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**THE COFFIN CLUB**

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A thesis and exegesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Creative Writing.

This thesis consists of a full-length screenplay for a feature film. A summary of the screenplay is as follows:

Cassie is a nobody in a nothing town. She's 28, lives with her reclusive grandmother and works at 4 Square, the only grocery store in the shabby town of Blythe.

Cassie discovers Jason, her high school crush, is back working at the local newspaper. Maria, a stalwart of the Blythe Senior Citizens Club, is making herself a coffin.

Their three worlds collide when Cassie encounters Jason at the Club, taking an active interest in Maria's creation. Cassie seizes the opportunity to make herself known to him and lies, saying she also needs a coffin because she's dying.

Word about Cassie's terminal illness travels like wildfire through Blythe and the community embrace her wholeheartedly.

Maria tucks Cassie under her wing and together, they negotiate the suddenly burgeoning business of DIY coffins, making fast enemies with the shady funeral directors across the road.

Cassie encourages Jason to use her story and as her celebrity grows, so does her deception. Cassie finds out Maria is dying and is suddenly faced with the severity of her lie. Through Maria, Jason and the love of the townspeople of Blythe, Cassie has seen another way to live.

The Club's open day has arrived and a hundred pensioners from the district show up, wanting to make coffins. Cassie knows what she needs to do. She comes clean, leaving Jason crushed and the Club in chaos.

Maria dies. As Cassie gives her final goodbye, she discovers the funeral directors are recycling coffins, unbeknownst to the grieving families buying them.

Cassie steals Jason's camera and documents the scam, leaving him with the evidence as an apology. Cassie leaves town, never to return again but quickly realises her jobs not done.

As a final gesture to her beloved friend, Cassie hijacks Maria's official funeral and rouses her newfound community into giving Maria the celebration she deserves.

The thesis is framed by an Exegesis, which is a 6000 word essay on the subject of:

- a) The genre of the Thesis.
- b) The development process from synopsis to second draft.

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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.

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Emma Newborn

16 February 2018

THE COFFIN CLUB

Exegesis

January 2018

By

Emma Newborn

In the first part of this exegesis, I will demonstrate my understanding and the history of a particular film genre. I will also discuss the set of expectations that an audience have when they go to see a film of this genre.

The second part of the exegesis will be an analysis of *The Coffin Club*. It will be a reflection of my intentions and the decisions I made in constructing the narrative of my script.

## **PART ONE: GENRE ANALYSIS**

### **THE GENRE OF THE COFFIN CLUB**

The Coffin Club is a New Zealand **small town life, deception comedy** film. As it is a genre mix, I will divide my time discussing two genres; **deception comedy** and **small town life**. Primarily, I will be using the following produced films as examples in the essay:

*Skin Deep* (Davies, Horrocks, & Steven, 1978), a New Zealand **small town life** film which takes place in the fictional town of Carlton; *Tootsie* (Gelbart & Schisgal, 1982), still one of the most widely celebrated **deception comedy** films and *Waking Ned Devine* (Jones, 1998), an example of the two genres combined, a **small town life deception comedy**, set in the tiny Irish village of Tulaigh Mhór.

### **INDUSTRY RECOGNITION**

The genre of **small town life** is a favourite amongst audiences worldwide. [www.screenjunkies.com](http://www.screenjunkies.com), [www.listal.com](http://www.listal.com) and [www.tasteofcinema.com](http://www.tasteofcinema.com) are just a few of the curated movies sites that have lists dedicated to **small town life** films.

Screen Junkies sums up their love of this genre by saying, “small town movies will help remind moviegoers and aficionados of just how intimate and identifiable the small town film can be to viewers. Such movies can make us feel like the events of a story

could happen anywhere, that we could very well be a part of what is being portrayed on the screen.” (Screen Junkies, n.d.)

*Skin Deep* centres on the fictitious small town of Carlton and the members of the Progressive Business Association. This depiction of community life was so celebrated, it went on to win the Mitra Award for Best Depiction of a Small Town at the Asian Film Festival in 1980 (Martin & Edwards, 1997).

In the case of *Waking Ned Devine*, on seeing the film, Fox Searchlight paid more than \$4 million dollars to distribute it worldwide (Entertainment Weekly, 1998). They recognised that audiences far beyond the British Isles would resonate with this quaint **small town life deception comedy**. The story of Michael O’Sullivan pretending to be the late-Ned Devine, to trick the lottery man from the city, has universal appeal.

