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Exegesis: IT'S IN THE BAG - stories of identity, memory and loss and the
short-story cycle.

Thesis: THE HANDBAG TALES

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Primary supervisor: James George

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Jeanette Elizabeth Paine

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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

This thesis consists of the creative work of *The Handbag Tales*, a short-story cycle of 10 interlinked tales based on the everyday objects found inside women's handbags and the backstories of how they came to be kept or found within them.

The thesis and exegesis will explore themes of secrecy, identity, memory and loss in key periods of women's lives, sometimes using handbags as a plot device or motif, treating the highly personalised contents carried within them as a narrative vehicle.

The exegesis, *It's in the Bag: stories of identity, memory and loss and the short-story cycle*, discusses the creative work *The Handbag Tales* and the work's genre, the short-story cycle. It also looks at the evolution of the woman's handbag as more than a purely practical object, as a symbol of various perceptions of femininity, as a signifier of social and economic class and as an emotional talisman because of what – specifically and sometimes randomly – it carries.

EXEGSIS: IT'S IN THE BAG: stories of identity, memory and loss and the short-story cycle

Within every handbag is a story waiting to be told. If you emptied out the contents of a bag you would find everyday objects and some items which might appear incongruent to their owner. Or it might be the bag itself which tells a bigger story. Is it a fake designer bag or an expensive original? Was it handmade or mass-produced overseas? Was it a gift? Was it stolen?

From the purely functional to the highly fashionable, a woman's bag can take many different forms. Some women covet a luxury accessory while others are happy to handcraft something themselves for everyday use. Others prefer something less gender specific, more practical, and eco-friendlier. Some prefer not to be encumbered with a bag at all, while others spend their lives, and a great deal of money, in pursuit of the ultimate accessory – the designer bag.

Regardless of style, a bag's main purpose is to carry things. Sometimes it's the items that we choose to carry that hold greater value and meaning than the choice of the handbag itself in which these items are held. Some items also give their owners a sense of security so that they may feel prepared for any of life's unpredictable circumstances they might find themselves in.

Some are items that are kept to serve as emotional talismans. They are reminders of special people in our lives or places or encounters and experiences which remain significant or precious to us. Some are kept because the owner feels they'll bring them good luck. Some remain as unconscious possessions, their meaning long lost to the owner.

They can also represent secrets, intimacies, and stories untold. For it is only really the bag owner who knows an object's true meaning or providence no matter how cheap or of insignificant value the items might appear to the uninitiated eye.

The Handbag Tales is a short-story cycle consisting of 10 inter-related tales told through the narrative device of 10 everyday objects which could be found in women's handbags. The stories are connected across decades, countries and characters.

The object featured in each story is symbolic, representing a pivotal and significant experience or relationship in the life of its owner. In the manner of *Story Cycles*, supporting or secondary characters in one story sometimes become the protagonist in another, each with their own personal story revealed through the objects relating to their bags or kept that are within them. Some characters reappear as their older or younger selves or in the memories and recollections of others.

In *The Guitar Pick*, the object's value to its owner is far greater than its real-world economic value. Kept within the purse of a retired cleaner it speaks to an encounter with a young musician and an innocent and memorable night. For Rosie it was a moment in her later life when she could revisit the spirit of her youth and be appreciated for her wisdom and honesty. Years later, when Rosie is dying from late stages of dementia, she reveals to her nurse Sarah the story of how she came to have the guitar pick in her purse. Sarah is then able to tell this story to Rosie's granddaughters, who question the providence of such a strange object they found while cleaning out their grandmother's belongings after she died.

In *The Photograph*, I use the black-and-white photograph of nurse Sarah's birth mother as a metaphor for lost maternal love. Sarah keeps a black-and-white photograph in her purse to help comfort her during difficult times, such as when she loses a patient. The act of gazing at and holding the photograph is a soothing practice. She thinks of the young woman in the photograph who gave birth to her and who she never knew. She imagines the conversations she might have had if they met and the unlived lives they share between them.

In *The Red Scarf*, the object represents the loss of innocence. Nurse Sarah's birth mother, Catriona, meets a young reporter in a seaside suburb on the outskirts of Australian city in the late 1960s. She is 17 and about to go away to nursing college. But a one-night fling changes the course of her life. She loses her favourite red scarf and her virginity to the handsome reporter and as a result also a future daughter she must give up for adoption nine months later.

A guitar pick would have remained just a piece of plastic if it were not able to be charged with the power of a compelling backstory shared between a patient and her carer. A black-and-white photograph becomes even more precious because its full story can never be revealed. And a red scarf has disappeared completely except perhaps in the memories of a man and woman who once shared a passionate encounter.

Motivation behind *The Handbag Tales*

In 2019 both my parents died within five weeks of each other. Finding myself orphaned in my early 50s was an unsettling experience and writing greatly assisted me in coping with my grief.

