

Tane's War

&

Shearing Identity

Envisioning New Zealand's queer past

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Attestation of Authorship

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

Brendan Weir

Abstract

This thesis explores whether a primarily minority-focused (homosexual) narrative can remain accessible and meaningful to a majority (heterosexual) audience. Through the perspective of Queer Theory, and through my own authorial paradigm as a gay artist, I examine the plausibility of gay characters and heroes to a mainstream audience and consider to what extent they should remain recognisable through the lens of mainstream social and cultural experience.

The thesis is comprised of two elements; *Tane's War*, the creative-practice-as-research component of the Master of Creative Writing degree and *Shearing Identity*, an exegesis critically reflecting upon the creative work. The exegesis is presented in two parts; a foreword discussing the form of the creative work (which is presented before the screenplay) and a critical analysis of my creative practice (presented after the screenplay).

Tane's War is presented as a *screenplay for reading*, a format which uses many traditional conventions of the screenplay but incorporates additional descriptive elements to allow any reader (not just those familiar with the screen-industry) a full understanding of character, structure and voice. *Tane's War* is set in 1950s rural New Zealand and on France's Western-front during the Great War. It explores themes of identity, family, prejudice, marginalisation and courage.

FOREWORD

The screenplay is a unique artefact of authorial endeavour because, in almost any written form, it is commonly perceived as an 'unfinished' work. When a novel or book of poetry is printed, it is recognised as a completed artwork; the incontrovertible (and legally protected) creation of the author. Similarly, a stage-play, once printed, is seen as a completed work in and of itself; something to be read and pondered and, from time to time, recreated in a live format. In contrast, when the final words of a screenplay are typed by the originating author, there is seldom the same recognition of finality. The expectation is that they will be subsequently reworked, edited and reshaped to fit the requirements of other artists involved in the downstream process of film or television production. In most cases, the screenwriter is not even expected to remain the intellectual owner of the completed work. I have highlighted this prevailing idea of the screenplay as a mere 'blueprint' because *Tane's War* is presented as one of the exceptions to this rule.

Due to the complexity of the screen production process, and owing in no small part to the politics of the industry, screenplays come in a variety of different forms; shooting scripts, pitching screenplays, technical scripts and talent-scripts to name a few. While each different screenplay type has its own shapes and conventions, the linking commonality is their need to do a job; to provide sufficient and appropriate information for their specific audience. A technical script, for example, is likely to be heavy in technical detail, perhaps containing annotations about camera angles or lighting. A pitching-script, on the other hand, is usually presented to sell the work and will seek to express the story clearly and powerfully.

As the author of the screenplay you are about to read, I have had to make a number of decisions about the shape and form of my work. The most fundamental of these has been what form my screenplay should take in order to function as a creative-writing thesis. The various screenplay-types mentioned above, include conventions of form that define variables such as overall length, the use of cinematic elements and the inclusion of technical directions. But what conventions, if any, should apply to a screenplay developed (in the first instance) to be read as a body of written artwork? In any traditional sense, *Tane's War* is closest to a pitching script. But to whom is it being 'pitched' and for what purpose?

In researching this question, I became aware of various academic discussions around the idea of a 'screenplay-for-reading'. With a dramatic surge in the number of

screenplays now being published to be read, several arguments have been made about the form and function of such works. Charles Deemer (2002), in his lecture series titled *Are screenplays literature?*, suggests some screenplays are more readable (and thus more literary) due to their written form and aesthetics.

Screenplays can be written to be read aesthetically, even when delivering an entertaining story. They reflect a different set of literary rules than those of fiction, of course. In fact, screenwriting is closer to writing poetry with its emphasis on compression and minimalism. (Deemer, 2002, p. 3)

He points out that to recognise the literary value of a screenplay we must consider the play's ability to communicate beyond the superficial, to tackle 'enduring human themes'. The screenplay writer accomplishes this through focusing on elements of character, not technical directions or conventions. He argues that 'a screenplay can be written in such a way that it tells us much about the human condition... offering touching and universal themes of what it means to be human... They can make us feel and make us think' (p. 3). This perspective can be supported through a close reading of any number of screenplays. A good example comes from *Brokeback Mountain* by Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana (2005). The action descriptor at the emotional climax of the film goes well beyond typical shooting-script conventions.

ENNIS presses his face into the fabric... hoping for the faintest smoke and mountain sage and salty sweet stink of JACK. But there is no real scent, only the memory of it, the imagined power of Brokeback Mountain, of which nothing is left but what he now holds in his trembling hands. (McMurtry and Ossana, 2005, p. 92)

This level of description is clearly for the reader. Smells and feelings so specific cannot be easily converted to screen but they provide contextual clues for the reader to allow the work to be understood on a deeper level. Kevin Alexander Boon (2008) defines the screenplay-for-reading through the lens of academic study (screenplay studies). In his book *Script Culture and the American Screenplay*, he highlights the primary role of the written text as opposed to technical notations.

First and foremost, the primary object under examination in screenplay studies should be the written text. [. . .] screenplay studies, like literary studies, should illuminate a reader's understanding of a text. (p. ix)

In her thesis titled *Filmnameh* (2001), Pari Shirazi defines the screenplays-for-reading, now popular in the Middle-east, as 'mental cinema or filmnameh' (p. 1). As a genre

written specifically to be read, they tend to share elements or conventions that emphasise their readability.

