How Far From Here is Home:
Space and Silence in Creative Practice

Kathryn Heyman

Submitted, with the novel Captain Starlight's Apprentice, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctorate in Creative Arts

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I certify that all corrections in the body of the work have been made, to the satisfaction of my supervisor.

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Acknowledgements

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ABSTRACT

*Captain Starlight's Apprentice* is a novel about home, displacement and longing. Beginning as a novel about a woman bushranger, Jessie Hickman, the novel is historical in setting without being categorisable as an historical novel. At the centre of the novel is a connection between two characters across time.

Part Two of this thesis, *How Far From Here is Home*, is a series of journalistic pieces using a mix of memoir, op-ed and reportage, which as a whole form a study of the processes of writing fiction. In particular, these essays consider the necessity for silence and solitude in the making of an emotionally authentic creative work. As the title suggests, *How Far From Here is Home*, is concerned with the importance of home, and displacement, in literature, and in particular in *Captain Starlight's Apprentice*. 
**Introduction – How Far From Here is Home**

This dissertation illuminates the themes and processes of creating the novel, *Captain Starlight's Apprentice*. My intention is to reflect on the thematic concerns of the novel in the context in which the novel is primarily assessed, that is, the marketplace. As a result, this dissertation is formed from a series of essays published in publicly refereed journals – by which I mean, journals and magazines which allow the market to assess the success or skill of the piece. The test of this reflection is to consider what it's possible to say about the deeper processes of creating a novel within the world of commercial journalism. What are the opportunities and limitations of this as an arena for critical reflection?

The key process which has concerned me, and which illuminates the wider themes of the novel, is that of finding creativity in silence. Connected to, or drawing on, that process, the key theme of the novel – and therefore of the exegesis - is the experience of longing. In this work there are strands of thought which run throughout, notably the need for the artist to find stillness in order to develop an instinctive creative process, and the impact of place, and of longing for place, on the creative work.

I wanted to explore in writing some of the issues which were implicit rather than explicit within the creative work which makes up the body of this thesis.
The creative work – Captain Starlight's Apprentice – which forms the basis of the thesis is my fourth novel. As such it necessarily draws on and develops craft and thematic issues I have been concerned with throughout my writing career. Issues of home, and homelessness, of longing, of the gap between the outer, dynamic, world and the inner, reflective one, have for many years been central to my fiction writing. Similarly notions of landscape affecting behaviour, indeed of affecting narrative, have been expressed in my work since my early playwriting days.

This exegesis presented here is formed from a collection of essays written for publication in Australian and British newspapers and magazines, around the themes and processes of Captain Starlight's Apprentice. As the Doctorate in Creative Arts differs from a traditional PhD in being a development of professional creative practice, I have elected to use the essays as published, both as critical and creative reflections on professional practice, and as a record of the writers' engagement with the critical marketplace. These essays written out of the experience of creating a novel, reflect my major aim for the creative work: that of attempting to marry an emotionally authentic depth with a sense of craft.

Captain Starlight's Apprentice is a novel about two women, in two different time periods, and the fictional possibility of their interaction, supporting each other in their struggle for survival. Jess A, is a circus-rider, cinema-star and bushranger; Rose Dobell is a British migrant to Australia – a ten-pound pom – struggling with post-natal depression, and with an alien landscape. The
novel was conceived as a version of *The Odyssey* as a reflection on, and
subversion of, the masculine, violent, nature of mythic heroism. Considering
the journey through Hades, I elected to have the heroic role of Odysseus
played out by a homesick woman with post-natal depression, thrown about
by the 'Gods' of the 1950's medical establishment. Athene – the goddess who
takes many forms, and who seeks to restore Odysseus to his home in Ithaca –
becomes a role Jess plays in her circus performance, but also a role she plays
out in relation to Rose.

This novel tried on different dresses before it found the one it now wears.
The novel began with Jess. The seed of an idea: a female bushranger, and
Jess was always the star. A woman living out a traditionally male life, and
winning at it. Little is known of the real Elizabeth 'Jessie' Hunt Hickman: that
she won the Rough Riding Championship of 1905 is indisputable, as are her
numerous arrests – under a range of aliases – for petty theft. Beyond this,
though, much is rumour and hearsay: she lived in a cave near Nullo
Mountain, almost certainly. But opinion is divided as to whether she was a
mere eccentric, or a dynamic bushranger. In the early stages of researching
the story, I hunted through the Sydney Police and Justice Museum's
Archives, looking for accurate records of Hunt's career of robbery under
arms, but I found little hard evidence. Similarly, the State Archives of New
South Wales offered little in the way of verification of her marriages, or of
the birth of her son. One rainy afternoon, I huddled into the Police and
Justice Museum, a pile of papers spread along the wooden bench beside me.
In the process of looking for information on Jessie Hickman, I'd come across
the letters of bushranger Captain Moonlite – Andrew Scott, a lay preacher
turned outlaw who spent his last months writing letters asking that he be
buried with his one true love, Andrew Nesbitt. For a time I tried to find a way
of bringing these two voices together; in spite of all the evidence pointing to
the fact that it simply wasn't working. I knew that the novel was partly about
place, about the body being owned by a particular landscape, and I knew that
it was about heroism. I tried to shift through what it was that had compelled
me to try and bring Moonlite and Jess together, and realised that it was their
apparent machismo, their heroism – in each of them playing out alongside a
gender or sexuality which subverted the very heroism they were emulating.
In my journal, I wrote: “Jess's tragic flaw is her gender, surely?” - and I knew
then that the novel needed to be a dialogue between two women. Other notes
at the time record my desire to explore the power of stories themselves, the
potential of narrative to unlock mystery, to offer redemption. So, then, it was
clear to me that one of the women was telling a story to the other.

I first heard the story of Jessie Hickman in 2001, and it was instrumental in
my decision to return to Australia. While searching the internet for
information on the Aboriginal wife of Frederick Ward – the bushranger
known as Thunderbolt – I stumbled on a page referring to a female
bushranger in the Blue Mountains (ssp.wa.edu, 1999), and I was immediately
intrigued; the site referred to a self-published local history book on Hickman
(Studdy-Clift, 1999) which in turn referred to the Kandos Local History
Museum. The Kandos Museum, then, became my first search point,
although little archive material was actually available. I began working on
the novel in earnest in 2003, when I commenced the Doctorate in Creative Arts, and completed it late 2005. *Captain Starlight's Apprentice* was published in hardback in the UK in April 2006 by Hodder Headline (UK) and in trade paperback in Australia by Hachette Livre the following month. I was commissioned by BBC Radio to write a dramatic serialisation, which aired in April 2007, to coincide with the paperback publication.

Jess's voice emerged almost instantly: there were so few historical facts on record, that I felt free to discover a distinctive voice. She's borrowed, though, from the traditions of Anglo-Irish-Australians, and their spectacularly colourful speech patterns and metaphors. My mother grew up in the bush on the edge of Nimbin, in far north New South Wales, and her speech has always been peppered with an extraordinary freshness, drawn – she claims – from that history. For these people – my relatives – it is never merely dark, but “as dark as the inside of a cow”. One is not merely hot but “baking like a dead frog”. Jess has, I hope, that colour and courage that I associate with those early working-class European-Australians. The vivacity of her voice became a necessary counterpoint to Rose's much more muted voice. Choosing to have Rose travel to Australia as a ten-pound pom inevitably meant that I had raised the spectre of the White Australia Policy, as it was this policy which led to the inauguration of the British Assisted Passage Scheme (Tavan, 2004: 109-125)). So Ariel, Jess's husband, becomes a second generation Chinese-Australian, to provide a foil, a shadow, to the journey of the new 'white Australians'. Similarly, Billy Awaba, the Awabakaal man who rides with Jess, provides a counterpoint to Rose's furious response to a
Within this exegesis I have done little exposition of the writing techniques on a craft basis. For the purposes of this work, I am more concerned with the inner processes, with the conditions the writer must create in order to access craft and creativity. The exegesis, then, is divided into two main sections: Process, and Theme. In Section One: Process, I reflect on the layers of stillness, of reflection, required to find the deep threads within the life of Captain Starlight's Apprentice. In Chapter One, Still Small Voice, I contemplate the necessity of silence and stillness in the creative process, and on its role in my own professional practice. This becomes a more personal story, in Ten Days of Silence, published in the UK's eve Magazine, a glossy magazine for young professional women. One of the interesting aspects of this exegetical process has been noting the demands of varying publications, according to their market. Resurrection speaks of the acts of memory, and of personal interview needed to create the core of Rose's character. As with Ten Days of Silence, this memoir piece explores some aspects of my mother's story, which influenced the narrative decisions I made. Chapter Four, Stealing Stories is a discussion of the ethics and the process of borrowing stories such as my mother's, while Adaptation looks at some craft elements a little further on, during the writing of the radio serialisation of the novel; in that chapter, I return to the consideration of stillness as a critical element in the creative process,

Section Two: Theme reflects on the central thematic concerns of the novel,
some of which intersect, unsurprisingly, with the process. Chapter Five, *True Fiction* is a short piece on the importance of story, which became a crucial element in the structure of *Captain Starlight's Apprentice*. *Longing* considers the well of longing which drives literature; in Chapters Seven and Eight, *The Importance of Here* and *In Search of the Inner Eden* this rumination on longing is focused on human desire for home, in its many aspects. In each of these chapters, I reflect briefly on the impact of these thematic concerns on my own work in *Captain Starlight's Apprentice*.

It is my hope that in presenting these reflections I will have encouraged readers to explore their own sense of stillness in the world; their own sources of creativity and their own sense of fulfilled, or unfulfilled, longing.
Section One: Process
I was twenty. I'd left uni to hitch-hike around Australia and washed up on a fishing trawler where I was locked in with five fishermen and constant drone of diesel for weeks at a stretch. Back on shore, I shared a tiny flat with about eight people. One morning, I walked into the centre of Darwin, rented a room, and locked myself in with a pen and a journal book, a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter. I didn't leave or speak for three days – I'd never been so alone, or so quiet – but, my god, it was like the first taste of sunshine. I could feel the fibres inside me unraveling. I could hear my thoughts. I could breathe. After all, without being able to listen to your breathing, how can you listen to your heart?

Composer John Cage has insisted, "there is no such thing as silence. Something is always happening that makes a sound." (Quoted in Sontag, 1966: 10). In 1951, Cage studied sound and silence, spending time in a soundless, echoless chamber. He reported hearing his heartbeat and the blood coursing through his body. After negative audience response to his 4'33" - three movements without a note - he said: “What they thought was silence because they didn't know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds.” (Kostelanetz, 1988) The first time I snorkeled, it was the quiet which mesmerised me: the sound of my breathing amplified so that when I emerged, blinking, from that underwater world, I was dazed, as though literally transported, having to remember my own name. Yoga is the same:
which is why yoga to music seems odd, a wrong combination. Yoga is at least partly about the transportation of self through silence. Some practitioners suggest that the physical transformation – the asanas, or postures – are secondary to the main purpose of yoga, which is a subjugating of self to something greater, deeper.

