

Exegesis: Finding the footprints in the frost

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Finding the footprints in the frost: an exegesis to *The Art of Broken Pieces*

‘All the art of living lies in a fine mingling of letting go and holding on.’ Havelock Ellis

This exegesis accompanies my thesis, a novel entitled *The Art of Broken Pieces*. It investigates how a writer can present grief authentically in a fictional context. It proposes physical activity as the catalyst through which individuals suffering through grief can begin to heal, and it uses the passage of time through the changing seasons as metaphoric of that journey.

The novel is essentially art imitating life imitating art. In order to give an authentic account of the experiences of my characters, I began my research by doing the courses I have described. I learned how to make sushi; I completed a two-day barista course; I suffered through a pottery course, which highlighted the limitations of my artistic ability. In doing so, I unwittingly underwent the same healing process intended for fictional characters. What became evident is that, no matter how much distance we have between ourselves and the negative experiences that have dictated our emotional shape, each time we learn something new, we affirm our status as a survivor. We celebrate our resilience.

In essence, although this was not the intention, the novel has strayed into the realm of ‘grief writing’. M. R. Dennis speaks of writing grief accounts as a way of:

“*achieving closure, recovering and moving on from grief.*” (2012 p.402)

I have drawn on my experiences of my husband coming out of the closet, leaving me with two children under five; of my mother withering away from breast cancer; of a good friend blaming herself for her sister’s death from cancer; of a school friend losing her brother when a van hooked the handlebars of his bicycle.

I came up with the idea of writing about these experiences as a series of short stories. However, even with grief as its primary subject, I didn’t want it to be just sad. I doubt that people want to read stories that bring them down - sort of like a *Chicken Soup for the Masochist’s Soul*. At the 2017 Auckland Writers’ Festival, Roxane Gay spoke about her first book being a collection of short stories that did just that. No publisher wanted to touch it. One of them even commented that they made him ‘want to die’. Only once she was an established author with a critical reputation did a publisher decide to take a chance on her first one. My stories could have focussed on the traditional stages of grief identified by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (2005) - depression, anger, denial, bargaining, acceptance - but it would have been difficult, or perhaps even inappropriate, to imbue them with a sense of happiness. Using them to create a novel allowed me to voice them and connect them with something resembling hope.

Self-help

Although this novel touches on key themes of death and healing, it is not meant as a self-help book. It is an invitation to the reader to decide on their own response. It is taking real life scenarios and disguising them as fiction to allow readers the safety of distance from which to examine their own lives.

Self-help books were a good starting point for ascertaining the kinds of emotions and reactions attributed to different causes of grief. Although not academically rigorous, they provided me with ideas for things to consider when developing the characters.

One thing suggested in a wiki-how article is to:

"Go to an animal shelter to bring home a rescue animal. You'll feel even better for bringing home an animal who really needs your love and care."

I decided that Wendy did not need that, but I have Angie adopting an animal.

"Angie was happier than I'd seen her before. She almost rushed over to us. 'I'm getting a dog!'" (TAoBP, p.143)

It also suggested that *'grief takes time to process, and when you're grieving, it's likely that you won't be able to enjoy many of the things that normally make you happy. You may want to stay in instead of going out with friends.'* In the novel, Bev explains this in her introduction to the course she runs.

"Most of the time I locked myself in the house and only went out when I had to. My friendships suffered, my florist business suffered. I did not care." (TAoBP, p.32)

The ideas expounded by publications that purport to offer 'self-help' advice are most often glib and unhelpful. They offer trite statements wrapped up in a cloak of empathy. One example is:

"Each person grieves differently." (Tappouni (2013) p.6).

In some cases, they seem to invalidate the experience of someone going through emotional trauma:

"Grieving mindfully is the process of using your emotional vulnerability not to suffer great distress, or to intensify your pain, but to redirect this pain toward your own growth as a human being." (Kumar, 2005, p.8).