Fox Searchlight was right. The world wide gross box office as of December 2006 was over \$43 million (IMDb, n.d.b).

From Shakespeare’s gender-swapping comedies to classic films like *Some Like It Hot* (Wilder & Diamond, 1959), the main protagonists use of **deception** in a **comedy** film is instantly recognisable. *Tootsie* is one of the most successful films of this genre.

Four years in the making, its opening weekend in the US grossed at \$5,540,470 and it went on to become one of the highest grossing films of 1982, second only to Steven Spielberg’s *E.T. Extra Terrestrial* (IMDb, n.d.a). The film was recognised at the 55<sup>th</sup> Annual Academy Awards, receiving 10 Academy Award nominations, including one for Best Screenplay (Oscars, 2015).

## GENRE HISTORY

Screenwriters have long been drawn to set their stories in small towns. As well as allowing the audience to meet a wide-ranging cast of characters, the specificity of place and community can often set the stage for stories about much larger issues (Kim, 2013).

American cinema has a rich history of films that put **small town life** front and centre. One of the earliest, and arguably the most famous, examples of this is the Christmas classic, *It’s A Wonderful Life* (Hackett & Goodrich, 1946). After some bad financial

luck, George Bailey finds himself contemplating suicide. Clarence, an angel summoned by his George's loved ones prayers, shows him what life in Bedford would've been like without him.

“George reaps spiritual rewards - and is ultimately redeemed - by putting the interests of his family and community before his own. This is the small town way.” (Halper & Muzzio, 2011)

In the 1960's, American **small town life** stories turned from the tale of city versus country and moved to the as-yet unexamined issue of race (Halper & Muzzio, 2011). One of the most famous of these films was *To Kill A Mockingbird* (Foote, 1962), set in the fictional small town of Maycomb, Alabama.

This film bears all the recognisable hallmarks of a classic **small town life** film. There's the town's hermit Arthur "Boo" Radley, who everyone gossips about, the kindly Atticus doing his best for the people of the town, often accepting gifts in place of money as payment and the threatening mob mentality of the townsfolk. Despite this, good wins out in the end.

Back in New Zealand, the feature film industry was still emerging. *Skin Deep* was the first feature to be funded by the fledgling New Zealand Film Commission (Martin & Edwards, 1997) and it put **small town life** front and centre. The film satirised issues of sexism, small town conservatism and threw the spotlight on the urban/rural divide.

Two years later, comedy film *Came A Hot Friday* (Mune & Parker, 1984), became an instant Kiwi classic. Based on the novel of the same name, by Hawera writer Ronald Hugh Morrieson, the film takes place in another fictitious town, Tainuia Junction.

Martin & Edwards (1997), described this depiction of New Zealand small town life as “Good natured, nostalgic fun is made of small town 1940's New Zealand where Friday night's excitement is a pie and chips at the boozier.” (p. 103).

It was the second of Morrieson's novels to be put on the screen and since then, his remaining novels have also been adapted, the last one being *Predicament* in 2010. Each has New Zealand **small town life** at the heart of them.

In more recent times, Taika Waititi has taken up the mantle of small town representation in his films. With the exception of *What We Do In The Shadows*



(Clement & Waititi, 2014), that takes place in Wellington, Waititi chooses intimate communities as the backdrop to his films.

**Comedy** based on lies, **deception** and disguise go back much further than cinema but one of the first times it showed itself successfully on screen was in *Some Like It Hot* (Wilder & Diamond, 1959). The story follows two musicians who are being chased by the mob and in an effort to avoid them they dress up as women. Both men find themselves vying for the attention of Sugar Kane, forgetting they're in disguise and of course, chaos ensues.

This film was historically important for many reasons. Through the genre of **deception comedy**, it began loosening the restrictions around depicting taboo subjects in film. In this case, touching on the subject of cross-dressing and homosexuality (Mondello, 2008).

Over 20 years later, Michael Dorsey in *Tootsie* deploys the same, cross-dressing tactic. In a desperate attempt to get work, this unemployed actor dresses up as a woman and gets the gig.