My life is busy, and noisy, and I'm the noisiest thing in it. The fact is, I talk a lot, and I often talk loudly. Certainly I laugh loudly. Snort, actually, or so I've been told; I play music of both the dirt and digital kinds. And yet silence etches it's way through my life, escalating at crucial moments. As a child, I immersed myself in books, huddling under an old grape vine in the backyard, diving into the quiet of the pages with nothing but the noise of my own breathing to disturb me. Of course, it's no surprise that a writer would confess to book addiction as a child. Actually, though I wonder whether it's the silence, the deep prayerful quiet which is the real draw of a career in writing. In high school, I forgot about quiet and gave in to the demands of adolescence: noise, action, talk. My mouth was rarely closed, and when it was, I pumped up music loudly enough to fill in the gaps. And, like many ex-teenagers, I reckon I could safely point a finger at my back-then hair-gelled, Cure-listening self and suggest that I was depressed. And that the noise wasn't helping. In fact, I dived into depression whole heartedly in my late teens – and I wonder now whether that was simply a reasonable response to the cacophony. When there is no language, no context, in which it would be acceptable to ask for a few days silence, how else is a girl to retreat?
Writing of the film, *Into Great Silence* about the contemplative monks of La Grande Chartreuse, many journalists have been astonished at the notion, and the effect: a silent film about silence? Who'd have guessed? And those monks, day after day, wouldn't they go nuts? Only allowed to speak on Sunday? (Leyland, 2006). It's as if we are so enormously separated from the quiet that the notion of it now is bizarre; as though we are defined primarily by the noise we make, even if the noise is babel. The human world once was punctuated by the sounds and rhythms of nature; before mechanisation, periods of silence were inevitable. Now we are more bombarded by consumer noise than ever before. By consumer noise I mean noise of the purchased, chosen variety, as opposed to the sounds of nature, or of industry, or incidental life. Speaking of the film in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, reviewer Paul Byrnes (2007) marveled that “its rhythms are so alien to the 21st century” reminding us again of how strange it is to us now, this notion of quietness, steadiness, contemplation. Yet, I wonder whether our noisiness has made us happier or healthier?

A retreat into a lonely sulk is not the same as active creative silence. Trappist monk and prolific writer Thomas Merton (2002: 39) has said “Silence has many dimensions. It can be a regression and an escape, a loss of self, or it can be presence, awareness, unification, self-discovery. Negative silence blurs and confuses our identity and we lapse into daydreams or diffuse anxieties. Positive silence pulls us together and makes us realize who we are, who we might be, and the distance between these two.”
When I was twenty-two I had, as many people do at that age, a messy break-up. I could barely haul myself through the day, I'd been so reliant on my boyfriend – we lived together, worked together, and my self-esteem was heavily, desperately, bound up with being desired. I felt, to tell the truth, ashamed – and couldn't imagine ever recovering. Rebounding madly, I started to date a man I'd known for about five minutes. On the second date – I think I was babbling, sobbing into my wine, and he was no doubt desperate to shut me up – he told me about a retreat he'd been in on, in South-Western Australia. Run by a lay catholic community, it was a retreat which asked for silence, for up to three weeks. I thought about not having to speak for three weeks – not having to explain why my eyes were red, not having to answer any questions. I caught a bus down south the next morning.

That three week retreat woke me up to something astonishing: the creative power of silence. The retreat was in an old building which had once been a convent; I imagined the ghosts of young Irish nuns lurking about the place. There were maybe ten of us, all wandering about doing our own thing, eating communal meals in silence, passing each other on walks, nodding. And here's a strange thing, at the end of that three weeks, I felt in communion with those strangers. Words aren't always the tools for connection. Anyone who has communicated outside of their own language knows that: I spent months in Prague in my mid-twenties, with barely thirty words of Czech to get by on. And yet I made a friend who is still a friend: we connected, in spite of language. And something else, astonishing, transformed within me. When I arrived in that old convent, I was broken, depressed, deeply wounded. I
discovered, in the words of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1797), how “the silence sank like music on my heart.” A week after my return to the city, I ran into a friend on the street - “what's happened to you?” she asked “you look transformed.” And I was. I had realised, not before time, that I was not the centre.

I make my living from imagining things, from calling up words and worlds from an apparent nothingness. My hunch, though, is that solitude and silence – those disappearing arts – are crucial in the creation of a beautiful life. In The Call of Solitude, Esther Buchholz (1997) makes the connection between solitude and creativity, and connects creativity with the act of creating a worthwhile life. Jonathan Franzen (2001) has claimed, though I suspect some exaggeration, that he spent much of his writing time, while working on The Corrections, in complete silence. In several interviews soon after the book originally came out, he insisted that he had spent day after day blindfolded and wearing earmuffs, and he makes the point eloquently enough, of the writer's need for silence, the need to hear the inner world, to see the inner landscape. Australian novelist Tim Winton (2004) has declared that – like Franzen – he needs total, absolute silence to work with any noise proving a potential distraction.

American writer Annie Dillard takes the need for silence further; working without noise, or even with visual stimulation – otherwise known as a view. Outer landscape is a distraction, she writes in A Writing Life. It is the inner view, the imagined building, that we need to access, as artists, as writers, and
as fully realised humans wishing to create an authentic life (Dillard, 1989:19). Unlike Dillard or Winton, I don't have the circumstances in my life or architecture which allow me to keep silence through the working day. I have children who punctuate my day with noise. My study is part of my house – not in the centre of a city, but nor is it a cottage in the woods. Dogs bark. Workmen batter a house down the road. Often, I play music to create an aural landscape which works for me. Instead, I find chunks of time – weeks or days at a time – when I can carve out a retreat into silence.

I confess to being, nowadays, a bit of a retreat junkie, if such a thing is possible. Each of my books has been powered at some crucial stage by periods of intense silence, often in a convent or monastery. And, really, it's like magic, the balm of quiet unlocking the creative self, and healing wounds as well. Just by doing nothing except breathing, quietly. I can trace the evolution of my life through periods of silence, and where the silence was facilitated. For me, the quiet of a convent or monastery is closest to the attentive, creative quiet needed to make something new, something from nothing; this is the alchemy of silence.

I grew up in a noisy house: the youngest of five siblings, with loud friends fired up about politics, about music, about art. There always seemed to be at least three extra strays around the place, and I loved that. My first Christmas with my husband's family – at that time one father, one sister – was quiet and civilised and I kept wondering when everyone else was going to turn up. Still, perhaps it was the noise, the debate, which fired this need for silence.
learned to shut out noise by reading, but I remember once reading a story of a girl who lived alone on a mountain, with goats, never speaking – and being filled with longing to taste, just to taste, that life of utter simplicity and utter silence. So, perhaps in another time, I might have become a nun. But contemplative orders are rare these days and in any case don't sit so well with my other desires: to tell raunchy jokes; to sing loudly with other people; to shout when angry; to laugh often. So, this is a compromise, one of many which we make in a modern world: I find a way of nurturing what I believe is an ancient need. I have no doubt that some people have a greater need than others for silence – nor would it surprise me to discover that there was a correlation between need for silence and the vocation of the person as an artist of some persuasion. But the truth is that we all need it, some of it, and that the act of living well is, as Buchholz suggests, in itself a work of art which requires care and contemplation.

When I told a friend recently that I planned to take one of my regular sojourns into silence, he paused, startled. Then: “You? Being silent? You couldn't shut up for ten minutes.” Which, in a social context, is probably true. And which is precisely why I feel such a strong – physical – desire to feed the quietness in myself. As it turns out, this has become a crucial part of my writing practice, but I discovered that side-benefit accidentally. I wrote the first chapter of my first novel while spending a week in silence with a group of nuns on the edge of the Home Counties in the South of England. The nuns weren't silent, actually – not that lot. They included a jazz harpist, a clown, and a drummer; the guest house though, was empty of anyone except me.
And I could breathe, think, quietly, in solitude. And after a week, or maybe
two, I woke up in the middle of the night with the story of that first novel
pouring itself through my body. It's become a professional habit now, a few
times for each book: two or three weeks spent in silence, usually in the
company of a religious community. Sleeping in a single bed, working at a
narrow desk with a blanket over my knees, I relish the absence of any sound
except the blood coursing and the words tapdancing in my head. In the case
of Captain Starlight's Apprentice there were several silent retreats: a week
alone in an isolated boat-access-only river colony, with a freezer full of
instant meals; two weeks in a Franciscan Hermitage; and ten days editing, in
a beach house, mid-winter. Typically, in those times, I write thirty thousand
words over a ten day period. As Cage points out, there isn't an absence of
noise in those times — but there is an absence of speech, the clutter of
unnecessary words.

My father died in 1997. I flew home to Sydney, and drove through the night
to get to Tamworth, where he'd been living in the years before his death. His
five children gathered, and proceeded to shout and sing and fight and cry.
We made — as we usually do when we are all together — a lot of noise.
Perhaps that's why I'm so precious about my silence, because I'm the
youngest of a fairly noisy brood. Grieving, I returned to Scotland, canceled
reading and teaching commitments, huddled in and spoke to no-one for over
a month, and at the end of that time I felt ready to — albeit nervously — re-
enter the world. People called, wanting to talk, wanting me to grieve with
words, but I could not. Psychiatrist Anthony Storr in his book Solitude: A
Return to the Self writes: “In a culture in which interpersonal relationships are generally considered to provide the answer to every form of distress, it is sometimes difficult to persuade well-meaning helpers that solitude can be as therapeutic as emotional” (Storr, 1988: 29). As with initiation rituals, I often feel that our culture, our time, has lost the ability to value silence as one of the colours on our palette of human experience.

My daughter, every so often – possibly two or three times a year - makes it clear to me that she needs a day alone, not speaking to anyone. The signs are usually clear in advance: an escalation of grumpiness; an increase in occasions of snapping at her brother; a heightened desire to hang out with her pets. I am a lax parent, possibly, in relation to school attendance, because on those days I allow her a day at home, silent, uninterrupted in her room. At the end of the day she is invariably restored to herself.

Last weekend I took my children to a large cinema complex. Christina Aguiliera was blasting out in the foyer, competing with the noise of a mass of Timezone games; threading through it all, an electronic voice called ticket numbers for the snack bar. In order to communicate, children and parents shrieked at each other: it was the aural equivalent of coke and chips. And I wonder whether, as with an excess of junk food, we've simply stopped noticing the effect of all that noise.