Such statements would not be valuable for the characters in the novel; they were not helpful for me. In his critique of self-help books Dennis suggests that these books may be less than useful through their propensity for:

"...fostering unattainable personal goals, advocating solitary improvement at the expense of interacting with others." (2012 p.403).

This novel advocates interaction as part of the healing process. In the novel's story structure it was important that the individual tasks the women work through on their course weren't just there for the orientation of the task itself, but opportunities for dialogue, for connection, for conflict, for understanding and for misunderstanding. The course offers no guarantees of healing. In a sense, the novel asks the reader for the same commitment, with no promise of a changed life. If a reader finds some type of closure or healing through the pages of *The Art of Broken Pieces*, it will be through his/her interpretation.

Synopsis

Winnie the Pooh said, "I used to believe in forever, but forever's too good to be true." (A. A. Milne)

Wendy discovers this when her marriage ends with her husband's death. She keeps going through the normal everyday activities. She thinks she's okay. She thinks she is getting on with her life. Everyone around her thinks otherwise. With the encouragement of her best friend, Keith, she joins a therapy group offering 'Healing Through Activity', and she embarks on a journey through which she finds a space for herself, and recovers her sense of humour.

Her companions on this journey are Marsheka, Steph, Angie and Lorelee, who have lost their own forevers. Each one is looking for some form of healing. Bev offers this in the form of a programme called 'Healing Through Activity'. The women bump up against each other as they complete the activities in the hopes of finding their own path to wholeness. Wendy is not there to make friends or to be anyone's shoulder to cry on. She thinks she is taking part in the programme to convince those closest to her that she is over her grief. What she discovers is that the healing process has not really begun.

We follow the story of this fifty-something-year-old woman and gain insights into the other women through her eyes.

So if my narrator is also a woman in her fifties who has lost a husband and is completing activities that I have done, how is she different from me? This is an issue faced by authors when creating characters based partly on their own experiences. This question appears multiple times when researching the issue. The author Midge Raymond suggests:

"It's not the end of the world if your character sounds a lot like you — as long as this character is real, engaging, and true to life." (2011)

In an effort to create unique characters who are authentic and engaging, a writer needs to create sufficient difference between themselves and the character, allowing the character to plot their own trajectory. Although Wendy's emotional response is extrapolated from my own experiences of loss, her character is sufficiently different from me to be regarded as an artifice. I deliberately gave her no children and a job that fosters isolation to make her action of reaching out more pronounced.

The intention with this novel was to cover different journeys through grief, but not give them happy endings. Most of all, I wanted them to be authentic. In life, not everyone gets a happy ending, but the hope is that we can find some way of going on with our lives, despite the missing pieces.

The original concept, due to its inception as a collection of short stories, was to include twelve characters. Through the mapping and research process, the need for a smaller cast became clear. This was partly due to the impracticality of such a large number of people

completing each course, and partly due to wanting to develop Wendy as the protagonist. Too many of the other characters would have been sidelined.

With Wendy's battles with grief moving the narrative's tone in one direction, I was conscious of balancing that out, so I chose a character who could bounce witty repartee off Wendy. This was the role assigned to Keith, who was not in my original planning. I wanted to inject some humour into the novel's early stages, when Wendy's grief was strongest.

Keith's role in the story's emotional landscape grew, and he developed his own backstory and interiority. This was brought out in dialogue scenes, which are meant to be funny at times. This humour sometimes masks their feelings. My intention was not for it to be a love story, although I want the suggestion of a possible romance to permeate.

Healing through activity

The foundation on which the novel is built is the idea of using activities to overcome grief. The idea behind the therapy course in my novel stems from personal experience and research. Many people who have experienced significant loss do not want to simply speak about their problems. They need something to keep them busy, to re-integrate them into society.

Working with your hands engages your brain in a different way. Being tactile gets you closer to the project being undertaken and allows you to forget what is troubling you as you focus on what you are doing. It then allows you to be lost in your thoughts as your hands do the work. This is what I experienced when I did these activities. Jennie Wright-Parker's website touches on the idea of 'creative grieving'. She quotes Dr Rachel Naomi Remen, a writer and teacher of alternative medicine, who believes we are all healers.

