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Thesis: Understanding the Enigma

Exegesis: A Reflection on Writing a Pasifika
Mystery

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Attestation of Authorship	4
Intellectual Property Rights	5
Confidential Material	6
Ethics Approval	7
Abstract	8
Exegesis: A Reflection on Writing a Pasifika Mystery	9
References	21
Thesis: Understanding the Enigma	22
Bibliography	175

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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Ethics Approval

This research project did not involve human participants or any other potentially contentious elements, and as such did not require approval from the AUT Ethics Committee (AUTEK).

Abstract

Understanding the Enigma is the story of a group of young Pasifika people and the two (and related) mysteries which particularly involve two members of the group: Mele and Lee. Mele has apparently attempted suicide, although she cannot remember the night of the event and denies it, and Lee disappears after arguing with Mele about this. Each of the remaining characters try to understand what has happened, and Cory Matthews, a therapist, is enlisted to help. Part One follows Mele's and Seth's POV as they navigate their world post these events, Part Two follows Mele's, Seth's and Dexter's memories of Lee via the recorded transcripts of their interviews with Cory, Part Three and Four reveal the unexpected truths and surprising heroic characters.

Understanding the Enigma also seeks to explore the struggles of Tongan Pacific Islanders through the novel's characters. Most importantly, this novel explores the realist themes of power vs powerlessness, culture clash and cultural identity, poverty and its consequences. The novel uses Multiple POV, the anti-hero as protagonist, and flashback to explore these concerns, and move the plot along. These aspects are particularly reflected upon in the exegesis.

Understanding the Enigma is indebted to the various texts that have inspired its journey. These include: *Wild Dogs Under My Skirt* by Tusiata Avia, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* by Robert Sapolsky, *Inside Us the Dead* by Albert Wendt, *Bend it Like Beckham* by Gurinder Chadha. *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess, *Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents: How to Heal from Distant Rejecting, or Self-Involved Parents* by Lindsay Gibson.

A Reflection on Writing a Pasifika Mystery

Exegesis

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Introduction

In the beginning of this journey, I already knew that I did not want to create a mystery or crime fiction novel where the protagonist is the good guy. Originally, I wanted to focus on morality and the question of goodness and evil and also shed light on cultural class and identity, and I was inspired by the quote from Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*: 'If he can only perform good or only perform evil, then he is a clockwork orange – meaning that he has the appearance of an organism lovely with colour and juice but is in fact only a clockwork toy to be wound up by God or the Devil.' (1962). I became interested in questions like: what influences people's morality? How can I incorporate two opposing forces into a crime fiction protagonist?

As time progressed, my thesis evolved from my original inspiration and I started asking different questions. I wondered, for example, how much sway an adult has over child and how much that sway will shape the child. I wondered about the struggles that Pacific Islanders face when living in a westernized society, and about how the tensions arising from culture clash affect their decisions and behaviour. Most importantly, I started to wonder, can I, a Pacific Islander, become another voice for my people who struggle with similar issues to my characters? After the first draft I discovered that I was really thinking about power vs powerlessness, and that I wanted to explore how Pacific Island characters might respond to that theme within the mystery genre.

I looked at Albert Wendt's take on cultural identity, and Tusiata Avia's passion in expressing the battles between two cultures, and I became interested in whether there are many – or any – crime novels set in New Zealand and written by New Zealanders which focus specifically on the Pacific Island community. I decided I wanted to write such a book, pay homage to my own personal struggles, and combine mystery fiction conventions with realist themes, and Pacific Island characters.

Exploring the Conventions of Mystery Fiction

Disturbing the roles of protagonist, anti-hero, and antagonist, the side-kick as hero.

In a mystery or crime fiction novel, who the protagonist is, is usually obvious. A crime is committed, a protagonist tries to solve the crime and an unknown antagonist is revealed later, or explicitly during the chase. So, the structure is usually clean cut. An example of this, that I spent time with, was the film *Halloween* (2018). Michael Myers,

known as the Bogeyman is the antagonist and Laurie Strode is the protagonist, and the plot for this film is straight forward, as the audience watch how Laurie Strode becomes victorious against the murderous Bogeyman who has escaped from prison and returned to Haddonfield on Halloween night to kill people once more.

