

**BLACK PRISM:** Manuscript of a contemporary New Zealand novel

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Black Prism** is a social realist novel that reflects on and explores some of Post-Colonial New Zealand's social and political problems, interrogating these issues, without prescribing definitive answers.

Opening with the shocking violence of a home invasion, the work sees the brutal collision of the two protagonists and their contrasting worlds. It is the confrontation of Carla Hughes and Ben Pomana, victim and perpetrator, Pakeha and Maori, privileged and disadvantaged, upstanding citizen and gangster.

In the bleak aftermath of this event, the novel traces in parallel, the lives of Carla and Ben as they each try to make sense of their new reality. It is many years later that their lives once more intersect, again with startling consequences - each character ironically finding a measure of redemption through the other.

**Black Prism Unravelled** is an exegesis exploring the difficulties encountered by the author in the craft of this novel, in particular her search for authenticity.

**BLACK PRISM UNRAVELLED:** Exegesis exploring the crafting of  
**Black Prism**, a contemporary New Zealand novel.

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*'Go for broke. Always try and do too much. Dispense with safety nets. Take a deep breath before you begin talking. Aim for the stars. Keep grinning. Be bloody minded. Argue with the world. And never forget that writing is as close as we can get to keeping hold on the thousands and one things – childhood, certainties, cities, doubts, dreams, instants, phrases, parents, loves – that go on slipping , like sand through our fingers.'*<sup>i</sup>

As I embarked upon the writing of **Black Prism**, Rushdie's words echoed in my ears. My dreams were big, my destination unvisited. I wanted to capture thought, record life, and move people with words. I wanted to hold on to experiences at least long enough for people to ponder them. The issues that inspired me were not comfortable, nor restrained by propriety; but instead likely to perhaps incite controversy and challenge complacency. So I took a deep breath, threw caution to the wind, aimed for the stars ... and draft one of **Black Prism** was born.

**Black Prism** is a contemporary New Zealand novel written within the conventions of Social Realism. It aims to reflect on and explore some of Post-Colonial New Zealand's social and political problems – interrogating these issues without prescribing definitive answers.

Opening with the shocking violence of a home invasion, the work sees the brutal collision of the contrasting worlds of my two protagonists, Carla Hughes and Ben Pomana - victim and perpetrator, Pakeha and Maori, privileged and disadvantaged, upstanding citizen and gangster. In the bleak aftermath, the novel traces (in parallel) the lives of Carla and Ben, as they try to make sense of their new realities. Many years later, their lives once more



intersect, with startling consequences - each character ironically finding a measure of redemption through the other.

Using the tension that arises from employing two different voices, I endeavoured to arouse within the reader a conflict of emotion and sympathy. The work challenges standard concepts of good and evil; and explores the interplay of factors involved in the making of a criminal, all the while exposing the terrible pain and anguish resulting from such offending.

Athol Fugard's novel, '*Tsotsi*,'<sup>ii</sup> is a work that profoundly influenced my own. In this book, Tsotsi is a street-kid/thug who lives on the streets of a South African township, existing only to rob and kill. After accidentally stealing a baby through a bungled car-jacking, he finds himself, for the first time ever, forced to care for someone else. In so doing, he finds his capacity to love and he rediscovers his humanity. Whilst the ending is far from happy, it is uplifting. Tsotsi, whom the reader initially abhors for his callousness, cuts a devastatingly human figure at the close.

The seed for my work ***Black Prism*** was drawn from a real life New Zealand event. As Tom Wolfe put it in his polemic introduction to the second edition of *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990)<sup>iii</sup> - 'life is where the novelist finds material, no need to invent myth or fable.' My stimulus was the Reporoa farmhouse invasion in 1998 of Beverly and Henk Bouma, which resulted in the murder of Beverly – wife, farmer and mother of three.

***Black Prism*** falls within the realm of realism. The concept of realism is a complex one. In fact its meaning has changed over time, from the nineteenth

century 'objective description of contemporary social reality,'<sup>iv</sup> to the more widely divergent definitions of recent times which either, as in Marxism, implied specifically a grasp of the social structure and its future trends or, as in Western interpretation, embracing 'a more sophisticated awareness of the difficulties raised by the concept of reality'.<sup>v</sup>

My work is best aligned with the latter definitions, appreciating that no art can ever be fully realistic, but should at least attempt to give as accurate and unbiased a reflection of everyday life as is possible. Whilst I have embraced realism in this work, I concede that it but one trend in modern literature that does not necessarily surpass the other styles of the romanticists, classicists or the like.

Tom Wolfe's novel '*Bonfire of the Vanities*' has been a seminal influence in the evolution of my own. I admired Wolfe's passion for his subject matter. He had a story to tell which he clearly believed in; and he told it in defiance of literary tradition and expectation, refusing to be dictated to by theorists and contemporaries. His work grew out of what he witnessed on the ground, and in the end was an impassioned defence of realism.

