongst married and de facto men. That research focussed less on their sexual behaviour, instead focussing on the lengths these men went to in order to maintain their secret. It was during the publicity for this book that I met Jim Malcolm. We were both interviewed by Kerri-Anne Kennerley for her national *Midday Show* on Channel 9 in Sydney.

Her researcher asked me to invite one of the men in my book to attend the interview.

None of them agreed but suggested Jim Malcolm as he had had extensive prior media experience. Malcolm agreed to the interview despite his reservations about my book and its conclusions.

Unwittingly, I exposed Malcolm to a gruelling onslaught from Kennerley about his personal sexual life despite his requests that he not be asked about his own experience but rather focus on his work as a psychologist and scholar, having just completed a PhD on the exact same topic as my first book.

In light of this, Malcolm was not hostile but definitely not welcoming when approached for this project. However he did agree to the interview – but at the time, not necessarily to publication. Perhaps arrogantly, I proceeded on the basis that he would ultimately be persuaded.

His chapter in *Speaking Secrets* is perhaps one of the most powerful in the manuscript because of his prior relationship with the media. Malcolm is a man who was exploited on *Four Corners* in the early 1990s; then agreed to come onto a national and live television chat show where he was ambushed and his character virtually destroyed by

the host. Yet he still agreed to be interviewed for *Speaking Secrets*, with a potential for publication.

However, having read his chapter, Malcolm did not give his permission for it to be published. I tried to persuade him; I cajoled him; I almost begged him but then I heard myself and realised, his refusing permission for publication is exactly what this dissertation is about – integrity and trust and ethics and empathy, as an intrinsic part of journalism practice. I stopped trying to convince him and just listened to him.

He explained that reading my chapter on him truly taught him something about his prior choices to expose himself in the media, and he decided it had to stop. He had to educate the world in other, less public ways.⁹¹

Effectively, Malcolm managed to take back some of his power which the media had taken from him. It was all about choice and control, and he demonstrates that while the story is of the utmost importance to a journalist, the person is more important.

The Case Studies

Interestingly, the authors of the three case studies explored in this dissertation have all been accused of unethical behaviour in the form of fabrication or misinforming. It was another one of the reasons why they were selected for this dissertation.

Janet Malcolm was sued for defamation by Dr Jeffrey Masson for a piece she wrote on him in the *New Yorker*, prior to her book on Joe McGinniss. Michael Finkel confessed to making up a character as a composite of several young Malawian boys for a piece he wrote in the *New York Times Magazine*, prior to *True Story*. And Helen Garner fought to reclaim her credibility after creating seven differing characters in the book *The First*

⁹¹ Jim Malcolm granted limited permission to use his chapter in this dissertation.

Stone to disguise the name of a female academic, Jenna Mead, also prior to writing *Joe Cinque's Consolation*.⁹²

Joe McGinniss claims he did not know whether Jeffrey MacDonald was guilty or not throughout his trial. However in *Fatal Vision*, his opinion was clear. The ethical dilemma faced by McGinniss was that he never told MacDonald that he had decided, definitively, that he was guilty. Using the guise of a friendship and confidante, McGinniss obtained considerable and exclusive information. McGinniss's was the worst kind of deception to be perpetrated on a subject, and Janet Malcolm crucifies him as such.

This kind of duplicity was never an issue in researching *Speaking Secrets*. The approach used was different as each interviewee understood that all that was sought from them was their story in their own words. And only one subject, Jim Malcolm, placed any kind of potential veto on publication at the time of interview and afterward.

Malcolm herself had been sued for defamation and accused of inventing quotes in her two part *New Yorker* (1983) article on psychoanalyst Jeffrey Masson. She did not disclose this history in the first edition of *The Journalist and the Murderer*, which when contextualised, suddenly becomes a defensive, albeit definitive, attack on herself and her own practice.⁹³

Malcolm was accused by Masson of fabricating several quotes. Further, Malcolm could not produce them in notebook or taped form for the courts. The case went on throughout the legal system for nearly eleven years before a jury found against Masson, and exonerated Malcolm.

