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THE SCARS OF GRIEF

Abstract

I EYE MY SCREEN, read the critics' comments on an early draft of this story, one with endnotes, overstatements ... my novice shot at metafiction. Comment after comment opens my own questions. I ask myself about this form of postmodern writing, a form whose currency in fiction may already have shifted. Is it worth resurrecting?

The critics' words echo in my head:

While I found the prose interesting and quite good in parts, my general feeling is that the work is too self-aware and draws attention to itself, rather than cutting (this) reader free to explore nuance and variousness in emotion and physicality. I was more aware of the academic behind the narrative, which kept me from full immersion. (Critic 1 2014, pers.comm. 18 June)

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... although I like the concept of this work it is not ready for publication... it has quite a long way to go... I do love the ideas in it, and the use of endnotes, and metafiction, all of which are such good devices, but it needs a better focus and some clean up of clichés and overstatements. This said, once we get into the story the writing has a lot of energy. Perhaps it's a matter of tone. (Critic 2 2014, pers.comm. 20 June)

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The idea is excellent, and I am delighted to see metafiction finding a second life, as it were; however, the tone needs to be better handled, with more attention to the process of making and less on direct address to the reader, instructing what is to come and how they should respond. (Critic 3 2014, pers.comm. 20 June)

Let's revisit what Prof. Wenche Ommundsen, author of *Metafictions?* (1993), said of her own book:

the book, to me at least, seems a bit dated, but it is also true that the main period of theoretical (possibly even fictional) activity around metafiction was in the 80s and 90s.

(2014, pers. comm., 3 April)

Is metafiction that dead?

The scars of grief

THE STORY STARTS HERE. This is a work of fiction. The author is struggling, he finds his story rigid. He wants to write about a thing he once read in the paper, an article about a bad tabloid that gained from victims of murder, hacked into their phone lines. Anything for a juicy caption, right? Wrong. The tabloid marched into trouble. Frankly it was shut down.

The author wants to build a set of events. Not around the tabloid and its shutdown, but around the families that were harmed. He makes the choice to write about the families because he understands his talent. He has a knack for people stories, no aptitude for institutions. He wants to be true to his learnings on the art of suspense. He wants to make sure that all is not revealed at the start. He worries. If he manages the use of suspense well, what if the reveal comes too late? He is nervous. What if he runs out of story? He is restless. What if the reader gets unhooked?

He looks at his cast.

Ralph:

Ralph Patton avoids their eyes. His wife Trinity sits haggard, listless. Withdrawn into herself. Marble Norman handles it best. Her husband Dane cradles a tempest. Time leaks perilously, frightening and consoling.

It is a common grief, reborn. It unites two couples who lost two little girls nine years ago to a murderer. Trinity finds her question. 'Why?' There is a dead twig in her voice.

'Because journalists are knobheads,' snaps Dane.

'Cookie...' Marble reaches across the table to calm his fists. Despite her composure, Ralph knows, her anguish is undiminished. Her grief is the kind that spills inwards.

It seems minutes since Detective Vera Downs came to see them, first the Normans, then the Pattons. To alert them to the phone-hacking, to stress again her regret at finding the girls too late. Yesterday. The detective came yesterday; brought them a day that opened up grief, that awakened the one thing that stirred the Normans, the Pattons, to seek each other out. Now they sit together at the Norman house in Halls Gap, Victoria. Same way they sat those many years when tragedy snatched their children.

Trinity lets out a sob, rises from her chair, flees the room. Marble chases behind.

'Bleeding freaks,' Dane Norman says.

The author pauses at this stage, feels like he is scratching an itch. Should he dump the Normans? He notices that, with this story, he asks himself a lot of questions. Regarding the Normans it's ... it's not that he is insensitive to Dale's rage, his despair. But he ... he wonders if the story is better served focusing on a single family. A typical short story has a small cast at a single point in time. The author feels he can achieve more fleshing out the characters of Ralph and Trinity Patton.

