

Exegesis

Searching the Literary Spectrum for Place and Space

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Searching the Literary Spectrum for Place and Space

“I think all novels are actually compounded short stories. It’s just the borders get so porous and so squished up that you no longer see them, but I think they are there.”

David Mitchell (Birnbaum, 2006)

In the initial proposal for my creative work, I talked of my aspiration to blur the boundaries between the novel and short story genres. In my naivety, I believed what I was attempting to do was unique. I have since discovered it is both unique *and* extremely commonplace simultaneously. Whilst there are countless examples of linked short stories, there remains a level of ambiguity surrounding them all. Each body of work is subjectively assessed by the author/reader/critic and classified differently depending on their view. Some might call *The Accident* a novel, others may call it a short story cycle or composite novel. Through extensive reading and research I have failed to find a piece of writing that exactly matches my own with regards to how the stories are linked (be it by character, plot, time, theme, place or plot) though many come so close as to be nudging *The Accident* in the ribs. Such is the elusive nature of the linked short story genre.

Just as characters in *The Accident* are searching for their individual sense of place and value (within their families and community), so too is the body of work. Is *The Accident* a novel? Is it a collection of short stories? Or is it better located somewhere in between? In discussing the unique characteristics of both short and long narratives, and reviewing written works that successfully exist on the spectrum between these two fictional modes, it is hoped *The Accident* will find a happy resting place, and a recognisable sense of space within the expansive, variable parameters linking the novel and short story genres.

As well as discussing the genre of *The Accident*, I will also explore how place and space are crucial narrative elements essential in helping to shape a story. This is an aspect of writing I have come to appreciate through the course of my year in the Masters of Creative Writing programme. As Siobhan Harvey stated in our Masterclass on Place and Space: “Action must happen somewhere.” (S. Harvey, personal communication, April 12, 2016). Understanding the value of place and space in fictional writing has become central to the development of my skills as a writer. I will discuss how I have tried to incorporate my newfound respect for and knowledge of place and space into my work.

Overview of *The Accident*

The Accident is a series of stories told chronologically over one year. Each month offers the point of view of a different character. While the chapters mostly follow the conventions of short story in design and can be read independently of one another, they are linked together by an overarching macro story threaded within the twelve chapters. When the stories are read

as a coherent whole from January through to December, they deliberately follow the three act structure of a novel as discussed by McKee (1999). Through this macro-story, the reader explores the transitioning lives of two families attempting to overcome a devastating event.

Core characters reappear in either minor or major roles throughout *The Accident*. By following these characters month by month, the reader develops a greater understanding of how the characters deal with love, loss, and resilience, as they attempt to gain a sense of place and self-worth amongst their families and society.

My aim in writing *The Accident* was twofold. Firstly, to create a fictional piece of work which brings together the qualities of both the short story and novel genres, and in doing so demonstrate successful novelisation of short stories. Secondly, to give the reader a multi-faceted view on how people react to challenges by demonstrating various levels of resilience. When the characters in *The Accident* are faced with loss, it is their ability to accept and give love which becomes central to how they ultimately deal with that loss. The more a reader can ‘step inside the shoes’ of a diverse range of characters, and realise that we all see situations in different ways, the more, I hope, the reader develops greater empathy when interacting with family, friends, and strangers in their everyday lives.

Defining a genre: Short story versus novel?

At the start of the year, I wrote the following questions in my notebook:

How linked do I want the collection of stories in *The Accident* to be?

What defines a short story versus a novel? What are the key differences?

Is there a market for this type of work? Who would my readers be?

How important is the macro-story? At present, I view it as secondary, will this change?

Clearly, from the beginning of the Masters programme, genre has been a significant area of interest with regards to my work.

The reader has a certain expectation when reading a novel which is different to that of a short story. Yet, it is difficult to accurately clarify what separates the two. The only true definitive distinction between them is that the novel is long, while the short story is short. Or put another way, the short story can potentially be read in one sitting, the novel cannot (unless the reader can’t put the novel down and stays up all night). However, the short story does differ from the novel.