Then the other day the family conversation turned to the question of birthday presents and the prospect of MP3 players. My six year old son turned to me.
“Mum,” he said, “You're too old for an iPod.”

It's a relief really: one more excuse for the alternative, the music in my heart, the silence.

(Heyman 2007a)
Fourteen Days of Silence

A busy life, to paraphrase Shakespeare, is full of sound and often fury.

Although, as a writer, I spend hours in silence during the day, it is punctuated by the telephone, the doorbell, and always tail-ended by my children demanding food, information, attention. Then there’s the virtual noise, my own buzzing as I trace endless unnecessary journeys online. Working on my fourth novel – about a female outlaw looking for her son - I began to hit walls of resistance. Something would almost bubble up, some mystery connected to my book, and then, inevitably, a downstairs door would bang and my children shout up for food. Sometimes my head ached with trying to hold the whole life of a novel. I wanted it to have magic. Then one night it struck me; I needed silence.

It’s a two hour drive to the hermitage. I rise early and drink three cups of coffee before hitting the road. By the time I arrive, I’m jittery and tense, barely able to be still for a moment, let alone two weeks. Two nuns step out into the courtyard, smiling. I’m terrified. The younger one puts her hand on my elbow and I nearly leap into the flower border. She says, simply “Welcome.” I clap my hand over my mouth to hold in my usual babble: how I got there, how the journey was, why I’m so jumpy, how I really should have worn something more sedate than pink shoes. The nun introduces herself quietly and shows me to my room. She hands me a card with extra information on it: silence at all times. Panic surges up my chest – mealtimes, in my house, are noisy affairs, often with arguments or singing, sometimes both. It’s been a long time since I’ve eaten in silence.
The room has one single bed; a wooden desk and chair; a slim wardrobe. When
the smiling sister leaves I sit down, then stand up and walk to the window,
looking out across the fields. Then I sit down again, bouncing on the bed
deliberately to make it squeak. I pull the chair out, tap my fingers on the desk.
Pulling out my notebook, I write the word silence on a clean sheet. I’ve been
quiet for almost an hour, and I’m longing to call someone, to tell them that I’m
there, in the convent, being quiet. I look at my watch and consider how long I
have to wait until lunchtime. Perhaps I could take a walk. Do some yoga in the
garden. There must be a payphone nearby; I could call a friend and - I stop
myself and try to breathe. How often, I think, I need an audience for my life. As
though I don’t consider it real unless someone is watching.

The lunch bell chimes a clear peal. Worried about etiquette, I stand in front of
the mirror and practice miming requests for salt, or for tea. Lunch is
accompanied by the sound of swallowing, the quiet smatter of forks on
crockery. I sit with three nuns. It’s a freedom not to have to chatter, to be
comfortable in the quiet. It strikes me that needing to fill the gaps with talk is a
kind of clutter. Absorbed in the act of eating, I notice the taste of each bite, can
feel the food nourishing my body. Back in my room, I sit down to write, but the
bed-spread beckons. Like a toddler, I climb beneath the covers. Two hours later
I wake with a lurch of anxiety – where am I? Where are my children? In that
groggy aftertaste of sleep, I cannot think who is looking after them, am sure I
was supposed to be somewhere. But I don’t. I don’t have to be anywhere but
here.
By the third day, a pattern is forming. Mornings, a solitary breakfast, some yoga, and then I sit at the desk, taking pleasure in the scratch of pen on paper and the absence of reverberations through the building. Communal, silent lunch and then a nap. More writing, a walk before dinner. On the fifth day when I begin to write, I'm drawn somewhere else. I get a desperate, breathless sensation. I'm writing now about a woman in a coma and I've been diving down into her world. The silence which has been a balm, unwinding me, suddenly feels oppressive. I am overcome with desperate loneliness. In daily life, I talk to my husband constantly, and I am blurred with missing him. I take out my wallet, with its three photographs — husband, daughter, son — and sit staring at them, tear-blind. Out of nowhere, a dizzying loneliness opens up; a great chasm slicing the floor of the room. It's no longer about them, my beloved family, but about something else, someone else. I curl up on the bed, like a baby this time — and then I know. It seems ridiculous that I hadn't made the connection between this outlaw, determined to keep her son, and my mother, unable to cope with motherhood; foolish, that I hadn't understood why I was drawn to this particular story. I reach for a notebook and begin again: *When my mother tried to kill herself, she was in a coma for fourteen days.* I stop. Fourteen days — the time I will be here, displaced from the world. I spend the night waking, weeping, and shaking into sorrow. Finally, as the sun comes up, I sleep. I hear none of the bells marking the day but when I wake, I am clearer than I have been for months. I write through the night, in a fever, and through the next day. Without the clutter of my own voice, I am transported.

On my first night home, my husband fetches the guitar and we sing, badly, joyously. Settling back to my noisy life, I notice when my speech is full of
pettiness and I resolve to be more careful, not just with words, but with the space that lies between them.

(Heyman 2006a)
Resurrection

It's the earliest photo I have of myself. Blonde scruff-haired mop, pulled up at the front; square sunglasses – the photo is black and white, but the glasses, I remember, had a pink edge. My legs, like rugby players legs, are stuck out from a faux Mary Quant dress: polka dots, wide pockets; my mouth is flattened out, I can see that behind the sunglasses I am frowning, and in my hand I'm carrying a brown school case. I am four years old and this is the first photo of me. There are no baby shots of me kicking my feet in the air, none of me as a wide eyed toddler, stumbling through my early steps. This photo marks an awakening: my mother, unseen behind the camera, returned to me, as though risen from the dead.

My mother died on the operating table. I have always known this, the way that children of other families know that Grandpa didn't come back from the war, or that Auntie Maud was never quite right after that lovely man jilted her. Each family has a set of stories, some happy, some sad – and this was one of ours. My mother died and she came back from the dead. She's one of those women, my mother, who's always dancing, full of music; someone who makes people laugh. Not someone who would try to kill herself.

Like many women in the late sixties, the love revolution had passed my mother by. Instead, she was tucked inside brick walls, caring for four children while her husband lived out various alternate lives with a range of mistresses. When she fell pregnant with her fifth child – me - he spent more and more time away.
Giving birth, let's face it, is never a ball of laughs, and this was one of the less hilarious deliveries. Afterwards, my mother was unable to breastfeed, unable – she said later – to gather any sense of joy from anything. Her husband, my father, spent almost all his time away, and when he was home he was – well, unpredictable. The kind of unpredictable that leaves bruises.

In those days, health visitors didn't come knocking, checking up on young mothers. The term 'post-natal depression' had yet to be coined, let alone enter into common usage. Certainly, women of my mother's generation – expected to buck up, to get on with it, to stop making such a fuss – were prescribed astonishingly high doses of 'powders' – seemingly harmless headache powders which promised to give you a little lift (Kincaid-Smith 1998). Valium, too, was prescribed happily. And when everything got too much, these women were hospitalised, often given Electro-Convulsive Therapy, or 'shock treatment'. So, this is the way it was for my mother. Children as sole company, and a deepening depression, the certainty that her children would be better without her – cared for by a kindly aunt – and that she would be better gone.

It was my sister who found her – sprawled in the living room, one hand still holding a powder. I was the screaming toddler, still tucked into my cot, my nappy sodden as I dangled over the wooden bars, my cries unheard. Perhaps it's more truthful to say 'she' – I have no memory of myself as this toddler, can barely associate her with me. My mother, though, sprawled on the floor, her heart slowing to stillness, my sister screaming, running outside, the screen door banging, screaming for the neighbours, for my father, for anyone – I feel, oddly, as though I remember this, that I can still see it.
My father made it home, the neighbour organised an ambulance, and my mother was rushed to the hospital half an hour away. She was wheeled into the operating room; her stomach pumped, a cardiac compression on her chest. Her heart stopped beating for over one minute. Measurable brain activity stops at twenty seconds. The young doctor told my father that his wife would not be returning, not ever. The cardio-pulmonary resuscitation had not worked and my mother was declared dead. It was only after my father left the hospital that her heart began beating again. She was in a coma for two weeks. Recovering was, of course, merely the beginning of becoming well again: I was sent to live with an aunt, until I was a blonde pre-schooler. When my mother returned to me, I didn't know who she was.

When I began writing Captain Starlight's Apprentice, at the moment I knew that there was a woman in the novel who was in a coma, I knew that there was one woman who could tell me about that state. I flew across the world to sit in my mother's living room, in a coastal town in Australia, and asked her to tell me the truth.

“I could see myself, as a shadow, in the operating room, could see the doctors. I didn't want to leave my children, but I really believed you'd all be better without me. It's a terrible disease, depression.”

I put my hand on her knee, and she paused. We have been over this, many times.

She went on: “There was a path, and I was traveling down it. I wasn't frightened. There were rocks, water, a path down the middle. The rocks were
dark – I can still see them – and sharp, and the water was on the other side, with light on it. It looked – it was beautiful, and there was a voice telling me I was fine, I would be cared for. The water – it sounded like a baby crying. When I heard the baby sound, I knew I couldn't stay there. I had to come back.” Of the weeks in the coma, she remembers little but says she could hear voices, and feel the touch of hands. She was in two worlds, she says, and is unsure that one is more 'true' than the other. There is a theory, I tell her, that these visions are physiological: as oxygen cuts off, random images flash into the brain. My mother shakes her head: to her, she inhabited that place as clearly as she inhabits her home, and it was the call of her children which brought her back.

I'm grateful that it did, and that her life became one of laughter. In the photo, I have my suitcase at the ready, setting out for a journey. My mother's visions mean that I have no fear of that final journey; as far as I can tell, neither does she.

(Heyman, 2007b)
Stealing Stories

At a party in Oxford, I met a woman who told me a story of a brief period in her youth. The story was quirky, strange, and I immediately felt the stirrings of excitement that I have learnt to recognise as creative desire. Oddly, the feelings are not dissimilar from any other kind of desire: the tremble in the belly, the dry mouth, the tumbling, terrified exultation. I held my tongue until the end of the evening, then cornered her and asked her if I could steal her story.

But why did I even bother asking? When Peter Carey (2006) published 'Theft: A Love Story' last year, his ex-wife, Alison Summers, complained of another theft. Carey's novel, about an artist in the throes of a hideous divorce, cut too close to home for Summers' comfort, insisting that one of the secondary characters, the 'alimony whore' of an ex-wife was a representation of her – or rather, of a version of her. In an interview in The Guardian last May, Summers insisted on her right to defend herself against literature, asking: “Should we all lie down on the highway and let the author drive back and forth on top of us because he is the author?” (Summers, 2006)

And this is the tricky element, isn't it? Because, within the created world - as in, the fictional world – the author is, indeed, God. So, yes; if you are a fictional character, and the author chooses to drive back and forth over you, then I'm afraid it's shut up and put up. Or whatever that saying is. However, what if the character isn't fiction, isn't invented and isn't terribly happy?