I marvel at his success in telling an utterly convincing and gripping tale and to this end especially, his work has influenced the development of my own. In search of truth and accuracy, Wolfe headed out beyond his personal experience, as a reporter, to observe and document - riding the American subways and wrestling with 'the beast', to produce an outstanding, but more importantly, authentic story. In this way I too have attempted, through extensive

research, to capture as best I can, the realities of contemporary New Zealand life.

The 'Bouma' incident affected me deeply, both for its brutality and for the youth of two of the four offenders. It sensitised me to the topic of youth offending. I became aware of an apparently increasing trend of youths committing hard-core crimes, epitomised by the conviction of thirteen year old Bailey Junior Kurariki for the manslaughter of pizza worker Michael Choy in 2002. I was appalled and fascinated. What would lead a 'child' to murder?

My interest piqued, I began to read around the youth crime issue, following stories in the tabloids, watching television documentaries and listening on the radio to experts in the field. The more research I did, the more complex and elusive I found the answer(s) to be. Armed with this awareness I felt an onus to challenge society's knee-jerk reactions to such atrocities. I wanted to bear witness to the fuller story that lay beneath the mere statistics of such heinous crimes; and what better medium than through fiction - which would provide a measure of distance from the heat, permitting the reader space to consider the issues.

The subject matter of ***Black Prism*** places it more specifically in the realm of Social Realism – the movement that addresses social and economic issues of importance; delving beneath propaganda to find the truth; focusing on the often ugly realities of contemporary life, and faithfully recording observations in a dispassionate and somewhat detached manner; indirectly calling for social reform.<sup>vi</sup>

*Bonfire of the Vanities* navigates the underbelly of urban America. An unfortunate New York bond-trader accidentally runs down a black youth, the aftermath of which sees the progressive collapse of his white upper class world. Wolfe uses the individuals in his book as symbols or social types of the urban environment he is writing about. As he says, 'It strikes me as a folly to believe that you can portray individuals in the city today, without portraying the city itself.'<sup>vii</sup>

***Black Prism*** similarly navigates the underbelly of urban New Zealand, articulating some of the social tensions and highlighting the inextricable link between man and society.

As I embarked on the writing of this novel, I had a very hard question to ask myself: As an immigrant white female (landing on these shores some twenty years ago), how could I have the audacity to write about a disconnected Maori youth?

I will attempt to answer this.

Nancy Hartsock, a strong proponent of the Feminist Standpoint Theory,<sup>viii</sup> would no doubt have argued against my overcoming this challenge successfully. Her theory, as discussed by Susan Hekman in her article *Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Revisited*<sup>ix</sup> 'asserts that material life structures and sets limits to understanding social relations' and that 'reality will be perceived differently as material positions differ,' 'the dominant group in society (labelling) its perspective as "real" and (rejecting) other definitions.' She further asserts that 'whilst the ruling group's perception of reality is "partial and perverse", that

of the oppressed is not; that it exposes 'real' relations among humans...' insisting that 'the feminist standpoint allows one to go beneath surface appearances to reveal the real but concealed social relations'.

Whilst I agree that material life structures and sets limits to the understanding of social relations, and that socially dominant groups have more power to impose their view of the nature of society, and hence the definition of real, I disagree with her statement that the ruling groups vision is necessarily partial and perverse, and that the vision of the oppressed exposes the real relations among humans.

As Michel Foucault, quoted in the Susan Hekman's article, believed, knowledge is necessarily from some perspective.<sup>x</sup> Hekman takes this one step further: 'If material life structures consciousness, and if different experiences of different groups create different realities, then it must hold for the oppressed as well as the oppressor ... If there are multiple feminist standpoints, then there are multiple truths and multiple realities.'<sup>xi</sup> .

What makes one standpoint epistemologically privileged over another?

All I can then do as author, is do my research well, keep an open mind and view things from as many different standpoints as possible.

There is another point I'd like to raise. Whilst I agree that knowledge is situational, I also believe there is knowledge that transcends situation, tapping in to a universal theme or stream of life that is independent of actor or venue. The task of the writer is to access it.

Throughout history there are stories penned, that share a commonality despite the differing value-systems, class, race, creed or situation of the authors.

The common denominator, I think, is the author's own humanity. And to this end I would like to believe that my humanity qualifies me to write a story about those whose lives fall outside of the realm my experiences. I am interested in the issues that challenge us all, as humans.

In *Change of Heart*, Jodi Picoult<sup>xii</sup> writes about killer Shay Bourne languishing in an American prison, living a life that has given him nothing. He has given little back in return, other than heartache and anguish, until an opportunity presents for him to redeem himself – the opportunity to donate his own heart to the child of his victim (who, without a matching donor, would die of heart failure).