Issues of gender and sexism were a hot topic in the 1980's and films like *Tootsie* allowed audiences to "examine the lessons gained by a man interacting in society as a member of the opposite sex." (Travelling Tigers, 2001).

By the 1990's, **deception comedy** became popular fodder for romantic comedies. *While You Were Sleeping* (Sullivan & Lebow, 1995) presented a much subtler deception; a simple lie that gets out of hand.

In this film a subway station worker, Lucy has a crush on a man she's never met, Peter. After he gets knocked unconscious and falls onto the train tracks, she saves his life. Peter lies unconscious in his hospital bed and Lucy tells his family she's his fiancée. As one would expect in this genre, the deception goes from being helpful to a hindrance, as Lucy starts to fall in love with Peter's brother Jack.

More recently, **deception comedies** have turned to the smaller lies and deceptions that humans engage with on a day-to-day basis. In recent TV comedies like *British Fleabag* (Waller-Bridge, 2016) or *You're the Worst* (Falk, 2014), characters lie, not necessarily to gain an obvious goal but to hide their innermost thoughts. Characters

“constantly wallpaper over their doubts, insecurities, and vulnerabilities with devil-may-care facades.” (Chaney, 2016)

## KEY SIGNIFIERS OF THE GENRE

**Small town life** films have recognisable markers that attach them to this genre. One of the most enjoyable qualities is that everyone knows everyone’s business, because they’re all within a stones throw of each other. In *Skin Deep*, the health club where Sandra is employed to work is in the heart of the main street. When she’s caught topless with Bob by the local policeman, it takes only a matter of hours before everyone in town knows.

In *Waking Ned Devine*, best friends Michael and Jackie organise a dinner for the entire village in order to sniff out the lottery winner. Process of elimination quickly helps them figure out who it is.

Within a **small town life** story, there’s often a character that serves as the ‘guardian’ of community values; someone who resists or makes life difficult for the change or foreigner that’s infiltrating the town.

Lizzie Quinn in *Waking Ned Devine* is the cantankerous old woman who threatens to reveal the town’s fraud, demanding extra money in order for her silence.

Phil Barrett’s conservative wife is the constant thorn in the side of the Progressive Business Association, in *Skin Deep*, insisting shrubs in the main street is preferable to massage parlours.

The night of gambling and drinking that happens in Act II of *Came A Hot Friday* is cut short after local goody-two-shoes, Aunt Ag, alerts the policeman in the middle of the night.

There’s almost always an event that brings the entire town together in **small town life** films. This is when we as the audience get to see all the characters we’ve come to know and love in the same place.

In *Waking Ned Devine*, this is the funeral for Ned. The lottery inspector, who's come to the village to ensure everything's above board, wanders in. The entire community engage in the lie, pretending that the funeral is for Michael O'Sullivan instead.

It's the celebration dance in *Skin Deep*, which the Progressive Business Association holds after reaching their \$20,000 target. This is where tensions between Sandra and the women of the town come to a head.

The night of debauchery in Sel Bishop's woolshed, where con-man Wes embarks on a glorious bender for the whole town to witness, is the key community event in *Came a Hot Friday*.

In **deception comedy**, the key signifier is the deception or the lie itself. It's what the audience spend the film watching for. "Whether in a simple joke, or a comic story line, suspense is held in anticipation of the punch line or revelation of this deception." (Voytilla, 2003, p. 56).

How and when will Michael Dorsey's true identity be revealed in *Tootsie*? Will Jackie, Michael and the village of Tulaigh Mhór get found out in *Waking Ned Devine*?

"In most successful comedies, we see some level of deception. A character creates a new guise for him or herself in order to successfully pursue the goal." (Voytilla, 2003, p. 56)

Another key element is the conflict or development that makes this deception increasingly difficult to maintain. In *Tootsie*, Michael falls in love with his female co-star and is unable to pursue the relationship dressed as a woman. In *Waking Ned Devine*, it's the increasing amount of villagers that find out about Michael and Jackie's deception and then finally Lizzie Quinn, who could potentially unravel the whole thing.