For British audiences, this was familiar territory. In 1998 Hanif Kureishi published his fourth novel, Intimacy, about an Oscar-nominated writer choosing
to leave his publisher wife (1999a). Kureishi, an Oscar-nominated writer, savaged the female character. His publisher wife, Tracey Scoffield, whom he had just left, was publicly unimpressed (Tonkin, 1998). For his part, Kureishi claimed, “it's the writer's job to be irresponsible. That's what we're paid to do. In a sense writers have to say what isn't supposed to be said.” (Kureishi, 1999b)

The notion of the artist as being outside morality – an elevated being, removed from mere constraints of humanity – is as least old as de Sade, and as short on substance as that cliche of the artist in the garret. Do writers really bear no responsibility for the stories they choose to tell?

In 1809 William Dampier rescued a young Scot, Alexander Selkirk, from an island off the coast of Chile. Selkirk - who had in fact sailed with Dampier on an earlier pirating expedition - had been voluntarily marooned on the island four years earlier. His rescue brought him a level of celebrity familiar to any peddler of survival tales, and contemporary reports have him lurching from London pub to London pub, swapping a tale of overcoming the odds for a pint and pie. It was only after the the journalist Richard Steele interviewed Selkirk for The Englishman (Souhami, 2002) that Daniel Defoe came across the tale and began work on his first novel, Robinson Crusoe (Defoe, 1992). Did Selkirk own his own story? Defoe, in choosing to write the story as fiction, allowed himself the right to make the story an allegory, a tale of a man finding himself, and his civilisation. In Defoe's version of Selkirk's story, the island changes location, his solitude becomes instead a replaying of British Imperialism, with “Friday” standing in for the subjugated nations. Arguably, it is the fictionalising which gives
the writer license. Summers and Scoffield, scorned wives, have both argued that it's the lack of fictionalisation which constitutes an ethical faceslap.

Fictionalised versions of real people and real events are neither new nor necessarily reliant on close relationships. Dostoyevsky's *The Demons* (1995) was inspired by a well known murder case, as was Wilkie Collins's *Woman in White* (1994). And before them all, Homer's tales of Troy were richly fabricated versions of an historical event. This fabrication can become quite strange: there are websites - whole online universes - devoted to something called 'Real Person Fiction'. Here, you can find real people - by which I mean, celebrities; or at least, an imagined version of celebrities - living out alternate lives. Same names, same looks, same same, but different. So Emma Watson works in a supermarket, where she hopes the boy she likes, Jake Gyllenhall, will come to shop. Or Lyndsay Lohan dies tragically while running across the road with her friend Paris, to grab a bag of coke (Fandomination.net 2004). In one tale, Chinese popstars Gillian Chung, and Charlene Choi “works in a British Cathouse that you know, they have to work at. Well that Cathouse is a sex house and they are the top sexy girls in that shop... they have sex with Mens” (Fan Fiction 2007). Oh how I wish I were making this up. In some ways, though, these online writers, creating stories about schoolboy Keanu and his pal, footballer Heath Ledger, running away from the law, are playing a version of Homer's game, and of Defoe's – that of taking a celebrity, and making a story from them, molding the story to suit your own
message, your own purpose. The theft of fact for the purposes of fiction is interwoven with the creation of storytelling itself, and not merely in print.

When the Jane Austen biopic, *Becoming Jane*, came out this year, many Austen scholars were horrified at what they saw as a blatant fictionalisation of a slim moment in Austen's life (Bradshaw 2007). Watching the film – a love story – the audience is caught between willing suspension of disbelief (I mean, we *know* Austen never glowed like that Anne Hathaway, but we want to watch her looking lovely) and the discomfort of knowing how the story ends. Caught, in other words, between the fiction of the film, and the known facts. But surely a good storyteller finds the gaps in the facts of history and fills in the flourishes.

I've used historical characters in two of my novels: Judith Bastiaanz, a minister's daughter on board *The Batavia* in 1629, is the narrator for *The Accomplice* (Heyman, 2003). The fact that I understand, and expect my readers to understand, that my Judith is a literary creation, a construct based around the skeleton of the facts, is in part a gift of post-modernism. In *Captain Starlight's Apprentice*, I based a central character - a circus-performing filmstar-turned-bushranger - on Jessie Hickman, a woman who had been a rodeo rider and ended up living in a cave out the back of the Blue Mountains. I wrote about these women because I was curious about their lives, about their moment in history - especially about what the historical record left out. Somehow there was a truth there that only fiction could reach.
This appropriation is always going to happen: writers are writers partly because of an insatiable curiosity about people. For my money, writing which matters, which connects, has curiosity at its heart. Writers of this sort are the ones who, like Proust, hear stories, read snippets, and wonder what it would be like to be that person, to know that person.

Alan Garner in his magnificent essays on writing, *The Voice that Thunders* (1998), writes of discovering a curiosity about William Buckley, escaped convict. On a meeting with Buckley's descendant, Garner is almost overwhelmed by a sense of being connected to Buckley the elder. As a writer, Garner understands this connection to be created by an imaginative act, in the same way that the character of Buckley is created.

When the characters are closer to home, though; when the characters are based clearly on real people, known to the writer; people who – as with Carey and Kureishi – might rather they were fictionalised more thoroughly – what then? To some extent, of course, readers – and journalists – will always assume a writer's work to be autobiography. I've used family stories, too, in my work – plundered them, you might say. And I wouldn't flinch. I can trace the genesis of characters, of storylines, quite clearly to family members but I'm not sure that they would recognise themselves. In the case of *Captain Starlight's Apprentice*, I imagined a woman who had such severe postnatal depression that she attempted suicide and was hospitalised. My mother had severe postnatal depression, and was hospitalised. When I saw that
this character was going to hold some weight in the novel, I drove up to see my mother and asked her how she would feel about me exploring this thread of her story. She shook her head: “It won't be my story, will it? It'll be yours.” Even so, when I gave her a copy of the book, she was puzzled: “I thought it was about me?” Well it is. And it isn't. Because in order to find the truth of the thing, a writer sometimes has to be unloosed from the facts. And that means inventing. Otherwise, write non-fiction. What Timothy Garton Ash calls 'the literature of fact' (Ash, 2002) and the literature of fiction have something important in common: they're both literature. And words, after all, are tools of invention.

As for that Oxford party, and the woman with the quirky story I longed to appropriate: she said no. She wanted to write a screenplay about it herself. So every year I email her and ask her if she's written it yet, and every year she emails back and says no, not yet. One of these years I might just write it anyway. But you have to promise not to tell.

(Heyman, 2007c)
**Adaptation: the story of a battle**

This is a story of a journey of letting go, and of faith.

I am sprawled on the floor of my study, surrounded by manuscript pages and yellow post-it notes. The line of papers extends out the floor to the connecting verandah. My partner – foolishly – sticks his head in the door, offering a cup of tea and points out that I have a post-it note in my hair. Also, he adds, I look demented.

"Who wrote this thing?" I ask. "Who's idea was it to have a dual narrative?"

"Yours," he says, and quickly closes the door.

When I was approached to adapt *Captain Starlight's Apprentice* for the Woman's Hour serial on Radio 4, I was thrilled. As a playwright I had adapted the work of other writers for the stage, and knew the pitfalls and possibilities of adaptation. Who better to dramatise the novel than the novelist? I knew the novel better than anyone else, I write for radio - so it should be a piece of the proverbial, right?

I spent years working on *Captain Starlight's Apprentice*, and I'd been buried in that imagined world. Twelve months of that time was 'pre-production' - researching the life of a female outlaw, digging into the experience of British Migrants in the 1950's, the beginnings of the film
industry. A final year was spent editing – getting the nuances of language and of emotion carefully right. Each sentence was combed, each moment of character engagement thought through. I was working here with a producer I'd not worked with before. The novel is over eighty thousand words, which needs to be condensed to a total of twelve thousand. And I'd not done a serial before, still – how hard could it be?

With other people's work, I have been clear-sighted, cutting with respect and clarity. With my own, I discover - to my surprise - how difficult it is to let go of the beautiful sentence, or the moment which has crucial meaning in the novel, but not in the play. When it wasn't my work, I was able to be both respectful and brutal. I skimmed through the novel; I still held much of it in my head, but I needed to see it on the page. At the end of a reading, I felt no clearer about how I might adapt it.

*Captain Starlight’s Apprentice* is a story of two women. One, Rose, is a ten-pound pom in a coma after a failed suicide attempt. The other, an ebullient, dynamic female 'bushranger' - or outlaw - at the turn of the twentieth century. Parts of the novel are high action, parts are imagined dialogue, and the connection between the two women is revealed slowly, carefully. Part of what interested me in writing the novel was the coma state, that place between life and death, where it is possible to go either way. What if it were possible to be in that state and engaged in another world entirely? Radio at its best has the potential to capture
both of these qualities - half-life, action, internal musing - without losing narrative. The downside, of course, is that nothing is seen, so a subtle action - a hand holding another hand, someone looking away - has to be shaped into dialogue.

Writing a novel is a delicate and a quiet process. It is wooing something out of a buried place, waiting, listening, responding. Long, arduous, joyous: the dance with creating a fully realised novel is about balancing plot - the externals of action - with reflection - the internal world of motivation. I confess that I love writing novels. Not in the annoying “oh my writing is always a joy, it just flows out of me” way. No, there are many, many days that I find the process painful; many days I find that I am as empty as the screen or page in front of me. And, since I'm being honest here I may as well lay it all out as though I'm on an episode of Oprah - I spend a lot of time shouting at innocent people when I'm in the midst of a novel. It frustrates me, and there is only me to understand it, only me who can bring the world I am imagining to birth. Yet for all that, I reach a point where I am buried, I am deep down in some otherworld, and it seems miraculous to me, that it has been born, that I can see it, smell it. It's often this inner world of my characters which interests me, the way external conflicts impinge upon their own constructed worlds.

Writing a script is not a quiet process. There is little room in performance for quietness, for gentle wooing. The internal must, of necessity, be translated into action. In a novel, we come to know
characters through their inner world, in performance we know them only through action. This is especially true of theatre and film; every nuance must be made external. Radio has a little more leeway - and it's one of the reasons I love it so - but still, a full length radio play, or a serial, with endless internal monologues is going to struggle to maintain interest.