When discussing the short story in his essay in *Short Circuit: A Guide to the Art of the Short Story* Graham Mort (2009) said: “The shortness of the story, rather than seeming like a compromise, meant that it could powerfully suggest, if not actually achieve the complexity of the novel.” (p. 8). In another essay later in the book Linda Cracknell again talks of the compression and density seen in the short story form. “Every word doesn’t only count, it must multi-task.” (p. 231).

The *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Narrative Theory* (Herman, Jahn, & Ryan (Eds.), 2005) states that the short story differs from a novel in that it is “a sojourn within the extraordinary consciousness of an ordinary character, unfolding through the cumulative effect of meaningful imagery rather than through the linear logic of goal-directed action, and leading to a deepening of perception rather than a resolution of problems.” (p. 528).

Acclaimed short story writer Lorrie Moore, in *The Paris Review* describes the difference another way: “There’s urgency and wholeness in short stories. Not necessarily in novels, which may proceed at a more leisurely or erratic pace.” (Gaffney, 2001).

At the Auckland Writer’s Festival (2016), author and director at the International Institute of Modern Letters, Professor Damien Wilkins said the novel allowed the reader a level of relaxation the short story does not. With a short story the reader is always thinking ‘where is this going’. “Short fiction has to suggest consequence from largely inconsequential stuff.” (personal communication, May 14, 2016). During the same discussion, American short story writer Elizabeth McCracken believed the difference between novels and short stories was often most apparent in the ending. “At the end of the novel you can think ‘that’s done’.” She went on to contrast this with the short story where there is an “opening up, an unravelling. It is the reader’s job to find the meaning in the short story – often at the end.” (personal communications, May 14, 2016).

Some writers have talked of short stories being more closely linked to poetry. Mort (2009) says “Switching from the rhythms of poetry to prose...I realised there was considerable crossover in the forms...my stories could borrow the rhythms, compression, imagery, motifs, patterning and concision of poetry. They could leave a lot out—trusting the reader to fill in—and they could, theoretically, be word-perfect.” (p. 7).

Mort (2009) argues that short stories are often more fragmentary than novels, but they are necessarily so:

They speak to our wider human experience by focussing on a tiny patch or patches of time. What prevents short stories from becoming merely fragmentary—nugatory lumps of prose—is their ability to

engage the reader...The reader, I would argue, both experiences the story as it unfolds and completes it. Not in a systematic way in which a novel is completed...but in a speculative way that fleshes out the bones of a narrative...short stories are more powerful because their very brevity enrolls the imagination of the reader. (p. 9).

With each story in *The Accident*, my aim was to incorporate the above elements distinctive to the short story genre. In particular focussing on brevity or compression, imagery, fragmentation, urgency, and endings that are 'open'. For example, the March story has an open ending, yet the reader can infer the protagonist, Anne has undergone a subtle transformation and is showing her resilience and independence as she prepares for the battles she must face ahead.

“Despicable,” Anne said loudly. No one turned her way.
She *would* find a way to give back to the boy what her husband had stolen.
Standing at the bar, she drank her gin and tonic. Then she ordered another...and another... (*The Accident*, p.77).

Linked short stories:

Some of the most important examples of short story owe part of their force to publication in single-volume collections. The cycle or collection allows the short story writer to obtain that sense of an extended investigation into a particular issue or topic that the novelist can achieve in the course of a single work. Authors often plan individual short works as component parts of a larger whole. (Hawthorn, 2010, p. 54).

Lundén (1999) states that as interest has grown over the past twenty years in “the book consisting of autonomous short stories which interconnect and join into a larger whole”, many scholars and critics have attempted to explore and define this distinct narrative form, yet in doing so have been “frustrated by its evasive nature and by the subsequent difficulty of defining it.” (p. 11)

Various terms are used to describe linked short stories. These include but are in no way limited to: the short story composite, short story cycle, short story sequence, and composite novel.

The short story composite as described by Silverman is:

A group of stories written by one author, arranged in a definite order, and intended to produce a specific effect. Though every story of a composite can be understood in isolation, the stories have an added dimension when seen as co-ordinate parts of the larger whole. (as cited in Lundén, 1999, p. 14).