In *Cold Blood*, Truman Capote<sup>xiii</sup> explores a horrendous killing in 1959 of a Kansas farmer and his family, exploring the circumstances surrounding the crime and creating a compelling character study of the killers who are at once despicable creatures and also so very human.

A review of *Tsotsi* in *The Times Literary Supplement*, describes 'an engrossing psychological thriller ... illustrating the cardinal Fugard principle - that no matter how brutal the system which has destroyed families, broken bodies and reduced homes to rubble, it cannot turn out the light.' Could it not be said to be the theme that underpins the other two tales above? Set in different parts of the world, these books are different and yet very similar, dealing with problems peculiar to a specific situation, yet also representative of problems common to the human race.

Surely an author cannot be limited to writing only what falls within his/her realm of life experience? Otherwise no male author could ever create a

convincing female character, no adult ever write about someone older, or about an invalid, a fraudster, or a murderer. Where would that leave Agatha Christie? (Mind you some say she *did* in fact commit a murder in real life!)

To me, a writer is like the actor. He must be able to take on many different personae. To do it well though, and to be convincing, he must of course do his preparation. He must be an acute observer, and have an omnivorous interest in the world. This brings me back to the definition of realism - a *faithful representation* of human life.

I have endeavoured throughout this year and last, to thoroughly research the world from which I drew my characters, in particular the world of Ben , a sixteen year old disconnected Maori youth.

For my novel to work, it had to be authentic! This was my greatest hurdle. Research was crucial to any success I hoped for. I had to immerse myself in Ben and Carla's worlds.

My research was important for accuracy and authenticity in creating plausible characters and in giving me insight into the context within which I was writing.

First up, I went to listen to Celia Lashlie speaking about her book, '*He'll Be OK - Growing Gorgeous Boys into Good Men.*'<sup>xiv</sup> I went on to read her first book, '*The Journey to Prison – Who Goes and Why,*'<sup>xv</sup> as well.

A researcher and at times outspoken social commentator with a degree in anthropology and Maori, Celia has been a solo mother, the first female prison officer to work in a male prison in New Zealand, and then manager of Christchurch Woman's prison. She was involved in the 'Good Man' project in

2004, going into twenty-five single-sex schools to talk with pupils, teachers and parents to create a working definition of what makes a good man in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. Celia has also worked on several projects aimed at improving the lives of 'at risk' children, and empowering families to find solutions to challenges they face.

In her book *'He'll Be OK – Growing Gorgeous Boys into Good Men'*, she explores 'the dangerous years' for our young New Zealand men and identifies factors that could help boys 'cross the bridge of adolescence,' without going off the rails and ending up in trouble with the law, in prison, committing suicide or killed in car accidents.

In *'The Journey to Prison – Who Goes and Why'*, she explores the making of criminals in New Zealand, as well as the punishment of them and the success or not of the prison system in rehabilitating offenders.

After working on 'the inside' for many years, she attests to the fact that in many instances, 'there but for the grace of God, go I,' and 'these people who come to prison come from our communities ... Their journey to prison often (beginning) on the day they were born ...' She suggests that 'the simple reality (is) that they have been born into the wrong family.'

Of note, she underscores the role of family in the making of a criminal, the inextricable link between financial hardship and crime, and the role of societal expectation in perpetuating crime. The cycle of violence - violence begetting violence – is a recurring theme, the abused becoming the abuser.

This notion emerged over and over again in subsequent research I undertook.



Celia highlights the role drugs and alcohol have on the path to prison, and affirms that in her experience very few individuals are inherently bad, very few are born evil; that everyone has dreams, at least when they start out in life.

Finally she reviews the rationale behind imprisonment as a punishment, and what changes can be effected from behind bars.

One thing in particular which she said, resonated with me long after I had closed her book: She asked of the reader to look beyond the picture of any murderer, and see the abused child looking back.

At no time however does Lashlie excuse or minimise the atrocity of the crimes that have been committed. Instead she shows that life is not all black or white, but rather 'vast areas of grey with small blocks of black and white scattered throughout'.

Warren Cummings, Corrections Northern Regional Manager,<sup>xvi</sup> was my next port of call. I contacted him to request permission to visit several of the prisons around Auckland. I was very privileged to be granted permission to go inside Mount Eden Remand Prison,<sup>xvii</sup> Paremoremo Maximum Security Prison,<sup>xviii</sup> and Northern Regional Corrections Facility in Kaikoe.<sup>xix</sup>

The first two visits involved being shown around the respective facility by a member of staff during lockdown of prisoners, and any questions I had, were answered. This provided me with some very concrete information for my book about setting and a little about character and personality. In Kaikoe however, I was invited to talk with a prisoner, an ex-gang member currently serving a life sentence, who has turned his life around, and been 'put in charge' of the Youth