In general certain elements essential to the writing of a film script have been adapted. The filmnameh contains formal dramatic and cinematic elements, dialogue, action, imagery, successive movement [...] and temporal interruptions. The writing style follows the format of screenplays, although these are not 'shooting scripts' and thus do not include detailed technical directions. (Shirazi, 2001, p. 57)

From a more western perspective, Ali Saeed Zanjaani (2006) in his thesis *Screenplay: movie script or literature*, defines a new genre he calls the 'screenplay-novel'; a screenplay to be read.

The style of format of the screenplay-novel resembles that of the screenplay with some adjustments made to fit the nature of the text. [...] It reflects the characteristics of both screenplay and novel. It stands between the borders of the two disciplines; a narrative writing with a hybrid nature. This identity remains unchanged as long as the screenplay-novel is on the paper, bonded within the diameters of writing. (Zanjaani, 2006, p. 108)

Most commentaries have recognised two distinct types of published screenplay: those that were initially written to be used by people involved in film production (spec-screenplays and shooting scripts) and those that were produced specifically to be read. Screenplays from this first group are seldom published, and those that are almost always appear after the movie has been produced (and often seem to function as a value-adding artefact). The second group of published screenplays include those written primarily to be read by people outside of the usual film-industry practitioners. To date they include: i) academic works, ii) the emerging genre of literary-screenplays, iii) Filmnameh and iv) filmic texts. As a creative-writing thesis, *Tane's War* falls into the first of these categories; academic works.

According to both Zanjaani (2006) and Shirazi (2001), most 'screenplays-for-reading' conform to the general formats common to all screenplays. They include traditional dramatic and cinematic elements such as action, dialogue, imagery and, in many cases, even small amounts of camera direction. However, in most cases, they contain a minimal amount of production direction. To enable the reader to fully interpret the screenplay, the author adds written detail to replace the visual language of film. Pari Shirazi (2001) defines this additional material as 'novelistic text', which she states involves 'written elements that describe images, thoughts and feelings in prose to supplant them on the screen of the readers mind' (p 235). Through the addition of these

visual elements as text, the reader is provided with a cohesive interpretation of the screenplay without the need for accompanying visual imagery or the practiced mental translation of film industry professionals.

Tane's War has been crafted with this reader-accessibility in mind. I have attempted to produce a work that incorporates elements of both the screenplay-novel and filmnameh. I have included many elements of novelistic text (particularly in action descriptors and parentheticals) to ensure the play presents as a cohesive work to any reader, regardless of screen-industry experience. For example, where a traditional screenplay might leave the appropriate expert to fill in details of costume, atmosphere or actors' facial expression, I have included these as an integral part of the screenplay where they impact directly on the texture of the work. Emotional nuances have been retained. Furthermore, to maximise readability, I have removed almost all technical detail (including transitions), and done away with the use of beats. However, all the defining elements of a screenplay remain. It is written in the master-screen-format, the almost universal convention of font and layout which equates (on average) a printed page of screenplay to a minute of screen-time. Each scene is introduced with a Scene-Header (a capitalised line indicating an interior [INT] or exterior [EXT] shot), the setting and the specific time (often in relation to the previous shot). Action descriptors include a capitalised name and age when a new character is introduced. Dialogue often includes parentheticals which provide information about the mood or movement of the character. Interrupted dialogue maintains the convention of 'more' and 'cont'd', which many non-industry readers will recognise from modern stage-plays. I have also included one montage, a series of action-descriptors (defining a sequence of distinct visual images) that abbreviates the process of a young man learning to ride a horse. Apart from the trope of a 'Fade in' to begin the play and a 'Fade out' to finish, I have retained very few transitions. The exception is where the narrative moves between the two timeframes of the story where these transitions function as a stronger visual break between the sections of narrative.

Shearing Identity

Envisioning New Zealand's queer past.

'Tane's War' is a screenplay set in 1950s rural New Zealand and on France's Western-front during the Great War. It explores themes of identity, prejudice, sacrifice and courage and considers the fluidity of our expressions of 'family'.

The protagonist, Tane, is born to a Maori father and European mother in Auckland 1899. After a rocky childhood, at age 16 he escapes a fabricated murder accusation by enlisting as a WW1 soldier under a false name. Assigned to a company of 'coloureds and criminals', Tane meets Zach, a young British cavalry Lieutenant. The two young men fall in love and, risking a firing-squad, develop a relationship. As their battalion is overwhelmed, Zach is ordered to abandon his 'inferior' men. However, at the last minute, he defies orders and sacrifices himself to save Tane and the soldiers under his command.

In 1953, Tane is the foreman on a Hunua sheep station where orphan boys are trained as shearers. When a troubled youth, Briar, arrives at the farm, he becomes a target for the farm bully. Aussie, one of the older boys, takes a shine to Briar and protects him. Aussie's feelings intensify and are returned by Briar. Eventually they develop into romantic attraction and Aussie must confront his own sexuality. Tane watches the burgeoning relationship with concern. Struggling with his own past, he must examine his responsibilities as role-model, protector and teacher. Eventually he decides that the path of valour is worth the price and dies protecting Aussie and Briar's right to choose who they love.