As well as being ripe for comic potential, these deceptions can give the main characters insight and empathy into the disguise they assume. "In *Tootsie*, Michael got a valuable look into life of the opposite gender, and was able to shed some of his distancing tendencies and egotistical methods." (Travelling Tigers, 2001)

Comedy films can enable audiences to engage with subjects and themes that can otherwise be difficult to address. "Humour challenges the morals we value as a society

by either exalting them or flying in the face of them. It really comes down to challenging the audience's own sensibility as to what is antisocial behaviour rather than making strong statements about it. In this way, comedy avoids being preachy.” (Duncan, 2008, p. 145).

## CONTEMPORARY GENRE EXPECTATIONS

In Western films, we've spent many years exploring the division of the genders through cinema. In more recent **comedies** that have **deception** at the heart of them, simple gender-reversal is being left behind in favour of disguises of a different kind.

In the case of TV show *Fleabag* (Waller-Bridge, 2016), we watch a 20-something Londoner negotiate her life whilst giving us, the audience, her true feelings as a direct address. The contrast of her life versus her inner emotional truth is where the comedy is found. “There's the Fleabag (Phoebe Waller-Bridge) that she allows the people around her to see, and there's the one that talks directly to us, eventually revealing the depth and cause of her depression.” (Chaney, 2016).

*Toni Erdman* (Ade, 2016) is a film about a father who dresses up as a character called Erdmann in order to try and reconnect with his adult daughter, Ines. He dons the disguise of Erdmann and begins to infiltrate her life. Ines knows it's him immediately and eventually relents, letting him engage in her life as Erdmann in a way she never let him before.

This comedy film uses deception in an interesting way, causing a very real emotional conflict for both Ines and her father. “Ines is embarrassed by her silly, sad, borderline sociopathic old dad – yet ashamed of having derided him to her friends when she thought (wrongly) that he couldn't hear. And he is ashamed on her behalf and is convulsed with an emotion very like hate at the realisation of how little she thinks of him.”(Bradshaw, 2016)

**Small town life** films continue to reflect the state of the wider world and tackle big issues, head on. “While every film set in a small American town is a product and reflection of its era, a common thread in these films is the way our towns betray a vulnerability to economic depression.” (Phillips, 2015).

*Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (McDonagh, 2017) is a story about Mildred Hayes who, frustrated that her local authorities are slow moving in their investigation into her daughters murder, very publically takes them to task over it.

“It seems to me the police department are too busy torturing black folks to solve actual crime.” – Mildred Hayes in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (McDonagh, 2017).

The film faithfully continues the tradition of **small town life** films, containing all the hallmarks of its genre. “- robustly drawn and richly written; a violent carnival of small-town American life. Yet it has a big, beating heart, even a rough-edged compassion for its brawling inhabitants.” (Brooks, 2017).

#### **THE COFFIN CLUB AS A NZ SMALL TOWN LIFE DECEPTION COMEDY**

*The Coffin Club* demonstrates elements of both **small town life** and **deception comedy** genre films. Set in the fictitious town of Blythe, the story focuses on 28-year-old resident Cassie Richardson and the relationship she has with the town after she tells them she’s dying.

The town is small enough that word travels fast. Even before an article is published in the local paper, half the town know she’s dying and begin responding accordingly.

Hemi Blake, the President of the Blythe Senior Citizens Club, appoints himself as the moral guardian. Hemi resists the changes happening at the Club and doesn’t relent until well into Act II.

There is a central event, the Club’s open day, where the entire town is able to come together as a whole. It’s the scene where Cassie’s lie reaches its pinnacle and she makes the decision to reveal the truth.

*The Coffin Club* is a **comedy deception** film because Cassie uses a lie and a disguise to try and get what she wants. In order to get Jason to notice her, she tells him that she’s dying of cancer and the lie sets the ball rolling for the entire action line of the film.

As with all **deception comedies**, the lie then becomes the main source of conflict for our main character. Cassie struggles to maintain her story after she comes face-to-face with Maria, who's actually dying of cancer.

There's an attempt to reflect the wider economic state of the world in the town of Blythe. The Three Pines Funeral Home acts as the corrupt, money-hungry force versus members of the local community, who operate at a human level. There's also a nod to the 'cult of celebrity' as we watch the fickle townspeople only notice Cassie once she proclaims she's dying.

### **CHARACTERISATION IN THE COFFIN CLUB**

The genre of **small town life deception comedy** affected characterisation of *The Coffin Club* in the following ways.