Narrative is the centrepoint of any story - stylistic concerns, emotional depth, intellectual exploration, character studies - these are all servants to the narrative. Human beings have listened to stories for hundreds of thousands of years; our tribal ancestors performed and recited stories which made sense of our place in the world. Without narrative, for my money, the novel becomes self-serving. Native American writer Sherman Alexie says 'We were speaking stories long before we could read'. In an interview on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Radio National, Sherman said 'In my culture, the artist has a job to do. Not more or less important, the job helps the community run' (Sherman, 2006).

The thing with the novel, though, is that it is 'narrative plus' - the story is part of the whole. Most novelists choose the form because of its possibilities; in the novel, storytelling meets character contemplation. Unlike film, or theatre, the novel can dwell on the inner world and explore its meaning in relation to the outer world.

Playwright Zinnie Harris, when writing her award-winning play
"Further Than The Furthest Thing," took as her starting point a real story, of a real place. When questioned about points of fact in relation to the story, Harris said simply “I knew what the history was, which was my starting point - and I knew what the best narrative was. For me - as long as I'm respectful of the history - the best narrative is always going to win” (Harris, 2005). It worked, in her case, because she wrote a damned fine play.

Adapting a novel for performance - radio, stage, film - requires the same clear-mindedness as taking an historical event. It requires the writer to be able to look clear-eyed and say ‘this needs to go, because it doesn't move the action forward.' Now, theoretically, I am a writer who can do this. I have a history of doing this. Yet when I came to cutting down my own novel, I discovered my own preciousness.

A Woman's Hour serial takes a particular form. Unlike a television mini-series, it is expected with a Woman's Hour serial that some listeners will tune in for one episode, or two - some, of course, will listen for the entire week. This means that each episode needs to be both self-contained, as a dramatic whole, and also to intersect dramatically with other episodes.

And here is another problem: five episodes, from a novel which is structured as a kind of dream-state. I search and search, marking pages, for a natural five. There is none. I make a list of all the necessary episodes in the life of the novel: if I were to use them all, I
would need twenty episodes. Finally, desperately, I return to an earlier manuscript and start tearing it up. Hacking and hacking, I try and force myself back to the essence of the book, the narrative heart. I try not to look too hard at the carefully constructed sentences, paragraphs, pages that are littering the floor. If I look too hard, I understand that the novel doesn't work without them - and if the novel doesn't, then how can the serial? Finally, five parts, a kind of meaning - with huge chunks of monologue, and every scene which I consider to be crucial. I've written for radio before, and have always counted - as for film - one page per minute. The deadline is two days away. I send my five scripts, then pour myself a glass of merlot.

The next morning, there is an exclamation marked email in my inbox. 

*Just to let you know it's twice the length we've got room for.* I open another bottle of merlot. I look at my double length script, somehow panic-struck. Nothing can be torn from this. Every line is crucial. I see a paragraph which isn't helping the narrative – but, it's one of my favourite scenes, with several beloved, witty lines. Surely it can't go? It does.

I've written a novel with a twin narrative; I tell my students never to do this. It's impossible, I tell them, to make it work. Yet, here, I've done it myself. Okay, I mutter to myself, I'll lose one of the narratives. Except of course that the point about each narrative is that it makes sense through the other story.
The list of writers who have adapted their work for radio is impressive—Dylan Thomas and Harold Pinter among them. Radio sits neatly with prose; yet a dramatisation has all the marks of constriction which mark adapting for screen and for the stage. I axe my way through, attempting brutality. Each scene which needs to be removed causes, I know, far more consternation and consideration than it would were I adapting the work of another writer. The thing is: I know what each of these scenes cost. It's like tearing up photographs of your children, shredding memories.

The novel has been carefully constructed, and is held together with a connection which may be real, or may be imagined. This duality is easier to get in prose than in performance. Once something is dramatised or spoken, it appears to be real. On film, or on stage, I could use a visual clue to suggest that, for instance, only one character can see a certain situation. On radio, this is trickier. Perhaps, my producer suggests, I can introduce a new relationship, one which doesn't exist in the novel. I place two significant male characters at Rose's bedside. Five episodes in, I see that these men are repeating information. I create new dialogue. New characters.

I look at each section, carefully. Perhaps if I remove the central character? Or introduce a new storyline? My producer suggests a storyline which doesn't exist in the book. I attempt it. My producer sends an email and signs off with the salutation: Courage.
Each draft seems further away from the novel. The studio is booked, and I am more and more muddled, more - as my husband so kindly pointed out - demented. Finally, in desperation, I abandon the earlier drafts and return to the essence of the novel. I tell my students to trust their work. What would happen if I trusted the novel? If I had the courage to write the serial just like the book? The bones, the voices, even some of the difficult structure. What gets cut, in the end, are subplots, and supporting cast.

I send it off to my producer. Yes, she says, wonderful.

(Heyman, 2007d)
Section Two: Theme
Friends came to visit recently, with their brood of children. Amongst the bedtime chaos, I overheard my friend asking her youngest:

"what sort of bedtime book do you want - one with information in it, or just a story?" Hearing me spluttering in the background, she did at least have the grace to scuttle off, embarrassed, to read her son's chosen book. One from which he would 'learn something'. She's not alone. As a novelist, I frequently encounter adults who proudly declare: "I never read fiction, I don't have time" or, "I just want to use books to learn" – the clear implication being that fiction cannot teach, or is inevitably time-wasting.

At the Sydney Writer's Festival in 2003, the novelist Alan Attwood responded to a 'how-to-break-in-to-writing' question from the audience, by saying "Looking at the queues around this festival it's clear to me that if I want a large readership I should be writing narrative non-fiction and dispense with novels entirely. But I can't, because I love what fiction can do" (Attwood, 2003). At the Edinburgh Festival the same year, I was on a panel with Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman, who dismissed the idea that non-fiction might be the only - or even the best - means of communicating political truths, insisting that fiction could best capture what lies beneath the
illusory surface (Dorfman, 2003). Non-fiction is an enormous growth area in publishing, as reality television is in visual media. In times of shifting certainties and lack of physical community, it seems that we want to engage with real people and their real stories, to believe that they are our community, that we are as much a part of their lives as they are of ours. Novelist and academic Debra Adelaide (2004) suggests that "non-fiction has learnt the lessons of fiction incredibly well." Yet the great characters of fiction continue to live with us long after the book is finished. The characters stay as they were with us within the pages of the book, allowing us to muse on the possibilities. Unlike non-fiction, we have no means of knowing the ending-after-the-ending; we are able to create our own 'what happens next', making us morally accountable for the future lives of the fictional characters. With a novel, after the book has been read, the characters belong to the reader. I choose to believe, for instance, that Lizzie Darcy, nee Bennet really did live happily with Mr Darcy, and I have spent pleasurable hours imagining how this might have been lived out. Sadly, though, I know - with the same surety - that Dr Bovary lived out his remaining years with his mother, until his death two years after Emma's. This is the invitation a novel issues to the reader: to become part of the creation, to be immersed in the life of the novel so deeply that we continue to imagine the life after the writer has closed the door and turned off the lights. When I read Julie Gregory's memoir Sickened recently, I was able to log on to her website to find out the facts of what
happened next (Gregory 2003). It isn't that I was - am - less engaged by the story. Just that I am not invited to imagine or create it myself. With non-fiction I am purely an audience, however enraptured I am by the story. It is in going on the journey, becoming part of the story, engaging my imagination, that I see a different me, see other possibilities. With fiction, I am invited to live a different life and through that life, to more adequately understand my own world.

When I had decided to marry the man I loved, in spite of my very serious misgivings about the nature of marriage, acquaintances offered all manner of helpful books, mainly in the 'how to love one person for the rest of your life' line. The How-To books were handed over to a charity shop sometime in the first year. The novel which my godmother gave me, though - *Happenstance*, by Carol Shields (1994) - gave me a deep immersion in character wisdom. Through Shields, I was able to live through two characters - husband and wife - and their thirty years of marriage. What I learnt about happiness and commitment from Shields continues to sustain me. Like Albert Camus, Shields frequently wrote as a moral educator, though her narrative never suffered for it. Scottish writer Janice Galloway has no desire to educate, yet her first novel, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, contains all I need to know about surviving and recovering from grief and depression (Galloway, 1989). When I want to be immersed in the pleasures and dangers of desire, I go to
Jill Dawson's marvelous *Fred and Edie* (2001) and when I want to be reminded of the value of life I return to my battered paperback copy of *Cloudstreet* (Winton, 1992).

A few years ago, I spent an afternoon with Norma Khouri, author of the discredited memoir *Forbidden Love: Love and Betrayal in Modern Day Jordan* (Khouri, 2003). To my later embarrassment, I found Khouri charming, committed, passionate. "All I can do," she said "is tell the truth." She echoed that sentiment later on in the day, at a public reading, when an audience member asked about the view she was perpetrating of Arab cultures. "I value my culture, and I value all that is rich about it. But I have to tell the truth" (Khouri, 2004). And there's the rub. You can line all the facts up in a neat row and still not have the truth. Our obsession with this certainty, this 'reality' leads us, as readers, to foolish kinds of trust, often missing the truth shining in our faces. In seeking to be part of a real-life story, we miss the opportunity to become co-creators, to be part of a community which continues to exist long after the author has set down the last word. We become shallow readers, only interested in the bare bones of the story, the action, never longing for the lingering understanding which good fiction can bring.

Apparently you can find books now instructing you on how to read. You could buy one. Or - be a devil - you could simply pick up a novel.

(Heyman, 2004)
Longing

On a Sunday morning in Oxford, a young publisher wakes early. In
spite of her hangover she walks across the city to sit for an hour, in
silence with twenty strangers. A grandfather listens to a piece of
music and is surprised to find himself weeping. Sitting by the
Thames, a teacher watches a woman pushing a pram and is almost
doubled over with the pain of it. A writer carries mementos of her
homeland with her everywhere and dreams of the water of her
childhood. Each of them united by longing: deeper than desire, and
as universal as hunger.

Sylvia Plath, writing in her journals as a young student, mused:
“"There are times when a feeling of expectancy comes to me, as if
something is there, beneath the surface of my understanding,
waiting for me to grasp it" (Plath, 2000: Section 12). Who among
us doesn't recognise that feeling of bubbling expectancy, of
yearning hope? It's a deep feeling, one which drives many of us.
The endless traveler, the hyper-achiever, the serial monogamist:
longing for something out of reach. Sometimes the desire itself is
the motivating force, not the end product, although we may
convince ourselves that we are merely pining for the perfect lover,
place, or job. Australian psychotherapist Dr Craig San Roque says
that longing differs in intensity from simple desire, and adds,
“intense feelings are part of human life, in some ways they look for a home... longing for perfection, yearning: like the desire for happiness, it's one of the absolute fundamentals of human life” (San Roque, 2007). Indeed, in a letter to her lover, philosopher Rosa Luxemborg wrote: “I do have a cursed longing for happiness and am ready to haggle for my daily portion with the stubbornness of a mule” (Luxemborg, 1979: 33).