"At the deepest level, the creative process and the healing process arise from a single source. When you are an artist, you are a healer."

Wright-Parker goes on to say:

*"It doesn't matter if your creations are simple stick figure drawings, or colorful and intricate abstracts, or even realistic landscapes. The value of healing artwork for you is in the **doing**, not the final product."*

Activities have been used in different ways to help people overcome trauma. Examples of this can be found in Théogène Niwenshuti's story about using dance to overcome the Rwandan genocide he survived. He says:

"Dance is a very good way of bringing people together. It doesn't necessarily mean they become friends. It's more about sharing the space as a community. It is a start... And movement is a safe way of opening their journey." (Boland, 2016)

Brooke and Miraglia, in their book '*Using the Creative Therapies to Cope with Grief and Loss*, 2015 write that:

*"**Using the Creative Therapies to Cope with Grief and Loss** is a comprehensive and exciting work that illustrates the use of art, play, music, dance/movement, drama, and animals as creative approaches for helping clients cope with grief and loss issues. The editors' primary purpose is to present an array of creative treatment approaches, which cover the broad spectrum of grief, more than just loss through death."*

The order of activities undertaken by the characters is by no means random. I spent time completing many of these activities myself so that I would have a real sense of how they feel. I wanted to create a programme for people that are hurting, as if I was really going to do this. My understanding of grief is that, when something traumatic happens, we just want to hide away from the world. We feel like we are on our own and we don't want others to intrude on our grief. The process of rejoining society needs to be a slow one.

Jerry de Gier acknowledges this in his article 'The Pain of Letting Go' when he says:

"The key is not to do anything in a hurry." (2004)

That is why the course starts in a non-threatening way with activities that require almost no interaction with others. They allow people to be in the company of others with no expectations. These activities are repetitive, thereby making few intellectual demands. I want Wendy to be able to live inside her head for a while. The activities allowing this are macrame, mosaics, pottery and art.

From there the activities move to ones that require more collective input, both in terms of having to think and interacting with others. Food is a universal symbol of bonding and, for this reason, the activities involving food form the largest group. They include making chocolate truffles; completing a barista course, a seafood course and a sushi course; baking and learning how to ice cake.

In New Zealand we see this bonding when kai is shared at the end of a powhiri to show the acceptance of the manuhiri by tangata whenua. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, which, through the narrative of an African tribe, reflects the traditions of many cultures, the characters share food before they discuss the issue at hand. We see this too in the Catholic church where the celebration of Mass includes receiving the blessed host - known as 'communion'. Perhaps my own African, Catholic heritage has influenced my social positioning as a bringer of food.

The act of bringing people together to eat is widely recognised as a way of breaking down barriers. The characters in my novel spend lots of time eating outside of the 'Healing Through Activity' course. Marsheka acknowledges the role food can play when she explains her choice of venue for a date:

"Fortuna at Sky City. I think a buffet restaurant is more comfortable. If you get stuck for something to say you can go and get some more food." TAoBP, p.78)

Food also features largely in the relationships of Wendy and Keith, and Wendy and her dad. The inclusion of food is made to stand out. Restaurants, specific meals and even recipes pervade the narrative. One restaurant that is used as a motif is the Secret Thai Garden. It is the place to which Wendy attaches the most sentiment when thinking of Arthur, her late husband.

"I shook myself and made the decision to go to the Secret Thai Garden for an early dinner. It was also the restaurant we went to when I thought I was pregnant and we drank ginger beer out of wine glasses. And the place we went to when we found out I wasn't. I put my keys back down, knowing there was no way I could go there now." (TAoBP,

p.45)

The novel ends with her going there with Keith, signalling a shift in her emotional journey.