Right from the opening scene, we see how the entire town of Blythe is affected by one event. Two old women and Pamela, the receptionist in the doctor's surgery, choose to ignore Cassie, giving their full attention to the (dead) celebrity who's just rolled into town. The next day, everyone is on the street to celebrate someone who has had no impact on the community yet still brings the town a great sense of pride.

When Cassie says she's dying, Blythe are quick to scoop her up and celebrate her in anyway they can. As pharmacy assistant, Janice says in scene 51, "We'll always look after our own."

Some characters in *The Coffin Club* are written as stereotypes. The officious manager of 4 Square, the dull shop assistant Tracey, Janice and Martin from the pharmacy who know the business of every resident in Blythe. The characters assign themselves these roles within the community and in the script, give the impression that this story could happen anywhere.

In the stifling environment of Blythe, Cassie witnesses first hand the only way to get noticed is by being famous and adopts the use of a lie to get this. The town has been indifferent to her existence for most of her life, so as an audience we understand her motives to lie.

In the tradition of **deception comedy**, she adopts a disguise. First shaving her head, then dusting dark eye-shadow under her eyes to enhance her sick appearance. As the story progresses we see her in a constant battle of forgetting and remembering she's supposed to be sick and the increasing difficulty of maintaining her lie.

### **THE COFFIN CLUB OFFERS A FRESH PERSPECTIVE**

*The Coffin Club* is a new offering to the genre of New Zealand **small town life deception comedy**. It's a blending of two well-recognised and understood genres.

As discussed, the genre of **small town life** changes with the economic shifts in the wider world. *The Coffin Club* attempts to speak to the current climate of New Zealand.

Many shops in the main street are empty, the small town is unable to support more than a handful of local (albeit franchised) businesses. Elderly pensioners overwhelmingly populate the regional town of Blythe, with the younger generations noticeably absent. The pensioners in the town are desperate to find ways to save money, most living hand to mouth off their measly Government pension.

**Deception in comedy** usually comes from a place of the hero wishing to make him or herself either disappear or appear more important than they actually are. In *The Coffin Club*, Cassie is in constant conflict with her disguise. She shifts between improving her appearance to be attractive to Jason and making it worse to uphold the lie.

Cassie has put herself in an impossible corner by telling Jason that she's dying. There's only three ways out of it: to tell the truth, run away or to actually die.

*The Coffin Club* sets itself up as a romantic comedy by Jason being the reason Cassie initially lies but it's her relationships with Maria, Debra and burgeoning friendships she has elsewhere in the town, as well as Jason, that finally force her to come clean.

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## **PART TWO: THE SCRIPT**

### **SYNOPSIS**

Cassie is a nobody in a nothing town. She's 28, lives with her reclusive grandmother and works at 4 Square, the only grocery store in the shabby town of Blythe.

Cassie discovers Jason, her high school crush, is back working at the local newspaper. Maria, a stalwart of the Blythe Senior Citizens Club, is making herself a coffin.

Their three worlds collide when Cassie encounters Jason at the Club, taking an active interest in Maria's creation. Cassie seizes the opportunity to make herself known to him and lies, saying she also needs a coffin because she's dying.

Word about Cassie's terminal illness travels like wildfire through Blythe and the community embrace her wholeheartedly.

Maria tucks Cassie under her wing and together, they negotiate the suddenly burgeoning business of DIY coffins, making fast enemies with the shady funeral directors across the road.

Cassie encourages Jason to use her story and as her celebrity grows, so does her deception. Cassie finds out Maria is dying and is suddenly faced with the severity of her lie. Through Maria, Jason and the love of the townspeople of Blythe, Cassie has seen another way to live.

The Club's open day has arrived and a hundred pensioners from the district show up, wanting to make coffins. Cassie knows what she needs to do. She comes clean, leaving Jason crushed and the Club in chaos.

Maria dies. As Cassie gives her final goodbye, she discovers the funeral directors are recycling coffins, unbeknownst to the grieving families buying them.

Cassie steals Jason's camera and documents the scam, leaving him with the evidence as an apology. Cassie leaves town, never to return again but quickly realises her job's not done.

As a final gesture to her beloved friend, Cassie hijacks Maria's official funeral and rouses her newfound community into giving Maria the celebration she deserves.