Any meaningful examination of artistic practice must start at the beginning of the creative process. Few, if any, authors truly begin the creative journey by placing pen to paper. As artists, we bring hopes, intentions, dreams and inclinations with us to the empty page. In contrast to the common whimsy of 'divine inspiration', I have always found these personal drives, not only valid, but in many ways the central engine of my artistic creativity. My motivations for creating *Tane's War* centre on my exploration and recognition of my own identity as a gay New Zealand artist.

To provide a literary context for my work, I have considered *Tane's War* from the perspective of Queer Theory. As a literary theory, it recognises my authorial paradigm as well as the social and cultural context of my work. Through my writing

practice, I hope to develop a distinct voice as a queer New Zealand writer; but one who can speak to a broad audience.

While all writers must struggle with the challenges of plausibility when presenting fiction, this is particularly dilemmatic when writing elements of character or narrative outside the social or cultural experience of a majority audience. Complex gay narratives and characters can represent a cultural 'unknown' and, in some cases, may even be defined as culturally unsafe. In the context of queer theory, I will examine how this potential audience-impediment has informed my writing practice; particularly with reference to the representation of gay characters as heroes. Focusing on an example from *Tane's War*, I will consider the way I have attempted to tie the narrative to pan-human themes which might resonate with a broader audience.

There has certainly been an historical pattern of misrepresentation of gay characters and themes in fiction. While the number of gay narratives has increased in recent years, stereotypes still prevail. Publishing, television and cinema continue to shape content to fit perceived majority audiences, often 'straightening' gay narratives or reducing them to palatable stereotypes. As a creative practitioner, I remain aware of this potential downstream threat to the cohesiveness of my writing.

In considering the framework of my creative practice, I have examined my own paradigm as a writer; a process that has required a conscious examination of my motivations as well as a recognition of the personal and extrinsic forces that have delivered me to this point in my artistic journey. An active involvement in the struggle for gay-rights in New Zealand during the late nineteen-eighties shaped many of my political and artistic views. Both as a political activist and as a writer I have been heavily influenced by queer-theory.

As a young gay teenager living in suburban Auckland in the early 1980s, I searched for support and validation by seeking role-models and examples that could reinforce my alternative self-image. In a single-sex educational environment, I was surrounded by 'straight' boys who were looking for and finding the same thing; role-models they recognised as kindred; heroes if you will. For these heterosexual peers, a myriad of sportsmen, movie stars, literary characters and real-life adult mentors provided developmental guideposts towards an integrated adulthood. However, my hunt for gay-heroes was largely in vain, turning up only hints and allegations or villainous stereotypes. The shelves of the public library provided the few highlights; in the case of my sixteen year old self, E.M Forster's *Maurice* (1971) and an illicitly procured copy of

Edmund White's *The joy of gay sex* (1977). In these two works I found two heroic, if flawed, gay fictional heroes (Maurice and Scudder) and a gay authorial role-model (Edmund White).

Maturing beyond the tumult of adolescence, like so many gay men, I often found myself drowning in the overwhelming heterosexual focus of the world I inhabited. From every angle I was washed with neatly-packaged slices of straight culture; television, magazines, songs, films, pulpits and billboards all rocked me with waves of busty-babed, large-familied, picket-fenced success. Desperate for air, I continued to reach for gay heroes; 'out' public figures, queer artists, gay fictional characters - any dry land on which to catch my breath. Slowly, through the 1980s and 1990s, the body of work we now define as Gay Fiction began to surface in the domain of mainstream literature. While American and European authors provided the first offerings, it was the emergence of a New Zealand gay-fiction voice that excited me and focused my own artistic energies. Peter Wells' *Dangerous Desires* (1991) was a defining work for me; a voice that spoke in the language of my own experiences. Other gay New Zealand authors quickly followed with homosexual narratives and unapologetic depictions of gay lives (Graeme Aitken, 1995; Witi Ihimaera, 1995; Jeff Buchanan, 1998). These works have provided me a context within which I have been able to develop my own writing; a journey to discover my voice not only as a gay author, but as a 'New Zealand' writer.

To examine my own creative practice, I have found it necessary to provide a theoretical context for my research. While Structuralism has often been applied to the analysis of filmic texts, it is Queer Theory that most broadly encompasses the elements of *Tane's War*. As a literary theory it not only examines the role of gender, identity and sexuality, all important themes within my work, but also recognises my authorial paradigm as part of the social and cultural context of my writing. In a society where sexual-preference is instinctively linked with gender (often from the earliest moments of life via dualities as banal as pink versus blue), queer theory smashes the supposed links between gender, identity and desire. Judith Butler (1990), one of the foundational proponents of queer theory, argues that identity and desire are flexible and not defined by stable factors such as sex-based-gender.

There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; ... identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results... If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender. (p. 25).

While some commentators have questioned the validity of queer theory (Morland, 2007; Green, 2002), I have found it to be an effective tool for the examination of my own text. In his article *Queer and then*, Yale professor Michael Warner (2012) argues that, far from being irrelevant, queer theory remains a valid tool for the analysis of queer-writing.