Despite their age and various ailments, my parents' deaths were unexpected. They had been married for over 52 years and had built and lived in the same house for more than four decades. The eventual move to a retirement village necessitated by my mother being wheelchair bound played heavily on my mother's mental and physical health and she never recovered from this disability or having to sell the family home. My father ably cared for my mother through her various treatments following emergency surgery she had to undertake. At this time, we were unaware that he was suffering from late-stage pancreatic cancer and from which symptoms had been masked by his Type 1 diabetes.

I was unable to reach my mother in hospital in time before she went into a coma brought on by pneumonia and severe emphysema. However, I was with her as she took her last breath. I was more fortunate with my father's death in that I was able to spend the last week of his life by his side. It was during this time that he revealed to me stories of his young adult life before he had met my mother. Newly widowed and facing his own death it was as if he could now confess stories which he had kept to himself all these years. This included an affair with a married woman he had in his early 20s before he had met my mother. He guided me to an old confectionery box full of black-and-white images belonging to his musical theatre troupe days and I would find her photograph.

In the months following his death I found myself drawn to this story again and again to this very intimate story, thinking of various 'what if' scenarios. Was he really in love with this woman? How would a divorce have been received back in late 1950s New Zealand if they did get together? And inevitably to the realisation that if he had

chosen a different partner in life, then he would never have met my mother and I would never have been born. It made me think of the untold stories in people's lives – the stories we choose to keep secret and those which when pushed we may choose to reveal.

In the weeks following his death, while cleaning up my parents' estate and sorting through their household effects, I spent time going through my mother's wardrobe and in particular her extensive handbag collection. An émigré to New Zealand from Poland in the late 1960s, my mother had an exotic Eastern European style, and she was never without her lipstick or a handbag. She had a distinct Polish accent, sometimes impenetrable to a New Zealander's ear, and she retained her accent all her life; it seemed like a way of defining herself by her otherness. I discovered within her handbag collection various random personal items – the providence of some which could be easily explained while other items remained a mystery to me. These everyday objects also took on special meaning because they created a snapshot in a moment of time in my mother's life. A carefully folded tissue blotted with her familiar pink lipstick, a ticket stub of a ballet concert she had attended and some costume jewellery that my father had given to her in the '70s which I had always coveted growing up and which I thought had been lost forever.

These objects once held in my mother's possession gave me inspiration for story possibilities. Were they kept for some greater significance or were they simply forgotten after their use? Were they hidden within side pockets for safe keeping? Did they remind her of a specific time, place, or a person? How did they function, symbolically, in the narrative of my mother's life?

That same year, I visited the *Carried Away: Bags Unpacked* exhibition at the Auckland Museum and was fascinated not only by the range of bags from the collection which were exhibited but also the stories which the curators were able to interpret about their designers/makers/owners, how they were crafted and, more importantly, the women's lives which were reflected in terms of ownership and the contents they carried in the bags. I began to draw the connections between my mother's handbag collection and those which had been curated by the Museum for the exhibition.

In the process of packing up my parents' last home together, I reflected that in some way I was undertaking my own curation of their lives with every decision I made about which items to keep and which to give to other family members or friends so that they might have something to remember them both by. In the end the items I chose to keep filled only a few boxes and I just kept the items which I knew the backstory to – how they came to be purchased or gifted and how they were used or admired in our family home. I was conscious of the backstories which were never to be revealed, lost with the objects they linked to and the memories of my parents.

In 2020 I suffered a major health scare spending over two weeks in hospital as the doctors grappled to determine what was the cause of my heart failure. Nothing clarifies the mind like a near-death experience! It had always been my intention to write a book but now I felt that if I did not fully commit to this personal promise then it might be something my health might prevent me from achieving in the future. From my hospital bed I googled on my mobile phone searching for writing courses, which led me to the AUT Master in Creative Writing programme.

The submission called for examples of prose, and I was able to use the drafts of the stories I had been writing over the past year as a practice I had adopted to help me with my grief. Rather than one story arc for a novel, I had multiple story ideas and multiple ideas for characters which I felt could best be conveyed in a series of short stories.

I also felt that the act of writing short stories would help make the overall task of writing my thesis more manageable and less daunting and would give me a sense of achievement as I completed each short story, which in turn would serve to motivate me to write more.

When it came to framing up the short stories as a book, I decided to name each story based on the key object within the bag rather than the handbag itself, even though a bag in some form features in each story. The handbag motif became a way to organise my stories, along with each story's main and supporting characters and settings in time and place. The objects in each short story represented or became the instigator for pivotal experiences in the lives of the main characters.

I like to think the collection of stories is contained within one big 'bag' or book and that the reader can choose to dip into a story they are drawn to either by a particular title or object. Alternatively, they can read the stories as they are presented and use the collective reading experience of reading these stories sequentially to join the dots between each story as a short-story cycle.