## **CHARACTER**

The main storyline in *The Coffin Club* is the action line of Cassie's lie about having a terminal illness. In an effort to ease her insomnia, Dr Bliss gives Cassie a prescription to get out of the house more and widen her social circle.

Cassie approaches Jason Crawley, her recently returned high school crush, in the street but he brushes her off. So, when she sees him again the next day at the Blythe Senior Citizens Club, she seizes the opportunity to get noticed.

Club member Bill, has made Maria a coffin that Jason is taking a very active interest in. Cassie closely listens in before pushing herself in front of Jason's camera, announcing to him and the group that she's dying and needs to make a coffin of her own.

Word gets around the small town and things start to change quickly for Cassie. Janice and Tracey recognise her in St Vinnie's Op Shop, where she takes advantage of the lie for the first time by asking Janice for a free makeover.

As Cassie goes deeper into the deception, the more committed she is to appear as someone who's dying. In Scene 72, Cassie shaves all the hair off her head and starts her diet of starvation. Scene 78 sees her adopting a ritual of dusting dark eye shadow under her eyes, enhancing her tired look.

As Cassie's celebrity grows in the town, so does the popularity of the Club. Now her lie is intrinsically linked to Maria, the success of the Senior Citizens Club coffin venture and Jason's potential job opportunities.

In Scene 94, Jason tells her that Sir Rodney Fyfe, All Black Captain, is coming to Blythe in support of Cassie and her coffins. Her lie has taken on a life of its own and is moving beyond the safe confines of Blythe.

She relishes the attention until she realises her new friend, Maria, is actually dying. Confronted with the reality of this situation, she realises she's gone too far.

At the bidding of Reverend Colbert, Cassie attends Church but faints from lack of food. She resolves to tell the truth but faced with the eager congregation, she proclaims that God's healed her instead, adding another lie to the mix.

At the beginning of the film, Cassie has spent her life being ignored. Ignored by her grandmother, ignored by the town, her peers and tormented by teenagers. When she encounters Jason, she actively chooses not to be ignored again and uses a self-serving lie to get his attention.

As the film progresses, Jason, Debra and Maria share parts of themselves with her and she in turn, opens up to them. Cassie encounters true friendship and community for the first time. She finally realises she cannot continue lying to the people of Blythe. Despite knowing she will likely lose everything she's gained, she chooses to come clean.

Cassie equates popularity to magazine covers, posters and fame. She wrestles with the desire to be liked and accepted versus the need to live honestly. In the age of celebrity, this is an emotional experience that many of us understand intimately.

## **STORY STRUCTURE**

### **Key Turning Points**

The main storyline of *The Coffin Club* is the action line of Cassie's lie. Cassie says she has a terminal illness when she doesn't.

The first turning point in this line is the lie itself. On their second encounter with each other, Jason's attention is focussed on Maria's homemade coffin. With the memory of Sarah Tyler's death fresh in her mind, Cassie leaps forward, declaring to Jason and the small group of pensioners that she's dying.

In Scene 40, the night after telling the lie, we already see a change in Cassie. She's at home, cheery and bouncing around the unit. Even Dot, her grandmother who never notices her, observes the change. Until this point, we've seen nothing go her way. It's a monstrous lie but we finally see our main protagonist with a bit of hope in her world.

Sarah Tyler is all but forgotten as the townspeople adopt Cassie as their new hero. Jason publishes an article in *The Blythe Bulletin*, announcing to the town Cassie's plight and the new venture she's inadvertently become the figurehead for.

Cassie's delight at being on the front page is short lived. In Scene 60, Dr Bliss storms into 4 Square and confronts Cassie with the truth that only she knows. Cassie admits she may have taken things too far and promises the doctor she will come clean. This is genuine guilt for Cassie. The lie was spontaneous, and she only did it to get Jason's attention. As the audience, we're relieved to see Cassie's conscience finally kick in. She follows the advice of the doctor again and goes to the Senior Citizens Club to tell them immediately.

At the Seniors Citizens Club, Bingo's busier than normal. After reading the article, the members aren't there to play Bingo - they want to build coffins. Despite being there to tell Maria the truth, when Mo and Flo single Cassie out as the one to explain the coffins, she's wowed by the attention. Cassie spots Jason across the room and he smiles encouragingly, which eggs her on. At this point, we see Cassie's change of heart. Dr Bliss' words seem to vanish from her mind as she faces a room full of expectant pensioners. Jason's presence in this scene is another factor that pushes her lie forward as she remembers why she lied in the first place. As the audience, we may not agree with Cassie's choice, but we understand it.