Many of queer theory's greatest challenges - for example, in the analysis of normativity, which should have become central to philosophy and the social sciences, but has been scrupulously ignored by them, or the connections between sexuality and secularism that are central to so many kinds of conflict around the world - remain undeveloped. Thus to my mind, the widespread impression that queer theory is a thing of the past, that we are now at some point "After Sex", seems tragically mistaken. (Warner, 2012, para. 23)

The identity of a queer artist becomes central because it is inherently anti-establishment. In much the way we might consider Sylvia Pankhurst a communist writer or Sheila Jeffreys a feminist author, to fully understand the queer writer we must also consider their work in the context of the social norms they are working outside of. Ruth Goldman (2010), in her article *Exploring Norms around Sexuality, Race and Class in Queer Theory*, defines the queer artist as working against oppression. 'It's important to think about how sexuality is connected to other systems of oppression. Queer theory is not an identity but a way of looking at and examining hierarchy in our world.' (p. 170). In fact, it is queer theory's ability to question normativity, particularly in relation to an artist's self concept, that has made it a useful tool for an understanding of my own paradigm as a writer. During my undergraduate years, I studied post-colonial gay-studies and tried to understand my own work through that discipline's gender-role-focused, social-historical framework. But gender-questioning never played a role in the formative recognition of my own queerness. I was always comfortably and confidently a homo-focused 'male' - a recognition, not of a socially defined 'role', but of a self defined state of being; a sex and sexuality complete unto itself and un-requiring of a social prescription. Queer theory recognises my whole artistic identity as queer; gay self-identity and gay politics viewed as complimentary aspects of an artist's 'self' without drawing a line between the two.

Tane's War certainly incorporates a world-view that is uniquely mine, albeit expressed through separate narrative voices. It is without doubt a 'queer' perspective. Homosexuality is presented as an unquestioned reality of central characters, not argued in terms of an alternative to a heteronormative model. Queerness is innate and it is the conflict between these characters' individual realities and the semi-secularised societies

they exist within that drives the narrative. Only one of the four gay characters, Aussie, struggles internally with the conflict of sexuality and the expectations, rules and politics of the world he exists in. It is his eventual recognition of the imposed extrinsic social pressure that enables his self-acceptance. His recognition of identity is an act of self-empowerment, a rebellion; a refusal to accept the identity of expectation and, instead, embrace his personal truth. For those of us who, amongst thousands of our brothers and sisters, marched loudly on the streets, this may seem a trivial accomplishment. But in the context of the 1950's rural setting, Aussie's conscious defiance is every bit as radical and, as referenced in the final line of the play, a foreshadowing of the civil-rights struggle to come. Tane's journey has been set in contrast. His innate recognition of his sexuality, while momentarily acknowledged in the emotional crucible of the trenches, has not led to a life of openness and companionship. His contentedness as a 'single man' is a judgement I have left, in part, to the reader. A life of clinging to the perfection of the past, of holding onto the dead, might seem a half-life, a denial of the needs and realities of one's present. Tane's final lines offer clues to his true emotional state. The couplet he delivers as he halts Victor's blade (p. 116) suggests a man who has lived life with a sense of defeat, his emotional war lost even as the physical war was won. The real wound he carries is, perhaps, a contained bitterness; one which surfaces as an assault on Victor, but which is usually concealed by his respectful temperament. Tane's deepest hurts have been inflicted by his society; a society for which Tane has lost so much but which has refused him its sanction. Aussie's life lies at a sort of historical tipping point. In contrast, Tane has lived before that time of change, just as his death looks beyond it.

Tane's War certainly attempts to highlight this multi-generational process of social change; the sacrifices of previous generations to win the freedoms we have today. On a very direct level, I have attempted to do this by re-envisioning New Zealand's queer past; replacing the queer characters in New Zealand's past, characters and heroes that have been forgotten or actively removed from our histories or re-written to conform to more hetero-normative expectations. The struggle for gay-rights in New Zealand may have reached its public zenith in the 1970's and 1980's but it was built on the small (and often dangerous) challenges to social-convention, enacted by generations of individuals in accepting and living their own queerness. Chris Brickell (2008) has suggested that this gradual process led to a sense of community. And only as a community could we recognise 'queer' as a valid minority. Writing about the gradually evolving New Zealand gay culture of the 1940's and 1950's he states.

In the cities and in the country, homoerotically inclined men embraced opportunities and created sexual worlds out of the circumstances at hand. [...] even the most apparently constrained of conditions presented interesting possibilities, and different sorts of parallel worlds came into being. [...] While many mid-century New Zealanders thought that any man might have sex with another, for some men the fusing of the emotional and the sexual heralded a queer future. (Brickell, 2008, pp . 176-202)

This recognition of a queer future, a better tomorrow, is woven throughout my work. For example, in a scene contrasting empirical and colonial rubrics, Young Tane and Zach consider their own future through imagined introductions to each other's families; a moment of clinging to conventional family-centred social structure which is quickly replaced by a shared vision of a new kind of reality, a future of travel and discovery, their own complete family unit - an undiscovered country. The post-colonial, one-generation-removed reflection provided by Aussie and Briar goes further in exploring queer futures. The new vision of 'family' embodied by their suggested bond with Zac is not a pale echo of heteronormative domestic structures, but a unique answer to the needs of three individuals newly unburdened of societal expectations.