The Evolution of the Woman's Handbag

The modern Western handbag is primarily associated with being a woman's fashion accessory with an emphasis on form rather than function.

The name 'handbag' was derived from the handheld leather luggage which accompanied upper-class 19th-century men who were able to travel independently and explore the world in pursuit of wealth and knowledge.

In contrast, the wives, daughters or sisters of these affluent men lived far less adventuresome lives. The safety and relative comfort of their domestic lives were punctuated by social occasions such as attendance at balls or concerts where they would carry with them small personal items such as a fan, calling card or face powder in delicate draw-string bags made of silks and satins which they had often hand-embroidered themselves.

According to Lai (2019), who curated the 2019 Auckland Museum's exhibition *Carried Away: Bags Unpacked* (which featured over 150 bags from the Museum's Applied Arts and Design Collection), these "delicate dispositions of reticules limited to the home or evening parties rendered them quite unsuitable for women out in a public space" (Lai, 2019, p. 8).

Unlike men's clothing whose primary on-person storage for items such as keys, money and tobacco and matches were pockets, women's clothing continued to be designed without them.

As the Industrial Revolution ushered in train travel a new dawn of independent journeying for women was realised. Lai (2019) suggests that as Victorian women in Europe began to travel more both domestically and abroad, they therefore required something sturdier and more robust to carry their possessions that would withstand damage through transportation while retaining privacy and respectability.

“Emulating luggage’s material and form, the handbag’s metal frame, sturdy leather body, top handle, and internal compartments results in a bag that could withstand the hard knocks of the outside world” (Lai, 2019, p. 8).

In the 1920s as more women were employed in offices, retail shops or factories, the handbag in its traditional form as we know it today became commonplace and necessary. Travel to and from work required something more practical that would allow women to safely carry with them their necessary everyday items such as cash and coins, cosmetics, combs or brushes, handkerchiefs, and other belongings. The bags needed to be durable, with a handle and a snap-lock to protect the valuable contents inside.

The history of the development of the handbag parallels that of the women’s suffrage movement argues (Harris, 1997, p. 128)

“The modern purse was created, not only by the absence of pockets in relatively tight 20-century dress, but by the women’s emancipation, by their need to be out-of-doors.”

The period of World War II saw a return to a more utilitarian handbag but post war and with manufacturing developments of plastic technology, handbag design became more of a fashion statement and could now be made of hard, transparent materials such as Lucite. The invention of injection moulding allowed mass production of handbags, reducing the price point and accessibility for everyday Western women consumers.

In the 1950s, handbag manufacturing development continued to provide affordable and practical accessories for everyday working women or housewives. However, there was a significant juncture in fashion design targeting the wealthy as well, with handbags which became distinctly personal luxury items as they were to be made from more expensive exotic animal skins such as alligator and crocodile.

Women in this period were also heavily influenced by the power of post-World War II cinema and in particular the glamorous lives of movie stars turned Hollywood royalty. American actress Grace Kelly, who literally became Princess of Monaco overnight, was photographed in 1956 holding a Hermès bag allegedly to cover her pregnant belly. According to the manufacturer (*The Birken, 2022*) this image of her ran on the cover of *LIFE* magazine in 1956, making the Hermès bag the most famous bag in the world at the time and in doing so it went on to take her name, The Kelly, which the design is still called today.

Fashion house Chanel created a handbag in the mid-1950s and its diamond-quilted 2.55 (named after its launch date February 1955) remains one of the most iconic handbags of all time.

According to Cerini (2021), the 2.55 “subverted all the rules” when it was first launched as it came with a practical chain shoulder strap rather than having to be carried like a clutch purse. In doing so it “offered new freedom to women and transformed the way women’s bags were designed” Cerini (2021).

By the 1960s this style of shoulder bag had grown in popularity. Women could choose to *wear* their handbags over or across their shoulder as a fashion accessory rather than having to be encumbered by having to *carry* a handbag. A shoulder strap literally freed up women’s hands and gave them more ease of movement. It is interesting that this development in handbag design paralleled the rise of the women’s and sexual rights movement.

Today, handbags bought from high street stores are often copies of the designs of luxury fashion houses. The untrained eye cannot tell the difference, yet the owner can feel they have attained the cache of owning a designer bag but at an affordable price.

Hermès’ Birkin Bag is perhaps the best example of how one handbag design has captured the hearts of the world’s ‘bagaholics’ and become one of the world’s most coveted objects.

According to the manufacturers (*The Birken, 2022*) the Birkin was co-designed by the British actress Jane Birkin and the Executive Chair of Hermès, Jean-Louis Dumas, in the mid-eighties struck up a conversation on a flight about Ms Birkin’s quest to find a durable yet fashionable bag which could fit all her personal items as well as her needs as a young mother. Today there is a waiting list to purchase the bag which commands a minimum NZ\$20,000 price tag.