The decision to research the names of specific meals was born out of the quest for authenticity. It developed into a quirky necessity to set the novel apart. One of the many places where specific dishes are mentioned is when Wendy takes Keith out to dinner for his birthday:

"In the midst of this important discussion taster platters of entree-sized portions of Bistecca Al Pepe Nero, Pollo Alliaglio and Cannelloni Ricotta E Spinach appeared before each of us." (TAoBP, p.57)

When Wendy's dad wants to have a serious word with her, he does so while cooking in her house. This sets him up as the father-provider and makes it easier for him to offer her advice.

*"Dad went over to the stove and heated up the pan. I stood next to him. He tossed the meat in the hot oil.
'When last did you clean the stove, poppet?'
'What are you? My father?'
He smiled. 'It's not just the stove. Your house is dirty.'"* (TAoBP, p.28)

When the group learns to bake a lemon meringue pie, the actions in the scene revolve around Bev telling them exactly how to make it. Explaining each step of the process while Angie is emotional and Wendy annoyed, serves to highlight the importance of a structured world offering stability.

The food courses are the heart of the healing process - making and sharing food to confirm our place within a community of people. And making ourselves feel better in the process.

The characters then move onto two activities that require them to think outside themselves. They are asked to volunteer to help others - first animals, then people. It is easier to help animals because we can make decisions for them. Helping people is harder because it makes us realise that there are others who may be worse off than ourselves. It helps us to realise that we are just a part of a hurting world, rather than holding the monopoly. In both of these, you are given the opportunity to make a difference to others. Feeling valued is an essential step on the path to wholeness. These activities involve volunteering at the SPCA and the Salvation Army op shop.

The final activity, bonsai, allows people to reflect on the journey they have undertaken. Metaphorically, it allows the characters to regain control over something in their lives. It works on the premise that if you cannot save a forest, at least you can save a tree. Every character needs to decide for themselves how far they have come and where they will go from here.

While the activities in the novel may provide the means of healing, the characters themselves are not there to serve as healers. Bev, who runs the course, offers the catalyst but does not step in as a grief counsellor. Likewise, the characters themselves can offer

support and empathy, but no answers. Wendy is acutely aware of her limitations. When Angie is upset and seems on the brink of confiding, Wendy finds a way to deflect it.

"Her voice caught, suggesting that she might begin explaining what had happened to make her change her ways. I was not taking that chance, so I launched into an explanation of how I liked to cook, and what my favourite dishes were." (TAoBP, p.81)

The course is designed to draw them out slowly, in a non-threatening way, until they are ready to be part of society again and gain some semblance of a life.

For some people, the feelings of grief go beyond simple feelings and slip into the realm of depression. Aside from the therapeutic nature of the activities, there is scientific evidence to suggest that exercise, meditation and certain foods release the neurotransmitter, serotonin. The benefits of serotonin are backed up clinically by psychiatry professor Simon Young in his article. He writes:

"Several studies found an association between measures related to serotonin and mood in the normal range...Motor activity increases the firing rates of serotonin neurons, and this results in increased release and synthesis of serotonin." (2007)

According to Annamarya Scaccia's article on the Healthline website (2017), serotonin makes us calmer and more emotionally stable. A practical site examining grief has been set up by two young women, Litsa Williams and Eleanor Haley. In their blog 'Grief and Exercise: a guide for those who prefer the couch', we read:

"Here is the quick and dirty of exercise and mood that is important to understand: in our brain we release neurotransmitters that impact our mood. Serotonin and norepinephrin are both neurotransmitters that help us feel happy and good about the world. Those who struggle with depression often have lower baseline levels of Serotonin. As you may have learned if you checked out our food and alcohol posts, one of the reasons humans love food, alcohol, and drugs is because those all boost our serotonin levels, in turn boosting our mood."(sic)

As such, the activities serve as a way of improving the feelings of the characters. They are able to do this because the characters are grieving, but are not clinically depressed. The 2017 helpguide.org article outlines the difference between grief and depression.

"Remember, grief can be a roller coaster. It involves a wide variety of emotions and a mix of good and bad days. Even when you're in the middle of the grieving process, you will still have moments of pleasure or happiness. With depression, on the other hand, the feelings of emptiness and despair are constant."