But for Janet Malcolm, it had been a harrowing experience. Craig Seligman writes that the victory was:

⁹² published by Pan MacMillan, Australia, 1995

⁹³ The Masson article was published in book form a year later – *In the Freud Archives*

...a pyrrhic one. The public spectacle had been huge and humiliating, her reporting widely criticized and mocked. The lawsuit gained her more notoriety than any of her books ever had; thenceforward everything she wrote would be a target (Seligman 2000).

Perhaps she was grappling with her own demons while clinically eviscerating Joe McGinnis in the *Journalist and the Murderer*.

In the second case study where Christian Longo murdered his wife and three young children, author Michael Finkel was acutely aware of the publication of Janet Malcolm's *The Journalist and the Murderer*. In fact, he cited her frequently. Finkel had previously been found to have falsified information in a story by creating a composite character out of many individuals for the *New York Times Magazine*. He was sacked for the offence. Again, it seems that the lines between fact and fiction for some journalists are blurred.

In *True Story*, Finkel defended the legal notion of a person being 'innocent until proven guilty' to defend the time and energy he invested in gaining Longo's confidence and corresponding with him before and during his trial. In the end, Finkel is upfront about the moment he realised that Longo was manipulating him throughout the trial. It is clearly not credible that he was not aware of this beforehand – he saw Longo's story as his chance to reinvent himself as a journalist and a writer, and took the opportunity to do just that.

Finkel's self policing throughout his text reflects the dubious professional position he found himself in after his dismissal from the *New York Times Magazine*. In many ways his process seems like an apology, not for the fabrication he was caught out with but an apology for talking to Longo and upholding a relationship with him for so long.

In terms of *Speaking Secrets*, there was no reason to judge or moralise in relation to the interviewees. Each had been contacted after they themselves had sought out some kind

of media attention, and each was given the opportunity to halt the process at any time, as indeed Jim Malcolm did. And each subject took the opportunity to tell their story, almost as a form of advocacy, mainly theirs as opposed to mine.

Finkel and McGinniss's texts raise questions about whether it is in the public's interest or whether it is the public's right to know about the life and minds of criminals like Christian Longo and Jeffrey MacDonald. While, indeed, the public may be interested in these stories, it does not necessarily follow that these stories are in the public interest. Both McGinniss's and Finkel's books are more about gratuitous journalism. Both books give considerable insight into the workings of the minds of notorious criminals which may be of more benefit to the world of psychiatry than journalism, albeit interesting and rivetting entertainment.

Janet Malcolm's book, on the other hand, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, exemplifies the sort of professional practice analysis and debate needed in the industry. It therefore follows that any sort of debate about journalism professional practice process has got to be in the public's interest. It is irrelevant whether the reader agrees or disagrees with Malcolm's assertions, her work has certainly contributed to and furthered ongoing debate. Elizabeth Fakazis describes Malcolm's opening lines as 'one of the most provocative in the history of American journalism' (Fakazis 2002, p.93).

The third of the case studies is most analogous to *Speaking Secrets*. In Helen Garner's *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, Garner is upfront about her lack of objectivity in her relationship with Joe Cinque's mother Maria. Through the interview process, a friendship forms. But, like in *The First Stone*, Garner has only one side of the story given Anu Singh would not agree to an interview. Because of the public reaction to *The First Stone*, Garner reports feeling that she could not pursue the project. However she admits to feeling personally compelled to because of her relationship with Maria

Cinque. But she does note that at no time did Maria Cinque attempt to persuade her to write the story. Garner states she felt a moral obligation to continue with the writing of the book, purely and simply because she had asked Maria Cinque to tell her her story in the first place.

There are also huge public interest issues in the book associated with drug abuse and its role in precipitating mental illness in predisposed young people. There is also the issue of giving the family of the victim a voice – one it never had during any of the court trials around their son's murder.