Luchner describes the short story sequence as “a volume of stories collected and organised by their author, in which the reader successively realises underlying patterns of coherence by continual modifications of his perceptions of pattern and theme.” (as cited in Lundén, 1999, p. 15).

And the short story cycle is defined by Ingram as:

A book of short stories so linked to each other by the author, that the reader’s successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts. (as cited in Lundén, 1999, p. 17).

Finally, the composite novel, a term first coined by Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris (as cited in Hermann, 2005, p. 78), is described in the *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Narrative Theory* as:

Collections of short stories which share common settings and characters. Such texts therefore display some overall thematic and structural features, allowing readers to follow the development of one or more characters through the sequence of tales. (Herman et al., 2005, p. 78).

Regardless of the name and definition used, there is a clear space for this narrative form occupying as it does an ambiguous, yet definitive place between the novel and short story genre. There are countless examples of linked short stories in the literary world, a select number of which I will refer to in this exegesis. Perhaps the best way to consider these stories is, as James George suggests, to think of them as existing on a continuum from short story collection – short story cycle – composite novel – novel, “with the composite novel being the most ‘blended and blurred’ entity on the continuum, where you could call it either way and be right”. (George, J., personal communication, October 7, 2016).

Which definition should be used for *The Accident*?

Use of the word ‘cycle’ in short story cycle implies a circular nature, a returning to the beginning which is rarely seen in any narrative form. As stated by Bianca Zander in one of our Masterclasses, with fiction there must be conflict and something must change as a result of this conflict. “The story should be forever altered.” (personal communication, March 15, 2016).

Neither the individual stories in *The Accident* nor the overall macro-story cyclical in nature. There has been a clear transformation, particularly in character, from beginning to end. Similarly, describing these stories as ‘sequential’ is, in my view, misleading. While *The Accident* follows a chronological pattern, the reader does not necessarily come to understand the character and their motivations in a linear way. Many other short story collections share this non-sequential trait. *A Beggar Maid* (1991) by Alice Munro is a prime example. Stories jump about in time and place and follow no sequential order, yet the reader gains a greater understanding of the characters Rose and Flo, and important themes are exposed, through appreciation of the whole, rather than seeing the stories as isolated parts.

Short story composites are stories grouped to produce a specific effect. This implies the link between the stories can be tenuous, such as a recurring theme or symbol. The stories may not necessarily be linked by characters or setting.

I feel *The Accident* aligns most closely with the description of a composite novel as it shares character, setting, theme, and structural features. Yet, I am aware of the inferences involved with the use of the word ‘novel’ in this title. As Lundén (1999) points out:

“Associating the short story composite primarily with the novel invites unfortunate connotations of unified story, coherent narration, and closure, neither of which is necessarily a characteristic of the composite.” (p. 13).

How Short Stories may be linked

Many collections of stories are linked in such a way that they can successfully be marketed as novels. A number of these works I will mention later in this exegesis. They are collections which occupy a space at the novel end of the spectrum. Yet a vast array of short story collections exist which are seen by neither reader, critic, nor perhaps most importantly, author as novelistic in form.

In his preface for *Back in the Day* (2015), Mike Johnson discusses how he hopes readers will approach his stories:

“The stories can be read separately, but there are rewards for the reader who starts at the beginning and works forward, with characters reappearing and new vistas opening up...the reading of each story should inform the reading of the others. However independent each may be, the stories as a whole are a composite picture.” (Johnson, 2015).

Following are examples of creative works which demonstrate the scope and spectrum of the linked short story. I have highlighted ways in which the stories have been grouped. As you will see, some have a very tenuous, barely perceptible link, other connections are far more transparent.

Stories linked in retrospect: Raymond Carver, *Short Cuts*

These stories originally appeared in a number of different publications and were collated not by the author but by film director Robert Altman. He drew inspiration from the stories to produce a film also entitled *Short Cuts*.

It is interesting to note, Altman said when discussing the collection of stories in the introduction:

“I look at all of Carver’s work as just one story, for his stories are all occurrences, all about things that just happen to people and cause their lives to take a turn...the film is there, and the stories are there and one hopes there is a fruitful interaction.” (Carver, 1993).