Undecided, he continues typing.

Ralph understands the freaks. They are monsters bold as gold but septic inside. That same tabloid, a glimpse of hell, already once prospered on a story, the Patton and Norman story: two six-year-old girls curled ten-foot deep in a ditch at the mouth of Mount William ranges. How the press bled it.

The curtain flaps. Slowly, Ralph understands it is raining outside. A determined drizzle grows into slanting rain. He has never set foot near that bushwalk in the Grampians again. Neither has Trinity; they both want to forget. But Marble visits it annually like a shrine. Ralph never thought he could feel a knife so deep, so twisted in his breast.

He doesn't know why the news scandal has thrown him into the pit again, why so bottomless. But it has. Each word the detective said curved the blade deeper. 'I am sorry they

targeted you,' she said. 'There may be more families.'

The press stopped at nothing, disregarded whose privacy they breached. Just the ready money a hot yarn cashed. The tabloid's ugliness is personal. Stolen conversations of trauma, of gloom, distorted on front pages. Intimate words shouted to the world, vilifying everything, sparing nothing. Ralph wants to climb to an edge and leap from the world.

At this stage the author pauses. He has hinted about the tabloid, about the children's murder, more than hinted. He has unveiled that a grief almost healed is now again torn open. But he is not sure ... Is he indicating well what exactly is doing the tearing? So the press hacked the parents' phones, nosed into their grief. All for back story. But the coppers just found out now titbits of press data. Leaks, like how Trinity wanted to down a palmful of pills. Like how Dane was going to quit the marriage. It was all too thorny for them, barbed enough without the press. The author wants to show, not tell. He wonders how much detail to contain, how much to tell. Should he spell out what the tabloid did with the conversations it stole?

Less is more, he decides.

Ralph.

With the phone-hacking scandal, *Hot off the Press!* has slashed open scars that began to heal after that trial in August 2005 at the Magistrate's Court. Ralph thought the torment was abridged when Chief Magistrate Gray handed the monster two life terms. But what he feels now is wolfing him alive.

Even so, those same shock-and-awe tactics that saw the tabloid thrive since 1901 have proved the tabloid's own undoing. 113 years of scandal flushed down their rotten drain. That infected ink will never hurt anyone again. Not after one week today, the publication date of their last edition ever.

The end.

But—wait. The author sees how this ending moves away from the parents to the tabloid, how it is rather rigid. How can the story be over?

The phone tapping is part of Trinity's sorrow. The author wants to build on this, make it her recovery. So he deletes 'The end'.

But the tabloid's disgrace, and then closure, cannot patch what has happened. It cannot fix open scars. The Normans and Pattons part yet again as they did years before, no longer allies, no longer able to feed as one the grief that joined them in the first place. It is as if they can no more bear looking at each other, being together.

Weeks after that parting, fog remains in Trinity's eyes.

Ralph takes to writing. He sits at his desk by the window. Trinity pours herself into works of charity: baking, resourcing, fundraising, publicising ... Now with the Salvos, the Vinnies, the Givewells, Philanthropy. Bugger that. Ralph types, types, types into his computer. Ideas jotted down on a shoddy notepad in the dead of the night, in that stretch between midnight and dawn when sleep eludes him the most.

He writes about Apple and the swell in his heart the first time his eyes set upon her. She was so tiny, so rosy, her face scrunched like an old woman's before she moved that strong little mouth and smiled. He remembers her baby smell, even now, apricot and honey soap. He remembers her furious curls ... a tangle right there on the crown of her head, an island of red.

Sometimes, gazing at windswept grass in the fields beyond the gate – it needs new paint – he thinks about what to write. Other times, he presses his nose against the window and an eye towards the horizon and can't think because his mind has slipped off. Just as well. He gets stuck in his head too much. But often, words swirl like waves and he cannot type fast enough.