In Scene 72, we find Cassie alone in her bathroom at home after she's just finished shaving her head. Cassie has said she's dying but it's not until this point that she fully commits to playing the part. As she looks back at herself in the mirror, we recognise that there's no going back for her now.

As the film progresses, the audience see Maria getting weaker although Cassie has seemingly remained oblivious. Scene 92 is another key turning point in the action line.

Cassie goes to see Maria after she fails to show up at the Club one morning and is confronted with her friend's reality. Cassie's taken aback and unsure of how to respond. Maria explains, using Cassie's own descriptor, that she too is "riddled with it". In the same scene, Cassie learns that Maria's only family is somewhat estranged and she's relying on her friends and Cassie for support. As the audience, we recognise

this scene as the beginning of Cassie's change of heart. It's from this point Cassie becomes increasingly uneasy about her celebrity and her fake cancer journey.

The final key turning point in this action line is the moment when she tells the truth to the town. The entire town has turned out for the open day and to welcome Sir Rodney Fyfe to Blythe. Faced with Maria's imminent death, Cassie no longer wishes to sustain the lie. She stands on the stage and looks out at all the faces she's grown to love. Jason's camera flashes and she's reminded of the mess she's in and the only way out of it. The lie is revealed and the expected chaos ensues. Finally though, the lie is out. From this point in the film we are watching the fallout of Cassie's revelation.

### **Dramatic Question**

In *The Coffin Club*, the audience spend the film waiting to see how far Cassie will take her outrageous, insensitive lie and how or if the truth will be revealed.

We know this girl has problems; she lives with her uncommunicative grandmother, is disliked by her colleagues and she can't sleep. In Scene 5, Dr Bliss prescribes her with a challenge to "Get a boyfriend. Or even just a friend."

So when Cassie learns that her high school crush is back in town, she tries to make herself known. After a failed first attempt, she's delighted to encounter him again at the Senior Citizens Club. It's not until Scene 38 that Cassie spontaneously declares to Jason and the small gathering of pensioners, that she's dying of a terminal illness.

Dr Bliss' presence acts a direct threat to the revelation of Cassie's lie. The doctor pops up throughout the action of the film, in a relentless game of cat and mouse.

In Scene 100, Maria introduces Dr Wynn, the only oncologist in town, to her friends. Cassie introduces herself and the audience see Maria twig that Cassie has been lying about having cancer.

In a scene between Three Pines Funeral Home assistant, Trevor, and Cassie's grandmother Dot, two more people learn the truth.

Finally, we see the question answered as Cassie stands in front of the entire town and confesses. Faced with Maria dying, Cassie has made the decision to tell the truth, despite risking losing everything.

### **Core Conflict**

#### Cassie and Blythe

In the main action line of *The Coffin Club*, the fundamental conflict is Cassie's lie versus the town of Blythe. Very quickly, Cassie gets everything she thinks she needs. Free makeovers, posters with her face on it, donation boxes set up in her honour, the attention of Jason Crawley and love of everyone in the town.

Cassie is given an opportunity to speak the truth after fainting in Church, but her want to still be popular overrides. As she faces a room of loving parishioners, she claims God has healed her.

It's not until the reality of Maria's situation really sets in that Cassie can stand in front of Blythe and tell the truth, finally letting her own needs go.

#### Cassie and Jason

The relationship between Cassie and Jason is another one of the major lines. Cassie says she's dying to get Jason's attention. Jason's seen better days and wants to get out of Blythe as soon as possible.

Cassie suggests he uses her story and the DIY coffins to bump his journalistic profile and get the story further afield. Their relationship develops as activity around the coffins grows and Jason warms to Cassie, in spite of himself.

After their date almost goes wrong, some real romance sparks between them and he shows genuine care and understanding when she claims God healed her.

Jason's career progression is intimately wrapped up in Cassie's story, so it hits him hard when she finally tells the truth.

### Cassie and Maria

In the film, Maria is the first person who shows Cassie any kindness and it doesn't happen until scene 16.