Stories linked by protagonist: Sherwood Anderson. *Winesburg, Ohio*

Routledge states the connection between these stories “trace the development of one major character in a manner of the Bildungsroman”. (Herman et al., 2005).

Glenn Love states in the introduction to the stories “the book has a collective power which is greater than the sum of its parts.” (Anderson, 1997).

Stories linked by setting: John Updike, *The Olinger Stories*

John Updike refers to *The Olinger Stories* in his foreword:

Its eleven stories constitute, it may be, a green and slender whole...All the stories draw from the same autobiographical well—the only child, the small town, the grandparental home, the move in adolescence to a farm—but no attempt is made at an overall consistency. (Updike, 2003).

Stories linked by multiple characters: Amy Bloom, *Where the God of love hangs out*

In this collection, four of the stories focus on two people, William and Clare. Four other stories focus on Lionel and Julia. Each story jumps ahead in time and provides a snapshot into the characters at separate stages of their lives.

Stories linked by community: Eudora Welty, *The Golden Apples*

These inter-related stories look at life in small town, Mississippi. While characters and themes reappear, it is the interaction of characters in the one location that unifies the collection. As Welty (2011) states: “From story to story, connections between the characters’ lives, through their motives or actions, sometimes their dreams, already existed: there to be found. Now the whole assembly—some of it still in the future—fell, by stages, into place in one location already evoked, which I saw now was a focusing point for all the stories.” (p.vii.).

Stories linked biographically: Katherine Mansfield, *Prelude, At the Bay, The Doll’s House, The Garden Party*

Mansfield saw these stories, which follow the lives of the Sheridan and Burnell families, as part of a ‘novel’ which she never completed. She used memories of her own childhood to create fictional stories that are nonetheless biographical in nature.

Stories linked by narrative inspiration: Sue Orr, *From Under the Overcoat*

This collection of stories takes inspiration from well-known classics.

Sue Orr states: “Those writers were literary geniuses and their works masterpieces. My stories simply salute the excellence of those old works and acknowledge the continued influence of them on today’s and tomorrow’s writers.” (Somerset, 2012).

Stories linked by narrative structure: Lorrie Moore, *Self-Help*

While there are commonalities in types of characters and themes in this collection, it is the recurring narrative structure that is of interest in binding this collection together. Most of the stories are written from a second person point of view “in the form of a pop-psychology self-help manual”. (Weekes, 2002).

Stories linked by an event: Haruki Murakami, *After the Quake*

While these stories all have different settings, characters, themes, and voice, they are linked by the 1995 Kobe Earthquake in Japan. This catastrophic event is encapsulated in various shapes and forms in each story.

Stories linked by theme, setting, character, and tone:

Tim Winton, *The Turning*.

As the title suggests, in each story the protagonist reaches a turning point in their lives. It is clear the stories take place in the same location. Characters reappear, however each story is very much distinct from one another. There is a style and tone that reverberates and repeats itself in each story helping to bind them together.

The degree to which readers find themselves linking stories is largely determined by the narrative elements the author has incorporated into the collection. As James George states:

“Story cycles linked thematically can be read individually, as the connections are often sub-textually, inferred, perhaps largely intuited by the reader, whereas story cycles linked by place, space, and/or character tend to feel more holistic, largely because we inhabit the characters and places in a way we don’t quite with themes/ideas/underpinnings.” (George, J. personal communications, October 7, 2016.)

Structuring linked short stories:

It has become clear to me throughout this year that structural form is paramount to the cohesion and success of books composed of interlocking stories, especially when they follow a chronological pattern as *The Accident* does. This has been an aspect of my own work which became of utmost importance as my work progressed, specifically as I was attempting to incorporate an overall macro-story.

I wrote the stories for *The Accident* in a linear fashion with a sketchy outline of the overall plot and theme of the collection. However, once I reached the April story I realised I could go no further until I had finalised the structural form of my work.