In 1992 I took a hike up Ben Lomond, a lochside mountain on the edge of Glasgow. Near the summit, buffeted by wind, I stopped and looked at the blue-green loch below, and was slapped by the realisation that for years I had been 'imagining' this landscape in meditation sessions. I could barely breathe for the yearning it set up in me: to be part of that landscape, to belong to it. Music too, has that potential to illuminate our deeper longings. A sudden gasp in the midst of music which leads us to remember that we are more than the sum of our parts: more than our mortgages; our jobs; more than our holiday plans and our renovations. Much of our lives, for many of us, is constructed of a careful forgetting: we have too much to achieve or to maintain to be distracted by the siren call of our own longing. We need it, though: it is our thread, connecting us to the depth of our humanity.

Listen to any Arvo Pärt composition and I defy you not to notice an aching gap in some deep, private part of your being. Even pop songs
- the best ones, those that people return to year after year – are about a deep, primal longing. For what? For a lover, mostly; for belonging – but more than that. Think of Radiohead's “I'm a Creep” to get a sense of what I mean; that desperate need in Thom Yorke's voice hungrily repeating “I wish I was special” (Yorke, 1993). Pop music is often about the desire to be special, to be beautiful, no matter what they say.

Pop music is arguably the realm of the adolescent - that era of human lifespan which is all about longing. Teetering on the cusp of something big, not quite sure what it is, having left childhood behind; it's a waiting-room of a time, made taut with angst and desire. Most teenagers, being teenagers, are unable to articulate that longing and so lyricists like Thom Yorke do it for them. Of course some of these articulations are of desire rather than deep yearning. Is there, after all, a difference between the two?

Pop-singer turned Anglican priest Steve Butler, thinks there is. “We cannot long for our daily bread, no matter how much we want or need it,” he argues. “Rather we long for what we once knew, and for whom we have known. Longing looms up from the unconscious. Like a memory that is felt but cannot be recalled. It is a 'back then', and a 'one day', and 'sadly, not now'. It is the psychodynamic - living with the 'loss' of what's deepest within us” (Butler, 2007).
Occasionally, we surprise ourselves with a moment of clear pining, without knowing what it is we pine for. Carol Anne Duffy, in her sublime poem, *Prayer*, captures that delicate forgetting, and sudden remembering: “Some nights, although we are faithless, the truth/enters our hearts, that small familiar pain/then a man will stand stock-still, hearing his/ youth in the distant Latin chanting of a train” (Duffy, 2000: 79). Film and theatre, too, at their best illuminate our longings. Markus Michalowski, director of the German hip-hop theatre company, Renegade, says theatre “is about the duality of human life, which is captured in the symbol for theatre – the Dionysian mask: half smile, half-grimace. In that duality is the human longing to find the full experience of ourselves” (Michalowski, 2007). It seems on some level that we have this space within us, some innate yearning which seeks a home, a focus. As existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote in 1845: 'The thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die' (Kierkegaard, 1938: 15).

Some years ago I spent some time working with Indigenous Australians in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. Speaking through translators, several women told me of a deep hunger for their country - their land - a never-forgetting. For these women, the desire for country seemed vivid, three dimensional, and as hungry as the desire a young woman feels for her lover. The Welsh talk about this longing for home as *hiraeth* - a deep pining for the patch
of land which is your home. Is it home that we long for - is that
what the psalmist of the Old Testament meant when he wrote “deep
calls to deep” (Psalm 42: 5 – 7)? Raymond Carver in his poem Late
Fragment asks: “And what did you want?/To call myself beloved, to
feel myself/ beloved on the earth” (Carver, 1989: 124). Is it the case,
as Carver implies, that our primal longing is to know ourselves as
beloved? To be as intimate as humanly possible. Allen Ginsburg in
Song, wrote: “I always wanted to return to the body where I was
born” (Ginsberg, 1956: 50 – 53). What place, after all, is more
intimate than the womb?

The Portuguese have perfected a form of song, known as fado,
dedicated to this deep yearning, sometimes for home, sometimes for
the beloved, sometimes for the unknowable. Fado is both a
celebration of, and commiseration with, saudade - described by A.
F. Bell back in 1912, in the book In Portugal as “a vague and
constant desire for something that does not and probably cannot
exist, for something other than the present” (Emmons and Lewis,
2006: 402, quoting Bell, 1912). In The Weight of Glory C. S. Lewis
wrote of a similar longing as a “desire for our own far-off country,
which we find in ourselves even now... (it is a yearning) which
pierces with such sweetness” (Lewis, 1941: 265).

When I began writing Captain Starlight's Apprentice I knew that it
was at the very least a tale about longing. It is, after all, the story of
a woman, an Australian rodeo rider and silent film star, Jess A., who becomes an outlaw in order to find her lost child. This desperation to be reunited turned out to be at the heart of the book, surprising me with its intensity. It is echoed in the parallel story of a British migrant to Australia, Rose, longing for home, and for her child. Yet underneath all this something even more fundamental is gradually uncovered: the yearning for life itself and the need to be connected, to matter. This, after all, is the primal longing.

In the medieval Christian classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the anonymous author describes a form of prayer that perhaps also describes the form of our life's yearning: 'When you first begin, you will find only darkness, as it were a cloud of unknowing. You do not know what it means except that in your will you feel a simple steadfast intention reaching out... never give up your firm intention: beat away at this cloud of unknowing... with that sharp dart of longing love.' (Anonymous, quoted in Honda 1981: 94) Perhaps we do not truly know what it is we long for. Yet surely we can do this: steadfastly to listen, and to then allow the longing in our deepest selves to shape our lives and our loves.

(Heyman 2007e)
The Importance of Here

On a rainy Glasgow night in 1995, I took shelter in a city church. After the service, I stayed, drinking horribly strong tea. Recognising my Australian accent, a burly man hurried over. "I was oot there in Australia," he shouted down at me, "Ten quid it cost. Too hot oot there. Full of flies. And I couldnae stand that migrant hostel. Saved me money to get back quick smart." Bafflingly, he then added: "Best three years of me life. The making of me." In several years in Scotland, I was to meet many of these 'returnees', many of them expressing the same sort of ambivalence about the country they had emigrated to and found wanting. In the thirty years following World War Two, well over one million British people paid ten pounds to emigrate to Australia on the Assisted Passage Scheme. A quarter of them returned (Hammerton and Thomson, 2005).

Fifteen years ago, I moved to Britain. It cost significantly more than ten pounds, and wasn’t as active a decision as that phrase implies. More a vague ‘yes’ to whatever opportunities turned up. In those days I was an actor in Western Australia, beginning to teeter into playwriting, with a few productions under my belt. One night I had a phone call from England – Nottingham to be precise – and a producer I’d worked with echoed down the line. Remember how the phone used to echo? An actress had pulled out of a project, did I
want to come to Northern Ireland? Of course I did. I was desperate to get to the UK, schooled as I was on Enid Blyton, Jane Austen, and a whole stack of bad boarding school books. When I arrived, it was Guy Fawkes – cold, damp, miserable. I had a gum leaf with me in my bag.

The deep loneliness of this cold, new place ploughed away at me. Expecting commonality – after all, the language was the same, the food, television and books familiar – I was thrown by my own sense of ‘otherness’, and of disconnection from the landscape. In the countryside, I felt the sky to be too low, the hills too close. Working with a touring theatre company meant I had no means of making friends outside of the rather small, rabid company of actors. All that sustained me was my gum leaf, a poster of Cottesloe Beach and, I’m ashamed to admit, daily viewings of Neighbours. At my most homesick I upped the dose, including Home and Away in my daily intake. In performance-free weeks, I caught trains and buses to places I marked with pin-pricks on a map, trying to find a piece of landscape I could breathe in. In Welsh, the word is hiraeth. Deeper than homesickness, it translates roughly as an intense longing for place, a desire for home which goes far beyond the desire for family or recognisable rituals. It is the pain of physical dislocation, of being, quite simply, in the wrong landscape.

By the time I met my husband and moved with him to Scotland, I’d
settled, become used to the cold, to the humour. I had a National Insurance number and understood its purpose; could navigate my way about the country with relative ease. The landscape of England still felt odd and small, but the Scottish landscape had echoes of my own childhood environs. Lakes, hills, blue-green light, a high sky. The woods, as well as the mountains, wooed me. In Scotland, as someone clearly ‘other’, I found myself to have a certain freedom, the ability to reinvent. As Philip Larkin said in his poem *The Importance of Elsewhere*: “Strangeness made sense. The salt rebuff of speech/Insisting so on difference, made me welcome” (Larkin, 1988: 104). I’m not the first person to find the pleasure of reinvention in a new place; it’s a common upside of migration. In Scotland, I became known as a novelist; I built a life rich with friends, music, extended family and weekend mountain hikes. It would be wrong to suggest that the place didn’t – doesn’t – have a strong hold on me. Yet, still, the light felt wrong. Although my Welsh father-in-law insists that only the Welsh can feel *hiraeth*, the longing for the flat, bright sky of Australia was physical, not connected to my desire for Vegemite, or for my mum.

Over a decade ago, I was in a French village with my husband. It was the first time I had seen him in France, and I was surprised by his effusiveness, the sudden emergence of an arm-waving, voice-raising version of the quietly-spoken man I had fallen in love with. Even with my limited French, I could see that he was different there,
that the self he presented in Britain was being left behind. Initially, I thought this was to do with language, the ability to be so immersed in another tongue inevitably producing a different quality of speech, and therefore of thought. Now, though, I suspect it has as much to do with place – light, space, the contours of the earth – as with speech. Now, I observe him having a different part of himself opened by being in Australia. He, in fact, is discovering the pleasures of ‘Elsewhere.’

Perhaps hiraeth is simply to do with childhood, the landscapes which hold our earliest memories. In the book, *Ten Pound Poms: Australia’s Invisible Migrants*, by James Hammerton and Alistair Thomson (Op. cit), hundreds of British migrants speak of their adjustment to the new country. Margaret Scott, who left Britain for Tasmania in 1959, speaks of being disconcerted by the unfamiliar landscape. She says “I didn’t find it beautiful. I found it threatening. … the misery of the loss of the known, not of network and ritual but of familiar places and the sense of possession that familiarity bestows.” Later, she describes herself as being “unhappy that I couldn’t, without resorting to books, open the landscape for my children as my mother had opened Gloucestershire for me” (Hammerton and Thomson 2005: 123-4).