The 'It bag' phenomenon started at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s when bags became covetable and very desirable objects according to an interview with Lucia Savi, Curator of the 2021 Victorian and Albert Museum in London's exhibition *Bags: Inside Out*, (*Bags: Inside out at the V&A Review – A Glitzy Exploration of the Not-so-Humble Accessory.*, 2020, "2021, 00:51" sections).

It was during the 2000s that these types of designer bags started to feature in popular television series, and celebrities who featured in these programmes were seen wearing them on and off set. Designers explored opportunities to showcase their lines and in doing so influence the viewer. Women eagerly sought out these designer accessories which were becoming more of a personal statement that spoke of who women were or aspired to be.

The trauma of the loss of an authentic designer handbag was immortalised in a scene in the hit series of the period *Sex and the City* when lead character Carrie Bradshaw is mugged for her "Fendi bag". While reluctantly handing it over she feels compelled to correct him with the cry "It's a Baguette" (D Starr, 2000).

Today women choose not to carry a bag at all for both practical and political reasons. Founding feminist and writer Dr Germaine Greer has been known to refer to women's handbags as an external uterus.

According to Treneman (1998), Greer says that only by removing the handbag from her life will women be totally liberated. Greer says that whenever she sees a woman

carrying a particularly large bag, she wants to ask her if she “is expecting to be kidnapped” (1998, para. 19).

Harris (1997) is sympathetic to Greer’s fixed view on the handbag and suggests, the modern and independent professional woman “jettisons unnecessary feminine baggage so that she doesn’t have to babysit her purse like a safety-deposit box” (Harris, 1997, p. 130)

Harris (1997) also suggests that there is a direct outcome to the:

“...waning of the pocketbook’s importance in the modern outfit is the direct outcome of the growing confidence that women below the age of 40 feel as self-sufficient and autonomous individuals who no longer need to carry their houses on their backs in order to survive the workplace. (Harris, 1997, p. 128)

In her seminal book of essays, Ephron (2006) describes a handbag as a “demanding and difficult accessory” and laments the need to carry a bag, which she says she replaced by wearing an overcoat with deep pockets instead.

Ephron is bemused by the morass of random content inside women’s handbags which are carted around every day but are no longer useful or relevant or reminders of a life they used to live or experiences they once had such as “little bits of tobacco even though there has been no smoking going on for at least 10 years” to “boarding passes from long-forgotten airplane trips”, “leaky ballpoint pens” to “Kleenexes that either have or have not been used but there’s no way to be sure one way or another” and “hotel keys from God-knows-what hotel, scratched eyeglasses, an old tea bag, several

crumpled personal checks that have come loose from the checkbook and are covered with smudge marks” (Ephron, 2006, "I feel bad about my purse" section).

The purse itself can be political also. In response to reactionary arguments with the election of former President Donald Trump in the USA in 2019, American artist Michelle Pred created a collection of art entitled *The Power of the Purse* using vintage handbags as her canvas. Each carries political motifs such as “Consent is not implied”, or “Pro Choice” and “Time’s Up” which are made of electroluminescent wire which can be lit up using batteries housed in the bags. The purses are meant to be carried and serve as small-scale political billboards.

By repurposing actual handbags which were fashionable in the 1960s in an era where women were starting to question their traditional roles in society, the artist utilises the handbag as a counter-argument in a subversive statement. According to the artist (<https://Michelepred.Com/Section/315880-Power-of-the-Purse.Html>, 2019) she chose purses from the mid-20th century as her canvas because they were from a critical era in the women’s movement, and they allowed her as an artist to:

“...marry the powerful, politically charged language of today’s resistance with representations of women’s modern economic power and the possibilities for change that come with it.”

The Handbag as an Emotional Talisman

The exterior of a handbag can reveal a lot about a woman – her social and economic status, her fashion consciousness, and her roles within society.

Handbags can also give women an added sense of security. Away from home, the owner carries items for everyday ‘emergencies’ such as Panadol® for a migraine, scissors to snip loose threads from clothes, balm to soothe chapped lips or sunglasses to protect eyes from glare or to cover unwanted tears.

While the exterior of the handbag is on display and could be seen as an extension of the bag-carrier’s personality, most women when asked would fiercely guard the content of their bags which are seen as intensely private and personal.

I believe, therefore, that much can be revealed about a woman as a whole person through the contents of their handbags. The handbag carries a social whakapapa and is a vessel for memory through the objects that are conscious and unconscious links to a personal backstory.

It is this key observation of what is revealed in the contents of a woman’s handbag which has informed each short story in *The Handbag Tales*.