For this, I developed a three act plot structure for the macro story (McKee, 1999). This structure helped me to identify the trigger, turning points, climax, and resolution and which month these should be incorporated into. I also made up a storyboard and moved the stories around so characters and plot points appeared in the relevant months. This was hugely beneficial in allowing me to remain focussed on how the macro-story was to be interwoven into the individual stories to produce a cohesive narrative.

Interestingly, it was only at this stage of my narrative journey that I realised my stories were closer on the spectrum or continuum to the composite novel, rather than the short story cycle I had envisioned at the beginning of the year.

When do linked short stories become a novel?

The answer to this question is hugely subjective. There are many examples of fictional works marketed and sold as novels which are collections of stories, joined together in some way, be they by character, plot, or merely an object or place. Perhaps this can best be described as

“novelisation of the short story”, a phrase I first heard from Siobhan Harvey in a discussion regarding my own work. (personal communication, March 30, 2016).

David Mitchell, when describing his very successful novel, *Cloud Atlas* (2004) in an interview with *The Paris Review*, called it a group of six novellas, split in half: “I wrote all six novellas from start to finish, though in each case I had a fairly clear idea about where the cut would come.” (Begley, 2010).

When discussing another of his novels with *The Morning News*, Mitchell said: “One of the commandments of *Black Swan Green* (2006) was to write a novel made of chapters that are theoretically extractable short stories.” He goes on to say three chapters from *Black Swan Green* were originally published as short stories in separate publications. It is interesting to note in the same interview David Mitchell’s comment that: “I think all novels are actually compounded short stories. It’s just the borders get so porous and so squished up that you no longer see them, but I think they are still there.” (Birnbaum, 2006).

Olive Kitteridge (2008), by Elizabeth Strout, won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and is described by Thomas (2008) in the *New York Times* as a “novel in stories”:

It manages to combine the sustained, messy investigation of the novel with the flashing insight of the short story. By its very structure, sliding in and out of different tales and different perspectives, it illuminates both what people understand about others and what they understand about themselves. (Thomas, 2008).

The American Interest describes Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, as a “novel composed of interlocking short stories”. (Gioia, 2007). When interviewed by *Penguin*, Amy Tan says the novel began as a collection of stories she later expanded on and linked together:

An agent saw the first published story and asked to represent me. I had nothing to sell, so she badgered me every week to write another story. I did, and then she asked me to write up a description of what a whole book of these kinds of stories might include so that she might find interested publishers... When the book was published, the short story collection was called a novel by reviewers.

Author: Amy Tan (Readers guide: *The joy luck club*, n.d.).

Finally, Lorrie Moore describes her book *Anagrams* as “a novel that takes as its form a short novel and four stories. The stories are variations on the central narrative line—rearrangements that visited me while I was writing the main story.” (Gaffney, 2011).

When looking at whether a series of stories could also be considered a novel, James George states: “The intensity of the connection is often the differentiator, with the novel promising a continuous immersion in an extrapolated contiguous story world.” (George, J, personal communication, October 7, 2016).

Pigeon-holing a genre

The scope and breadth of variation in linked short story collections should be celebrated. Often features of both the novel and short story can be used to create a piece of narrative fiction that is both startling and unique. By trying to define and confine a collection, there is a risk of diminishing its power to excite and surprise the reader. Understandably publishers are more likely to find a market if the collection can be bracketed as a novel, but we run the risk of deluding the reader and undermining the qualities and nuances of the short story genre in doing so.

As Lundén (1999) so aptly argues:

Seeking to establish some sort of legitimacy for the hybrid genre, many critics have felt obliged to emphasize its unity and coherence in order to make it resemble the novel, which still enjoys privileged status. In this legitimization process much of the genre specificity of the short story composite has been lost. The tension between variety and unity, separateness and interconnectedness, fragmentation and continuity, openness and closure has been, if not ignored, at least given less attention than it deserves. (p. 12).

So what is *The Accident*? It is a collection of stories that exist between the short story and novel genre, mixing features of each to produce a body of work that celebrates its place in a dynamic space free from the boundaries of definition.