For me, the landscape of my childhood was not opened by my mother, or my father. As the youngest child of five, with a divorced,
shift-working mother, there was never going to be a lot of time for jolly nature walks. The landscape of my childhood was stumbled upon. If read at all, it was done so accidentally, but with a sublime freedom. My own children were born in England, not Scotland, with a Welsh father. I needed them to have - I thought - a childhood which felt like mine. Yet when I returned to Australia, I found myself full of longing, this time for the landscape I’d left behind.

After more than a decade away, the light seemed too bright, the trees too dark. In the first two years, I travelled back to Britain five times, unsettling me further. There, the dull light seemed kinder. The bureaucratic tangles, which had enraged me for so long, now appeared sensible. Simply familiar, actually, whereas the Australian systems had changed, and I was the foreigner muddling along, with no idea of how to organise health care, car registration, my children’s immunisation. I experienced the unsettling discomfort of the returnee – the expectation that all will be the same, when it is not.

Before I left Britain, I’d stumbled across the story of Jessie Hunt Hickman, a woman who had been a rodeo rider, and who became a bushranger, hiding out in a cave at the back of Nullo Mountain. As the daughter of a rodeo rider, the story tugged me, and I began to work on a novel inspired by this woman. As I was writing, though, a second voice emerged, of a ten pound pom grappling with the new landscape, and with her connection to Hickman. In early,
abandoned, drafts of the manuscript - my first novel written in Australia – there are long threads that rage at the Australian landscape. Without hiraeth as inspiration, I found myself casting about, furious. Australia had for so long been my muse, and I resented the longing itself: with friends, family and work in Britain, in many ways it would have been easier to stay. It was the desire for the particular shade of rock, of heavy night air, which pulled me back. When I first came back 'home' I walked in the Blue Mountains and was startled to find myself wishing for moss, bluebells, grazed hills. It was only when I moved back to the Hawkesbury River - less than fifty miles from the town I grew up in - that the rock, and the light, felt right.

As for my children, they have a childhood utterly unlike mine. Recently, on a woodland walk in mid-Wales, we spent a cold spring afternoon building fairy dens. After they’d propped dead wood against the side of a tree and strung it with bracken, my children set to discussing what sort of animals might like to live in their little hut. “Squirrels and possums,” my son decided. “This isn’t Australia,” his sister insisted, “we can only have squirrels.” He thought for a moment, than declared: “This is an Australian and British den. You can be both. Like us.”

During dinner with a friend, the Northumbrian poet Katrina Porteous, I bemoaned my obsession with place, my sense of being
owned by certain landscapes. Surely, I complained, normal people live wherever their hats are, without waking in the night, weeping for a particular smell. Porteous insisted - as she does in her work – that longing for home is the unacknowledged human need (Porteous, 1996). “More primal,” she said, “than romantic love.” Half a bottle of wine later, she added “More important, too” (Porteous, 2006).

Indeed, she has twice ended romantic relationships because of place – one with an American, and one with a Cambridge resident. Of the Cambridge man, she says “it just couldn’t work. I couldn’t live there, with all that waterlogged flat land, and he couldn’t live here, by the sea.”

Increasingly, we live lives of movement; emigration is a small matter, at least in terms of practicalities. We find lovers who belong to other places, we move to be with them, or they with us. Careers blossom, and invite permanent travel. Perhaps, though, Porteous is right to imply that place, and our connection to it, matters more than we can dare admit. In constantly shifting town, state, and continent – in endlessly seeking the new – we lose not just the familiar, but also the sense of physical roots.

In August 2005, the Australian Visa Bureau issued a press-release promoting a recruitment program for ‘skilled labour.’ The press release was headed “Is the Ten Pound Pom Back? Almost” (Australian Visa Bureau, 2005). Alistair Thomson, one of
the authors of *Ten Pound Poms*, speaking of the new program said:

"The new generation of migrants will still be lured by images of a sunny paradise, and like their predecessors they will need to realise that Australia is not just like 'Britain in the sun'. In subtle but powerful ways Australia will be profoundly strange: all the smells and tastes will seem 'wrong'; the Australians speak a different 'English'; they live and work in different ways... perhaps most importantly, the new British immigrants will face the universal problems of all migrants: family dislocation and homesickness. Twenty-five per cent of Ten Pound Poms returned to live in Britain, mostly because of a desperate longing for family and friends or a nostalgic sense of 'home’” (Thomson, 2005).

Absence of home – the being cut loose – creates a kind of freedom. Like adolescents escaping from the parental abode, we become able to test out new identities, to find other selves lurking within. Yet without rediscovering home, I suspect that we are unable to truly grow up. Home implies not just rest and ease, but also work and commitment. Larkin ends *The Importance of Elsewhere*: “These are my customs and establishments/ It would be much more serious to refuse./Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence” (op cit). The trick, of course, is to recognise Elsewhere for what it is, and – perhaps harder - to know Here, or home, when we find it.

(Heyman 2006b)
In Search of the Inner Eden

I am sitting on a verandah by the Fitzroy River in the Kimberley; leaf shadow dapples my hand. Beside me, the indigenous artist Daisy Smith is painting a circular picture of her return to country after being raised on a station in Fitzroy Crossing. How did you know your country, I ask: how did you recognise it? Daisy taps her hand against her chest: “It was in here” (Smith, 2002). I am breathless with an unnameable grief. How would I know my own country, if I found it?

Here’s a familiar story: young marrieds, Adam and Eve, grow up and settle down in their home town, Eden. Each leaf and path of the lusciously designed town is known to them. So much so that after a while, they get bored and start indulging in acts of vandalism. The landowner - let’s call him God – kicks them out of town, and they spend the next decade searching for the perfect place; a place to call Home. Devastated, they know that it’s the place they’ve left behind.

It’s a resonant myth, speaking as it does of the human desire for groundedness, for home. After all, Adam’s name comes from Adamah, the Hebrew word for ‘Earth’. Beyond all else, it’s the loss of their special place which causes such grief for this young couple.
I think of this as a tale humans told each other to remind themselves - ourselves - of our need for home, of the effect that the magic and specificity of place can have upon us. We belong to place as much as it belongs to us. When we lose home, we need to find another one, and any piece of ground will not do. We have requirements, and where we live impinges deeply on our happiness.

Grief for a place left behind is a common response to new landscape. Some of this, of course, is to do with the loss of the known landscape, the ache for the recognisable. When everything is new, it is unsettling. Early European migrants to Australia attempted to form a version of Europe in the Australian bush. We scoff nowadays at those flimsy attempts to create stone buildings; to sip afternoon tea on freshly mown croquet lawns; to tame wild rock into something resembling rose gardens. Although agriculturally ill-considered, those early European-Australians behaved instinctively, in an act of psychological survival. Home is what we know, after all, at least in part. History shows us, though, that those Europeans made things more difficult than they needed to, because of their inability to see their new land in all its aching strangeness. In attempting to perceive the wildly strange as familiar, they missed the bleeding obvious; the food growing wild, the animals for meat, the outstanding, outrageous variety of flora and fauna (Hughes, 1988).

But is it just the familiarity of place that affects our happiness?
Happiness is the new sex. Enter the word ‘Happiness’ into any search engine, and over fifty-two million entries spring up (Google, 2007). Happiness has always been desired by humans - Aristotle was on about it, before the modern chariot was a twinkle in Ben Hur’s eye. In Book One of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle identified happiness as the *telos* or ultimate end of human life. Now, though, happiness is a business, worth billions of dollars, rivaling even the diet industry for profits (Maidment, 2006). Alongside this raging obsession, the search for happiness, we appear to be unhappier than ever before: at least if we are to judge by the prescription levels of anti-depressants (Vedantam, 2004). We are also – and this may be a coincidence – more mobile than ever before. In ‘minority world’, or Western countries, we are frequently mobile through aspiration: wealth provides choice, and some of that selection is about where we choose to live (Staubhaar, 2000). In the rest of the world it is often poverty which forces mobility. As poorer nations become more dependent on industry or the tourist dollar, village life becomes less viable and young people move to the city to work for cash rather than subsistence (Ashley and Boyd, 2000). There are other reasons besides economic migration: political asylum seekers, refugees from war and environmental destruction. The desire to seek out fresh pastures is hardly new: the original Australian inhabitants may well have walked here from New Guinea; early Maoris made incredible ocean voyages and fetched up
in Aotearoa. It is the scale and speed which are new, and the lack of familial or tribal context. Nuclear families, young couples and singles move internationally now, tribeless, and often find themselves alone in a strange, strange land.

Anthropologist Hugh Brody has spent many years with the Inuit of Northern Canada. In *The Other Side of Eden*, he contrasts their traditional nomadic life as hunter-gatherers with that of supposedly more advanced pastoralists and agriculturalists (us, that is). Ironically, for Brody, it’s the nomads who know their place, care for it, live within its limits, and return to it year after year. The agriculturalists, on the other hand, knowing no limits, are always moving into new frontiers, trashing the land then moving on forever (Brody, 2002). Before the first world war the poet Rupert Brooke traveled to Tahiti in search of an inspirational life; Robert Louis Stevenson found creative succor in Samoa; James Joyce, Somerset Maugham, Ernest Hemmingway, Edith Sitwell: the list of ‘creative exiles’ rolls on. The possibility of finding creative epiphany in a new place, a place resonating with the inner sense of home – the inner Eden – leads to lifelong questing for many artists. As with the possibility that there is a perfect lover – the soul mate – the mythical place of perfection haunts writers and artists. And not just artists – surely the desire in seeking a new Eden is for a fresh life. Peter Mayle in *A Year in Provence*, the first of his hugely successful Provence books was writing about place as healer (Mayle, 1989);
Susan Duncan’s *Salvation Creek* (2006) enters the same territory. It is an attractive idea, this notion of the perfect place waiting for us. The new home will deliver all that our flawed previous home did not: healing, inspiration, energy, love. For surely this search for the perfect place - and I speak here as someone who has used more than my share of airmiles seeking home – is nothing less than the search for happiness. I wonder, though, whether it is the exile from the familiar which focuses creativity. As much as the inspiration of the new Eden, the longing for the original creates a drive to make a new home, built from the imagination.