Helen Garner caused huge controversy with her book, *The First Stone*, about a 1992 Ormond College, Melbourne University sexual harassment scandal. Parallels can be drawn between *The First Stone* and *Joe Cinque's Consolation*. Specifically, Garner never managed to interview Anu Singh in relation to the murder of Joe Cinque. And similarly, she never managed access to the two young students at the centre of the *The First Stone*. But what she did do in *The First Stone*, which she did not repeat in *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, was create seven different figures throughout the narrative, representing the one – academic and journalist Jenna Mead, who was advisor to the two victims at the time.

Garner presents the book as a non-fiction or literary journalism. To counter the difficulties she met in gathering all the information, and the vitriolic criticism afforded her process of research and writing after the first print run, Garner included a disclaimer at the front of the book for the second run. Her author's note explains why she invented names for the characters throughout the narrative. She says because she could not get access to the information she was forced to write 'a broader, less objective, more personal book' (Garner 1995, p.x). She goes on to write that obstacles to her research left her 'free to invent names for all the characters' and that the book became not just

about the incident at Ormond College but rather, ‘its archetypal features have become visible’(ibid).⁹⁴

Garner claims she has an ongoing and friendly relationship now with the Cinques.

While being on good terms with them, no ongoing relationships were created with any of the interviewees in *Speaking Secrets*.⁹⁵ At the time of interviewing I was empathetic and at times, regretted asking my questions because of the palpable pain they caused. Apart from that, the interactions or contracts, worked. My subjects told their stories, their way, with some guidance and challenging from me, and I got powerful and emotional stories to place in the public domain (apart from the chapter on Jim Malcolm), as advocacy journalism, to add to ongoing debate about such notions as rape, child sexual abuse, rape as a war crime, sexual reassignment, disability and sex.

The Fourth Estate

Twenty years after Foucault wrote about the imperative to confess discussed above, University of Utah Professor Doug Birkhead appropriated this theory and inverted it, directly at the feet of journalists. He claims that journalism: ‘reflects an impulse to bring events into a forum so that they may be publicly accounted for. The press traditionally has sought to make itself – and us – bear responsibility of being witnesses rather than merely onlookers’ (Sims et al 1995, p.13).

Birkhead places journalists and the practice of journalism as public confessor – a position of immense responsibility, in the name of the public’s right to know.

Interestingly, as a symbolic Fourth Estate, that is exactly the forum that each of the subjects in *Speaking Secrets* initially sought out to tell their untellable stories. This eagerness to tell reflects a collective impetus for righting wrongs and creating a space

⁹⁴ Author’s Note, *The First Stone*, Helen Garner, 1995

⁹⁵ there was already a pre-existing relationship with Michelle Tess

for social and political recognition. Many of them were intent on informing the public about mainly unspoken or taboo topics – this seemed to be the common imperative in the subjects interviewed for *Speaking Secrets*. This can be contrasted with Jeffrey MacDonald in *Fatal Vision* and Christian Longo in *True Story* who were self-serving and as busy attempting to manipulate Joe McGinniss and Michael Finkel while simultaneously being manipulated by them. The subjects in *Speaking Secrets* all individually took on an almost advocacy role in agreeing to the interviews and the themes they were attempting to portray. Walter Lippmann likens the press to the beam of a searchlight, ‘bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision’ (Cote et al 2006, p.100). As Cote and Simpson write:

Better reporting about trauma can help readers and viewers gain empathy for the suffering of victims and enrich everyone’s awareness of the powerful role that trauma plays in people’s collective lives...if the ultimate benefit is greater awareness of how others suffer from trauma, the public’s renewed capacity to offer collective care and support will be the greatest public benefit (Cote et al 2006, p.8).

And this is what the subjects in *Speaking Secrets* collectively aspired to – educating the public and bringing taboo subjects ‘out of the darkness’.