As I wrote my second draft, I couldn't understand why this aspect was important, what it brought to the table and how it could develop my thesis even more. I took interest in referencing films like *Halloween*, that had unsympathetic and morally dubious protagonists. In the Harry Potter film series, specifically, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2* (2011), Professor Snape is portrayed as an antagonist at the beginning but is then flipped into a protagonist (or at least into a sympathetic anti-hero), by the end. And I wondered why did J.K Rowling do this? What purpose did it serve? And then I questioned the natures of the characters Lee and Leilani in my own thesis. Both are characters who seem antagonistic at the beginning, Lee to a much greater degree, and Leilani to a much less, but both develop in the course of the novel: Lee into a protagonist and Leilani as Lee's side-kick, and unlikely hero. Both steer the plot towards resolution.

I repeatedly watched the Harry Potter series and searched for the reason behind Professor Snape's 'good' vs 'bad' character role; and then I found that Rowling had said, "Snape is all grey. You can't make him a saint: he was vindictive & bullying. You can't make him a devil: he died to save the wizarding world." (Kelly, 2015). It was the same in my thesis: Lee looks like an antagonist at the beginning, preventing resolution, and bullying the other characters in the novel; including her brother Dexter to whom she says, "You're great at the drums – only because your father was great at beating something, guess it runs in the family huh?" (pg.62). However, it became clear during the second drafting of the novel, that Lee was in fact the antihero and protagonist of the story – although she is antipathetic, she ends up putting things right and deals to the true villain of the thesis.

Leilani, who makes a brief entrance in Part One of the novel, is similar. It's hard to imagine the hero's role she will play, when she triggers Mele as they get off the bus: "'You were whispering pathetic words under your breath. I didn't do it. I didn't do it. I didn't do it,' she whispered in my ear over in over like some mantra, I covered my ears trying to block her out but no matter how hard I tried to block her out, the words she kept uttering screamed in my ears and seeped into my bones, weaving its way into my chest making its way to clutch my very own heart." (pg.56).

So, neither Lee or Leilani are saints, although it is their search for answers that sheds light on the night on the mysterious events of the book.

On the other hand, the therapist, Cory Matthews, is portrayed as the hero at the beginning of the thesis. He is the one who is trying to help Mele and piece together the events of the night of her attempted suicide, and he is the one who is trying to understand and find Lee. But by the end he has morphed into the antagonist, the one who has in fact tried to thwart every resolution. This morphing wasn't easy to achieve however, and took a lot of work and re-writing. In the first draft, Cory was one-dimensional character, and already painted as the bad guy from the beginning. This made his turn too obvious.

It also made the plot too predictable so I had to question how I could change this. How could I make the revelation of Cory more of a surprise? The solution was that Cory's character needed to be developed more. Cory needed to be the good guy in the beginning rather than just a bad guy; and so, I incorporated moments of him being an older brother figure to Seth. To Seth, Cory is his role model who provides him with wisdom and guidance, and he supports Seth when he says "You're smart, and you're good at engineering. Fuck, you can fix anything as long as you can put your time and heart into it," And, "Just because you're lost at the moment doesn't mean that you'll be lost forever man." (pg.35).

Despite not playing much of a part in Parts One and Two of the novel, Leilani becomes a POV character in Part three at the same time that her role leads the other characters to action. This seemed important as it she, the heroic side-kick, who will move the story to its conclusion, Along with Lee, she will reveal the true villain (and she will exposes a different side to Lee). But most importantly, it is Leilani a Pasifika woman, who will have the last word in Part Four as the only POV narrator.

However, I am still left with questions like: how can I strengthen Lee and Leilani further? And are their rises to the occasion believable? I don't want their roles to be obvious from the beginning but I also don't want their development to feel unorganic. These are the main questions that I ask as I continue to consider subsequent drafts; but these are also the questions that have broadened my understanding of the genre. I've come to realise that not every character has a clear-cut mould when it comes to the matters of identifying who is the hero and who is not. There are always characters who are grey, and not everything is black and white. These 'grey' characters play a role in guiding readers and viewers into forming their own questions, and in expanding their minds. There really is more than meets the eye in fiction – as in life.

The novel had begun to focus more on the journey and development of each character rather than on just the crime.

Narrative Technique

Multiple POV Narrators, unreliability, instability

Narration is key in creating coherent storytelling, and I chose to write Parts one to three in multiple voices for two reasons. Firstly, I wanted to give more than one person the chance to tell the story from their perspective, and secondly, I wanted to create confusion and uncertainty over each of the points of view. I wanted the audience to wonder about the reliability of each of the characters (Mele and Seth in Part One, Mele, Seth and Dexter in Part Two, Mele, Seth, Leilani and Lee in Part three). For example, Mele is upset and unsettled – and in any case can't remember the night of her attempted suicide – Seth is vulnerable and going through an emotional difficult time, and Leilani and Lee – both antipathetic and disliked by the other characters – are not totally trustworthy.