An element of my writing that could be seen as 'at odds' with queer-theory is my intention to create a piece of gay-fiction that remains accessible to a non-gay audience. Early queer-theorists such as Sedgwick and Butler might interpret this as inherently 'apologist'. However, I disagree that maintaining a queer work's plausibility and accessibility to a mainstream audience will undermine its impact or necessitate the 'watering down' of queer elements. In his Epilogue to *The Duration of a Kiss*, Peter Wells (1994) comments on the heterosexual audience's experience when encountering gay fiction.

The most challenging thing for heterosexual readers is simply to experience a world in which their concerns are placed to the side, viewed from a different angle. The priorities of home, family and children are here viewed by people who have often been there, then taken a different route. This is the most challenging experience, perhaps: to experience marginalisation, a curious parallel to the life-long experience of most homosexual men and women. (Wells, 1994, p. 206)

Tane's war presents a recognisable slice of rural New Zealand life viewed initially through the eyes of a semi-closeted older gay man and subsequently through the slowly-distorting lens of adolescents coming to terms with their emerging desires. The screenplay contrasts the characters' differing responses to their own homosexuality;

unquestioned acceptance clashing with internalised homophobia in the two younger characters while Tane travels a more complex journey from naive self acceptance to a socially aware pragmatism. My heroes react to their own sexuality in different ways; for Aussie, there is a reflection of heterosexual misconceptions, but for Tane, Zach and Briar their recognition of queerness is innate and unquestioned. It is this paradigm-shift away from heteronormative realities, expressed through the characters' self-image, that I believe offers a framework for interpreting and integrating any unfamiliar point of view a mainstream audience may encounter in my work. Ben Walters (2013), in his article *How gay cinema wooed straight audiences*, considers if it still matters if a film's lead character is gay.

The real indication of gay no longer being a mark of irreducible otherness comes when straight audiences identify personally with stories about LGBT characters. Queer audiences have long imagined themselves into movies without overtly gay subject matter, from *Pillow Talk* to *Mommie Dearest*. Why shouldn't heterosexual viewers do the same? Last year, *Weekend*, about two men meeting and hanging out, attracted a considerable crossover audience. And Pietro's situation in *A Magnificent Haunting* is one that slightly lost daydreamers of any gender or orientation could recognise. (para. 11)

To provide a broader perspective, throughout the creative process I have invited readers of varied backgrounds and orientations to consider parts of my work. Their varied responses have reinforced Wells' comments on the 'marginalisation' of straight audiences. The invention of a homosexual 'hero' means enabling an audience to put aside preconceptions of traditional outcomes and even traditional roles; the customary temptress may wear a beard, the damsel in distress might be a rent-boy and there may be no alluring leading-lady to reward the hero's struggle and reinforce the reproductive 'ever-after' of success. Tragedy may lie in a character's heterosexuality or comic-relief in the fruitless seductions of the opposite sex. But for the 'hero' to remain accessible, even plausible, to a non-gay reader, the elements that define the character's heroism and invest the audience in the character's plight must remain recognisable. The need-for-belonging, the act of sacrifice and the search for identity are elements of pan-human experience, greater than the specific concerns of sexuality. And, in fact, it was these themes that my test-readers (regardless of orientation) felt focused their empathy towards my characters. This reinforced my initial creative decision to ensure that these larger themes underpinned the narratives of *Tane's War*.

While the sexuality of the protagonists in my work define it as belonging to gay-fiction, I am aware of the dangers presented by pre-existent stereotypes; information or

misinformation the reader might bring to the bear on the text. In psychology, Cognitive Theory has examined the effect of 'assumed prior-knowledge' on an audience's understanding of new or unusual material. Morris & Maisto (2001), describe this effect as derivative and correlative subsumption.

Integrating new information involves the subsumption of meaningful material within existing cognitive structure, through derivative or correlative means... It is remarkably easy to present an audience with material that is inherently meaningless for them because they do not have the required background information. (Morris & Maisto, 2001, p. 89)

And it is not just a lack of knowledge of gay life that might present a challenge to a reader. Existing misinformation could be just as problematic. Powerful stereotypes such as effeminate-gay men (pansies) or sexually-predatory-homosexuals (two images often still perpetrated in conservative politics and sensationalist media) could create a sense of detachment for any reader of gay fiction. An audience that holds strong preconceptions of what a homosexual might be or how they might act, could find it hard to accept the integration of a gay hero. Of particular concern to me, are the problems of reconciling traditional masculine archetypes with the development of emotionally complex homosexual characters. For a contemporary audience, the idea of a 1950s rural homosexual who is well-adjusted, highly masculine and pedagogic, could represent a barrier to plausibility. However, Tane's sexuality is crucial to the story. It needs to be integrated without compromising the audience's ability to empathise with him and without undermining his emotional complexity. Armistead Maupin (1976) in his serialised tale of social change, *Tales of the City*, uses setting to get around this problem. The 'gay-quarter' of San Francisco (perhaps equivalent to Auckland's Ponsonby & K-Road) can be more easily accepted as a setting full of 'well adjusted' gay characters. In contrast, Annie Proulx's short story, *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), highlights and explores this very issue by challenging the reader's preconceptions and using the barrenness of her landscape as metaphor for the loveless existences of many rural homosexuals in the mid twentieth century. In *Tane's War*, I have tried to use this disaccord between the social-conservatism of the time periods and the characters' sexuality as a way of driving the narrative conflict. The social conventions of the day create misunderstandings and confusions for both straight and gay characters. These lead to conflicts, sometimes frustrating and even farcical but counter-pointed by the very real dangers of living a homosexual life in these settings.