But possibly the most important issue in the current research is that each story is the victim’s own story told in their own way. This does not mean that rigorous research and cross referencing is not necessary in order for the journalist to do their job properly. It just means that the victim or subject needs to feel some control, at this stage. Cote and Simpson write:

Trauma may leave a person feeling violated, angry, powerless. Many trauma victims feel their suffering had had some purpose if their story is told at the right time and in the right way. It can be a catharsis that releases some pain and gives their lives new dignity (Cote et al 2006, p.121).

They argue that this is a process that could help victims become survivors.

Literary Journalists Argue the 'I'

Mark Kramer believes it is the strength of the author's voice in literary journalism which gives the genre its resilience and power. He describes this voice as 'an effective tool for a difficult modern job. It enables the author to step around acculturated views of relationships and issues that are usually guarded by walls of formal language and invisible institutional alliances'. He also postulates that a certain formality of language creates a protection of 'pieties, faiths, taboos, appearances, official truths' (ibid). And that the voice of the literary journalist helps to sidestep these, resulting in a closer to the real truth reading and watching experience.

Gay Talese writes that the notion of the 1960s-1970s' New Journalism allows the writer to 'inject himself into the narrative if he wishes...'. And Barbara Lounsberry declares these writers have the best of all worlds: 'They can be as artful in language and form as the most ambitious poet, dramatist, or novelist, yet they have the bonus of built-in reader credulity, for the moments they re-present have existed in time' (Talese et al 1996, p.30).

But for Truman Capote, the presence of the literary journalist within his or her work is anathema. Talking to another renowned American literary journalist, George Plimpton, Capote claimed of his book *In Cold Blood*:

My feeling is that for the non fiction novel form to be entirely successful, the author should not appear in the work. Once the narrator does appear, he has to appear throughout, all the way down the line, and the I-I-I intrudes when it really shouldn't. I think the single most difficult thing in my book, technically, was to write it without ever appearing myself, and yet, at the same time, create total credibility (Plimpton in Weber 1974, p.195).

While he would reject the assertion, the fact is that Capote's personality and presence is present throughout his text. This is what Ronald Weber calls 'an omniscient shadow slipping unannounced from scene to scene, character to character' (Weber 1974, p.20), making his presence clear. Dan Wakefield also writes of the 'shadow' component: 'If

you know me at all you most likely know me as one of those shadows that lurk behind the printed word in magazines, books and newspapers...' (Wakefield 1955, p.1). James Agee is perhaps the most honest when he confesses to his presence within each story. He recognises the effect his presence has whilst 'spying' upon his subjects (Wakefield 1974, p.47).

Despite his protestations to the contrary, Capote's relationship with convicted murderer Perry Smith and Dick Hickock is heavily veiled in the personal. His protestations are based on his belief that the 'I', once used, has to continue to be used and actually gets in the way. But clearly, as Capote's *In Cold Blood* demonstrates, it is not necessary to write in the first person to be present as the author in a text. It may not be as directly apparent but the over-riding essence is of the author there, reporting through the eyes of his subject, a very personal account.

Capote concedes further in the Plimpton interview:

I make my own comment by what I choose to tell and how I choose to tell it...in the non-fiction novel one can also manipulate: if I put something in which I don't agree about I can always set it in a context of qualification without having to step into the story myself to set the reader straight (Plimpton in Weber 1974, p.196).

Dan Wakefield argues Capote actually rejected the future of reporting as an art with his omission of himself as the 'I' in his work. Wakefield writes: 'From the artistic as well as the journalistic viewpoint, I am disappointed that Capote chose to go off in the opposite direction from the personal 'I' approach in his effort to revitalise modern journalism...' (Wakefield in Weber 1974, p.47).