I was inspired to writing in multiple POV by the series *How to Get Away with Murder* by Shonda Rhimes and Betsy Beers (2014). I liked that the plot was confusing as I tried to figure out what happened, and that I didn't know which character I should I believe in and trust. I loved how the makers played with this narrative technique to create instability. Meanwhile, I wondered whether writing in the voices of multiple characters would challenge me and help me to become a more well-rounded writer: I knew one thing, that I was interested in adding more complexity as opposed to writing a more straight forward reliable narrative.

There are various of examples of doubt and confusion as driven by the characters in *How to Get Away with Murder* inspired me also.. For example, in episode six, Annalise, tries to convince Nate – the person she has an affair with – that her husband hasn't murdered Lila. However, Nate argues his point and tells her that he knows the truth about her husband's secret. As the audience we are disorientated and don't know which character is telling the truth. We get involved in the storyline and wonder whether Annalise is covering up her husband's trail, or whether she truthfully does not think him guilty.

In my thesis, Mele tries to convince everyone that she has not attempted suicide; however the fact that she can't remember the night in question, prompts Lee to

constantly interrogate her about it. I hope a reader would start to wonder why Mele can't remember, and also why Lee is so fixated on the answer (and whether this means that she knows something about it).

Flashbacks

In the first season of *How to Get Away with Murder* (Rhimes & Beers, 2014), the technique flash forwards is used to progress the storyline of the murder, and the themes of trauma and guilt. And it is the same with my thesis. However, instead of flash forwards, I decided to use flashbacks in Part Two, written in transcript form, as if the characters have been recorded.

This technique allowed the traumatic memories the characters have of Lee to surface, and also allowed for a fleshing out of Lee who has so far been quite shadowy. My hope is that readers will want to ask more questions like: what is Lee after? What happened on the night Lee disappeared? Why did Lee pretend she didn't know about Mele's suicide? Why was Lee so ruthless to those closest to her? And where is Lee now? Really, this narrative technique ties in with the antagonist as protagonist aspect. The Characters' memories all further suggest that Lee is some kind of adversary, 'the bad guy' to Cory's 'good guy', and the reader is given more evidence in order to come to the conclusion that Lee really is capable of staging Mele's attempted suicide.

I have used flashbacks in an attempt to disorient readers further and to agree (with Cory) that Lee is a dangerous person: "Yes, it seems like Lee is a person we have to be cautious of when we do find her. You've all mentioned that she's charismatic and good with her words. That's dangerous." (pg.108).

Realist Themes

Poverty and its Consequences (Dysfunctional Family)

I decided to explore this theme particularly through Lee, but initially this was struggle. I wrote about her interactions with other characters, but I had not fully investigated her childhood and her upbringing; other than letting readers know she is Dexter's adopted sister. And I explored Lee's upbringing without writing in her perspective, after being drawn to the idea that children who are brought up in unhealthy environments, where poverty exists, often lead to the children not being able to function in society or not being able to navigate relationships with others. Moreover, Sapolsky (2017) mentions

that the more misfortune that a child suffers at different degrees in their childhood, it would be unlikely that they would have a chance of a happy, functional adulthood.

I knew that adding the poverty and dysfunctional families as a theme would add more depth to the Lee's character development, but I had to figure out why Lee was so important to the progress of the novel. I had to prove to readers why she was worth feeling sorry for during the progress. And I needed to justify why she had to be the one to reveal the news and come out as the protagonist despite her nature in Parts One and Two.

I brainstormed and developed a specific background story for Lee with a view to creating sympathy for her. "I could easily see the needles poking out from under the worn-out, tattered red sofa, the glass coffee table in the middle of the living room had bottles littered on top and around it." (pg.169). Lee has suffered under the hand of an abusive father and a drug-addicted mother whom she watched committed suicide in front of her; and all of this was due to poverty. So I came up with a single scene that portrays this story and that would help explain the reason why Lee behaves the way she does towards her brother, Mele, and Seth.

I did want to create reasons for why my characters are the way they were, and in the case of the theme of poverty and dysfunctional families, this falls specifically to Lee. Lee doesn't understand love because she has never experienced it as a child.

Poverty and its Consequences (Crime)

Seth epitomises the theme of poverty and crime. He wants to be a responsible and morally good son, but fails. He wants to be the best he can be, for both his sister and his parents, but poverty pushes him into sell drugs in order to help his family. And because he is caught dealing his parents push him away and into loneliness, "I missed the voice of my mum yelling at me to get up and go to work, I missed her prayers she would do every morning in my room." (pg.33).