His writing this morning is charged, stimulated. A whiff of melting butter, lime rind and fresh blueberries fills his nostrils. Trinity is baking. The waft of cookery is like a therapeutic balm. The smell

stirs fond memories. Apple loved cookies, macaroons, turnovers, brownies ... gobbled chunks whole without chewing.

Now and then, on difficult days, a sting of tears escorts his writing. Other times like now, memory massages his heart, lifts something inside him. Elation swells his being. He feels merry, surreal even.

Apple was always a scrawny thing, no matter what. Always wandering, investigating her world full of butterfly, ladybird and garden snail surprises. He remembers her dazed expression at each find ...

‘Look papa! I gots a new friend.’ The trapdoor spider escaped but Apple found a Goliath stick insect to replace it. ‘She hungry, papa. I ask mama for a cookie.’

‘Why not, kiddo.’

The moment her eyes, and then hands, locked on Jojo Norman, their love was instant. Without question, as if destined, Jojo reciprocated. She followed Apple everywhere. They toddled with hitched up skirts in grasslands near home, ran—their delight giddy as summer rain.

‘Me and Jojo see a wolfie near the park, papa.’ Ralph remembers the fork of fear in his gut, before he found it was a neighbour’s European Wolfdog—completely tame—on a run.

The girls’ lust for adventure steered them into trouble most times.

The author pauses. Is there a better story out of building the characters of Jojo and Apple? Then bringing in murder? Or maybe ... How about looking individually at Ralph, Trinity, Marble and Dane now? How each responds in a different way to news that their privacy has been breached. Maybe exploring if that breach is as important to them as the way their daughters were treated in the original news reports. Yes, emotions directed at themselves, at their feelings of exposure, instead of at their daughters’ loss.

Still ... he questions the angle, understands that this kind of feeling may not be true of Dane. Or Marble. Or Trinity. Or Ralph. After all Ralph has been writing, a cathartic way to deal with loss.

The author asks himself why he cannot put away 'The scars of grief' for three months, give it another look then. It is too raw right now, he knows. But, then again ... He is in a hurry to bed it down. He likes where he is going with Ralph.

Look behind you, Ralph, he says. Forget the blinking cursor on my screen.

Thanks.

'Do you remember when Apple made toast in your brand new stereo?' his wife speaks quietly to his hair. She is right behind him. 'How you lost it and scolded her to tears but stopped short because Jojo bawled so loud?'

Ralph looks up from the computer, startled and then awed. Fog has lifted from Trinity's eyes. What brings about her change? Is it reading his writings?

'Clearly it works,' she says softly. 'It works very well.' He stares at her. 'The way you bring her back each day ... Apple, she is right here.' She presses his hand to her chest.

'Oh, Sweets.' He nestles his head against her breast. 'I missed you.'

'And I you. Dreadfully.'

Their coupling is ... animal.

Later, Trinity showers his face and throat with kisses that cool and burn. Wrapped in her arms, Ralph speaks against her wet skin, bedraggled hair. 'I thought ... maybe ... Marble and Dane ... I thought maybe we could go and see the Normans tomorrow.'

'Okay.'

'Sweets,' he murmurs. 'How I missed you.'

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RESEARCH STATEMENT

Research background:

In a recent conversation with my principle supervisor, we touched the subject of metafiction and reflexivity. We agreed it is still present, not only exemplifying itself in the works of writers like Salman Rushdie or Toni Morrison but in forms of poetry.

Theorist David Carter says:

What a work communicates to its reader 'depends on what questions we put to it'; it also depends on our understanding of historical context and how we assimilate it into our world. (2006, p. 85)

Metafiction is a reflexive form of postmodern fiction that was popular in the 80s and 90s. It can take the form of a self-conscious narrative that probes the reader's consciousness, commanding the reader to be aware of his or her role as a partner in the literary act. While the reader is never a passive observer of the text, his or her approach is with an initial openness to engage.