The Value of Place and Space in *The Accident*

It wasn't until I began to appreciate the short story form both critically (through the Masters of Creative Writing workshops, and researching the genre for my exegesis), and personally, on my creative journey in writing *The Accident*, that I understood the significance of place and space in short stories. I realized as Graham Mort does that “stories could not only have a conscious layer where we engage with events in time, but a subconscious layer where references and imagery triggered a deeper reaction.” (Gebbie, 2009, p. 8).

It was a lightbulb moment for me when Mort again put into words the growing sense of value I began to attribute to place and space. “The primary way a story engages a reader for me is its appeal to the physical senses when evoking place...human senses can be powerfully suggested through verbal language.” (Gebbie, 2009, p. 9).

Incorporating a sense of place and space into my work has been a challenge as my writing has tended to focus on dialogue, action, and character. Yet, I now understand it is not enough to simply describe something. Every part of the setting of my stories must serve a purpose. Mary Buckham (2014) calls this active setting. She suggests active setting is more than “stringing together a list of adjectives or dumping a chunk of visual clues to orient the reader”. (p. 1). Rather, it should help to “create the world of your story, show characterization, add conflict, slow or speed up pacing, add or decrease tension, relate a character's back story, thread in emotion, and more.” (p. 1).

When reviewing the importance of place and space in my own work and others, I have considered certain key elements: landscape, plot, character, language, contrast and texture, transference, subtext, theme, mood, and the wider effect of place and space on the reader's own consciousness and society.

Landscape

To think of place and space is to consider landscape, and how characters exist within it. McFarlane in an essay for *The Guardian* sums up beautifully the importance of landscape in literature: “The finest writing about landscape is almost always modest, exact, and attentive. It is precise without ever being curt. It understands that lyricism is a function of detail, and not of abstraction. And it is ethically alert.” (McFarlane, March 26, 2005).

Plot

Bianca Zander in a Masterclass on plot structure referred to the essential use of setting in driving plot: “Setting must help generate story—it can’t just be a backdrop.” (personal communication, March 15, 2016). Well written setting can “impact the thoughts of your readers and actions of your characters and thus move the story forward.” She goes on to say the details used regarding place must matter to your story. (personal communication, March 15, 2016).

Character

Place and space is also essential for character development. As Buckham (2014) argues “the important element to remember is that place can and should be filtered through a specific character’s emotions, impressions, viewpoint, and focus. How one character sees a setting can be more important than the setting itself.” (p. 26).

Certain authors are known for immersing readers in place and space to the point where it is almost a character in itself. Tim Winton (1991) for example, uses landscape as a vital part of his introduction in *Cloudstreet*. The reader can connect with where the story is taking place and starts to understand how the characters are molded and shaped by their surroundings. *Loving Ways* by Maurice Gee (1996) is another example where landscape plays a vital role. The landscape acts to show the protagonist, May’s personality. It reflects her sense of self. Most importantly the place is seen through her eyes. In this sense there are almost two protagonists: May and the landscape itself. As Siobhan Harvey stated in the Masterclass on place and space, “Landscape is a primary means of showing the inner workings of a character. If you want to make the most of place and space, describe how the character would see the landscape.” (personal communication, April 12, 2016).

This was an aspect of my own work I felt was underutilized. In order to try and incorporate place and space into *The Accident*, I was given some writing exercises by my mentor, Siobhan Harvey in which I had to imagine I was a character in a certain location. I had to describe the details of the location through the character’s eyes being as descriptive as possible (using adjectives, colours, shapes, the senses). Then I had to move around the space, and through neighbouring spaces, thinking about the time of day, and the season, and how the character related to the landscape and if it evoked other memories. This not only helped to

consolidate my characters, it also helped to enhance the mood, support the theme, and most importantly allowed me to show, not tell.

Below is an excerpt from the first draft of January before I had a clear understanding of the use of place and space.

Oscar walked past his mother without looking at her. “They’re fine, Mum. We ate and cleaned up. They watched a movie and now they’re in their rooms, maybe in bed, maybe not. I can’t control them. I’ve done my bit.”