Ben Yagoda concedes that the use of first-person is seen as taboo by many journalists. He claims it is seen as violating basic journalistic practice formulae. But he acknowledges that when done intelligently, that exact same 'violation can lead to inspiration' (Kerrane et al 1997, p.16). He writes:

...outsized and unabashed subjectivity can be a superb route to understanding. The disembodied, measured voice of classic journalism is a kind of flimflam; the pure objectivity it implies is probably unattainable to humans. By stepping out from the shadows and laying bare his or her prejudices, anxieties, or thought processes the reporter gives us something firmer and truer to hold onto as we come to our own conclusions (ibid).

Ronald Weber states clearly that because the journalist is present, mostly physically, he or she is 'more or less an active consciousness' between the reader and the event.

He claims: 'To deny the shaping presence of the reporter because of the theoretical demands of detachment and objectivity is to be fundamentally dishonest with the reader as well as oneself' (Weber 1974, p.18).

He further argues that by rigidly adhering to the detached mode of reporting, it gives the reporting a false sense of accuracy. He asserts that any rigid adherence to detached reporting often generates misinformation, perpetuated predominantly by governments and institutions.

Ted Conover claims that writing in the first person is how he is best able to tell a story. He regards himself as a 'witness' in all his stories and says that: '...not using the first person would make me feel like a left-handed person who was forced to use his right hand' (Boynton 2005, p.27). He says:

I'm really interested, and I think readers are interested, in knowing my personal opinion. A temptation for a lot of first-person non-fiction writers is to hector the reader or browbeat him and make too clear their own biases and not let the story tell itself. The quality of first-person voice – what you say, and how you say it – is really important. I want to be a likeable narrator (Sims 1995, p.14).

Richard Ben Cramer rarely uses first person, but when he does, it is deliberate. His criteria is '...unless the subject does something *with* me that is revelatory about *them*' (Boynton 2005, p.51).

Echoing Capote, Tom Goldstein writes of his own research:

Many journalists cannot imagine how they or their colleagues can possibly be part of a story – or the subject of a story itself. They cling, sometimes mindlessly, to the textbook definition of themselves as observers...that is an

attitude essentially unshaken by the liberalising winds of 'new journalism' that encouraged reporters to express their feelings. Aggressive journalists, many reporters feel, should be pointed outward at the world, not at themselves (Goldstein 1985, p.244).

Jonathan Harr strongly maintains his invisibility. He says: 'I strive to be invisible. I don't like to write in the first person, or be a character in my work. I'm an observer, not an actor'. However he is then inconsistent in that he concedes to being present (but not overtly) in his work: 'I try to construct a narrative that flows naturally, so the reader doesn't notice me pulling the strings behind the scene' (Boynton 2005, p.124).

Weber argues this is an implicit dishonesty in writing. He asserts that the absence of the 'I' is merely cosmetic. He writes:

...the absence of the 'I' remains to some extent a matter of appearance for the presence of the writer is strongly felt in the shaping and dramatising of his material and in managing its implications. In such work the writer is never as directly or powerfully present nor the journalism so personal...but the work is still given the mark of a distinctive consciousness, a signature that is uniquely if not assertively its own (Weber 1974, p.20).

It is such an obvious statement to make, but the difference is in the reading. If the narrator is there (typically evidenced by the use of the first person), he or she becomes a character and the reality of the relationships between author and subject(s) becomes transparent. It is acceptable to use a third person narrator, but it is dishonest to call this a tool of 'objective' or 'impartial reporting'. The writer is present always. This is a seemingly obvious statement, but one that is explored in a range of different ways in the manuscript.

Speaking Secrets and the 'I'

When writing *Speaking Secrets*, my instinct was to write in the journalism of the third person – often spoken about in creative circles as 'third person subjective' or 'third person omniscient'. Melvin Mencher quotes Tolstoy in *War and Peace* as saying: 'I

don't tell; I don't explain. I show; I let my characters talk for me' (Mencher 1977, p. 134). Presumably, what he means by this is that the author should 'step aside' and allow the words to assume an energy and motion of their own. Mencher argues, in the same vein: 'Telling not only makes for dull reading, it makes readers passive. Showing engages readers by making them visualise, draw conclusions, experience insights' (ibid).