That same approach is also with generic expectations of what to expect of a narrative of that genre, for example short fiction. Applying, as an author, metafiction into the work rightly or wrongly assumes reflexive competence in the reader. Deviation from norms (e.g. use of footnotes) may add controversy that compels the perplexed reader to abandon the text.

Research contribution:

'The scars of grief' attempts to address the research question: *Is metafiction still alive?* Rather than query its life, a superior question may query its being: *Does metafiction fit in today's literary world?*

Let us consider Gerald Murnane's *A million windows* as a whimsical and recent form of metafiction. In its delivery of sustained monologue, a reader might evoke Nabokov's Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* (1955). One might even recognise in its author some choice words that John Lennard in *Vladimir Nabokov: Lolita* used in relation to Nabokov:

Whether one considers him as an exile, litterateur, scientist, nostalgic, or self-reflexic and highly paradoxical artist, Nabokov induces delight, puzzlement and indignation in equal measure. (Lennard 2008, p. 9)

Murnane's novel lends itself to a certain peculiarity, fitting the very description of a novel only in being fictitious prose of book length that encloses characters, actions and some realism. The realism loses and finds itself in the narrator's play with trust and mistrust in the writerly/readerly relationship. The work comprises vignettes on the techniques of fiction writing, impish in its rundown to the reader of authorly ploys such as point of view, withholding information or use of present tense.

Academics and readers exposed to metafiction may welcome *A million windows* with certain interest, recognising in it the reflexive, self-conscious narrative that interrupts the reader's consciousness with the author's thought. But *The Sydney Morning Herald* [review](#) returns the question of the validity of metafiction in today's world:

Such is the world we have. Such is the world to come. Buy this book and read it like a bible. Never mind your fury, never mind your boredom. (Craven 2014, ¶16)

Research significance:

'The scars of grief' crosses from normal short fiction to creative short fiction that explores conditioning factors in the author/reader relationship, i.e. the 'textual intercourse' between the author and reader, and how it interacts with factors such as the 'genre to which the text is perceived to belong' (Ommundsen 1993, p. 74). Generic expectations in the reader's approach (anticipation of what is preconceived as normal short fiction, for example) 'condition the reader's reception of the

individual text' (1993 p. 74).

I compare my approach in the early draft with the techniques that Murnane employs in *A million ways*. He too interrupts the reader's consciousness with the (fictional) author's thought. But, while also in first person, Murnane's approach is playful, softer:

I react in the presence of a narrator who I suspect of being unreliable or when confronted by one of those curious texts sometimes published as fiction but having the appearance of diary-entries ... I have no answer for the discerning reader, but I can state for his or her benefit that I decline to read any piece of fiction if I suspect the author of believing that fiction is mere artifice and that the reader of fiction has no more urgent need than to be diverted or teased. (Even the discerning reader should have learned from the previous sentence that the narrator of this present work of fiction is to be trusted.) (2014, p. 29)

It is stable if you approach it with an open mind and a predisposition to reflexive reading; unstable if, where the narrator invites you to gain access to his thought, you allowed it to conflict and exasperate you.

My initial approach worked against the narrative, refused to weave a touch of irony or playfulness into the work. *A million windows* has irony. The weightiness of my authorial voice, above all in a topic as sombre as grief, compounded my reader's resistance to a work that already defied (in its use of footnotes and hard reflexivity, for example) the normal process of reading fiction.

Softening the writing with the hesitation of a fictitious author leaves room for the reader's intrigue, allows them to care, nudges their choice toward participating as a partner in the literary act.

Metafiction is alive in various literary forms; it can remain alive in the short story. Metafiction, like today's reality television that wins consumer ratings, invites consumer participation in the creative act. Metafiction, in an industry that is increasingly competitive, is worth exploring.

It deserves a second life, is a path for the spirited author—like Murnane—to bring back the old as if it is brand new, to shift the balance of power and seduce the readers, nudge them to play.

Skilfully done—I do not suppose to have achieved this in my narrative— it is workable. But it will also likely remain the love it or loathe it kind.