Wendy's grief does not tip over into depression. As the protagonist, she is able to offer moments of light when Keith's mum dies and she becomes *his* support. Before the funeral service she is joking with Keith:

*"Then he let on that he had been in touch with [Bev] earlier in the week and had arranged to join us for the barista course.
'And while we're talking about your school friends, Lorelee made the cakes.'
'And I suppose Steph is going to do an interpretive dance.'
He looked at me and then we both started laughing." (TAoBP, p.94).*

Once the service starts she thinks back to her husband's death and slips back into the role of the grieving widow:

"The service passed in a blur as I cried for Arthur and the love of friends, for the mum I didn't have time to know and my dad who would also pass away one day..." (TAoBP, p.95)

Grief

The author Chuck Sambuchino (2013) offers advice on writing about grief. The first point he makes is to make the reader care about the protagonist before showing the grief. Wendy is introduced to the reader through a romantic flashback, establishing her positioning as the protagonist and garnering the reader's empathy, before the truth of her grief is shown. Although this reveals the premise of the narrative to the reader, it is not the inciting incident for Wendy's actions. This incident is the suggestion of the two most important supporting characters in Wendy's life, her dad and Keith, that she seek out some help.

Another point Sambuchino makes is to shake up the lives of the characters so the path to recovery is not smooth:

"As an author, it is your job to push your characters forward on their journeys, and not to allow time to do all the work." (2013)

The introduction of Keith's mother serves as a key plot point, forcing Wendy to confront the pain of her husband's death again. Not because she was close to Keith's mum (in fact she had never met her) but because Keith is her closest friend and she supports him through the process. Keith plays a pivotal role in the text, in that he is the person Wendy can lean on as she journeys to wholeness. Yet he never intrudes into her personal space. When his mother reappears in his life as she lies on her deathbed, Wendy is forced to look outwards from her cocoon of grief.

Many novels in popular fiction play on the stereotypical convention of introducing a love interest for the protagonist. Jojo Moyes does in *After You* (2015) and the result is a watering down of the emotional integrity of the grief. Real life is not that simple. I wanted the healing process to be an authentic one, where pain is real and ugly, and where Wendy finds strength within herself.

This informed my decision to introduce Wendy as a character whose grief has become so much a part of who she is, that she doesn't see it for what it is. She believes she has moved on, but is only fooling herself. The foreword to the 2014 edition of Kubler-Ross's book states:

"The truth is that grief can make you feel like you're going crazy. Grief can make a liar out of you. You say you're doing fine, when really your heart is shattered into a thousand tiny pieces." (2014, Foreword, p.xii)

It is only by going to the programme that she is able to move through the different stages of grief and realise how far she has to go.

Because my characters are all going through some form of grief, though in no way comparable, I have used the commonly recognised elements of the grief process. These were first outlined by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and have often been misinterpreted as steps, rather than possible stages, in the grief process.

There are elements of denial, bargaining, anger, depression and acceptance in the novel, but the characters follow their own emotional journey rather than a lock-step progression. Alan Chapman's interpretation of this model explains the way the stages are meant to be read. He says:

"It is important to bear in mind that Kübler-Ross did not intend this to be a rigid series of sequential or uniformly timed steps." (2006)

Kubler-Ross herself acknowledged the common misinterpretation of her work in the 2005 edition of her book:

"The stages have evolved since their introduction, and they have been very misunderstood over the past three decades. They are responses to loss that many people have, but there is not a typical response to loss, as there is no typical loss. Our grief is as individual as our lives. The five stages are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling. But they are not stops on some linear timeline in grief. Not everyone goes through all of them or goes in a prescribed order." (p.7)

Bringing this idea into a fictional piece of writing, Sambuchino (2013) offers advice for writing about grief in fiction. He outlines different emotions which can be portrayed, but suggests that the important thing is that characters do not stay stagnant.