Even today, these social misconceptions continue to impact the lives of gay men. One of the best examples that continues to recur is the misrepresentation of male-male pedagogic relationships as pedaphilically motivated. In *Tane's War*, the nominal protagonist's later-life position as a role-model for young men, defines his character as, amongst other things, a mentor. Within the context of the setting (and the social expectations of its timeframe), his sexuality could be viewed as contrary to, or in conflict with, his role as mentor. Brickell (2008) points out that from the McCarthy style paranoid-conservatism of the 1950s until as late as the homosexual law reform of the 1980s, mainstream New Zealand had been bombarded with messages of gay men as predatory paedophiles and that 'adolescents would be led astray' (p. 352) by gay men. Fifty years ago, celebrated NZ novelist, Bill Pearson (1963), dealt with this specific conflict in his story *Coal Flat*, by presenting his protagonist's sexuality as ambiguous and then using narrative voices to question the cultural preconceptions of gay men as 'effeminate' and 'deviant'. Pearson lived the majority of his life as a closeted gay man (homosexuality was only decriminalised in New Zealand in 1986) and his work provides an interesting comparison for a gay writer creating fiction for a contemporary mainstream audience. Michael King (2003) in *The Penguin History of New Zealand*, suggests that Pearson's *Coal Flat* could be seen as 'a gay novel in straight drag' (p. 458), a disguise to make it accessible to a 1960s non-homosexual audience. Christopher Burke (2008), writing in the *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, points out that, in the context of queer theory, Pearson's characterisation of his protagonist as 'sexually ambiguous' is a response to the social pressures of the time.

Such a representation conflates many of the anxieties surrounding the protection of children from 'deviant' men perpetuated in public and official discourses of the 'homosexual'. (Burke, 2008. p. 108)

Burke evidences the way that Pearson then uses other characters to attack the reader's preconceptions.

[He] also displaces lingering medical discourses applied against queer bodies when he suggests that 'everyone's got a different nature' and that not 'everyone' is 'made the way the doctor ordered'. This notion of innate subjectivity displaces state and community interventions of male homosexuality as legitimate. [He] underscores the fundamental disjunction between dominant social assumptions and the reality experienced by those outside the rubric of heteronormativity. (Burke, 2008. p. 109).

The half-century since *Coal Flat* was written has seen fundamental changes in the preconceptions of much of NZ society, undoubtedly driven, in some small way, by the daring and challenging work of these early gay authors. In the last twenty five years, gay New Zealand fiction has 'come out of the closet'. The need to hide homosexual characters as 'signal-characters' in the manner of Frank Sargeson or veil homosexual narrative, as can be seen in the works of Pearson and Courage, has now passed. However, for my own creative practice, these works provide a clear lesson about the challenges of fully engaging a non-queer reader or viewer in homosexual character or narrative-elements, particularly in an historical setting.

From the homoerotic subtexts of Frank Sargeson's short stories to the semi-autobiographical narratives of contemporary writers such as Witi Ihimaera and Peter Wells, New Zealand has a proud history of gay writers creating gay characters and gay narratives. These champions have all reached beyond the confines of a minority audience by embracing themes of pan-human significance. While I cannot hope to scale the heights of my forebears, I have tried to use the narrative threads within my work, including the gay narrative elements, to explore the broader themes of honesty, identity, courage, fatherhood and family. A satisfactory development of multiple themes in a two-hour screen-drama is a significant challenge, and only by interweaving these threads was I able to explore these ideas with any conviction. For example, the climactic line of Father Patrick's sermon, 'What evil it is for a woman to deny a father his child!' (*Tane's War*. p. 73), uses the idea of denial as a nodal point for the themes of identity, courage and fatherhood. On the surface, the priest berates the suicide, but sub textually, he is attacking Edna for refusing to sanction his wish to have a family. The clerical title 'Father' is an empty one for Patrick but he lacks the courage to begin the journey to what he perceives as true fatherhood. The priest's words also highlight Edna's refusal to give George a son; a regret George carries with him. On a more carnal level, Edna is denying Patrick the love of her child; both because Edna is the priest's paramour and because Edna controls her daughter. However, the juxtaposition of 'father' and 'child' in this line, also calls attention to the shared secret of Victor's identity. Because Edna lacked the courage to deny social convention, Victor's nameless father is denied a son just as Victor is denied both parents; the mirror image of the choice made by Tane's mother. The imperfect outcome for both mothers is a commentary on the complex nature of 'family'; there are never easy answers. Counter-pointing these denials is the connection between Tane and his adopted daughter; a fatherhood of choice. The meaningfulness of a non-biological parent is dismissed both by George's actions (his distance from the

orphan-boys) and by Patrick's words. Yet Tane and Zac's bond is both real and meaningful. So too is Tane's fatherly bond with the boys, something George recognises but fails to truly understand.