Cassie says she's dying. We find out later, Maria actually *is* dying. Cassie's a loner and disconnected. Maria is surrounded by love and friendship. This important relationship acts as a mirror for Cassie, showing her an alternative way to live.

When Cassie realises Maria is dying, it heralds the start of the lie unravelling.

Maria is the reason she finally tells the truth. And the lessons she's learnt from Maria and the Senior Citizens Club are the reason she turns around in Scene 165. Cassie returns to Blythe to give her friend the funeral she wanted.

### **Ending**

The dilemma that Cassie faces is whether to tell the truth or not. She actively debates this in the hospital with Maria in scene 126. Maria explains that there's always a choice and though it may take time, honesty is generally rewarded.

In this scene, Cassie expresses her fear of the outcome. Maria reaches out her hand, sharing her own fear. Cassie's impending challenge is nothing next to Maria's.

Cassie is reminded of this decision as she stands at the microphone in scene 144. Throughout the film, camera flashes have captured moments of Cassie's journey, starting with the first one moments after she lies. Her desire for attention and cameras pointing at her is what brought her to this point.

As Jason's camera once again flashes, we see Cassie collect herself and launch into her confession.

### **THEME**

I was inspired to write *The Coffin Club* after my grandmother joined a local group of pensioners who were building and decorating their own coffins. My grandmother has



never been a hugely social woman and spends increasing amounts of time alone but this group gave her easy access to a community.

Every week she'd excitedly tell me about how her coffin was developing and about the many other coffins that were taking shape around her. She'd joined to save money but found something undeniably more valuable.

In 2014, I went to celebrant school and learned how to write and perform secular ceremony, including funeral ceremony. I was astounded to learn all the options we as New Zealanders have when it comes to how we say goodbye to our loved ones.

Death and dying is still a subject that pakeha New Zealand struggle to speak plainly about. In the throes of grief, it can be easy to make impassioned decisions, handing all responsibility to a funeral director, resulting in a large bill of expenses.

*The Coffin Club* is my attempt at showing a wider audience that we can make these essential ceremonies considerably more personal and affordable.

The film also serves as critique of the 'cult of celebrity'. New Zealand has chosen to honour its All Black Captain with a knighthood. His recently deceased wife, Sarah Tyler, is given a state funeral. Jason and the tiny town of Blythe have largely ignored Cassie until she proclaims she has cancer.

As Richard says in scene 144, so many of our lives have been touched by cancer. It elicits an emotional response from almost anyone you talk to. How desperate must someone be to make these claims? Yet, a Google search will bring up hundreds of results of people all over the world who've done just that.

Money is an obvious reason and plenty have been guilty of that but I became increasingly interested in people lying for emotional reasons. Online cancer forums are littered with stories of people who have claimed to be dying and subsequently been found out.

These people gave reasons like they enjoyed feeling that strangers were invested in their (fake) journey, that they felt wanted and a part of something and overwhelmingly, that they had a community who cared about them.

These are basic human needs. New Zealand has reached a critical level of suicide and it's not restricted to any one demographic. People who've battled with suicidal thoughts and depression often speak about increased feelings of loneliness, worthlessness and disconnection from those around them.

The core idea I'd like my audience to walk away with is that connection to a community can aid some of these feelings and at best, bring about the healing of chronic loneliness.

In *The Coffin Club*, Cassie goes the wrong way about it but her intentions are hopefully understandable. She wants to be seen, to be valued and to be loved.

Whilst the themes of this film are dark, it's been written as a comedy. I want the audience to enjoy the humour in it and set this tone from the opening scene.

As Cassie crosses the road, the expectation is the hearse will hit her or come close to it. Instead, as the tyres screech, we see it's a previously unseen elderly woman who's in the firing line, subverting the expectation of a well-worn gag.

The key image of *The Coffin Club* is the final scene. It's in direct contrast to the image of Sarah Tyler's cavalcade in scene 28, where townspeople line the street to wave through a glossy, black hearse, leaving Blythe behind in a cloud of dust.

In the final scene, the entire town celebrates a real hero of Blythe. A colourful and lively sea of people carries Maria away from the corrupt Three Pines Funeral Home. She is lifted high through the main street of Blythe, the small town Maria gave her life to.