In a way, the creative activities undertaken by the characters mirror the stages of grief. The first stage of denial can be seen in doing macramé, where you are in your own world and nothing else exists. Anger is shown through the smashing of bits in mosaics. Making something good out of nothing to show yourself as worthy can be seen in pottery and art. Seeing others worse off than you when volunteering can echo depression. And the final stage of acceptance can be seen in bonsai - cutting away the dead bits to let the new you shine through.

As the protagonist, Wendy's emotional state forms the axis around which the story revolves. At the outset of the novel, before the course begins, the reader is introduced to her fluctuating state of mind. My research suggests that this is typical of the erratic behaviour of someone deceiving themselves as to the length of time needed for healing to occur.

Normal calendar events have been incorporated - birthday, Christmas, New Year, Easter - to highlight her emotional turmoil. These are events which are usually planned together and when the absence of a loved one is more significant. Smith et al (2017) speak about the effect these days could have on someone who is grieving the death of a loved one:

"Plan ahead for grief 'triggers.' Anniversaries, holidays, and milestones can reawaken memories and feelings. Be prepared for an emotional wallop, and know that it's completely normal."

Different elements of the suggested stages of grief have been used during key calendar events. Depression is shown when Keith takes Wendy out for her birthday.

"With an exaggerated sigh, I ripped through the paper and found my present. A

phone case with purple glitter and Mickey Mouse ears. I started laughing and then reminded myself that Arthur was gone.” (TAoBP, p.15)

The words ‘reminded myself’ are a deliberate choice to show the tendency to make ourselves stay miserable because in some way we feel we need to do this so as not to betray the memory of the person we have lost.

Anger is portrayed at Christmas time when Wendy turns Arthur’s picture to face the wall and refuses to speak to him.

Bargaining has been introduced on New Year’s eve. This is not the traditional bargaining with God not to take the person’s life, but a rationalisation of why he died:

“Do you ever wonder how long we’ve got? I mean, so many people are getting cancer these days. I might already have it and just not know.” (TAoBP, p.23)

Inclusion of the other two stages, denial and acceptance, would appear contrived. She cannot deny the death of her husband, and the acceptance she longs for will come later in the novel. The plotline of the story is the quest for this acceptance.

Chapman (2006) acknowledges that the grief cycle does not have to refer only to death. He says: *“Death, as life itself, means different things to different people.”*

This idea has informed my decision to include characters with different losses. Steph has not lost someone, yet she feels the loss of her dancing career in a similar way.

“They said the muscle was damaged and that my professional dancing days were over. I stayed in my room and cried for days. I even thought about killing myself. If I couldn’t dance, my life was meaningless.” (TAoBP, p.91)

Likewise, Marsheka goes through a grieving process when her husband abandons her.

“You have no idea what it’s like to have your husband leave you for another man. I feel like I’m only half a woman. I wasn’t enough for him.” (TAoBP, p.128)

Many sources offer examples of the physical manifestations of grief. Among them, Smith et al (2017) speak of fatigue, nausea and weight loss. Wright-Parker includes chest pain and insomnia. Rather than an angst-filled wallowing in misery, which would result from the incorporation of these manifestations, the focus of the novel is on Wendy’s personal journey. Some of the things suggested by Gregory (2017), such as crying, difficulty in sleeping and isolation from friends, form a natural part of my protagonist’s grieving. Likewise, Der Sarkissian’s idea of *“Trouble ...cleaning the house”* (2016) is used as sub-text to illustrate Wendy’s frame of mind.

Her character is a woman who is known for taking pride in the state of her house, and her dad comments that her house is dirty. Wendy is forced to look at it through his eyes.

“And my house wasn’t a show home. It didn’t need to be spotless. I unlocked the front door and stepped inside. Maybe the place could do with a clean. Tomorrow.” (TAoBP, p.32)

Metaphor

The use of metaphor in a text serves many purposes. Aside from the symbolic nature of Wendy’s house being reflective of her fractured psyche, I have employed the use of the

seasons to emulate the grief process. Bryce Courtenay encapsulates beautifully the feelings associated with each season in *The Family Frying Pan*. He is one of my favourite authors and I was struck by how effectively his characters' emotions were reflected in the different seasons.