When I began writing *The Handbag Tales*, I started with a list of objects that a woman might keep in her handbag and from there developed backstories for the providence of each object. I originally saw each story as standalone and unrelated to one another.

However, as I wrote, the more I became curious about the motivations of my

characters and the objects they coveted, seeing possibilities for story interconnection – across characters, settings and time. The objects in the bags took on greater meaning than the bags themselves as they came to represent or symbolise a pivotal point in the main characters’ lives. The bag became a safe space in which to store the objects that carried with them this significance.

According to (*Bags: Inside out at the V&A Review – A Glitzy Exploration of the Not-so-Humble Accessory.*, 2020, 2:34) bags are special objects too because they are so complex.

“They are private containers of our most personal belongings. We carry them close to our bodies but also, they are very public because we walk around the street with bags, and they help us tell who we are and what we want to be.

Bags hold memories.”

The contents within a bag may also be retained because they allow the owner to maintain connections to past roles or aspects of their lives which they are reluctant to let go of or forget. These items take on a form of keepsake or memento that reminds their owners of happier times, significant events, encounters or achievements, or are linked to special people in their lives.

The bag itself could be symbolic of transitions in life as well. This theme is explored in *The Concert Ticket* where protagonist Tess decides to use the handwoven bag she had bought in India on her travels, which for her represents a time when her friendship group was open to new ideas and experiences and when they were more accepting of one another.

There are also items which remain in a bag even though they may have reached a manufacturer's expiration date. This is the case in short story *The Lipstick* where protagonist Lucy keeps a used lipstick case in her vintage 2.55 Chanel handbag in the hope that she will one day come across the same shade her late mother wore even though it is no longer produced by the cosmetic company.

Harris (1997) argues, these items could become emotional talismans that the owner believes will help to ward off unwanted events. Beth reveals in *The Two Pebbles* a deeply personal secret that her cancer has returned to a man whom she only just met for the first time that day. She does so because they have no history and possibly no future beyond their encounter that weekend; therefore, Beth feels more liberated to reveal her most intimate of truths. In return he gives her two small pebbles which he picks off the beach during their after-dinner walk to remind her that she cannot face the diagnosis alone.

Beth knows that what lies ahead will be challenging so she chooses to keep these pebbles to take with her during treatments or to remind her of that moment of freedom when she was not defined by her medical condition. The reader therefore becomes aware of its significance before her family members do.

In my research for this exegesis, I came across a study which looks at how handbags and their contents can help facilitate memories of the lives and personal histories of

women suffering from dementia in caregiving facilities. This helped me to develop *The Guitar Pick* storyline.

In research from Buse and Twigg (2014), the authors explore how handbags and their contents can help trigger memories of their lives and personal histories to help facilitate caregiving. They look at how, by using everyday objects in care and treatment, patients retain a sense of connection from their old lives as they transition to their life in care as well as providing the patients some sort of emotional security.

I liked the idea that Rosie always kept her handbag with her and that it carried with it a secret from her past. I also felt that if having her handbag among her possessions in the caring home was part of the practice of her carers, then an empathetic nurse rather than a close relative would naturally be the person to hear her story about how the guitar pick came to be in her possession – hence the creation of the character Sarah, who in turn has her own story to tell in *The Photograph*.

It is the theme of the hidden personal backstory of objects which I was drawn to again and again in writing *The Handbag Tales*. Some objects are catalysts for a new life, such in *The Watch* where Rebecca is given the means to return home to study through the generosity of a stranger at an airport, or to help a woman through troubled times that lay ahead as seen in *The Two Pebbles*.

The origin of stories behind everyday objects brought to life with narrative can be seen in TOTeM (Tales of Things and Electronic Memory), a project funded by the Research Councils UK. Here, they took the concept of the backstory of objects by creating a website that allowed people to write or upload a recording of a story about how they

came into possession of an object. People could scan bar codes on the site using their mobile phones to reveal more about the backstory. This concept was taken further by a partnership with an Oxfam opportunity shop who put 60 items up for sale, each with a personal backstory of providence, which were very popular and sold well.

According to an article published in *The New York Times Magazine*, Walker (2010, para. 17) argues that sometimes the best narratives about objects “are the ones we can only imagine”. Even a banal object has story behind how it came to be, then as soon as you hear it, “it becomes something far richer”.

The author describes an old trunk that belonged to his late grandfather which he has carted around for more than 20 years despite knowing little about the object. Yet “despite its muteness” he considers it to be one of his most valuable possessions (Walker, 2010, para. 7).

The Short Story Defined and Repurposed

This exegesis looks at the short-story cycles that have influenced the writing of *The Handbag Tales*. In order to explore the genre of the short story as part of this exegesis, we must first understand what defines a modern short story.

As a literary form, the short story is shorter in length than a novel and from the reader’s experience, it can be read and enjoyed in one sitting.