This is how most journalists have been taught and have practised journalism for decades – a practice of detached writing. With the exception of two pieces – one a column in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and another a first person piece on the birth – and survival – of seventeen week premature baby twin girls in London – I have always written my own journalism in the third person.

So when one of my supervisors, author and academic Associate Professor Dr John Dale suggested *Speaking Secrets* be written in the first person, I was unreceptive. After further discussion, I agreed to try.

What happened was like a loosening of years of constraint. It was not that I had a lot to say. Instead it was about admitting that I, as reporter, was actually present and that I played an active role in the interviewing process. Indeed the journalist guides and manages the interviewing process – yet this is rarely acknowledged. The process also precipitated a sort of epiphany in that I realised that I had been 'present' in every single story I have ever written. That is like stating the obvious but the fact is, in withholding themselves from the scene of an interview and claiming implicit detachment, journalists are not only fooling their audience but themselves. This dishonesty is rarely acknowledged or debated within the profession.

Each chapter flowed with a different energy – there were no constraints. It was like for years I had been writing around myself, avoiding my physical self in the story. I believe

the more dramatic moments unfolded and told themselves unsensationally because I was allowed to confess to witnessing them.

Dan Wakefield writes:

We journalists are trained by custom and conventions of our craft to remain out of sight, pretending not to be there but simply to know...we are really individuals after all, not all-knowing, all-seeing Eyes but separate, complex, limited, particular "I's" (Wakefield 1955, p.1).

As mentioned previously in this dissertation, Wakefield believes what journalists put into stories may not be nearly as interesting as what they leave out (Wakefield 1955, p.2). In 1955, he published his seminal text *Between the Lines* as an experiment in revisiting stories he had reported on in the third person, and rewriting them in the first person.

This notion was explored in writing *Speaking Secrets*. The fact that anyone would even care what a reporter thought or did during an interview can appear arrogant, even where it is fairly implicit in direct quotation. However it is difficult to imagine how the emotions would have been portrayed in *Speaking Secrets* if I had been unable to refer to my own emotions and reactions, and reflect on what that felt like. Wakefield writes of his own experience:

The effort...is to reveal what was there all along, between the lines. I believe that conventional third person reporting is a special code; this is an attempt to hold those official coded reports over a flame and allow the warmth to bring out the other, more interesting words that were there in the white space, written in the invisible ink of personal experience (Wakefield 1955, p.2).

Effectively what I have attempted by writing in the first person is exactly this – to bring my personal experience of meeting my subjects, and how I reacted to their stories unfolding at the time, into the narrative. Using the technique of this interaction and the overt handling of my subjects through the blending of interview and dialogue, and

narrative, to convey the reality of their stories, underpinned by the suspense of experiencing the telling, which I hope brings a certain humanness and dignity to them.

As Mark Kramer says:

The voice is rarely no-holds barred, accusatory, or confessional...In most literary journalism, an informal, competent, reflective voice emerges, a voice speaking with knowledgeable assurance about topics, issues, personal subjects, a voice that reflects – often only indirectly, as sub-text – the writer’s self-knowledge, self-respect, and conscience...I hear it at dinner parties when people tell anecdotes. Reading it feels companionable (Sims et al 1995, p.29).

This dissertation argues that this notion is especially pertinent to interview subjects who have traumatic memory or who relive their trauma and pain and difficulties during the interview process. If it is a relationship between the writer and the subject, then the writer must place him or herself squarely at the scene, and record not only what is observed but what is felt. Ted Conover likens this to the presence of a filmmaker’s camera – the journalist’s presence does make a difference. He argues that his first person narration is aimed at making it clear that the reader is able to understand ‘the *kind of difference*’ that presence makes (Boynton 2005, p.23).