*"Spring was hope, summer was life, good and bad, autumn was at first beguiling but then became a warning of misery to come, and winter meant death...
The autumn days are beautiful, mellow and tranquil at first...Darkness comes suddenly, with a cluck of the tongue or the snap of malevolent finger and thumb...
God has gone absent from Russia... the bone-white horizon bleak beneath a firmament where the stars have turned off in a vacant sky that offers not the slightest hope...
It has been a lovely spring day, still cold, for the ground has not fully thawed, though the sun is bright enough for hope to leap like skipping children into our hearts..."*
(pp.26-29)

In my novel, the 'Healing through Activity' course starts in autumn, takes them through winter and aims to help them emerge in spring as a healed person (or on their way to being healed). It is more than simply using winter to symbolise sadness and summer, joy. The characters do not demonstrate a collective sense of misery which gradually dissipates as the end of the course approaches. However, there is a clear sense of something changing as time marches on.

Wendy's emotional state correlates with the weather in a kind of pathetic fallacy:

"With my hands rested on the car's bonnet, I tried to ignore the rain and breathe deeply to gain control of my emotions. As I watched the clay flow from my hands and down the red paint, I lost the battle. Wracked with sobs..." (TAoBP, p.85)

*"A gust picked up sand and I wiped some out of my eye. Keith rested his head on mine and spoke softly. 'Maybe you'll meet someone else one day.'
And then the rain came down."* (TAoBP, p.122)

The passing of time has also been depicted through the symbol of the red kitchen clock. Because she and Arthur bought it together, she attaches emotional significance to it. It forms a link between her emotional present and physical past as an embodiment of Arthur's presence.

In a moment of deep loneliness early on in the novel she hides it in the drawer.

"I could hear the clock ticking above the sound of the rain. Suddenly I hated the ugly clock. I took it down. Threw it in the bottom drawer." (TAoBP, p.93)

It is only towards the end of the novel that she feels at peace within herself and can then consciously surround herself with reminders of her husband.

"I sat at the kitchen table, listening to the silence. I waited for the familiar sense of loneliness to wash over me. It didn't. Arthur was still present in everything around me, but today I took comfort in that. I was just taking the clock out of the drawer when Keith rang." (TAoBP, p.173)

Characters

One of the masters of the ensemble cast is Maeve Binchy. Her novels are well known for introducing the reader to multiple characters and then having those characters' lives

collide. *A Week in Winter* is a perfect example of this. Each section of the novel is named for the character/s we are going to meet. We then reach a point where these characters come together in a situation that requires interaction.

The original intention for my novel was for it to have multiple points of view, like Maeve Binchy. With her work the reader feels as if they are getting to know friends. However, when reading *A Week in Winter*, I felt that she had done the protagonist a disservice. Just when I was getting interested in the main character, she was skimmed over as more characters came to the fore. The first section of Binchy's novel is from Chicky's point of view. It ends with:

"She would wake ready for anything, which was just as well because in the months ahead there was quite a lot she had to be ready for." (p.29)

I decided against this. I have gone with a single protagonist in an ensemble cast, so that we only find out about them through what my narrator, Wendy, tells us. This feels like less of a 'whack-a-mole' approach. This is also why I have chosen a first person narrative point of view. Although we follow the grief journey of each of the characters and form an opinion of them, our main emotional attachment is to Wendy. Because she is our window on their world, our view of the others is skewed by her perception. This centres the narrative and allows for a closer relationship between the reader and the protagonist.

In this sense it is closer to Moyes' *After You* (2015), although her characters in the therapy group with Lou are merely functional. They are needed to show that others are going through the programme with her, but we form no opinion of them. My characters are real. Of all of the women completing the course with Wendy, Marsheka can be regarded as a trope - that of the antagonist. However, she is not objectionable for the sake of creating a contrasting character, she has her own story arc and her own misguided idea of what she needs to find healing.