Times are most assuredly 'a-changin'. Today's queer New Zealand youth are unlikely to need to trawl library shelves for hidden LGBT narratives. On an international stage, the mainstream success of gay novels such as *A boy's own story* (White, 1982), *The regeneration trilogy* (Barker, 1996), *The hunger angel* (Müller, 2012) and movies such as *Making Love* (Alder, Sandler & Hiller, 1982), *Beautiful thing* (Garnett, Harvey & Macdonald, 1995) and *Brokeback mountain* (Hausman, McMurtry & Lee, 2006) shows that queer narratives can resonate with a straight audience. However, most mainstreamed queer-fiction fits a narrow definition of acceptable narrative form; the queer protagonist struggling with his/her marginalisation in an unquestionably heterosexual world. Here is a portrayal of the homosexual a mainstream audience can feel comfortable with; the tortured alien having to accept their extrinsic nature and find a way to integrate it within the majority's social framework. In effect, many of these works can be defined as belonging to the sub-genre of 'coming-out' stories. Early queer narratives presented to mainstream audiences even reinforced the moral superiority of heteronormative, procreative culture. For example, *The boys in the band* (Dunne, Crowley & Friedkin, 1970) and *A very natural thing* (Larkin & Coencas, 1974), both presented dysfunctional and ultimately untenable queer realities. Today, as writers of queer fiction, we continue to grapple with the preconceptions of cultural majority - all characters are heterosexual until proven otherwise. Teresa de Lauretis (1991) states that queer theory seeks "to recast or reinvent the terms of our sexualities, to construct another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual" (de Lauretis, 1991, p. iv). In *Tane's War*, I have introduced the main protagonist's sexuality not as a defining difference, but rather as an inherent and undeniable aspect of identity; one the character never questions. This reflects the experiences of most gays and lesbians and, in fact, the unrecognised and largely unexamined experience of most straight people in unquestioningly 'accepting' their heterosexuality.

While the days of invisibility for LGBT characters in fiction have passed, we are still a long way from achieving a realistic representation of LGBT life on our pages and screens. For many contemporary gay artists, the answer has been to focus solely on a gay audience. Evans & Gamman (2004) recognise this in their article titled *Reviewing queer viewing*.

There is a growing trend for gay writers to produce work that is primarily (or even exclusively) aimed at a gay audience. Gay film festivals are flourishing all over the world and there is an increasing audience of gay men searching for gay stories and content online. (Evans & Gamman, 2004, p. 213).

However, the options are more limited for LGBT novelists and poets. The requirements of mainstream publishing remain largely the same as they have for many decades.

Projected sales figures can dictate 'publishability', with content taking a back seat to the harsh financial realities of editing, printing and distribution costs. Rose Fox, reviewing editor for *Publishers Weekly*, offered a good example of this process at work when she highlighted the way publishing agents 'straighten' gay characters. On Fox's blog, Rachel Manija Brown (2011, September 12), the co-author of a YA novel shared the response from her agent.

The agent offered to sign us on the condition that we make the gay character straight, or else remove his viewpoint and all references to his sexual orientation. [...] The agent suggested that perhaps, if the book was very popular and sequels were demanded, Yuki could be revealed to be gay in later books, when readers were already invested in the series. (Brown, 2011, para. 1)

The relatively small size of the potential homosexual market in New Zealand, coupled with reports of dropping book sales across all markets, may well indicate why publishers are becoming less inclined to invest in minority focused works. The same trend is apparent in film, with minority-audience focused works becoming less palatable to the traditional funding bodies. McDermott and Wolfe's (2010) screen adaptation of Witi Ihimaera's novel *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* (1995), is a particularly interesting example of this trend. The screen version was eventually funded by two independent Maori-owned companies (Nicole Hoey's *Cinco Cine Films* and Christina Milligan's *Conbrio Media*). The narrative in the motion picture (Hoey, Milligan, McDermott & Wolfe, 2010) appears to have been altered from the original book to give a more Maori flavour; in line with the focus of the funding companies. While the gay-content remains, it appears to have been shuffled sideways to make room for narrative elements more in keeping with the expectations of the funder's primary audience. In this particular case, the additions have been very skilfully integrated and the gay narrative retains most of its power. However, this is very often not the case and many gay-themed narratives are 'toned-down' or otherwise heterosexualised to make them more palatable to their perceived majority audience.

This trend is nowhere more evident than in productions created for network television. While LGBT media-watchdog, GLAAD (2013, October 12), recently reported that the number of gay characters on scripted broadcast network television is at an all-time high, the actual percentage is less than half of one-percent of all characters - hardly a statistical reflection of the eight-point-four percent LGBT portion of the general population. Many fictional narratives defined as 'gay', seem to act primarily to provide 'safe' gay story-lines and characters for the straight public; stereotypes are rehashed or, at best, barely stretched, usually to add an element of comic relief or reinforce the superiority of heteronormative culture. While undoubtedly raising the general awareness of LGBT lives, high-budget network shows like *Modern Families*, *The Simpsons* and *Will and Grace* all still tend to reinforce narrow (and often negative) stereotypes. The effeminate 'queen' (usually bitchy or derogatory) the closeted and dysfunctional 'fag' and the man-hating, butch 'dyke' are never far from the surface. Offerings from the United Kingdom have occasionally provided more complex representations. In his article *Does 'Downton Abbey' perpetrate gay stereotypes?*, Richard Kramer (2013) considers the representation of gay characters (GCs) in historical settings through an analysis of the narrative arc of gay character, Thomas Barrow.