In the introduction to his children's collection of short stories (Gaiman, 2007) speaks to the young reader from the point of view of his younger self when he first discovered the genre and how convenient the shorter form was so that he could consume stories from start to finish in morning breaks or after lunch naps or on trains.

Short stories tend to begin 'in medias res', which is Latin for 'the middle of things', making exposition superfluous. The character's backstory does not have to be completely revealed to the reader and in such a compressed format there are fewer characters as well. A short story also contains a single turning-point moment in time, between an unknown past and an unknowable future.

This was something I had top of mind when writing *The Handbag Tales*. In the second draft, I rewrote the beginning of several stories so that the 'point of attack' (as is used cinematically) was brought forward. In *The Watch*, I moved the opening scene from mid-flight to the moment of preparation for landing where we find the protagonist Rebecca steadying herself emotionally for the next leg in her travels, which she no longer looked forward to.

In *The Coin*, I began the story at the point where protagonist Linda discovers that her new Italian handbag had been stolen from the back of the café seat. Alone and abroad, she is forced to accept the kindness of a charming stranger rather than rely on her husband, who remained at their hotel and who she knew would be unsympathetic to her plight.

The reader comes to a short story not necessarily knowing the complete history of the protagonist or how a character came to be at the point where the story begins or is set.

When discussing short fiction (N. [Masterclass] Gaiman, 2021, 6:40) argues

“...that whether it’s true or not, is to feel like these characters didn’t just start to exist the moment the story began. You want to know they’ve all been in existence all along. You want to know that things have happened to them, and things have taken them to this point and now we are at the point of heightened emotion, we’re at the point where the plot is actually kicking in.”

Modern short-story structure allows for non-traditional styles with endings left open. Just as I reviewed the start of many of the short stories in *The Handbag Tales*, I also looked at their endings. Some I felt required a coda where the actual handbag was brought back to the fore, such as with the ending of *The Guitar Pick* where Rosie’s two granddaughters discover the plastic guitar pick in among the remaining personal items of their late grandmother. I chose to also interweave different characters from one story to another even across time periods – for example by introducing Rosie’s nurse Sarah in subsequent stories such as *The Photograph* and *The Red Scarf*.

The Short-Story Cycle

In their published form, stand-alone short stories can be collated and published as a collection by an author or curated as an anthology of different authors selected and edited around a theme, background, country of origin or setting.

However, in the short-story cycle (also referred to as a ‘short-story sequence’ or ‘composite novel’) the author consciously by design creates a series of interlinked short stories which in turn creates the overall reader’s experience.

According to an online article (Glendenning, 2019, para. 1) she defines the short-story cycle as:

“...a collection of stories in which the stories are interlinked; however, each story can stand alone as an independent piece. A short-story cycle is not a collection of short stories but a cycle where each story is connected to one or more stories in the cycle.”

(Ingram, 1971) first introduced the term short-story cycle, describing the genre as a set of stories so linked to one another that the reader’s experience of each one is modified by the experience of the other stories.

In research from Morris and Dunn (1995) Ingram’s definition was expanded, and attested that there are five ways in which stories could be linked to one another, including stories which share the same setting, narrator/protagonist, common theme and narrative style and which feature at least one character from a shared group of

protagonists.

It is the overlapping and interweaving of the narratives in the short-story cycle which opens up distinct story possibility in ways very different to a more traditional, single-throughline approach in novels and which I set about to achieve in *The Handbag Tales*.

The Turning (Winton, 2004) is an excellent example of a short-story cycle by this definition and was an early influence in my thesis development. All the stories are set in the Western Australian seaside town of Angelus, a coastal town in gradual economic decline mirroring that of the lives of its inhabitants.

Several of Winton's 17 short stories feature the same character but at different ages explored across three decades or as seen through the eyes of other significant people in their lives such as a wife or father. The reader must piece together an overall impression of a character based on the memories of these other people, or how other protagonists in different stories observe or interact with them.

One such character is Vic Lang, who weaves in and out of several of the stories; this is a narrative characteristic typical of the short-story cycle format. In 'Abbreviation', Vic is a teenage boy having his first pleasurable sexual encounter with an older girl on the beach at White Point on New Year's Eve. The girl deliberately twists his ear as she kisses him, claiming "You won't forget your first real kiss" (Winton, 2004, p. 26). In 'Damaged Goods', it is Vic's wife who sensitively retells her husband's early infatuation with a girl nicknamed "Strawberry Alison" due to her birthmarked face. His wife wonders if it was the memory of the young woman's tragic death which shaped the man she married and whether his unrequited love for the lost Alison might be the cause

of him pushing her away from him. In ‘Immunity’, we see young adult Vic from the perspective of an adoring unnamed teenage girl who knew Vic from school and who recounts the short-lived thrill of sharing a train back to Angelus after he returned from cadet training. She cannot fault him. In ‘Commission’, Vic returns as the protagonist and a middle-aged man having the difficult task of tracking down his long-lost father in the outback so that he can bring him back to visit his wife on her deathbed. In doing so he has to confront the man who left him and his mother 27 years ago and whose undesirable traits he may have inherited.