Polly followed Oscar inside, slapping at a mosquito on her arm as she went and closing the door firmly behind her. (*The Accident*, 3rd draft).

Here is my final version, having completed the exercises on place and space outlined above:

Oscar walked past Polly without looking at her. “They watched a movie, did their teeth, and they’re in their rooms. Maybe in bed, maybe not. I’ve done my bit.”

Tipping the balls off his racquet into the ball machine, Oscar sauntered over to the house, and disappeared inside the back door. Polly stood staring out through the tall black wire fence, to the low untamed clumps of spiky grass scattered across the sand dunes. She couldn’t see the ocean from here—the best view was from her bedroom window upstairs—but she could hear the repetitive rumble, slap, and hiss of the waves. Already, she could taste salt on her lips. Soon it would be too dark to see anything out there. Out there, beyond the cast of light from the house would be an unsettling black hole filled with an ocean’s roar. A space you could stare into and see nothing. Slapping at a mosquito on her arm, Polly went back inside. (*The Accident*, p.37.).

Throughout *The Accident*, I use Polly’s inability to connect with the landscape to highlight her feeling of disconnect and discontentment. My aim is to show a character who has no sense of place and is searching for a space of her own. She has built up a wall of defense against the physical environment as a mechanism to deal with her traumatic childhood.

She knew the image held beauty. The rippling sea, the cloudless sky, the glowing lighthouse, the family sitting together eating freshly-made bread rolls, watermelon,

and chocolate brownie. It was a scene to Polly even as she sat inside it. She was the onlooker, the critical observer. (*The Accident*, p.44).

It is only in a flashback to her one happy childhood memory that the reader senses Polly once had a connection with her surroundings:

The burnt grass and nodding wild flowers instantly became Polly's sympathetic, soft-spoken friends, as she emptied the mince pie from her stomach. The heat from that gaping blue sky spreading out to infinity above her, enveloped her like a soft blanket as she bowed over the oven-hot pebbly ditch. (*The Accident*, p.45).

As a foil to Polly, I introduce characters in *The Accident* with a strong sense of connection to their environment. James George spoke in a Masterclass of this interrelationship between character and landscape: "Think of embodying your landscape as if it is a character... Use the landscape as an extra voice." He went on to suggest the landscape can often influence character to the same degree that character influences landscape. (personal communication, July 26, 2016).

Millie's grandfather, Gordon in the July story of *The Accident* is particularly embedded in the Central Otago landscape. His every thought and action is linked to the space in which he lives.

Gordon stares at the familiar hills, orange and glowing. Caught in the sun's final song of farewell, their tops iced with blushing pink snow. Melancholic and undemanding, even as they burn. His heart thumps loudly as Millie leans her head against his shoulder. They look on in silence. The air holds its breath, stunned into stillness. (*The Accident*, p.132).

Language, Contrast and Texture

The particular word an author chooses to use when describing place is pivotal when looking at how a character exists in a space. As Siobhan Harvey stated in a Masterclass: "Language is so important when creating landscape—look at verb choice, adjective, metaphor—make them

personal to the character...a character's emotional state can be depicted from how the character engages with the landscape." (personal communication, April 12, 2016). Similarly, it is important to engage all the senses when writing about landscape; colours, smells, shapes, touch. Landscape is not one-dimensional. The more a writer can set the stage or "make a movie screen in the reader's head" (Harvey, S, personal communication, April 12, 2016), the more successful the story will be.

Not only do individual words need to be selected with care, but the overall language is important when writing of place and space. During a Masterclass with Mike Johnson he discussed the importance of contrast and texture in language used to describe the landscape; contrast between abstract and concrete images, from specific to generalized images, zooming in on a scene and zooming out, altering sentence length, understatement and overstatement, variations in rhythm and pace: all these narrative tools should be used. He highlighted the fact that "prose should be rich in material things" (personal communication, July 19, 2016). In essence, the power of language to evoke place comes from a juxtaposition between all these narrative devices. Contrast is also important on a macro-level. With regards to my own work, I aimed to have some stories which relied heavily on landscape to drive characterization and mood (for example, January, August, and November), and others which were far less focused on the setting (May, September, and October).