Here is a truth too awkward, too shameful, too 'not what people want in their big box entertainment'. And that truth is the envy, even bitterness a gay man can feel for what he sees, rightly or wrongly, as the ease of a straight man's life. It's not an easy moment to own or to witness, and as I watched it I wondered if so-called 'positive portrayals of gay people in the media' can comfortably include such bitterly honest observations. The GCs on *New Normal* and *Modern Family* and *Glee* are snippy-sweet, proudly trivial, commedia dell-arte figures fingering price tags at *Design Within Reach* on a Sunday afternoon. I enjoy these shows; they're well-meaning, and well done. But don't we deserve the whole picture? Aren't gay people as contradictory, compromised, fucked up as anyone else? I know I am, and I'm pretty sure Thomas Barrow is. Life has taught him some rough lessons, and they haven't sweetened him up much; in fact, they've made him a bit of a monster. (Kramer, 2013. para. 26)

In the final analysis, it is hard truths and not mainstream palatability that dominates the character's portrayal; perhaps a positive glimpse of the future of mainstream gay narratives.

The world of cinema has provided a similarly biased representation. With a few recent exceptions, most notably the above-mentioned *Brokeback Mountain*, mainstream cinema has been largely devoid of complex gay narratives. In his essay, '*300:*' *The*

Straightening of the Spartans, Scott Telek (2007) comments on the 'heterosexualizing' of the movie '300', a stylised retelling of the ancient Spartan story of the Sacred band of Thebes. This iconic ancient-Greek army was composed of 150 pairs of male lovers. But the motion picture (Canton, & Snyder, 2006), had them reshaped as heterosexual warriors defending their wives and girlfriends. Early in the plot, the protagonist denies the (historically accepted) homosexuality of the characters through several lines of homophobic dialogue. The narrative then invents an idealized heterosexual romance to assuage any lingering doubts the audience may have about ancient-Greek concepts of eros.

Much as we like to retain the notion that movies are the result of unfettered creativity, the reality remains that for this creativity to be realized and released, movies need to be well-positioned to make money. And the perception, probably correct, is that throngs of young movie-going males feeling uncomfortable about their admiration for scantily-clad men will probably have a direct effect on weekend grosses. Right or wrong, with movies like 300, disowning homosexuality is good box office. (Telek, 2007, para. 16)

Although Snyder drew heavily from Frank Miller's graphic novel of the same name, not even this source material so intentionally distorts history, instead depicting the relationships between the warriors themselves (and the society they were defending) in a more ambiguous way.

This threat of downstream reinterpretation is a real concern for any originating screenwriter, and one which I hope to avoid. While my screenplay is presented here as a screenplay-for-reading, I remain cognisant that it may eventually undergo conversion into a film. As discussed, one of my aims in writing *Tane's War*, is to create an inherently 'homosexual' narrative which remains accessible to a wide audience; and therein lies the conflict when writing non-sexually-mainstream stories. As an author, I want my voice to reach as wide an audience as possible. And for a screenplay to communicate broadly, it must eventually become an audio-visual work. The key to attaining production remains finding funding; and to have any real chance of succeeding in today's market, the themes and narratives of my work must be perceived as appealing to a majority audience. Something of a catch-22 situation. In a very real way, this recognition underpinned my creative practice. Early on, I had to truthfully examine the often difficult path for a queer writer through the harsh realities of commercialism. How could my work survive and retain its voice? Should I 're-orient' the work for the sake of future potential? To add plausibility to my historical settings, should I embrace the

guilt-ridden, apologist homosexuals of John Boyne's (2012) *The Absolutist* or Ben Elton's (2005) *The First Casualty*? The answer was a resounding 'no'. This process of contextualisation, this 'inward look', pushed me in the opposite direction. It reinforced the queer identity of my own core; the well of my own creativity. And while my current practice may or may not be up to the task, I hold a resolute belief that a sensitive and humanistic development of the main themes will create a work that speaks to all readers, even across any divide of sexuality. The above-mentioned *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* shows that concerns of kinship, of acceptance and belonging to a family, are central to most human lives. While *Tane's War* questions and reinterprets the definition of family, the need for belonging is as fundamental to gay characters as it remains for most people today, regardless of their sexuality.

The creation of *Tane's War* has reaffirmed who I am as an artist. And as a gay author, the strength of my work lies with my ability to develop my own voice. My intention is to 'hold the door open' to mainstream readers, not to condescend or question my reader's judgement. Nor does my writing pander to any preconceived normative expectations by subverting, softening or 'normalising' the realities of the gay text.

Tane's War demands much of the non-gay reader. It asks that they reorient their world view for a few hours and accept a story where 'gay' can be a default; an unquestioned and unquestionable variation. If this remains unachievable, then the fault lies with my deficiencies as an author. I have created characters and narratives that speak and move with their own voice. Only my reader can judge if that 'voice' was sufficiently compelling to communicate across divides.

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