For me, *The Turning* benefited from a second reading so that I could make the connections between the stories and the characters and get a fuller picture of the life and depth of a character such as Vic Lang. I also gained a greater appreciation for Winton’s creation of sense of place with the shared setting of Angelus and its surrounds. His descriptions of the decay of the infrastructure of the town matched its economic decline over the decades and that of the lives of its inhabitants. The sea or the waterways in the town provided a place for play and recreation but both were always menacing – be they shark-infested or filled with dangerous submerged objects.

As suggested by Morris and Dunn (1995) in terms of a shared setting, the stories which make up *A Visit from the Good Squad* (Egan, 2011) share global settings (New York, Los Angeles, Africa) rather than one township like in *The Turning*. Similarly, the stories cover many decades and feature a reoccurring character, Bennie Salazar, whose journey we are able to track from wannabe punk-rock musician to successful yet dispirited music industry producer through his own stories and those of other protagonists he connects with over the years.

Reading *The Turning* in its short-story cycle form could be likened to the act of making a jigsaw puzzle – carefully considered and methodical. The reader must link each story together across decades, identifying characters and their relationship with one another and to the township of Angelus. There are gaps in storylines which require the reader to fill in their own blanks and to make the connections.

The Handbag Tales attempts a similar approach. Stories are set across different decades but not grouped chronologically as a collection. Secondary or supporting characters' backstories work to interweave different perspectives. I wanted the reader to discover those connections for themselves, mapping the relationships across all the stories – be they through the object, the handbag or the owner or discoverer of the item.

Egan, as a post-modernist writer, is more experimental by nature than realist writer Winton when it comes to narrative style in that each story is narrated in a variety of tenses, from different perspectives and even in different formats such as a Microsoft™ PowerPoint® presentation or a magazine article. Egan's reader is therefore challenged by this approach to actively synthesise the different episodes in the characters' lives across different time periods and settings.

Egan challenged me to consider my work as a reading experience. When I first started to write my short stories, I wasn't thinking of how they might come together as a whole. But on rewriting the drafts, I was drawn to the overall structure and whether there was an opportunity for stories to interlink.

One of the more satisfying parts of this process was stepping back from the first draft to literally map out the connections between the stories through characters, objects, or the handbags themselves.

I felt I needed a visual aid to help me keep track of these interconnections and therefore used the simple diagram ‘My Short Story Links’ (Glendenning, 2019, Figure 1) which recommends planning a short-story cycle and uses a diagram of how short stories might interconnect.

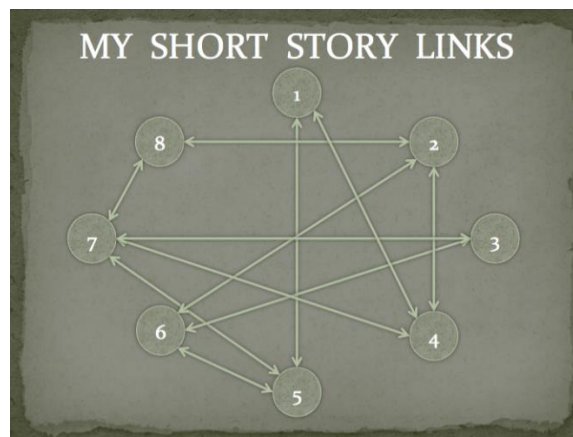


Figure 1

When it came to the final sequencing and ordering of the 10 stories (Figure 2), I did not want the connections between the stories to be too obvious using story order, but rather I wanted make room for the reader to connect the stories themselves, whether this be through recognition of a character’s name, the setting, the object or the time period within which the story was set. At the same time, by listing the stories in a contents page the reader also has the option to select a story based on the appeal of the object and its title.