Subtext, Theme, and Mood

Place and space can be used with great effect to bring subtext into a narrative. The reader can read below the surface of the words to consider the underlying theme and mood of the piece of work. Katherine Mansfield, for instance, often wrote stories sub-textually concerned with class structure and the rigidity of social norms. As stated in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature*, she positioned her narratives "within the stereotypes that identify colonial culture in order to challenge them." (Sturm, 1991). In one of her most well-known stories, *The Garden Party*, protagonist, Laura Sheridan is swept up in the excitement of a party, yet the reader has a sense Mansfield is questioning social conventions in highlighting the superficial gaiety of the occasion:

"But the air! If you stopped to notice, was the air always like this? Little faint winds were playing chase in at the top of the windows, out at the doors. And there were two tiny spots of sun, one on the

inkpot, one on a silver photograph frame, playing too. Darling little spots.” (as cited in Morrissey, Ed., 2000, p. 44).

Later, Laura looks down on the lower class houses and through her description, Mansfield highlights class prejudice.

“They were little mean dwellings painted a chocolate brown. In the garden patches there was nothing but cabbage stalks, sick hens, and tomato cans. The very smoke coming out of their chimneys was poverty-stricken. Little rags and shreds of smoke, so unlike the great silvery plumes that uncurled from the Sheridan’s’ chimneys.” (as cited in Morrissey, Ed., 2000, p. 49).

In my own writing, for my August story I sought to help explain the motivations behind Polly’s character through a depiction of the depressing, unloving environment she grew up in.

The frigid room stunk of stale beer and rancid fat. Thin, stained carpet had ripped apart in numerous places, exposing wooden, borer-ridden boards. Apart from a scattering of chairs, and a couple of bar leaners covered in graffiti, the room was bare. Even the walls were empty. (*The Accident*, p.155).

A writer’s personal search for place

I believe for many writers, stories are written in an attempt to find their own sense of place in the world. Katherine Mansfield has often been described as an author who felt a sense of displacement and sought to find a place of belonging through her writing. Sturm (1991) states: “Mansfield saw New Zealand as a landscape she must recollect, rediscover, and renew in writing, a landscape in which she could re-live the country of her earlier life.” (p. 260).

Scope beyond literature

Place and space can be powerfully suggestive to the reader as it highlights themes and values of the wider communities in which we all live. In an essay for *The Guardian*, Robert McFarlane states: “The more superficial a society’s knowledge of the real dimensions of the land it occupies becomes, the more vulnerable the land is to exploitation.” (McFarlane, June 4, 2005). He argues that through literature, society is able to improve its knowledge of and kinship with place and the responsibilities it has in occupying that space.

In a separate essay, McFarlane talks of the power of landscape to affect its reader. He talks of “Landscape as accomplice to dreaming; landscape as escape.” (McFarlane, 7 May, 2005).

Through recognition of a landscape in literature, the reader can feel a connection to, an acceptance of, and an accompanying sense of value in the place in which they live.

In *The Accident*, I sought to relate a person’s sense of place to their feeling of self-worth and belonging. I hoped to highlight my belief that people without a ‘place’, whether it be within a physical landscape, a community, or a family, will demonstrate lower levels of resilience and happiness.

Conclusion

I chose to write *The Accident* as a series of stories as I love the short story in all its wonderful varied forms. I am an avid reader and admirer of the genre for its brevity and fragmentary nature, use of imagery, illumination of the ordinary into something extraordinary, and for the way, as Mort says, a short story “eschews a grand excitement for a quiet epiphany.” (Gebbie, 2009).

Yet often short stories leave me wanting more. I want to know more about the place, the characters. I want to spend more time in the space—the world—the writer has created in my head. I also want short stories to be more approachable and less ‘scary’ to the reader.

Frequently, short stories are seen as literary; readers can be put off this unique and exciting genre as a result. With this in mind, a further impetus for writing *The Accident* was to produce a series of interlocking stories which could be considered and marketed as a commercial novel, thus appealing to a larger audience than there might be for a literary short story collection.

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