I chose Seth to represent the struggles of young adults living in poverty while trying to support their families. Families who live in poor conditions prove to be victims and/or perpetrators of crime. (Webster & Kingston, 2014). Seth is that prime example. He lives in South Auckland, juggles jobs and deals on the side – all so that he can help his family.

But as in the case of Lee, poverty can have significant consequences. In Seth's case his choices ultimately isolate him from his family.

Power and Powerlessness

This realist theme is portrayed throughout the whole novel, but it was the theme I hadn't noticed until the last stages of writing. It is also related directly to the idea of poverty and its consequences; and only one character in the thesis seems unaffected by poverty, and so comes to represent power in the novel (at least at the beginning). A therapist who holds all the cards from the beginning, Cory is a rich and successful man, "He was wearing Gucci today. I could tell that it was a brand-new suit, he hardly wore the same one twice." (pg.154).

Throughout the novel in Parts One and Two, Cory exudes power over clients like Mele – who expresses that she always feels uncomfortable around him because he is intimidating and intense, and that it causes her to go into random mini panic attacks: "I was given the full view of his height, and I gulped. I knew I had to get out; every part of my body was telling me to run for some reason." (pg. 55).

Cory similarly has power over Seth, who admires Cory as an older brother and for whom he becomes a role model: "A small smile reached my lips; he felt like an older brother." (pg.34). He also expresses how inferior he feels standing next to Cory: "A slow burn worked its way up my throat, I couldn't lie even if I wanted to; I was a bit embarrassed standing next to him." (pg.33). But theirs is not a relationship of equals and is another of the relationships that has to change in the novel, as Cory loses his power.

I see Cory's arc as similar to the Bogeyman in *Halloween*, (2018), In the film the Bogeyman is powerful at the beginning, but by the end, when Laurie Strode and her family defeat him, he is powerless. In *Understanding the Enigma* also, Cory's loses power when the family of other characters in the novel work together to defeat him. This is obvious when Lee and Leilani scheme to expose him, and Leilani notices Cory's in-control facade start to shatter: "I hadn't planned on spending my night watching Cory from across his office...He was frantically throwing things from across his desk with an angry look on his face... 'Yeah? Oh, nothing just watching Cory. Yes, I slipped the pictures under his door in his apartment, just like you asked.'" (pg.126).

But I still have questions surrounding Cory's arc. I'm still questioning how Cory falls, and whether it is obvious enough that he has so much power over the rest of the characters in the beginning (in order for his fall to be that impactful). The fact that he is denied a voice, that is, not given a POV section right from the get go, I think lays the groundwork for his demise, but I would revisit Cory, in particular, in later drafts. He is

an antagonist that only becomes one in the course of the novel. The other characters Mele, Seth, Lee and Leilani seem weak at the outset but by the end, all three have defeated Cory, assumed power and revealed his true nature.

Cultural Clash and Cultural Identity

This theme was mainly portrayed through Mele. I wondered how I would be able to explore this theme in mystery or crime fiction without tilting the thesis too heavily towards drama; and it was a challenge to attempt bring the realist and crime fiction aspects together in a balanced way .

Gibson (2015) says that ‘by pretending to be what their parents want; children think they’ve found the way to win their parents’ love’, and Mele embodies this particularly. She only worries about keeping her image pure in front of those who know her family because she doesn’t want to disappoint her family. This is also explored in the film *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002). The cultural clash Jess Bhamra experiences living in London but being from Indian descent, is clear. Jess struggles trying to be an obedient Indian daughter while also hiding the fact that she is playing soccer at a club. Mele struggles to try to live life as a young adult, (to go out, drink and smoke), in the same way - all while also trying to keep up her angelic image in front of her parents and her people as a Tongan daughter.

Lee constantly questions why Mele always has to hide what she does: “Why can’t you act freely as you please? Must you always obey being fake in front of everyone?” (pg.24), and Mele expresses how much she despises having to keep up a certain image in her community in order to please her parents, “It wasn’t just me that would get judged...it was the fact that I had my parent’s reputation to think about.” (pg.45). Meanwhile, Seth also struggles to try to gain their parents love and trust: “. I was still on the hot seat with my parents, and I didn't know how to get back into their good books.” (pg.49).

In *Mean Girls* (Michaels, 2014) Cady, who has been home-schooled, struggles to find where she belongs, who she is, and what she needs to do change her situation. Her story helped me understand that although culture is a big part of a person's identity, once a person is influenced by people or things outside of their community, they either change their personality or behaviour to suit where they are living, or they create another life lived in parallel. As a result of these considerations, I emphasized Mele’s parallel lives in the third draft, and included more instances when this was voiced by

other characters. Dexter talks to Mele about this early on: "You can't have both worlds, Mele. It's fake of you acting innocent to your parents then come act the total opposite once you leave the house. And I don't want you to do anything to hurt your parents..." (pg.64).