By initially writing in the third person, then changing to the first person, this research has attempted to underline, through the experiential change in the tone and composition of each chapter, the argument that when appropriate, first person narrative is a more effective means of conveying subjects’ voices. This argument is particularly pertinent to stories of people who have suffered injustice meted out through violence, trauma or prejudice. I have attempted to display these findings via an array of people and their experiences – ranging from child sexual abuse, rape, sexual reassignment and the prejudices surrounding it, likewise disability and the prejudice surrounding it. I have examined each of these stories and reflected upon degrees of detachment between the author and the subject by comparing to three seminal texts by three literary journalists, dealing with the trauma and thematic notions surrounding murder.

One text – *The Journalist and the Murderer* – is the critique of a text using a mixture of first person and third person (*Fatal Vision*); the second text – *True Story* – is written in the first person; as is the third text – *Joe Cinque's Consolation*. All three texts demonstrate the spectrum of journalistic detachment – at the extreme end, duplicity in creating a 'false friendship' with the subject in order to elicit information; in the middle, writing in the third person, while maintaining strong boundaries; and at the other end, the subjectivity of first person narration

Janet Malcolm clearly positions Joe McGinniss and *Fatal Vision* in the first category. Not only did he include first person correspondence but wrote in the third person as a method of camouflaging his work as impartial when in effect, he judged and misled his subject throughout.

Michael Finkel, taking up the middle position in *True Story*, writes in the first person, again demonstrating subjectivity but also attempting to camouflage it as impartial reporting. He does not succeed in this attempt, although it is a good read. There is nothing impartial about his text, despite his protestations at attempting this.

Helen Garner on the other hand, holding the third position of total and self-effacing subjectivity in *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, states from the very beginning her total involvement in the victim's family, and her complete immersion in the topic. Her book becomes as much about her, moving through the process of researching and writing it, as it does about the victim, the victim's family, and the perpetrator of the crime.

Speaking Secrets is clearly not one story about an incident or moment in history. It is ten stories about ten people and covers mostly ongoing trauma and pain. A common thread is the trauma and its lasting effects on its subjects, and how they have survived and dealt with it, and finally spoken about it in order to help educate. In this way, *Speaking Secrets* is an exercise in advocacy literary journalism.

Unlike the three texts, the length of time spent with each subject was less, and the stories told more a potted history of their lives, in their own words. It contains elements of biography, history, politics and policies, social taboos, opinions, psychology, medicine, media and the law. By allowing the subjects' voices to tell their own stories, gently prompted or alternatively, challenged by the reporter, human suffering and tremendous courage through ordeal is polarised in a series of literary journalism chapters. The narrator is present in the first person, not so much as an important part of the writing but as an attempt at a more honest and empathetic depiction of the moments captured during the interview process. The writing then became a weaving of literary device and technique, in and around the subjects' stories and own voices.

Empathy and ethics played a crucial role in the collecting of these stories. This dissertation has examined current debate surrounding both the notions of ethical reporting in terms of journalism, as well as the longer form literary journalism. Whilst concentrating on these debates, it is impossible to ignore the ongoing discourse surrounding the word 'objectivity' in terms of journalism. This dissertation argues that rigid adherence to its meaning is the downfall of the practice – there must be a loosening of the semantics surrounding the debate.

This dissertation posits that the 'essence of objectivity' is a notion to be strived for at all times by thorough, ethical, competent journalists. To aim for accuracy, balance and fairness, in the name of the public's right to know and public interest, is a credo all journalists should aspire to. To position these terms within the umbrella meaning of 'to be as objective as humanly possible' must not be regarded as a crime or antithetical to journalism practice, but something worth practising and teaching.

Empathy as a notion is another word almost regarded as anathema to the journalistic industry. This dissertation has argued, and shown through the execution of the text

Speaking Secrets, that empathy is an effective and valid tool of the trade and in some instances makes for better and more thorough and honest journalism.

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