Unlike Sam in *After You*, who is the love interest, Keith plays the role of the shoulder to cry on. He also has his own trauma to deal with and his journey intersects briefly with the other women as he joins their programme for a few sessions. This contributes more to the authenticity I am aiming for. He keeps the reader interested in Wendy's grief. Likewise, Wendy's dad is not there to give her the answers. He tries, in his awkward way, to give her some guidance.

"I don't know much about these things, poppet. I didn't ...you know... when Mum died. One of the ladies in the village gave me this number." (TAoBP, p.15)

An important aspect of writing about grief authentically is to include humour. If someone is battling their way to wholeness, glimmers of who they are will show. Wendy has a dry sense of humour and this needs to show. There are some moments when her reaction to things shows humour, and other times when it is in the way she and Keith talk to each other. A major influence for this type of witty repartee is Craig Silvey's *Jasper Jones* (2009) where the banter between the two young boys masks the unpleasantness each one is going through.

'You're not the king of opinion. It just means you're foolish and narrow-minded.'
'No. It means you have no taste. And no idea what you're talking about.'
Jeffrey laughs. *'Well, who's better then?' he asks.*
'Batman. Easy. The greatest superhero of them all.'
'Batman?' Jeffrey stops walking, and looks around as though he's appealing to a jury.
'You are queer!' (p.68)

Humour like Marian Keyes uses in *Angels*, where every line is supposed to be funny, would not create the authenticity of feeling that I have tried to create. Hers is lightweight, comedy over content, pushing the issues into the background. Mine is to allow the reader a reprieve from the emotion. Her opening page of a novel beginning with a marriage break-up is in keeping with her comedic style.

"Of course, I didn't just wake up one morning and skip the country, leaving my poor sleepy fool of a husband wondering what that envelope on his pillow was. I'm making it sound much more dramatic than it actually was, which is strange because I never used to have a penchant for dramatics. Or a penchant for words like 'penchant' for that matter." (Angels, p.1)

Finding a place in the real world

Although the original concept for this novel was in the genre of 'grief writing', this is not the outcome. The closest critical literary theory inherent in the finished product is a 'reader response lens'. The readers are left to consider their place in the world, and the world of the novel.

The experience for the reader is meant to be an authentic one. There is a balance between allowing an authentic experience and making the reader 'want to die', as Roxanne Gay put it. People can cope knowing that there are others suffering similar losses and overcoming them.

As mentioned earlier, this book is not designed to sit on the self-help shelf. But, the hope is that readers will be able to make an emotional connection and perhaps see something of their own experiences reflected. The characters are intended to portray real-life possibilities. Not everyone finds their happy ever after. The world of my novel is real and complicated. Not everyone will find the same degree of healing in counselling or therapy.

It is important that stories are told. In a world where people find validation through social media and where they judge themselves by the standards of others, there needs to be an avenue of authenticity against which to juxtapose their experiences. Even if only to decide that they're doing okay.

The Art of Broken Pieces is finished. It has been agonised over for eight years and is finally on paper. My hope is that it will find a publisher (who will undoubtedly want me to change everything!) I am prepared for that. I feel there is a market for a novel that is genuine and that shows real people. I have already planned a marketing strategy that involves a 'goody bag' for pre-orders. This would have recipes, a map following Wendy's movements, and vouchers from the restaurants named in the book. In this way, readers could live the story, which would capture their interest.

Perhaps a part of me felt compelled to write my story, to share my experiences. Although it was not in the form of therapy, I can see how my experiences have developed me as a person. And as a writer. To use Kim Etherington's words:

"I see myself as a weaver, a tapestry maker, whose tale is created from the yarns and threads that arise from the stories which have gone before. This tale is a retelling of my own stories, new and different stories that are evoked through the process of reflecting on the previous stories. As we listen to, write or tell stories we are changed by them and something new is formed. If our stories remain untold, closed off inside our heads, without stimulation from new input, they may remain stuck and unchanged, denying us the opportunity to update ourselves in the light of our here-and-now experiences of ourselves." (p.180)

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