Unit at the prison - a unit, separate from the main facility, that rooms a cluster of young Maori males and first time offenders. Run along the principles of a *Marae*, the programme aims to catch these youngsters before they become contaminated by hard-core prison life. Immersing inmates within their *whanau* and *tikanga*, 'the gang' is replaced by the family culture, giving the offender a different focus and a different sense of belonging. The ultimate goal is to reduce recidivism and return these men into the community to live productive lives

The prisoner with whom I spoke, has even received commendations from the local mayor for his efforts in the unit. My time with him involved listening to the presentation he would give to new arrivals at the unit, and a subsequent discussion, in which he outlined some of the reasons why he himself had fallen into crime. It was a moving and enlightening day. I also had the fortune to witness the unit bidding farewell to one of the in-mates, by way of a *haka*, on the day of his release.

Having watched the compelling TVNZ series '*Into the Darklands*', in which New Zealand forensic psychologist Nigel Latte examined some of New Zealand's high profile murder cases, I went on to read his book '*Into The Darklands and Beyond – Unveiling the Predators Among Us*'.<sup>xx</sup>

Latte has spent a large part of his career working with sex offenders and murderers, helping them confront the consequences of their actions. In the book he tries to answer questions about why offenders are the way they are, and whether they can ever change. One message I drew from the work was again how violence perpetuates violence, and how the role of family and abuse play

such an important role in the moulding of these social ‘monsters’. I was deep affected by the sadness of the stories he told.

To further my understanding of dislocated, disadvantaged youth I then met with Glenn Compain - a cop on the beat in West Auckland, rap artist and international aid volunteer, who recently published a book ‘*Street- Wise Parenting*.’<sup>xxi</sup> Tired of dealing with broken lives, and drawing on experience from his own troubled youth and work at the frontline, he has spoken out; his book outlining the reality many youngsters in New Zealand navigate; and providing information to assist parents in helping their kids survive. Glenn was an inspiring individual to talk with, sharing some valuable insights into youth crime and, in particular, the makeup of youth gangs in Auckland.

One of the reasons that motivated me to write **Black Prism** was that many of the issues it highlights are very current – racial tensions, increasing violent crime, child abuse and immigration. Hence the media proved another valuable source in my research. From watching a TV3 two-part special on gangs,<sup>xxii</sup> and a documentary about seventeen year old from South Auckland’s experience in prison<sup>xxiii</sup>, to a radio interview with a troubled youth who has turned his life around through acting,<sup>xxiv</sup> to another interview with an author of a confessional book about violent offending ‘*Fighting for My Life: The Confession of Violent Offender*.’<sup>xxv</sup> This is to name but a few. There has been a wealth of such material for me to draw on. I have even been found watching u-tube videos of local rap artists, much to my own children’s horror!

The book '*True Red*'<sup>xxvi</sup> by Tuhoe 'Bruno' Isaac and Bradford Haami is a biography of an ex-Mongrel Mob leader as he struggled to turn his back on a shockingly brutal existence. An explicit and honest account of gang life – the activities, language, symbolism and thought processes - this too proved a very useful resource for me.

A meeting with Victim Support,<sup>xxvii</sup> and a police inspector/ ex -head of Homicides<sup>xxviii</sup> was necessary to furnish me with details of police protocol in the aftermath of a violent crime.

The book '*Deep Beyond The Reef*,'<sup>xxix</sup> and the subsequent documentary film made about the book -*In the Name of God* - by award-winning film-maker Annie Goldson; then the visit by author Owen Scott himself to our AUT MCW class,<sup>xxx</sup> all proved invaluable to me when trying to grasp the reality for a survivor of horrendous crimes. Owen was the brother of John Scott, the Fiji Red Cross Director who was murdered alongside his partner Greg Scrivener in 2001 in Fiji. His very personal account of the immediate days and weeks following the horrific death of his brother, gave me a unique insight into the madness and emotion that belongs only to a family caught up in such tragedy

Reading other literature in the genre of social realism has of course been another imperative. Patricia Grace, Alan Duff, Kate Grenville, JM Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, and Athol Fugard are some of the authors that stand out in my mind for the power their words wielded over me. Of note, Patricia Grace has kindly granted me permission to use one of her short stories within my work.

Like Duff's 'Once Were Warriors'<sup>xxxi</sup> and Fugard's 'Tsotsi', **Black Prism** is a grimly realistic work. Yet despite the darkness of the tale, it is a story of hope and possibility. I hope, my chosen title will convey this: The colour black is usually associated with evil, with opacity, with darkness. A prism is associated light. Yet it can also be simply a dull, unremarkable piece of glass, which, if a light is shone through it at the correct angle, will reflect a rainbow. Such is the human story. We all have the potential for good. Whether that potential is ever realised is largely dependent upon the circumstances life deals us.

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