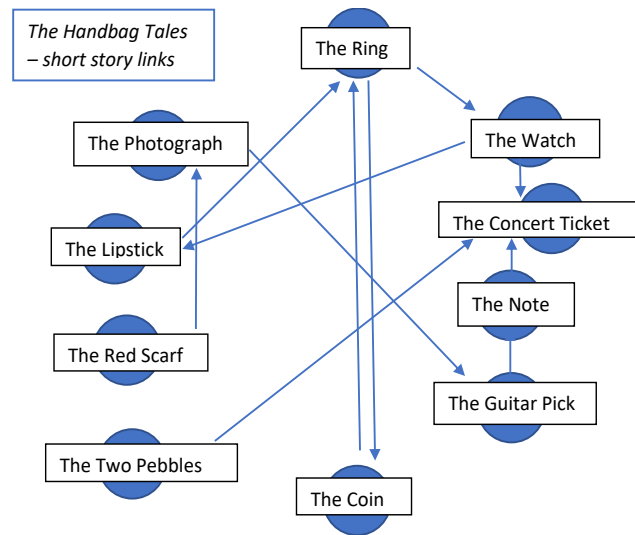


Figure 2

Pulitzer-winning author Anthony Doerr said he adopts this approach to his writing of short stories as he explained in an interview from Hill (2021, 12:45/25:31)

“Even short stories I never, very very rarely will write them in the order that a reader will read them. You’re piecing things together all the time. Often, I’m using the carpet of my office and laying out scenes.”

Taking the Boat out

According to (N. [Masterclass] Gaiman, 2021). writing short stories is a great way to begin to learn the craft of being a writer because one of the hardest things to do as a young writer is to finish a piece of writing.

The act of writing short stories provides essential learning skills, and he likens the act of writing a short story to that of a taking a short boat out on a quick round trip to a headland and back to shore. The most important thing in his mind was that the writer “took the boat out” (N. [Masterclass] Gaiman, 2021) and wrote something and therefore learnt something of the art of writing in the process.

I couldn't agree with Gaiman more. The decision to write in a short-story cycle form with 10 interlinked short stories felt much less daunting than attempting a full-length novel. As I completed each story, I grew more confident in the writing process and explored multiple storylines and characters progressively as each storyline nudged into the next.

The short-story cycle genre facilitated key themes in *The Handbag Tales*, being the private stories in our lives which we choose to conceal and the manifestation of these memories in the items we choose to keep.

With *The Handbag Tales* now ready for a third draft, I feel that I will be able to revisit each story and perhaps find new connections through additional stories which I could add to the cycle. I am curious to know what object Angela in *The Concert Ticket* carries with her or if Emily, mentioned in *The Lipstick*, has a way to remind her of her late father, Martin Clutterbuck, and whether she was able to tell him that she had found love with another woman. I wonder whether Linda in *The Coin* ever returned to Italy and in doing so returned the coin she had kept, this time throwing it in the fountain in the square to mark a new beginning after her divorce.

When I began writing *The Handbag Tales* it provided catharsis for the intense grief that I felt having lost both my parents in such a short period of time. It was not until I had completed the first draft and in preparation for the second draft that I could see a theme emerging – that of loss and the major transitions we go through in life. These recurring motifs unite the stories. Actual death featured across several stories – for example the death of Sarah's patient Rosie in *The Photograph*, the death of the neighbour to breast cancer in *The Ring* and a co-worker's suicide in *The Note*.

During my research I was particularly moved when listening to author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describe how devastated she was by the unexpected death of her mother, who died on what would have been her late father's 89th birthday. She revealed that she was unable to let go of her mother's handbag along with its contents as she grapples with the pain of losing both parents in such quick succession:

“I have her handbag in my study here and just having that, her things are still in it – her little bottle of perfume, her lip gloss, her pack of Kleenex, her inhaler (because she had asthma). I have them and they're here with me and they've sort of become necessary objects for me.” (Day, 2018, S11, 47:19)

Many stories involve characters undergoing periods of personal growth, such as Tess in the short story *The Two Pebbles* where she is about to embark on a trip to India which will change the course of her future personal fortune and in turn her friendships with the women in her life. In *The Coin*, Linda realises that her marriage is over. Friendships also transition and come to abrupt ends while immediate connections are made with strangers in airports and on beaches where intimate backstories are shared.

While the objects remain at the heart of each story, they are only made special by the fact that they are still being carried around in a bag which is a commonplace accessory in many women's lives. They have become life's “necessary objects”, as Ngozi Adichie describes (Day, 2018).

I am sure that, unlike Ephron's view of the handbag as being a “demanding and difficult accessory” (Ephron, 2006), millions of women around the world are not quite ready to give up the handbag for its practicality or its pride of place in their wardrobes.

We need a reticule like our Victorian sisters in which to hold the items that are necessary to our modern lives but also those that bring us joy or remind us of who we once were or who we long to be with still.

In conclusion, I believe that *The Handbag Tales* as a short-story cycle will appeal to readers of contemporary women's fiction who not only have a fondness for the accessory but are also curious about the lives of others and the pursuit of love and self-discovery. I hope that my readers are motivated to unpack their own handbags and reflect on the objects which they choose to carry with them every day and why. More importantly, I hope that my readers decide to share the stories of their precious memories of their youth or unlived lives so that the everyday objects they carry around with them might one day not be discarded but treasured by someone who loved them.

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Figure 1 Short Story Links

Figure 2 *The Handbag Tales* Short Story Links

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