The relatively recent widespread use architects to create an ideal space is partly, surely, an attempt to carve out a ‘sacred’ space, a place to inhabit happiness. Sydney designer Marian Macken celebrates the increasing concern for good building design, but adds a cautionary note: “Happiness is at least partly about how you inhabit space with other people. My concern is that the direction of domestic housing design – the increase in making separate space, parents retreats, extra bathrooms – has certain side effects, to do with not engaging with other members of the household. If you’re a guest in a house and you’re in a retreat space, with a separate bathroom, you never have to take part in the life of the house. Architectural photography is about an idealized version of a living space which is empty of life. When people reproduce those spaces… they feel that they are creating a space which reflects their identity.
but in fact it’s a constructed individuality.” Macken considers the house as a public space as well as a private one. “A house should be a celebration of its place publicly: how the occupants relate to each other; how the house relates to the space next door; to the street; to the environment” (Macken 2006). Award-winning English architect Meredith Bowles designs houses with a focus on beauty and on ecological sustainability. He speaks, too, of this interconnectedness in design. A sustainable house – one which considers the wider environment - he argues, is inherently more pleasing. “A building that responds well to the environment is more comfortable to be in. A good building should lift one’s spirits” (Bowles, 2006).

Architect Christopher Alexander, co-author of *A Pattern Language* (Alexander et al, 1977), puts forward the notion that there are geographical and architectural qualities of place which are inherently pleasing or displeasing; unlike, say, Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist who focuses on the correlation between social position and aesthetic judgment. Bourdieu insists that taste is learned. I might believe that I desire that Prada jacket because it's beautiful, because it flatters my waist so – but according to Bourdieu, I’m mimicking what I’ve been told to believe is beautiful (Bourdieu, 2007: 13, 104). Alexander, though, suggests that taste is *not* learned, not a symptom of class. He spent years showing people photos of various spaces, asking them which they liked. A simple enough question; and the answers were surprisingly simple, too.
People appear to like design which puts them first, we respond positively to towns and to buildings which have nooks and crannies, which have pleasing things at eye level, which have places to sit and observe nature; places which have, as Alexander says, life. Place affects our happiness so deeply we cannot dare admit it, lest it hold us back from our wanderings. According to Alexander, interconnectedness is part of what pleases us.

“Each pattern can exist in the world, only to the extent that it is supported by other patterns: the larger patterns in which it is embedded, the patterns of the same size that surround it, and the smaller patterns which are embedded in it. This is a fundamental view of the world. It says that when you build a thing you cannot merely build that thing in isolation, but must repair the world around it, and within it, so that the larger world at that one place becomes more coherent”


He speaks of this quality, of inter-connectedness, and of the effect of spatial design on pleasure, as being a ‘quality with no name’, and explains:

“The first place I think of, when I try to tell someone about this quality, is a corner of an English country garden, where a peach tree grows against a wall. The wall runs from east to west. The sun shines on the tree and as it warms the bricks behind the tree, the warm bricks themselves warm the
peaches on the tree. It has a slightly dozy quality.”

(Alexander 1979: 25).

In my late teens and early twenties I traveled through the Northern Territory and Arnhem Land, through spectacularly alien landscape. Everything was unknown, yet my response to it was one of sudden, total absorption. Akin to the sensation of falling in love across a crowded room, the landscape set fire to my imagination: my journals at that time are fiery, full of rhapsodic responses to my cultural and geographic surroundings. The place, to borrow a phrase from C.S. Lewis, baptized my imagination (Dearborn, 2006). For a decade afterwards, the intensity of that landscape provided an impetus to my writing; the place, in fact, became an imaginary location, the site of my inspiration. When I began writing novels, I lived in Scotland and wrote partly out of a sense of exile. On my noticeboard above my desk I pinned pictures of eucalypts; Cottlesloe Beach in Western Australia; a red sunset across the Nullabor. Iconic, borrowed images, certainly, but it was their absence which spurred me on, which created the gap for words to fill. My fourth novel, Captain Starlight’s Apprentice is partly about a woman bushranger, a wild woman who is utterly one with the wildness of the Australian bush. In contrast, though, is Rose: a British migrant suffocated by that same landscape, full of longing for the pale green hills she has left behind.
Anita Shreve’s novel *The Weight of Water* is about a journalistic photographer revisiting the site of a murder which occurred on Smuttynose Island, off the coast of New Hampshire. Shreve suggests that the place itself may hold a kind of memory (Shreve, 1998). Implicit in this idea is the sense that place can create mood and possibly even behaviour. In Morelos State in Mexico, on the edge of the Sierra Tepozteco, there’s an ancient Mayan city, Xochicalco. It’s in a beautiful part of Mexico, and is spread with shade giving trees. During my first visit there, I climbed a hill in the centre of the ruins, and looked down onto a flat field, marked with stone hoops on either end. Eagles circled overhead, and the hill was silent. In spite of the sunshine, the pleasing trees – the qualities of life within the environment – I was shafted by a terrible, sudden distress, which didn’t leave me until I left the site. At the entrance, I stopped and read some notes on the history: the ‘basketball court’ I had been looking down on was, in fact, the site of an ancient game. Played in teams, as with basketball, it had one crucial difference: the winners were sacrificed to the gods at the end of the game. Perhaps my sudden sadness was due to something else entirely: hormones or hunger. I’ve never been a believer in ghosts of any kind, yet I cannot help but wonder whether the history of that place marked it in someway, that the memory was held in the landscape in the way that the memory of physical pain is held in my body.
In *The Snow Geese*, writer William Fiennes describes a journey he undertakes across Canada, following these migratory birds as they shift from one home to another. Propelled initially by restlessness after a long illness, he pursues the geese and is drawn by the image of freedom implicit in their flight. Early in his journey, he recalls precise objects in his unchanged childhood home, and reflects “the fact that they were there, and just as I remembered them to be – the fact that now was agreeing with then - was itself reassuring: a conduit to less equivocal days, a mark of steadiness in the chaos of illness and its treatments’ (Fiennes, 2003: 43). Paradoxically, it is the snowgoose’s instinct to know home which marks a turn in Fiennes’ sense of his world, and which sends him soaring back to his family home in England. Longing for home, discovering or understanding the geographical space we belong in is, to Fiennes, a central piece in the puzzle of contemporary life.

Fiennes knows where his home is, and he has a history attached to it. Increasingly, for huge numbers of us in contemporary life, this is not the case. Towards the end of *Captain Starlight’s Apprentice*, Rose elects to make home wherever she is; as her creator, I know what that decision will cost. Perhaps, there are two extremes: those who have never left and those who have never arrived. The rest of us are somewhere in between, traveling hopefully because to stop would be an admission of failure. We don’t know where Eden is, and our history is not located in one place. For us – perhaps for all
of us – the task is to create the inner Eden, the site of our own happiness which we carry with us, always.

(Heyman, 2007f)
Conclusion

*Captain Starlight's Apprentice* is a development and distillation of themes which have concerned me over the course of my writing life. In particular, the thematic exploration of home, and of longing for home, has culminated in the development of the characters and responses to the Australian landscape within this book.

When I completed the novel, I felt certain that I had come to the end of my exploration of those themes within fiction. Now, though, the process of completing the essays included in *How Far From Here is Home* has drawn me back in to the circle of wondering; and I suspect that my body of work will continue to exhibit some attachment to these concerns. The creation of this novel, though, and the exegesis, has demonstrated to me several threads of deeper work around displacement and homelessness, which I intend to explore in non-fiction and in fiction.

The process of writing this novel, and in particular the exegesis, has allowed me to examine themes of home, place, and displacement, and to consider my own motivations in delving into those themes. It is no surprise that the personal initiates the creative longing – I believe this is always, inevitably true, whether acknowledged or not.
but it is the recurrence of concerns which has been illuminating.

The process – both of developing a body of work, and of reflecting on that body of work - is iterative; and this has been particularly evident in the writing of the essays contained in *How Far From Here is Home*. The collection of essays was surprisingly coherent in spite of the pressure to produce self-contained reflections publishable in the mainstream press, demonstrating again the onion-like layers of creative thought. Each article was a complete reflection at the time of writing; yet the ruminaions required for each new essay, improved my understanding of the process, and in particular allowed me to delve deeper into considerations that have been implicit in my work for many years; and the opportunity to reflect more deeply on this pull – of home, of place, of landscape – has been one which I'm grateful for, and which has given birth to two new works.

When I began this process I identified very strongly as a fiction writer: although I have been a writer of plays for theatre and for radio, I had little interest in the world of 'literature of fact'. The act of creating the essays which make up this exegesis has been surprisingly pleasurable and has, ironically, awoken a hunger for non-fiction – as a reader, and as a writer.

The process of completing this thesis has restored to me a
confidence in my instinctive approaches to creative work: instilled in me a renewed faith in my habits of waiting, watching, and being still; further, it has suggested to me a wider need for these habits, within our creative communities.
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'A tale of passion and courage...
Heyman weaves the strands together with an imaginative gusto that echoes the great Angela Carter... delightful'

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'This is a remarkable novel, funny and heartbreaking at the same time' Glasgow Herald

'I loved it. I was swept along by its exuberance — and like all true comedies, sensed the underlying sadness, so subtly touched upon . . . very deft, never lost momentum at all' Margaret Forster

'A superb mix of lyricism and economy' Sunday Herald
Kathryn Heyman’s previous novels are *The Breaking*, *Keep Your Hands on the Wheel* and *The Accomplice*. Her work has been longlisted for the Orange Prize, shortlisted for the West Australian Premier’s Prize and the Scottish Writer of the Year Award and won an Arts Council of England Writers’ Award. Both *Keep Your Hands on the Wheel* and *Captain Starlight’s Apprentice* were adapted for BBC Radio.
For my mother, who made it home.

And, as always, for Richard.
If we could embrace, even in the house of the dead, we might gladden each other in our icy grief.

Homer, *The Odyssey*

The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends, 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.

Alfred Tennyson, *Ulysses*
Jess is a stunt-rider who can outride any man. In the early days of film she finds her calling, playing wild outlaw women who answer to no one. But when her circus-owner husband disappears she is left pregnant and vulnerable and, after enormous betrayal, finds herself closer to the outlaw’s life than she had ever imagined.

Rose goes to Australia in the 1950s in search of a new life. But neither the new country nor motherhood are what she had hoped and she soon finds herself estranged from those she loves, incarcerated and terrified. As Rose’s world unravels, it is clear that neither woman’s story will be finished until they find a way of helping each other recover their loss, and discover hope in the midst of their disrupted lives. With this Odyssean tale, Kathryn Heyman celebrates the resilience of the human spirit.

**PRAISE FOR KATHRYN HEYMAN**

‘Glorious… remarkable… there is a shimmering beauty to Heyman’s descriptions’  *Vogue, Australia*

‘Deserves a standing ovation… there is warmth, humour and compassion, and a resolution that is nothing short of inspiring… brilliantly original… this ranks up there with Kate Grenville or Peter Carey’  *Bulletin*