I contemplated whether to create a space for Mele to escape from her community and her parents, and about whether this would help readers with similar challenges, and help them take similar steps. I was riddled with questions about how I should reconcile the different sides of characters like Mele and Seth. But I soon realised two things: I did not want to give a solution to their personal issues, and that – most importantly – offering Mele and Seth tidy escapes from their worlds would not fit the confusions and grey areas that I was trying to write about in this novel.

Albert Wendt (1980) helped me to realise that Mele cannot escape her identity and who her parents are. In his first collection of poems, *Inside Us the Dead: Poems*, Wendt explores ideas of ancestry and how earlier generations are connected to the present bloodlines and that we carry the dead – our ancestry - inside us. Reading Wendt's collection of poems only made me conclude that no matter where we go and no matter how many generations pass, the cultural identity of who we are will still carry on through our bones and our blood. From the poem 'Inside Us the Dead': "Inside me the dead. Woven into my flesh like the music of bone flutes." This idea contributed to the development of Mele in my thesis.

Tusiata Avia (2005), another Samoan poet I was introduced to while writing my thesis, also contributed to this thinking; and her work also inspired the questions I had over how to write Mele as a Pasifika woman. In her collection *Wild Dogs Under My Skirt* Avia unapologetically draws out two different cultures clashing with humour, while also being quite confrontational. From her poem 'Alofa': "Alofa going to church...Alofa singing to Jesus...And everybodys say, Alofa is da good girl - she got so much alofa...Alofa dancing in da Tropicana nightclub!" clearly depict both the ideal Alofa (that the community at church might describe for example) and the other Alofa, the one who dances in the night clubs with boys: that is, the typical club life of a young woman.

Avia's poetry lit a fire in me that urged me to join the voices of Pasifika young women who struggle to honour and obey their Pasifika way, traditions, and pride while living in a more westernized country. "Then there is me, slow fade to black. A lack of identity turns me down. Turns me off. Screen my self. Sentenced to irrelevancy." Marsh (1994) expresses in her poem, *The Young and the Restless* about inferiority towards her

brown skin being inferior due to public's thought on white skin is beautiful. This spoke volumes to me on how our brown-skinned Pasifika women are considered not beautiful, as we were taught that if your skin was white it is considered beautiful, more than a brown skinned woman. Mele hints at these insecurities she has about her culture and skin. Because white is considered as clean in some cultures, this is also the same for other communities outside of culture. I wanted to use Mele's voice to portray the thoughts of a young women who isn't comfortable in her skin and in her culture as it is a concerning issue I wanted to express.

I aspire to portray the complexity of what young adult Pasifika women go through – the overprotective parents, the pride of Islander families, the sneaking around behind parent's back and the heartbreak of not being able to reach expectations, and the upset that comes as a result – without striving for a remedy.

To conclude, the thesis evolved as time went by, but I do believe it will need more improvement. The genre conventions, narrative techniques and realist themes all explored various expressions of power in this thesis, and I've come to hope that in the future, *Understanding the Enigma* might help young Pasifika women especially to relate to the struggles of Mele and other the characters', and to help them see they are not alone.

By the end of my research my attitude to the questions that I'd originally asked slowly evolved into a different set of questions. As the final draft was coming to an end, I came to realize that I was less interested in exploring morality in the abstract, in a crime fiction narrative, and I became more invested in the voices of my characters and the themes that affected them instead; focusing on shaping their personalities, behaviours, voices, and struggles. The crime fiction aspect has grown more organically out of my characters' lives and the criminal forces they find themselves up against, or are the result of.

At this point it has become easier to understand who I might become as a writer and where I might go from here. And I ponder how this thesis might potentially impact the literary field of mystery or crime fiction in Aotearoa. I have come to realise that the thesis is now more than a whodunit, more than a story about someone who has gone missing (or not), or about someone who has tried to take their life (or not). It is about young Pasifika adults who struggle to live in a society where they feel powerless and about the crimes that can happen to them, and by them, in this dangerous mix.

But even though this thesis has come to an end, I will keep asking questions such as: how can I make the crime fiction aspects of this novel better? How do I – for example – make my readers care more about the antagonist at the start so that the reveal at the end packs more of a punch? Most importantly, how might I address our culture more in this novel, and can I become a voice for my Pasifika people? I will continue to ask these questions as I continue to develop my craft, and this novel into further drafts. And I like that the one thing that has not changed at all is the title: *Understanding the Enigma*.

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